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Behind the Glass

Some men go through a transition stage in their mid-thirties, settling in or moving on to something or someone new. For women, it's earlier. By their thirties they've generally decided on a path, family, profession but their mid-twenties gives them pause.

I turned twenty-six in 1963. I was searching for the center, for the core of things, attempting to find a point from which I could define myself. That may be why I climbed. Maybe I wanted to force myself into nature, to develop a relationship with her beyond mere observation, to put myself at the mercy of the elements in order to glean from them a kind of knowledge not available to the casual student. I wanted to be John Muir in his tree, not a laboratory botanist, and an expedition to the Chugach Mountains in Alaska gave me an opportunity to go further into the heart of things than I had ever gone before.

Richard, my husband, and I had been living in an eastern industrial centre where he was an engineer and I taught language and literature at a small college. We spent every weekend driving to rock-climbing areas. We would leave as early as possible Friday evening and arrive home in time for work Monday morning.

We spent summers in the Rockies, the Kootenays, the Selkirks, or further south in the Tetons or Wind Rivers of Wyoming. That year John, a climbing acquaintance who had contacts in Anchorage, suggested climbing Mt. Marcus Baker in Alaska. The mountain had been climbed once before, in 1938, the year

of my birth. John suggested an expedition to climb a new route beginning on the glacier below the mountain, and he explained that the mountaineering club in Anchorage had written that at least one person from their group wanted to join such an expedition if it came about. The prospect was exciting.

Accordingly, the three of us left home the second week in June and headed west on the Trans-Canada. Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, we ticked off the provinces like minutes in an hour glass, passing through Grand Prairie at two o'clock in the morning when nothing moved on the streets and the land stretched out before and after the city like flat breads put out by a housewife to cool. At Dawson Creek we bought plastic covers for the headlights to protect them from flying gravel on the still unpaved Alaska Highway. In Whitehorse we bought steak in the supermarket and cooked it that night over a fire at the edge of the road. We marvelled at the high prices of commodities and at the eternity of black spruce that surrounded us. The road was a dusty rope tying Whitehorse to the cities ahead.

We battled mosquitoes larger than any we had encountered even in the back country of British Columbia, and we avoided the campgrounds with their overflowing outhouses and garbage cans surrounded by flies, preferring instead the occasional gravel pit where we pitched tents in the lee of the car. There was little sleep, however, as the late spring sun glowed nightly through the yellow tents.

Our fourth day on the Highway brought us to Anchorage. Our dispositions were frayed by dust, insects and exhaustion, and Anchorage was a disappointment. The city was a frontier town afflicted by cancerous suburban growth. Three months earlier, on Good Friday, there had been an earthquake the results of which could be seen in the rubble along the main street and in the houses tipped precariously off mud cliffs outside the centre of town. And although the offshore volcanic peaks jutted cleanly skyward out of the ocean, the interior

Chugach Range shed rotten rock off crumbling sides. I wanted to head south, to British Columbia and the clean blue granite of the Bugaboos.

But that night I decided to stay. We went to the monthly meeting of the mountain club and I met the climber who wanted to join us. My hopes for a good expedition were raised on two counts: the climber had a lot of experience in the Alaska mountains and she, Ingrid, was a woman.

Two days later we did an air reconnaissance of the Marcus Baker Glacier.

"Hey, look at that," the pilot shouted as we flew slowly over the river of ice that would be our route in two days.

On the ridge to our left and slightly ahead moved a large blond grizzly, his coat golden in the late afternoon sun. The pilot tipped us wingward and swung down, expecting to see the grizzly run when the plane drew near. Instead the bear flung back his head, mouth open, and reared onto his hind legs pawing the air and screaming his outrage at the plane, a gigantic insect entering his domain.

"He knows whose country this is," the pilot called back.

