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Introduction

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

– Mark Twain

Sunlight tinged with the shadows of the oncoming autumn lingers on the hills above Christchurch. A brisk nor'easterly whisks in from the sea, driving before it small clouds that skip gleefully overhead and across the city. The pine trees at the top of the hill bow and creak. The wind tames the waves at the coast, stretching them evenly and far out to sea. Out to the west, the Southern Alps show off their first inconsequential coating of snow; a further indication of the changing season. They sparkle, as do the waves, as does the air.

It's February 2010, and I'm climbing with friends above the city. It could be any February day of the past twenty years – a bunch of my friends carrying packs and ropes, chatting loudly as they traverse the hillside. Someone has brought their dog and it trots in the lead. The air temperature is pleasant, as the heat of midsummer has passed, but it's left the hills brown and the grass brittle. In the park below, people in white play cricket and their calls carry on the wind. Very different sports, I think, as I put on my harness and squeeze into my rockclimbing shoes.

A few metres away Eric also prepares to climb, and Tony stands beside him sorting the rope. All three of us, plus my belayer, Nick, chat animatedly about something; we've been climbing together for many years now. Eric and I begin to scamper up the overhanging rock wall; the conversation continues, and we just talk louder, turning occasionally to look down to make a particular point. Fifty metres away, Dave is drinking from a thermos

of coffee and I can smell it. Nice. Eric and I reach the top together, and as we can't hear the others above the wind, continue our own conversation as we thread our ropes through the steel ring anchors. 'Take me,' I shout to Nick. 'Got ya,' he replies, in mid-sentence.

I lean back, expecting Nick to take my weight on the rope. This is something I've done a thousand times – we've all done it a thousand times – and it requires little thought. I move quickly down the first couple of metres, but there's no alarm; there must be a bit of slack rope in the system, I assume. But then I start to fall ... fast. Why is this happening, I think, and alarm bells ring. I make a reflexive grab at the rope, but by now I'm plummeting, far too quickly, free-falling. My head, and then my hip, hit the ground. *Thump-thump*. All is quiet ...

It's dark, but I'm aware of two things. First, a deep, cloying pain in my back, and second, voices in the distance saying, 'Fuck, fuck, fuck'. Then, closer, a 'Lie still.' I recognise Eric's voice and open my eyes.

Six inches from my face my hand is in tatters – flaps of skin dangle from the fingers and the palm – and I wince in horror. 'Please put something on that, it looks awful,' I manage to say. Tony wraps his T-shirt around my hand. Then the background conversation becomes clearer and I make out the word 'helicopter'. It dawns on me that they're calling the Westpac Rescue Helicopter.

Oh no, oh no. *I don't want the helicopter*. Get up; stand up, make them stop. I stagger to my feet – multiple arms reach out to help. The pain in my back has me gasping and tears well in my eyes. 'You forgot to tie into the rope,' I hear Tony say. I forgot to tie into the rope? Thirty-five years a climber and *I forgot to tie into the rope*? I've made a mistake *that basic*? I couldn't have! But I have.

Later in the afternoon I lie in the accident and emergency department with an orthopaedic collar around my neck. The pain is bad despite the morphine drip in my arm, and I've just started to think I've been forgotten when a doctor walks up flapping an X-ray in his hand. 'You've broken your back,' he says, as if I've caught a cold. 'See here?' (I recognise a spine) 'These vertebrae should be square, not triangular. You've compressed your L2 and L3. I'm going to admit you to Ward 19.'

I stare at him disbelieving. 'You're going to put me in hospital? For how long? Surely it can't be that bad?'

'Yes, we need to ascertain there's no spinal cord damage,' he says, sauntering off towards another hapless patient.

Tears fill my eyes again; I can't help them overflowing, and soon I'm sobbing. What about my plans for the year? There's so much at stake here; my new job with the Alpine Club, my new boyfriend, my plans to climb Vasuki Parbat in India in the spring. The mountaineering expedition will be my tenth overseas in as many years and I've come to see the planning, the fundraising, the travel and, ultimately, the climb as part of my identity. I can't imagine not having an expedition to look forward to. I have to go to India – I can't let a broken back stop me!

