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MY FIRST JOURNEY INTO THE ALPINE ENVIRONS

I began my journey with the human species one warm summer's day in Wellington. I had been part of a consignment of prototypes sent to Wellington and was somewhat anxious that I would not be put to good use as the higher alpine environment in Wellington was reputed to be rather sparse.

However in the early afternoon a chatty some-what over bearing tall blonde woman came in and requested my services. She seemed a decent "green sort of a woman" and I thought that my purpose in life may actually come to fruition in that summer of 2010. To my astonishment she requested two of us and so my companion also accompanied me to the front counter. I was initially quite shocked to be placed by the counter in full-view of the public. To make matters worse my intended purchaser (soon to become my "mistress") began a lively debate with two Australian tourists about my intended purpose and contribution to the clean green nature of the alpine environs while she wished to frolic and play with gay abandon with her mates over the majestic snow-fields and peaks of the southern Alps (the fact that the alpine environment was not green appeared to be lost on these Australians). However they appeared suitably impressed. Initially I found this degree of public exposure rather distressing. My "mistress" appeared to be totally oblivious of the embarrassment I was feeling. The moment in which I was offered the safety of the yellow DOC rubbish bag provided me with great relief. My trusty companion who was considerably less mature with regard to public policy and personal issues seemed to be more phlegmatic and composed and the small part of me that was "green" glowered with envy.

We were then taken to an outdoor shop where my mistress had ordered some maps. She appeared to me to be a rather loose rough sort of a woman as she avidly entered into quite a detailed dialogue about our purpose and where we would be placed within the pack. I thought she lacked some basic social graces. However later in the discussion I realised she was some sort of medical person and so this explained the level of comfort with issues I considered of a more personal than public nature. To my surprise the young men in the shop seemed to engage in the discussion easily and very soon were assessing my potential volume and distensibility. I developed the distinct sense that I had not been well designed and perhaps not with the hearty appetites of mountaineers in mind. I felt somewhat dispirited that I may not be able to fulfil the small number of personal goals that had been imprinted on me by the Department of Conservation but then I was not entirely clear that they had my best interests in mind either.

When we arrived home I was inspected by a few members of the family and one rather dominant male member suggested that he immediately provide alternatives to the food pile of my mistress. After this, a complex debate followed about the percentage of my "contents" that would be water versus cellulose. It soon became too scientific for me but my mistress argued her case quite clearly and she seemed to have some considerable understanding of the anatomy physiology and biochemistry of the human colon. Unfortunately my DOC training was woefully inadequately. They had warned me that budget cuts may not properly prepare me for any scientific discourse I would hear en route to my final destination. Thus I had to be content with imperfect

knowledge and made a note of discussing the sub-optimal training with my line manager.

We were soon consigned to the bottom of a large blue pack and I entered into some sort of dark hibernation mode preparing myself for my ultimate expendability. However when we “came to” and daylight woke us from our slumber we had actually arrived into a real alpine environment. Snow and rocky ridges could be easily seen as we perched straining over the top of the pack. A rather terrifying moment then followed when we were both picked up and my companion was handed over to large Australian. At this point I felt extreme relief, my spirit of generosity weak. I am embarrassed to say I believed my companion’s fate would be less savoury than mine. My mistress appeared at least to know how she would put me to best use and had been concocting some sort of chemical formula to ensure I would not be overwhelmed. My companion’s fate seemed less certain. I am sure my line manager would have been disappointed with the lack of leadership I had modelled as a prototype.

Over the following day there was considerable debate about how we could be put to best use. Alas there were several Australian members of the group but to improve the scientific rigour of the debate we included the discourse of an engineer, a drug and alcohol nurse, a food quality specialist, a photographer, an adventure racer (who ate and expelled on the run from various orifices), a florist and a biology teacher. I struggled to keep up with the debate but made furious notes to share with my team. There was concern about probable low alcohol intake and the effect of dehydrated food on gut function. I was impressed with the knowledge and practical wisdom of my mistress and realised that she must have spent significant parts of her professional life discussing the bowel function of humans. My initial impression of her softened and I felt more compassion for “her lot” in life. No wonder she felt a strong need to take to the mountains and I hoped that I would be able to facilitate her enjoyment of the alpine environs without too much internal distress and discomfort.

Soon we were on our way. There were now several of us in tandem making our way up into the alpine environs. We were not removed from the pack for the first two days causing us some consternation and worry about our owners’ clean green ethics. We later discovered that the group had been offered the use of hut facilities and they had acquiesced putting off the inevitable moment when our use would be tested. Finally after what seemed to be hours of discussion about our relative merits our moment of glory arrived and I was taken down to rocky ridge overlooking a stunning vista of mountain, glaciers and seracs over the Annette Plateau. We lingered many minutes and I was grateful that my mistress was flexible and comfortable in a rather compromised position so I could continue to profit from this spectacular panorama.

Alas from this moment onwards conditions deteriorated. We were all consigned to a “burial” in the snow and were not even close enough to each other to make eye contact or enter any kind of debate. We were brought out at short notice and rapidly placed back in the snow with no view or fresh air. Some of the group were literally dumped at the bottom of a pack and squashed leading to distress and disorientation. It would appear we became objects of derision and shame. Even my mistress with her daily practical no-nonsense biology chat could not seem to influence the mood of the group. We were pretty weary by the time we returned to our home in the DOC

retrieval system. Fortunately or perhaps not so fortunately I was kept on after the round of redundancies and was thoroughly washed and cleaned (my guts are still recovering from the purging despite government funded treatment) and now I have a permanent home next to a large canine beast whom I accompany daily on walks. It feels some-what like a demotion but I like to think I am using transferable skills.