

Shear Force

Contributed by Mari Reeves

Ok, so I knew the whole time I wasn't close to death, but it did get the adrenaline pumping. I heard it before I saw it. I had hung back to wait for Phyto the dog. She was pooped from a long trek in to Alaska's Pastoral Peak; up a long valley, a saddle, down the other side, then up the mountain beyond, and back.

I had stopped to give poor P the remainder of my small pack of beef jerky, when the roar began. It sounded distant, like a river rapid deep within a canyon. I looked up, and a large slice of the snow on the ridge above me was peeling from the mountain.

At first, I gazed up at it only. Then, the blustery feeling of emergency overtook me. Like when someone drops to the floor in front of you and begins convulsing, and you're the only one around who knows first aid. Or when something hits you really hard on the head, or you cut yourself bad and are stunned, but not pained at all.

I looked down the skin track, which all four of my companions had followed about three minutes before, into a gully. Bad move. I looked up-valley. I was in a relatively flat spot, which we had calculated to be out of the avalanche runout zone when we had traveled up it about five hours earlier. We had discussed the issue at length.

My only thought was to get Phyto and self out of what might become the way. As I backed up-valley, away from the roiling mass of snow and towards the edge of the gully, a larger piece of the slope began to fail. The slide had set off a sympathetic fracture that increased the width of the original slab by two-thirds.

Oh my god! I am going to get hit by an avalanche! The knowledge of visceral mortality often hits in a hard way that is neither painful nor romantic. I watched the elfin white horses gallop toward me at full speed, as I shuffled away on skinless boards.

I hadn't really been worried that broiling Spring day—the first my pale Alaskan skin had seen of tank top and shorts in over eight months. Everyone had always said that wet snow avalanches moved slowly and were less predictable than slabs. I figured the dice were loaded, but I wouldn't get the usual assessment out of a snowpit anyway, so there wasn't much to do but accept the risk, travel smart, and enjoy.

I skittered fifty feet to the top of the gully and stood, watching the rush of snow thunder towards me, and rumble to a stop. It covered the skin track, on which I had originally been standing, in two feet of snow talus. As soon as it stopped, and I could finally move downward, I swished into the gully track, hunched over for speed, and rushed to catch up with my surely worried friends.

We all high-tailed it towards the bottom. Enough adventure for this day. Enough sun, enough joy, enough adrenaline.

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