



FULL VALUE

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I WAS IN LOVE. Below me, the Middle Teton's Northwest Couloir snaked down for a thousand feet, then shot over cliffs into Idaho. The southwest face of the Grand Teton, directly across, burned in brilliant alpenglow. To the east and west, glacier-carved valleys tumbled down into streams and meadows and plains. I felt as if I could fly.

It was 8 p.m., August 17, 1994. Nevermind the “what in the hell was I doing on the summit at sunset” thing; my incessantly chattering internal narrator nearly shouted with joy: *Man, this is sooo cool! That's that Exum Ridge thing I'm gonna solo tomorrow! I am going to do this forever.*

I scrambled down from the top, but soon hit a dead-end ledge. In fading light I looked toward the Lower Saddle, where I'd set up my tent three hours earlier. *Man, I'm getting hungry. So where's this descent route?* Six feet above the couloir's hard blue ice, a rounded horn appeared.

I've thought a lot of stupid things in my life, but as I draped my rope over the bulge and threaded my belay device, this notion set the bar: *It'll probably hold. If not, it's not far anyway.*

I leaned back. The rope rolled off the horn, and I fell.

Second stupidest thought I've ever had: *Ha, stuck the landing!*

A millisecond passed before momentum shot me headfirst backward down the couloir in a blur of Gore-Tex, racing toward eternity.

AFTER CLIMBING FOR ONLY NINE MONTHS, I'd already earned myself a nickname: Sketchy Kelly. As in, “Man, whatever you do, don't go climbing with that Sketchy Kelly guy. He's bad news.”

Upon moving to Missoula, Montana, I'd immediately fallen in love with the mountains. When a friend invited me ice climbing, that was it. Hooked,

instantly. 100% enthusiasm, 0% knowledge.

I scoured used-gear boards to piece together a cheapskate mess of barely functional gear that I didn't know how to use. My third day out, I insisted on leading the second pitch of the WI4 Graineater, until Jason Albert, my regular (and pretty much only) partner, relented. I promptly factor two-ed onto our anchor, showering ice on an “Intro to Ice Climbing” class below—where I should have been.

The next time out, I insisted on leading the second pitch of Swan Slabs, a 400-foot WI2. When Jason followed, he found me gleaming, all smiles—*Yeah, I led that, check me out, I'm a stud*—sitting on a tuft of grass *above* two manky, unequalized screws.

For reasons that still escape me, Jason agreed to go to Denali with me that May. In the crevasse field at Windy Corner, as I strolled over to talk to him, loops of slack accumulated. I didn't know how to light the stove

without causing a near explosion. My packed sled looked like the truck from *Sanford and Son*. I hadn't practiced crevasse rescue (*We're not gonna fall in a crevasse!*).

Two weeks in, Jason couldn't take it anymore. It being me. *Fine—I'm stayin'*. I tied in with a strong guy from Anchorage I'd just met; he short-roped me back down from 16,500 feet with borderline HACE. Sketchy Kelly's traveling train wreck then jumped on with the fragments of another disintegrated team. I eventually summited with a woman from Fairbanks; I haven't talked to her since. Back in Missoula, someone asked another friend if he thought I'd stay on Denali for long. "Oh, Kelly will stay until he summits—or gets himself killed."

LATER THAT SUMMER I hit the Tetons for some real alpine ice—alone, of course, since nobody wanted to climb with me. *No problem—I just summited Denali!*

At the backcountry office, the ranger behind the desk slouched and wore glasses. *Who's this guy?* He looked and sounded meek. *Guess they'll let anybody be a ranger these days.* I stood impatiently, my favorite shirt—a CCCP T-shirt given to me at a boxing competition in the Soviet Union when I was eighteen—barely covering my 140-pound frame. I'd worn the shirt damn near every day since I got it. It had so many holes that it made me look like a skanky groupie from an eighties metal concert.

The guy—Renny Jackson, his name tag said (*What kind of name is Renny?*)—put down his pen, paused and looked up at me.

What? my face must've said. *Just give me my permit, dude!*

"Do you need a shirt?" he asked, as deadpan as if he were making a funeral announcement. I would find out soon enough he was the chief climbing ranger in the Park. "Because I've got a whole bunch of them at home, and I'd be happy to give you one."

