

Seeing but not believing – a Winter Ramsay Round 6-8 March 2006

An account of a solo unsupported 48 hour non-stop traverse of 23 Munros around Glen Nevis in full winter conditions.

Glen Nevis Youth Hostel is all too familiar in the cold light of pre-dawn. For me this is the scene of two summer Ramsay attempts (the latter one of which was successful) and two Tranter rounds, as well as countless excursions up the Ben. Today I feel slightly drained and lacking in sleep and the 10kg sack reduces my pace to no more than a yomp down the forestry track. The summits are cloud free at first but are soon draped in cloud and I am similarly wrapped in my own thoughts until the keen breeze shakes me out of my reverie. At the first steepening I don crampons which at least lightens the load and I keep them on to the end apart from the valley floors. I settle in to no more than a modest pace, aware of the immensity of the task ahead. I am alone on what promises to be one of the great challenges of my mountain life – almost 60 miles of Britain's highest mountains lie before me clothed in majestic winter garb.

The summit of Mullach nan Coirean confirms my feeling of inadequacy. Already the snow makes for heavy going with the tracks having been blown in and a fresh wind making the minus eight temperature feel much colder. Out to the West, the hills of Garbh Bheinn and Moidart stand out under a thick white blanket, whilst the mountains of Glencoe dominate to the South. I don't linger on the summit – its far too cold for that – but neither do I speed away – its far too taxing underfoot for any thought of running. Even these first two hills seem an effort and I wonder about the journey ahead as the boulders on Stob Ban are almost completely covered and the descent is a lunge through knee deep powder snow atop hard neve.

The day has been a grey one up to now, but on the ascent to Sgurr a Mhaim the cloud lifts to reveal a splendid scene. Before me lies the whiteness of the Aonachs, whilst behind, the Devil's ridge stands proud under a pristine mantle of snow. Only my steps desecrate the crest which cuts in to the sky like an Alpine prow, shining against the backdrop of the wall of Glencoe. I stop many times to record the scene, to savour the airiness of the ridge and to gaze at the magnificence of the peaks to the South: Beinn a Bheitheir, Aonach Eagach, Bidean, the Buachaille, the Blackmount, Rannoch, Schiehallion. For me, each has their own story, but today my story is one of many peaks, of a rhythmic up and down, lift the foot up, plunge it down, lift the next foot up, then down, lift ... the snow forces a slow, methodical advance. Determination rather than haste is the order of the day here where the snow sets the pace and I must go with it.

However, descending Am Bodach, the snow is kind to me, and to my knees in particular: the deep powder snow makes for a delightful swooshing slither, the scree hidden far beneath. I delight in its softness which seems to soak up my aches and pains as surely as thick eiderdown. Too soon it is over and I resume the precise plodding upwards. I am glad of my crampons on An Garbhanach where bizarrely I meet radio enthusiasts holding a radio mast. I ask one of them to take a picture of me which he duly does and then asks me where I'm going. I tell him but I'm not sure it really sinks in.

The track out to Na Gruagaichean normally involves a traverse below the col, but today direct traverses are made impracticable by the deep snow. I take an easier line where the snow is likely to be less deep, but it involves more ascent almost back to the top of Stob Coire a Chairn. I reflect that this is one of the attractions of winter: the ever changing conditions which makes route choice

so much more important. Today's hill is a different hill than it was yesterday and tomorrow it will be different again. I pass two walkers on the rise to Na Gruagaichean and these are the last people that I see for the next 40 hours.

Squally showers come in and out and the narrow crest to Binnean Mor sucks up my legs as I lunge forward through the drifts. The sharp summit of Binnean Mor is especially fine with its sinuous edge hosting shapely cornices. The rocks are almost completely buried in windblown snow but soon I find the snow reaching up to my thighs. The lunging becomes more pronounced and as I look back all I can see is white: a white expanse of slope against a white sky; whiteness around me, whiteness below me, whiteness above me. Unsurprisingly my progress is not swift, but the boulders of Binnean Beag break up the whiteness and make for a less troublesome ascent than I might have anticipated. However on the stalkers path to Sgurr Eilde Mor, the whiteness resumes making it hard going even at this lower altitude. Looking back, Binnean Beag's summit cone is crowned by later afternoon sunlight, whilst fantastic blue pillars of ice festoon the slopes to the right. I take a good line up the narrow summit ridge of Sgurr Eilde Mor and am greeted by the most stupendous vista. A wide arc of mountain upon mountain lies before me stretching from Rannoch to Glencoe to Moidart to Ben Nevis to the Grey Corries to the Easains to Ben Alder and beyond. It is cold and I feel very alone, for now I must descend away from humanity to the darkening pit where lies the head of the River Nevis. From now on, I am very much on my own with darkness an hour away. The light fades as I descend the rough ground to the river, cursing as I trip in the snow covered heather. I make the crossing of the river with just one wet boot and head for the relative comforts of the Meanach Bothy.

