

A TALE OF DANGEROUS OBSESSION

By Gordon Smith

KINGY, Terry to everyone else but me, and I had planned a summertime in the Alps for 1975. We had planned this as we defrosted in the warmth of his caravan after some very cold nights spent curled up like husky dogs in the snow outside the CIC hut. We did indeed go to the Alps that summer for our first season together, and we climbed this and that, including the Shroud on the Grandes Jorasses with Dirty Alex. For some reason, which escapes me after thirty years of doing other things, instead of climbing up the ice chute leading to the great ice field of the Shroud we climbed up very steep and very difficult rocks littered here and there with sections of faded fixed rope, soft steel pitons and old bits of tat. And then, after a five or six pitches of this, we traversed wildly into the top of the left-hand chute (or right-hand chute if you are one of the French guidebook writers who always are looking down when we Brits are looking up – leaving us enormously confused). What we climbed, entirely free as far as we went, by skirting round the hard bits on the left or pushing Kingy, our secret weapon, up them on the sharp end, was the start of René Desmaison's route on the North West Face of the Walker Spur. Thus began an obsession with the climb, for I had seen pictures of Desmaison and Serge Gousseault, his doomed companion, stormbound on the first attempt, and Desmaison with his nephew Michel Claret and the Italian guide Giorgio Bertone on the successful ascent in 1973, in Paris Match while a schoolboy in Scotland. And now I had seen the climb itself. Kingy wasn't interested. He wanted us to go to Afghanistan with our Polish friends. Dirty Alex wasn't interested. He wanted to go to Afghanistan with Kingy and the Poles instead of me and, seeing as he had money and I only had a broken leg and a sore head after a debacle on the Ben, he went and I got left behind to my own devices.

Black Nick Colton was around, however, and without a partner, and he agreed to come with me to climb Desmaison's Route on the Walker Spur. And he agreed in the full knowledge that I was still then gimping along on a bionic leg full of titanium rods and screws after that little mishap on the wintry slopes of Ben Nevis. Ah, Black Nick. Now he may be a Respected Mountaineering Bureaucrat but in those days he was a black haired, black moustached young hooligan, one of the bad boys of the Biolay campsite along with Kingy, Dirty Alex, Blond Nicky and me. As a gang of thieves we had, directed by our indomitable leader, 'Our Man From the Petits Charmoz' Colin Somebody or Other, raided a building site in the centre of Chamonix and walked away like a gigantic centipede with an enormous roll of thick and heavy polythene on our

heads. Through the centre of town. In the middle of the night. Without being caught. Enough polythene to provide the Biolay campers with kitchen shelters for many years to come. Black Nick, good lad, he would come and do the climb with me.

We huddled together in the early June rain in 1977, under a polythene kitchen shelter, and made our plans. We didn't have much gear, for a climb reputed to be one of the great routes of the Alps, graded EDSup, and on which the first ascensionists had used over three hundred pitons. But we both had Terrordactyls and the confidence, nurtured in the Scottish winter, to climb in any weather on just about anything just so long as there was some ice around somewhere. We packed our sacks and coiled up our ropes and took the train up to Montenvers, being lazy buggers, and walked along the Mer de Glace and the Leschaux Glacier moraines up to the hut below the North Face of the Grandes Jorasses.

Alain, the Leschaux Man, guardian of the hut and my pal from seasons past, was concerned at our sacks for such a 'grand excursion' and concerned that, as usual, we had no guidebook or route description. Oh well. We had done 'Le Linceul'. We had done 'Le Walker'. We had done 'Le Croz'. We knew Les Grandes Jorasses and what we were doing, or so we all thought. We promised him, though, as we left the hut sometime after midnight filled generously with his chocolat chaud, that we would signal with a head torch every night so that he could monitor our progress. And so we intended, although we didn't intend to spend more than one night on the climb.

We couldn't be bothered to go around the corner and start up the same way that Kingy, Dirty Alex and I had started the Shroud. There was a better way. Closer. In the rimaye at the very bottom of the crag.

