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SANDBOX LEGEND HELMET, BOSS GOGGLES, AND A WHITEGOLD NORTH SNOWBOARD

THE THINGS WE CARRY

Meditations on Gear

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THE BEST GEAR TELLS A STORY. Here's one: three years ago, I ripped my softshell pants from the hip pocket to the seam down the center of my crotch. I was not wearing underwear, and six men saw the white skin of my upper thigh, maybe more.

The pants are made by Patagonia, a company that has built a bombproof marketing campaign around the ways that their products are used and abused. Customers submit anecdotes about their grandfather's fishing shirt or fuzzy pastel jackets passed between toddlers. The tagline: "Every patch is a memory, every tear has a tale. These are the stories we wear."

I have not submitted the story of my ripped pants to Patagonia's Worn Wear campaign. I know one way to describe giving six men a full-frontal flash at 14,000 feet in the pre-dawn alpine glow: it's a funny, self-deprecating anecdote that I sometimes tell at parties. But I don't know how to write the story in a way that explains that it didn't matter.

We had flown across the country, and hiked into base camp just in time to meet a bitter snowstorm head-on. By the time we had a weather window long enough to make a summit bid, we had eaten everything except coffee beans and peanut butter and olive oil. When we left base camp we were already weak.

The weather held, and we climbed quickly. But as we stepped onto the summit ridge, a climber on my rope team stumbled. I caught the fall with the rope tied between us, and the four-inch blade of his axe missed my femoral artery by less than a centimeter. I saved his life; the blade of his axe could easily have ended mine. We didn't speak, but he held my eyes for one long beat. Then the moment had passed and we were on our feet, each finding our balance. I taped my pants. We summited the mountain.

Ten days later a seamstress from the Patagonia store stitched the pants. There was no charge. I still wear them commando, but it doesn't feel right for that story to be featured in an ad campaign. I'm not quite sure why.

TRUST. As athletes and adventurers and friends, we learn to place our lives in each other's hands. We tie knots, replace the batteries on our avalanche beacons, lend each other gear. Trust is a confusing thing: it seems so simple, but it's hard to pin down. Every time I rappel on an unfamiliar rope, my muscles are tightly braced for the unknown. There is no moment when I am not aware of the threat of an unmitigated fall.

It's like that with people, too. It's only with time and familiarity and shared miles that I relax and start to lean in: a climber into a belay, a lover into a body, a skier into the slope. A human being into a friendship.

Maybe that's one of the reasons we crave shared adventure: for that one week or day or moment, we forget to be wary. We forget to calculate each other because we're working together to build a campfire or evaluate avalanche risk or ford the stream. Adrenaline and a shared mission force us to rely on each other's strength, and we forget to be in any place but that single moment. The right gear can be one of the tools that creates a day that lets us forget.

We talk about trust as something you build, as though it's a structure or a thing. But in that building there seems to be something about letting go: of expectations, of self-doubt, of that calculated presentation of self. When I wake up in the mountains, there is no wondering what to wear. I already know who I am that day. I am something more than 160 characters; I am a three-dimensional human being. I'm my best self, the one I wish I could always be.

MOST adventure requires at least some gear. Some of it is utilitarian: tents, sleeping bags, lanterns, ropes, harnesses, Vibram-soled shoes, wool socks, knit gloves. Until very recently, we wanted the most techni-

cal gear we could find; every product was lighter, stronger, waterproof, breathable. By streamlining our gear, we seemed to think that we could push farther into the unknown. In that thinking, it was the gear making the adventure, and not what we found in ourselves.

But now our collective subconscious seems wary of gear from the future. We trust the past more than the present; we are learning to trust ourselves. And in so doing, we are free from needing the gear to define the adventure. We're still buying gear for function, but now we're also buying adventure gear for fashion: \$300 flannel shirts, artisanal Sequoia-scented beard oil, titanium travel chopsticks. We are lumbersexuals who post hundreds of photos of tiny cabins on Pinterest. How many of us know how to chop wood?

The lines between gear and fashion are increasingly blurred. Big outdoor brands are launching heritage lines. Stylish twenty-somethings dress like Swedish men from the forties. Companies in Portland, Oregon and Maine are specifically designing products to be heavier, more durable, less modern. Waxed canvas is big. In autumn 2013, Marie Claire dressed models in L.L. Bean. We're sentimental for a more-authentic time that—in truth—we have never known.

IHAVE SORTED GEAR left by friends lost to adventure. Co-workers have been buried by avalanches. Mentors have run rivers and not come back. The gear they leave behind is divided, cherished, used.

Last summer, after six climbers died on a mountain, I sat in a ranger's hut on a glacier and drank gin out of a tin cup until I forgot how my legs worked. Then set my alarm for the next morning to climb the same peak.

As we passed the cup, we talked about climber Kelly

Cordes, who later wrote that "...transcendence forever [comes] from long days in the mountains. You're sharing the deepest corners of your brain, your strongest feelings. You are completely vulnerable and completely authentic."

One of the men I drank with that night had a sticker on his skis, which commemorated a different fallen friend—a skier who died in an avalanche in South America. The man was wearing his dead friend's gloves, and for a reason that neither of us understood he let me try them on, flexing the leather across my palm. We toasted to authenticity, then we held shiva in the only way we know: by living.

IF WE'RE BUYING GEAR that we don't need, then that gear is fashion. Fashion is: a form of self-expression, an art, a tool, a status symbol. It's a religion, an escape, a disguise. Your clothing and shoes and self-presentation tell people why you came, who you are, what you want. Consider: a business suit in a boardroom, a lace bunny costume at a college party, a black dress at a funeral. So what does it mean when executives wear tin cloth in the corner office?

Maybe we wear heritage brand outdoor gear as a symbol: I have been there. I have done those things. Wherever I stand, I have chosen those things. I chose that life.

WHEN I WEAR my softshell jacket to Costco to buy dog food, I am sometimes scared of living up to the idea of a life that I have built for myself. I own waxed canvas and tin cloth and Gore-Tex and wool, and in my search for authenticity I am blurring the lines between gear and fact and fashion.

But even if I gave only the straight facts of my life, I would only be telling one version of my story. It would probably be less beautiful, and, strangely enough, it might even be less truthful. Maybe that's what we're doing with all this gear, technical or sentimental: sharing facts and, somehow, sharing more than the facts. We are sharing our best selves, the selves we want to be. Maybe our gear is the best way we know to say: I am more than you think. I am not the label you see.

Am I cultivating a lie? Are we? I don't know. What I know is this: that softshell jacket is full function, regardless of form. It has been to the summit, and I will wear it there again. I will also wear it to Costco, the dog park, and with flannel pajama pants and house slippers when I walk across the street to buy a bottle of wine. And when I get home, I will hang it on a hook so that it is ready for the next late night campfire, the next 4 am drive, the next pre-dawn excursion. It will remind me that ice and dirt and snow and rain and blood and dust and wind are my currency; they are the language I speak. I will wear that jacket to remind me what I choose. 