



This Is What I Thought on June 21, 2012, When I Heard that Nick Hall Had Died

I DIDN'T KNOW NICK WELL. I knew him well enough, in a way. My first summer on Rainier, last summer, he and I worked on the Paradise side of the mountain. We were on the same shift, and we spent many days at the Camp Muir hut together, climbing, shooting the shit, doing our work. I don't yet know how

Nick died. He just died. Sometime today. I don't know when. I just got a call. That's all. I still don't know what happened.

There is a feeling of crystalline something right now. A stillness to the air. The door is open to the veranda, and people and cars go by. The public buses reach their antennae up to the sky, pulling electricity from the wires that crisscross like a mesh grid just above our heads. There are joggers here, and roses, and

pug-nosed dogs on the leashes of people I'll never know. A million anonymous cars and their drivers, and the fading light of another day. Evening into night. Some clouds gather on the horizon, and I feel shamed and humbled by noticing all this beauty.

I don't know what to say about Nick. He was blond, and this season he showed up with long locks that made him look like a Sixties surf bum. He looked great. He was soft-spoken, and he talked little enough that when he did, you listened. What am I doing? This is bullshit. Someone who knew him better can eulogize him.

I don't know what is to be said. Death is a phantom that creeps closer and closer. I've never lost a best friend, or a lover. My near family members are all well and intact. Two days ago, my sister had a baby, and this event feels to me much the same: some giant happening in the world that touches me peripherally at best. My email server shows me acquaintances on the sidebar to whom I haven't talked in months or years. I live inside my bubble.

Nick told me not to stop practicing avalanche safety. He said that my beacon skills were shit, and that if he was going to team up with someone, he would sure as hell hope they were more qualified than I was. He was right. I didn't know shit about avalanches, much less about snow in general. I always respected Nick for saying that. He didn't sugarcoat anything. He said, "Keep practicing, never stop practicing, constantly improve your skills." I hadn't done much. Why would I? Who could ever die on Rainier?

People die there almost every year. It makes me wonder why I am there, what I am doing. A vacuum rolls through the house disturbing me with how the world continues as if nothing has changed. I cook dinner and chop onions. They make me cry. Finally.

There are prayer flags on the porch, and some in my van. I don't know what they mean. They are something superstitious I think, some warning against bad luck: *Come not here*. But I don't know. In some ways, they are a fad. People see them in the mountains, and they like the idea of mountains, so they bring them back home to the city. I think the flags are the colors of the world. The color black is not among them. They omit that altogether. So the flags must be something to take with you into the dark. Nighttime falls on the Mountain, and now only the western slope of Rainier's mass fades out in dying light.

This could be me. This could be me. Am I saved, here, by my caution? I take fewer chances in the snow, because it is bizarre and cold and white. It is fickle, and it does not resemble the granite I've come to know. Crevasses disquiet me—not because of their ominous nature, but because of how sleepy and irrelevant they look. They are nothing to cross, just a nuisance to walk around. Does Nick lie now in one of those? Would I join him if we were roped up? Would I have been able to save him? Myself?

I have no answers for anything. I have only questions. I don't understand how I feel, or don't feel, or what to do or not to do. I ate Thai food. I think I'll eat chocolate and drink juice and a beer maybe. I think there is some pie in the dresser outside. Beneath the drawer with the bananas. The whole thing is absurd. The fruit flies are out of control. Breeding and repeating, eating and seeding. My girlfriend Megan throws out the dumpster flowers, but there are more flies every day. She's just cleaning up the waste of the world. Still, there are three ivory wreaths that hang on the banister outside, next to the prayer flags. The flowers will die brown and decompose, but now they are beautiful in their autumn hue. There are pink roses across the street, and carmine poppies line the block. I think I saw a magnolia tree here in Seattle somewhere. We walked around Volunteer Park, and lay down beneath a big old western red cedar. We ate lychees and drank German light white wine. How come when David called to tell me the news some part of my mouth kept quivering like a smile?

When I was young, I was told, often, that people smile when they lie. Tell me the truth! They'd say. I know you're lying, look at you smile. But the truth was that I smiled when I told the truth—because I was being entirely honest. No matter what they thought, I could smile because I was at peace with myself. The truth is: I mourn Nick's loss silently, in a dumbfounded medley of grinning and frowning. The truth is: I don't know what to say. I am sorry for the world's loss. I know that the sun will rise tomorrow. I'll eat again, and I'll return to Rainier, and Camp Schurman. I'll watch the sun set over Seattle. The orange light will melt all over

the glacier, and turn the blue hues to pink and violet. Those crevasses will suck in all the light they can, and melt out, bit by bit, snow from their glaciers and deposit it into the rivers below—rivers that flow back to the sea. Everything will be the same, again. One day, all of us will be the same again. We'll see.

—Chris Kalman, Seattle, Washington

[On June 21, renowned climbing ranger Nick Hall fell 2,500 feet to his death during the rescue of four climbers from Rainier's Emmons Glacier. Hundreds of people attended his memorial service. In an official statement, the US Department of Interior Secretary praised Hall's "brave and selfless nature." Hall was thirty-three years old.—Ed.]



Baeriswyl

I WRITE TO YOU from the end of the road. The signs on this road, labeled from somewhere else, say Highway 9, the same number of points as the perfect star on Ernest Shackleton's grave. In the small hours of January 5, 1922, on a vessel at an anchor near South Georgia, far beyond the end of any concrete road, Shackleton wrote: "In the darkening twilight, I saw a lone star hover, gemlike above the bay." Minutes later, his heart, which had faltered all

along his Antarctic adventures, stopped. And he was dead, leaving others to imbue his story with their own transplanted meanings.

If you try to go past the signs on this road, you'll come, after a long walk on ancient stones, to the cross that marks the end of the Americas, Cape Froward. A quick glance into the dictionary reveals the meaning of this name: perverse, difficult to deal with, unapproachable. The tales of boats and men who ignored this warning are now scattered over the bottom of the sea.

You'll find me in a boat floating at anchor, if you turn left at the statue of the Virgin Mary,

one of many littered around the continent of South America. Usually, these figures are garishly painted clay dolls marking the ground where locals have died. This one is a white cement copy of an original in Lourdes. She smiles serenely north toward the place where the bodies of the dead are stacked in neat suburban rows, named and dated in their perfect cemeteries. She turns her back to the immense, Patagonian chaos of waiting stone and wind.

To the east, so long as the daily rainbows are not too bright, I can see the grey coast of Dawson Island, where General Pinochet is rumored to have buried many of the victims of his secret police. The virgin does nothing about his yet-unpunished crime, although the townspeople come out by the busload to implore her return.

I've always wanted to write about my perception of where I am on this road, but I'm just a sailor washed up on a beach, a climber confused by too many untouched summits. A man who doesn't really know enough about either pursuit to write the conventional wisdom. But I have been out Here forever. What can I say about anything?

Just what I see. Who will read it? Well, you are. What will I write about? I will write about Here, since there is not much else, here.

Here is where the concrete ends. Here is where the wind blows tornadoes of sea foam and then suddenly stops—like a narcoleptic. Where even the albatross has to mind the gaps as it glides over puzzles of rocks laid out in eternity. Here is where you have not yet sent the bombs, though the road has been stealthily designed to bring them. Here is where the numbers no longer match and