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Tales from the Hut

Sanctuary amidst inclemency

Right now, it means everything: warmth, safety, food, water. All the makings of life itself. But the sun is going down, and a storm is just beginning to unleash its January fury. The treeless landscape is void of markers, waypoints that could be the difference between survival and an icy grave. Decisions become so crucial they hurt, weighing upon the conscience like the snowpack itself— heavy, laborious, enshrouded in the finality of death.

And then the muted candlelight through a frosty window, the taint of woodsmoke as it swirls on the night wind. Like a ship tossed about in a giant sea, far away from the world of humans, deep in the recesses of the wild world, there it is. The hut. Smiles replace the frets and squints of worry. Elation rushes in like pulling up to a hot fire. Numb fingers and toes ache at the prospect of seeing blood again. The pack

seems lighter, the boards faster, the forthcoming darkness not so feared. The storm is no longer a foe, but a welcome friend.

British Columbia is dotted with huts. Some are frequented regularly, others are lost to time and the relentless elements that make up this grand place. Some are fancy, some rustic, some just off the highway, others accessible only by helicopter: all share certain commonalities yet each one is unique. They are, in practical terms, the link between valley dwelling skiers and snowboarders and the great expanse of inhospitable alpine that lines this province in a whitewashed ceiling of peaks and bowls, beauty and adventure.

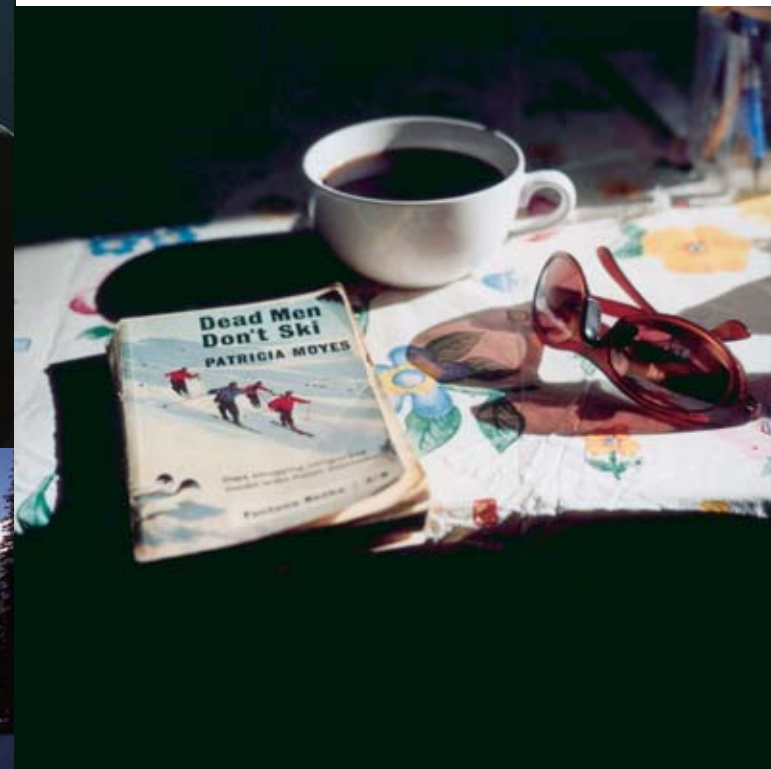
But more happens in the hut than just rest and replenishment. They offer an odd juxtaposition, as dynamic and forthcoming as the mountains themselves. During the day we're travelling through a landscape as



Photo: Paul Morrison



Photos clockwise from top: unknown, Karl Medig, Paul Morrison



I DON'T THINK I HAVE EVER BEEN SO HAPPY TO SEE A MAN-MADE CREATION IN MY WHOLE LIFE.

open and free as it gets on this earth. In stark contrast, by night, we're confined to these small, rustic spaces. Sometimes alone, other times crammed like sailors in a submarine, sharing tiny spaces with people we've never met before.

Mice scurry across sleeping bags, old-timers snore like icfall, and polyester rustles in the wee hours of half-sleep. We share food, tell stories, work as a team to chop wood, keep the fire going all night and shovel the door out from snow that never stops. Stinky touring gear drips and sizzles over a hippie-killer woodstove that is as dangerous as it is life-saving.

But we love it. The good and the bad. The odd and the ordinary. This is the concentrate of life, distilled amongst the sweet endlessness of wintertime in the mountains. And when we return, back to electricity and forced air heating, green grass and paved

streets, we have stories. We've discovered "Tales from the Hut."

