



# Sledding

*By Gary Gilbert*

**R**oy Benton, my second cousin, and I have a tradition—now four years old—of climbing New Hampshire's Mt. Washington during the winter. Our tradition has a unique twist: we carry plastic sleds up the mountain to speed our trip down. The snow-packed, eight-mile auto road to the summit, with its 11 percent grade, offers the best sledding we have ever experienced.

Mt. Washington impresses a person with its weather rather than its altitude. At 6,300 feet, the summit is only slightly higher than Denver. A road and cog railway climb up the gentlest slopes, but these are open only during a brief summer season. Even then, they close on days when high winds and freezing rain prevail.

Harsh weather results from an elbow of the jet stream that bumps down from Canada and scrapes the mountain top. On any winter day, chance dictates a 40 percent probability that wind gusts on the summit will surpass the 80 mile-per-hour hurricane-force threshold. The winds convert winter cold into heat-sucking conditions that compare to Antarctica.

Severe weather and the accessibility of Mt. Washington—a fit mountaineer can climb from Pinkham Notch to the summit in four and one-half hours—mean that many people have climbed in the winter. Unfortunately, many have died. Over the past century the only North American mountain to claim more lives than Mt. Washington has been Mt. McKinley, the tallest in North America at 23,000 feet.

On the morning of our ascent a temperature of 5 degrees Fahrenheit, gusts of 50 miles per hour, and fresh snow indicated that the easiest route up the mountain might present an impasse. But we had both climbed on colder days and in stronger wind.



Inside the Pinkham Notch Lodge we reviewed the recent weather report from Mt. Washington's weather station, entered our planned ascent and descent routes into the climbing log, then headed out into the white, blowing mountain world.



## Lion Head Winter Trail

12:30 P.M.

After 75 minutes of steady hiking we reached the junction where the Lion Head Winter Trail leaves the main trail to climb above tree line. We strapped crampons onto our boots and climbed directly up a mountainside as steep as a ladder. We had to kick away new snow to find the steps of our ladder, steps that alternated among tree roots, ice patches, and rock. The rock was worst because our crampon points shuddered and slid rather than poked and gripped.

Powdery snow swished against our nylon pants above gaiters. Two hundred feet above, wind roared over a ridge and loose snow blew in a blotchy white screen against the gray sky. We stepped off the trail into the powder and removed our packs to get warmer clothes.

Minutes later, stocking-like balaclavas covered our heads and necks, leaving only our eyes exposed. Goggles covered our eyes; hats covered the balaclavas; fleece jackets, then Gortex anoraks covered our shirts. Slowly, I started up the trail feeling warm breath recoil from the balaclava over my mouth.

Two climbers descended past us, covered in bright nylon, lifting their goggles as they emerged from the strongest wind. Their expressions were flat and they shook their heads to indicate that wind had turned them back before they reached the top. Roy and I agreed to stop at Lion Head, a rock outcropping with boulders large enough to shield us partially from the wind, and reassess the conditions and our preparation. Then we hiked up the snow ramp into the wind.

I took three steps on ice, then six steps through drifted snow that reached my knees. Roy hiked seven yards ahead, but, whether the distance had been four or one hundred yards, we could not have talked because of the wind's noise. Although my thin balaclava broke the force of the wind, my face grew colder by the minute. Eight climbers appeared, one-by-one, as they rounded the boulders of Lion Head hiking down the trail. The leader stopped to exchange information. The wind was

too strong, he said; they had turned around at the Alpine Garden Trail. In the final one hundred yards to Lion Head I reconciled myself to turning back.

"My face is cold," I told Roy as we crouched between two boulders. My chilled cheeks made speech difficult and the words sounded funny.

"I don't think I should keep going."

"I have an extra, expedition-weight balaclava in my pack," he said. "Do you want to try it?"

I nodded. After a couple minutes I removed my balaclava and pulled the thicker one over my head. In moments, my face was warm.

"Do you feel alright? Do you want to keep going or would you rather go down?" Roy asked.

"I feel OK. Let's climb to the Alpine Garden Trail and see how conditions are."

On the right side of us was Huntington Ravine, a series of frozen waterfalls, rock cliffs, and steep ice slopes dropped into the clouds.

Nobody chooses to go down that side. To our left, Tuckerman Ravine, famed as the steepest downhill ski area in North America, hid in wind-blown snow.


On a warm spring day two thousand skiers climb steps kicked into a 45-degree slope. The bravest ski down the head wall, skirting rock drop-offs, protruding scrub trees, and a crevasse. A climbing descent of the face can be managed under good conditions. Today fifteen inches of power snow covered it and avalanche danger was extreme.