Despite the dark, the lack of any form of warm glow and the silence of the hut, I am strangely cheered by what might in other circumstances seem rather austere accommodation. I can't quite work out why, but may be its because even an empty damp shell of a building feels cosy compared to a breezy hillside. Whatever, I soon feel the need to strip off and the 2 degrees registered by my thermometer feels positively tropical so that I feel able to tiptoe round in my bare feet, whilst my boots steam away in the corner. I feel ravenously hungry and it soon becomes apparent that I just haven't brought enough food in my efforts to restrict the rucksack weight to 10kg. Unlike summer rounds where I am moving at a rather faster pace, the slow striding through the snow doesn't make me feel sick, but rather it builds an almighty hunger worthy of the umpteen thousand calories that I must be burning in the cold. I examine my somewhat meagre supplies and ration them for the hours ahead, which leaves just a bowl of porridge and a sandwich for my one hot meal: hardly a feast fit for kings and certainly not one for someone who has been romping through knee deep snow for the past twelve hours. Thus it is, that like a bothy mouse I go searching for leftover food, sniffing out any choice morsel that might have been left by parties with better provisions than my own spartan fare. The search yields a fresh gas cannister, some coffee and a bottle marked 'rum', and it is the latter that causes me much inner turmoil. I reason that the bottle could contain absolutely anything and even if it really is rum, the short term kick will surely not compensate for the added cold in just a few hours time. Reluctantly I pass over the rum and take the coffee and gas, which at least warms me even if it doesn't supply much energy. Outside the snow is starting to come down whilst inside the roar of the stove is a cheering sound, breathing life in to the stone shell and heating my liquid for the night ahead. The sight of a sleeping loft is a very tempting one on a cold winter's evening with the snow driving along outside, and I am truly tempted, but steel myself to the task which I have set and leave the small pleasures of Meanach for what looks like a cold and dark night.

It is indeed cold and dark, but the snow flurries soon stop and a crescent moon lights the sky,

leading me on down the valley to Loch Treig as I follow the sinuous course of the river gurgling its way to the dark loch. As always the darkness draws out the hours where a minute seems like ten, an hour almost an age, the stride shortens, distances elongate and the monotony is only assuaged by the dullness of a tired mind. The broad moor stretches out to Rannoch punctuated by a single pin prick of light at Corroun, a lonely beacon in a black wilderness, seemingly devoid of all life. Darkness can be exceedingly drab and so it is tonight as I plough through the snow covered heather, step after step whilst the top remains elusive, a point beyond these slopes which stretch unerringly upward in to the blackness which enshrouds everything now that the moon and stars have vanished for the night. The atmosphere is cheerless with a keen wind starting to ripple my jacket, cutting through the lethargy of night with an icy sting. As I finally approach the summit of Ben na Lap I can barely walk such is the strength of the wind, so I stumble gratefully in to the shelter of the summit cairn for a moments respite from what has become a tormentor – a shrieking evil blast in the blackness which won't let me rest, won't stop until it has driven me off this mountain. With a physical temperature of minus nine degrees, I reckon the wind chill is well below minus twenty., but at midnight I set off once more in to the howling gale, lurching down the crusty snow. I can scarcely believe that the conditions are so poor given a good weather forecast, but you get what you get and I face the maelstrom which screams around my flapping hood, leaning in to the wall of wind. Needless to say, the descent is most unpleasant – a stumble down ice encrusted slopes in total blackness with an Arctic gale ripping any warmth or energy from my battered torso. Lower down the gale subsides enough for me to contemplate the steep descent to the river below, but the snowy thrash through knee deep heather proves easy enough in this direction. On the other side, the slope rises at a similar angle and in an upwards direction, its not quite so easy, so I pull on the heather, dragging myself up the initial slopes until these open out to a broad ridge which I follow to avoid the deepest of the snow. I expected a hard fight here and mental preparation is half the battle – if you think its going to be bad, it probably will be, but its often not quite as bad as you'd feared – and so it proves on this occasion. The ridge is scoured by the wind and makes for relatively easy going until I hit the plateau where the wind re-asserts itself and the cloud descends, leaving me plodding rather aimlessly upwards, buffeted by the wind, lost in my own murky world of dark and driving spindrift.

Eventually the large summit cairn emerges from the murk, but it offers no protection from the wind as each aspect of the cairn seems to attract swirling eddies of spindrift which make stopping wholly unattractive. Only the compass shows me the way ahead, my own lighthouse in the tempest. The wind really is starting to cut right through me now, so I stop to put on my down jacket which does no more than assuage the cold. I have everything on – powerstretch tights, salopettes, shirt, fleece, down jacket, cagoule and I'm still cold – time to move on, yet moving is so slow in drifts well above the knee. On a compass bearing in the dark with blinding spindrift, its almost impossible to choose the best line through the snow which leads to much floundering, cursing and staccato lunges forward. Perhaps because of attempts to avoid the drifts, I suddenly find myself going in completely the wrong direction, recognising that I've ascended too far and am heading up Meall Garbh. I rue my mistake since it requires me to descend the very deeply drifted slopes that I've just painstakingly staggered up, but there's nothing for it but to do just that and seek the next top in this confusing undulating ground. In negligible visibility, I'm really struggling to stay on course, especially as the compass seems to be wobbling all over the place before settling down to indicate the way ahead. The gale is blowing just as hard, the snow is deep, the spindrift is zipping right into my unguarded face, my hand can barely hold the compass, I can see nothing but the immediate slope in front of me (or I could, only I dare not raise my head to be stung by the driving snow) and its 4am. This is about survival, nothing else: no-one can get me out of here but me, and I guess that

