

Chasing Avalanches

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The day started in the usual way - well, usual for a day out climbing in winter. The alarm dragged me from the comforts of sleep at some ungodly hour, and the morning routine saw me ready just before Diane pulled up outside.

"See you later," I said, as I kissed Sharon goodbye, "I'll be in touch before 10 p.m., but I should be home much earlier than that - this'll be just a short day out."

The drizzle on the windscreen turned to rain as we headed south towards Forfar, but as we passed Dykehead, the rain turned to sleet and then to snow. By the time we got to the car park at the Glen Doll road-end, the world was white. So much for the forecast of sunshine and showers.

The plan was to meet Stephen and Anne, Sarah and Michael at the car park at 8.30 a.m. With no sign of them by 8.45, we were getting cold waiting, so we started putting the boots on and dividing the kit between the two rucksacks. Just as we were packed and ready to set off, Stephen and Anne pulled up. Their excuse for being late? A minor accident on the snowy roads, fortunately with no injuries and only slight damage to Anne's car. Looking back, that could almost be seen as a portent of things to come. With still no sign of Sarah or Michael, the four of us set off up into Coire Fee at a steady plod.

The original intention for Diane and myself was Look C Gully. However, the thaw of the last few days had stripped much of the ice off the steeper climbs, and the old favourite, B Gully, looked like the best option. The added advantage was that this climb, a grade II, was of a standard such that we could all climb together for much of the way.

With the weather continuing to ignore the predictions and doing its own thing, conditions were rather miserable - still, misery loves company, and so the four of us set off up into the lower reaches of the gully, stopping after about 50 metres at a snow ledge for a bite to eat and to gear up.

Festooned in gear and trailing ropes, Diane set off upwards from the snow ledge. Conditions in the gully were far from perfect, and yet weren't that bad either. The snow had eased off, the weather was improving and once we rounded a corner, we could see all the way to the top of the climb. In the bed of the gully, there was about 20cm of rather wet new snow on top of an old hard layer. Progress was slow as crampons kept balling up, but with Diane performing trail-breaking heroics, the rest of us had a slightly easier time than she did.

Up ahead, the ice pitch rose steeply from the bed of the gully. There had been no sign of the small pitch that is sometimes present lower down the route, but this, the section that gives the gully its grade, was there to be climbed. I moved up past Diane and crossed the bed of the gully to a rock outcrop on the right wall. The soft snow was a little deeper now, and there was an almost constant stream of powder and spindrift down the ice pitch from the upper bowl above. In retrospect, this is where we should have stopped and said, "No - this isn't looking safe. Let's go back down." However, with the top in sight, an unspoken decision was made by each of us that it was better to press on.

The belay below the ice pitch offered a little shelter from the spindrift, which was starting to make life pretty grim. A bomb-proof no. 4 nut was slotted home and, backed up by a peg, afforded a secure stance. Diane tied on, and as Stephen and Anne moved up to find themselves a belay, I launched myself at the ice pitch.

The initial 10 metres were wading though increasingly deep soft snow. Sticking to the right hand side of the gully, I found a good blade-peg runner in rock, which also provided more solid footholds to assist upward, instead of inward, motion. Once contact with the ice was made, things became more satisfactory - ice-axes bit securely, crampons gave firm purchase, and an ice-screw was placed to give a dose of somewhat psychological encouragement.

The pitch was surprisingly technical - powder snow masked much of the ice, and a delicate leftward step had to be made at one point as I realised I had followed a groove away from the ice and onto snow-covered rock. Higher up, hollow ice, centimetres thick above the stream that was still flowing beneath, necessitated gentle hooking with the axes into holes made by the water, instead of the traditional stabbing motion.

As the angle eased, and feeling quietly pleased with myself, I continued up to the only significant outcrop of rock. Unsure of how much rope I had left, and with a biting wind precluding any verbal communication with those down below, I elected to take a belay rather than push on to the top of the climb, another 20 metres above. The pitch had been harder than expected, certainly grade III, and not that much easier than Aladdin's Mirror Direct (my one and only grade IV,4).

For what felt like a good half-hour, I scraped and scratched looking for cracks to take gear placements. As fast as I could clear snow off the rocks, the wind deposited fresh reinforcements in a battle I was never going to win. Eventually, I found a solitary crack that accepted a no. 7 rock. Several sharp tugs convinced me that it would offer a reasonable level of protection, although there was nothing with which to back it up. Eventually, I was forced to place a Deadman in the snow to the left of the belay. Although I have never been overly comfortable using Deadmen, I dug down to the old hard snow for the placement, which then survived my

test attempts to dislodge it. Feeling reasonably happy that the belay was the best available, I started taking in the rope and bellowed into the wind for Diane to follow.

