**The Blood Red Moon – A Mountaineering Tale**

*“A challenge in which a successful outcome is assured isn't a challenge at all” – Chris Macandles*

Michael smashed his axe into the icy surface with enough force to stop him sliding. He looked around for another place to cement his free hand and sighted a solid hold amongst the rock wall to his left. The slide was unexpected but the self arrest was fast and well executed. He tried desperately to get his feet back under him but the snow shoe length hindered the motion. His body was awkwardly twisted towards the mountain, whilst his feet pointed outward.

He swore at himself for being so foolish as to leave his crampons in the car.This type of down climb quite simply should not be attempted either forward facing or with snow shoe crampons. He felt his arms begin to strain further with his weight. He shimmied his body towards the rock easing the strain and grabbed a better hold with his free hand before wreathing the ice axe out again and plunging deeper into the hard packed ice further up the slope. He paused and took a deep breath, still awkwardly spun around and trapped against the slope.

Sliding down the mountain at this point might not have been the worst thing. He might have slid away on the blue ice, rapidly gaining speed but eventually come to a halt in the powdery snow some twenty five feet below. However, If he slid to the right, he’d shoot off a cliff edge. There was no knowing where he might land and the speed of the slide and the risk of smashing his head or leg against the rock in this isolated location was completely unacceptable. Especially in negative 20 degree temperatures.

Most families were at home with presents under a Christmas tree; fires illuminating their joyous faces. Why on earth was he here he thought to himself. What had driven this madness? But he knew why, he always knew why he bought himself to these places.

As long as he could remember, Michael would challenge what was normal. At 19 he’d trained for months on end to surf gigantic waves. He started by increasing breath holds and then surfing bigger and bigger storm swells. This training culminated with surfing a cyclonic storm front which battered the East coast of Australia and pulsed 5 meter waves. Most people were content to examine the waves via telescope from the shore. It took Michael some 30 minutes of swimming and duck diving monstrous 2 meter white walls just to get out back (behind the sets). It was almost a meditative exercise. Paddle hard, duck dive under the white wall, surface, repeat. His mind wandered with the routine until he was suddenly shocked to see no white walls in front of him. As the waves cleared he put in a final burst of power in a desperate attempt to reach open water behind the sets. He put the hammer down and punched it with his remaining energy thinking he might actually make it! But then he stopped dead.

Frightfully alone and out of place on the closed beach, he watched a 5 meter set bearing down on him. A bright orange baited shark buoy skimmed across the waves lumpy, rain dusted face. The chain anchoring the buoy eventually ran out of length and the buoy plunged beneath the surface, yet the face of the wave was still building... As it reared up and detonated, it was truly the most horrifying thing Michael had ever seen; one of which very few humans should ever witness. The wave sent an impossibly large white plume of mayhem into the sky.

The white wall rolled forward brutishly at roughly 4 meters. Michael charged forward and prepared to duck dive. He pushed the board deep below the surface and met the wave with force; driving his foot through the board to try get below it. It still sent him somersaulting end over end back toward the beach, challenging his lung span with the hold time. As he went even over end, his thoughts were quite peaceful; lost to the maelstrom.

Eventually the wave would release him and he followed his leg rope to the surface, taking sweet gulps of air when he arrived. It wasn’t bravado that drew him to these insane places or situations of consequence. He wanted to see something special. He wanted a slice of an experience that was more personal. He wanted earth to reveal moments that would be his and his alone; searing themselves brightly into his memory, for life is but incredible memories, until we become dust.

So here he was in yet another position of consequence. This time; he needed poise, he needed to find more energy reserves, he needed to get back to the flatter ground and figure out another plan. His body was exhausted and the act of maintaining his weight on the slope was making his arms burn and fatigue. His body slid further down and placed even greater strain on the ice axe. He changed his hold to an under cling on the rock, whilst smashing the ice axe down again. “For FUCK sake!” He cursed his situation. Cursed the decisions that led to this point.

Alone in the Jutenheimen glacier network, just 2 hours earlier Michael had arrived at what he considered the most gorgeous sunset he’d see or many might ever see. The crisp – 20 degree air was bitingly cold and the sky was completely free of any clouds. The sun’s journey down was all too quick but it blasted the night sky with intense orange then transitioned to a ghostly purple.

He was on the Bessegen ridge line which tumbles away to the fjord some 900 meters below. It was not a place to loiter. The windblown rocks contained thousands of icy needles but the terrain layer still had fresh powder. Michael was elated; having reached 2 summits of his 5 summit goal and the ridgeline he always dreamed of in Jutenheimen.

He pulled a rock hard frozen sandwich from his bag and breathed deeply to recharge his senses whilst taking a bite. It was the most stunning place he’d been and unquestionably, the most isolated. He was humbled to have it all to himself but knew more than ever, every step mattered. There wasn’t a soul for miles and the glacier network was considered an ancient home of giants and other Nordic mythology. After taking more photos and finishing his sandwich, he set off towards home, refreshed.

