1979 The Timeless Face

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WHEN I PINNED THE PICTURE OF Mt. Huntington’s north face onto my bedroom wall, I felt the heat of a glowing knot in my stomach. Each month, as Simon McCartney and I planned our expedition, the knot grew larger and larger. By the time we drove north, it had swollen to a chunk of hard, hot coal.

Simon and I had first seen the face on the front of Mountain #19—sheer, steep and white, streaked with dark rock, so smooth it almost seemed to glisten under the cornice-covered ridges—and we agreed it would be our next fix. I knew Simon would be the ideal partner. We’d met...

I remember the exact moment when we knew the mountain had become alive. I was following an ice pitch, and a hundred feet into it I looked up and saw a huge wall of snow headed toward me. Simon and I yelled as if we could drown it out. Knocked off my frontpoints, I spun helplessly in the air. It was at that point that I gave up trying to control the situation: the mountain and the storms were dictating where and when we climbed or hid. I could only accept it and keep going.

At bivies, we’d distract ourselves by reading the fortunes on our Salada teabags. Lines like “the hardest tumble one can take is falling over one’s own bluff” kept our conversation light and easy.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to eat when we get out of this?” Simon would ask.

“Everything,” I’d answer.

Deliverance would only come by climbing through the pain, the hunger, the confusion and the fear of death (Would we die when a cornice collapsed? Or when we froze?). Our biggest concern was that we would never find our way out. During one bivy I felt as though I were floating and looking down on my own sleeping body. A calm filled me, and I thought, “We’re gonna get through this in one piece.”

Five days after we started, we stood on top of the mountain, exhausted but alive. We began down the Harvard Route with no idea that it would take three more days to reach the Tokositna Glacier and another two to climb over the French Ridge to the Ruth. We had nothing left to eat; we lost our ropes and had to rely on an old fixed rope we found frozen in the ice; Simon fell through a cornice and sprained his ankle. By the time we reached camp, we had been gone almost ten days and lost twenty-five pounds each. We were not the same two climbers who had left for a grand adventure.

I’ve spent the rest of my life trying in vain to recapture that experience. Before the climb I didn’t know what I wanted; now I am haunted by what I felt and what I still need. I’ve gone on to higher and more dangerous mountains with less gear. But twenty-nine years later the memory of our climb continues to drive me. All that has changed is that every year deposits another layer of scar tissue over the hot ember that still burns today.

I climb because I need to feel that heat.