Although Diane's progress was steady, it was also quite slow as she fought with the peg, then the ice screw and always with the steady stream of snow sliding down onto her from the top of the pitch. By this time, I was chilled to the bone, and unable to see for much of the time. I hadn't bothered looking out my goggles while I was setting up the belay - a decision I was rapidly regretting as the spindrift stung my eyes and forehead, penetrating into every layer of clothing I was wearing. The poppers holding my cagoule hood on had also come undone, and in the cold I had only managed to re-attach one of them before Diane started climbing. This meant that I had to keep my back to the wind to prevent the hood blowing off and away, and being unable to move much meant that the cold sank in even faster.

When Diane reached me, she looked even colder than I felt. Snow had filled the collar of her cagoule to the brim, so that she was being chilled by a necklace of ice. Her ski gloves, soaked by the wet snow during the approach, were numbing her hands; she looked thoroughly miserable.

Diane volunteered to carry on up the final snow slopes to the plateau, and I agreed, advising her to stick to the right flank of the gully to avoid the worst of the soft snow. As she disappeared from view, I retreated into the collar of my jacket in an attempt to keep out the probing snow, slowly paying the rope out as Diane inched towards the top. I remember watching the half-way markers on the ropes go through my belay plate shortly before there was a panicked cry of "Stuart!"

I didn't even have time to react. There was motion past me in the bed of the gully, the ropes went tight, the belay ripped and I found myself inexorably propelled towards the top of the ice pitch. I slid down towards the drop, feet first, on my back, thinking "No, no, no...", watching as the ground plunged away in front of me and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

After I shot off the top of the pitch, I must have shut my eyes, since I don't visually remember much else. However, I was quite collected in my thoughts. I don't remember making contact with the base of the drop, but I was aware that I had started to somersault and cartwheel, limbs flying. I was very focussed on my arms and legs, and kept thinking over and over, "OK, nothing broken yet..."

At some point, I'm not sure how or when, I stopped tumbling and ended up face first, on my front, sliding down the gully. I stretched my hands out in front of me in an effort to brake, although I doubt it actually had much effect. And then I stopped.

The emotions I felt were almost indescribable. I was alive, my God, I was alive! I was tangled up in a knot of ropes, and it took a couple of minutes to free myself. I had already given myself a quick mental once-over and nothing hurt - arms, legs, head. Was this possible? I had fallen for what seemed forever, and I was going to be able to walk away? I was almost ready to whoop with exhilaration!

Then I looked on down the gully and there was no sign of Diane. No - this can't be right. I was uninjured, and Diane was gone? I heard shouts from back up the gully. That must be Stephen and Anne. "I'm OK!" I shouted back. Despite my concern for my partner, I was still experiencing waves of euphoria. I don't know what this says about me as a person. Does this make me selfish, elated by my own survival and concerned more for myself than for the welfare of my partner and friend, or is it just that the survival instinct is dominant? Speaking to the others in the days following, I seem to have been alone in having experienced this surge of what? Adrenaline? Emotion? A potent cocktail of the two? Perhaps it was because, after we stopped, I alone was in a position to get up immediately and move about, realising what had happened without needing to focus first on how to extricate myself from where the fall had left me. In the time since the incident, it is this, more than anything else, that has preyed on my mind. I'm not sure I like what this has shown me about myself.

As I turned to look back up the slope, I realised that I was opposite the start of B Gully Chimney, and a quick calculation showed that I had fallen about 100 metres. Continuing to look round, I felt a weight lift as I saw Diane lying about 15 metres up from me. She was sideways to the slope, not moving much, but moving, thank God. Beyond her, it looked as if Stephen and Anne had been pulled down after us, as both appeared to be lying together, another 15 metres back up the gully. They weren't moving.

Finished untangling myself from the ropes, I removed the remains of the failed belay from around my waist and moved up to Diane. I realised that I had lost both my ice-axes - they were still parked neatly beside the belay at the top of the ice pitch. A jolt of pain from my left thigh shot through me as I put weight on that leg, but it was bearable. I shouted to Diane, and was comforted just to hear her reply, and that she thought she was OK. Stephen also shouted something, and it sounded as if he thought he was suffocating.

As quickly as I could, I reached Diane, checked she was genuinely OK, and hurried up to Stephen, wincing in pain as the numbing shock due to the fall left me and the pain in my thigh made its presence felt. It soon became apparent that Anne wasn't with Stephen. Her voice, thick with emotion, was shouting for me from back up the gully. "I'm OK," I

replied, "I'm with Stephen. Just sit tight and someone will be up to get you as soon as we can."

Now at Stephen, he was less panicked than before as we realised that the tightness across his throat was just some slings around his neck and over one shoulder that had come tight during the fall and were easily loosened. However, he was more concerned about his leg, which he thought was broken. His legs were lying side by side across the slope, slightly uphill of his body. Very delicately, I helped him move round so that he was more upright, freeing one leg, which had become caught in the snow, causing him to think it might be badly injured. Finally, he became aware that his back was painful, and with one of our ropes snagged tightly around his waist, I could see why.