I think back to my last stay in hospital, eighteen months before, when I resorted to an artificial knee replacement in order to keep climbing. For years I'd suffered knee pain but never bothered to consult a doctor, thinking it was just something that happens to middle-aged climbers. But on an expedition to Pakistan in 2007 the pain had become so bad that I couldn't function without multiple doses of strong painkillers, and I arrived home barely able to walk. I agreed to an MRI scan of both knees and my GP reported the findings a week later. 'You have advanced osteoarthritis in both,' he said. 'No cartilage, no meniscus, bone resting on bone.' I remember being flabbergasted. How had my knees reached such a state? What had I done? 'Climbed mountains for decades,' my GP said with a shrug. 'You've been doing it hard. You need to visit a surgeon – see if anything can be done.'

So I went in search of a remedy. The first surgeon I spoke to was in his early sixties and displayed all the trappings associated with a long career in orthopaedics. I took an instant dislike to his pinstripe suit, starched white shirt and ostentatious brogues. Mum was with me for moral support.

'What you need is a bilateral [read double] knee replacement,' the surgeon said pompously. 'And then you can forget climbing – take up swimming. I swim every morning and I find it's a great way to be in the outdoors.'

Back outside, Mum and I were equally despondent. Did I really have to take up swimming? I hadn't swum since high school – could I even remember how to swim? No. I would continue climbing, no matter what it took. I knew the risks if I didn't – I'd lose the most important thing in my life. First and foremost I was a climber. I decided to look for another surgeon – maybe there was one out there who could better meet my requirements.

The first time I visited James Burn was at his holiday home in Wanaka. He was a small man in his fifties who fizzed with a vitality that belied his age. 'I think what we'll do is a hemi Oxford partial knee replacement on your right

and give the left a good clean-up, see how it goes,' he enthused, bouncing backward and forward, heel to toe. 'I've had some very good results with the hemi Oxford. We'll have you back climbing in no time. When can we book you in?'

I was speechless. Did I hear 'back climbing in no time'? 'I need it as soon as possible,' I said. 'I'm off to climb in Pakistan next June.'

James looked a little taken aback at that, but rallied. 'OK the earliest would be end of October. I can't promise anything, but if you work really hard you should be ready to climb by June. And by the way, I'm sure you'll be the first person to climb a Karakoram peak with a titanium knee joint,' he said, flashing me a grin.

Six weeks later I woke in the recovery room of the hospital. I sat up and looked at my right knee. There was nothing to see – it was covered in a swathe of crêpe. Hurray, I'm on my way to Pakistan, I thought, but three days later I was less optimistic. The pain was crippling, and what made it worse was the sight of half a dozen seventy-year-olds with brand-new knee replacements like mine walking briskly up and down the corridor.

'Don't worry,' James said, 'your nerve endings are still healthy, that's why you're feeling the pain and they're not.'

A few days later I was out of hospital; after a week I'd ditched the crutches; two weeks after that I was back at the gym. 'Pakistan, Pakistan, Pakistan' was my mantra as I tried to do a leg press. 'Pakistan, Pakistan, Pakistan' pounded through my head as, grimacing, I sat on the floor forcing my knee to straighten. 'Pakistan, Pakistan, Pakistan,' I sang to the cadence of the exercise bike as I pedalled along, lopsided.

At eight weeks I went back to James for a check-up, feeling quite nervous. He flexed my knee this way and that, knocked and prodded, then sat back quietly. 'Congratulations, you are doing fine,' he said. 'I have no doubt you're going to get to Pakistan.'

Leaving the room, I remember feeling so happy. I'd beaten the odds; I could still climb. Five months later, I flew out for Pakistan.

But a broken back! Isn't this a more serious imposition, especially with the expedition only six months away? I leave hospital after a few days with instructions to take six weeks off work. I am also in a back brace. 'Don't take it off till we tell you to,' says someone. 'Come back in eight weeks.'

Eight weeks in a brace? The prospect of eight weeks of not knowing seems interminable. How will I manage? How will I stay focused on the positive?

