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Vampire Peak, Southeast Face, Single and Searching

New Zealand, Southern Alps

Step, step, swing. A serpent of white ice slithers down a bullying headwall above, forcefully compelling, drawing me: gravity's inverse. Down here, though, the portal to the unknown is but scraps and slivers of ice. Engaging.

Fatigue from last night's new route pulses quietly. [The author climbed Twilight, a seven-pitch WI3 ice line on the right side of the southeast face of Vampire Peak, with Mark Evans on July 26.] So many reasons to abdicate, if I like. However, I don't feel particularly mathematical. Most of these "problems" don't threaten to cast me off the mountain. Lately, I've read of the Daoist concept of alignment of self with situation, relinquishing our eternal striving and fighting. It's been working for me. And here I am, despite everything, feeling confident, strong, right. The schrund shrinks below.

My mind seems distracted and diffuse. Thoughts trivial and everyday in nature flit past. This is disappointing. I realize I'm here to experience singularity, focus, utter absorption: a mountain, a moment, me.

A slender pillar descends from above, demanding more. I feel a light glow of gratitude. It looks snappy. I scuttle up and right—how is the mixed bypass? The rock is down-sloping but looks solid. Easy now.... Huup! Oof...tenuous. I miss the tangible "thunk" of thick ice; here my tools shatter what little is available, here they scrabble on slab. Commitment grows with movement leftward, toward the gully beyond the pillar; exposure grows beneath my boots, breath shallow. I'm not conscious of it in these moments, but I have found the focus I desire. No cracks materialize, forward movement is key—and then I'm balanced on an arête, feet and one good hook, facing an unappealing, full-body stretch down into the gully. The top of the pillar looms just below; thin and overhanging, pouring into space. I belabor snowy rock with the side of a Quark, hunting hooks. A short but heartfelt scrabble, and I'm thankful to be established back on hard névé.

As I clamber with increasing joy toward the next narrow aperture, a WI3 thread—so much fun WI3 on this climb!—I know how easy it would be to pop and plummet. And, as I swing my tools time after time into the snowy ice, I know these moments are far from over for the day. I'd really appreciate pure, blue water ice, but welcome to New Zealand, baby.

The crux. Fear. More rock than expected; more and harder. To descend with one rope would take an epoch. A sojourn is called for. Returning, I fiddle in one...two...three small pieces, and scoop a hole for the 7.8mm rope, skeptically. With no device along for the purpose, I'll be on a fat old clove. In a general mess of rope and faff, I clip a screw—acres of slack bellying below—before scratching and stretching to a snowy but apparently secure hook. There's nothing for the feet below chest height, so it's swing the right foot up and get a questionable high tool in a crack that is slightly too wide. Pumping out, so I'll just torque a little...there. Ignore the dagger behind you, gray and dessicated—it'll snap. Thrash, twist, left foot up, clawing out some purchase in the shale. Arms burning now, core feeling first tremors, but a well-bonded sheet of ice hangs to the left. Tap, tap...stick. Yikes, you'd never do this without the rope!

Elated, I move up and left across the pillar's arête onto easier ice. Ten meters and the crux is below;

it's not easy here, but the climbing above won't ease much anyhow. Down and up, coil rope, laboriously upward once more. Each stick comes grudgingly. Death sits patiently behind my shoulder, waiting—the crux is in the past but so is the rope and the freshness of the morning. Eggshell ice booms. I quest left and right. Kicking, gouging feet break away saucers, dinner plates, tectonic plates of brittle white lacing, raining into the void I don't consider. After a little way, but a long while, the bowl above begins to unfurl itself. I hoot hoarsely but force each movement to remain slow and methodical until I'm in the snow. Then it's freeform, winding up icy arêtes where possible. The soft snow is faceted, and I've no wish to find out just how stable it isn't.

The watch hits six, mauve light makes its last dance across the great peaks of the Southern Alps, and I step onto the ridge. It's emotional, somewhat, looking down at my little line of tracks padding out of the depths. A matter of meters up an exposed snow ridge, sinking into soft feathers of rime, and now I stand a meter below a graceful, pointed summit. I feel grateful, a vague fulfillment, quite lonely, and a bit cool and wet.

As my damp gloves freeze stiff, I scamper back to the col and throw on my few items of clothing, dusk unfurling her wings across the sky I stand in. The Tasman Sea pounds silently somewhere to the northwest, invisible below a roiling sheet of dark gray cloud. Lesser peaks, unknown and savage, rise against the glow to the southwest. Aoraki stands regal to the north; the great Mackenzie basin lies in fading purple repose to the east. My eyes, though, are for the shattered heads of the Douglas and Landsborough rivers, glowing deep below. Down there, a tangle of streams braid across snowy plateaux, an alien planet—bare and pale, adrift among snow-dusted ranges of shadowed teeth, all snow and rock and disregard for the fragile, forgotten worlds of flesh and blood, wood and salt.

I drop off to the west, into the wild. Only the promise of the map contours invites me over toward Bernard Col, high on the shoulder of Burns, looking so stately in this last light. I really should have taken that extra set of gloves, the spare headlamp and PLB, maybe the shovel, or the bothy. I taste the tang of utter vulnerability, and realize how I've missed this feeling. And as the dark sweeps in and snow swirls into the void to my left, I—cautiously—revel in it.

Summary: Solo first ascent of Single and Searching, 500m, V, 6 (WI5 M6) on the southeast face of Vampire Peak in the Southern Alps, New Zealand, by Ruari Macfarlane, on July 27, 2020. The route starts up the gully of Far from the Madding Crowd and then heads up the steep right wall of the gully.

This report is adapted from a story originally published in the 2020 New Zealand Alpine Journal.

Images



The southeast face of Vampire Peak, showing the line of Single and Searching (Macfarlane, July 2020). The route branches right from the route Far from the Madding Crowd and takes a direct line up the face to the summit area.

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