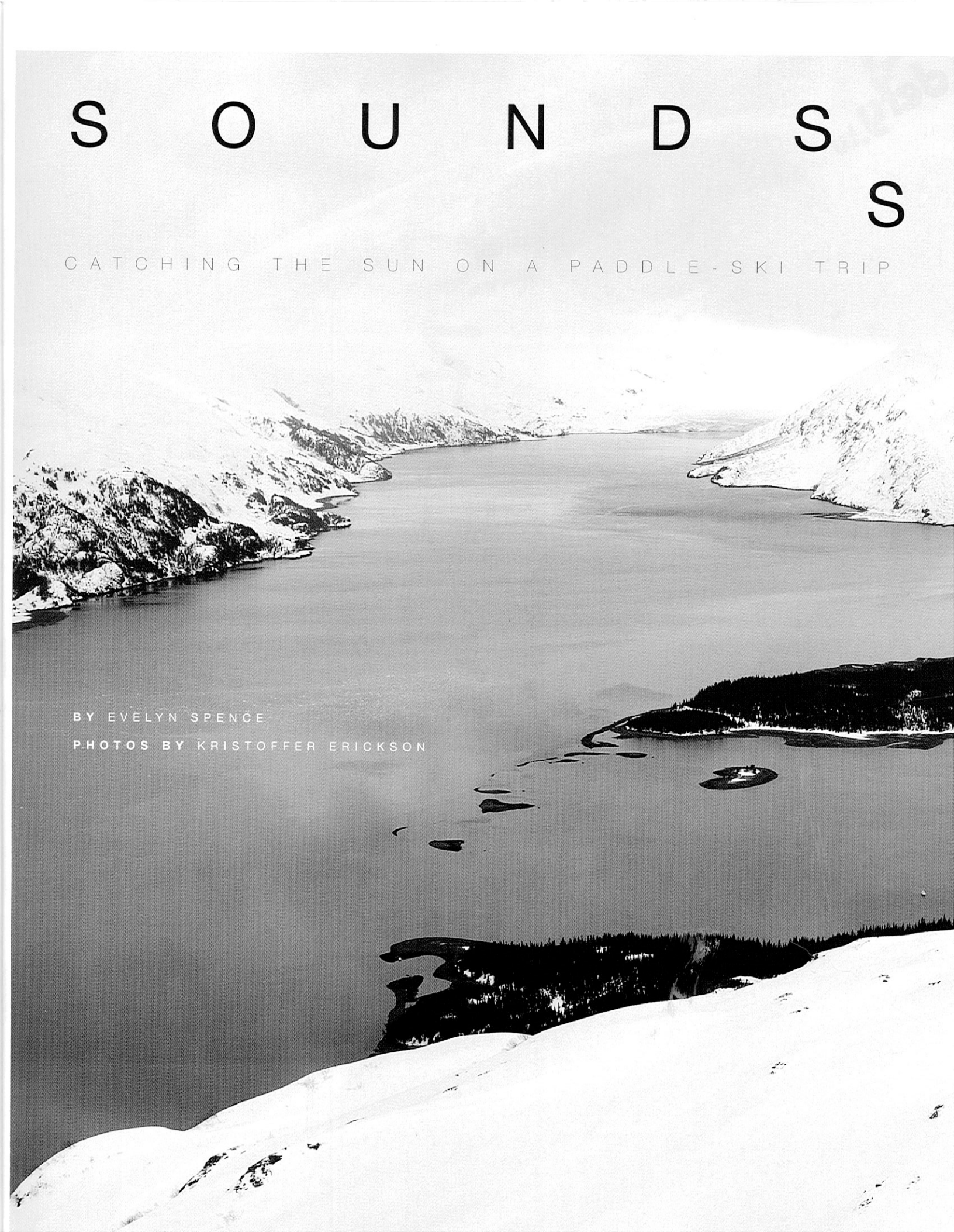


S O U N D S S

CATCHING THE SUN ON A PADDLE-SKI TRIP

BY EVELYN SPENCE

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O F I L E N C E

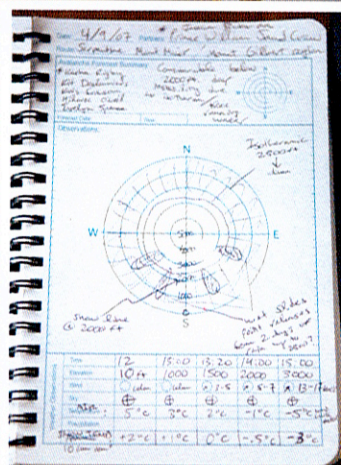
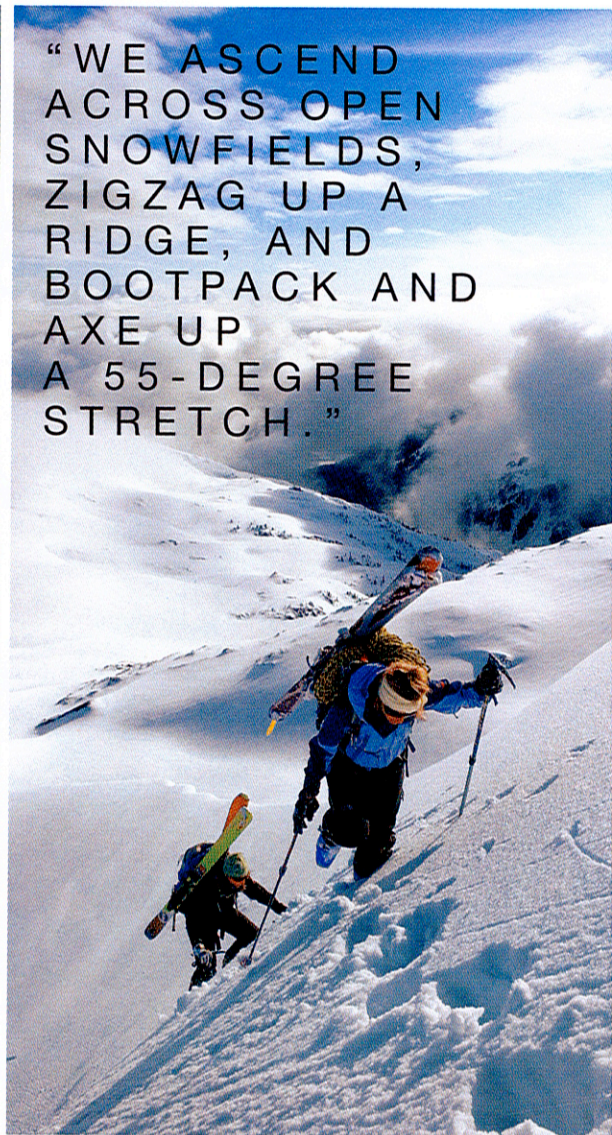
IN ALASKA'S PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND





"VESSEL AFLOAT. NOW WHERE'S THAT KETCHUP?"

"WE ASCEND ACROSS OPEN SNOWFIELDS, ZIGZAG UP A RIDGE, AND BOOTPACK AND AXE UP A 55-DEGREE STRETCH."



There are certain things you pack when you're going on a ski trip. Make that a ski trip to Alaska. Better yet, a ski trip to Alaska to motor around Prince William Sound in a somewhat ramshackle fishing boat called (with no shortage of smirks and, given the chance of a three-week streak of April rain, irony) the *Good Times*. A ski trip with Kit DesLauriers, Kasha Rigby, Jessica Baker, and Hilaree O'Neill, who have, between them, skied Everest and Cho Oyu and Tolbachik and Aspiring and Qornet as-Sawda. A trip where we sea kayak to shore and skin up peaks that start at the beach and jab skyward—as if the earth is teething ice and rock—up to 13,000 feet in spectacular underberites.

Yeah, people have been dropped off by choppers on the nearby summits. They've paid their seven G's and ripped turns in the Choog. But things look a lot different when you're at the bottom looking up.

You don't want to forget your dry bags and dry suits. Your pogies and paddles. You'll need not one, but two ice axes—because, as Kit said before we left, "We are going skiing, but sometimes it's a little firm." Be sure to throw in some prusiks, 'biners, tiblocs, snow pickets, and ice screws.

You'll need 16-inch X-Tra Tuff insulated rubber Wellingtons, because getting out of a kayak in ski boots—and then skinning all day with wet feet—just plain sucks. You'll need to let go of your preference for tofu, whole grains, skim anything and organic whatever, because the captain of the *Good Times*, Dave Pinquoch, does the shopping, and he likes hams, Stove Top, and mayonnaise. And once you rumble away from the dock in Whittier, heading east past Decision Point and Point Pigot and north to Esther Passage, you won't be able to restock the booze. Which is crucial. Especially when you'll be living on the *Good Times* for eight days. And your captain, who is a former prison warden, says, "I forgot my log book, but I brought ketchup!" And, most particularly, when you find out that the ice that cracked off a tidewater glacier two days ago and just floated past the stern, impossibly-gem-blue and super-dense and marinating in 27-degree Fahrenheit water, is the best thing that ever happened to whiskey.