The first pitch of the route we chose to climb, after a tenuous and sugary creep out of the rimaye and up the little snow slope above it, was a loose wall topped by an overhang. I had led the climb out of the rimaye so I declared that it was Nick's job to lead up the loose wall and over the horrible roof. And so he did. It was not that he didn't whimper a little. It was not that he didn't drop a few rocks, including most of the holds, on top of me. It was not that the ropes didn't shiver, electric, with the expectation of a tumble. It was that he led the thing without falling off and with such a spirited burst of Elan Anglais that Desmaison himself would have been proud to be called English.

He tied himself to something a little less loose than most of the bits of rock up there and then he dragged me up after him. We climbed on and on up mixed ground that wasn't hard and that wasn't easy until we reached a fine looking channel of green ice, shaded at this time of year from the sun and therefore hard and brittle. I wandered up the ice to a large flake, where an old and faded bit of fixed line came in from the left. I tied myself to the flake and thought to myself that this thing was

big so it shouldn't fall down. I mean, it didn't tremble at my touch. It didn't squeak. It didn't give any other sign of being anything other than a big, solid belay. But just in case and because it cost nothing, and everyone knows that if it doesn't cost anything a Scotsman is well likely to look for at least some benefit from it, I clipped a jumar that I carried for just such things onto that old, faded bit of rope that Desmaison had left there years and years before.

The route ahead looked like a doddle mostly, I realised later, because of foreshortening and not because it was easy. Nick crunched and banged his way up the brittle green ice. As his black moustachioed face hove to between my legs I moved aside, as a gentleman should, to let him pass. And as I moved, so did that great big tombstone flake. It gravelled and ground around like a bloody great molar ready to pop out. And pop out it did. Rolling right over my foot and squashing my expensive chrome-moly steel crampon flat. And rolling right over the expensive ropes. And it carried on rolling down, Nick scrunching himself quick as a cat into the smallest ball you ever saw and out of its way, with a great rumble like a clap of thunder and a cloud of black smoke shot through with sparks that looked and smelled like Trafalgar or Jutland being fought on the flanks of the Grandes Jorasses.

Down the way we had come it rolled and roared, a sight that entertained our friends climbing on the Petites Jorasses five miles away, disintegrating into millions of pieces that soiled the snow fifteen hundred feet below us in a vast, dirty triangle that disappeared over the edge of a crevasse. I was left dangling from that tatty old bit of rope while Nick, who didn't know about the jumar and the tatty old bit of rope, was left wondering when I would start to roll down our route in the wake of the tombstone and pull him down with me to a place where we could begin to climb the heavenly mountains partnered by angels. Or, in Nick's case, down to stoke the devil's furnaces with shovels full of black coal.

The pair of us were left shivering with shock, and we still had to abseil back down our fifteen hundred feet of climbing with the ropes all chopped up, and me with a gammy foot as well as a gammy leg. Fortunately the foot and leg were both on the same side, leaving me one entirely good leg to hop on. We got back down to the glacier because we had to. And the little nicks in the ropes became long sections of bare insides, where only a few of the strands remained intact.

Now, instead of going back down our own route we nipped around the corner and down the line of stuff on the left, the stuff that Kingy, Dirty Alex and I had followed for some way coming up years before. We even found a faded Millet sack on the way down, not far below our high point, filled with old soft steel pitons and Camping Gaz canisters. So, being poor Brits as we were, we cut it off intending to pick up the old

pitons and gas canisters at the bottom of the face. Unfortunately it, too, burst into a zillion pieces like the tombstone before it and almost all the pieces followed the tombstone down into the depths of the crevasse. We carried on abseiling down, tying off bits of bootlace and jamming the knots into cracks as abseil anchors wherever there were no old pitons conveniently in place.

Down on the glacier my foot hurt like hell when I tried to walk on it and so I took my boot off to have a look and to see if it was broken. Instantly the foot swelled up like a bullfrog preparing to mate or like a blowfish in a tizzy, and I couldn't for the life of me put my boot back on.

There I was stuck on the glacier with only one boot on, and the other foot looking like a barrage balloon in a dirty sock. But I was friendly in those days with Schmutz of the Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne (PGHM they called themselves) and I told Nick to run down and see if Schmutz would come up with his helicopter and give me a ride down. Nick ran off, filled with good intentions, and I settled down in the snow, admiring the blue sky and the lovely, snowy peaks all around, to wait for my ride.

