

The Randkluft

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2025 Nonfiction Contest — 1st Place

Midnight found my boyfriend and me at 12,000 feet, trying to sleep in a hole in the snow.

In technical terms it was a *randkluft*, or a gap formed where glacier meets rock face. As far as randklufts go, ours was friendly – flat-bottomed, five feet deep, about the size of a closet. But that did not stop us from shivering, or from feeling the icy pang of the vertical mile that separated us from camp.

We had pooled our scant outerwear, Taylor with socks on his hands and my pink raincoat over his torso. Other than the occasional bout of dispiriting conjecture, like how far below freezing it had to be before numb toes turned black, we didn't say much. Mostly, we held each other and let our thoughts run loose at the interface of panic and prayer.

At first, Mount Moran had not seemed particularly foreboding. We had gotten our customary late start, but by lunch were done bushwhacking and starting up Skillet Glacier, our push to the top. It was a warm summer day. The sky was perfect and the snow was soft.

But we soon encountered obstacles – a chasm, an island of slabby rock, an increasingly plumb pitch. New to technical climbing, I began to flag. Taylor set up ropes for me. He would scale whatever was giving me pause, and keep me on a tight leash as I labored up to him. The afternoon passed quickly.

For six years we'd been doing this – roaming wild places, choosing each other. It was good enough that I wanted it to last, but therein lay the sticking point. Taylor wasn't ready to commit; he didn't know if he'd ever be. Staying with him felt alternately like accepting a gift and stealing from myself. As we swung up

and down the ranges we loved, I swung up and down internally, trying to decide.

If there was a decision to be made on Skillet Glacier, we let it slide past without mention. Although our paces were different, Taylor and I shared a key trait: wherever we went, we led with our hearts. So on this day, on this mountain, because we felt like it, we climbed on.

We summited after 8 p.m., as the jagged shadow of the Tetons slipped into Jackson Hole. Taylor, normally prone to musical outbursts on mountaintops, barely spoke. We were exhausted. And I was scared. Getting here had been about as much as I could handle. Looking down, I saw an eternity of glacier, now unlit and, minute by minute, returning to ice.

Night caught us on the rocky ledges just below the summit. By the time we reached the glacier, it was long past dark, and the snow was cement. Even with crampons, it was hard to hang on. We had to walk backwards, driving our ice axes into the slope at belly level before lowering our feet.

Eventually, Taylor put me back on belay. He found a stable place to sit, and let out the rope as I downclimbed. He warned me that, because his body was my only anchor, I couldn't weight the rope. If I slipped, he would arrest us both. But it would be better if I didn't.

Legs shaking, I put steep space between us. One of my crampons kept loosening, threatening to fall off my boot. I stopped and fumbled with the straps, started again, stopped, started.

"Babe?" he called down after forever. "I'm really cold."

When it came to mountains, Taylor had always been our MVP. It was he, and not I, who bought the climbing gear and learned how to use it. It was he who canvassed the Tetons, taking in a line of famous peaks. Once, snow camping in the High Sierra, I became mildly hypothermic and altitude sick. Taylor rushed me

into the tent, swaddled me in sleeping bags, and lay on top of me until I recovered.

Now, I needed to be the strong one, and I barely knew what I was doing. Fortunately, this is when the randkluft appeared.

“There’s a hole we can hang out in!” I yelled, stepping down to solid ground. “It’s good!”

It was one kind of hell watching the distant bob of Taylor’s headlamp as he inched down the ice untethered. It was another kind once he arrived in the randkluft, and all we could do was wait. My inner narrator was no help. She looped stories of how this might go, each its own shade of grim. We would freeze to death where we lay. If we survived the night, it would only be to slip and die once we resumed our descent. Or be horribly maimed. Or be ruined by a large-scale rescue. Or at least be humiliated.

The night passed. We lived to see the first streaks of dawn. We lived to see an American marten pop its head over the side of our hole, peer down at us for an eternal second, and bound away.

Looking back, the randkluft may have saved us. I learned of climbers who had skidded out of control down the glacier, catapulting over the rock island and into the bottomless gap below. As for us, we emerged around 8 a.m. to find the snow soft again, ready for our feet.

Before all that, though, when the light was gray and our fate unclear, I took one picture of the gilded horizon over Jackson Lake, and another of Taylor, eyes closed, pink-raincoated, with socks for gloves and a climbing helmet for a pillow, framed in snow.

Nine years later, with Taylor and I long split, both pictures still live on my phone. The first reminds me where to look when I’m low. There is nothing like a gleaming vista to help me see straight. The second makes me smile every time. Some things just get burned into your heart, no matter the decisions you’ve

made or waived: a special person, a redeeming sunrise, an immortal mountain.

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