Oh My God, We're Dead!

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I bumped into Guy on the balcony of the Monzino hut. He was off to do some multi-day route on Mont Blanc, whereas I had only come for a training climb on a nearby pinnacle. But I could see he was unimpressed by the Ottoz route on the Aiguille Croux, even for the first route of the season. *Faut faire la Gugu, c'est à vaches.* I certainly didn't think that meant that the Gugliermina would be a walkover, if only because it is a three-day outing. But Guy's remark did work its way through the filing cabinet of my mind until, in the course of the next few days, it pushed *la Gugu* out of the 'not for me' dockets into that of the 'possibles'. Simon does not have such a wimpish section in his climbing classifications and so, once I had tentatively mentioned it to him, I knew that I was committed.

We left Chamonix rather later than we should have done. It takes a full day, in August, to get through the tunnel, find somewhere to park, flog up the screes and cables to the Monzino, carry on as far again to the Col de l'Innominata, get down the other side, and cross the horribly tortured Frêney glacier. Even if one is planning to nip up and down the route itself in a day, only carrying a chalk bag, there are still going to be two bivvies on the Vires Schneider, which means carrying large and heavy sacks to the foot of the mountain. That is why, of course, one does not find the rock-jocks anywhere near it: just the superfit, like Guy, and the over-ambitious, like me.

So it was getting late when we saw the plaque on the Col de l'Innominata commemorating the death of the last victim of the 1961 Central Pillar epic. Now the whole trip took on a serious air. Behind us were the easy and tedious slopes up which we had slogged under a sweltering sun all afternoon. A steep abseil down the tottering blocks on the reverse of the col landed us on the glacier. I tried to put on my new crampons but Jules had adjusted the right one far too tight. In the shop it had seemed a good fit, but here it simply would not go on. Eventually we managed to hammer out the front retaining pieces sufficiently to get my boot in. It was an inauspicious start, and we had not much more than an hour of daylight left to find a way through what appeared to be an impossible ice-fall.

Slushy snow treacherously covered the lower part of a serac that seemed to give access to a passage above the first crevasses. I remarked to Simon that a fall here would be fatal. Shortly afterwards we found ourselves at a dead end, with vertical drops on all sides. There was no time to try and force our way further. We were less than halfway across and we would be benighted. Never mind, we could bivvy somewhere near the col and start again early next morning. Nothing would be lost.

We returned to the key serac and Simon started to climb down. There was no question of a belay. Besides, we had no ice screws and only one ice axe each. So when Simon reached the slightly less steep, mushy far edge, diagonally below me, I threw down the last useless coils and, with both hands free, started teetering down the 60° top section high above an impressive crevasse. Suddenly I saw Simon's feet shoot from under him and he started slithering helplessly. I knew exactly what was going to happen. 'Oh my God, we're dead,' I shouted, as the rope came tight on to my harness and tugged me off. It was, as Simon subsequently said, a very defeatist remark. I suppose I must have tried to brake down the serac face with my single ice axe, for I was still clutching it as I shot over the lip into the crevasse. Suddenly I jammed and the snow piled in on top of me. In a situation like this one's mind seems to operate at two different levels: so this is what it's like to be buried alive in an avalanche, I thought dispassionately. Disinterestedly, I looked up at the overhanging wall of ice above my head and knew that there was not the slightest chance of getting up it.

'Are you all right John?' an anxious voice yelled from somewhere in the remote world outside. 'Well, at least I'm alive,' I replied laconically. As I tried to turn round, a shooting pain cut through my side; my feet flapped in space and I felt my ribs glugging in liquid. Now I could see into the depths of the crevasse yawning to my right. If I had fallen three feet further along, both of us would have been dead. Perhaps for the first time in my climbing life I was afraid, *really* afraid. 'Simon, for God's sake hold me!' I yelled in uncontrolled panic. I managed to stay wedged as I turned around, and I could see that the ice wall behind me did not look quite so steep. But if I was to climb it I had to move fast, for in my now febrile state I was convinced I had punctured my lungs and would run out of strength. I had read enough of such situations to know that fear lends wings and I had to make use of that fear as an ally. 'I'm going to try and climb out,' I shouted, 'just keep pulling all the time as I move up.'