I waited for a long time. I brewed up the occasional cup of cold water. I nibbled on our bivouac food. I chatted with climbers, lots of climbers, walking past filled with resolve to climb their climbs with derring-do. Without exception each group asked me what climb I was headed for. How embarrassing. 'Well, actually, I was going to climb up there, but a rock landed on my foot and now my foot's swollen up, see, look at it, and I can't put my boot on, and I'm waiting for my friend to come and get me with his helicopter, and my partner left quite a while ago and I've been sitting here for bloody hours. And no-one has come!'

They all shrugged and went off to do their respective things. As the sun fell below the horizon, and as the cold tendrils of night started to darken the glacier I prepared myself for a lonely bivouac lying on my polythene bag in the snow. And I made my plans for a long crawl down the glacier, like Doug Scott on the Baltoro, on the morrow. But with the last of the light Schmutz came for me with his helicopter and whisked me down to the valley.

I wanted just to get out of the helicopter and hobble back to the Biolay campsite to lick my wounds, but they were having none of that. Journalists flashed their flashbulbs and wrote little notes to themselves, and Very Big French Gendarmes escorted me into the hospital where the nurses, for reasons known only to themselves, put me into the maternity ward among the babies.

Lots of nurses came to look at M. l'alpiniste Anglais (I chose not to correct this presumption) lying in his bed in the maternity ward, among the babies. It was actually rather fun. Lots of pretty young nurses came to see.

The next day Nick came to visit and explained, very sheepishly, that he'd seen a helicopter flying up the Mer de Glace and had assumed that Alain from the Leschaux Hut had seen what had happened and that the helicopter was for me. When he'd come in the late afternoon with Blond Nicky to visit no one had heard of me at the hospital, so they had realised Nick's error and had run off to explain what had happened to my pal Schmutz.

I was booted out, after a couple of days fretting about the bill, with a plaster cast on my leg and a pair of crutches that I had to promise to return. I spent the next several weeks hitch hiking between Leysin, where I once was one of those notorious ISM instructors, and Chamonix. Keeping an eye on my route. And the border guards became so suspicious of me passing the frontier to and fro with a cast on my leg that they took to yelling at me about drug smuggling and poking long sharp things down my cast, with scant success in the search for drugs except that the long sharp things scratched the itchy bits down my cast that really wanted scratching and caused me great pleasure.

As the days passed I became more and more obsessed with the climb, however, and with the gear that I was sure was stashed on it close to the top, until eventually I cut off the cast myself with a penknife and hitch hiked back to Chamonix and persuaded some fool to come with me to do the climb and recover all that mythical booty. Three times I hobbled to the foot of the climb with different fools whom I had suckered with my stories, and three times my foot hurt so much, with the bones grinding around inside, that I gave it up as a bad job. In the end I hitch hiked back to Scotland and went to visit my friendly ortho doctor at Bridge of Earn hospital who had looked after my broken leg with all its Raigmore pins and needles four months before. By that time the bones in my foot had already fused into a lump and the doctor said he couldn't do anything for me and just sent me home with a flea in my ear for being such a burden on the NHS.

Of course, the minute I was home I was packing up my stuff and away I went, hitch hiking with a will in the direction of the Grandes Jorasses. When I got back to the Biolay at the end of September, however, Black Nick had already gone off with RBJ onto the Whympur Spur. So I was left again partnerless. But someone knew someone, who knew someone, who had come across an American who didn't have any gear but who was looking for someone with whom to climb an Alpine North Face. And that was how I met Tobin Sorenson, the wildest, looniest, luckiest climber alive. Until the day he unfortunately fell off from high up some mountain face in Canada while soloing, which is never a lucky thing to do.

I'd seen a photograph in a book, some time or other, of Tobin laybacking under a flake on hand jams, or so the caption said, and

looking as if something nasty had approached him affectionately from behind. I knew, from that book, that Tobin was one of the top rock climbers in the US, one of the Stonemasters. What I didn't know was that the expression on Tobin's face was characteristic of the kind of trouble that Tobin constantly got himself into while climbing.

