

Now

by Edward Shelley

Now I'm hanging from my ice axes, hands clutching tightly and legs dangling free. Beneath me the glacier is yawning and the wide mouth of the crevasse exhales cold air. But there's no need to worry, this is all part of the plan. I pull up past the bergschrund, and continue on the journey upwards. At the belay we exchange ice screws and karabiners, and then exchange glances. The excitement is hard to conceal as I set off up the slopes above, chasing the two climbers to our front. Axes swing and crampons kick, my sharpened claws biting into the ice, and I edge ever closer to our goal. Far below I see the wrinkled skin of snow on top of the Leschaux glacier, and I let the sense of height sink in until my breathing settles back into a gentle rhythm. Two pitches in, maybe eight more to go, and the sun only just starts to creep out from behind the horizon. This is what we came here for; this is what we do. There's a crack heard from above, and a shout to go with it. I look up to see the sky become a patchwork of shadows, the blue alpine backdrop blotted out by silhouettes of rock and snow. I grit my teeth, press my body hard into the ice. I'm a small person, but I want to be smaller. Shattered rock and ice lands all around, and I make myself microscopic. Staring at the blank white ice in front of me, there's a resounding thud and my world fades into darkness.

Now I'm in that preeminent centre of knowledge, the Office De Haute Montagne. The eyes of the man behind the desk light up, betraying the sense of excitement his face refuses to show. With his best impression of nonchalance he says, "Yes, the Grandes Jorasses is in good condition at the moment," and launches into a detailed explanation of how to navigate the glacier. After taking in the half-French, demi-English instructions we leave with mental notes logged to "descend the ladders onto the ice cream" and "look out for the windmill halfway up the glacier". We head out into the hot afternoon sunshine and grin foolishly at each other. We are on to a winner and we know it; this time tomorrow we will be staring up at one of the great north faces of the Alps, with the fickle conditions of ice and weather aligned perfectly in our favour.

Now I skip from rock to rock, the world moving backwards beneath me as my feet find good footings on rough granite. I dance across the ridgeline, making as much haste as my skill will allow. The mountain drops away to either side into dark corries, and I let the vertigo sink in, a helpful reminder of where I am. I look up to the peaks in front of me, still five to go until my run is finished, and silently I name them in my head, chuckling to myself at my continued inability to pronounce their names. A granite tower looms in front of me, and my hands come forwards to pull my way up the holds. I perch on the top and look further into the cobalt sky to the Hebridean islands that surround me. Some I recognise from their skylines, others are just hazy smudges, and I take guesses at the names of each one. My heart races with the exertion of the climb, and I remind myself that it will only be harder in the snow and at altitude. My trial blazes on, and I pull my mind away from the present to think of the jagged peaks of Chamonix, reminding myself that this training will pay off one day soon.

Now it's three in the morning, and breakfast is served. A large bowl of coffee and concern served alongside a plate of trepidation on toast. Just yesterday the four of us talked about the Tour Ronde as if it was done and dusted. A thing of the past. The perfect way to round off what we so jokingly called an acclimatisation trip. But now I can't help thinking that I've bitten off more than I can chew. The coffee burns bitterly at the back of my throat. The toast sticks in dry lumps and shrugs off all attempts to be swallowed. I ask mundane questions about how we'll coil the rope, and who will be in front for the glacier crossing. It's not long before the conversation runs as dry as the toast and we're in the next room endlessly adjusting boot laces, harnesses, loops of cord. The cold outside beckons, and we head out under the light of the stars. I look across the Vallee Blanche at the distant peaks and can't help but wonder which one we'll be doing next, when this one really is done and dusted.

Now the darkness is absolute, the headtorches are switched off, and we listen to the relentless song of the waterfall. Voices echo through the cave, distorted and muffled, and we try to decipher what words lie within. But there are no words, just a cacophony funnelled by the limestone walls

and tuned by our hopeful minds into something on the cusp of being recognisable. Somehow darkness deceives the ears. I switch my headtorch back on, his now long expired. Nervously we shift and shuffle about, our seat a precarious perch above a pool of murky black water. I take off my left boot and the wetsuit sock underneath to reveal the humorous sight of a shrivelled white foot, and with my hands rub back and forth to try to dry and warm the skin. I repeat the process for my right foot. And then for my left. Then again for the right. How long has it been? And how much longer will we be here?