therein lies the attraction – me against the mountain; no get out clauses, no options, no turning back – an elegantly simple challenge. The time wears slowly on as I painstakingly traverse the tops to Sgriodain, concentrating fiercely on the navigation, trying to hold in my mind the aspect of the slopes and the distances. The terrain is most confusing in the conditions but I make no more mistakes and eventually slump on to the summit cairn of Sgriodain. It is 5am – I have taken 2 hours from Chno Dearg, an unbelievably slow time which crushes my spirit, but there's little to do except face the wind once more and stagger down the ridge to the dam. Even this proves more troublesome than I might have anticipated, as I start to descend a side spur in the dark, and then elect to follow the slope to the right rather than descending the blunt nose, which subsequently leads to much time consuming traversing of icy slabs, heather and drifted snow. To cap it all I fail to find a good way over the deer fence guarding the railway track and wobble my way over after thrashing through the trees for a short distance. I arrive at the dam, battered both physically and mentally: it is time to take stock.

Its 6.45 am and I'm way behind my rough calculation of where I should be at this our. My breakfast of cold sandwiches and a swig of equally cold juice has diminished my scanty food supplies yet further and I feel that I have little fire power left. On the other hand it looks like its going to be a fair weather day after the night before and I do I really want to give up now after having endured such a torrid night? That thought does it – I'll continue at least to the top of the Easains – it would be a waste of a good day otherwise. With that thought I try to dose, but its just too cold, so still feeling the inadequacy of the breakfast I plod on.

Its invigorating to breathe in the fresh air now that the wind has died, the clouds have dispersed and the full glory of the morning starts to become apparent. As I gain height, the view to the North opens out: hill upon hill, mountain range after mountain range stretches out from Beinn Teallach to the Monadhliath. Even the sun makes an appearance on the steep nose ahead, and thoughts of the night almost seem like a dull memory, except that it has taken it out of me and I can only move ponderously, carefully scouring the ground for ice. My energy levels are low but I can't afford to eat any more food so I have to satisfy my craving with a sweet or two. Whether the sweets or the sunshine, I sense something of a new lease of life on the nose where I savour the tussle of a direct ascent of a steep gully which demands brushing off voluminous quantities of powder snow to reveal hard neve beneath up which I front point, glad of the excuse to exercise more thought than knee deep snow plodding demands.

On top of the nose I am greeted by an amazing view. Ahead, the slopes glisten, luring me on, whilst behind, snowy peak follows snowy peak, all lit up by the brightness of the sun. The sun, the sun: it banishes the depths of the night, lifting the spirits like nothing else can on a cold winter's day, adding sparkle, sheen and glimmer to an icy wasteland. Rather than enduring the experience, I am now savouring the day, relishing the privilege of being here on this day, in these conditions, embarked on one of the greatest journeys of my life. I am further encouraged as neve replaces knee deep powder snow on the ridge, which largely continues to the fore summit, and even here the drifted snow is mercifully brief. I push on in snow above my knees to the col, but I note that it appears to be the Southern and Eastern slopes that are the main depositary of drifted snow and most of those I will take in descent. This theory is partially dispelled on the next summit where I once more flounder in bottomless powder, but in the light of day I can avoid some of the worst of it, and the view from the summit is sweet compensation. To the South lie the Mamores, Glencoe and Rannoch, whilst to the West the Grey Corries lead to the Ben, and all around is dazzling white, punctuated only by the browns of the low valleys. Out of an azure blue sky blazes the sun,

transforming the Highlands to an Alpine wonderland. There is no wind, no life, no sound – just a perfect stillness which is only apparent on stopping. Nothing moves, nothing speaks, nothing but mountain upon glistening mountain greets my eyes and all beneath a brilliant blue sky. Moving seems a desecration of the scene, but move I must for my ambition is moving on again. Just perhaps, just possibly I could sneak it. If I can get up one mountain, I can get up another, and the next, until the goal suddenly seems achievable.

So I slide down the drifted snow, picking my way through the large holes in the snow until I strike out from the tracks for a direct route to the river. Momentum takes me relatively easily through the thigh deep snow, then its on to the high ground and a slither down to the twinkling, jabbering burn. What an idyll this is: sun burning down, clean, red slabs to sit on and the mesmeric sound of the river, whilst all around snowy peaks rise majestically. Its a truly gorgeous spot, a moment to be savoured, so I do just that by lying on the rough red rock, staring in to the sky and listen to the roaring of the stove. A cup of tea is welcome, but one piece of cake is my allowance, which doesn't constitute a great lunch in my book. Still, I can console myself with one of the best lunch spots in Britain on this day and the privilege of the moment is not lost on me as I take in the space around and above me: glorious mountains with not a soul in sight.