If you come to Alaska to ski, you have to be prepared to not ski. For three days, the rain pitters on the glass, the windshield wipers tick like metronomes, and we roll out of our closet-size cabins with more resignation than anticipation. Someone calculates that it would take 53 laps around the boat to make a mile. The peaks disappear into a thick bedspread of fog. Kasha curls up in one corner, reading *The Autobiography of a Yogi*. "I've been carrying this thing around for years," she says. Hilaree naps—she's six months pregnant. "My body has changed so much," she

"If we go over to Unakwik, it'll clear right here," says Jessica, wearing a down-day uniform of trucker hat and yoga pants. She's taking time off from her stint as a heli guide at Alaska Rendezvous Guides near Valdez to help lead the trip with Kit.

"But look, it's clear over there," Kit points somewhere east. Her hair hangs most of the way down her back, her eyes intensely blue. Last year, she skied from the top of Everest.

From the bridge, we hear the weather report: *Today: East wind 30 knots. Seas seven feet. Rain.*

"Another low pressure," says Captain Dave. He has a young face for a 50-something, a small white mustache.

"We've sunken to new lows," says Jessica.

"Pigs burn more calories trying to stay cool than trying to stay warm," says Captain Dave.

"Maybe we can motor over and have a look at the other side of Unakwik Peak," says Kit.

Jessica sighs. "But I really like this zone. There are some big daddies here."

"But it's raining here."

"What if it clears here and we're all the way over there?"

"In Asia," says Captain Dave, "they raise pigs on chicken shit."

When you finally do get to ski, there's a whole lot of guesswork. Take the day that we make use of a break in the rain to skin up from Serpentine Cove, underneath an endless cloud layer and below peaks we know are named Muir and Gilbert but that we still haven't managed to see. We ascend across some open snowfields, zigzag up a ridge, and bootpack and axe up a 55-degree stretch until we hit something that feels like a high point. Except we aren't sure: We're suddenly in a whiteout.

"What are we going to call this?" says Jessica.

"Milquetoast Peak?"

"Shit Toast Peak?"

"It's kind of crowded here for a Monday."

On the way down, retracing our tracks, we jump-turn down the steep section—only this time it's like dropping into oblivion. "Um, I can turn, but I'm not sure where I'm going to land!" shouts Kit. "Am I good?"

We follow each other until the fog thins and then clears; we ski down a spine and dodge alders and duck under hemlocks. When we hit the shore, popcorn kelp snaps under our boots.