According to John Long, another Stonemaster, whose article 'The Green Arch' I read many years later, no-one was better than Tobin, who tended to rush pell-mell at any climb, on a straightforward route that was just plain hard. But no-one was worse on any climb that required devious thought and cunning. He took the most appalling whippers, astounding his climbing friends that he could walk away from them and still come back for more. But the very fact that Tobin had arrived in the Alps without any equipment at all and looking to go straight onto a big Alpine North Wall never having climbed in the Alps before warned me straight away that here was a climber just like me. There was just one, small, issue given that we managed to solve the gear problem. Tobin knew nothing about alpine mixed climbing. And my route (for it was now 'my route' in my head and to hell with Desmason) was a big alpine North Face route with lots of alpine mixed climbing and not some sun-drenched granite spire.

Of course we got along famously once we had met each other, seeing as we were so alike in our attitudes. And yet Tobin was quiet and very shy allowing me to babble on and on enough, in the way that I had, for the two of us. I suggested that we should do a training climb and then tackle 'my climb' on the Walker Spur. Naturally Tobin agreed, like a horse that has been tied in shackles for far too long.

I chose to approach a couloir climb, an ice climb, on the West Face of the Plan which I knew would be in condition after all the bad weather I had missed. Tobin borrowed a Chouinard ice axe, hammer and pair of Salewa crampons from some generous American who wasn't using them just then, probably Rick Accomazzo, another of those Stonemasters. He was equipped. He had his tartan shirt, or 'plaid' shirt as he preferred to call it because he wasn't a Scotsman and therefore ignorant, and he had an anorak, blue jeans, and an old pair of climbing boots that he had worn into Eastern Europe while smuggling bibles, or some such foolishness.

Our route had an easy approach from the meadows at the half way station of the Midi Telepherique. It also had an easy 'descent' along the Arête Midi-Plan to the Telepherique station on top of the Midi. Yet the climbing would be quite hard. That I knew from earlier adventuring on the West Face of the Plan as the butt end for Kingy's jokes in his scribbles for Mountain Mag. It would be the perfect training climb for us. And it would be new.

The start of our training climb was a granite slab, thinly covered with

slush, that led up into a narrow gully blocked by an ice bulge that well could have decorated Green Gully on Ben Nevis. We set off at midday, creeping up through the slush to a spot at the bottom of the bulge equipped with a rock crack for providing a belay. I led the bulge, which was indeed just like something out of Green Gully, not too hard, not too easy, and I tied myself to a spike at the top. Tobin followed. After one or two jerky moves the rope twanged tight as a bowstring. Tobin started again. After another one or two jerky moves the rope twanged tight as a bowstring. Tobin started a third time and a long time later he appeared covered in powder snow, sweating profusely and smiling innocently, as was his wont. Hmmm. I figured that this chap, famous rock climber though he might be, doesn't have a clue about climbing ice.

We continued up the couloir, leading through up steep ice and over difficult and loose rock. We bivouacked somewhere in the middle. Now, Tobin didn't have a sleeping bag so, being the Hardy Scot and believing Tobin to be nothing more than an American Softie, I had elected to leave my bag behind in order to climb light. In the middle of the night it froze very hard and I cursed Tobin for a fool for coming to the Alps without a sleeping bag, and myself for an even bigger fool for having a sleeping bag but leaving it behind, useless, in the tent just because Tobin didn't have one.

In the morning the final pitch of the goulotte Smith-Sorenson, when we reached it, reared up before us. Horrific. A vertical rock corner sporting an evil off-width crack, encased in ice and verglas and topped by a large roof dripping icicles. Tobin led it, for it was his turn and he never was one to shy away from a challenge, with all the histrionic and noisy brilliance that I later came to expect from him. And that was the end of our training climb. At the start Tobin didn't seem to have a clue about how to climb an ice bulge. At the end he led one of the hardest ice pitches I have ever seen. It was a bit strange, all this falling off, but then Tobin did have a reputation as a practical joker... Anyway it had proved to be the perfect training climb for us. Or almost.