As he came towards the nearby ridge line on the return journey, his mind began to play tricks. He could hear the sound of small children laughing, sending shivers up his spine. He approached the fear head on; establishing the source of the sound; a repeated movement with his ski pole. He noticed the friction made all sorts of odd sounds. He concluded it was just a figment of his tired mind embellishing the ice pole sounds. He was 5 hours in to his hike at this point and hadn’t seen a soul in over 2 days. Though it didn’t make it any less unnerving each time the laughing was heard.

Stranger yet, was the glowing fire on the horizon. He’d just seen a sunset, so wondered what it was. Maybe it was a town, or a forest fire? But that made no sense. The closer he got and the more it revealed itself, he finally understood. A blood red moon was forming up over the glacier network and illuminating his way. The glow of the moon created its own ‘sunrise’ sending unimaginable red glitter over the snow pack and unmasking an alien world. The photos he took would never do it justice, so eventually he just sat at the rock strewn summit and took in the beauty for himself. Eventually he begrudgingly left the blood red moon, and resumed his hike home. Turning his back on the colours and sparkles was hard and time had slipped by. It was getting late.

He stuck largely to the path he took coming in and relished the new angles and shadows of the terrain. His mind flashed back to a time he was hurtling over this same terrain on a run last autumn. On this occasion, the weather shut down quickly, he had to run out to avoid a storm front and prevent his hands from freezing. At the time, he knew the Bessegen ridge line would be a prize for another day, but he’d never have imagined it would be like this.

Snow changes terrain significantly and his way back wasn’t always completely clear. It was around 8 pm by the time he reached the point where a heavily exposed cliff greeted his tired legs. The contour lines of the map run closely together at this point and the terrain falls away, cliffing up. Home was tantalizingly close. Though he knew this was the very time climbers often make mistakes. The urge to reach your comfort grows strong and caution is thrown to the wind.

 During the day he’d had to use his ice axe to gain traction on this terrain and didn’t think kindly of the return journey. You have to follow a fairly technical blue ice downhill. The summer fixed chains were frozen deep into the terrain with one jutting out awkwardly. He’d made light work on this section on his autumn run, even though it was becoming a raging waterfall at the time. That same water fall and flow path had frozen into deep blue ice and then covered over with snow. He slowed significantly and analyzed the snow pack. The glimpses of lights in the distance taunted his taste buds and the pending rest beckoned, his car, the tent, and tea.

The snowpack here was far more perilous than during the day. This was to be expected but no less nerve wracking. For most of the day he’d been sinking into powder with every step on all but the most exposed ridge lines. Even when he came through this section earlier, his snow shoes had a good amount of bite. Now, they bit poorly and gave Michael no comfort that they’d hold securely.

Still on the exposed cliff and staring down a 20 meter fall to the right if he slid away, Michael downed his backpack and got into safer travel mode. He shed all his pack weight and then meticulously dug in steps, working his way slowly across the terrain face, still mindful he was in the “mistake zone” of his return journey. He worked methodically by torch light and secured a safe passage most of the way down. Once he’d reached a safe shelf where it flattened out, he went back for his gear and then planned the next move. The next section was steep and gnarly exposed blue ice, though the dimming light made it seem far sketchier than earlier in the ascent. He put snow shoes back on for the final section, and wanted to test out how the shoes would bite on the ice whilst crouched. He was attempting to keep the entire snow shoe in touch with the icy surface whilst keeping a low profile to make a self arrest easy. The terrain was far too steep however and a foot slid out completely, then the other and he began slide down the blue ice. The snow shoe crampons were simply not sharp enough to bite the hard blue ice forcing him to turn and slam his ice axe in.

And thus we arrive back to his perilous situation. There he was in a seemingly odd yoga position on shinny blue ice. He examined the rock terrain to his left in more detail whilst breathing deep in his nose. In all situations of this nature, he’d come to realise, no help is coming and you are your best bet. Save yourself. Human beings are so naive to their own mortality at times and have been known to wait for help in some of the most outrageous situations. Own your own fate, learn, develop.

His mind flicked to sliding away and trying to shoot for some powder, but he stubbornly rejected the idea and sent adrenaline and blood flowing to tired muscles. He took the ice axe and slammed it under the rock to his right up from his hand. He then gave a heave with his body up the slope. The slide and weight eased. With one final shimmy, another swing into the rock further up, he pulled forward to the flat and stopped the slide. He lay on his back and gulped some air. “You fucking idiot!” He exclaimed to himself. This was no longer the way out. He was going to have to improvise.