The sign at the trail junction pointed straight up the Lion Head Trail to the summit; to the right stood the Alpine Garden Trail.

"Let's go that way." I pointed between the two trails. The wind would hit us at an angle rather than thrust directly into our faces and the tangential wind might not have dropped such deep snow drifts.

"If it gets too tough to go up we can traverse until we get to the auto road."

A twenty-foot ribbon of road winds from base to summit. We were sure we could find it, even in a white-out. We wouldn't get lost.



## Near the Summit of Mt. Washington

2:30 P.M.

As we climbed into the blowing snow, I sighted a route along patches of exposed bush limbs. My watch



said 2:30. We neared the summit, having made excellent time. Thirty minutes remained until our "turn-around time."

"My legs are tiring," I shouted to Roy. "It must be from cross-country skiing yesterday."

"Do you want to turn around?"

"No. But I may have to climb slower."

The slope steepened; when we walked on glazed ice we held our ice axes deliberately, ready to drive in the points if we began to accelerate down the glistening surface. The force of the wind slowly rose and a white blanket of cloud and snow closed in.

Suddenly, everything became white-gray: no distinct sky, snow, or ice. I held my arm forward and saw a dark extension, the only nonwhite thing in view. When I turned around, Roy's gray form was a few steps behind me, isolated in a white expanse. I stepped forward without deliberating.

The white world was eerie. We would descend, I decided, as soon as we found the auto road. Climbing to the top did not appeal to me under these conditions.

The wind pushed harder. I leaned forward, but could not push hard enough. I reeled backward, turned, and dropped onto my hands, driving the head of my ax into the ice. The wind whipped me around the point like a boat at its mooring. I pulled my knees beneath me, then pushed the steel crampon spikes into the ice. With one hand on the ice and the other on my ax, I finally steadied myself against the gale. These were not the 50 mile-per-hour gusts that the weather station had reported when we left the bottom, but 80 to 90 mile-per-hour hurricane-force blasts.

I didn't know how to go forward or backward. A rhythmic thumping sounded, the drone of the diesel generator powering the weather station at the top. I realized we were a few hundred yards from the summit. Roy was down on his hands and feet, too, moving slowly, crab-like across the ice.

The wind gusted. He flipped over, landing against a rock. The wind whipped off my hood and, with my mittens on, I could not put it back on. Fear traveled from my arms into my chest. No longer were we in control. If we crouched and waited for the gusting wind to subside, we would become dangerously cold within minutes. In an hour, we would become sluggish, our thinking impaired. My neck hurt when I tried to look up; the balaclava, stiff with frozen breath, had frozen to my neck. We had to get out of the wind, quickly. The weather station stood only yards away, heated and inhabited, but it was directly upwind and we could not move in that direction.

I crouched on the ice next to Roy, yelling, my face an inch from his ear. He couldn't hear. We crouched lower as the wind threatened to roll us over the rock that protected us. Roy put his face next to my ear. I heard his voice, but could not understand him. He pointed with his ax down the mountain to our left. I nodded. He lunged down the slope, leaning far to his left into the wind. The white closed in and I was alone, shuddering against the bellowing wind.

"Mountaineers die this way," I thought.

Then I thought about Jonathan, my six year old. That morning, he had held my hand and asked if he could come with me.

"And can I carry an ice ax . . . and get crampons?" He had smiled up at me eagerly.

Now I shook my head vigorously, rejecting the thought of little Jonathan in this icy blast and trying to focus on climbing. Guessing at the direction, I thrust myself into the wind and staggered down the slope.

I glimpsed Roy, crouching into the wind, waiting for me. We plunged downhill almost running, then crouching as the gusts arose. The clouds thinned briefly and I saw that we faced the afternoon sun. The direction did not seem right.

Half a mile below the summit our boots sank into drifted snow deeper than our knees. Suddenly, between passing clouds, a landscape emerged. The mountain face angled down into the forest, continued into a gully, then became a valley, which disappeared around a ridge to the north.

To our left stood another ridge and another mountain. On our right, perhaps a mile away, the mountain face ended in yet another ridge, and we could only guess what lay beyond it. Then, the clouds wrapped around the mountain again and the landscape disappeared into swirling gray. Nowhere had we seen the auto road or any landmark that instilled confidence. We were lost.

We considered two different options for the couple of daylight hours that remained. We could hike uphill to the north through drifted snow, certain that we would eventually get back to the Lion Head Trail. If we ran out of daylight and stayed above tree line after dark our clothing would not be warm enough to ensure survival throughout the night.

