

## The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2006

### FINAL DESTINATION

By Guy Robertson

THE two of them sit there, all hot air and comfy. Like a brace of stubborn pupae, they try to ignore the inevitable metamorphosis that will eventually extricate them from the car. Straight off the back of a long working week, and four hours of warm stasis is about to crumple under the staggering load of two overnight winter packs. Their task is substantial – two hours to camp, at least – and the lateness of the hour induces sleepy second-thoughts into their lazy minds. But there's no escaping it.

Four burning legs power down big-booted on four tiny pedals, the first steepening of the track melting slowly into darkness behind them. Sweaty uphill first-gear grunts and twitchy front wheels, torch beams dancing under monstrous loads. They slither out-of-control through icy puddle glitches, rectified only by more effort and downward momentum. And then, in a jolt, the unthinkable arrests them, their jaws dropped slack like a pair of wooden puppets. A mighty Gulf Stream fist has driven unchallenged across the great stand of pines through which they toil. And now, up ahead, great wooden bastions lay slain and slaughtered across their way, all twisted and crumpled, 5m. deep in all directions. And more, the moss of damp on dead bark has cunningly frozen to sheath each calloused carcass in a slippery veneer. At once their wheels are rendered useless – crampons may well be required.

A few tentative probes at the main massif are convincingly rejected. Each stepped branch may be a ladder, but each hulk of trunk is an icy snake-back, creeping up, across, then down and sideways, this way and that, always onwards and somewhere, but never forward. The stumbling, prickled pair soon wearily retreat to diverge and meander through unknown, but at least, less precipitous outliers. Their rapid, wheel-assisted approach is presently transformed into a complex and demanding approach of energy-sapping proportions.

Once through; moonlight, stillness, and the hot slow steam of frosted breath. No more dead trees to wrestle. A clear path ahead and at last two clear minds. The West Buttress stands guard like a million miles away or more, its 1000ft. of cracked rock and turf and ice made small by the trick of Midwinter's dim. And so they crunch on, a second start, through a fresh frozen carpet of snow, towards an uncertain destination, finally.

Tented and togged up, cocooned in feathers and fibres and fabrics, the two of them soon lie silent in wait of dreams. Legs still throb from the endless march. The tent skin flaps briskly in a gathering breeze, and one of the two ponders the undeniable advantages of not being born a ptarmigan. A few words of quiet optimism are exchanged passively, before the slight touch of snowflakes tickles falling minds off to sleep.

Nokia bleeps, the repetitive strain. A quiet, but sufficiently, insidious and narking irritant that ensures that both parties are infected with a blurred awareness. First things first – coffee *in-situ* or straight up and at it? A turgid bladder makes one decision, while the other is forced shortly after, through a combination of guilt, and paranoia that time is warping against them. For the Clock – as ever – ticks loudly in the silence.

Back to the future again, and the dull memories of sleep evaporate in the sudden heat of an uphill stomp. With monotonous whiteness once more they engage, as a biting easterly swells up and tears away any chance of conversation. Two little flecks of silent torch light edge forward on the map, each hosting its own little hooded world of hopes, fears and dreams. Step, step, step, crunch! Stop, leg out, breathe, step, step, step, crunch! Stop, leg out, step, step, crunch! Partners in purgatory, taking it in turns, but it won't last forever.

The angle relents and they scuttle now, relieved and wind-assisted over ice-scoured flats towards the col. And there they sit, crouched in the drifting lee of the ancient dyke, gorging snappy, crunching, chewy bars and salt-sugar drinks. A strong grainy wind whips the air with a sharp bite and few words are spoken. And then, right there, straight above, a window is opened, the thick morning clouds are cleaved into blue, and two hearts start to pound. Some more and then more and then more is revealed, unfolding in great sweeps from sky down to loch. Cold and unmentioned apprehension is replaced with sharp excitement in the tight snap of a krab. To their right, and across, their Buttress emerges slowly, glistening and festooned with great icy shards. A dragon in waiting. Decisions are made and minds are prepared and weapons are drawn. They move off together, spitting hope into the wind, two hot-faced jangling fools with spikes and cranked-up boots. The clock ticks louder still.

Side-stepping carefully out and down and left, one of the pair now scans the wall – a great icy canvas, devoid of art. His eye traces keenly up, through familiar territories, to a previous impasse where it all ran out. The undisputed blankness that black schist often presents. Dwelling briefly on that point of return, of

sure and sudden failure, he shrinks back quickly from memories of defeat. Tracing left now, across and away back down, he finds a subtle snow cone flirting with sheer rock; a weakness, a quick decision, and a flicker of his fire.

The ropes are unleashed at the base of the line, and the signs are good. A cooperative fault quite bristles with vegetation, slanting left to a bulge, from where a line of tenuous icy tears weeps back across right. And so on into a groove, it would seem, and the start of a battle unknown. A quick knuckle-numbing punch up the fault yields blood to the bones, then a sinker belay, and the second man soon flights up behind to kick out his place.

Into the fray now, teetering out on the tears, to where a searching grope right for the groove is rewarded with a pick in a crack. Both feet swing in tandem to settle on creases, and the unknown groove is now shedding some light. Nuts tumble from the rack like coins from a slot machine. A thin seam yields a high torque on the left wall, for a high step up with the right foot, then the same again, rocking over, to both picks in good turf. A scrabble, a puff and a manteling heave, and the turf sits solidly under his crampons.