— Mitchell Scott

Hallowed Ground

WHEN THE WORLD FALLS DOWN AROUND YOU, THE HUT IS MORE THAN JUST A HUT — IT'S A SAVING GRACE

By Steven Threndyle

Thank the good Lord it doesn't need to be dug out. It is mid-April during a relatively light winter for snowfall in the Selkirks, and our group of eight skiers arrives at the rather decrepit looking Glacier

Circle Cabin, high and remote in the Purcell Mountains, sunburned, exhausted and stinking from a combination of well-earned sweat and nervous apprehension. I don't think I have ever been so happy to see a man-made creation in my whole life. No more setting up tents in a whiteout or hours digging snow walls in soaked clothing.

Our guide, Karl Nagy, removes his glacier glasses and peers into the darkness of the cabin. It is pitch-black inside but serviceable. Luckily, whatever vermin may inhabit the cabin are still hibernating. It's all inconsequential, however, considering the threat of destruction banging in our minds over the last few hours. All that matters now is that we're safe. Alive.

Just a few hours before—day five of a ski traverse from Battle Abbey to Rogers Pass—the adrenaline charge began when Nagy

AT LUNCH, WE SAT ON OUR PACKS, ALONE IN OUR THOUGHTS. FOREMOST IN MY MIND WAS THAT WITHOUT NAGY, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN OUT OF OUR LEAGUE AND LIKELY DEAD BY NOW.

lowered each of us through a series of rockbands known as the Deville Headwall. After flailing and postholing through old avalanche debris, we got to the bottom of the slope. We were in a vulnerable spot, smack in the middle of the shooting gallery known as Glacier Circle. In this alpine amphitheatre of seracs, crevasses and towering peaks, the searing spring sun had loosened a season's worth of snowfall before our very eyes. We watched in horror as an avalanche barreled down Mount Topham, pounding into the gully where we had rappelled less than an hour before.

Earlier that day, a group of fast young guides had skied past us on the way to the hut at Glacier Circle. One of their members had been caught in a similar slough—he was ripped off the cliff and rag-dolled to the bottom of the névé below. Our guide had to call a rescue helicopter to transport him to

Golden. His prognosis didn't look good.

At lunch, we sat on our packs, alone in our thoughts. Foremost in my mind was that without Nagy, we would have been out of our league and likely dead by now. But even with a skilled pro at the helm, the group was on edge. In the middle of it all, Nagy was the calm in the eye of the storm.

Finally, he spoke. "We're on a safe island here. No slides will reach us. However, we're going to have to stay put. The snow is pretty rotten right now, and we'll have to wait for a couple of hours, maybe even until dark. The snow has to freeze in order to support us."

Sure enough, as the afternoon wore on, the hot spring sun created large cumulus clouds that blotted out the sun and dropped the temperature. Slowly, the snow morphed into an eggshell-like crust. The avalanches that had been ripping off faces all around us that morning had finally stopped. It was

now safe to continue the traverse to the Glacier Circle Hut, which took about two hours. The temperature dropped, a wind came up, and we arrived at the hut just as voracious hunger set in.

Now that we're in the hut, we start splitting wood to stoke the cast iron stove. Nagy pulls a flask of single malt from his pack, takes a long pull and passes it around. Suddenly, three more plastic bottles appear and are drained. Few words are spoken as a numb warmth and mellow buzz takes the edge off what has been an intense afternoon in the mountains.

The next day, we awake to the sound of steady rain drumming on the roof. Nagy is up at first light, skinning up to check out conditions on the Illecillewaet Glacier. To our immense relief, he announces a rest day. We roll over and go back to sleep. The Glacier Cirque Hut is more than just



Photos: Doug Lepage (left), Heath Korvola (right)

IN FACT, IT'S LESS CRUISING THAN CULINARY: YOU ONLY SKI TO GET HUNGRY FOR THE NEXT MEAL. THE GOAL IS TO COME OUT WEIGHING MORE THAN YOU DID GOING IN.

a hut right now, it's our saving grace.

This trip across the Selkirks shines a light on what it really takes to be a guide. Whipping a short piece of prussic rope on the end of a ski pole, not unlike a fly-fisherman, to tell up from down in a whiteout. Ensuring the skiers are properly tied into their harnesses, while negotiating a nasty crevasse field in zero visibility. Carrying two huge packs when one of the client's is exhausted beyond his limit. And, of course, keeping the spirits of the group up when the weather fails to cooperate. After all, Nagy tells us, "I'm at work. You're on vacation."

