

THE FIRST TURN

BY DAVID GOODMAN

The first turn is always the hardest.

That time-tested cliché of the steeps taunted me as I stood paralyzed at the top of the forty-five-degree gully. Below me, a ribbon of white plunged 2,000 feet to the valley floor. The gully was hemmed in by rocky outcroppings and laced with ice bulges, making the sinewy corridor appear all the more menacing. But this was also a secret passageway through this forbidding landscape, an elegant line that tantalized and lured me. I stomped my skis into the firm snow, bent my knees, and shuffled my feet. But my mind overruled my legs; I couldn't budge. Minutes ticked away in slow, tortuous progression as I tried to talk myself into making a turn, but nothing succeeded in bringing me any closer to the bottom.

A several-hour hike up New Hampshire's Mount Washington had delivered me to this remote couloir. Mount Washington, the highest peak in the northeast, is the home of Tuckerman Ravine, a legendary proving ground of extreme skiing. Each year, I make a pilgrimage to the mountain, partly to pay my respects to this skiing shrine, partly to test myself once more on its fabled steeps. These journeys are a way to take my pulse as a skier, to see just how far I've come since the last time I was here. Some years, I push my limits. Other years, I am resoundingly humbled.

On this excursion, several friends and I had hiked to a little-known wilderness ravine on Mount Washington to claim a rarely skied backcountry prize: Airplane Gully, so named for a plane that once crashed here. Upon arriving at the top, my partners and I recoiled as we peered down the throat of the chute. The northwest-facing gully radiated a cold, steely glare, the frozen surface resisting the softening effects of the sun. After fifteen minutes of silent ogling, four of my five friends broke their numb stares, pulled back from the edge, and quietly rehitched their backpacks. "We're gonna go find something a little mellower," Peter announced, looking a bit shaken. They disappeared around a rocky knob and resumed their search for tamer terrain.

I flashed a look at Barry, my ski partner. "I'll ski it if you'll ski it," I proposed with a faint smile, privately hoping he would decline. Without hesitation, he nodded and snapped on his skis.

I slid slowly to the edge of the small cornice that overhung the top of the gully. Leaning over, I probed the snow to check its consistency. An inch of wet corn lay on top of a firm, granular base. It was skiable. I shifted forward, my skis sliced through the soft cornice, and I sideslipped onto the firm headwall of the gully. Then I stopped.

Balancing precariously on the slender steel edges of my skis, my eyes locked on the route below. The gully was shaped like an hourglass, narrowing sharply in the middle. Stray too far left, and I would be forced onto a bulge of dull blue ice; too far right would suck me into a boulder field. Directly below lay the passageway—a fifteen-foot-wide slot hemmed in by a house-sized boulder on one side and a rock wall on the other. All I had to do was link jump turns down the fall line, and the descent would be complete. I turned my shoulders down the hill, planted my pole hard in the snow, crouched like a tiger about to spring...and couldn't move.

Inside my head the mental chatter was deafening. "I'll hurtle uncontrollably into the rocks...The gully is too icy...It's steeper than it looks...I'm too old for this...."

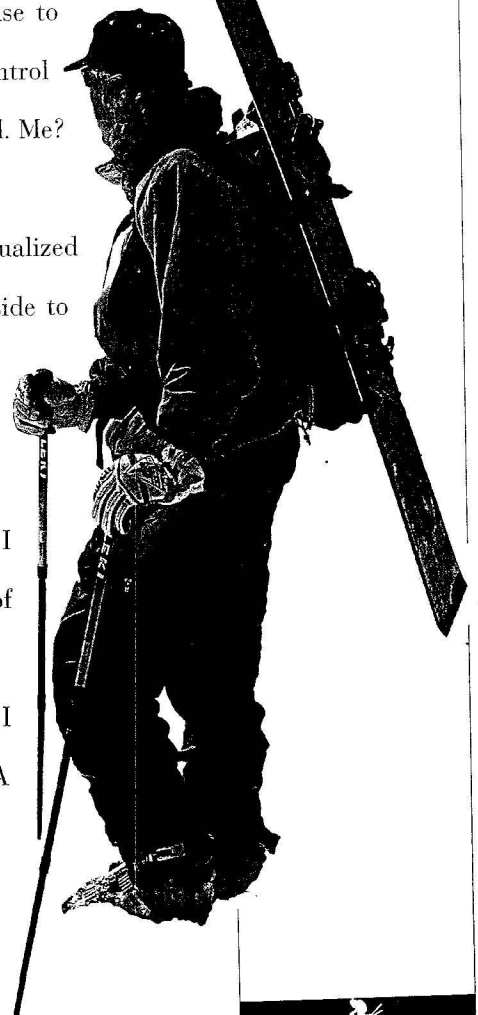
Fear is a constant partner on extreme terrain. It is a rational response to being in irrational places. The best skiers learn to harness the emotion. They control their fear, using it to sharpen all their senses and focus them on the task at hand. Me? I was just plain scared out of my wits.