Above is a corner – smooth, black and steep. There’s no hint there of turfy goodness, and there’s no faint slot for a pick to keep. So he swings back out left, blindly, popping up onto the crest, to where an eyrie and dragging ropes force out a second stance. Good cracks, good belay, and some good progress for sure. Safe? – Enough, at least, to stave off the ridicule of the bulging wall barring access above. This is steadfastly ignored, as coils of rope are rushed in, and the shivering second is yanked from his bubble to hack and claw his stiffened limbs up the groove to the stance.

Their words of uncertainty are brief and in agreement; they are only mild in hope. Our second now leads through, from defence to attack, struggling with the sudden shock of the transformation. Soon he’s 10ft. or so up, axes dangling hopelessly from his wrists, spread-eagled, underclung it seems on verglas, and looking quite the limpet. With nothing stopping him below, their stance becomes a target, a human bullseye. The belayer concentrates intensely, hounding every twitchy move, surely wishing he was leading and out of the firing line. But the limpet sticks, and slithers haltingly upward, nothing breaking the shared apprehension but the frightened, lurching gasps of his frozen breath. Until a pick is thrown suddenly, repeatedly, and with conviction overhead. C’mon! C’mon! C’mon ya bastard! The pick finds a slot.

Several great gasping puffs, and an all-or-nothing heave confines their ‘impassable wall’ to the history books – for now at any rate. Watch me here! Not hard, but bugger all gear! No worries, it’ll save some time, and it’s running out for sure. A quick snack. Stomping feet and bouncing shoulders, as the rope feeds quickly out and the second’s eyes gaze out into the murk, questioning the depth of the grey, and the lateness of the hour. Then the ropes go slack. Aye, slack, take some in then. What? But that’s no...WHAHHOOOOAAAAAYYAAAA! The Banshee howl booms heavily round the bowels of the Coire, both the ropes are struck tight, and there’s metal clashing metal. Delayed impact...WHHHHHHHUUUMP! Jeezus man, you OK?! Oh man, oh man, I don’t know, I think so, give me a minute. Any blood? When does falling become flying?

The clock’s tick now echoes tangibly, such is the hour, and the white murk is turning brown towards the sunset. At this, the third stance, their prospect is undoubtedly the grimmest yet. Any weakness above is reliably short-lived, and not a line to take seems logical in any way. The grooves all fade to walls, all the walls are capped by bulges, and there’s no glinting crack to catch the eye. But with battered pride set aside with such stalwart valour below, who would they be to shy away now? Take a look at least man, take a look. So he looks, and he looks, and he looks again. Each time he probes tentatively higher, each time he is more committed, and each time the intensity of his awareness of that commitment grows, until he knows; there’s no going back. A move up on more frozen moss than turf, with no bite for crampons, arms locked at the elbows and feet smearing an uncertain balance on the smooth blank shist. Protection still eludes him, and his need becomes acute. The leader must not fall. Fate hangs like a guillotine, sharp and taught around him, as his moves become more frequent, more sure, but less cognitive. It’s climbing by instinct. The belayer stares silent at the clean sweep of the rope, momentarily punctuated by a solitary peg, tied off and tokenistic.

The first bulge is beaten trending left under the worst of it, the second succumbs to a more head on approach, cranking hard towards the sanctuary of what appears to be a decent crack at last, praying for mercy. And brief mercy there is, in the form of a nut, but the crack turns blind and forces wild swings out right, crampons all smearing again until a tiny spike accepts a sling. Then right again, and down. Down? He realizes now that there is no line, only the desperate and chaotic clamberings of a man who seeks escape. And there, at last, it appears, out of nowhere – a slim groove laced with ice. Once more the cracks all disappear but it doesn’t seem to matter; there’s a way out up ahead, and the trimmings of ice and turf have returned sure grip to both feet. Head down, into high gear, engage the exit ramps, and they’re out of there.

Staring out into the giddy, amorphous expanse of a winter's dusk up high, he feels the clammy cool of relief on frosted cheeks. The *Final Destination*. It's over, and he knows it, but he's spent of any passion. Sleep whispers in his ears as he slowly heaves the ropes. Real Life is a galaxy away – driving cars, tapping keyboards, drinking beer, sitting on sofas, watching telly. For a while up there it's just hot blood and wind and grey space and frozen ropes, until the faint jangle of the second becomes louder from below. And then the two are united, slapping backs and shaking hands, sorting the compass, the map and the who-goes-first as the slow grind down dawns wearily upon them.

The two of them sit there, all damp but comfy. Like two fat cats by the fire they embrace the car's warmth and settle in for their journey. Straight off the back of a 16-hour epic, four hours of food, music and warm stasis beckons them homeward. Their task is substantial – three hours to bed, at least – but the rich zest of their experience fires crazy ambitions and new dreams across their lazy minds. They'll be back for more, there's no escaping it.

**This article relates to the first ascent of the unclimbed wall left of *Ice Bomb* in Coire Grandha on Beinn Dearg, near Ullapool. The route was climbed in January 2005, and was named *Final Destination* (VIII,7).**

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