

## X Marks the Moments

Cormac Flynn

The only sounds within the tent are a steady stream of curses and the scraping of metal. The small space reeks of fuel and sweat. Paul is hunkered over a malfunctioning stove vigorously pumping the piston to pressurize the gas.

“Blasted thing!” he grunts.

“No luck yet I see,” I say trying to get comfortable lying on an assortment of rucksacks and sleeping bags. Paul turns to me, blinding me with his head-torch.

“How very astute,” he replies. “This is my third attempt on Magellan. I’ll be bummed if we have to bail after one day because of a crappy stove.”

He eyes the nozzle closely before scraping it carefully with a penknife.

“Jeff’s been gone awhile,” I say.

“Nature is giving him a long call,” Paul replies. “Thinks he might have a touch of giardia after last weekend.”

“It’s a nice dramatic setting to have a dicky stomach and diarrhoea.”

I lie back and close my eyes. The smell of the fuel is making me drowsy. The tent wall presses in on my face from the strengthening wind. The flysheet flaps incessantly. There is a sound of crunching snow barely discernible from the gale. It grows louder. A pause then a sudden opening of the tent-zip.

“Man, great to lighten the load,” Jeff exclaims poking his head in. His breath smokes in the beam of his head-torch.

“Well as long as you do it well away from here,” I say sitting up to make room for him.

Jeff looks over at Paul. “So Boss, are we gonna have a brew or what?”

“Probably not, mate. That’s the last time I’m borrowing anything of Matt’s.”

I pick up the stove and examine it. There is a big green X painted on the side of it.

“Hey, doesn’t Matt mark his faulty gear with an X?” I enquire.

“So it would seem,” Paul sighs. “Won’t be able to get any more water now.”

“That wind is really picking up out there,” says Jeff. “Look’s like that weather forecast was a tad off the mark.”

“Listen,” Paul says seriously. “Between the on coming Nor’ Wester and the dud stove, we’re going to have to descend at first light.”

“I don’t fancy a descent from this spot,” I say.

“Damn right. I hope to hell the snow holds off. There’s plenty of tricky terrain to cope with to get to Katies Col and then down to the Pioneer Hut.”

We all ponder our situation in silence. Shoulders rub roughly. Something sharp digs into my back. The tent walls heave in closer. The air grows staler.

“Right! I’m calling it a night,” I say getting to my knees and unzipping the door. “I’ll sound the alarm. You two boys have a nice night now.”

I heave myself out into the cold gale. The sky is pinpricked with millions of stars. There is a large halo around the full moon. A few feet from the tent, the terrain falls steeply to the Lower Balfour Glacier. The crevasses stand out sharply as black lines. The glacier undulates down to the forest. The silhouettes of Tasman, Torres, Magellan and Drake tower over me. The distant glow off a cluster of homesteads gives off a warm, homely feel. A sharp gust of wind stirs me to action. I check the stakes on my bivvy bag before zipping myself into my cocoon.

---

The gravel of the driveway crunches in the crisp night air. I stop and look down at the hut. I haven't seen it since my college days in Dublin. Shadows dart about in the yellow windows. A full moon is suspended over the roof. I shoulder my pack and walk down to the red, iron door. I press the latch and push it in. A wave of conversation, noise, and music pour out on top of me. I step into the kitchen that hasn't changed in the intervening years. The whitewashed walls; the long table covered with drink cans; the pots and pans stacked in the shelves. The table is lined with people drinking and bantering about the day's events. One guy is making exaggerated motions with his arms demonstrating some gymnastic move he claims to have made on the rock earlier. He succeeds in knocking over a can of Scrumpy Jack, which generates wild protests from his neighbours. Over at the cooker, someone is trying to light the temperamental grill to make toast. I recognize a few of the faces from the past. A friend throws me a can of beer. I reach to grab it but my pack unbalances me and I miss it. I must get rid of my stuff in one of the dorms. I shuffle on to the stairs. The soles of my boots grate against the bare concrete floor. One bloke is bridging up the walls to the second floor. I choose the stairs and pass underneath him and head up to a dorm. I remember to duck my head under the low doorway. Laughing emanates from an amorous couple lying in a dark corner. I dump my pack and head back down. I look into the living room. The fire is roaring and the stereo is up full volume. Dark silhouettes bounce about and throw flickering shadows up on the walls. Someone calls my name. I salute into the darkness but the humidity prevents me from entering. I return to the kitchen grab a beer and squeeze into a bench along the table. Brian, an old climbing buddy is sitting opposite.

"Howya Mick! When did you get back?"

"A week ago. How's the crack with yourself?"

"Ah same ol' same ol'. What's life like in New Zealand? Been climbing much?"

"As much as I can."

"Any epics?"

"Er ... yeah ... of sorts."

I proceed to tell Brian of the aborted climb with Paul and Jeff on Magellan.

"Aye, sounds like a grand day in the hills," Brian says slugging another mouthful of beer. "Exposed on an avalanche prone glacier in the face of a storm. How'd ye get down off that one?"

"Eh?" I am distracted by something on the ledge behind Brian. There is a stove with a big green X painted on the side of it.

"Mick! How did you get down?"

I look at Brian in a strange manner.

"Brian, I don't think we have yet."

---

I awake with a start. It is dark. I am convinced I can smell stale beer. I feel a weight pressing down on my body. I need air. I struggle for the zip on the bivy bag and burst out into the teeth of a Nor' Wester. My bag is covered in snow. Dawn has broken into a grey, stormy day. The snow drives into my face. I step into my boots and stumble over to the tent.

"Paul! Jeff!"

I unzip the door.

"It's time to get the hell off this mountain."

Word count: 1159