

It Ended With A Bottle

BY BRUCE WHITE

It ended with a bottle. Just a Platypus, dead in the talus.

It began with a hug.

The real story began long ago, outside the same hut. Snow lay crisp and even, and he swished through the mountain beech on twin ski-touring sleighs with the red and white uniform of a mid-winter dream. The hills laughed with congeniality. From the depths of his pack he conjured gifts for the children. One for his daughter. One for mine.

Over a shared meal in the embrace of an alpine hut we formed a bond. Outside, the black and white cold harassed the walls and roof, but inside the colourful warmth of fire and friendship held it at bay.

Time allowed us to share homes, adventures, dreams and summits.

Long ridges traversed, swollen rivers forded, icy tarns drunk, gendarmes politely avoided, interminable nights huddled and past epics related over hissing cookers and cocooned in chrysalitic sacks.

Adventure forged this bond, the trust and intimacy that adds a further dimension to climbing.

Some climb to masturbate their ego. Others aspire to heaven in environmental reverence. Or there are those who perform a carefully choreographed line, dancing to rock and ice music. And some just revel in the sensuality of fluid movement in a natural setting; the call of the wild. To me, it is the joy of adventure shared with a special friend, like children in a secret garden.

The alpine flowers had migrated when we met again. Driving to an appointment in the city, knowing he was doing some hut maintenance, I stopped for a chat. He invited me to join him on a climb of the Otira Face. I had already done it twice before, but despite the patches of appalling rock, had thoroughly enjoyed the social experience and the magnificent setting.

The first time was a solo trio. When I wanted a rope it was nowhere in sight, so there was nothing for it but to focus and make every move positive. We followed sinuous fingers of old couloir snow, largely avoiding the rock crumbling in its grip. With no rope work, the climb was quickly over and we were driving home by mid-afternoon.

The second was a wonderful day out on warm rock with a close friend. Our pace was relaxed and abilities similar. Enough suitable protection was found to back up the few committing moves, justifying the belaying. The rope took its toll, and when we politely shook hands on Middle Peak, it was in a rapidly dimming cloud. A long May night followed, shivering and stamping in a slot at the head of the Crow Glacier, but the warmth of the friendship kept the frostbite at bay. And so with extreme sadness I had to decline the chance to spend time with my friend, sharing an adventure in a beautiful environment. Work commitments had priority. With a heavy heart we hugged and I went on my way, never to see him again.

I stayed in his house, and when he hadn't returned on Monday night, concerns began to stir. Tuesday morning I contacted the police, and they confirmed that his ute was still parked in the Otira carpark. Not good. But he'll be fine. The weather is stable, he is competent and well equipped. No worries. Perhaps time caught up with him too. Midday and still no sign. His work rang wanting to know where he was. Oh dear.

Tuesday night and SAR had been activated, but by now the weather had socked in. A flight over the summit and a team between the peaks found no sign. Where are you buddy? Why don't you come home?

Wednesday and still nothing. Visibility poor, and no signs.

A ground party at the base of the face found his battered body on Thursday. His neck broken. A backward fall, and not even from very high. What if I had gone with him after all? Would he still be alive? Would we have been roped, and if so, would the protection have held in that dodgy red sandstone? Or would I have watched him arc away, tumbling in slow motion, hearing his last cries and the cruel bite of rock on flesh? The despairing shouted monologue. Nothing. All sounds silenced. Just my continued breathing and thump of a terrified heart as the cold shadow of Death slides down to meet me, lingering over my trembling, sweaty fingers.

Oh no. You're not getting me yet. Focus. Reverse those moves, one at a time. Test each hold. Remember that nightmare after the first time?

Pulling down on the hold to have it peel away in my hand, and the tug of Death on my pack as the cliff recedes from reach, slowly at first ...

Or the fright when the old ice axe releases its grip in the narrow couloir

and again I peel off. Only that time I had the fortune of a rock wall behind to fall against.

Would I have kept composure enough to make it all the way down? Would the sight of his crumpled body have destroyed me also? If I had made it, how could I look at him? My friend reduced to a bundle of bloodied clothes. Lifeless. Just an empty house where my friend once lived.

What do I do with you? A dead weight. I can't shift you. What might the police think? There will be an inquiry. I have to preserve your dignity. Protect you from the elements that we came to enjoy. No wild animals, but kea are disrespectful. Optimistically I gently ease you into the recovery position, and turn your sightless eyes to the ground. I build a cairn around your head. I'll need to borrow your ute though. Where's your pack? Eventually I find it in the small schrund where Rod dropped his boot that day as we prepared for the climb. It is half undone and stuff is missing. Axe and crampons are gone. At least the keys are safely zipped away.

Then the long walk down the valley, choked with loss and anger. Stumbling, swimming through tears. Almost as blindly as that very first descent when I was so young and invincible. Four of us had come up from Waimak Falls and traversed the three peaks, but oh how slowly. That guy that would only go on hands and knees along the ridges. Darkness when we reached the base of the slide. No moon. Just a heavy blanket of sightlessness, save the myriad of stars, a few lights at Temple Basin, and very little traffic at the far end of the valley. I fell often that night, head first sometimes.

But I let you go without me. Instead I sat in a boring lecture in Christchurch. You died alone. Why couldn't I be your friend and be there for you? I failed you when you needed me the most.

A week later I returned to the face. No joyful romp up the valley amongst nodding lilies, leaping from rock to rock across the sparkling stream. Instead every movement laboured through swirling gloom. Mist shrouded everything. Fangs of dirty snow lurked in gullies. Nothing stirred. Even the water flowed with sorrowful silence.

I knew the mountain was close. The ground rose before me, a moraine wall like a moat at the base of a fortress. I climbed the damp black shards of rock. There, in the talus, lay a shattered Platypus. The lid

intact, but the body burst upon impact, contents spilled over the stone. I turned it over in my hand and imagined your body greeting these impassive rocks with the same unwillingness.

I need to talk to you and say goodbye. The funeral had been so hard and so public. I can't talk to a box, especially with all those people there. I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

I lied. I hadn't hugged you at the hut at all that last day we spoke. But I wanted to. I am sorry. My special friend and I let you down. I wanted you to know that. Take care.

Far above a kea laughed of freedom, no longer a slave to gravity.