

TITITEA SPEAKS

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It was a balmy night and a breeze almost warm danced through the hut as the last climbers prepared themselves for the short sleep ahead. An occasional clunk of metal suggested yet others were still sorting gear for the morning climb. This warm sultry mood was in stark contrast to the night before when winds ferociously rocked the hut and icy gusts almost funnelled climbers in from outside. The previous day's cold winds had prevented a successful summit bid as gusts had knocked us over at the base of the Ramp and large frozen icicles had hung menacingly from the rocks above. Within the hut, the cacophony of noises soon ceased and was replaced by sighs and gentle breathing as the hut once more cradled another group of climbers preparing for their quest ahead.

I woke early at two having reflected within the confines of my dream the anxieties of the previous day. I had felt disappointed and had a moment of tears when the summit attempt was thwarted though we had enjoyed a magnificent day of alternative climbs. And yes, I felt sure footed and well balanced and the fear of falling lessoned. This day would bring new challenges though as the stillness around the hut felt quite threatening, and several furtive glances passed between climbers as the soft snow and lack of freeze became apparent. Indecision for the journey onwards wavered but very soon a slow steady stream of head torches began to smear the mountain-side first across the glacier and then up the mountain flank. We pushed onwards whilst courting the very real risk of disappointment that Tititea would again not allow us to crest her ridge. Larger holes within the glacier were obvious even in the pre-dawn and required more conscious side-steps as the warmth of the impending day

became apparent. A group of three young Australian men passed beside me with their guide, at a pace faster than mine: "It's good to be out" yelled one of them to me, an air of apparent confidence resonating all around.

We moved upwards towards the Ramp with an unspoken but now increasing sense of concern. The guide ahead paused and seemed deep in reflection. The young men now only metres ahead were silent, their ebullience dampened. All movement slowed and I felt enveloped almost entranced by the mountain around me. Suddenly there was a violent pull on the rope. I looked upwards and heard a high pitched whistling sound which had catapulted itself from the dull light of the emerging dawn. Initially it was difficult to localize the sound but as my ears traced its source I saw a rolling-pin shape of snow hurtling directly towards me down from the rocks above. It seemed some time before reason and reflex took automatic control of movement. I remember distinctly trying to understand why a solitary piece of snow had become air-borne down the mountain. The whistling sound intensified and I sensed both a strong force and instant danger.

I threw myself down on to the slope like a cat. A funnel of air passed over me creating a cold draft down my back and into my parka hood. Then I felt a freezing sensation down my back and front as snow was stuffed down into my clothing. The air then stilled and the whistling noise abated. As I stood up I realised I was completely covered with snow, and my eyes greeted those of the climbers now gathered around me, their pupils dilated wide with fear and shock. The relief ran down their spines appearing to drain them as I reassured all that I was not in any way hurt. They had seen the rock and watched its progress down the mountain

toward my stooped body and yet seemingly been unable to alert me to the danger. Of course what I had perceived as taking some minutes had in fact unfolded in microseconds before speech muscles had time to create spoken words from unfolding thoughts. We made a quick-turn around with a pace now pressured as further rocks loosened from above. After a buddy check we continued back now retracing our steps to the hut. My mind was now alternating with the rhythm of the step placement and the realisation that a rock as large as my torso had catapulted through the air barely missing my pack.

We returned back to the hut as dawn was just breaking. Two early morning starts and the emotional relief that soothes the body after danger meant sleep easily overcame me. Tititea displayed her grandeur as she emerged from the dawn. I dreamt not of rock-falls but felt gently embraced by her as runnels of red and orange colours swept down her ridges to the glacier below and I was captivated by her beauty.

When I awoke after barely an hour of sleep, the events of the pre-dawn seemed like a dream. Cups of tea were proffered and further questions followed about my welfare. Such interest clarified any doubts I harboured about rock-fall being crafted by dreams.

The three young Australian men stood outside whilst discussing their final plans for the day and had not rested after their climb was thwarted. They remained shaken. A passing shadow of anxiety flickered across their faces. I remember from my medical training that witnesses of accidents can be as equally affected as potential victims.

As I sat with my tea, my eyes cast across the glacier, I contemplated the vagaries of weather systems and patterns. One could so easily explain the events of last two days as reflecting just that. However I like to think Tititea was not yet ready for me and was offering the opportunity to visit her again.