Reluctantly I stir myself and head off through the heather for Stob Ban. I spot what appears to be a reasonable line which will avoid the worst of the drifts, and this proves to be the case. My rejuvenation is complete when I hook up my ipod and dream away the miles listening to the evocative chords of Pink Floyd which momentarily takes away the pain. 'I have become comfortably numb' seems quite apt, or at least it would have 10 hours ago, but now I can scarcely countenance the contrast. The sun burns down so relentlessly and reflects off the snow to create a blinding glare which is staring to drain me in quite an unexpected manner. I roll up my powerstretch tights and shirt sleeves, but this does little to alleviate the onset of dehydration. I've drunk little enough as it is and with this on top I could get myself in to severe trouble. My solution is to put on my balaclava as protection from the sun, pulling it half way down over my eyes so the glare has less of an impact. Its probably a good job that no-one else is around – they'd probably give me a wide berth, given my unusual attire of hat pulled over eyes, rolled up trousers, listening to music whilst walking with crampons and probably looking thoroughly disheveled. No matter, there is no-one to see me, and I return to the soaring guitar of comfortably numb.

Stob Ban and the first of the Grey Corries pass in a bit of a daze. The reflective heat in the sun is incredible but the music really does inspire me on through more knee deep slogging. I feel so emotional that I start to cry, yet I don't even know why. As the tears fall, such a deep intensity of feeling overwhelms me and I just can't stop it. The combination of a horrendous night, an immaculate day, fatigue, lack of food and liquid and music stimulates my emotions to great heights. I stop frequently to gaze back at the truly awesome scene behind where peak upon peak shines brilliantly in the afternoon sun, and reflect just how amazing this experience is. The sense of isolation simply adds to this potent mix, which brings me to tears time and time again.

On finally breasting the summit of Stob Coire Claurigh, the twisting ridge of the Grey Corries is revealed, whilst to the North, a seeming infinity of snowy mountains stretches in to the horizon. Suddenly it feels cold, so much so that I put on my down jacket once more, a move which is justified by a glance at the thermometer – minus seven. Afternoon is on the wane; soon it will be evening and then night. I sense that the joy of the day is also on the wane and that the real test is just around the corner. But first more pleasure: the Grey Corries ridge is one of the finest ridges in

Britain in such conditions as these. Waves of snow billow over the sharp edges, forming exquisite cornices, whilst the ridge twists from side to side, pleasing the eye and beckoning one forward. I accept the invitation and romp down the deeply drifted snow, before painstakingly blazing a trail up the other side where the drifts pass well above my knees. Up, down and along; up, down and along: so it goes. I can see a distant figure on the shapely peak of Choinnich Mor, but no-one has passed this way, no-one to break my reverie, no-one to share my story with; but then no-one could really understand – the experience is too personal. With that thought, I phone Alison, my wife and let her know that I am going for it and not to expect a call until early morning.

So the die is cast. Cloud is building to the West but I hope that I will at least get over the Aonachs before it obscures the summits. I perform rough calculations in my head as I go – an hour and a half to Choinnich Mor, 45 minutes to the col from there, 2 hours up Aonach Beag, 50 minutes to Aonach Mor, 50 minutes to the next col, 2 hours to Carn Mor Dearg, an hour and a half to the Ben. Its going to be another long night but will get off the Aonachs before the gathering storm comes in? I proceed with a mixture of hope, apprehension and confidence in my knowledge of the hills. The early evening is one of my favourite times of day in the hills and today is no different. The quality of the light, the feel of the air, whatever it is, the early evening embodies a certain sense of tranquility, of contentment, of peace. I feel this as I finish traversing the Grey Corries and wade up the initial steep nose of Choinneach Mor., before tackling the exhilarating final steepening and narrow crest. I spot the 'crevasses' which lurk on this part of the ridge – large natural holes between rocks which when snow covered really can act like crevasses in the true sense of the word. Night overtakes me on the far side of Choinneach Mor and after a lolloping descent of the main summit in delicious soft powder, Choinneach Beag dishes up an awful desert of knee deep breakable crust. Even in descent, this is painful stuff which starts me thinking whether this night will be as awful as the last. This time the suffering seems to have started early, but will it last? The imponderables of the night loom large as I smash my way down uncomfortably. Its one foot on top, then down it goes, scraping my shins as it does so; then lift the next foot out of its hole and repeat the exercise. Needless to say, this last traverse to the col takes an absolute age, amplified by the dark which ekes out the agony.