At the Glacier Circle Cabin, Nagy is able to relax. Or, I think he is relaxed—you can never really tell. His aura is calm, yet intensely focused. As a man who spends much of his life in the mountains, he knows that as secure as a night or two in a hut might be, that challenges lay ahead.

ENDNOTE: In 2000, Karl Nagy was hit by rockfall and died while teaching an ACMG climbing course in Banff National Park.

Melting Pot

A WEEK IN A HUT REVEALS MORE THAN JUST EPIC SKIING, BUT ALSO THE STRANGEST OF APPLIANCES

By Raymond Schmidt

Last summer, I was struggling to decide what to get my friend and his bride for their wedding gift. I wanted to get something that would last, something meaningful. But nothing really appealed to me; nothing stood out and yelled "buy me!"

Not the potato scraper, the salad bowl, the silverware or the tablecloth. How boring, I thought. How domestic.

So I put off picking anything, until it was too late to get the pasta strainer or the oven mitts. That's when I picked the item that was sure to be enjoyed for many years to come: the fondue set.

I was invited a bunch of times, post-wedding, to my friend's house for dinner. I was hoping to see the fondue, but only steak dinners and shish kebabs filled my plate. Not once did I get to enjoy a Swiss-cheese fondue or a melted chocolate dessert delicacy or a hot oil deep-fry. I never saw or heard of that fondue set. Ever.

Fondues and wedding bells were far from my mind while putting together food for a ski trip to the Dave Whyte Hut in the Purcell Mountain Range. A hut meal is serious business. After a full day of skiing in backcountry

IT WON'T IMPRESS ANYBODY TO CRACK OPEN A BOX OF HAMBURGER HELPER AFTER YOU'VE SCARFED DOWN THEIR LOBSTER BISQUE, BAKED BREAD AND RACK OF LAMB THE DAY BEFORE. KRAFT WILL GET YOU KICKED OUT.

powder, you're all bagged and voracious. So, when it's your turn to cook a dinner, you do not want to cook KD, whisper a word of freeze-dried, or breathe a breath of canned meat. A hut trip is not a camping or mountaineering expedition where you're looking to shave ounces—and taste—from your pack. In fact, it's less cruising than culinary: you only ski to get hungry for the next meal. The goal is to come out weighing more than you did going in. A stranger may be snoring next to you and stale poly-pro may be wafting through the rafters, but this is not roughing it. It won't impress anybody to crack open a box of Hamburger Helper after you've scarfed down their lobster bisque, baked bread and rack of lamb the day before. Kraft will get you kicked out.

I was responsible for one full supper for our group of five: from appetizers to dessert and from slop duty to dish-pig. But I'm not

a prolific cook. I like the skiing much more than the cooking. But my need to eat a week of powder provides me with enough impetus to come up with an acceptable meal for one night. After gastronomically Googling, I decided on a can of smoked oysters, cheese and crackers, small pasta shells, sun-dried tomato pesto, fresh vegetables and a package of Jell-O. It was a safe choice, one that would hopefully shut up the picky eaters and wouldn't piss off the gourmets.

The snow was three metres deep and stable. It snowed 30 centimetres every night to cover our deep tracks, and the temperature hovered a few degrees below freezing: conditions that gave us, if there ever could be, the perfect snowpack. The steep, treed terrain around us kept revealing new and entertaining lines. Our fivesome—some better acquainted than others—had the small cabin for ourselves. And we had lots of food.

When it was my night to cook, I was suffering from a 5,000-foot day, so I threw everything together more like a sloppy short-order cook than a schooled chef. It was a decent meal, if a little bland, but nobody complained. It satisfied at least one of the tenets of hut meals: there was lots of it.

The next evening, I was one-upped by Nadine. We were dazzled by her homemade hummus, stove-baked pitas and a rich herb-filled cream sauce with sautéed mushrooms over a bed of sumptuous wild rice. But the pièce de résistance came for dessert: juicy grapes, watery pineapple, crunchy apples and ripe bananas for dipping into a chocolate fondue.

The fondue was a spur of the moment choice for Nadine, who had just discovered the set while rooting around for some pots. You never know what goodies you'll find in

Photo: Kari Medig





Photo: Dave Heath

WITHOUT A WEDDING, THERE MAY NEVER BE A REASON TO BUY A FONDUE SET. AND WITHOUT A FONDUE SET, DESSERT IN THE BACKCOUNTRY WOULD JUST BE SOUPY JELL-O.

a hut. Kitchen items are usually castaways or donated by the people that build it or the association that supports it. Since none of us anticipated the Dave Whyte hut to be so well-equipped, we hadn't thought of packing smooth-burning methyl hydrate to fuel the contraption. Nadine improvised with Coleman white gas, which warmed the chocolate to a creamy consistency and enveloped the juicy fruit with a smooth brown coating, while our powder-stained gear dripped around us like weeping tile.