For the first week I just sleep. Friends visit, bringing little gifts and voicing commiseration. I do my best to appear bright and make jokes of the accident, but inside I'm in turmoil over the thought of having to give up my trip to India. I just can't, I think.

Eight weeks later I'm given the option of going without the brace 'for part of the day'. I take this as permission to start back at the gym, but am appalled at how weak I've become. A sit-up is impossible and I can lift only the tiniest dumb-bell. I visit a recommended physiotherapist, who suggests Pilates, but one session is enough to prove I haven't the patience for such gentle measures. I go back to weight training, but progress is slow.

June 2010 arrives. The departure for India is just eight weeks away. I am morose and anxious, very unsure of how I'll perform – even so, it never occurs to me to pull out of the trip. 'I'm going to be fine,' I say to the other expedition members, my friends in the UK. 'I'm improving fast.' But I'm not so sure; I haven't regained my strength and my back throbs with a constant, deep ache. I tell no one, try to act normally and hope my accident will be forgotten, that I'll forget it. Come September, I leave for India with a huge question mark hovering over my ability to climb.

But I do climb. Not as well as I hope, but I come home secure in the knowledge I've done the best I could under the circumstances. More importantly, the trip reaffirms for me that, after thirty-five years of climbing, the mountains have lost none of their challenge, none of their allure. They enthralled me back at the start, and nothing has changed.

So what is it that motivates a climber? Where does the desire to climb mountains come from? After all, mountaineering is about hard physical work and serious deprivation, and the rewards are intangible and specious at best. Are climbers oddballs? Are they egotists, adrenalin junkies and dreamers? Are they searching for something more than everyday life can offer?

In this book I try to answer these questions through my own story. I was a shy, overweight teenager with a depressive disorder who became a climber and discovered in the mountains a panacea to sustain me into middle age. This is the story of a lifelong passion for the mountains and climbing that's endured the test of time and loss. It's also a book about travel and exploration, and an attempt to explain to the layman what it is that makes a mountaineer tick. I'd like to think of it as a climbing book for both climbers and non-climbers alike.

CHAPTER ONE

Learning the Ropes

Climbing may be hard, but it's easier than growing up – Ed Sklar

When I was fifteen I met the man who set me on the path I'd follow for the next thirty-five years. His name is Norman Hardie and he is one of the greatest mountaineers New Zealand has ever known. Norman is in his eighties now, but in 1955, just two years after Edmund Hillary climbed Everest, he was part of the first ascent of Kanchenjunga (8586m), the third highest mountain in the world. He paid his way through university by culling deer, and made many early first ascents of mountains in the Southern Alps. He was also the leader of New Zealand's Scott Base in Antarctica. His autobiography, *On My Own Two Feet*, was published in 2006. Norman introduced me to the mountains.

Our sheep farm in coastal North Canterbury has been in the family since 1905. My father was born there and took over the farm from his mother in the early 1950s. His father was killed in a tractor accident in 1929, leaving my grandmother to run the farm and raise four children through the Depression years. She had one child crippled with polio and was on the verge of losing the farm to the bank numerous times, but clung on through determination and a desire to provide for her family. She was a remarkable woman. Dad, now eighty-seven, belongs to that rare breed of farmers who have maintained a lifetime passion for the land irrespective of drought or interest rates or the plummeting price of wool. My brother is the farmer now – as the only son he got the farm, while my two sisters and I got a private education. As kids we all worked hard on the farm during our school holidays, driving the tractor, stacking hay bales, crutching lambs and feeding

out to stock. We were never paid, but we loved the work and it instilled in all of us an invaluable physical toughness.

I'm not sure where my desire to climb mountains came from. Granted, we were an outdoorsy family, but tramping the Heaphy Track was as intrepid as we got in the mountains. Our adventures were more from the farm – scrambling around the hills and sea cliffs, galloping along the beach on our horses, and mustering in the early morning with Dad. But I knew from the age of twelve that I was going to be mountaineer. Maybe it was the winter view of the snow-capped Puketeraki Range from the top of the farm that inspired this, or maybe it was our infrequent family visits to Mt Cook and the West Coast, touring the South Island in our turquoise Holden station wagon, Dad at the wheel. I remember looking up at the steep, scrubby hills around Lake Sumner and asking him, 'How do I get to the top?'