When I finally get there, the col is windy, dark and generally unpleasant but I'm so tired that stop anyway, just before the first steep sloop up Aonach Beag. Its the moment I've been waiting for: I can have my last piece of Christmas cake! It doesn't last long as I ravenously devour the cake but it's good for the thirty seconds that it lasts, even if I'm left salivating for more – more of anything in fact. I'm so hungry that its tempting to eat my remaining supplies there and then, but I know that would be plain stupid with the real test ahead. I'm really not looking forward to this next section and lie on my sack staring in to the blackness, trying to take myself out of the situation to garner any morsels of energy that remain whilst I can do so. However, the pesky wind is too persistent to allow me to lie for long, so reluctantly I raise myself to face the mountain. It looks steep; lets not beat about the bush, I know its steep and the snow won't make it any easier. I scan the slope looking for the easiest line through what looks like deeply drifted snow, but conclude that I'm probably just as well off to follow the normal line round to the left and then up the ramp to the right. From the start its tortuous: not only is it steep but the snow is crusty, deep and untrodden. At each step I break through the crust and sink to the bottom. This has been termed 'post holing' since its like driving a post through the crust with each step and like a post you go in a long way ... and its a long way to drag your feet out. After a hundred metres of post holing I'm exhausted, but there's only one way to deal with this and thats to keep plodding. No matter how slowly you're going, keep going – axe in, drag the foot up, then plunge it in, take a deep breath, haul the next foot out and sink

it. Sounds like fun? May be for the pure masochist, but even I don't quite fall in to that category, so i seek a better route out to the side of the deepest snow. Unfortunately this doesn't seem to be any better, as i find myself alternately balancing on rocks and without warning plunging in to holes in between the rocks. I head back for the ramp where at least I know what each step is going to bring, but the snow is even worse here. I am not so much walking up the mountain as driving a trench up it, where every footstep just slides back to the next in painful crust. My axe is swallowed up by the snow, so I resort to thrusting both arms in horizontally to get some purchase, kick my legs as high as I can manage and then wait until they slide miserably back to where I was before. I can't believe I'm having to excavate my way up the mountain after 38 hours on the go with precious little fuel left in the tank. I cry out in anger at the snow and attack it with renewed vigour. It doesn't last long but its good to get out of my system, and eventually the slope eases off a little which means that the trench making reverts to post holing. I take a quick breather, then off I go, one post at a time, until I reach a point where I'm not sure if the ramp up the prow leads off. I try to put my torch beam on to full beam, but the battery is too low for that by now, so I'm forced to revert to the white light which fails to light up the buttress sufficiently for me to make a decision. I go back down a few steps to get a proper look, but it soon becomes clear that the snowy ramp is a false trail, so I haul myself back up the ramp and stay close to the rock wall so that I can take a good look at it as I pass. After considering a few false lines I remember that the ramp back left is actually just round the corner and when I get to it, its plainly obvious and very easy, or at least it would be if it were not plastered in this white cement. Higher up, the wind rises and the snow becomes less impenetrable. In fact, as I near the end of the ramp, it becomes clear that the usual track to the left is a 'no go', as the slope is very steeply banked out with icy neve which just isn't worth the risk. I'm therefore forced to head directly up which requires front pointing and the cutting of hand holds in the ice, but at least it takes my mind off the drudgery of the post holing and I actually rather enjoy this brief bit of climbing. Its rather like being a pioneer of old, cutting steps in the dark up some unfrequented wall, except that I'm cheating with crampons and modern clothing but I reckon that after 39 hours I'm allowed to cheat. In the dark, its a small world where the torch beam defines the perimeter of this world, yet I can feel the space beneath my feet as I mount the wall, giving an awareness of the mountain beyond my torch defined world.

Soon, however, I'm up and on to the prow where the wind greets me in gusto. The storm is starting to brew, but its not here yet and the peaks are still clear of cloud. Nevertheless, I feel a certain menace in the air and don't waste time in plodding on, now following windblown footsteps in the snow. Aonach Beag really is a big mountain: on this side huge cliffs mark the route which I must follow, whilst great whaleback slopes form the mass of the mountain to the West. Not surprisingly, the snow has drifted on these immense slopes which makes for an arduous, mentally testing ascent, where I scarcely dare measure my progress because it is so slow. The wind is starting to whip up the spindrift, the footsteps are so blown in that they're useless and the slopes just stretch on to infinity, or at least they seem to until the very moment that I arrive by the summit cairn. I say by the summit cairn, but a better description would be *over* the summit cairn, since it is completely buried and I only know I am there because the footmarks have stopped. The Aonachs plateau is a barren place, somewhat reminiscent of the Cairngorms, and on a cold winter's night its no place to linger. I immediately set off down, keenly aware of the race against the ensuing storm, but this race is no ordinary race. Its not a race that I can run, but one where I just have to keep going, plunging down the steepening snow, focused on the few metres ahead, trying not to let my mind wander. The immensity of the landscape is all too clear. The rolling plateau fills the horizon with limitless quantities of snow, bounded by cliffs falling seamlessly in to the dark depths below, and then there's me – a lone figure in a hostile world which swallows me up and threatens to spit me out. I feel very

vulnerable, aware of how reliant I am on my ability to just keep on going. Stopping is not an option: once more the die is cast and I am just acting out my part.

