

Free Radical

BY GAIL INGRAM

Becs followed Campbell, dragging her rope and prussic-filled pack away from the spindrift of the ski plane. A few minutes later it buzzed over the rim of the glacier, and they were alone. They sat on their packs, the hut like a strange glassy rock in the distance. Once in a while, she changed position to get a different view.

The place was impossible to define. If she'd had a frame of reference—the view from the plane window, for example—she might have been able to place herself: *I am the speck in the centre of the Grand Plateau.*

But all she had were sensations—the sting of atmosphere on her throat; the delayed boom of an avalanche; the sense of ice grinding under her feet. She felt as if she was a molecule adrift in the mountain air.

At one point they talked about their route. Campbell pointed out Zurbriggen Ridge and she traced the long, jagged line up the mountain with her finger, noticing the many steep pitches requiring rope work.

'Are you sure?' she asked, hoping that seeing the real thing might change his mind. Her preference was for the snowy Linda Glacier around the side of the ridge; it was shorter, less technical and the most popular route for first-timers. 'The Linda looks pretty good,' she added.

'No,' he said shortly.

Becs screwed her mouth but kept her silence. She knew it was the Gun Barrel he didn't like, the avalanche chute they would have to pass under if they took the Linda—it had been known to knock a few climbers off. Still, she couldn't ignore the prick of irritation under her skin. Didn't he think the longer, more exposed ridge might be a risk in itself? Especially since the Gun Barrel didn't bother her. True, it was something you couldn't control, but she preferred to believe in good luck. Why not? Life had buoyed her along until now. Look at the two of them. A unit. A Yin and Yang. How many people had that? That was why, she supposed, she acquiesced. The Yang's technical expertise was an irritation in her side but up here she might need it.

In the evening, Becs found it hard to snap out of the trance the mountains had brought on. She stood at the kitchen entrance watching the climbers preparing their freeze-dried meals. One hot-shot was telling a fellow-climber the weather forecast. Really, he was making sure the whole hut heard. He knew his magnetism, a rough-at-the-edge cockiness she'd begun to associate with climbers. *You had to be*, she thought, *to take on these big mountains with rocky buttresses and black falls.* A thrill shivered through her. Could this really be her—in the same peer group as this gun—at the *Plateau Hut* planning to climb *Mt Cook*, names that had rung in her ears since childhood?

Lying in her sleeping bag that night, she couldn't sleep; too cold, light headed. The bunkroom was full of shuffling restlessness. She thought of Cook. Had they dreamed too big? Before the plane had taken off that morning, they'd joked of the sweet victory it might be; their mountain followed by their wedding in a month. Drifting in and out, she was aware of her bones on the wooden bunk, the thinness of down around her shoulders and the grey humps of packs across the room like Hobbits huddled in Greatcoats.

It seemed wrong when the first beep-beep of someone's alarm went off. Then the ceaseless shuffling of people getting dressed, pulling packs off racks, rustling plastic bags and the crunch crunch on snow outside. Silence, waiting for their turn, hoping it wouldn't come.

Another hour perhaps, with morning threatening at the window, they sat up, their legs over the bunk. 4.30am. Other climbers were getting up too. Not speaking, everything automatic: shell over fleecie over polypro—no time for clean undies; drink as many glasses of water as possible—six; get the cooker going, make tea, porridge, gulp it down.

Outside, the giants encircled the hut, dim shapes under the velvet blanket of the Milky Way. Fingers worked like separate entities to harness up, toss slings over shoulders then rope together. They nodded at their chosen route across the plateau to Zurbriggen and began walking, their headlamps making a white path through the grey. Ahead, two other circles of white lights were veering up left towards the Linda.

They stepped over black cracks in their path, crevasses too long to zigzag around. Once Campbell put in a belay to enable them to cross an ice bridge that stretched halfway across a gaping crack. Becs went first, the rope taut between them. The ice seemed brittle, but firm. The walls of the crevasse were dark. No bottom, only a decreasing black slit.

Suddenly, the climber fell. The belayer slipped and slid across the ice towards the edge. The climber hung suspended, legs dangling into nothingness ...

Sometimes she hated her imagination. It was two steps—that was all—and a leap to the other side. She watched Campbell when it was his turn. He stepped gingerly on the bridge then they carried on. The reality of climbing wasn't like the movies at all. Still, it was hard to shake the eeriness. The cold greys of dawn and their footsteps crunching into silence kept her in thrall of the thing they were doing.

Becs took the lead; Campbell seemed to be slowing. They hadn't reached the ridge yet. She wondered how they would handle the pitches, the ridge and the timing—the top was only halfway. The snow on the plateau was firm, easy-going. She had to wait for Campbell.

'Come on,' she urged.

'I'm coming.'

Did he think it was a picnic? The bottom of the ridge was another thirty minutes. Becs let out another loop of rope; Campbell was dropping behind again. He didn't hurry despite her impatience. The fourth time she stopped to wait, he called for a break, pointing out they'd crossed the Plateau now.

It had taken two hours, longer than she'd expected. Chewing her raisins, she looked along their chosen route. From here they would be climbing up a snowy ramp, then onto the rocks and ice. It looked as hard as anything they'd done, and much longer and more exposed. She squashed down the image of the rock face that came after the ridge. Campbell was taking too long for his break. 'We better get going,' she said, suppressing a rising anger.

'I think we should belay from here,' Campbell said without getting up from his rock.

'But it's okay until we get off the snow ramp,' she objected. 'It's wasting time.'

Campbell didn't answer. He didn't get up either. She began to set up the belay: *dig ice-axe into appropriate spot, feed sling—no—live rope through carabiner, screw carabiner, tie on prussik from harness*. The routine was clumsy in her mind even now after many practice weekends. It was the physical act of climbing she found easy, her lungs stretched with air, the freedom of leaping on schist ... not this rope stuff.

'Ready,' she called. 'You can climb now.'

Campbell got up. She pulled the rope-slack through so she was in touch with him, and he began to trudge upwards. *God, why so slow?*

He stopped and bent over.

'What's the matter?' She climbed up to him.

'I've been sick.'

'What?'

He was looking at the snow, wiping his mouth. She started raving at him. Just nerves. They were here to climb. It'd be all right. Come on. Get up. Get going.

'It could be the altitude.'

What?

'I haven't been feeling that great. I don't think we should go on.' His voice was a wall.

'But, how can it be altitude sickness?' she faltered. People got altitude sickness in the Himalaya, not in New Zealand.

'We're at 3,000 metres.'

A hard bubble came into Becs' throat. She didn't believe him ... he'd been sick ... but he'd be all right!

She couldn't talk, stood looking at the snow around her boots, the rope heavy in her hand, the sky getting paler.

'We can try one of the other peaks tomorrow,' Campbell said, his voice lighter; offering consolation.

But it's not Mt Cook, she cried in her head. It didn't matter if the gun didn't rate it; it was *her* dream; she would never have the chance to do it again ... the weather, the wedding next month, the two years training.

Campbell waited.

At last she said, 'I wanted to climb Mt Cook.'

'I know.' His voice sounded as desolate as hers.

Walking back across the glacier, Campbell suggested she try next weekend with a guide. She shook her head. No, she didn't want that.

It wasn't that anything had changed. The only thing she knew for sure was that something had solidified in the pit of her stomach, and she imagined the bright molecules of mountain air bouncing off her outer layers.

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