The fondue tasted infinitely better than last night's half-gelled Jell-O. This was the way to end a powder day. But before the last chocolate was swathed from the bottom of the pot, the flashy white gas exploded and the brass covering on the fuel dish flew off. Flames lapped the edge of the pot and scorched the chocolate.

The flames ignited memories of the wed-

ding fondue set I never saw. Maybe the newlyweds had marched the set straight to the thrift store and unloaded it like a piece of trash. Maybe it was scooped up by some wayward skier and brought to this very spot, in the middle of the mountains, where no fondue set had ever been before.

There is a reason wedding registries have built-in phantom appliances like the fondue set. Without a wedding, there may never be a reason to buy a fondue set. And without a fondue set, dessert in the backcountry would just be soupy Jell-O. Next time, I'm packing some methyl hydrate with my pesto.

Strange Bedfellows

FOR ONE BACKCOUNTRY SKIER, A LONG-BURIED HUT IN THE KOOTENAYS IS AS MUCH ABOUT FINDING SHELTER AS IT IS SURVIVING ODD SOCIAL INTERACTION

By Kevin Brooker

Though it really wasn't all that long ago, it's hard to recall the time before the Internet robbed the mystery from just about every travel adventure. I vividly recall that delightfully queasy sense of cluelessness we had as we slapped on the skins late one March afternoon, long ago, in the nirvana time, at the utterly—and in hindsight, remarkably—empty parking lot at Kootenay Pass, between Creston and Salmo, BC.



Photos: Steve Ogfle



DIGGING BY HEADLAMP, WE EVENTUALLY SWUNG THE DOOR OPEN TO FIND THE NE PLUS ULTRA OF SKANK-ASS HOBBIT HOLES. THIS WAS, FOR US, A NEW FRONTIER IN DANK.

We had every reason to believe there was a hut somewhere nearby, even if we didn't yet know its name—Ripple Ridge—or know exactly how far away it might be. Our beta was nothing but a few drunken scribbles on a beer coaster from the Ship & Anchor Pub back in Calgary, making us exactly the kind of Albertans whom locals wished would just shoot straight on through to Red Mountain, hopefully to make a short stay of it.

That we found the hut at all was a miracle. With the old tracks rapidly disappearing under freshly falling snow, we nearly bypassed the ridge itself. Darkness, too, was falling when we spotted a building—or rather the beginnings of one—a partly framed cabin whose construction had obviously been interrupted by early snowfall. Then, just as we were about to give up, we glimpsed a tiny patch of log wall from another cabin. It was the old cabin, which was supposed to be

replaced by the semi-constructed one, and it was obliterated by three metres of snow-pack.

Digging by headlamp, we eventually swung the door open to find the ne plus ultra of skank-ass hobbit holes. This was, for us, a new frontier in dank: an oblong shack, barely stitched together by mouldy timbers, with a wide bench of bunk space that seemed to fade back into the very earth. It had the feel of a rodent festival waiting to happen, though thankfully not the smell; its aromatic essence was more like smoked lichen. And sure enough, there was a side room piled high with cordwood, a decent axe and an old oil drum for a stove. Within an hour, it felt practically habitable.

Candlelight revealed the true genius of Ripple Ridge. In an old can nailed to a post, we found a mimeographed note. "This cabin is maintained by the Creston Cross Country

Ski Club. Donations are welcome." There were coins and even some bills in there, refreshingly not stolen.

Our privacy didn't last. The next morning was a Friday, and a few go-getters started the straggling-in process. The first was a friendly RCMP officer visiting from another corner of the province. He happened to know the area well enough to take us outside for a brief primer on where to ski. To our eyes that included, well, everywhere.

Back then we hadn't toured much outside of Alberta, so our first order of business was to gape in awe at the infinitude of peaks whose every aspect appeared skiable. Where were all the cliffs and windward slopes scoured to rock? The idea of skiing where the snow appeared to fall straight down, not sideways, would remain very foreign to us for some time.