The feeling of vulnerability intensifies as I methodically follow the pisted track up Aonach Mor. Away from the ski slopes, in the dead of night, as a storm brews, this is a big snowy place which offers no shelter, no comfort, no trace of humanity: As I near the summit - or should I say the highest point, it is such a flat place – the cloud descends, the snow blows in and the storm starts. So this is it; the battle has commenced, the challenge has been issued, there's no doubt any more – its me against the mountain, the storm, the snow, lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of water, lack of vision – but there's something in me which revels in the heightened challenge. May be I wouldn't have planned it this way, but once I'm in it, I don't think twice about it. Bring it on!

And soon it really is 'brought on': the wind drives the snow in to my eyes, stinging them as I struggle to see ahead. Visibility is down to two metres and soon I will have to veer off to the right to seek the spur down to the pass beneath Carn Mor Dearg, which I know to be a very severe test of navigation in these conditions. The spur is a 35 degree slope, but the slopes to either side are more like 50 degrees, the site of indistinct climbing routes which I really do now wish to descend. I try to read the slope even though I can only see just in front of me, desperately seeking to get a feel for the lie of the land so that I hit the top of the spur. The cairn marking the top of the spur will be well buried in this, so I'll just have to take a calculated guess. The compass isn't a lot of use on its own as the spur is very indistinct at the start, so I am fiercely focused on looking around me, sensing the slopes until I take the plunge and start to descend more steeply. The spur becomes more defined and I grow in confidence that I've found it, even though I can't recognise any features because everything is so plastered in snow. On these Western slopes the snow has drifted to a metre deep, so even the suggestion of the formation of windslab causes me some alarm as I descend the steep slopes. At times I turn inwards and kick steps to avoid knocking the whole slope down and I try to stick to the rocks to limit the possibility of avalanche. Everywhere there is snow: snow up to my waist, snow in my eyes, snow down my gloves, snow in the air, snow in my sack; but at least the snow makes for a gentle descent on my knees. The usual skittering down scree, rocks and slippery grass has been replaced by a gentle whooshing in soft snow, which slides down in to an unseen abyss. Down, down, down I go, following small couloirs, ribs and finally what looks like a stream bed, except that it is covered in snow. The slope starts to ease off so I know that I'm near the bottom, and when an incised valley appears I know that I'm down. The most dangerous part of the journey is over, but I can't relax: the storm has come in earnest now. The wind is funnelling up the valley from the South and blasts the snow in to my face. Its also very wet snow which is quite the most depressing kind: the sort of snow that seeps in to the smallest opening, wetting everything in its path. This is the challenge I've been anticipating: once more its about survival, moving to keep alive.

However first I need a break and a bite of food. I take shelter in a little corner protected from the worst of the wind and eat a precious morsel whilst the spindrift blows all around. I lie on my back and doze, desperately trying to recuperate sufficiently to see me through to the end, and I do start to dream. Its as if my family are with me, talking to me, sitting by me, but I know they're not there. Nevertheless its comforting to sense the presence of them right by me whilst I lie comotose in the snow. After ten minutes I rouse myself and cease to resemble an abominable snowman when I shake the snow which has accumulated on me as I lay there. Its hard to do, but I face in to the wind, come out of my little corner and feel the blast of the storm once more. Immediately icy particles sting my eyes and my eyelashes start to freeze over, yet there's nothing for it but to heave up

through the deep snow and buried rocks, bound for Carn Mor Dearg. There's a certain unreality about the situation, where I'm a dispassionate body observing myself climbing the ridge, and Alison and Ben are there too talking to me, but I know that they're not there because there's no snow when I see them- its just a comforting dream that takes me out of this hostile world. I'm like a robot, programmed to go up regardless of whatever the mountain throws at me, yet I recognise that it is truly appalling conditions which demand that I continue because if I stop I won't recover, I'll only degenerate. I can't see anything beyond my hood, the ground by my feet, and if I dare expose my face to the icy bullets, I can see three metres ahead. I lose all sense of time and oscillate between a dream world where I am sheltered from the snow, the storm and the cold, and the reality of painstakingly dragging myself through the snow. Once more I take a power nap, aware that this is probably the last opportunity I will have until the top of the big bad Ben. Its a good decision and I feel quite rejuvenated for a while afterwards.

Towards the top, the wind really starts to pick up and I have to hold on to the rocks to avoid being knocked about, but it doesn't matter now. I just accept anything that comes and carry on, for there's no other option – its beautifully simple. Simple, but not easy. Following the arete, I'm now facing directly in to the wind which is ripping over the ridge, blasting the icy devils in to my eyes. I can't see them, but I can feel them alright. A full on hit blinds me for an instant, so I pull my hood lower still and bow before the wind. As the arete narrows I hold on to the crest for stability, not wanting to end the expedition by being blown in to Coire Leis. What a climax this is: a storm bound traverse of the arete in the wee hours.