'Follow a ridge,' he said.

Then again, my desire to climb might have come from something I saw on our black and white TV, bought in 1969 expressly for the family to watch Neil Armstrong take those first bounding steps on the moon. Or could it have come from a book I'd read? I was a big reader. As a ten-year-old my favourite was *With Dersu the Hunter*, the real-life turn-of-the-century adventures of Russian military captain Vladimir Arsenyev and his local guide Dersu in the Siberian taiga. I reordered the book again and again from the country library service, much to the bewilderment of my teacher. He wondered why such a book would interest me. 'Where's the taiga?' I'd ask him.

He had to look in the encyclopaedia. 'What's it like there? Who lives there?' Again, he would turn to the encyclopaedia ...

As there were no secondary schools in our area, we were sent to boarding school at age twelve. Around the end of my second year in the hostel I became aware that the school had a tramping club. This was available to girls in their final two years and was based around the school's lodge close to Arthur's Pass. I began to watch, and then envy, the older boarders as they packed and set off for weekends at the lodge, dressed in long johns and chequered bush shirts. They'd leave for the railway station on a Friday evening, an excited rabble lugging canvas packs full of scroggin and oilskin parkas, and return late on Sunday night, exhausted, dirty and sunburnt. Rumours filtered down of river crossings, shingle screes and campfires, and I hung on these stories. I couldn't wait! My sixth-form year finally arrived and I joined the club.

One Sunday in late February 1975, I woke in a tent outside the school lodge, a modest affair with two small bunk rooms and a kitchen with a wood stove. I was on my tramping club introductory weekend. The day before, we'd learnt how to make river crossing; it had been fabulous, and what's more, I was good at it, strong enough to take the upstream end of the long willow pole hitching me and my mates together as we waded into the current of the braided Waimakariri River. Today, we were due to tramp with mountaineer Norman Hardie, who had taken an interest in the tramping club. At 8 a.m., after breakfast, he arrived as promised, a dark, wiry man with large spectacles. Norman told us we would be making an ascent of Mt Binser. 'It's that mountain over there with three peaks,' he said, pointing east.

I was astounded. To begin with, the base of Mt Binser was at least 8km away across a big grassy flat. Then there was the mountain itself. It was huge, and steep, with a dark green carpet covering its lower flanks and a grey-brown expanse above. How we were going to get to the top was beyond my comprehension. But I was ready, my water bottle filled and my lunch and parka packed in my little canvas rucksack, long before anyone else. I sat on the step of the lodge, fidgeting with anticipation, willing the other girls to hurry up.

A noisy bunch of thirty of us headed off across the flats to Andrews Stream, with Norman (or Mr Hardie, as we were instructed to call him) spearheading the assault, his loping stride and relaxed manner speaking of someone at ease in hills. He had on gaiters – making him stand out from the rest of us – and a large H-frame pack full of ... what? Some of the girls chatted comfortably with him, but I hung just off his left shoulder, too shy to approach but needing to be up with the action.

After an hour we reached the start of the track to Binser Saddle. By now the group was well spread out, and the slower girls were starting to complain. I hopped from one foot to the other with irritation as we waited for them to catch up. 'We're heading up into the bush,' Norman announced. 'I want us to keep together. We're going to travel at a pace that suits the slowest person. Who wants to go first?' He turned and smiled at me. 'What about you, Pat?' I turned bright red and nodded mutely. 'Don't forget, slow and steady now, you're in charge,' he said.

Acutely self-conscious, I started up the track. In charge! What does he mean 'in charge'? I turned and looked at the line of heads behind me.

'Don't go too fast,' said Sally.

'Those fat ones at the back will never keep up,' said Penny.

Five minutes later, plaintive cries of ‘Stop! We need a rest!’ echoed through the beech forest.

‘You need to pace the group better,’ Norman said and, mortified, I nodded in agreement.

