

Twenty Five Feet Behind

By Moira McPartlin (Ochils Mountaineering Club)

The sound of someone near the door untangling out of a sleeping bag teases Carrie from her dream. She wrinkles her nose at the stale air she shares with the twenty other bodies jumbled on the attic's Double Decker platforms. Rows of bags are strewn like multicoloured slugs. Every now and then she sees the beam of a head torch dart across the ceiling as the early riser tries to pack his sack without disturbing anyone, shushing his rustling supermarket bags in vain.

Johnnie's steady sleep breathing lulls Carrie into a dwam, she secretly hopes for bad weather, then they could snuggle in for another couple of hours. He lies facing her, his breath warms her face with each exhalation.

A body, two or three down the platform, snores a quiet puttering interrupted by an intermittent snort. Another stirs by the shuttered window.

Carrie rubs her dry gritty eyes and becomes aware of her empty stomach. Murmurings stagger around the room like a Chinese whisper let loose. She shakes Johnnie.

'Come on, I think we should get up.'

He springs upright and begins to pull on the clothes he stores in the stuff sack he uses as a pillow. At home the snooze button would have been thumped twice before he rose, but not here. Carrie hustles her top over the bra she has slept in. She tops and tails with baby wipes and manages to pull her knickers and trousers on while still in her bag. By the time she is dressed at least half the occupants of the dorm have surfaced and someone dares to flick the light switch. The room ripples like a centipede flexing its legs.

Stepping outside, Carrie gasps as the cold night air seizes her throat. The short walk to the main hut gives her enough time to observe the forecast excellent weather conditions.

The black sky is salted with stars and a half moon plays on the sugar coated mountainside. She pulls a scarf over her mouth to protect sensitive teeth from the piercing cold. This is July in the high Alps. She checks her watch. 1:20.am.

Despite the queue loitering at the toilet block, Carrie decides to wait. She plans to visit twice before the off, she can't afford to be caught out once her mountain clobber is on. The rank smell from Turkish style squats nips her nose. It's always the same in the mountains, Carrie reckons the altitude has an adverse effect on the men's aim.

The main hut, ablaze with yellow welcoming lights, looks incongruous against the stark hostile backdrop of the mountain range. Every window drips with condensation where the heat from the wood burning stove inside collides with the outside temperature.

As Carrie approaches the door she sneaks a look towards the path they would soon be taking. Dots of lights from the earlier starts bob along in the darkness, like the seven dwarfs heading for the mines – hi ho!

The steamy heat of the room embraces her as she steps through the door. Johnnie pats the seat beside him and pushes a steaming mug of hot chocolate her way. Stale bread dabbed with jam and *Nutella* sticks in her craw but she forces it down anyway. Around the room sleepy eyes are rubbed and armpits scratched as people munch; no words required.

Chairs scrape across the tiled floor as thoughts and belongings are gathered and one by one the climbers head back to the dorm, banging the door in their wake.

Carrie visits the toilet one last time before donning her outdoor gear. She zips a waterproof jacket over black sallapottes and clamps the torch band around her itchy woollen balaclava. Johnnie helps Carrie wind the rope diagonally round her body, securing the loops to her climbing harness with a carabiner at her waist. Carrie helps Johnnie do the same. Soon they are bound together by a single rope length of about twenty five feet. Enough rope to give each of them warning to stop a fall with their ice axe if the other steps into a hidden crevasse. That is the theory, but Carrie remains dubious to the reality.

A sprinkling of clouds scuds across the moon, warning them that the wind has picked up. They check each other's gear again and, gripping their ice axes, follow the red and white paint splodges marking the path up to the glacier; Johnnie first then Carrie a rope length behind.

The early silence of the mountainside now rattles with the crunching of boots and the clinking of axes striking rock. A low rumble of voices at last waking to the day ahead.

After a few minutes the gravel path ends and Carrie joins Johnnie to strap twelve point crampons onto heavy boots, before stepping onto the snow. As she looks back at lights twinkling from the hut she tries to ignore her nervous bladder. Her stomach hollows as her gloved fingers fumble with the crampon straps, tug, tugging them tight. Cold hands throb. She pulls heavy mitts over gloves before hoisting her rucksack back on, noticing that Johnnie does the same. With the noise of the first sharp crunch of spikes on the hard snow Carrie forgets her discomfort and concentrates on keeping the rope between them above the snow but not too taut.