We could see the glacier stretched from a winding green river at its tongue to Marcus Baker and Mt. Good, with crevasses giving way to solid snow two-thirds of the way up. The earthquake had shaken everything loose. Ice blocks the size of houses had slid down the sides of cirques pushing soft snow before them. There appeared to be a way through the maze, but at one point the crevasses were so thick we would have to forego the ice and clamber over the moraine, at least a three hour climb. We figured if we were flown into the Grasshopper landing strip at the bottom of the glacier, the route would take four days then one day for the climb up Marcus Baker. We would allow six days, and if we had extra time we would climb Mt. Good.

Ingrid needed to make arrangements for the care of her two young children, and we needed time to recuperate from our long drive, so we didn't

leave Anchorage until the last week in June. Although it was summer, it was a cold day when we began our trek. I remember the wind in my face and the edges of my balaclava freezing against my cheeks when I stood at the edge of the landing strip and watched the plane disappear back towards the city. But our spirits were high as we took a first step on the untraversed glacier.

It rained later that day, but even then it was beautiful. Rivers of slush poured down the glacier, tumbled into moulins and were whisked down to the very heart of the ice, flowing silently through realms of soft light to the tip of the glacier, the melting source of the river below. The sun came out momentarily and we gazed down one of the moulins, a blue whirlpool moving faster than my eye could follow. I pictured a person pulled down in those waters, a sub glacial Alice exploring crystal rabbit holes.

The second day we got higher and rain turned to snow and then diminished by the day-night evening, when the sun sat at midnight on the horizon for an instant's rest before climbing laboriously back into the sky. The yellow tent heightened the daylight illusion, and our eyes stared at the light, waiting for morning.

That day the sun turned snow into a desert, burning our eyes and skin when we removed the parkas that had become too warm. We roped up and moved slowly over the crevasse fields, ice axes ready for a sudden arrest, rigging ladders over cracks we couldn't circumvent.

The worst part of the pack-in arrived as the glacier turned and dropped into a convexity bristling with falling towers of ice. We worked our way over to the moraine to avoid these seracs. There, glassy ice turned to rotten rock and mud where every ounce in my fifty pound pack made itself known. With pack straps cutting my shoulders, my back sweating, wet boots rubbing broken blisters on my raw heels, I felt my energy dissipate and began to think that making a second ascent of a peak climbed twenty-five years earlier was foolish. But when we

stood at the top of the moraine the glacier stretched out above and below us, gleaming its invitation to go on to the top and into the wonderland seen only by bush pilots from their planes.

The third day was glorious. At seven thousand feet we had reached the smooth light snow above the open crevasse field and could walk easily on snowshoes. This was a marshmallow cream world with every rise in the terrain covered with white topping. We improvised headgear from white cloth foodbags and moved like Bedouins against the sun, laughing at our shadows. Our energies revived, we dropped our packs and capered on the landscape, turning summersaults in the snow.

We made our base camp on the fourth day at the mouth of a cirque that dropped like an epaulet from the shoulder of Marcus Baker. The sun was temporarily blocked by the west wall of the cirque and a fine white mist settled in, muffling our voices and making us aware, for the first time, of our isolation.

Our spirits dropped as suddenly as they had risen and our earlier exhaustion returned along with an unnamed anxiety. We did our camping chores either silently or with sharp words. We quarrelled about the cooking and the melting of snow for water, and we cast anxious glances at the mountain as it became gradually obscured in the mist.

White clouds moved in that night and the rock candy landscape beneath us disappeared, leaving only the jaw of the cirque, overhung by a broken cornice from which large chunks of snow and ice had fallen like rotten teeth. We slept little and on the following morning tempers were short. We argued about the weather, some saying the clouds would lift as the morning wore on, others that we had allowed an extra day, why not take it? Yet if it were possible to climb Marcus Baker today, then we could make a first ascent on Mt. Good tomorrow, in this way gaining two peaks for our expedition.

And we argued about the route on the now nearly invisible Marcus Baker: whether to go around the side of the cirque, staying well above the cornice, and then on up the shoulder, or to go directly up the headwall of the cirque. While the latter would be quicker, the former would be safer. For the first time the tent was too small to hold our four personalities and perhaps for this reason we decided unwisely not only to climb, but to go directly up the headwall.