I tried to staunch the flood of panicked thoughts. Closing my eyes, I visualized myself linking a perfect set of turns down the gully. My hips were swinging side to side; my skis were biting solidly into the snow; my poles were tapping like a jazz drummer beating a slow, perfect rhythm. Yes, I assured myself, I could do this. I planted my left pole hard and unweighted my skis....

I opened my eyes to discover that I was still stuck like a fly to a wall. I couldn't move forward or back. My mind was mingling impassioned images of disaster with sensuous images of success.

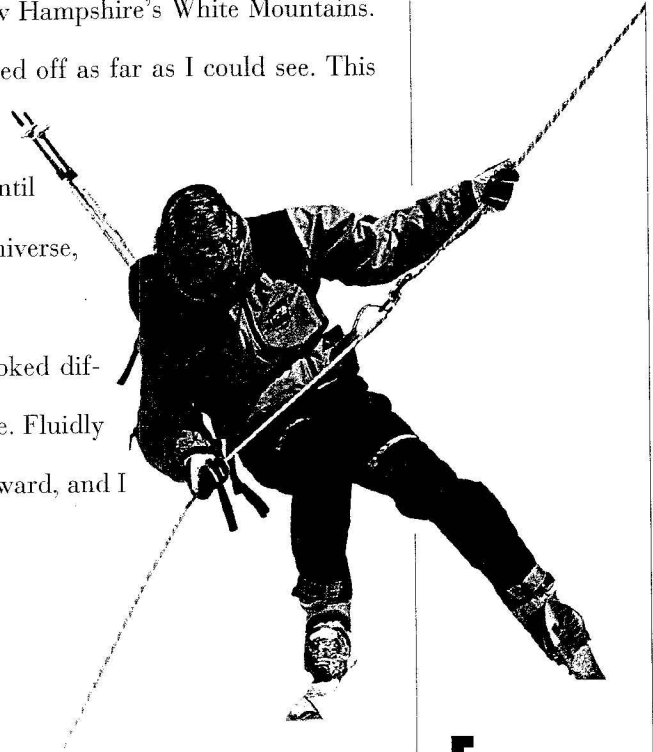
A mixture of disgust, frustration, and terror coursed through my body. I finally tore my gaze from the gully and refocused on the surrounding peaks. A

Fear forces you to think—again and again—before proceeding. It is the mind's way of reminding you that the usual laws of gravity apply; you are not in Disneyland here.



crystal-clear blue sky framed the craggy, brilliant flanks of New Hampshire's White Mountains. The mountain ridges were a series of deep-blue waves that rolled off as far as I could see. This was a familiar place, one where I had learned many lessons over the years. I took in the panorama in deep, hungry gulps until it filled me up. Suddenly, I was a small speck in this natural universe, just one more creature flowing in the current.

My eyes gravitated back into the gully. It somehow looked different. I gazed far down the mountain, beyond where I could see. Fluidly and instinctively, my pole pierced the snow, my legs sprang skyward, and I took flight. ✈



Fear is a constant partner on extreme terrain. It is a rational response to being in irrational places. The best skiers learn to harness the emotion. They control their fear, using it to sharpen their senses and focus on the task at hand."