It continued to flurry in this unfamiliar



Photo: Peter Moynes

HE PULLED OUT A FAT BAGGIE AND STARTED TO TWIST ONE UP. MY PARTNER ELBOWED ME AND GESTURED TOWARD THE COP READING AT THE END OF THE TABLE. "IT'S COOL," I WHISPERED. "THIS IS THE KOOTENAYS. ALL LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE ARE SUSPENDED."

fashion and the visibility good enough that we felt comfortable exploring. Looking back on it, we got nowhere near the good shots. But hey, we had about as much fun as people in leather telemark boots deserve.

Back in the squat —I mean, the cabin—the population had exploded to eight or nine, a proper valley mix with enough dreadlocks to offset the law enforcement contingent. As it happened, we walked in on a heated debate. A young duo who carried themselves like resident chargers were explaining why they had a serious beef with skins. They considered it cheating. A little grip wax was all they needed, and they'd outclimb anyone. Yeah, whatever.

As the dinner hour approached and competition for oil drum space increased, we got to jawing with a guy from Fernie who showed up late with his teenage son. He

wasn't boasting, but it came out that he'd bought side-by-side miner's shacks deep in the wilderness a year earlier for \$30,000. Life, he had to admit, was pretty sweet. Then he pulled out a fat baggie and started to twist one up. My partner elbowed me and gestured toward the cop reading at the end of the table. "It's cool," I whispered. "This is the Kootenays. All laws of the universe are suspended."

That's when the guy pulled out a small envelope and casually started sprinkling white powder into the blunt. Now it was me who felt the need to send an alert. "Hey," I said, then mouthed "RCMP" and indicated with a roll of the eyes. He, however, was totally unfazed. For the sake of discretion he merely turned his shoulder about 10 degrees away from that peaceful officer and leisurely finished his business. Then he stepped out-side and got the weekend started.

And we kind of did party. Us, the cop, the dreadies, the kid, his go-go daddy, and, if memory serves, a couple of science nerds from Spokane whose gear fetish was only in its infancy. But the vibe remained aggressively mellow.

Two days later, we certainly had the sense of mission accomplished, as we performed nearly five minutes' worth of intensive hut cleaning, deposited our tribute to the almighty CCCSC, and headed in the direction of Kootenay snowflakes.

I remember gliding down that postcard trail, thinking about shacks at two-for-30K and how we'd never see anything like that again in our lives. But I had another thought: choose wisely enough what you do this morning, this afternoon and *now*, who knows, maybe you can make the good old days your permanent address.

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MY UNBRIDLED PASSION FOR SKIING THAT HAD CATALYZED THIS PROFOUND ADVENTURE DID NOT PRODUCE A SINGLE TURN. I STAND LOOKING AT THE OFFICIALS GATHERED TO GREET US ASKING MYSELF WHY?

To Ski Again

DEEP IN THE WILDS OF THE HIMALAYA, A SKI MOUNTAINEER STRUGGLES BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH AMONGST FOUR STONE WALLS AND A JUNIPER ROOF

Story and photos by
Ptor Spriceniaks

Skiing is both skiing and not skiing. I am confronted by the Zen truth of this statement, staring out the vibrating plastic window of an Indian air force Lama helicopter. From 5,200 metres, the winter isolation of

the kingdom known as Zanskar, a subdistrict located in the Indian provinces of Jammu and Kashmir, passes beneath me and my friend Ty Mills. We can see the homes of the Tibetan Buddhist Zanskaris whose hospitality and generosity lengthened our passage toward the uninhabited and altitudinous reaches of the Great Himalaya Range. The aerial perspective of the presently thawed Zanskar River and its terrible canyon we had so gingerly waddled along for four days is humbling to say the least. In fact, we were retracing the entire path of our attempt to cross the Himalaya on skis and splitboard, a 420-kilometre journey through the world's highest mountains. But for the first time in 18 years of mountain adventures, I was being rescued.

Back in Leh, the largest town in the dis-

trict of Ladakh, I am skinny and weak from my mysterious malady. As I disembark from the helicopter, my moist camping booties leave damp tracks on the black military runway. I am significantly recovered, enough to feel egotistical pangs of guilt and remorse about being rescued, leaving the mission incomplete. I face a heavy rescue bill and my skis and other equipment are gone. It all remains back in the small stone hut where I had lain for six days, unsure if I'd make my 40th birthday. The hut is just a day away from Pensi La, a 4,500-metre pass surrounded by tantalizing 6,000-metre peaks and our exit from Zanskar. My unbridled passion for skiing that had catalyzed this profound adventure did not produce a single turn. I stand looking at the officials gathered to greet us asking myself why?