Back at the Biolay we prepared to assault one of the great walls of the Western Alps. We bought our bivouac food, a couple of small, heavy loaves of bread called 'pains', a lump of Swiss cheese full of lightening holes like a Chouinard bong fit for a four inch crack, a tube of Nestlé condensed milk, and a packet of chewy sweeties – Yoplait. Someone on the Biolay campsite generously donated a packet of Knorr Fish Soup Powder to complete our rations. We had a stove, but only one cylinder of gas, for melting snow to drink en route.

We gathered together our equipment. I had some slings, a bunch of nuts, three or four pitons. Tobin, of course, had nothing other than the axe and stuff that he had borrowed. I also had, at that time, two two-hundred foot, eight mm old fashioned laid nylon ropes, ropes better

suited to retreating from moderately difficult Scottish winter climbs than assaulting one of the greatest bastions of the western alps. Ropes terrible for getting into impenetrable fankles because they were twisty old laid ropes rather than soft and supple modern kernmantle. We packed our sacks and set off for the Leschaux Hut and my friend Alain the Leschaux Man. Alain, again concerned about our intentions, for he had heard about my previous misadventure after leaving the hut through the grapevine, insisted that we signal him every evening with our head torch. And so we intended, though we didn't intend to be on the climb for more than one night.

We started our climb at the bottom of the same rimaye as my previous attempt with Black Nick. This time, however, instead of a loose wall of crumbling granite topped by an overhang there was a magnificent icefall, something that could have come directly from Hadrian's Wall on Ben Nevis. We climbed up that, and the mixed ground above that was not too hard, not too easy, and back into the chute of green ice that led to my highpoint with Black Nick. I went up the chute in one two hundred foot pitch and tied onto lots of flakes and blocks and pitons and nuts at the top. Everything I could find that looked remotely solid I tied on to. I even clipped a jumar onto that same bit of old, faded and tatty string that Desmaison had left. Tobin followed without falling off, as he had by now already proved his worth on ice, and then led on into the unknown.

We had been following the first great ramp of the climb from the very bottom, in the rimaye at the foot of the face. Now Tobin wandered up the ramp towards an enormous overhang dripping icicles, a great rock that rested across the corner between the ramp and its retaining wall on the right. I turned that block of rock on the right by scrabbling up the icy crack between it and the wall, bridging out as wide as my little legs would go and laybacking with jolly abandon over three little overhangs. It was one of those pitches where once you start you either finish it or you fall off. You can't just stop and pass the time of day or have a cup of tea in the middle.

I suspect that this block is no longer there. That it remained transfixed while I clung to it and grappled with it I shall remain forever grateful. I didn't always have such luck, however, although not following that old tombstone flake down to the glacier on my attempt with Black Nick must constitute luck of the highest order. Tobin, I noticed, never seemed to have any problems leading, or following anything that I led, on rock or ice.

By the time that we had finished struggling with the big block the light of the short autumn day had faded. Tobin led a spectacular rock pitch up the retaining wall to our right by torchlight because I was sure I could see a ledge at the top. And so it proved, though Tobin had been doubtful. Tobin, my friend, shone our head torch down so that I could

have some idea where I was going and what I was doing as I followed him up.

Then we settled down for the night on our comfortable ledge having melted some snow for water to drink, and having chewed each on a lump of heavy bread garnished with cheese, decorated with Swiss Holes. And having exercised our jaw muscles on frozen Yoplait chewy sweeties for afters I remembered to signal Alain with our head torch, but as I never saw him again I don't know if he saw my signal or not. Tobin wrapped himself up in my nylon bivouac bag because it was cold and I had my little red down sleeping bag, that only lacked down, to keep me theoretically warm.

The next morning, because we were where we were I suppose, we continued on up the steep slabs and cracks above us until the climbing became very hard rock climbing and completely lacking in snow and ice. And it also became obvious that our route lay far below us on the ramp system where there was plenty of snow and ice covering the difficult rocks. We abseiled down again, all the way back down to the ramp. From there we climbed up slabs and corners covered here and there in plates of ice and lined with snow, leading out the rope in long bald pitches.

