

Peace after the storm
Mike Merchant

There was tea, mug after mug of tea in the police station while they wrote everything down, and then the long drive back, past Drumochter and Gaick, Errochty and Tilt. All through the calm frozen night the disturbed snow was locking solid again at the edge of the cliff. There was no harm in it and no call to go there till day.

"There's one of them up there yet", we were told early that morning in the filling station, while she looked meaningfully at our climbing clothes.

Walking up through the corrie, the livid white noise was still tearing over the cliff rim. We roped up and I followed on an easy snow climb, the Trident. It was quiet in the gully, neither friendly nor hostile, a long, smooth, workmanlike ramp of offwhite snow.

I found it quite steep near the top. No nasty surprises, just a steady rise in the gradient, the black rope twitching over the surface, streams of gritty snow hissing past as Murphy chopped out steps. The convexity eased. In the pale noon of December he sat a dozen feet back from the edge, taking in my rope. Our climb was done, had been permitted. The storm and its white noise had passed over.

We had been flagged down by police at the snowgates and brought to a room in the outdoor centre with a big aerial photograph of the Northern Corries. "Oh, you were on the Trident?" and so it emerged that everyone knew exactly where we had been. The site was pinpointed and the sweep searches could stop.

"I've been wondering what that is." Murphy was sitting beside a mound in the snow. It had the flawless curves of every surface on the plateau. There had been a big wind and the mountain was honed and blasted to aerodynamic perfection. Seamless, hard and granular, the snow was more like plate armour than blanket and was beginning to sparkle dully. It encased the whole mountain; except where a piece of dark green fabric was poking stiffly from the mound.

We had to find out why. The green stuff was as though concreted to the hill, impossible to pull free. But now it did look like a jacket. As we levered and prised at the snow crust with gloved hands there was more clothing under it, a man's clothing, and something hard under that; hard and smooth as plaster bonded to the mountain top. Hard as a mountain rescue dummy, perhaps.

We sat back, slightly out of breath, but it was apprehension rather than effort. "There's one way to find out", Murphy said, and he brushed fiercely at the snow at one end of the jacket. A man's black beard glistened in the sun.

It had been a hillwalking club trip. They were from quite near by, a town beside the broad grey firth. They had made Ben Macdui, their second summit, and then they were tracking back the two or three miles to their transport. The storm must have hit them on shelterless ground 4000 feet up, and maybe that was why they decided on a quick way off, the goat track down a splintered arete into the corrie. Their navigation was spot on, but one of the party was left.

"Let's get out of here." We were rattled; we bundled the rope and headed East, and I don't think we covered his face against the sun or the birds of the air.

We walked anxiously, boots creaking in the snow, wanting a telephone and someone else to take responsibility. But the mountain was serene. Evening came on kindly beneath drifts of soft cloud, and all the folds of the ground were unmasked, blue in the shadow, golden and then cool pink under the levelling sun.

These are hills I have almost always known, but they never before or since seemed so benevolent, so consoling to us creatures crawling over them. The shock wore away as we walked on towards the ski station.

There was a big man in overalls, probably a liftie going off duty. "Mister... we found a body up there. Can you let somebody know." He went away. We were cold by then, tiredness beginning, and we wandered on down to the car park.

Searchers had found a single glove in the corrie, an old inflatable glove, service pattern. Also a sandwich with one bite out of it. His leaving behind may have been explained, but the man's final lonely encounter with the mountain cannot be known, nor should it be.

Hesitantly, Murphy asked: "How do you feel about it?" We were both ambivalent. The paper next day said "Tayport Man's Grim Find in Cairngorms", but it wasn't just like that. After the scrabbling in the snow and beneath the beautiful indifference of the mountain something came over us that won't leave, and it's hard to write down, even after many mugs of police tea.

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