FOUR HOURS LATER my seventy-pound backpack and I reached the Lower Saddle. Other groups cooked dinner and packed for the next day. *Screw that—I'm goin' climbin'!* I set up camp and headed for the Northwest Couloir.

I bumbled through the approach, but soon gained the ice and started climbing. Beautiful, plastic, blue ice. *So perfect!* My smile reflected off the surface. I'd stop, look around and gasp—not from altitude, but from sheer exhilaration. The couloir ran up like a blue highway. *Stick, kick, stick, kick, breathe, look up*

and around and glow, smile, live, breathe, stick, stick... At 8 p.m. I was on top. *I am going to do this forever.*

A few minutes later I hit the dead-end ledge, draped my rope over the rounded horn and leaned back. Then I fell.

ROCK WALLS FLEW PAST at incomprehensible speeds, a horrifying blur of stone, ice, sky and alpenglow. My annoying inner voice disappeared, replaced by sheer terror. And, strangely, with something else: rational urgency.



While rocketing down the narrowing couloir, I'd somehow spun around, face in, head up. I tried to self-arrest, but my axe bounced out like a bad joke.

Everything shot by light-speed fast, but, somehow, my thoughts moved faster and emerged into a singular voice: *KICK—it'll wreck your ankles but it's all you got.* My crampons bit, my legs crumpled, and I somersaulted, violently, repeatedly.

I kept kicking, launching full backflips at Mach rapidity, clawing, clinging, scratching for life.

After maybe 100 feet, I smashed into the rocks at the side, slowing—*oh sweet Jesus, thank God*—and then I was off again.

I don't remember how it happened—I think I hit my head (the only smart thing I did: I'd worn a helmet)—but I found myself in the dark some 150 feet down the fast way, my body half on the ice, one leg pinned in the moat between it and the rock, just above the couloir's bottleneck, trembling, bloodied, tiny over the oblivion. *Holy fuck, oh God,* whimpered a voice. Then came a different

one: *Stop whimpering. Get your ass down.*

The moon cast huge, dark shadows.

Stop trembling. Get out your headlamp. Free your knee. Climb to the rocks. Down climb that ice. Get to that chockstone and thread it.

For the next six hours, I crawled, down climbed, rapped and hobbled. Terror randomly interrupted my focus and I'd let out a whimper, but then: *Shut up. Block it out. Get your shit together. Do this.* Occasionally I paused, expanding beyond my hyper-focused world of unemotional crawling and objective analysis to stare at the stars. Then: *Get back at it.*

The hours ticked by and I kept working. I looked down and saw a light—some kind souls at the Lower Saddle were shining a headlamp to guide me down.

At 2 a.m. I gimped to my tent, still rattled and hyper-focused.

God damn, I'm hungry.

One more rookie mistake: I'd left my food inside, and a marmot had chewed through and devoured it all.

BLOOD TRICKLED from cuts and scrapes as I balanced on one leg in Lupine Meadows. Bruising discolored my knee and football-sized ankle. I shot a detached gaze at my hands, shredded raw from clawing, and then stared up at the peaks, not yet aware of what I'd just learned.

I hopped toward the Cruiser, my \$400, pale-yellow, metal box with an engine, on/off switch, push-button start and wiring that made the horn honk every time I turned left.

Just then a Teton cruster—short, wiry, the sort of guy who'd probably done a million rescues and seen too many corpses—approached and asked what had happened. I could tell that he already knew.

I gave him the thumbnail sketch, then, feeling humbled and a bit confused, mumbled, "Guess I got pretty lucky."

"It wasn't just luck," the old guy said, his voice rising to match his fierce eyes. "You're here because you *fought* and wouldn't quit!"

A fighter? Guess I'd never thought of it that way. *What the hell else would you do, quit?*

My world slowed and I studied him. Every crease in his weathered face told a story that I couldn't understand. *He's seen me come and go a hundred times.*

"A lot of people just roll over and die like a cow. They give up. Just lay down and die," he said. He stared at me for a second more, and then he turned and walked away. ■