

Beneath the Layers

Contributed by Bruce Lindwall

When I reached the airy lookout, the cold and wind cut hard at my core. I added a layer to keep the chill from biting at my aged skin. Like me, the forest floor is covered but with snow that hides the rotting leaves like forgotten thoughts. Had I stepped off my skis, I would have wallowed long and hard before standing on them again. But at the top, I was done with the struggle. I zipped closed my jacket, pulled on gloves, tightened straps and began to slide down into the valley, peeling everything back.

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Rachel Wood rejoices in the descent. [Photo] Tyler Cohen

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It took so much sweat and work to reach that place. Now, the slide out is easy. For each minute of descent there were countless little struggles on the climb: wading through drifts, skis sinking, sliding, disappearing, losing my way. Always the path was just over there, one more drift, one more clean mound crumbling to flakes under the bright metal edges of skis that rejoice in descent and complain bitterly in climbing. Up the endless wallow, pushing grumbling skis through flawless white, shouldering aside trees and gravity and leaving behind a long path like the tail of a comet growing as it approaches the sun.

Now, I let the skis rejoice, sliding down the valley on the long thin line. On the edge of the stream, the valley wall is the only way in or out. I dart beneath a limb, drop through an opening, cut hard right because to the left lies yet another pool of open water. Don't go left, don't go left. The rocky stream will catch any mistake I make dashing along the riverbank. The splash would be only the beginning, here in this place.

I drop, crouch, laugh and remember how much fun this has been since I was a skinny little boy with a high voice and no knowledge of women, pain or mortality. This must be why I'm here, to shed the decades layered upon that skinny little boy, to whoop and shout as I slide, whizzing past trees.

Perfectly arcing skis carry me down the line; they keep me from flying over the brink to where I could splash into the stream. Don't go left, don't go left. The happy boy is to the right. The injured old man is off to the left, waiting in the stream. Yesterday, up on the ridge, there was a cliff lying below a beckoning slope of flawless powder. Don't go left, don't go left. That flight would not have had a happy landing. The injured old man was waiting down there. The giddy little boy was over here.

As I descend, I happily shed decades. Yet in those decades I have honed my skills like sharpened, shining metal edges. I have dashed headlong on the line between celebration and disaster, always a source of giddy delight. How long have I been kneeling before the gods of winter, bending a knee in supplication to each turn, each a little wager with gravity? We have been doing this for centuries, each of us throwing four or five or six decades onto the collective pile of years spent searching with boards strapped to our feet. I can't remember when we weren't searching for the whooping, shouting dash along the valley wall or that moment of dropping off the ridge when euphoria floods every molecule as we float weightless and immortal from turn to turn. Beneath these layers, I can't remember when we weren't searching, just can't remember....

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