

Awakening by Nick Hamilton

It was his turn to lead the next pitch. A steep ice-filled chimney with a blue evil looking bulge above them that prevented any view of the route higher up. She was still pumped up from the previous pitch and shouted advice in his ear as they huddled together on the tiny stance she had hacked out. The wind rose and fell erratically, sometimes dropping to nothing and then suddenly rising to an icy blast laden with ice particles that stabbed like showers of broken glass.

'It looks like the bulge will go on the right hand side. The wall on that side is at a better angle than the left'.

'Yes', he shouted back, 'but it depends where the gully goes above that. I'll get a better view when I move up from here.

He twisted in another ice screw. As the ice popsicle emerged out of the screw he bent down and took it into his mouth. He grinned at her as he crunched it up and swallowed the bits.

'You're disgusting !' she said with a laugh. She had come alive now that they were climbing; completely different from the quiet, almost morose, girl he had picked up in the dark some hours earlier. She seemed to have shrugged off her grumpy mood that he knew he had been responsible for. He'd been late, forcing her to huddle in the cold, draughty bus shelter at the end of the road where she lived. He'd been late before of course but she clearly found it more difficult to forgive him on a cold, dark winter morning than on those odd occasions through the Autumn when it had happened before.

'It's just water', he replied with a grin and a mouth full of ice, and then added, 'a bit gritty though'.

This was the hardest winter route they had done together and the trust they had built in each other's abilities over the previous weeks was proving valuable.

The chimney was hard below the bulge; the steepness and diverging walls gave a sense of insecurity he had not experienced so keenly before and he felt out of balance and very exposed. He had difficulty placing his crampons where he thought they ought to be and more than once he found his feet splayed out at an angle that he knew would look far from elegant when viewed from below. He heard her shout up to him.

'What are you doing, you look like a crab going up there; hardly Rebuffat style' !

He was too stretched to shout back but muttered a curse to himself. What did she know about Rebuffat, neither of them were even born when he was doing his ultra-elegant style climbing. Anyway, even Gaston couldn't have always looked picture-perfect in the way the coffee-table books depicted him.

At the bulge he took the right wall. He bridged out as far as he could, placed his right hand axe in the modest cleft above his head and the left hand axe into a ripple running across the bulge. Pulling up on both he was able to lean out and work his feet higher. With all his weight spread between his left axe and his toes he stretched up over the bulge and hammered the other axe into the ice on top. The placement felt good and he repeated the action with the left axe. Almost immediately he was past the bulge and into the gully above; heart thumping and relief flooding through him.

At the top of the pitch he whacked an ice axe into the hard packed snow ramp and rested a moment. Glancing up he scanned the steep rock face above and quickly assessed the problem that lay ahead of them. Then with a series of sweeps with the adze he cut out a stance just big enough for both of them. Moving up the ramp a few feet, trying to shelter his face from the stinging

spindrift, he cut an angled pit and hammered in his snow plate. He clipped in and moved back down to the stance.

'OK, up you come', he shouted as loud as he could.

The ropes told him she was on the move. In what seemed like no time at all an ice axe appeared over the top of the bulge followed by another and then her grinning face.

'That's how to do it', she shouted up, as she climbed up towards him.

'Ah, get lost', he called back, 'You're on the end of ropes, its easy for you'.

Within a few minutes she was beside him; already surveying the rock and ice that terminated in a cornice 30 to 40 feet above them. The rock band looked impenetrable but they knew others had climbed it before them and there had to be a way through; if they were good enough !

'I'll have a go if you want me to', he shouted at her above the moan of the wind.

'Not likely, this is mine', she replied. 'You always get the best bits'.

The first section was hard neve, ramped up at a steep angle to the foot of the rock band. She moved steadily up the slope and in a few minutes was at the first steep move. The band was not more than 20 feet high but almost vertical and criss-crossed with white lines of ice filled cracks. He knew the chance of even one good belay on the rock band was negligible and he braced himself against the pull of the snow plate, bearing down on the ice as if to stick himself to it.

She spent a few minutes placing ice screws. The thumbs up didn't fool him. 'Don't come off', he said to himself.

She moved up the first few feet, ice axes left and right, crampons horizontally into the cracks and patches of ice. At the half way point she paused; the cracks were fewer and more widely spaced and, from his position, there was not an obvious sequence of moves. He could see that she was working on a line, focused on the cluster of cracks and ice patches to her right and about ten feet above her head. If she could reach that area the rock band was unlocked and the rest would be easier.

His attention was riveted on her outline above him. The movements of her body, even though lacking a clear outline inside her winter clothing, held his attention. The yellow frames of her crampons outlined against the black of her boot soles were the only strong contrast in the foreshortened figure moving away from him. He was impressed, she looked terrific.

Her first tentative moves into the really difficult section were hesitant and seemed to lack confidence. He knew her strength would be waning and that decisive action was needed. Suddenly she seemed to make a decision. She hammered her left hand axe into an almost horizontal crack above her head, her elbow dropped and she gave it a vicious twist. A quick check on its integrity and she committed herself. Leaning to the right on the left axe her right foot came up and she planted the front points in what appeared to him to be nothing but bare rock. In one smooth movement she had moved up, placed the right hand axe into another crack with another twist, removed the first axe and stood upright.

The move that followed amazed him. There appeared to be a crack running vertically up in front of her. With the left hand axe horizontal she placed the point into the crack and levered it downwards. Then she placed the right hand axe just above it and in a repeat movement jammed it into the crack. The two axes were in her face but she lent out, pushed up and smoothly repeated the sequence. In a flash she was at the stance that moments before had looked unreachable.

Without pausing she was up to the top of the band and onto the easier ground above. She quickly moved up to the underside of the cornice and hammered in another ice screw. It took a few minutes of burrowing and kicking but suddenly she was through the cornice and the left rope came tight on him.

As he emerged from the cornice she was braced against her snow plate with a broad smile on her face.

'You took your time, you lazy git', she said, 'I'm freezing up here'.

They huddled together in the snow behind the cairn and shared a flask of coffee. Suddenly she turned and kissed him on the cheek. 'Thanks, that was great', she said.

'Yea, it was different. We've climbed together a fair bit but that was something else'. He glanced at her. 'You reached a new level on that rock band. Those axe placements were fantastic; I don't know if I'm more jealous or more impressed.

She looked gravely at him; in a movement that he didn't see coming she lent over and kissed him on the mouth. The warmth and softness, in the midst of the harsh landscape, stunned him and the sweetness took his breath away. He noticed a dusting of snow on the fine hairs on one side of her face and for the first time he was aware of the shape of her mouth, the tilt of her nose and the colour of her eyes.

'Hey, be careful, if you do that sort of thing you'll change everything'.

Quickly, she kissed him again and slipped her arm through his. 'You silly man, don't you understand, everything's changed already'.