



A NEW YEAR'S WEEK TO REMEMBER — 1984

By Barry Steeves

My yearning to be with the mountains had overcome me again. It was 8:00 a.m. New Year's Day, on the bus bound for Banff. I'd partied harshly just hours before, but only the desire to ski-mountaineer to Mt. Assiniboine (Matterhorn of the Canadian Rockies) filled my thoughts. Forget about being tired, sleepiness isn't conducive to good times anyway.

Still full of energy, I was really making tracks. It was a balmy -10° C, and my attention was focused on the rhythmical gliding of my skis. That rhythm soon developed into stumbling, as my ski tips would dive into the fluffier snows. I knew I would experience unconsolidated snow, but this was ridiculous. At times, the skis were a metre under, when I'd suddenly stop and wonder whether I'd lost them for good. Fixed on continuing, you'd have seen me like some primitive dinosaur plodding along through the swamps.

Climbing up the first obstacle wasn't so bad. Quartz Ridge (2500m) was just warming me up. During its descent, I was even a little reserved from just shooting down; you just have so much control with cross-country skis. I let gravity do most of the work as I breezed over the somewhat crusty snow. Then down I went, in a long, drawn out fall. The thin crust gave in like thin lake ice, and I splashed in a sort of belly flop, but my face hit first.

To tolerate my head being drilled a metre under was one thing, but trying to wrestle an uncooperative 30 kg. backpack off of me was quite another. I began to think such episodes quite funny, and I would just laugh at myself. It was the only way to put up with it 'cause it happened a lot more than just once.

The vastness of this alpine terrain was humbling, with each ski stride melting into another in such a way that the only perception of progress was the slight shifting in the position of the mountains. Their rocky heads stared down on me. They seemed to be brooding, as if I was trespassing their country and peace. Up above, someone else had turned the dark cloud machine onto fastforward, and night descended quickly.

It had become routine by now: to make a suitable tenting site meant rolling around in the snow. By the time things had settled, I had a metre deep depression firm enough for my tent. Once inside the shelter, my cold and aching fingers would fumble around trying to unfasten frozen boots, gaiters, and everything else. Then I'd dive into my waiting sleeping bag and shake into near-orgasmic warmth.

Awoken by a thunderous clap, my tent collapsed to a mass of wet snow. I just laid there, listening to the chinook winds pick up. It would gently sound like nearby roaring surf, or at times the scream of revved jet engines. That night was coming all...

Come morning, I barely kept my cool; everything was sopping wet, and the site was in ruins. It took a great deal of time and energy to pack up, and I wasn't off until 10 a.m. The breaking and establishing of camp each day was a constraint on my daily progress, for daylight at this time of year, and at these latitudes, is a scarce commodity.

Valley of the Rocks was just ahead, but all I could see of this world were the tips of my skis. Everything else was white white white.

Nevermind the snow bombarding my face, I couldn't see any slopes, bumps, or ridge lines in the terrain, couldn't make out sky from snow, and couldn't even see whether I was skiing on an incline or decline. You could never overuse the word white out there, as it overwhelms your senses into a hypnotic state.

The sky and ground were one with me, like some lone speck of color suspended in a world of cotton fluff.

I was way behind schedule and the going was extremely slow. I didn't know too much about avalanche danger signs, but I did recognize that enormous quantities of wet snow accompanied with strong winds do not a stable snowmass make. Although I couldn't see them then, I knew steep slopes were all around me.

I had to question what I was doing there, and the doubts set in. I wasn't up to it; the conditions had overtaken me. I trained my eyes to my compass while making my way according to my topographical map. She was taking me back home.

The ground's dense snow hoar was excruciatingly difficult to cover, with trail breaking up the steep slopes most demanding of all. It was still a long two or three day trek back, and I still had to get myself out of there!

After two days of white-out, the weather quickly cleared as quickly as it had come. The sun was nice, but this guy was soaked to the bone. When in my sleeping bag, it felt as if I'd peed the bed. Everything was at least sticky, and yet I managed to appreciate the warmth of wearing wet mitts when I laid there trying to sleep. Along with restless sleeps, I'd have the strangest of vivid dreams. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't imagine lying in my warm, dry waterbed waiting at home. I knew I would be there quite soon though. My body and mind were insisting!

Sure those mountains personified strength and timelessness, but I was feeling the presence of something else. Those snows high above those gorges were getting restless too. At times my skis seemed getting pressed together, and around me the snow surface would crack. Compelled towards me? I didn't want to stick around to find out.

Looking up and about was awful. Everything seemed so quiet and heavy. Off in the opposite direction for an alternate route, I'd give them the benefit of the doubt.

After six days, I had gone out and come back again. After thirty five kilometres of uncompromising terrain, I was again back to the Sunshine ski slopes. It was familiar turf, with the welcome sounds of energetic people screaming and yelling their skiing delight. I too skied those slopes, but more like some hunchbacked Abominable Snowman. I was really feeling satisfied though.

During my ski, little time was devoted to thinking of this new year and term at university ahead. I had intended to contemplate my growth, while resolving to be more intense and concentrate more. I'm led to believe that that trek provides the fertile ground to all that and more, in its very spiritual sense.

There is no success like failure, and failure's no success at all

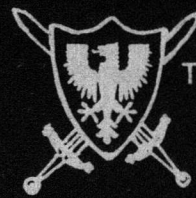
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