 He took some time to mentally come to terms with the fact he could have hurt himself badly in this place, whilst alone. He was bitterly disappointed he had got in that situation in the first place and his mind began to spiral. It felt almost as bad as being hurt. He hated making mistakes. “Just leave it Michael, leave it. We’re not injured, we’ve got time. There is no rush.”He said, seemingly talking to the Nordic Giants. He sat down and ate a handful of peanuts. He yelled again at himself and his invisible audience of giants before trying to regain some composure.

He packed his bag up again and then assessed the alternate route that avoided the ice on his phone. He’d need to loop around the back of the mountain. It meant he would bag another summit, crossing the ridge to the rear of it. He begrudgingly headed back into the glacier network up the steep slope through his ice steps towards a new summit. His water hose had frozen completely solid earlier in the day, rendering his supply inaccessible. Now he grew desperately thirsty. He reached the summit ridge line and made fast progress moving over and down to the other side. Something wasn’t right. He pushed further in and zigzagged deep powder pushing further towards what he thought would be an end to the sharp terrain and relief that would allow him to wrap around towards home. He attempted to check his position. His phone died. He pushed further forward and then stopped dead. He’d arrived at another cliff! He was off track.

Now utterly exhausted, thirsty and alone, he was not where he was meant to be. He pulled his charge bank out and put both phone and the bank close to his chest hoping the warmth of his body would resurrect the phone. He then pulled the ice hose out of his camel pack and examined the liquid in the container. On closer inspection, it wasn’t frozen, just the hose. His emergency blanket had protected the liquid from the worst of the cold, an old trick he’d picked up with time in the mountains. He pulled it from the pack and tried to spin the cap. It was stuck solid. He spat on it and tried again with all his reserves. Fuck you! He exclaimed. For fuck sake, fuck!! His mental fortitude was beginning to break. He felt so utterly alone. I looked over at his ski pole then snatched it up. He turned it on end and began to slam the handle over and over again into the water cap. He slammed it repeatedly, until finally, the cap moved slightly. He then turned the cap around and mercifully the water was open.

He took gigantic gulps straight from the vessel. He drank down half the reservoir and stopped, wiping his mouth. He packed up and strapped on his pack, invigorated. The small victory of the sealed water had been an important mental one. He pushed his phone power button and it too thrummed to life. He bought up his GPS and checked his position. He’d gone down one bend too early and was indeed heading towards another cliff. He back tracked back up the slope, and shot harder left away from the cliff area, heading away from home, food and warmth. It didn’t matter though now. He was alive. He could breath, he could drink, and he could get out of this.

His pace became methodical and his GPS checks more regular. He reached another valley bathed in the blood red glow of the moon. An emergency shelter was visible some miles in the distance. It was an option if shit got worse. He powered across heavily angled slope and avoided hidden frozen water with the GPS. He came to a windblown couloir where the terrain had turned the snow and ice into crazy angular tunnels; like shards of buckled bones. He slowed and took in the shadows and angles. The wind tunnel was ominous. He walked up into it to feel it loom and examined its shapes and contours closely, breathing deeply and absorbing the landscape. This tunnel was a sight nobody may ever see, before the violent weather of the mountains took the shapes back. The moon had lost its red tinge now and the valley was becoming ghostly blue. Michael left his chaotic fortress and moved on down the sheer angled valley slope.

He kept solidly to his old autumn trail run path, trying to remember it as he looped around the back of the mountain. He made good pace and started to eat the last of his rations. He’d been hiking for 10 hrs and it was coming up on 10pm. He paused and gave a final look inwards at the glacier network before letting it disappear around the mountain bend. After some solid GPS positioning and terrain reading, he sliced through two mountains and arrived at the base of the cliff he’d nearly slid down 2 hours earlier. He didn’t stop to gawk; he simply pushed on towards his prize, home. The glow of the parking lot and the lake below meant one thing, tea.

He made light work of the final decent and came into the car park; a broken, tired and dishevelled shell of a man. It was at this point, the damnedest thing happened. At the back of the café by the lake, a witch hovered and stared him down as he exited the path. She levitated impossibly, and the wind affected her cloak like tendrils as she moved and flickered in the light wind. Quite possibly, she wanted his soul and was there to claim it given his escape on the blue ice. Michael looked away and was quite close to a saying to himself, nope, fuck that and pushing towards his camp. Instead, the opposite occurred. He looked up at her and walked directly towards the witch despite every bone screaming for him to run. He let the tricks of light and shadow turn her into reality. She disintegrated into objects and hanging cloth which had been perfectly aligned to create the stuff of nightmares.

Ultimately she was a great metaphor for life’s challenges. You need to face fear head on and not walk away, never give up, never stop drinking in everything life has to offer. What’s out there in places like Jutenheimen is far too beautiful to miss. The fear is in you and in us all, but often, it’s not real. It’ll take time, effort, and risk, but the rewards will be humbling. Ultimately, the only thing stopping you going is you.

Dedicated to Brendan Jones. Rest in Peace my friend.