On and on we climbed up the ramp, moving fast and taking chances again and again with dodgy moves and not bothering about putting in runners. We were as bold and as bad as each other and each egged the other on to climb faster. We were so alike. Caution we threw to the winds. Here I would lead up a thinly iced groove. There Tobin would scabble gung-ho over a little rocky overhang dripping with icicles. Together we reached the end of the ramp up a long tongue of hard, black winter ice that squeezed between the headwall on the right and a giant shark's fin of granite on the left.

Then we turned right and started up the headwall of the climb. I led, swinging up icy grooves and over snowy blocks, and Tobin led swinging up icy grooves and over snowy blocks, until I came across an empty Millet rucksack stuffed behind a flake of granite. Aieee! The mythical horde! My dream of riches! The treasure trove! Empty! There was nothing there! Not one tiny little piece of inexpensive anything. But I was there, and at least I was getting close to the top of the route, my route, my obsession! And the long, cold autumn night was drawing in.

We decided to bivouac there and then even though it was quite early because we were tired and because we hadn't seen many ledges on the route so far. I would lie jammed behind the flake in my little red sleeping bag and Tobin would sit wrapped up in my nylon bivouac bag on a little ledge above me. We chewed on the last of our bread with the last of our cheese, and with the last of our Yoplait sweeties for afters, and then we melted a little water to drink and to fill our water bottles for

the morrow with the last of our gas, and finally we prepared ourselves for the long, cold night. Then, with the setting of the sun, the sky flamed brilliant green and a crowd of little lenticular clouds appeared milling ominously around the summit of Mont Blanc. Tobin, the ignorant fool, stood tall, still wrapped in swathes of nylon. With his arms stretched out to the sky he cried in his ecstasy, like some Moses standing on his mountain and holding aloft the ten commandments: 'Praise the Lord! Look at the sky! It's so beautiful!'

I gibbered in my little red sleeping bag, trying not to think about the storm working up to dump itself upon us and terrified at the sight of that anachronistic figure stood before me.

Two hours later, in the blackness of the moonless night, the storm hit. First the wind got up. Then a few snowflakes. Then more wind and more snow and wet, until at length I could not stay warm in my sodden pit and so got out into the storm and put the dripping thing away in my sack and went to join Tobin, sitting on his ledge, in his wrappings.

We sat there, wrapped up together, for long hours as the wind howled about us and the snow covered us up. Until the black changed to grey. Then, unwilling to stay another moment in that place, we went out from our wrappings and our covering of snow into the foul and blizzardy morning.

With empty stomach Tobin led off up through the stour onto a steep pitch of granite covered in fresh snow. I shivered hungrily in the bitter blast and thought long thoughts of father's hot tattie soup. There was much scrabbling of crampons on rock for a long time. Then without warning out of the storm flew Tobin, arms outstretched and jangling and clanking like a carillon. Those long, thin ropes stretched longer and thinner, but they held and stopped Tobin on his downward plunge.

Without a word he gathered himself together and went right back up. This time he waited for a skyhook for a long moment, but I had none to give him, and again he flew out of the murk, a black winged creature of the storm. When again he had jangled to a halt, with the ropes stretched longer still and thinner, he gathered up what little wits he had left and went back at it furiously. Third time lucky for Tobin, and this time he made it to a little foothold where he could bang in a solid piton and he yelled for me to follow. And follow I did, buffeted by the wind and by the swirling snow and climbing through the storm to join him on his little, lonely foothold.

I led on through, tenuously swinging around to the left and across a shattered wall of frosted marbles to reach a flake attached to a rock sticking out of ice. That flake I pulled off as I laybacked up and I threw it down at Tobin to keep him in focus. The next flake I laybacked up I also threw down at Tobin to ensure that he was paying attention. The third flake I laybacked up I also threw down at Tobin, and that was the

last of the flakes for I managed to get off that horrible arctic wall of frozen biscuit flakes and into a lovely bank of fresh fallen snow resting on a little spur. Tobin, when he followed, followed slowly complaining all the while that I hadn't left him much to climb on.

