



ABOVE *The Matukituki Valley from Cascade Saddle.*

BELOW *The Dart Glacier from below Cascade Saddle.*



ASPIRING

words by BRON WILLIS

photos by TERRY WILLIS

They found her pack on 3 January in the Dart river, 300 metres downstream from the walkers' hut where I welcomed in 2009. While my husband and I sat on the veranda, watching fork lightning crack over mountains, the pack may have just begun its inevitable journey—rolling, bumbling, floating, becoming snared, catching free, being pounded by a torrent of unforgiving water, making its treacherous way down a dirty grey glacial river.

Dart Hut, in New Zealand's Mount Aspiring National Park, was full to the brim with trampers. Half of them were warding off cabin fever after having their day's walk to the next hut aborted by rising rivers and an unrelenting downpour. The other half had stepped in under the shelter of the wooden roof, sodden and dripping, relieved and shivering, after six hours walking from the last hut.

Had things turned out differently, the missing walker could have been one of us, shaking her waterproofs and hanging them to dry from the wooden pegs outside. She could have watched the light of the candles play on the faces of new acquaintances as they discussed the day's walk. She could have befriended the other trampers in fitting new-year spirit, and tasted the port, brie and chocolate offerings that were passed around.

Had things been different, her voice could have joined in the New Year's countdown at eleven—since she didn't much see the point of being ruled by a clock in a place like this. Or she might have lingered, played cards with the stragglers and celebrated at midnight, before snuggling into her sleeping bag and falling asleep to the sound of snoring.

But she did not snuggle into her sleeping bag that night. She didn't stumble into the hut the next day, to replace her cold, wet clothes with warm, dry ones. Not that night, nor the next, nor the next.

I woke countless times during the night and lay still, listening to the noises. Did I hear boots outside? Was that the hut door opening? No. No boots, no door. Out there instead was Cascade Saddle—that I knew for sure. Other walkers had spoken during the evening, of trying for the saddle tomorrow. I wondered what the weather would have in mind. The alluring alpine pass, just half a day's walk from here, was what I had come to see. I'd dreamed of it for years. But somewhere on its slopes was a woman, alone.

I woke to traces of sunlight filtering through the small window above my bunk. It wasn't clear, but at least there was no rain. There was just a fraction of a chance that perhaps we would see our saddle after all.

But the mood in the hut was nervous. The laughter of the night before was replaced by eagerness to move on, and by the gentle chatter and busy sounds of pots banging as they were packed away and the click of buckles as packs were tightened. Parties were making a beeline for the gap in the weather, moving on and out while the rivers weren't looking.

Terry and I looked wistfully to the north, where glaciers crept and mountain parrots soared. Why was everyone in such a hurry? We would wait a while longer. Soon, the skies grew clearer, the weather report was radioed in and the ranger gave the all-clear. We shrugged our shoulders. 'Why not?' we agreed. 'Let's do it.'

Our spirits were high as blue skies erased all memory of yesterday's terrible

rain. Brown signs with etched white letters pointed to *Cascade Saddle – 4hrs* and *Aspiring Hut – 10hrs*. Aspiring Hut was over the other side of the saddle. The missing walker had left there yesterday morning at 7.00 am.

Signs warned against venturing into mountainous terrain during bad weather. What was she thinking, walking alone on a day like that? Perhaps she was thinking the same as us, that she would be fine. ‘Look out for her,’ the ranger had thrown out, almost as an afterthought, in case we had forgotten. I wondered what we were looking for—a woman or a body? ‘She has black hair. Thirtyish. Asian. Her name is Irina.’

The morning sun reflected off the water and we covered ground quickly. Our steps were light as we cherished the gift we had been given: the route was ours alone. I could think of no greater joy than solitude in the wilderness. For a while Irina was pushed to the backs of our minds. The track meandered along the grassy banks of the river and conversation became playful and lively.

The sun moved across the sky. Vegetation turned to rock as the glacier approached. I began to wonder if boots had trodden here the day before. Did she get this far? Had she rested on this very same rock? My eyes darted to shadows behind rocks, a slight tinge of colour in a side-stream, a distant glint. ‘What are you looking at?’ my husband asked.

Nothing.

A sound crawled up the valley, low-pitched and mechanical. It landed uneasily among the boulders only to run nervously away as the wind changed. We stopped, strained our ears, then walked on, choosing our footing carefully as the boulders gave way to slippery scree. Over a distant hillside a helicopter appeared. ‘She’s still out there,’ I said.

A hundred metres above, a search and rescue team hunkered down in the cockpit, listening to the blades slice the mountain air, peering down, scouring the endless valley below for a sign. She’s still out there. Irina, thirtyish, with black hair, is still out there. But no, I thought. She’s still out *here*. Where is she now? Is she alive?