The second option was to descend directly into the forest below, where we could find shelter from the wind. There we could bivouac and find our way out in the morning, possibly over a trail in the gully that might lead us to Highway 16. To us, descent into the forest offered more certainty of survival.



We took long strides in the deep snow toward the trees. Our backpacks held one extra layer of fleece clothing, one Power Bar, two peanut butter and banana sandwiches, two apples, and one thermos of hot chocolate. We lacked tents and sleeping bags. Roy had a flashlight, but he did not know how long the batteries would last.

The soft snow reached our knees, then our thighs. Our boots often broke through the crust and we sank until the snow reached our waists or chests. At dusk, we had entered the woods. I was ravenously hungry and my legs were tired, but I was comfortably warm.

"We could dig a snow cave here and bivouac until morning," I offered. "At first light we could climb back up and traverse until we find the Lion Head Trail. Alternately, we can keep going and hope to find a trail."

"I'd kind of like to keep going and see if we can find a trail," Roy countered. "But I can stay here if you want."

We decided to push on, but first I poured cocoa into the thermos cup and we watched as white steam rose in the fading light. In spite of our hunger, we decided to save the sandwiches and half the cocoa; we might still face twelve long hours of cold tonight, more the next day, maybe even more later on. Still, we did not feel frightened. We were warm, dry, and in excellent physical condition. Neither of us had bivouacked in conditions this severe, but we knew that it could be done and had read about how to do it.

Two years before, Sandi, my wife, had insisted that I carry a cellular phone during a winter climb of Mt. Washington. I had laughed but carried it anyway. Now I wished for that phone, though not to summon help. Not only were we ignorant of our location, fresh snow and the strong wind would have made it impossible for rescuers to reach us. What I really wanted was to call her at the Pinkham Notch Lodge and tell her that we were in good spirits, although she probably wouldn't see us until tomorrow morning.

## Gully on Mt. Washington

6:30 P.M.

The sky cleared to pale blue before dusk, then stars blinked into view. Starlight cast the evergreens as black masses and the snow as endless, undulating gray. Where the trees were thick, we broke through snow chest deep. Sometimes we pushed through thick branches, at other times we lowered ourselves over the

edges of boulders. I stumbled as my crampon caught a branch, then dove four feet—headfirst into the snow. My head far below the surface, I rolled and scrambled to find a foundation. Then I raised my head above the powder. Except for my eyes, snow covered me entirely and I came up chuckling.

Within an hour I began to feel uneasy. I dreaded a night with no rest or sleep and felt tired. Reaching a frozen stream was a small triumph. It marked progress and indicated that we had reached the bottom of the gully. Far more important, the snow crust over the frozen stream supported our weight. In effect, the stream became a path. We could walk at a medium pace. Rapid progress seemed certain and I began to think that we might rejoin anxious families by midnight.

The sound of water stopped me. Roy and I cautioned each other about the danger of breaking through the ice. Our boots and socks, polypropylene underwear, polyester layers, and nylon shells resisted the cold only when dry. If our clothes were wet, our situation would become much, much worse.

For 50 yards we skirted the stream, keeping distance between the two of us and slowing our speed. We returned to the stream in spite of the gurgling water beneath the ice because progress through the chest-deep snow was so slow. We determined to stay at the edge so that if the ice broke we could fall onto rock or mud rather than into the water.

## Pinkham Notch Lodge

7 P.M.

An hour after the planned rendezvous time, Sandi and Cynthia, Roy's friend, were concerned but not surprised that we had not returned.

They sat in the cafeteria. Sandi picked up a crossword puzzle. A few tables away, a group of diners chatted as they finished their meal, then got up to leave. As they passed, Cynthia asked one if he had climbed that day.

"No, he responded. "And you?"

"We're waiting for some climbers to come down off the mountain," Cynthia replied.

A look of concern flashed across the diners' faces, and, as if choreographed, they turned toward large glass window. Gusting winds hurled flurries of fine snow in wild loops beneath the exterior light. The



lodge shuddered under the wind's force.

"You mean they're still out on the trail?"

"Yes. We expect them back any time."

The look of concern stayed. "Are you worried about them?" His low tone failed to mask incredulity.

"Yes, but they've been out this late before. We expect them by 8 o'clock."

Sandi and Cynthia looked at each other. Each knew what the other was thinking. Worry must be avoided. Another gust pounded the building, and the party turned its eyes, without thinking, to the parking lot as a sedan pulled in.

