

Saturday, 18 October, 2014

West of and several hundred meters below Col de Susanfe, Canton du Valais, Switzerland. Bivouac simplicity. Wet t-shirt pinned down with rocks, pack leaned against rock, I lean against pack, a bundled bespectacled red worm scribbling as the last of the day's light fades. Stillness cut with the consistent rush of a trickle source out of sight in the deepest cut of this lunar valley. Grey, pink, violet, and subdued magenta mix with soft grey of last light and a soft breeze from the west where a bank of horizon clouds lingers, ominous. Weather tonight? Clear skies overhead, forecast for sun tomorrow, but if rain rolls in, could be miserable. Tomorrow morning, first light, hoping to summit Haute Cime, if no ice and no vertigo.

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I remember meeting Uli Steck at a talk he gave, and I thought his speed record on the Eiger was pretty cool. It was my first exposure to the world of mountaineering in the Alps, and I was fascinated. It was a small factor that drove me to Switzerland to study for a semester, but a factor nonetheless.

Since I've been here, though, it seems the main feats in the world of climbing and big mountains have been elsewhere. The American climbers Conrad Anker, Jimmy Chin, and Renan Ozturk reached the summit of a peak in the Himalaya's called Meru Central (6310 meters, or 20702.1 feet) not long before my meander up Haute Cime. It was a first ascent on the Shark Fin, a route that has baffled international teams for well over a decade, but I wasn't aware of the feat until I started following Jimmy Chin on Facebook, at the suggestion of my climbing friend Stéphan. I was, however, aware of the more recent completion of the Dawn Wall by Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgenson in the middle of January. The climb was sensationalized in the media, and even in the sleepy city of Lausanne, Switzerland, I thought I could feel the buzz of excitement when they finished.

32 pitches? Sounds more like the number I would offer up if someone asked me how many climbs I'd led in my life. 20,702.1 feet? I think I've been to 10,000 feet, a couple of times. And the Eiger is a summit I try and pick out whenever I get high enough in the mountains around Lake Geneva. It's a data point, something on the horizon line. Climbing it? A fantasy.

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I unrolled my sleeping pad in the flattest place I could find. Maybe it was the rocks protruding into my spinal column, or maybe it was the touch of frost in the air, or maybe it was the unnerving silence, but whatever it was, the night's sleep was fitful. Even bundled in all of the clothes in my backpack – save yesterday's sweaty t-shirt – my beat-up 20° bag isn't quite sufficient to keep my feet warm at this 2000 m bivouac just below the Col du Susanfe. Here at the transition between alpine grasses and rocky alpine desert, the light breeze slithers up the valley unimpeded by tree or bush and chills the toes.

I check my watch for the umpteenth time by the light of my headlamp: 5:00 am.

Convinced I will sleep no more, I don my glasses and gaze for a few more minutes at the spray of pearl stars above. I can see Orion has shifted to the horizon from its overhead position earlier in the night. I recognize Taurus and Cassiopeia and congratulate myself. Silence, save the wind. Unnerving, this immensity. The sound of a rock clattering down the steep slope of La Tour Sallière echoes through the stillness, a comforting gunshot that is within the realm of grasping for my feeble mind. This immensity unnerves because it is not.

I'm alone. Alone with this sky, these peaks, this night. Completely alone. Blessedly alone. Now, when there is no person in this world who knows my exact location, when I have not seen a soul since yesterday afternoon, I can feel – not in a threatening way, but in my bones – how easily these mountains would crush me, grind me to dust. I am insignificance embodied. I could be that clattering rock; it makes no difference to the mountains.

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I have no memory of learning how to ski; it's something I've simply done my whole life, coming from a New England ski-racing family. I do have early memories of sitting in front of the TV watching...well, I'm not sure what I was watching, really. Sprawled across a blue-grey carpet, images of snowy ridges and frostbitten hands on screen flicker through my memory. The word "Everest," I think. We were living in Maine at the time, and my Dad was working at LL Bean.