Or is she just a body? Is the last of her warmth slowly escaping from her woollen beanie, the quicks of her fingernails fading to a ghostly white?

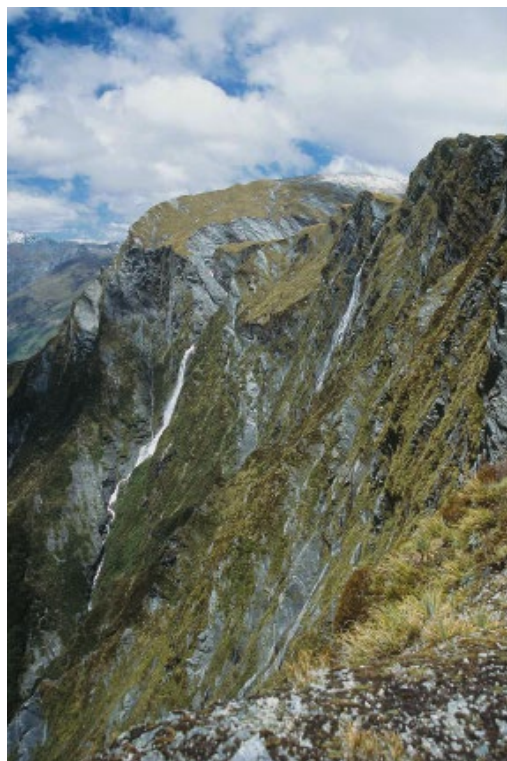
Stop thinking like that.

The helicopter made another pass and we neared the last of the scree before the ascent to the saddle. Terry looked up. ‘Come on!’ he yelled as his pace quickened. The helicopter was circling lower. *They must be stopping to talk to us.* I wanted to help. *Perhaps they have questions.* I had no answers but I ran up the slope, puffing. Terry was talking to a search and rescue officer.

There wasn’t much to say. *No, we haven’t seen footprints.* Men scoured the ridge above and worked in different directions. *Yes, we’ve been keeping our eyes out.* The orange of their jackets stood out against the browns, greens and greys of the alpine terrain. *Our names are Terry, and Bron. Thanks Aaron. Good luck. We hope you find her.*

The search cast a shadow on our afternoon. We were not far from the saddle. The weather was holding but the wind whipped at our faces. The blue of the sky gave over to clouds and our joy at the desperate beauty that surrounds us took on an edge of fear.

The last 30 minute climb was approaching. We had left the glacial scree behind and were now climbing on low alpine vegetation toward the saddle. Our breath



ABOVE *From Cascade Saddle.*

BELOW *The Dart Valley.*



Search helicopter flying over the Dart Glacier.



was laboured and the anticipation built as our hearts pounded in our chests. We reached the saddle and sent our greedy eyes from mountaintop to valley, from the grey darkness of rock to the lush green feeding from the meeting of rivers below. Among the mountains we are joyful and proud, dizzy with freedom and belittled by our nothingness in it all. We are in love with this thrill, in love with each other. We breathed in long and deep.

In the far distance the helicopter scooped and rose. We threw down our packs and chose a lunch spot. The sky began to turn. The chill of mountain wind stole the heat from our bodies. I threw on two woollen layers and my waterproof. Movements hastened. We left our packs and took a few photos. But I was feeling edgy now. I return to find a kea hopping menacingly towards my pack. Its presence felt like an omen.

I hurried to prepare lunch and realised that weariness had crept up on me. I threw together cheese, salami and mountain bread as Terry took more photos. My hands were cold and I fumbled with the knife. I wished he would come back. He returned. We wolfed down the food. The weather broke and hurled a grey and icy blanket of sleet over us. We crouched, swallowing mouthfuls as tiny balls of white landed all around us.

The helicopter was long gone now. The kea had

left for lower ground. I looked out to the bottom of the rock face and thought again of a fallen body. I looked to the glacial river behind us and imagined a pack floating rapidly downstream. *We must move on.*

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It is three days later. We are driving through Queenstown, a thriving tourist mecca that sells adventure to hordes of travellers drawn to the promise of something extraordinary. The radio reports a pack has been found in the Dart River. Its owner, Irina Yun, an experienced mountaineer, has not.

I imagine myself writing letters to her former partner, to her daughter, telling them why she did it. I would tell them she died in one of the most beautiful places on earth, that she loved the feeling inside her heart when she turned around and around to see mountains, rivers and sky in every direction. I would tell them that for her, the challenge of existing in it all was spiritual.

But of course I don't. I've never met Irina Yun. I might have been close to her when she breathed her last breath. I might have crossed the river metres from where her body lay trapped underneath never-ending torrents of pummelling water. But I've never met her. All I know is that she loved the wilderness. And that woven through this love was the fearful unpredictability of what might happen there.