After some time, Norman called a halt. ‘OK girls, this is where we leave the track and head for the ridge,’ he commanded, and led off uphill between the beech trees. The trunks were sooty black and the ground underfoot dry and crunchy with twigs and brown leaves. How does he know where to go, I wondered? There are only trees, how can he see? I quickly manoeuvred myself into a position directly behind Norman, hoping to pluck up the courage to ask him his navigational secret.

Suddenly, we broke out above the tree-line. We were standing among large silvery-orange tussocks, which above us were interspersed with long streaks of greying rock. I looked behind and down with delight – there was the lodge, far below, its iron roof blinking in the sun. Over to the east, the homestead buildings of Grassmere and Coralyn stations stood out like small brown buttons, while to the south, the silver Waimakariri River meandered away and mountains topped with snow scribbled across the horizon. Unable to contain myself, I turned and grinned at Norman. He grinned back. Then the others began to arrive.

After what seemed like for ever, the last of the group reached the tree-line. Norman split us in two, some to go on to the summit, the rest to turn back for the lodge. Good, we can get rid of the slow ones, I thought uncharitably, and as Norman headed for the ridge line I skipped, bounced and sprang along in his wake. Hitting the ridge an hour later, he pointed up and said, ‘Look, there’s the summit. Why don’t you go on ahead while I wait for the others?’

‘Really! I can go on?’ I hesitated, wary.

‘Go on,’ he said, waving his arm.

I turned towards the top. Wow! Was I actually going to climb this mountain? I began to move, hesitantly at first, then my feet took flight. I flew upward to the stony summit, arriving alone. A slight wind tousled my hair, tugged at my homespun jersey and shifted the tussocks. Blue-green mountains, shimmering in the midday heat, rolled away as far as the eye could see to the mysterious main divide, the Southern Alps. As I watched Sally and Penny and Norman working their way towards me, I knew something profound had happened. I was soaring, far above the summit of Mt Binsler, up among the clouds. It was the happiest day of my life.

In midsummer 1976, I was sitting at the green wooden door of the Alpine Guides office at Mount Cook village. A steady stream of long-haired, bearded men in red monogrammed jerseys went in and out of the door, ignoring me. They had knotted bandanas around their foreheads and wore dark reflective glasses. Their faces were tanned, they strode around the place confidently, and they talked loudly and familiarly to each other. By comparison, I was alone and quite scared, and couldn't think of a word to say to any of them. I was there as part of an eight-day introductory mountaineering course that was costing me \$230.

My first year with my school tramping club had ended on a high – I was voted club captain for the following year. That season I planned trips the club had never tackled – long ridge traverses linking passes and cols – and put my ideas to Norman. He always backed me. Saying goodbye to him at our end-of-year club lunch, I'd asked, 'What should I do now?'

'Be a mountaineer, of course,' he'd said. 'Go to Mt Cook.'

On the second day at Mount Cook, a motley selection of would-be mountaineers met in the dining room at Unwin Hut, the New Zealand Alpine Club base. It soon became apparent that I was the only female on the course, and the youngest of the ten participants by a few years. Our two guides, Geoff and Shaun, both in the red company jerseys, introduced themselves. Shaun was a jovial Englishman, who'd not been long out from Britain, and Geoff was a giant of an Australian. I recognised both men from the office the day before.

'Let's do a round and introduce ourselves,' Geoff said. 'I'm Geoff and I work as a mountain guide in the summer and a possum trapper on the West Coast in the winter.' A hardcore mountain man, I thought. The introductions went smoothly: Derek, an engineer on the Mackenzie hydro scheme; John, a traveller from England; Brett, a farmer from Geraldine; another farmer from Canterbury; a builder from Invercargill; a businessman from Auckland ... and so on, until it was my turn.

'I've just left school. I was in the tramping club,' I said with effort.

After an exotic outfitting of ice axes and crampons, karabiners and slings, we loaded up our packs and began the walk to the Alpine Guides tepee, erected as a base for the 'intro' courses in the Twin Stream area. That night we all slept in a circle in the tepee on a bed of tussock grass, but while the men chatted convivially amongst themselves I couldn't say a word. Why am I such a klutz, I badgered myself, feeling very young and socially out of my depth.