On Wednesday evenings, my dad used to take me to the Rock Barn in Plymouth when he taught high school English in central New Hampshire. He would shoot the shit with his friend Jim and teach me how to climb and belay and let me play around in the boulder cave. I imagine he was underwhelmed and maybe slightly disappointed by my performance on the wall; I was terrified of heights and completing a route was a rarity.

We moved further away from the Rock Barn around the time it went out of business, and we stopped climbing. I think Dad was concerned about forcing the march; my fear of heights was tear-inducing when I was ten.

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I sit up in my sleeping bag and reluctantly shrug out of the hood. I click on the headlamp, find my plastic food bag and pull out an apple, a hunk of bread, a piece of chocolate. I chew deliberately – headlamp off again – contemplating the silhouettes of peaks and ridges around me. I marvel at the mild temperatures. Given it's early October and I'm above treeline somewhere north of 6,500 feet, this slight chill seems trivial. Tropical, almost.

I throw back a mouthful of water from my Nalgene, haul myself the rest of the way out of the red bag. I shed all of my layers, put on yesterday's t-shirt, re-apply a couple layers over top, stuff my feet into shoes, stuff my sleeping bag into my father's old, tattered red L.L. Bean trekking pack – the one that I pulled off a hook in the garage – then roll up my sleeping pad and strap it to the outside. I shoulder the pack and cinch the waist belt. Step by tentative step, I feel my way up towards the Col de Susanfe by starlight and the sliver of the crescent moon that just appeared over La Tour Sallière.

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The first time I climbed Mt. Lafayette in the White Mountains of New Hampshire was with Dad on an unsettled summer day when I was twelve or thirteen. The cloud ceiling hung around Greenleaf Hut at 4,200 feet. Driving up Interstate 93 from Holderness, the sky had been spitting rain. The weather forecast had predicted a small chance of thunderstorms, but we arrived at the first viewpoint, a rocky outcropping a mile or two up from the trailhead without so much as a whisper of thunder and a light drizzle. From the outcropping, we could see the summits of Lincoln and Lafayette slipping in and out of swirling pearly vapor. My attention was drawn elsewhere though. As I looked over the cliff's edge, I turned to Dad and commented "That would hurt," then edged further from the precipice. Dad took a step closer to the edge and looked down. "Really? That's what you're thinking about right now? How much it would hurt *if you fell?*"

I can't remember if he actually spent the rest of the hike lecturing me about the importance of not letting my life be controlled by fear, but that's how the memory has cemented itself. That's how I relive it now, on the side of Haute Cime.

Lessons from Lafayette. I haven't thought about that day in a while. Mountains beget memories of the mountains, I guess.

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I reach the col as dawn begins to bleach the night. At first, I can't find the trail up to Haute Cime; there are no trail markers and no apparent trail visible by the light of my headlamp. Nothing but flattish rocks ground down by wind and weather into this ridge shape. I pause and contemplate waiting at the col for fifteen minutes until it lightens up. But the wind is cold and I can see the summit – 750 m from the col, says the guide book – so I strike upwards.

Soon I come to a low rock wall built up against a steep section of ridge. I duck behind it and look around, looking for the trail I presume to be nearby this monument to human passage. There it is, headed east and up on the diagonal. I walk up the trail for five minutes and freeze, swaying slightly as I contemplate the steep slope below me. *One false step, and you'll slide until you hit something that breaks you* I think to myself.

I turn around, return to the low wall and drop my pack, stuffing a hat into my pocket. More stable without a pack, I reason. I start back up the trail. Several times, the steep slope and the prospect of poor footing paralyzes me and several times I lose the trail and retrace my steps back 15 or 20 meters to find it again. I hum a song from a childhood Christmas movie, snatch a couple lyrics from distant memory and sing them to myself: *Put one foo-oot in front ooof the other, da-da di-doo.*

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This summer, in a new city and a new country, I was in desperate need of climbing partners. I don't like to climb with people I don't trust with my life, but alone in another country, I couldn't split hairs. On August second, the day after the Swiss National holiday, I had made plans to climb with a group from the Mountain Club at the Swiss Polytechnical Institute. I only knew one of the company by face; all the logistics were organized by email. The plan was to meet in Aigle at the train station and carpool to Yvorne for a day of sport climbing.

