

Rhapsody in Grey

By Thomas Dunstan

It's probably a good thing that you can't think straight at five thirty in the morning. In the semi-conscious haze between the reality of waking life and the conversation you've just been having with a horse, it is somehow possible to remove yourself from bed before your brain has a chance to tell you how stupid you're being. With practice you can be fully dressed and put the kettle on before you remember why you had to get up in the first place. It's a technique that has served me well and I would recommend it to anyone who is in the habit of climbing mountains during the frustratingly short days of a Scottish winter.

It was the first trip of the season for the university mountaineering club and it was set to be a rude introduction to Scottish weather for the new recruits. The minibus had been booked weeks before the inevitably bleak weather forecast could be confirmed, and any excuses about too much work couldn't reasonably be used for at least four more weeks. No. Today there would be no mercy.

"What's the plan then?"

Greg stared into the rain with weary resignation. "Glen Coe I think. Might as well suffer in style" he mumbled.

"You've heard the forecast then?"

"Yeah- still, it could be worse I suppose."

"No it couldn't, if it was any worse we could have cancelled the trip altogether and I would still be curled up in bed talking to horses." "Eh?"

"Never mind. Lets get going."

We passed through the hinterlands of the Clyde Valley in the pre-dawn gloom, and as the minibus rumbled along the shores of Loch Lomond, up ahead, the Arrochar Alps slowly found some definition against the grim, Tupperware light of an overcast sky. Freshers' week was still a recent memory for many on the bus (for others, the luckier ones, there was no recollection at all). Heads were groggy and conversation was decidedly thin as everyone mourned the loss of their pillow. The rain, which up until now had been making only tentative tapings on the roof, suddenly bust into full chorus; amplified superbly by the giant steel resonator that we were travelling in.

The bus rolled to a stop at the 'Meeting of the Waters' car park; a very apt name under the circumstances, in fact, today 'the Waters' seemed to be having their annual convention. As the windscreen wipers stopped, the landscape twisted and swirled, and the colours gradually blurred - so much so that I could appreciate why the Gaels never felt the need to distinguish between grey and green. In front of us the Three Sisters of Glen Coe were poking their toes out from underneath a dark, wet duvet of cloud and the gusts of wind seemed to be trying to rock us back to sleep. Its a strange and unfortunate fact that the weather always seems far more sinister from the comfort of a warm, dry minibus than it does when you're out in the middle of it, but telling yourself this makes no difference at all.

"Wake up everyone! we're here." I said with a forced enthusiasm that I immediately regretted; realising that there's nothing more exhausting than someone who has more energy than you. Any more careless cheerfulness could have been disastrous so I toned it down a bit...

"Half of us are getting out here to go and trudge around on Bidean nam Bian, and everyone else gets ten more minutes of dryness in the minibus while Greg drives on a bit further." Blank faces all round. Maybe I over-compensated.

"Who's getting out now?"

The question was met with resounding apathy. Some people were staring at their feet and some were staring at the rain, but while the internal battles between reason and instinct still raged in people's heads, a brave few found their resolve and jumped into action before instinct could regroup. We set off through the bogs towards the Beinn Fhada ridge, and even Cath, a relentlessly cheerful person under normal circumstances was reduced to stoical silence.

After half an hour or so of gentle climbing up a well worn path, somehow the day didn't seem so grim after all. Our legs and lungs finally caught on to what we were trying to do with them, and as energized blood flowed into cold extremities, the feeling of embattlement ebbed and the layers of fleecy armour were gradually shed. Finally we were starting to feel that it wasn't quite such an insane thing to be doing on a Sunday morning. Visibility was down to about fifty yards, but it didn't matter now because talk of holidays spent in the Himalayas and Alps fuelled our imagination. The thud-squelch of boots and clean, heathery air brought back images of the grandeur hidden from us today, and it was enough just to know that they were there. My summer had been spent, not in glamorous mountain ranges, but in the flatlands of the Thames Estuary, so I found myself more than usually glad just to be back in the highlands. It occurred to me just then, as it often does in the mountains that my brief deprivation during the summer had, with hindsight, been a better thing than it had seemed at the time. I took a deep breath and the air felt fresher than I remembered, the dark, towering cliffs carried a sense of drama and excitement that, I realised now, had previously been dulled by familiarity. Without realising it, some kind of internal, aesthetics gauge had been reset during my exile.

