



the last **MOONSET**

BY BRIAN IRWIN

AS SOON AS WE LANDED on the Kahiltna Glacier we ran into a familiar face from home, in New Hampshire.

Ben Gilmore greeted us, “Come on up and hang out! The girls just came off Hunter. It’s cocktail hour.”

We entered Sue Nott’s giant dome tent, its edges sprinkled with piles of freeze-dried meals,

ropes and duffels. Everyone was sitting comfortably on foam pads. Sue lounged in her pink jacket next to her friend Zoe Hart, sipping cherry Kool-Aid and vodka, recalling their attempt of *Deprivation*.

“Send it! Arrrghh!” Zoe mock-screamed at her as she took a sip of the ratty cocktail. “Remember that?”

Sue laughed, then turned and asked if I’d ever hung out in Talkeetna, from which we had just departed. I hadn’t.

“Just wait until you get back there and spend a day or two. The only thing more interesting than climbing in Alaska is

meeting the locals! You’re going to love it,” she said. We sipped whiskey and listened to Ozzy

tunes with Sue, John Varco, Ben and Zoe for hours. Sue told me about her near-death accident, during which a falling ice pillar, on one of Vail’s mixed routes, impaled her abdomen. I didn’t know Sue well; in fact, I had only met her twice. I was riveted by her stories. She was very energetic and unbelievably excited. Her partner, Karen McNeill, was due to arrive in a few days to join her on an attempt on the *Infinite Spur*, Mount Foraker.

Two weeks later my partner Eric and I returned from Denali’s 14,000-foot camp after a failed attempt on *Thunder Ridge*. Sue and Karen had left the day before for their climb. We pulled our cache from Sue’s tent and left her a thank-you note. Our plans to climb the Mini-Moonflower during our last day on the glacier were stymied by a flurry of seracs that persistently calved off Mount Hunter, pounding the valley below. One enormous slide had brushed Ben and his partner as they scouted Hunter’s North Ridge. We settled for a short route on Mount Frances, on which we had our own heels dusted by an avalanche, and flew back to Talkeetna.

After the requisite shower and burger at the West Rib Bar, we headed to the town park on the shores of the Talkeetna River. It was 10 p.m. and the sky was as bright as day. Walking by a group huddled on a giant log beside a campfire, I heard a voice.

“Don’t be shy,” an old woman said to me from her perch on the log. She winked once and took a pull from a bottle of wine. “My name is Fern. Come on and join us.” I walked over. Fern passed me her wine; I took a sip and gave it back.

“Nice here, isn’t it?” Fern asked. “Yes,” I said, looking at the horizon. The sun cast orange light across the giant peaks on the skyline.

By midnight no one was sober. “One Tooth Guy” was quibbling with Shannon, a loud, ruthless musher who was calling him the “ugliest piece of shit I’ve ever seen.” “Taurus the Guitarist,” recognizable in similar forms across the country as that crazy guitar guy you see in parks, strumming away as he stands alone, was breaking strings left and right. I asked him to play some Ben Harper.

Taurus said loudly, “I don’t have any of that, but how about some Byrds?” He leaned in and whispered, “I can’t really play the

guitar. I just strum and sing the lyrics, but no one notices.”

“Meat,” the co-owner of a Talkeetna motel, heaved a log the size of his F-250 into the fire, stood on the flaming log, held up his beer and screamed, “I’m one-quarter Athabascan!”

His girlfriend stood next to me wearing a tight camouflage T-shirt that read “Pornstar” in glitter paint across her chest.

After Meat’s ancestral proclamation she punched my arm and yelled into my face, “He really is, you know. You better respect it.”

“THE ONLY THING MORE INTERESTING THAN CLIMBING IN ALASKA IS MEETING THE LOCALS!” SUE SAID.

“Respect what?” I asked.

Pornstar rolled her eyes. “Athabascan. You know, we’re all descendants of Athabascan. Even Jesus was.”

Fern, whom I hadn’t seen since she invited us into the party, walked up with a plastic bag and pulled out a dead trout the length of my arm, saying, “Larry caught it for me.”

“I’d love to catch one of those,” I said.

“Larry!” she screamed. “Take this boy fishing!”

Larry was the son of a famous Alaskan bush pilot, but he turned out to be a bit more peculiar than his charismatic father, with a flat, medicated affect and an odd facial tick that rang of instability. Larry sped over from the other side of the fire on his ATV, clinching a basset-hound puppy by the neck as he rounded the giant log. He grabbed my arm, pulled me aboard and sped down the riverbank to his fishing hole. We didn’t catch any fish, but his dog, Hershey Bar, fell in the icy river twice.

Around 3 a.m. the town’s kindergarten teacher jumped on a log and yelled, “It’s happening!” Everyone by the fire cheered and ran down by the river. We followed. The gang stopped in a clearing and stared into the southwestern sky. The moon was

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Jack Tackle - Jan. 11;
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John Varco - Jan. 14

[OUTLOOK]



Cherry Kool-Aid, pink jacket; Sue Nott and Karen McNeill in their element before starting the *Infinite Spur*.

enormous, a rich amber hue, hung up in the trees south of town. Everyone stood in silence, even Meat, as the moon sunk below the horizon for the last time this spring. It wouldn't rise again until autumn.

We stayed by the river until sunrise. As the outline of the Alaska Range emerged on the horizon I stared at Mount Foraker. It was Sue and Karen's third day on the *Infinite Spur*. My eyes shifted to Denali. A lenticular cloud was building over its summit. In the days to come, a storm packed with hurricane-force winds would

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envelop both peaks.

A week later I was back at work.

My wife, Carolyn, called my cell phone.

"Brian, did you hear about Sue Nott and her partner? They're missing on a mountain in Alaska. Didn't you just see them up there?"

I scrambled to contact friends from Denali's National Park Service patrol, guides and local climbers, trying to find out what happened. I read about findings—boot tracks high on Foraker, the recovery of a pack from the base of the route—and the belief that the women surmounted the technical section of their route

but were hit just below the summit by winds estimated to be in excess of 100 mph. (The loss of the pack and the women's disappearance appear to have occurred separately.) Over the next week I followed the ongoing search very closely. The more I dug for new information or promising findings, the more I realized that although there were theories, the incident may always remain a tragic mystery.

Sitting at my tiny desk, I drifted between idyllic memories of my expedition and images of Sue's pink jacket. Occasionally I'd stumble onto a website that had a photo of Sue, grinning widely, wearing it, or an aerial photo that showed the jacket atop an avalanche-debris pile at the base of the *Infinite Spur*. Every time I saw a photo of that jacket I felt a lump in my throat. I couldn't get it out of my mind.

I remember telling Sue, that night in her giant tent, that my wife would be jealous of her pink jacket.

I vividly recall the bounding metronome of my pulse in my temples as we plodded up the glacier. The sensation of swinging into Denali's cold, brittle ice. The deafening roar and bitter aerosolized snow-filled wind gusts of Hunter's avalanches that poured up and over Radio Control Tower. And the charm of Sue Nott's giggle over a Kool-Aid cocktail as she relaxed against a bright orange tent wall while the sun slipped behind the ridgeline and the coldness of the mountains rose from the valley. ■

Brian Irwin is a family physician from North Conway, New Hampshire. This was his first trip to Alaska.