

Solo Echo:

By Sarah J Wilson

“Go for it” the voice declares, “You’ll die” shrieks the other. Two voices, one person. Just one more pitch of steep glinting ice and two tools clinging to the surface. Two front points of each crampon scratching against the boiler plate ice. No rope, no companions. The voices echo in my head. I need to move now and that move will either signal defeat, or commit me beyond the point of no return. Even though I must move the voices take me back to a dull July day on the “Unit” coming into Johnsonville.

It was July 27th, 8:07am and I was in the midst of the mindless daily commute. The “Unit” - a rattling remnant on rails unworthy of the title “train” - was crawling into Wellington crammed with faceless bureaucrats and me. I was obeying the unwritten laws of commuting:

*“Thou shall not make eye contact with other commuters;
Thou shall not be obnoxious or in fact even noticeable”*

I was busy blending into the grey day, grey coats and staring at grey shoes when a massive transgression occurred. As we pulled into Johnsonville station a loud fart erupted without apology. My neck jerked to my left and I made eye contact with the dread-locks in the next seat. She grinned wickedly and looked right back at me with a depth that broke all the rules. I lurched my eyes away from the grip of her stare and saw her hands - strong, callused, and flicking a karabiner. Then I smiled. Of course, a rock jock chick.

And that was the start of my hilarious, terrifying adventure with Trish, or TJ for short. She noticed the chalk marks on my backpack and before long we were comparing leads, red-points and reminiscing over summers of hot rock and aching muscles.

Rock-climbing was an obsession for me - training on the indoor wall, weekends at the Bay or Baring Head. It was an escape hatch from the grey world of work. But that was all about to change. TJ bought me wide eyed into the world of snow and ice. She spoke of mountains like they were lovers to be eyed up, studied in every curve and then committed to with totality, “till death do us part”. Before long her stories had me hooked and I was twitching for my next adventure fix.

Late August saw us packing enormous loads of food, rope, ice-screws and other climbing clutter and tottering up the ridge to the Alpine Club hut at Delta Corner, Mount Ruapehu. Our head torches lit up slumbering sleeping bags as we stumbled into a crammed hut about midnight on Friday, our stomachs still churning from the dodgy burger in Bulls. When we reached the Pinnacles early the next morning the race was on to find “bomb-proof ice” - whatever that was. All I knew was that my feet were encased in blocks of clunky plastic and that the bitter cold had pierced every layer of merino and gortex I had so recently spent my pay on.



TJ led upward and as the rope fed out I was thankful that at least the rope work felt familiar. Then it was my turn. My first mistake was to look up at the impossibly steep ice... “no way”... My second and more gripping mistake was to look down at the awful run-out below. I felt stiff, unsure with unfamiliar appendages strapped to my hands and feet. And then the voices started up - remembering the hastily conveyed instructions as TJ headed up... “Move like you’re wearing nappies - wide stance - drop your heels - it’s not a smash and grab, delicate placement...” Advice rattled around in my head like lotto balls in the tumbler. Then a winner popped out: “Take a deep breath... Focus”.

“OK, right... good... now, reach up... not too far... smack that ice-axe in and see what happens... ker-chunk... wow. That feels pretty good.” The wrist loop tightens and the axe sits snugly in its

new home looking like it will settle in and raise a family. “Now.. the other axe”... whack.. kerpoing..”Hmmm that’s rubbish. Try again – not so brutal this time – good... that’s better.... Now, move your feet up one at a time... watch out, don’t snag your new overtrou. Far out... that feels positive. Yeah. OK. I can do this!... Wohooo!”. My rock-fit body clunked into movement with shoulders, thighs and calves working and shaking with excitement and the edge of terror. The void opened up below me as I crunched upwards. By the time I reached TJ I was on a high. “Yeah man”. “This totally rocks, like even more than rock rocks! I’m a believer!” We whooped and hollered and those below thought we were either stoned or needing rescue. Actually, we were drunk on adrenalin, pumped full of the daring of 1 centimetre of steel locked in ice suspended over an abyss. And so the ice obsession was born.

From then on, every weekend TJ and I escaped the grey cloying city and climbed everything that the Mitsi van, our legs and getting back at 9am on a Monday would allow. Moonlight on Taranaki, Cupola in a blizzard, the couloir on Mt Hopeless, many a white-out on Ruapehu and endless river-crossings on an epic trip up Tapi. And when we weren’t recovering from the weekend we were scheming audacious new routes or sweating our way to cardio fitness. The rock wall was transformed from an end in itself to the means to our new goal... Tititea. Aspiring via the South West Ridge. Pure. Classic.

December approached and I was sleepless with anticipation when TJ dropped a bombshell. She was always hard to predict. Loved to shock and rode an edge that was too sharp, too challenging for most. It was a simple word she spoke, but one that bought up a breathless intensity of fear and desire. Repulsive and alluring all at once...

“Solo”...she said.. “you should do it solo”... “it’s much more intense, spiritual even. Only you and the mountain. And the voices in your head. I think you’re ready”.

Initially I felt abandoned and betrayed. I should have known she was dangerous, unethical, unreliable. She had hooked up with some other dread-locked loonies who were off to do something impossible in the Karakoram. In the midst of my rage and disappointment a small voice whispered “she’s right you know... you can do it”. And so the voice grew in strength as a plan was hatched in my head. I knew a mate who would come with me up the steep tree roots to French Ridge Hut and rope up for glacier travel up the Quarterdeck. We would look down into the depths of Gloomy Gorge and then plod in single file across the expansive white icing of the Bonar. They’d bivvy at the base of the South West ridge, scoff scroggin and sunbathe until I returned, or press the panic button if not.



And so the crisp dawn found me high above the Bonar on the final steep pitch. The elegant ridge curving away into the depths below barely showing any evidence of my passing. Doubt and fear were etched into my aching shoulders and taut calf muscles. The voices in my head made it clear that going down was extremely unappealing, so I began to inch upwards. Each axe swing was careful, calculated, precise, risking more and more as the placements got thinner and thinner. Crampon points seemed to scratch rather than sink into the surface. So intense was my concentration on each molecule of movement that there was no space for voices approving or defaming – everyone was holding their breath. With unblinking intensity I focussed on the immediate ice. To glance down would risk being drawn into the impossible aching emptiness below.

Those breathless moves lasted an eternity. It was more like balancing than climbing. Then without warning my gingerly placed axe plunged into deep ice. The shock of a positive hold jolted me into action and I catapulted upward into the new heaven of reliability. When I remembered to breathe the oxygen rushed to my head and I felt giddy with relief just as the summit came into view. As I stepped onto the top the pent up intensity erupted into sobs of relief, joy, wonder and humility that I had survived. The sobs morphed into crazy laughter, shouting and punching the sky. Yes! YES!

I had conquered the voices and now we were all laughing, eyes streaming with the freshness of cheating death and gulps of precious life.

In the midst of the riotous relief my ears pricked up as they caught a distant sound. I held my breath and strained to hear the sound that was coming towards me. I was completely alone, but the sound ricocheted, spiralled and cascaded off the surrounding walls, valleys and peaks, boomeranging towards me. It was as if, for the briefest of glimmering moments the mountain forgot itself and joined in the laughter.