

Sale of the Century

Paul Prince

He had said ten, and at a quarter past an old Legacy pulled up outside. A lanky young guy, all arms and hair, looking bleary-eyed. He watched him lope up the path. Waking at 5am seemed to be a regular thing now, but it was a sunny morning, gorgeous, after the crying had stopped. He was just finding a rhythm, the knife slicing the greenery, fronds piling up behind him. The baby always seemed to quieten just after it got light, whether she had fed or not. Strange. She clearly had no problem eating well at early hours. Bodes well for a mountaineer.

He stepped out of the greenhouse and they shook hands. It had only taken a fortnight after he had put the ad on the noticeboard. Do people not read noticeboards anymore? Everything must go. Or something like it.

“They’re growing like crazy, I can’t keep up, trimming the laterals off, I don’t even know what a lateral is to be honest. Amazing thing, photosynthesis. Growing like crazy. Would you like a cup of tea”?

The silence said many things.

“Whatever”

“You’ve got to be kidding”

“Just look at the stuff and get out, before this tomato freak tries to use you as fertiliser”

“So can I see the gear”?

There was an awkward moment as he realised the attempt at conversation was rejected. A ball bowled wide, sidestepped and lost in the grass.

“Sure, what are you looking for”?

“Just whatever mate, as long as it’s cheap”

Laid out on the deck it didn’t seem like much. Three ice axes, two sets of crampons, a pack, a tent, two stoves, a bundle of icescrews, a rack, skis, boots, bedrolls. Some left in boxes so it didn’t get mixed up.

“Man, your gear is pretty trashed, eh”

For a moment he forgot the kid, remembering a garage sale he had been to when he had first started. He was late, the remains thrown out on tables in the sun, slim pickings by 11 am.

“You know how it is, you wear them once, walk over a bit of rock and they look really used” said the vendor, holding up a pair of crampons that were really used.

There were scratches on every surface and each point was a perfect rounded ball, years of abuse, ice and moraine. The ball of a foot had worn the paint away, a sheen of rust filled the gap. He didn’t need crampons and didn’t have the money for them anyway. He had his own. Good ones.

An ice-screw caught his eye, modern, despite its early eighties vintage, in a bunch that looked like they should be on a wall in a pub. He didn't have any ice-screws.

"You know how it is" started the patter again.

"You use it a couple of times and the ice scratches them"

He nodded in agreement, not really knowing better but wanting to be agreeable. It was cheap, could probably leave it behind on an abseil. He had heard of people doing that.

"What about a rope"?

"No, thanks. Dad said not to buy second-hand rope"

"It's hardly second hand, you know how it is, one climb on the crag and it gets a bit..."

He ended up buying the screw. There wasn't much else on offer.

"What about this" the kid asked, picking up the bivvy bag out of the box. He had started rummaging through the 'keep' box.

"I'd rather not sell that, I might need it, one day"

You don't miss things until they are gone or rather, you miss them when they are not there.

"I can't see, we might have to stop"!

"Yep, bugger it, let's bivvy"

"You sorted mate"?

Um...um...my bag's in the hut. I thought we were going back to the hut tonight"

A chuckle in the darkness.

"We were"

"Naah, it's OK, I'll be right. I've got my jacket, it's a good one"

Some people bivvied in their jackets. He'd read about that. They were bullshitting. The water ran off his packliner, pooled in his lap and wicked up the inside of his Goretex, soaking his down jacket.

"Mate, have you got any gear that doesn't have a hole in it"?

The down jacket. Cripes. Look at it. Two layers of diesel-covered nylon, a gentle sheen of feathers between. Who would wear it, let alone buy it?

"So is it OK to, you know, crash here for the night"?

"Well, I'm still new here and we're not really supposed to have people stay"

“Naah, naah, that’s cool. I’ve got an old school mate around somewhere, I’ll give him a call”

“ Are you sure”?

“Yeah, it’ll be fine”

It had been useful that night as he had tucked his knees up into it to keep warm, but it had been new then. The shorts weren’t doing much and the tree didn’t seem to provide much warmth, though at least it was not raining.

“Jesus, look at this one, why didn’t you just throw it out”?

“Are you kidding, that’s my first pack, not for sale”!

“What makes you think I would buy it, it’s bugged”!

It was a universally acknowledged truth that there were too many people on the ridge. They should have turned around and followed their steps back. It was slow going and it was going to be a late night at the car, and an even later night home.

She needed a hand to step down so he stopped and dropped his pack. It moved and he jumped to grab it. It stopped and then moved again, and was suddenly gone, over the edge. Cursing, he helped her down. She would probably have coped anyway. He had sorted the group, sent them off down the ridge and then weaved his way down to the scree where his pack lay like the carcass of some fallen purple mammal. The lid zip had burst and his map, water bottle and pocket-knife led in a trail down the rock. He stuffed the innards into the main compartment and rushed to catch up. It was going to be a very late night.

“Are you selling those ropes”?

“Oh I wouldn’t sell you one of those, you shouldn’t buy second-hand rope”

“I’m not going to climb with it, I need a tow-rope”

“Tow-rope! It’s too good for that, it’s only been used a few times”

The kid’s interest was waning visibly. He nudged a box with his foot.

“Cheers anyway”

He walked off down the path, shaking his head to himself, then stopped and turned

“Everything must go”! he said and wandered off, laughing.