'Can you stay where you are?' Simon yelled a few moments later. 'No! For God's sake just keep me tight,' I peremptorily instructed. Concerned only at my own predicament, I could not understand his querulous tone. What I didn't know was that my companion had managed to brake to a halt and was now holding me across the tip of his ice axe still embedded in the slope. In fact, if I had not wedged, I would surely, in turn, have pulled him off and down into whatever lay below us. But now, from his precarious position, Simon was trying to pull me up. I started to climb. Suddenly the slope flattened out to a hidden ledge and I realized I could walk out of the side of the crevasse. 'OK, Simon, you can move now.'

As we joined together in safety, the reaction set in. I desperately wanted nursing over the easy ground back to the edge of the glacier. But it was dark by now, and we had to find somewhere to bivvy. There was no question of doing so under the Col de l'Innominata with its massive unstable blocks. Elsewhere the encasing walls were vertical and the rubble at their base showed that they were less than solid. But we had no choice, and Simon managed to find a crack where we could at least wedge ourselves into a sitting position. Fortunately we had no shortage of warm clothes, having come prepared for two bivvies. The trouble

was that I was still suffering from shock. Instead of explaining, for instance, that I wanted my rucksack passed over, I could only stutter out a staccato 'ru-ru-rucksack'. Believing that I must have struck my head in the fall, Simon determined that I should not go to sleep. His efforts to keep me awake were not without humour. As the shock wore off I was able to explain to him that my only worry was the liquid gurgling around my lungs. Half reassured, he relaxed his attempts to keep talking me awake and I began to think that perhaps I had not done any great injury to myself after all. But Simon need not have worried. Every time I began to nod forward, the pain from my broken ribs shot me awake again.

Next morning Simon climbed back over the col and down to the Monzino hut to call the helicopter. It was pleasantly warm, but as the clouds built up I began to realize what it must mean to be without help. I knew that if I absolutely had to I could eventually get myself back to the Monzino. But if my lungs were punctured? I had plenty of time to reflect. I remembered, after a forced retreat in the Himalaya, playing a game called 'VI Sup' in Base Camp and triumphantly producing my helicopter card when I got stuck, and how we all suddenly stopped laughing as the same thought crossed our minds. Roger and Nick were still up on the col in the hope of a summit push and the weather had again clamped in: no helicopter card for them to play. And in Peru, just a year ago, I had at one stage been in a position where I believed the others to be in trouble and, far from help, was faced with the problem of organizing rescue. A few days later, leaving for home, we had come upon the remains of a small American team from Dartmouth, who had befriended me when I was ill. They had just located Randy, who had been crawling for three days with a broken hip at over 6000m, after falling on Huascaran and seeing his companion killed. No helicopter to get him down.

The wait became interminable. With every sound of an aeroplane I anxiously scanned the clouding sky for the helicopter. Eventually the *deus ex machina* of the Alps arrived, and I was attached to a cable and lifted off the glacier. As the helicopter circled to climb out of the Frêney basin, the centrifugal force swung me in ever greater circles and I had an incomparable view of the savage pillars on Mont Blanc and the W face of the Noire. They were not appreciated. I closed my eyes as the cable jerked me in excruciating pain and swung me in a terrifying dance high above those menacing crevasses. Suddenly warm and gentle arms reached down and pulled me into the cabin. The winching was over and a few moments later we picked up Simon from the Monzino. In the clinic at Courmayeur it was discovered that I had merely a couple of broken ribs and nothing dramatic like punctured lungs. It had all been so easy, I reflected; I had played my helicopter card but in 'VI Sup' one is only allowed to use it once. Should I have tried to play the hero and avoid the indignity of being saved for such a trivial injury?

At least the location where my mini-drama had occurred sounded good. Later, René Ghilini caustically summed up the experience: *C'est aussi bête de tomber dans une crevasse sur le glacier du Frêney que sur la Mer de Glace, mais ça fait moins sarpé!* (It is equally stupid to fall into a crevasse on the Frêney glacier as on the Mer de Glace, but it is less bumbly.)