

# Skins

by Tracy Hill

Skins on. Always a challenge in the whipping south westerlies that never abate. At least we can finally stop carrying our skis, and give a much-needed break to our aching backs. First trip out this winter so we're a bit slow, not yet in the slick routine. As we search deep in our sacks for hard-to-find cheat sheets, the excitement grows. Quick check of the map, compass bearing taken, and off we climb. He takes the lead and I let him, happy to follow. We soon settle into the steady rhythm, skins sliding on snow, weight forwards. Arms flexing muscles that somehow never had the training workouts we'd intended, the lure of the gym no match for the sheer joy of just being outdoors. How we'll regret it in the morning.

Time passes and the concerns of our everyday world drift away as nature welcomes us into her silent, white world. We've been skinning for at least an hour, surely it's time for the first coffee stop? The col that signifies the end of the first climb is in sight – just a few more pushes and we're there. We shelter beside an outcrop of rocks and greedily replenish the burnt calories. Never much of a talker, we sit in silence, pondering the challenge ahead. Weather is holding and we're rewarded with a fine view of mountains that stretch towards the distant Cairngorms. Can't yet see our peak but we know it's there, hidden behind the gentle rises that we have yet to ascend. I remember the first time I toured here, the weekend of the old Braemar Telemark Festival. A group of us left Edinburgh in what seemed like fine weather, but how these mountains can fool you. By the time we reached the Spittal we could hardly see the road for the snow. Flakes swirling in a frenetic maelstrom, the windscreen wipers helpless against the chaos. They closed the road right behind us and we heroically battled on, determined not to be the ones that missed out on the fun. Our faith in the car soon waned and we came to an ignoble stop just a few hundred metres short of the summit. Tyres spun helplessly out of control, no match for the quickly building ice sheets that soon covered the surface of the road. No use trying to push, with feet slithering on the lethal ground. We just had to sit there and wait out our fate, rescued eventually by a farmer's tractor indignantly dragging us backwards over the crest of the hill. But we made the festival. Powder snow, torchlit parade, evening ceilidh witnessed by the thousands of skulls of long since departed deer. Always the better skier, you took delight in those hard-earned turns, moving with such natural grace. Always the first up the hill, always the first down. All those marathons you'd run, that's where the fitness arose. No sign then of what was to come.

The col gives way to a glorious, shallow descent and we submerge ourselves in the luxurious delight of skiing untouched Scottish snow. This is what makes it all worthwhile. Keep the turns wide, the traverses long. Savour the feeling, enjoy the moment. We whoop with delight (or at least I do) and all too soon it's back to the hard work. Skins on...

We pass the frozen loch and stop by the stream for first lunch. Time to check the bearing and map our route upwards. Then it's the stream crossing. Easy in walking boots, but not so in alpine tourers. Ever the gent, you always go first finding the shallowest spot, the well-spaced rocks. Throw the skis over, use the poles for balance, then just place one foot in front of the other. I make a hash of it as usual and one boot ends up in a foot of flowing icy water. Where once I would have giggled, my frustration turns to anger. Why couldn't you just have helped me?

Onwards we trudge. The steep bank on the other side of the stream needs careful negotiating – not easy with a heavy pack, wearing plastic boots and carrying heavy skis. Then at last the peak comes

into view and I can see the trail we must navigate. From here it's a steady climb. The rhythm returns. I watch your figure gradually proceed up the slope, powerful muscles driving the action. Hands, feet, head driving a balletic motion that falsely portrays the ease of the ascent. I remember how I reacted when you first gave me the news. Denial, disbelief, then a clinical 'oh well, you'll fix it'.

Eventually the steep climb levels and we emerge onto the plateau, rewarded by the familiar vista of peaks of snow topped ridges as far as the horizon allows. I am enveloped by beauty, an insignificant spec in a glorious and forbidding landscape, powerless against the will of nature. I am alive with the sense of connection with all that's around me and know that this is where I find my happiness, my contentment. We reach the summit and I tick my next Munro. Lunch stop number two. So what's the plan, I had asked? There's a schedule you replied, I've made a spreadsheet. A project to be mapped out and managed. Appointments here, visits there. Words I'd never heard before, meaningless phrases in an unknown territory. Like tackling a marathon – you follow the plan over a period of several months then you take the test and wait on the results. Only this time it's not the race-time you're anticipating.

Clouds start to draw in. Time to move. Let's try a different route back. The map shows a grand slope off the northern ridge. We can get down through this gully and then the wide-open descent is ours to enjoy. Wind picks up and I'm not happy with the speed it's urging me into so I put the skins on again to offer resistance. I'm a timid skier at the best of times and the subtly changing conditions start to unease me. By the time we reach the gully the wind has built in strength and I'm struggling to keep my balance. Need to find some shelter to take off these skins and I start to regret not taking them off earlier. Even in the best spot I can find, I fight to stop the skins blowing away, or doing their usual and sticking to each other never to be parted despite all the strength I can muster. Eventually I've packed them away, backpack is on, and poles hung around wrists. I emerge from my rocky shelter straight into a full-blown storm. Wind howls round my face, snatching every breath and cascading the fresh snow into a blinding impenetrable shield. I can make out the edges of the gully but have no idea of the gradient of the slope nor what lies beyond. I sidestep nervously downhill, skis bashing first one side of the gully then the other, aware that the soft snow beneath me could at any moment slip away from the harder under layer in an enveloping torrent. I reach the gully bottom and become aware of the enclosed space giving way to an open expanse of nothingness. An empty chasm into which I must cross. Where do I start, when shall I turn? The familiar fear returning to my belly, pushing my entire being back into the hillside, grasping for its deceptive lap of security. And my skis flatten, and my weight's back and I shoot uncontrollably into the abyss. Eventually the falling stops and I am a jumble of skis, poles and useless limbs bent into positions impossible to recover from. Hot tears burn, the shaking starts and I have no idea where I am. And suddenly you are there before me. Lift your left leg this way, put your right pole here, lift yourself up. Now traverse this far. Now plant your pole and turn. Traverse to here. Now turn again. A longer traverse and turn again. And now you are down. The relief is overbearing and the tears flow again as I look back at the impossibly steep, rocky slope that I've navigated. Look what you achieved – the danger's all in your head.

And now I'm panicking as I've strayed from the intended route, the urgency to get down the hill overcoming the need to check direction. Stay calm you always say, and check the map. Look what's around you, find some landmarks, check the GPS. It's not easy in this howling wind but somehow I find the grid reference and my calm returns. Once I've worked out where we are, the clouds magically lift as if on cue and I can see the obvious way down. A few more turns, a glorious long run and I can see the car. I sit and take in the view before it's all over. One final moment to regain the calm, gather thoughts and thank you for giving me the confidence when I needed it the most.

You followed your project spreadsheet to the letter. Went on all the visits, followed the rules, took the test. Turned out it wasn't as easy as running a marathon. Lungs that had carried you through so many races and up so many mountains just couldn't cope with the onslaught of an alien invasion. Fairness just didn't come into it. The race lost, the mountain untamed. The funeral was brief, friends honouring your many talents and sharing past times. All that's left are the memories, and your ever guiding presence helping us through life's storms.