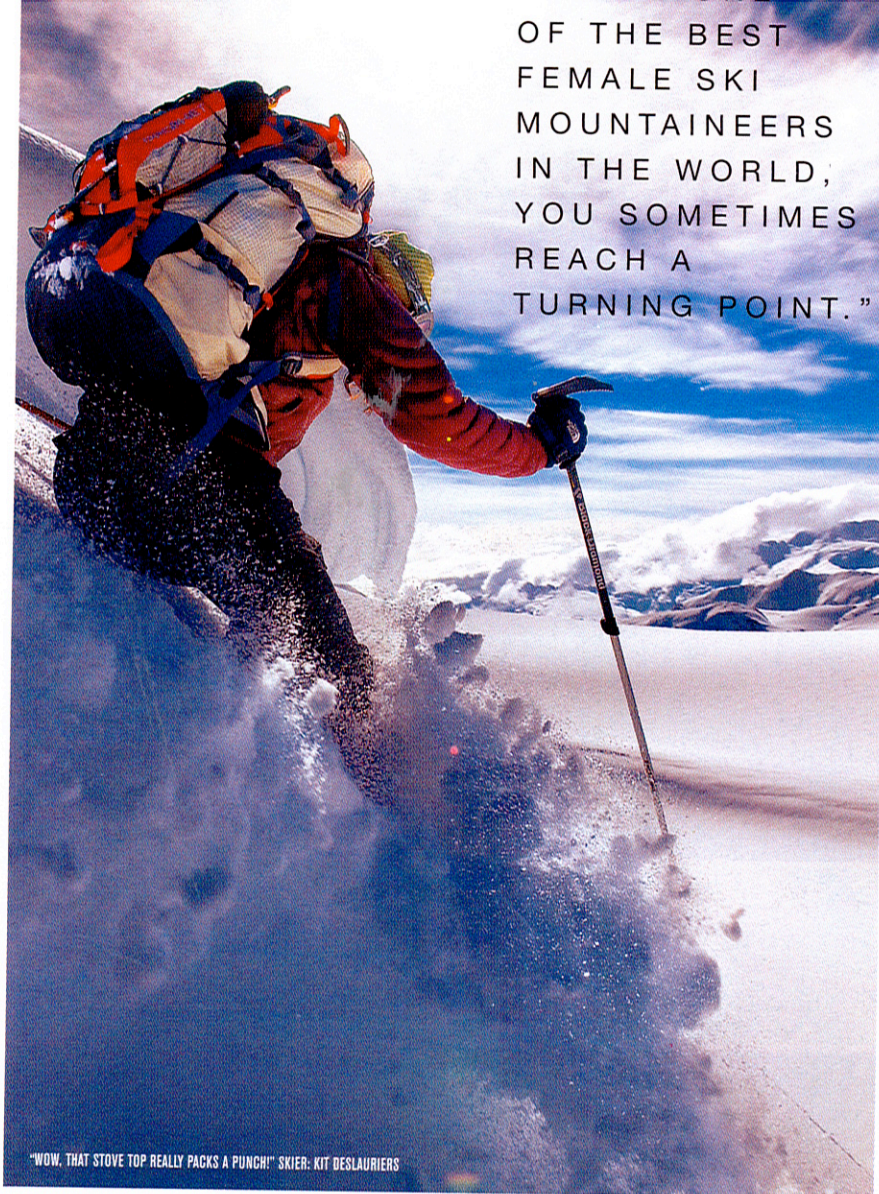


KIT DESLAURIERS RIPS THE CHOOG.



"HOW MANY MORE LAPS TILL A MILE?"

OF THE BEST
FEMALE SKI
MOUNTAINEERS
IN THE WORLD,
YOU SOMETIMES
REACH A
TURNING POINT.”



“WOW. THAT STOVE TOP REALLY PACKS A PUNCH!” SKIER: KIT DESLAURIERS

of convoluted shoreline, and 150 glaciers, some of which are 40 miles long and move well over a hundred feet a year. The precipitation is extreme (300 inches of rain a year in spots), the humidity high, and the temperatures maritime. The ocean spirals through the Sound, counter-clockwise, eddying in huge blooms of plankton, which bring in fish, otters (at one point, 11,000 of them), seabirds (at one point, millions of them), and orcas (at one point, 251 of them). Chugging up and down fjords, dropping anchor in lee hideaways, it doesn't seem like much has changed.

But of course it has. At one point, the Suppiaz and Tlingit lived next to Russians and Spanish and the population around the Sound was 40,000. At another, gold mines numbered in the thousands, claimed by characters like Pistolgrip Jim and The Man with the Big Nugget, and blue-fox farms numbered in the dozens. John Burroughs, on an expedition with 25 scientists and naturalists in 1899 that discovered the Harriman Fjord, wrote, “We were afloat in an enchanted circle; we sailed over magic seas and under magic skies.” In 1964, the Pacific plate snagged on the North American plate between College Fjord and Unakwik Inlet, causing a 9.2-magnitude earthquake that raised some islands up 40 feet and shifted others sideways 60 feet. Valdez, in the north-central part of the Sound, was destroyed by a tidal wave, and more than a hundred people died. At that point, the humans rebuilt and the animals shrugged.

But since 1989, no one can think of Prince William Sound without thinking about what happened at 12:04 a.m. on March 24, when the 987-foot-long Exxon *Valdez*—just one of 80 ships a month that sucked up crude from the end of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and negotiated the shipping channels that led them out to sea—plowed into Bligh Reef and bled 11 million gallons of oil. Second Mate Lloyd LeCain reportedly announced, “Vessel aground. We're fucked!” With the help of a strong wind, the spill spread southwest, eventually covering 1,600 square miles and leaving black bathtub rings around the Sound. In its wake were the slick, slimed carcasses of some 250,000 birds, 2,600 otters, 22 orcas, and 250 bald eagles. Said Walter Meganak, an Aleut elder, “Never in the millennium of our tradition have we thought it possible for the water to die. But it is true.”

Even if you're one of the best female ski mountaineers in the world—for which every woman on our boat qualifies—you sometimes reach a turning point. A point when your comfort zone, once as wide as desire, shrinks just a fraction. When doubt becomes a vacillator, not a motivator. We're up in College Fjord, below 5,077-foot Mount Emerson. The clouds are furling like cigar smoke; Harvard Glacier, 20 miles north, glows aquamarine in the sunlight. There's a technical-looking east-facing spine, a mellower southern ridge. There are pros and cons.

“Are we going to play putt-putt golf, or are we going to pull out the driver?” asks photographer Kris Erickson.

Kit glances at him. “It's one o'clock, we're starting for a 5,000-foot objective, and my stomach says no. I got to be 37 for a reason.”

“Maybe we can try for something less pointy?” says Kasha.

