

# WHAT GOES UP

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**On New Year's Day**, the sun finally climbs over Alaska's Kenai Mountains at 11 a.m. Skinning beside wolf tracks, we move quickly to escape the dark and cold below, through an inversion and into the subarctic light. We're quiet with thoughts of the New Year, breathing steadily as we climb.

Altitude. Latitude.

My life has always been about the climb. As a child, I would bike with my father and only count the uphill. He would sing the melodies of the Tour de France as we climbed endless hills. Later, with a backpack, I listened as the same tune played in my head. Even later, I heard the song on bigger mountains, in bigger landscapes, different states and different countries.

Always, I craved the uphill—as if it were the only direction that mattered. I find solace in steep places and high latitudes, craving northern climates, tundra and angled views no fewer than 360 degrees. To me, the hard work of an uphill pace comes naturally.

The slow and steady rhythm of the climb, however, is disrupted by the anticipation and focus required for the downhill. Once, before we took our first turns down the crevasse-etched side of a Coast Range mountain, my partner said, "Ninety percent of what goes wrong will go wrong on the downhill." In life, I run to northern latitudes for balance, guidance and healing landscapes. As a rule, I flee the spiraling down.

Now, with each step uphill, we lose ground. The descent grows nearer, and I struggle with the anticipation—what if I fall? What if I slip? What if I can't get down? Isn't it enough to complete the climb? No.

The climb is only half the story—only half the journey. I climb, and in climbing, leave behind the sound of the river, the glimpses of color-rich landscapes of blues and greens, the feel of ocean on my weary feet. I climb north and lose sight of the desert, the rich sunsets brought on by dusty desolation, the canyons that creep toward eternity, the friends made along the way.

At the top, the wintry Alaskan sun shines low on the horizon, casting slanted light down the slope. We tear off skins, put on layers, and pull goggles over our eyes. It's time for the other half of the journey, where we must let go of the fear, anticipation and hesitation. I have no song for the downhill.

But then my partner turns to me. "You know how to do this; you know how to get down," he says. "It will be fine." And then, before I can hesitate, he drops.

What goes up must come down. I'm beginning to see how the bottom can feel as glorious as the top. And finding a way down—through the fear and the doubt and hesitation—gets easier with the friends you meet on the climb.