We left the snowshoes behind on this last day, feeling they would be a hindrance once the climbing became steep, and we started out unroped. The soft snow gave way beneath our feet and we sank in further each time we moved. My own anger with the day, the conditions, and my comrades grew with every step.

When it was my turn to break trail I resentfully pushed ahead of John, glancing back to locate Richard and Ingrid placing flags behind us. It had begun to snow, and those tiny flags, made one evening by the fireplace out of tomato stakes and red cloth, would become our way back to camp if the white-out became complete. They grew out of the snow like poppies.

My anger fuelled me and I pushed ahead, sank in, pushed again. Beside me was the dim outline of an ice block dropped from the cornice; beyond it, I thought, the walking would become easier. I couldn't tell how far we had come up the wall of the cirque as the blending of snow and sky made steepness a matter of feel and guess, and I had heard stories of climbers thinking they were on level ground when actually they were climbing. Certainly I was winded, but that might have been from moving in deep snow, or from anger.

The next step, however, brought the snow to my waist.

"It won't go," I thought, and I turned to those behind me.

They were tending to the flagging, and I waited for someone to look forward again, having no breath to call but an eternity to wait. I stood with the snow encircling my waist and stretching out as far as I could see; it was as

though I were wearing the earth like a crinoline and the figures moving in the mist danced on my skirt.

Suddenly the snow settled as if it would adjust my weight more equitably and I sank in to my armpits.

"John," I called too softly to the nearest figure.

Then my throat closed as I realized my legs hung free. I had sunk into snow covering the bergschrund, the predictable crevasse where the ice of the glacier breaks away from the mountain, something we would have known we were near had we been able to see how high we'd come.

With a jolt, time started up again as I broke through the crust. Snow and ice flew in chunks around me as I fell and, wildly awake for the first time in my life, I knew both the speed of the fall and fear of being buried in snow. My back brushed the vertical wall down which I sped, slowing my movement, but then the wall dropped away and the rate of my descent increased. I was in an elevator shaft leading into the bowels of the glacier where the bergschrund would deposit me to be frozen into the slow moving ice for a millennium until I would be spit off the tongue of the glacier, a time capsule recording a human's attempt to play with nature.

A sudden shock of pain shot through my leg and side. Our climbing rope, coiled uselessly around my shoulder, disappeared below me, along with my ice axe, hat and goggles as I was flipped upside down. Snow powdered my body and face and combed through my hair. In the silence that followed, I heard myself scream.

My leg, caught on a thin ice fence coming out from the side of the bergschrund, was wedged in by a chunk of hard snow that had broken off from its lip. I hung upside down like a broken doll. Beneath me the ice fell away, turning from sapphire to azure to black. Sixty feet above me I saw Richard's pale face.

Our second rope was thrown with a web harness and I was instructed to help as I was hauled back up to the others. The rescue rope cut through the soft edge of the bergschrund making the last few feet a snow bath through which I emerged like a new born snowbaby.

Real fear didn’t come until that night. My left leg was useless. I was helped back down the line of flags to the tent which was collapsed and folded into a kind of primitive sled on which I was dragged several miles back down to the top of the open crevasse field where we set up camp to wait for rescue. Then, while others slept in exhaustion, I lay awake hearing the voices of the bergschrund laughing, and I realized for the first time in my twenty-six years that I could die.

The following day was clear. Our bush pilot flew in to see how the climb was going and responded to our signal to organize a rescue through the Rescue Communications Center. In the rescue helicopter, all the details of our four day trek blended into a twenty minute blur as we flew back to the city opening like a wound on the shore. I watched cars racing down the main street and ladies window shopping on their lunch hour, and weariness pressed in on me like the blue ice.

After that summer we moved further east. We bought a farm on Cape Breton Island. We had children, created a home, and built careers. Now, forty-five years later sitting in the warmth of my study with the map of Alaska in front of me, I know that I had to go to the edge before I could find the core.