

## The Gully

By Ruaridh Pringle

It was a test-piece. The most famous gully in the world, they said. It still had a reputation: nothing admittedly like it once had, when it had been spoken of in hushed whispers, but somehow, though the world had progressed around it, it had clung stubbornly to something which might be termed dignity; shielding itself from the denigration crampons had wrought on its siblings and their grades, to remain the epitome of the classic winter gully.

He had hired a car: a big one, more expensive than he could possibly afford, and had raced it through the plantations; up through glen after glen of bleak, snow-dappled moor, caring not very much if the next corner was just that little bit sharper or icier than he had bargained for. A curious sensation this. Anything was possible because there were no consequences. Life was exposed with breath-taking clarity as a narrow line, suspended, like the road's painfully stark black and white ribbon, between dim and mysterious unknowns. Existence was now his clinical experiment, and he explored its boundaries with cold detachment.

The walk up from the golf-course had passed, somehow. He didn't remember much of it. As his body carried on about its business he had been somewhere else, asking questions which so badly needed answers. There were none of course. The calmly reasoning part of **himself** he now found himself listening to most of the time as though it were another person told him this - and he desperately embraced the logic of it, but found it as cold and uncomfortable as old bones. The fact that he knew it to be true; that there was nothing he could do about any of all this, and might as well just get on with things, made it all so much worse because, somehow, he couldn't. He had shouted, again by way of a sort of experiment; he had screamed at the approaching, cloud-shrouded cliffs. He has said "you bitch!", but that didn't help; so he screamed it instead; trying each action on like a coat for size. None of them fitted, so he left them behind with his forgotten footprints.

As he reaches the hut, the early cloud is beginning to disperse. A scrum of climbers are there, kitting up: tinkering and clanging, breathing big silvery plumes into the chill morning air and drinking steaming coffee from thermos flasks. One of their number sports a stars-and-stripes bandanna. He wildly brandishes paired Charlet Mosers, enthusing in surf-speak with a borders accent. "Just look at that nick. So good. Ice like toffee. The Zero and the big "O" yesterday. Totally mega". Beneath a battered orange Joe Brown helmet, his haggard one-man audience draws distractedly on a drooping roll-up and fingers threadbare tea-stained salopettes. He sees his opportunity and addresses the newcomer. "Grand morning. What are you going for".

He has a few minutes on this lot perhaps "Don't know. Haven't decided yet". He drifts away from the hut, leaving them all to think he is stealing a march on them. The evaporating mist reveals crimson buttresses far above against a china-blue sky. They look molten, like sculptures of lava. **F... them. F... them all; these pointless rocks and mindless jerks who succour their little testosterone fantasies on them; violating every rotting, ugly, frigid crevice for the sole purpose of reliving each sordid deed in some dingy pub, like the re-enactments of pitiful one-night stands.**

The snow is steep, but casually kicked steps prove sufficient. He could fall here, he thinks, and maybe those boulders will take him apart. Finish the job already begun inside. He stoops before the first ice, unbuckling rusted weapons and studying their rounded points. He really should have sharpened them. He looks at the ice. He could imagine it was his face. Or hers for that matter. Bitch. Bitch!! He drives the first pick so fiercely that he can feel knuckles swell from the impact. The ice develops a crimson smear. As he pulls up, he does not realise it, but he relishes the pain.

Steep, this first bit. He had seen photo's, but had not realised how elbows and knees would get in the way. So much harder than anything he has tried before, even with the umbilical safety of a

roped partner. Plates of ice clatter and spin in crazy, unfamiliar trajectories towards the snow below. Hard work, this. Ice like glass: three strikes before each placement. Knuckles burn and throb, leaving a trail of red smudges.

The gully narrows: a dark tunnel; the future exactly. Maybe this is it, he hypothesises. Maybe, if he can hold on long enough, there will be sunlight at the end. Easier this bit, and so he cries, shaking on poorly driven axes. He's with her now. They're together, not very far away; he can feel it, like a hot iron in his chest. He can picture the two of them together; him holding her, kissing her. He screams something and then rushes headlong into the steepening; axes flailing, knuckles smashing, heedless of the damage. A placement fails and he screams her name, thinking he is falling, wanting to, but the other axe has held. He forces on upwards like a doomed train, gathering momentum from the unbearable feeling which he knows must burst through somehow, soon, or he will explode.

This is not the answer: he knows that now, and suddenly he is trapped. He wants to be far away from this wretched, vertical place. In trembling fear he teeters up the next near-vertical runnel. He calls her name once more, almost pleading; knowing everyone will hear, and scrabbles precariously higher.

The hard part is over now. He does not remember much of what has just transpired. He stands in a small foot-hole, swaying first one way, then the other. So easy to lean out just a little bit more. Just relax for a moment ..

The rest is snow. Far too much time to think. He feels cheated that the last part is like this. So easy to let go, like it was for her. Just drift, without effort into something else. Bitch. Much better to be asleep, or drunk. Or dead. He pulls over the cornice close to the summit shelter. It is still early and he is alone, thank God. A skin of high cloud has formed, reducing the sunlight to a watery iridescence. He sits with strange awkwardness in the snow, and watches the curve of a small snowdrift; entranced for a few minutes by the subtle texture of its ripples, the shape of its curving spine, and the dimness of its snow against the surrounding crust to which it tenuously clings. Then he catches himself and screws shut his eyes so tightly that he see stars.

This is not the answer. Maybe there really is no answer. Maybe this wretched, corrosive, destroying feeling is all there is. He does not know how long he sits there, but when he opens his eyes he is shivering.

He finds the top of a broad gully whose name he should know. Normally Grade II, it seems well banked out with firm powder, although he can't see the bottom. He bumslides it anyway; hanging precariously to control an axe-shaft braced against the steep slope; legs flailing, wishing he had what it took just to let go. Bare hands leave red streaks as snow gives way unexpectedly to lethally hard neve. At the gully mouth he surveys mangled knuckles with passing interest, and begins the long walk back down.

The car is still there, the same as he left it. Nothing has changed. It was meant to mean something. There was something that he had so desperately wanted from it - a sign perhaps ?, but now he looks at his hands and sees they are empty. It was just a stunt. There is a bottle in the car. Perhaps he will drive to a lay-by somewhere quiet, next to the sea and throw stones at the sunset. Maybe, bottle empty, he will see the sunrise.