The wind gets ever stronger as I pass round the narrow arete, causing me to focus on every step. I time my jumps to correspond with relative lulls in the wind and watchfully pass by the vertical side walls which loom up out of the dark pit of Coire Leis. My focus is total: there are no voices now, just me and the ridge. Most of the time I can't see the drops, but I can feel them as I pass by. Its as if a malevolent force wants to through me over the cliffs, but willpower draws me on. I can sense the beginning of the end and my excitement is only tempered by the knowledge that I must first find my way of the Ben Nevis plateau. Before then I have to climb the last thousand feet up to the summit, but although the wind blows as strong as ever, nothing can keep me from my goal now. I plod wearily on, wrapped in my private, circumscribed world.

At last I'm there at the summit of Ben Nevis, coincidentally at 3.17 am, the same time as on my summer Ramsay Round, but I feel no elation, just a desire to get down, to find my way out of this black and white hell. Once again I can see no more than two metres, the tracks are fully blown over and its a wild night on the big, bad Ben. What a finale this is proving to be! Again, I concentrate furiously on my navigation, counting my steps to the top of Gardyloo gully. I spot the cairn marking the turning point and follow a course for the Red Burn. Never an easy place to navigate in the mist and snow, tonight it is abysmal, allowing for no mistakes. I watch the ground, search for signs of footsteps and keep checking my compass, but after congratulating myself on passing off the plateau, I recognise that I have slightly overcompensated for avoiding Five Finger Gully and find myself on the right hand side of the Red Burn,. Most importantly however, I'm safe and can relax a little. The snow is balling up under my crampons and despite the great depth of the snow which reaches up to my waist at times, I'm starting to trip over rocks buried under the snow, so I take my spikes off, but its here that a curious incident occurs. My crampon straps are unsurprisingly iced up and prove unwilling to be prised apart, so I use my axe to scrape away at the straps and then to hack the more resistant bits of ice off the straps. Unfortunately it appears that my hacking is a little too vigorous, or else the straps are too old and my axe too sharp, because I'm soon staring at two pieces

of frayed strap and a disconnected ring. Somehow the ring disappears and despite ferreting about in the snow, I just can't find it. 'Never mind' I tell myself, I don't need them any more and the straps were looking rather worn.

Having shrugged this off, I inevitably proceed to slide around on hard neve, but at least I'm not tripping over as many rocks any more. The snow is so deep that I can pick my way down the right hand side of the Red Burn which looks strangely unfamiliar with the very deep snow and the dark. I can't really see much at all – just changes in angle – but I can see enough to cause me to think that entering the Burn would not be a good idea. Besides, with the softness of the snow in the thaw, I might find myself knee deep in water, so I proceed down the slope until I hit the main path just as it rises out of the Red Burn. I'm in no mood for the steep grassy bank that would now be a steep, snowy and exceedingly slippery bank, so I carry on down the track, but get bored of this, so take an intermediate line to cut the corner. It's icy and rather indeterminate in the dark and I begin to wish that I'd stayed on the path. The end is near and I know that I'm going to get there now, but it doesn't seem to make it any easier. In fact, I can only honestly call it a drawn out agony of stumbling down a steep and icy hill which doesn't seem that familiar despite having been down here many, many times. I don't recognise the trees to my left. Am I further down than I think? 'No' is the unfortunate answer which becomes all too apparent as I hit the track above the zig-zag on the slope of Meall an't Suidhe. I'm a little downhearted at this as it means I've cut very little off the main track, but at least I'm on the highway now and the snow's starting to disappear. The set rocks that make up the path are particularly painful on my bruised and battered feet, sending a burning sensation right up my leg on every step. I can't believe how long this is taking. Never has the Ben path seemed so tortuous, but I have the bit between my teeth now, focused on getting down, being able to relieve my poor feet from the cruel battering to which I've subjected them. For the present, I daren't think of the heaven that lies below: to get down I just have to force one leg in front of the other, pretending that the pain in my feet is an illusion. But it isn't; the pain is all too real – a rubbing, burning, shooting, stabbing pain that taunts my every step. I know the track all too well and the landmarks pass unbelievably slowly: the first bridge, the second and then the third; the zig-zag and then the next and finally the path junction. I'm almost sleep walking and am finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate. My true state of mind is made all too clear, when I approach a rock which appears to be covered in jigsaw pieces. I see coloured jigsaw pieces dotted all over the rock and although I know that this is an illusion, my eyes tell me otherwise. I have to prove to myself that it is an illusion, so I bend down and feel the rock. It's a rock covered in lichen. Time to get down before I start seeing pink fairies.

That's easier said than done. I can scarcely bare to thud my feet in to the stones, I've reached the end of my reserves: there's nothing left. I'm running on empty; the fuel gauge has been on red for too long; I can do no more than eke out the last few hundred metres to the car. My torch beam has been pitifully weak for the last hour, but now the light of day replaces the dim glow. The grey, soft dawn matches my state of mind. I'm in a slightly confused fog through which I'm stumbling in a protracted, painful daze. Again tears fill my eyes as I approach the youth hostel. I can't quite believe that I'm going to finish, but I am. I can hear voices for the first time for almost 40 hours and they aren't the ones in my head that have been my companions through the long night. Although I'm finishing alone, these companions are still with me – family and friends that have occupied my dreamland. There's an unreality about the finish as I limp up the road to my car. No-one knows, no-one cares about what I've just done and why should they? Yet for me, it's made its mark – a diamond which will etch a deep memory in years to come.

