



The Middle

Words:
Majka Burhardt

Left: Majka Burhardt and Anne Gilbert Chase use their shiver bivy to invent imaginary constellations 200 meters below the summit of Fitz Roy. Peter Doucette

It was 8:45 p.m. when Gilbert made the announcement.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

These were the first words she’d spoken to me since I’d seen her an hour before when I set off to lead an ice-choked crack that gave way to a rime-covered slot. Her head had just emerged from the slot, her body was still stuffed in it. She craned her neck so she could look me in the eye where I stood at the belay 10 feet above her.

“We’re going to have to bivy,” she stated.

“Yup,” I said. At 20 hours in and 1,600 feet to go, this seemed rather obvious.

Gilbert cast about with her left ice tool in the unconsolidated snow above her head, found something like an edge, grunted and pulled her torso from the slot. “And,” she continued, “Peter needs to be in the middle.”

Peter, technically, is my husband, and therefore should only be spooning with me. But two hours from darkness on the southwest ridge of Fitz Roy in January, he’s been reduced (or maybe elevated) to a wood stove.

By the time Gilbert joined me at the belay, she was on a roll making her case. “He’s bigger. He’s warmer. We need him.”

I sighed. My climbing partnership with Gilbert prior to this trip consisted of exactly four pitches. I’d taken a quick liking to her hardiness and practicality. It was those traits I’d relied upon when, over a second bottle of red in Chaltén, I’d casually suggested that I take the middle on all potential bivies. “You’re tougher than me,” I’d told her, “and Peter is married to me. It only makes sense that I take the middle.”

“I thought we had a deal,” I said now to Gilbert.

“What deal?” she asked.

Ninety minutes later I found myself perched on the outside edge of a

six-foot-wide and two-foot-deep snow ledge/love seat at the terminus of the southwest ridge. Our backrest was the ridge’s final fin of granite—handy for both comfort and as protection from the 40 mph wind gusting up from the east. The three of us used one sleeping pad as a group sit-upon, one sleeping bag as a light-duty lap blanket and a tarp draped over us to complete the system. Gilbert promptly fell asleep. Peter, in the middle where technically I belonged, did the same. I closed my eyes and attempted to follow suit. Minutes later my head lolled and snapped. I kept my eyes closed and tried again. The tarp flapped at my chin, the edge scratching me raw. Head-snap. I gave in, opened my eyes and watched the moon rise over Fitz Roy instead.

On the first night of this new year, it took exactly five hours for the moon to give way to the sun. I kept time with the beat of my boots against each other to stay warm. Peter’s princess seat only served him one hour of sleep, and soon he joined in the tapping. Gilbert slept slack-neck, chin to chest the entire time, silently breathing except for the occasional snort.

“How do you feel about being the bivy gigolo?” I whispered to Peter.

He sighed. “It’s all of the negatives without any of the positives.”

I kissed him, through my buff, on the cheek and nudged his thigh with my elbow.

Peter and I alternated between talking about the light and the route, and checking to make sure Gilbert was still breathing. Any urge I had to get up and climb was replaced with the knowledge that the only thing less comfortable than our bivy would be leaving it before the sun lent warmth to the day. In 20 years of climbing, I’d never been as invested in one singular transition of illumination.

At 5:25 a.m. Peter finally led out from the bivy and into the sun. I belayed as Gilbert packed away the bivy accouterments.

“How did you sleep?” she asked.

I looked into her eyes, bright from sleep, and considered my answer. Peter’s “off belay” filled the air. The ropes came tight. “I’ll tell you later,” I said, shuffling to the side of the ledge to let Gilbert through to climb next.

Gilbert shook her head. “I’ll go last,” she said, smiling. “You should take the middle—wasn’t that the deal?”

At age 5, Patagonia ambassador **Majka Burhardt** was motivated by ice cream and fudge to climb. Not much has changed. She lives in Intervale, New Hampshire, with her husband, Peter, and their poodle, Ptarmigan. Ptarmigan never gets the middle.