A blast of wind found a gap in my waterproof armour and drove some of the icy rain down my neck. Whingeing profusely, I realised that unfortunately my weather-tolerance gauge had also been reset. I tried to apply this gauge theory to the situation and convinced myself that if I could just put up with it, then it would become a little less miserable with every occurrence. Sure enough, after the fifth blast I had stopped yelping and after the twentieth I had even stopped swearing. My gauge had been re-centered. Hardships, I supposed, are endured only until their cause is considered normal.

As we gained the ridge the full brunt of the westerly wind made itself known to us, and the conversation once again thinned as we battled on towards Stob Coire Sgreamhach. Some meagre shelter was found behind a boulder on the last top of Beinn Fhada where we stopped briefly before heading across the saddle to Sgreamhach. Fifty metres or so below the peak the wind seemed to have eased a little. The rain, still cold and heavy of course, at least now was falling more or less vertically, and I remember having a feeling of gratitude for this that was hard to justify given the reality of the situation. The feeling didn't last long as it dawned on me with a slightly sick, draining sensation why the weather had changed. The wind wasn't blowing water in our faces anymore because we were, in fact, walking in the wrong direction down the wrong ridge! Four months away from the mountains and I had completely lost the ability to read a map. Apparently some of my other mental faculties had also been reset during the summer. Sheepishly, I turned on the GPS and it confirmed my stupidity with ten-figure accuracy. It was the last thing we needed on a day like this. Luckily we hadn't gone too far (although it seemed like much further with a bruised ego) and fifteen minutes of backtracking returned us to the Sgreamhach Peak.

I resolved not to be so complacent about navigating and noted with puzzled interest that it was actually quite comforting now to have the rain being driven down my neck. As we battled on, the wind picked up, and in places our progress was reduced to a kind of bovine slog as we lowered our heads and pushed forward through the angry air mass. Some situations, I decided, would always be a hardship no matter how long you have to adjust to them. However, this was no time to be thinking too much, or even talking, since our brains were almost fully absorbed in the subconscious calculations of balance needed to make progress along a wind-swept, rocky ridge.

The next hour or so was a relentless fight against wind, gravity and cold, and was punctuated only by the occasional need to swap hands holding my hood off my face. Bidean nam Bian came and went in the general maelstrom, and as we reached Stob Coire nam Beith it brought with it a Friday-afternoon feeling of relief as it marked our exit from the ridge. We dropped off to the east into Coire nam Beith and were immediately released from the bullying wind. At last, with a chance to lift our hoods in relative comfort, I looked around and saw big grins fixed on everyone's faces - slightly perverse I thought considering the last couple of hours, but infectious. We continued on down into the corrie, and as the rain eased off to a light drizzle, we picked up from where we had left off after our conversations had been so rudely interrupted earlier by the weather.

Cloud still entirely filled the spaces between the hills, and, as so often happens, we would have to consult a glossy book of Munros to fully appreciate the views that we were missing. The odd thing was that none of that mattered at all. The relatively small change in conditions since coming of the ridge had caused waves of relief to run through everyone. We were all tired, hungry and comprehensively wet, and spirits were so high it was as if we had just spent the whole day in glorious sunshine. As we squelched our way down towards the road it became impossible not to enjoy everything; the aching in my legs faded next to the memory of having icy rain bouncing off my face, and every slip and stumble seemed positively fun compared to the battering we had endured in the wind. The descent passed almost too quickly and before long we were all sat in the pub, steaming off some of the rain and recounting our tales of suffering to anyone that would listen.

Bad weather seems to be something most people just tolerate in the mountains, but for all the gloom and misery of the morning, I remember this walk as one of the best of the season. This might appear to be the product of rose-tinted reminiscing coupled with a feeble memory, and you may even be right. Nevertheless, there's nothing quite like a sudden shift in perspective to make you appreciate what you've got. And after several hours of assault at the mercy of a high-energy air mass your 'comfort gauge' gets well and truly shifted - even recalibrated.

We mostly try to find happiness by immersing ourselves in the things that we enjoy, but the alternative is to occasionally push the balance in the opposite direction, to seek out a little 'bad weather' once in a while. The rewards come when the balance swings back towards civilised life; discomforts become more trivial, everyday dangers recede, and the mundane suddenly seems luxurious. On the ridge that day, stripped of everything but essentials, and exposed (albeit in a brief and controlled way) to some uncompromising, untempered, good, honest weather, we were served a subtle reminder of how privileged our normal lifestyles are. Even the Glasgow rain seems a little less miserable once you know exactly what it feels like to have it blasted up your nose for several hours by a gale-force wind.

I spent the journey home revelling in the often-unappreciated luxury of a cramped and smelly minibus, and I couldn't help secretly hoping for worse weather next time.