We climbed through the storm, following our noses for we had nothing else to follow and we couldn't see damn all, until I got a nice place to sit in the snow on the top of a block. Tobin led on towards the snow streaming over the summit ridge which we could vaguely make out through the murk. Then the ropes ran out and I had to follow, hoping that somewhere along the way Tobin had arranged for a running belay to stop us both if he decided to fall off again. And he did fall off. Again. And the ropes stretched long and thin but stopped him, hanging from a sling looped around a cracked block that stuck out of the snow. Around he flashed. Up again he flew at it, his axe arm flailing, his hammer poking and prodding. And yet again he flew off. As he hung from his cracked block that stuck out of the snow I got close enough to shout at him and ask him what the hell the matter was.

'There's an overhang of soft snow up there and I don't know what to do to climb it. I can't get my ice axe to stick.'

Of course I hadn't taught him how to deal with a cornice before because on the Plan there had been no cornice, only that tremendous iced corner with its roof dripping icicles. So now I yelled at him to cut the crap and flog the bloody thing down with his axe and be done with it. Tobin was obviously stung by my words, for he never cursed nor did he ever say harsh words. He flew again at the cornice and cut it down just as I had told him, and he rolled over the crest onto the top of the mountain. I followed like a dog on a leash, and the climb was done.

We gathered up our stuff and packed it all away and rolled up one of the ropes into a giant knitting and stuffed it in my bag. Then we ran down the hill through the storm until, just before night time caught us out, we reached the Italian hut. There I took off my boots to find there were no feet there. At least I could see feet, but it didn't feel like the feet belonged to me.

They stayed frozen until we set off down for the valley the next day, and I ended up hitch hiking on my rotting stumps, which included walking miles and miles through London in the middle of the night, until I got back to Scotland and my mum, who fainted clean away at the sight and smell of my necrotic feet. Then back to Bridge of Earn. There they saved my toes, but my old friend the ortho doctor came to visit me in the Plastic Surgery Unit and gave me another flea in the ear about being such a burden on the NHS.

Now, if the truth be told, back up on the mountain when I said 'we ran down the hill through the storm' of course we didn't just run down a simple snow slope. Straight away we got lost in the storm, and fell down

countless little snow gullies, and set off little avalanches and slid down in them until they got too big to manage, and once we jumped a long way down off a serac into a crevasse and then had to climb out of the other side. Finally, just before it got dark and desperate for a drink of water, we found the hut. Thank goodness.

Then in the Italian hut we had been very, very hungry and thirsty with nothing to eat but that packet of fish soup and no gas left. But we found a canister hidden somewhere in a cupboard which I stole immediately, us being very poor and very hungry and Tobin being far too honest to contemplate such an action. And I boiled up that horrible fish soup and we supped it down. And it was so delicious that the best restaurant in town would have been proud to serve it. The next day Tobin walked and I hobbled down the long snowy path into green meadows and trees under a beautiful Italian sun. And behind us the mountain's Italian face looked so very high and so very beautiful against a cloudless blue Italian sky.

That is the end of the story of my dangerous obsession for Tobin didn't wait for me to come back but went off with Dirty Alex, and my long two hundred foot ropes, and did the Harlin route on the Eiger Nordwand. Thirty years post hoc I discovered from Rick Accomazzo that Tobin had already climbed the Dru Couloir Direct, the 'hardest ice climb in the Alps' with him the summer just before I met him, and that they'd 'swapped' leads. And there, I'd thought that I'd taught the wildest climber in the world how to climb ice, leading him on to doing some of the greatest Alpine routes in the world. Oh well, at least I did teach him how to cope with a cornice, that cornice at the top of the Desmazon when I'd spurred him on with my harsh words, 'Cut the crap and flog the bloody thing down and be done with it.' That was my lesson to Tobin Sorenson. Oh, and thirty years later another Scot, two Scotsmen in fact, who'd scarcely been born at the time of our great adventure, did that climb again and cleaned up the last few pieces of aid that we had left for them to clean up*. That was a very fine effort on their part, but it is a tale for them, not me, to tell.

* [Guy Robertson and Pete Benson, October 2007, VI 6c M5/M6—Hon. Ed.]