We decide to go for the ridge: In Alaska, in April, it stays light until 10 p.m., and you never know when your blue skylight might get swallowed up again. On shore, we come across fresh bear tracks. Everyone speeds up and starts singing the theme to *Gilligan's Island*—because we're freaked about our friend Yogi, and because this might end up being yet another putt-putt tour. The snow is very isothermic: Sometimes, even with skis on, we sink down to our thighs. It takes us almost two hours to climb 800 feet. Higher up, the skinning gets easier, and we set a track up a southeast-facing bowl. The sun hits the snow, setting off wet slides that look like burps.

A thousand feet later, when we reach an un reassuringly small boulder, everyone pauses. Kit lies down on her side and digs her fist into the snowpack. “There's an inch-thick crust, and a ton of sugar, and another crust,” she says.

Hilaree chuckles. “Yikes.”

“Jess, what do you think?”

“I think it's solid enough.”

“I don't know if I'm in a different head space,” says Hilaree, her hand on her stomach, “but I don't feel comfortable with this.”



"Neither do I," says Kit.

Kasha wavers. She looks at the summit of Emerson. It's gleaming.

"I'd usually be all over it," says Hilaree. "Kash, you should go, if you want to."

"I don't know."

Jessica strips down to her last layer. "We should skin one at a time. You guys watch me." She climbs out into the open. When she's hundreds of yards away, Kasha follows. "Why not?" she beams. With Kasha, you somehow know everyone is going to be just fine.

Our trio picks an ugly line down, through ligament-stretching slush, yelling when we pass what looks like the bear's lair. Back on the boat, we watch Kris, Kasha, and Jessica on the ridge, skis on their backs, sun behind their spiky silhouettes. They get within striking distance of Emerson, but it's too late. We watch them descend.

Later, when we're all drinking whiskey and eating burgers and crinkly fries, Kit asks about the southeast bowl. She sounds just a touch wistful. If you've skied from the highest summit on every continent, turning back can never be simple.

Jessica pops a fry into her mouth. "I *never* would have taken clients on that slope."

If you come to Alaska and she cooperates, and the roof turns iris blue and the winds die down and you find yourself face-to-face with what John McPhee called "the sky of rock," a few down days turn out to be a very small price to pay. Suddenly, life and mornings become urgent. There are mountains to climb—and we can see them.

After a week of buildup, we're giddy. We lash skis onto kayaks, maneuver our heads through the rubber ostrich necks of our dry suits, stuff our packs and boots into dry bags, and paddle to the northwest shores of 3,595-foot Mount Doran. We tie our boats to a snag in case the tide rises, hang our kayaking gear on branches, and put our skis on snow. The first hour of climbing is the same as usual—soft snow or frozen crust—but we pass through a stand of firs that are spiral-wrapped in vibrant green moss, and we catch glimpses of water and relief and distance. And when we stop at a knoll, right above treeline, there's no other word that better describes us as *gaping*.

"So this is what Prince William Sound looks like," someone says.

"Holy crap."

We keep skinning. Mount Gilbert is a hulk behind us. Shit Toast Peak—across Harriman Fjord from where we are—is a hummock, a memory. The snow is new, and light, and easy.

And finally we're on a summit—a knoblet that drops off on all sides, rolling down toward the water. The world is bursting. There's Esther Passage to the east, where we anchored our first soggy night; Barry Glacier to the north, where we watched house-size ice chunks break off and plunge; Harriman Glacier to the south. The sound of Surprise Glacier calving is like massive knuckles cracking, and we're above it, looking down.

"I feel land-sick," says Jessica. "Too much damn time on the *Good Times*."

"Did you hear when Dave said that 'hooch' is an Alaska native term?"

"Are we moving?"

"Did you hear him singing to the song about the yippee-yi-yay cow patty?"

"God."

Our kayaks are out of sight, tucked into an indentation. And we're on top of one small mountain, Mount Doran, in the middle of a sea of peaks that extends to what feels like forever.

Jessica drops off a 10-foot cornice, arcs down the knob's west side, and pops into view far below. Kit goes next, compact in the air, smooth as second nature. The snow is consistent, carpet-like. We ski one face, regroup, gape, then ski another. Because we've been waiting for so long, or because we've come to another turning point, or because we're five women in the wilderness, we take our time. Our tracks brush the sides of Toboggan Glacier, to our left, where a few crevasses open like jaws. They swerve around boulders and criss-cross each other. They dip into gullies, weave through hemlocks, and only end when they hit the shattered black rock of the beach. We look up, and look around. There's no one on earth but us, and our skis, and the ephemeral script they leave behind on the flanks of Alaska. ■