

When we passed through the Alps

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We reached upwards, looking for something to hold on to. That first time we were lifted up by dreams, until we stood on the summit of that giant among mountains: the Matterhorn. We knew the history of these precipitous rocks but were invincible, poised, unfaltering, young. Our safety was not in skill – we had none – but in grit. And when we descended, the guides who had laughed in the darkness of that previous night broke open the door of the Carrel hut and welcomed us in, relieved they would not have to pick our bodies from the slopes the next day. Drinking their tea, we said we would never come back. And we believed it.

But as winter turned into spring we felt a distant pull, the gravity of some titanic landmass. With snowdrops fading we crunched in summer boots over late winter snow, out of Llanberis and up the railway line under slate-grey skies. Snowdon was the second mountain we climbed. An odd apprenticeship.

By late spring we had worn through our boots and had discarded our tattered maps. Lean limbed we had scouted Llyn Idwal, to climb the Slabs three times in a day, and had clambered through the green gut of Devil's Kitchen to grope through the perpetual mist of the Glyders, and on to the south ridge of Tryfan. We sat on our ropes in the silence of the small ledge beneath the twin monoliths of Adam and Eve in the fading light. The thick smell of moss and chalk and sweat. On a July day we had enchained Horned Crag on Lliwedd, the Snowdon Horseshoe and Grooved Arête on Tryfan and were back by mid-afternoon to drink fresh coffee by Llyn Ogwen, bare-chested in the cool breeze of early summer. To be still. For the first time. To be awake.

Cut through by cold, head down against the spindrift we edged along the highest crest in Europe, towards the summit of Mt Blanc. We were projected by a rising sun onto the seas of cloud in Italy and France. Thumping each other hard on the back beneath our duvet jackets, we quickly turned to begin the long descent before the sun was fully up, shaking hands with strangers as we went. Then by car to Switzerland and up the Gornergrat to see the mighty Gornergletscher. That climb was the coldest I can remember. Sharp as knives through our thick leather boots till all we could think of was the pain of frost-nipped toes and blistered and bleeding heels. In inadequate footwear, we stood two days' walk in and one hundred feet from the summit of Dufourspitze. Despite the struggle, this day would not be ours. Descending again, to relax in meadows through those warm long days of summer, letting romantic names of glaciers drift through one's mind.

That winter, pressing on past ice-encrusted ropes of climbers beaten back by the blizzard, I floundered alone in waist-deep snow on the Glyders, knowing that beneath the powder were silent pools. Water, inky deep, that would draw me down if I faltered. I followed a compass bearing until I grasped with both hands the top of a fence post I knew could lead me out; down to safety and to reflect on the day I learnt the meaning of luck.

Then winter trips to the Cairngorms, Gressoney, and Rjukan, with the smell of sharpened crampons and wet rope. We spent weeks in deep cut gorges frozen thick. To the steady cut of pick on ice, and clinking of the screws, we climbed until our bodies knew the flow of movement, the axes an extension of our arms, the crampons natural on our feet. One day we climbed three thousand feet of ice, by night drawn up by a curious light. Fitfully through the high pines. We thought it was the warm glow of a high cabin, or car lights reflected off a road sign. It was a slender moon creeping low along the crest of the Hardangervidda plateau. At 2 am, after eleven hours of darkness, we reached the top, and a road out of the forest. By luck a Swedish bus driver passed and picked us up. Crashed out on the floor of the bus in a jumble of limbs and axes, ropes and harnesses, and caked in snow, unbelievably we fell asleep on the fifteen minute drive back

down. With the numbing low moan of the engine rumbling through us as we were swayed through turns.

We took a friend into the Bernese Oberland, and lived for days in an ice cave carved deep into the Ewigschneefeld – the eternal snow field – away from the chaos of the huts. By day we climbed the peaks around, carefully testing ourselves against the mountains. We returned to escape the blinding heat of the mountain bowl by crawling through an azure tube into the cool and churchlike quiet of the glacier. Where by night we talked by candlelight about the days' events, until we drifted into impenetrable sleep.

In the Engadine we climbed the Piz Bernina, and put up a tent five hundred feet below the summit. When the storm came in we laughed at ourselves for having caught the last cable car instead of checking the weather forecast, and hunkered down despite the cracking of lightning all around. We woke early the next morning to a dim light and silence, unzipping the awning of the tent to a wall of heavy snow. Kicking through to where the storm still whipped and roared. Fresh snow was blasted into our sleeping bags. Our tent was now a gentle bump in a desert of white. Two days later our rations ended, but for two raw onions, a misguided choice made during hasty packing. We had used up the fuel and now had only snow to eat, so chose to chance a long walk out over heavy cloud-draped glaciers rather than endure another night, or more. We had no money, but in a hut en-route I traded the onions for a two litres of warm water, walking back into the whirlwind of the storm to where my friend was waiting out of sight, leaving the warden bemused but better off for soup. That night we booked into a hotel and ordered three courses, regretting our grandness when we could stomach less than half the soup.

We bivouacked under blood-red skies on the Zwischenberg pass. And watched a meteor storm strafe the Allalinjoch, to the cannonade of rock-fall. We camped in a tarpaulin high on the muscular shoulders of Dome du Goûter, suspended on the candy-floss clouds of Chamonix, and slept beneath the rectilinear perfection of the Lenzspitze, as a wall of cloud pulled in, with the slow inertia of a leaden tanker's hull descending. We have dreamed in all these inaccessible places. After watching shooting stars burn streaks across the sky, and the slow procession of a satellite. Almost so close that we could touch them. Here friends without equipment were duct-taped into bin bags for the night, and allowed the luxury of the ropes as mattress and boots as pillow. When the stove was forgotten we collected drips in helmets and waterproof jackets, until we had enough to drink.

Only once did we see torches in the middle of the night. Deep snow had caused a couple to be benighted on the Rimpfischhorn. Two torches, several hours distant, intermittent on a ridge of snow. Night voices woke us, then the scratch of steel spikes on rock. They said the summit ridge was thick with snow. We were underequipped for poor conditions, and said we would join them at their lower bivouac in the morning. But instead they left their ropes and a rack of climbing equipment, then clambered down boulder fields under a full moon reflected in the tin-foil markers they had left. That day had been dog warm, and the night cold. Snow was still frozen hard as we retraced their steps along the airy summit ridge. And we were glad of the loaned equipment. Two days later we returned the ropes in the warm cigar-smoke fug of a Randa bar where we boasted through long sips of milky cocoa.

There were also days alone. The time I looked for bivouac spots on the soaring ridge of the Laggishorn, surprised to find myself with camping gear and cooking equipment on the top, much sooner than expected. I contemplated a night in a wind-carved hollow just beneath the summit, before walking down by night to sleep beside a boulder at the glacier snout, snug wrapped inside a sleeping bag as the wind howled down the slopes.

Valley days passed in lethargic bliss, resting sore limbs in lakes and streams, and lying in the leafy shade of meadows. I wandered off alone and slept in a clump of grass beside a stream one day, to wake spreadeagled and with my hat askew, confronted by a group of wide-eyed men who had ventured from their cars to poke me with a stick. "We thought you were dead," they said. "Not yet, my friends," said I.

In these twelve years we have stood on top of almost forty of the four-thousand metre peaks. Through these long days they have been unchanging, passive yet indomitable. The mountains are a slow mirror in which we see ourselves through a speeding world.