Once he was righted, Diane joined us and the three of us tried to take in what had just happened. We couldn't believe that we were all pretty much uninjured. Diane was becoming concerned about her ribs - she could feel movement where she probably shouldn't, and was fairly sure that something was broken. However, she was bearing the pain with little complaint. She had also lost one ice-axe in the fall, but Stephen still had both of his.

Now there was the question of rescuing Anne. I thought Stephen would want to go to her himself, but he was obviously suffering, so I borrowed both of his axes and set off back up the gully. It was a long climb, following the rope that still linked Stephen and Anne up a slope scoured down to the hard snow by the passage of three bodies. Several times, I collapsed onto the axes, exhausted. Finally, I got close enough to Anne to see that her leg and foot were tangled up in the rope, and that she was hanging on the slope, supported only by the belay I had placed below the ice pitch.

Closer examination showed that nearly all the rope between Anne and Stephen had run through Anne's belay plate, but that just before it had all run out, a short length had caught around her foot and that had locked against the belay plate. This is what halted Stephen's fall. This had also forced Anne's leg up against her body in a most uncomfortable-looking position. She had been stuck like this for what must have seemed an age, so I hurriedly moved up the final few feet between us and set about freeing her. With the rope untangled and able to stand again, the gravity of what had happened seemed to sink in and, giving what comfort I could, I hugged Anne as she wept.

However, having got Anne back onto her feet, the enormity of what had happened to us, and what could have happened, now hit me like a sledgehammer. I sagged onto the snow, thinking of Sharon, of my unborn baby, and the implications of how lucky we were. Now it was Anne's turn to comfort me.

Pulling myself together, I set about arranging the belay so that I could protect Anne as she descended. As she picked her way back down the slope towards the others, the emotional roller-coaster that I was still riding brought back that feeling of elation and, bursting with energy, I mentally urged Anne to hurry up so that I could start moving as well.

Looking up above, I noticed that our descent had managed to demolish most of the hollow ice near the top of the pitch, leaving the stream visible where, only a short time before, we had been climbing.

By the time Anne had reached the others, I was chilled again as the energetic buzz had dissipated. I had also discovered that my cagoule hood was gone - lost in the fall. Moving upwards, I dismantled the belay. Stephen had backed up my original peg and nut with an ice screw and a warthog in some frozen turf. The ice screw had ripped out in the fall, as had my peg, and the warthog was so loose that I pulled it out easily with my hands. All that had stopped Anne and Stephen from continuing down the gully was the solitary no. 4 rock.

With the belay dismantled, I moved quickly back down the gully to see the others descending themselves. There was a brief delay as I stopped to recover the gear I had left at the point where my fall had stopped, and then we regrouped at the base of the gully. Amazingly, just at the point where we stopped, I came across my cagoule hood lying in the snow.

It was here, coiling the ropes, that we worked out exactly what had happened. Diane had been close to the top, climbing ever-steeper snow. A slab of this had broken off under her weight (not that I'm implying Diane weighs too much, you understand), and the resultant avalanche had carried her head first, on her back, down past me and over the ice pitch. She felt two distinct jerks during the fall: the first probably due to my belay ripping out, and the second as she was brought to a halt. Diane also told of becoming immobilised by compacting snow as she stopped and the avalanche slowed and stopped around her, but how she was aware enough to dig herself out quickly before the snow set hard. One of our two ropes had become caught round Stephen as he had been setting off up the steep section of the ice pitch, pulling him off after us. This is what ultimately stopped us, since Anne had stopped Stephen. I hadn't realised that the fall was due to an actual avalanche, since Diane, immersed in snow, had sped past me before I realised what was going on. I had effectively chased Diane and the avalanche down the gully, at some point overtaking her, until the rope came tight and I stopped. We all had to be thankful for the soft snow lying in the gully bed, since it had cushioned us from serious injury, particularly Diane and me, as we had plunged over the ice pitch into the deep deposits that I had been cursing as I waded towards the base of the steep ice on the way up. Anne also explained that she had originally thought that only Stephen had fallen, leaving her trapped below the ice pitch with Diane and me above it with no way of reaching her. She was

therefore somewhat surprised to hear my reply coming up from below her! I suppose in a way, she must have actually been glad that we had all fallen (obviously, without sustaining serious injury) and that she was not going to have to spend hours pinned to the gully while we got help.

I did feel sorry for Stephen. I mean, there he was, minding his own business, climbing the crux of his chosen route, and all of a sudden, several tonnes of snow and climbers drop on his head and knock him off. Fortunately, he has been very understanding.

I also feel that Diane, Stephen and I all owe a great debt to Anne. I still break out in a sweat when I think of what might have happened if she hadn't managed to stop our rapid descent, and all this on only her third winter route.

And so we all descended into the woods, reaching the cars as darkness fell. We later discovered that Sarah and Michael had slept in, but turned up anyway. They had followed our footprints up into the corrie and had gone on to climb D Gully, a grade I route to the right of our climb, without ropes, crampons, helmets or incident.

This really is a game of chance.