So the end comes, except that it is not the end. A horrible thought emerges. My key was in the bottom of my rucksack liner – a black key in a black bag – but it isn't there now. I desperately search every crevice of my soggy sack, but a memory haunts me as I do so. On one of my power nap stops up Carn Mor Dearg I had emptied my rucksack liner to shake out spindrift which had accumulated in the bag. I had checked the contents first, but I must have missed the black key in the black bag under a black sky. My key was sitting in a pile of snow near the summit of a 1200 metre mountain. Utterly dejected I sit forlornly on the ground, but the cold soon seeps in to my bones and I reluctantly re-assemble my kit and shoulder my sack. I can barely hobble the fifty metres down to the youth hostel and my hallucinations proliferate. I think about making a call from the phone box, but there's someone in there – but there isn't – its just an illusion. The coke machine outside the hostel takes on another form. I don't know what it is: my mind just can't work it out. Only going right up to the machine shows it for what it really is. I see birds in the trees that aren't there, sticks are animate objects and I can no longer discern what is real. Its quite bizarre, since I am still alert enough to know that it is my mind playing tricks as though I am drugged.

In this sorry state I hobble in to the hostel which is mercifully open at this early hour. I explain my plight to the warden on duty who is none too sympathetic. I can't quite believe his lack of compassion, with his principle concern seeming to be that I inform the police that my car may be there for a while. I am utterly defeated by this disastrous setback and am lost as to what to do. I can barely think. All I had wanted to do was to strip off these disgusting clothes, bandage up my feet, soothe my throat with liquid and curl up in a ball to go to sleep, but now I can do none of these. The warden presses me to act, but I just can't think and the only action that I take is to prise off my bloodied socks to reveal the full horror of my feet. Eight of my toes are black, the rubbing on my ankles is so bad that it has gouged pus-filled holes, whilst my soles are ghostly white victims of trench foot. To top it all, my toes are deadened from frostnip. I reek like a tramp from hours of sweat and damp, but I am beyond embarrassment. Instead of offering me a cup of tea, the use of the facilities or even some words of comfort, after phoning the police (who helpfully suggest that I get my spare key sent up my special delivery) I am told that I will have to leave.

I can't quite face putting my odious socks back on, so I just wrap them around the worst of the rubbing and wear my boots barefoot. I limp out of the hostel and consider what to do next. My mind is working so slowly that it takes me an age to come to any decision and once I have done so, it takes an equally long time to act on it. I can't face the fifty metre walk to the phone box, so I try my mobile. It works intermittently and at last I can explain my predicament to someone who cares. After checking whether my breakdown service provider can help (negative as the nearest dealer is in Glasgow), Alison arranges for the key to be sent to Station Lodge at Tulloch where I will stay the night. I can catch the train to Tulloch but the next train isn't until 11.30, so will have to while away the morning in Fort William. There's no bus and precious few cars, so I just limp down the road, feeling more and more like the tramp that I have become. Half a mile later, someone feels sorry for me and offers me a lift. The driver informs me that only Morrisons will be open for breakfast, so on arrival in the Fort I hobble across to the supermarket. It is quite surreal. I am sitting having breakfast in Morrisons smelling to high heaven, wet winter kit by my side and nursing my repulsive feet. I feel truly sorry for anyone who comes in to contact with me and seek a table as far away from other people as possible. I have to concentrate to achieve anything such is my state of tiredness, but I eventually stir myself to buy more food for the day. I'm in a trance, moving round the store in slow motion, dragging my feet after me, feet screaming in protest at being bound in their tormentors once more. Next stop is the Nevis Sport Cafe for more food, drink and slouching over a table, then finally I can escape on the train. More lunch, a shower and the loan of a T shirt

from the kindly folk of Tulloch and then the long awaited relief of sleep. Its over.

Postscript: On coming to, I examined my crampon straps. They are quite as they should be – I had imagined cutting through the straps.

Logistics: I carried/wore the following: Dryflow top, powerstretch tights, 2 pairs of part woollen walking socks, Rab salopettes, microfleece top, Rab down jacket, Berghaus lightweight cagoule, thin balaclava, Dachstein mitts, Extremitie outer gloves, Aiguille gaiters, 2 season leather walking boots, Camp 55cm axe, 1 Leki walking pole, an old pair of strap on Camp crampons, 35 litre KIMM sack, compass, ipod nano, Sanyo video camera, billy can, mug, spoon, gas, pocket rocket stove, insulating water bottle carrier.

I also carried and then consumed the following: 1.5 litre squash (topped up by a further 2.5 litres), 1 tea bag, porridge oats, 4 homemade flapjack type cake pieces, 2 pieces of Christmas cake, 2 Snickers bars, sandwiches made with 8 rounds of bread, cheese, a bar of chocolate, 2 geobars, 1 apple bar, a few figs, liquorice allsorts, a handful of marzipan. This was not enough!