

# THE DARK HOURS

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“I CLOSE MY EYES and see the weirdest things,” Craig says. So I close mine, too, and see the weirdest things. Milliseconds pass slowly through my head, thoughts and images like light slipping through a shutter. They re-emerge into flashing billboards intermixed with other banners, like road signs. Snapshots of something. Maybe nothing.

We’ve slept three hours in the last 40 and have no energy to analyze, so I watch for a few moments before opening my eyes. My teeth clatter and I stare at my hands – distant, stagnant, like they belong to a mannequin. I think of my cousin in his casket last summer. How it wasn’t him anymore. Lifeless and gone. So strange. I nod off for two, three, 20 minutes? Wake shivering. Moan.

The worst mistakes sometimes happen easily, almost flowingly, like a wave or a gust lifting a feather from the earth.

I hover and return to consciousness, sitting on this tiny ledge stomped into a shallow snowfield on Fitz Roy, and calmly realize that we’re too far off-route, too far left, lost in too-steep terrain on the icy south face – we can’t possibly re-climb what we rapped down – we brought standard alpine-rock stuff – sneakers, aluminum crampons and one miniature ice axe to share between us. Fine for the 5,000-foot rock route we climbed, and the descent we somehow missed. I should have stopped before committing to that terrible free-hanging rappel. Should have just stopped, suffered it out and waited for daylight. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Should have bivied on the summit, not started down in the dark. No anger only simple thoughts that form and fade.

Damn how I loved the stars from our bivy last night, how they shimmered across the southern sky, illuminating the universe. How I love to peer against the borders of who I am, and how I loved the mooncast shadow of the Torres spread out upon the icecap.

Oh well. I drift off again.

Fog swirls up from below, signaling the incoming storm. Hail taps the ultralight tarp we’ve rigged to our anchor and we huddle closer. We rearrange the sleeping bag in a futile fight against wind that nips at us through tiny, ever-shifting openings. Our ropes snake down to the edge of the

snowfield, where I dangled on our last rappel, swinging across snow, ice and rock, searching for cracks, searching for anchors, as the beam of my headlamp disappeared into a terrifying darkness broken only by gentle wisps of clouds rising upward.

I’ve sometimes called today’s Patagonia “alpine light,” with the perfect weather forecasts, scores of climbers and detailed beta. I might laugh about that now but I don’t have the energy.

Since all of my recent surgeries, I’ve hurt with every step, and the pain steals too much joy and too much wonder. So I’d been thinking I’d shift to climbs with shorter approaches, climbs that exact a lesser toll. I was thinking this might be my last big, cold mountain.

Indeed.

I should take a photo but it’s too much effort. And really, what could one dark and blurry millisecond of a shutter opening and closing say right now? Could it capture 20 years? Forty? If we forced a smile how would it look?

Instead I think about my girlfriend, my sister, my aunt who loves me like her lost son, my co-workers and climbing partners, and how it sucks that our friends who climbed the route just ahead of us are probably going to feel guilty, even though they shouldn’t. And damn, I think, I’ll never again feel my girlfriend’s touch or hear her voice or her laugh, even though she’s coming to visit in two weeks. I guess she’ll have to cancel. A distant sadness runs through me, like the winds that come and pass and take with them pieces of our will. I’m sorry. I look again at my hands and wiggle them to be sure they’re still mine.

I close my eyes and drift away again, until another blast of wind reminds me that I’m still here. I open my eyes. When daylight comes, maybe we’ll find a way down. For now, we shiver and wait out the dark hours.



Kelly, I'm going to ask you to write this caption, or at least supply the info Kelly, I'm going to ask you to write this caption, or at least supply the info Kelly, I'm going to ask you to write this caption, or at least supply the info. PHOTO GRAPHER

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