Left to right: The Zaskar River from above; Golden-based snowboarder Ty Mills and a porter cling to the Zaskar's precarious canyon walls on the way from Leh to Padum, northern India; Ty Mills skins up into the glorious Himalaya, shortly before Ptor's life-threatening illness would end their goal of traversing the highest range on earth



IT WAS JUST A SMALL RECTANGULAR STONE HUT. IT HAD A DOOR WITH NO DOOR AND A WINDOW WITH NO WINDOW.

Our adventure had begun with five days of preparation in Leh that coincided with traditional winter festivals. Then we made a fabulous trek along the frozen Zaskar River, the only way into the Zaskar region. We walked with families scurrying to return home before the river melted. We passed Tibetan New Year's eve with them, hiding from the exposure in an area of caves, our campfires lighting up the canyon walls. Arriving in Padum, the Zaskar capital, we are greeted by our lead guide Tashi, his family and 30 centimetres of fresh snow. Unfortunately, the pre-existing base wasn't deep enough and the enticing terrain surrounding town remained unskiable.

We still had a long way to get to Srinagar and the snowpack would surely increase as we made our way westward. After a few days

of police red tape and another incredible ceremony at the Karsha monastery, we leave Padum and begin slogging our expeditionary loads on plastic sleds northwards along the Doda River. Gently climbing up the sweeping flats of the valley we come to a village every 10 to 15 kilometres, we experience another 60 centimetres of snowfall over the next week. Families take us in for the night and share local fare from a culture that lives in preparation for the long winter. This experience climaxed in the last village at the home of Targis, one of our porters from the river, who was very pleased to see us. Another light snowfall became the excuse to hang out an extra day eating tasty soups, *momos* and drinking the local barley brew *chang*, before engaging the wilderness just ahead.

Leaving Targis's place behind was tough;

it was so comfortable and warm. Two days after leaving "civilization", we rounded a corner and finally saw Pensi La, our intended ski zone. Rounding another corner, I came across a rare sight: a pair of Himalayan wolves mating down by the river. That afternoon, as the cold shadows cloaked the valley, we came across the hut.

It was just a small rectangular stone hut. It had a door with no door and a window with no window. It blocked the -20C night wind and made it easy to avoid setting up and taking down the tent. On the roof were stacks of juniper branches that, in a rash impetus of greed and recent habit, I used to make a little fire to warm my feet. It was a failed attempt, as the green branches smoked us out. All was good as we settled into our -30C sleeping bags with hot tea in hand.

FOR THREE DAYS I COULD BARELY EAT OR DRINK, I WAS INCAPACITATED BY FEVER, COUGHING UP BLOOD, ALL THE WHILE TRANSPORTED BY THE MOST PROFOUND DREAMS AND VISIONS.

It came all of a sudden, in the middle of the night. Wrenching nausea and diarrhea, then shivering until my teeth seemed ready to crack. For three days I could barely eat or drink, I was incapacitated by fever, coughing up blood, all the while transported by the most profound dreams and visions.

On the fourth day I awoke with enough strength to cook on my own. We determined that Ty should go back to Targis's place and organize a rescue, so he left. Then it started snowing again. I prepared my solo efforts for the worst. Over the next two days, by the silence of dimly lit stone walls, I improved dramatically. All I had to do was think. Cocooned in my sleeping bag, I designed a house, created a new format for a country and dove deep into the reality of my situation. I had finally met that intriguing theoretical

reality of Tibetan Buddhism I'd read about: Lamas, reincarnation, the oracles and their shamanic origins.

Was it the juniper smoke? Juniper smoke is the very substance oracles use to come out of trance during their winter ceremonies, which, I found out later, were occurring simultaneously down in villages far below my little hut. Is any illness but another way of describing cleansing? Ultimately, all this exposure to the inner realms transformed the uncertainty of my predicament and left me calm.

On the sixth day, the helicopters seized a break in the weather and one landed right in front of the tent-covered hut door with no door, plastering me and the interior of my shelter with blinding snow. The pilot was obviously not going to let go of the collec-

tive and linger a moment longer than necessary. I scrambled to quickly stuff a backpack. The next moment the ground dropped away and so did my glimpse into this intense culture and these dramatic peaks.

My skiing fantasy had been the vehicle that ultimately transported me into an experience that could only exist in that hut and in that valley. While I'm standing on the runway in Leh, ready to be examined at the hospital, I realize I love skiing, despite the discomforts of not skiing. My gear can be recuperated or replaced, and by deconstructing this experience—these six days confined to a hut—my life would be richer. I will ski again. □