



COMING TO TURNS

A SKIER'S SEARCH FOR MORE

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On a November evening, I shut my front door and step into frigid darkness that feels like it might last forever. In my arms, I clutch a basket of dirty laundry—my washer resides in the detached basement—while my feet shuffle through seven inches of heavy snow. It must've blown off Lake Michigan sometime tonight while I was grading papers. As I push into the heavy night, I realize that this is the beginning of my third Midwestern winter. The slow passage of time catches me by surprise.

Without meaning to—it's the snow's fault—I think of my thirty-six-year love affair with skiing. I meander through those seasons of frozen memories before lighting on the winter that I learned to backcountry ski—God, almost twenty years ago, in snow similar to the dense accumulation under my feet. New Mexico's winter days weren't cold enough to keep the snow light...sloppy leather boots...skinny skis....

I open the basement door with one hand, flick on the fluorescent lights and feed clothes into the washer under the sickly yellow glow. Somehow, in the last ten years, the worn T-shirts of a ski-town dishwasher and summer trail builder have changed into the collared shirts of a university professor. I shake my head and remember gloves patched with duct tape, and ski pants shredded by finely honed edges.

I feed the washer a pair of long johns that I wore during a recent snowshoe around the local lake. This lake had an honest-to-god turnstile—like you'd find at a stadium—to ensure that we snowshoed only in a clockwise direction around its shore. My head shakes once more. The longer I live in Michigan, the more I live in my mind.

This sickly yellow basement, this small city where I live, all the straight roads that lead only to suburban towns and shopping malls but never hills or mountains—they fade, and with my hands still on the washer, I see another place. I see the Colorado mountainside where I'm building a 10'x12' cabin. In winter, it is accessible only by skis.

I shove the last of the collared shirts into the washer, close the lid and start the machine. It churns, cleaning spotless clothes that haven't been soiled by dirt or sweat from hard work. I miss the sap and stench from the

effort and reward of ski tours on Cumbres Pass. I miss long johns muddy from dragging through Crested Butte's April melt.

I turn to shut off the light, but before its last flicker, I spot my tele skis in the corner. They have slept in this basement all winter, waiting for another turn. It's been nearly a year since I've skied them, but I remember the last climb, using the too-skinny skins that I bought in 1998. It's hard to justify new gear when it's used twice a winter.

Standing alone in my dark, cool basement, I try to remember every slog up every mountain. I try to remember how many times I cursed the track; the skins slipping; wanting to stop; wanting to be done. Tonight, I want to climb some mountain forever.

I live in my corner of the Midwest like my skis live in this basement—waiting. My job is a career job—a job that can last a lifetime. But will that life always be lived far from the mountains? My best memories are punctuated by great ranges—the Sangre de Cristos, San Juans, West Elks, and Palouse. Now the nearest hills roll in gentle waves three hours away; the nearest mountains, eight. But I could make a life here. I could give up skiing, and accept that it's something other people do. I could jog, go to the climbing gym, snowshoe around lakes guarded by turnstiles. I could.

Or I could give it all away—the house, the job, the promise of a career. But for what? Not just for skiing. No, it would have to be for something else. It would have to be for everything else. The way the snow falls in Colorado, the way my lungs ache as I skin past 12,000 feet, the way my girlfriend looks moving quietly through deeply buried aspens, the way our dinner tastes cooked over the woodstove.

As I close the basement door behind me and begin back toward the house, I imagine myself dropping into the familiar curve of Dog-Ear Chute. Each shuffling step becomes a ski turn driving powder to my chest, over my face and head. Each turn brings me closer to a small cabin—my cabin—on a mountain in Colorado. And by the time I reach the front door, I'm almost there. Almost home. Inside, a woodstove burns red to keep the cold night at bay, and pair of tele skis stands nearby, waiting no more.