Now we stand by the motorway, our journey at a pause. Months of eager expectation replaced by the elation of finally being on our way, and now replaced again by the reality that we are going nowhere fast. The van sits in darkness, the batteries a thing of the past. The land around is black and flat and featureless. I think instead of the Highlands, still so far away to the north. Up there the mountains would glisten in the starlight, their icy ridges cutting improbably enticing lines in the night sky. A few hours ago, nothing could have stopped us. Now, we wonder how we'll ever get started again. He is on the phone, waking his brother in the early hours. There's talk of alternators, belts, and jump leads, and through either good will or poor judgement his brother agrees to drive the four hours to come to our aid. We search for roll mats and sleeping bags, now eagerly expecting some sleep, and carve out a space in the back of the van. It's certainly no mountain bivouac, but my imagination fills in the skyline for me, and I drift off into snow-filled dreams.

Now the fires are lit and our feet are up. Cups of tea blow steam into the air by the window. I sit with my feet up, carefully thumbing through an old journal, several lifetimes of adventure captured in understated words on its pages. Outside, the wind refuses with famous Scottish pride to give in, the sunlight fades, and the snow not so much falls as blasts against the mountainside. Tired of listening to the gale, we talk again of yesterday's bumble up the Comb Gully, of the endless river of spindrift pouring down that frozen spout at the back of Ben Nevis, and laugh at ourselves for even attempting to climb something in that weather. This morning's outing proved less successful: a caricature of mountaineering defined by tangled ropes, misted goggles, and of course absolutely no climbing. Bad weather is forecast for the rest of the week. High up in the glen, nestled in our cosy prison we stare out of the windows at horizontal snow and wonder whether we'll get to climb again before the trip is over. I peer up through the whiteout and trace the faint outline of Tower Ridge above us, "I'd like to go back up there you know," I tell him. Slouching back into the chair I return to my cup of tea and in lieu of couloirs and cornices surround myself with guidebooks and magazines.

Now eight hours have passed since the rope disappeared into that bottomless pool. I stand up to shake the stiffness out of my legs, careful not to lose my footing on the slippery limestone walls of the cave. Fifty tuck-jumps to stay warm. Once again we run through the equipment we have to hand: finding nothing but bits of cord and a few karabiners. The thirty metre abseil remains impassable. We can't climb back out of the cave. We can't descend through it. So we sit, and we play guessing games. When will our rescue arrive? Will it be after nine hours or ten? What if it gets to eleven hours? But most importantly, will they bring Mars bars or Snickers? The water still plummets over the falls, the draught still bites at us through our wetsuits, and our bodies still shiver with the cold. I turn off my head torch again and let the darkness take hold once more.

Now the world is bright again, as bright as it has ever been. I see the rays of sunlight glistening off the edge of the Arête des Hirondelles, with the towering fortress of Pointe Walker looming above. I see the distinctive notch in the ridge we've been aiming for, and I see the clear sky above: the bombardment is over. My eyes trace a winding path down through the rock band onto the open face until they fix upon the lone screw holding me to the icy wall. Looking down at my harness and ropes, I barely recognise the knots that should be so familiar by now. I must have tied them thousands of times in practice and in anger, but now their simple geometry is beyond comprehension. I examine the combination of nylon and metal in front of me, unable to discern a karabiner from a sling. Simple, short words are shouted from far away. "Are you OK?" I try to move limbs to check, but my mind resists, as frozen as the very wall I'm attached to. I try to shout back, but it's a grunt at best. Fear building, my body starts to shake, and I try hard to push

the mounting panic to the back of my mind. In its place a throbbing pain emerges. I turn my head to look down and try to shout again, and with a wince I realise that this climb has come to an end. My mind now racing, the fear rises again and I find I can neither climb up nor down, my legs and arms no longer listening to me. Silently I rest my head against the icy wall in front of me; tears roll over my frozen cheeks.