The morning of August second rolled around and I rolled in to Aigle on the 9:51 InterRegio to Brig. I spotted a woman in outdoorsy-looking wear. I sidled over and asked if she was Lillie from the email chain. She was. We walked across the station's parking lot and sat down at the café on the other side to drink a coffee and wait for the others. I guess the national holiday hangovers won out that day; the others never showed. Stranded without rope or guidebook, we decided to hike to the glacier below Les Diablerets and take the tram back down before the afternoon's forecasted thunderstorms.

After a hair-raising ride up to the Col du Pillon – Lillie used to race cars in LA as a graduate student – and the requisite pre-departure pack fumbling, we set off up the switchback trail beneath the Glacier 3000 tram. Sun streamed down from a partly cloudy sky. Mud accumulated on my shoes, inducing fits of foot knocking every switchback or so. With the foot knocking came moments to pause and look around. Green pastures punctuated with spruce trees, cow bells echoing up from the valleys on either side of the col. Sickeningly bucolic to the point artificial; post-card worthy.

I pulled out my phone camera to snap a few pictures. *Mom and Dad will love this*, I thought to myself.

"I don't take pictures when I'm in the mountains," Lillie commented wryly. "When I'm here, hiking or biking or climbing, this is my time to be completely present. My time. No one else's."

I was relieved when my battery died.

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The wind is cold, so I stuff my hands in my pocket and focus on moving forward, moving up. Should have remembered to grab the gloves from my pack. The trail is getting easier to follow, a function of the increasing light.

Fuck. It's a really long way down, and there's not much to slow the slide.

The sky is clear. Above me, movement. Heart races. I see someone coming down towards me. A man with sleeping pad rolled up, bundled in more layers than I am. *T'as dormi en haut?* I ask. *Oui.* He responds. A kindred spirit. I smile. We pass each other.

One foo-oot in front ooof the other, da-da di-doom...

I reach the crest of the last shoulder before the summit as the first tendrils of light creep across the Alps. To the south, I see white-capped Mont Blanc painted salmon-tangerine where the tendrils reach, a soft cobalt blue where they don't. There's a small patch of snow, a low stone wall. Must have been the other guy's bivouac site. Cold. The wind snaps and crinkles my tired khaki Northface raincoat. The morning sunlight casts warm tones across this sea of mountains but fails to warm me. I look at the last leg to the summit, and imagine it only slightly steeper than the path up which Gollum leads Sam and Frodo to Shelob's Lair.

I whip out the phone camera and snap a picture of Mont Blanc, a picture of the summit. Then I remember Lillie. I put the phone away.

Again, I contemplate watching the sunrise from where I stand and descending. But I've come this far. And the guidebook said strenuous (read: steep), but not technical. Famous last words, maybe, but I point my paces upwards.

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About half hour after striking up from the last shoulder-crest, I arrived at the summit. I thought about Lillie and left the phone in my pack. I explored the snow-filled crevices and peered down the north face of the mountain, a sheer wall. There was a crow – at least I think it was a crow, with a yellow beak – hopping across the rocks, taking flight, winging loops in the wind.

I thought about the descent, and how important it was to avoid rolling my ankle, up on high on my own. I thought about the consequences of slipping or tripping and tumbling down the north face.

Then I thought about Lafayette, and I focused instead on the crow. I admired its black wind-ruffled feathers glistening. I basked in the cold sunlight, and engraved the horizon line in my mind. I looked out over the valleys containing their multitudes of lives and felt lucky to be on the summit watching the sun rise over the

Alps. I surrendered to the silence, my insignificance, and my solitude and I felt fiercely, joyously alive.