They work as a team, Johnnie in front, Carrie behind. They have been partners for six years and in that time she couldn't remember ever being at the front of an Alpine rope. And yet, when they rock climb together, they share the lead. Often she will take the crux pitch, proving she is just as capable as Johnnie. But Johnnie always walks in front. Even when he suggests she take the lead, he overtakes her again after a few minutes without realising. Like today, he assumed the lead and she succumbed in silence.

The cold from the metal ice axe creeps into Carrie's right mitt, chasing the blood from her fingertips. She wiggles each finger, then switches the axe into her other hand, curling and uncurling a fist to restore circulation.

Settling into her own rhythm and space Carrie switches off her head torch and lets the moon light the way. As the terrain steepens and the air thins, Johnnie stops now and then to allow them to catch their breath.

Time is running out for them, the frozen snow pack will soon soften under the sun's rays. They must reach the summit before daylight. Carrie looks to the east and glimpses on the horizon a thin line of crimson tint. The day is ripening. Even though she knows the urgency she takes a moment to look west. There, still in night shadow, lies the monstrous dome of Mont Blanc, an unmistakable profile from every angle, tempting her onto its slopes.

'Soon,' she whispers.

When they leave the glacier and move onto a snow field Carrie blows out a huge sigh. Johnnie suggests that for speed they remain tied and make a breenge for the summit.

Clouds begin to cover the moon but the creeping light dilutes the sky from black to charcoal to grey. Carrie's head bends as she pumps her arms to increase momentum. She is relieved when they meet climbers on their way down, there couldn't be much further to go.

She pulls on the rope and Johnnie turns.

'What?' he shouts

'I want to check my map,' she roars against the wind.

'What for?'

'To see how much longer.'

'About an hour.'

Carrie turns her torch back on, studies her map then checks her watch. Johnnie slashes at the snow with his ice axe.

'OK,' she shouts and they set off again.

Her chest tightens as she gulps air into her lungs desperately trying to absorb more oxygen. Her forehead is pounding and she can hear the thumping of her heart in her ears. *Slow down you bastard.* She plucks a small bottle out of her pocket and sips icy cold water while on the move but her bladder warns her not too much. She dare not ask for a stop, they are close but she fears still not fast enough. Then the rope slackens and Johnnie begins to slow. He stops and leans forward on his ice axe, coughing. He pisses onto the snow before leading off again, leaving a yellow splash for Carrie to step over.

The sky turns milky white with the promise of blue. Carrie sneaks a look behind at the valley below stretched out in the sun like a bolt of golden cloth. They remain in the shadow of the neighbouring peak.

Johnnie tugs the rope and grins.

'Come on Carrie, one last push.' He points. 'Look, the summit's there.'

Above them a trail of black figures snake up the white mountainside, ropes strung out, forming a continuous caravan. After Carrie scans the path zigzagging up a steep snow slope she drops her chin to her chest and begins to sing in her head. It is one of those repetitive pop tunes by a skinny manufactured girl band she hates and now can't get the damn song out of her mind.

I'll have a rest at the zag she thinks. She toils up to the bend and notices a zig just a little further on. I'll keep going, keep going to the next. But the rope drags in the snow and Johnnie stops again. Carrie's nose is streaming, she blows the snot out onto the ground to help ease her breathing. Off again! Breathe one out breathe two in and try to replace the oxygen.

Her head is still down when the rope slackens once more. She looks up into the grinning scruffy face of Johnnie. He swing his ice axe in an arc to the left, his breathing heavy, he coughs and spits behind him.

Fifty feet above them is an escarpment with a huge iron cross and a white statue of a Madonna, hundreds of colour splashed Alpinists litter her feet like pilgrims, their ropes lie tangled in a confused mass. Johnnie takes Carrie's hand and pulls her up onto the ridge beside him. When they reach the summit she wipes the snot off her nose with the back of her mitt before accepting Johnnie's kiss full on the mouth. His lips are cold and taste of salt and suntan cream, his stubble scratches her cheeks.

The sun that glints on the carabiners and axes shines on the full expanse of the snow capped mountains that impose for miles in all directions into France, Italy, Switzerland and Austria. Tongues of many nationalities babble in excitement. They have all beaten the sun and can make it back through the glacier before the hard snow turns to porridge.

Carrie licks her dry lips and tastes the cold beer waiting for her at the hut before the rope tugs her to leave the summit twenty five feet behind Johnnie. This time she tugs back, digs her crampons into the hard ice and holds firm. He turns with a question on his smile.

'There,' she points to her goddess Mont Blanc. 'If we start up tomorrow we can be on her summit next day. And this time I lead – the whole way.'