"They could drive in at any time," said Cynthia.

At 8 P.M., she found the head ranger and asked about filing a missing persons report. By 10 o'clock, he had alerted members of the Mt. Washington search and rescue organizations. A search party would set out at 6:30 the next morning. Meanwhile, the families could stay at Pinkham Notch Hostel.

## Gully Above Great Gulf Trail

Approximately 9 P.M.

A boulder the size of a car blocked our travel along the stream's left bank, and thick evergreens formed a wall on the slope above. Flat, even snow extended from the boulder into the middle of the stream. Roy and I guessed that the flat expanse covered a pool, a treacherous place to walk. We decided to cross upstream to reach better terrain. The 25-foot-wide stream had large bumps, which suggested rocks beneath. I probed with my ax. Halfway across—just as I lifted one boot—the ice cracked. Then it tilted and I dropped, thigh-deep, into flowing water.

"Oh no!" I yelled.

I concentrated, lifted my knee onto the ice, and pushed. The ice broke, dropping me back into the water. Water trickled into my socks and filled my boots. I swung my ax as far from the edge as I could and sank the tip deep into the ice. Then, using the ax as a handle, I pulled myself onto the fragile ice and rolled from my belly onto my back.

"Gary! I'm still in the water!"

I turned and saw Roy's dark form fifteen feet away. Only then did I realize that he had also fallen into the stream. I scrambled over the rocks, anchored my crampon tips in the ice, wedged my ax against a stone, and held out my hand. Roy pulled and slid onto the ice.

"My God!" I said. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

One minute earlier I had been confident about survival. Now, dread crept into me. Wouldn't our warmth seep away within minutes? What form would our trouble take? Would sleepiness—a symptom typical of hypothermia—engulf us? No shivering or shaking, just sleepiness and fatigue. Would we give in to the urge and lie down in the snow for a nap . . . our last one? Would our feet hurt, then become numb while microscopic crystals of ice formed, first in the skin, then in our veins?

I pictured my family preparing for church, not expecting ever to see me again. Then I saw myself shuffling through hospital halls with plastic prostheses in place of frostbitten feet. I imagined myself hobbling along in running shoes, searching for a balanced stride, testing the spring in my feet despite loss of my toes. But my thoughts passed quickly.

"We can't afford to do that again!" I warned.

"We've got to stay warm. I'm not sure how we're going to do it. My boots are full of water. Are yours?"

I could not see Roy's face, nor he, mine. Balaclavas covered them both.

Our first impulse led us up the steep bank, away from the stream. We climbed into the thick evergreens, scrambling slowly uphill against flexed branches into snow chest deep. My heart pounded.

"Roy, I think we should dig a snow cave. That's what the wilderness books say. Look where I'm scraping with my ice ax. There's a lot of room, the snow is at least three feet deep under the crust."

The evergreens' drooping branches grew too close together to allow one big cave, so Roy and I hacked away separately. My cave soon extended four feet. I had to climb in headfirst to pull the snow out. Soon it was seven feet long. Amazingly, the work kept us warm, though our pants were wet and our feet ached.

## Pinkham Notch Hostel

10:30 P.M.

The telephone interrupted Sandi and Cynthia as they prepared for bed. Rescuers called, first to confirm our route, secondly to ask questions. "How much mountaineering experience do they have? What other equipment do they have? What were they wearing? Did



they have sleeping bags? Are the men in good physical condition?"

## Gully Above Great Gulf Trail

Approximately 11:30 P.M.

Roy's flashlight illuminated clothing in our packs. Fleece and Gortex pants and a pile jacket remained in mine; Roy still had a fleece jacket and Gortex pants. Snow, which had drifted into my backpack, mixed with the pants, jacket, and thermos. The water bottles had frozen, so there was no drinking water. When Roy began to unlace his boots to drain water, the laces were frozen and resisted. He struggled for five minutes before his fingers went numb with cold. It took five to ten minutes to warm them inside his gloves before he could try again, but he quit after three tries.

The ice was simply too hard. In spite of the snow and moisture in my pants, I felt warm after putting on the extra layers of cloth. In fact, I was almost cozy. I slid my plastic sled into the cave and used it to keep me off the snow. I maneuvered both of my feet into my empty pack, then slipped into the cave.

I rested my head on the back of the sled and closed my eyes. Stillness. My legs felt heavy, my shoulders tired. I yawned. A few minutes later, coolness passed from my left toes into my calf. Then it went into my left knee. My eyes were still closed, but the spreading coolness quelled the urge to sleep. Soon, I felt cool in my arms.

"Roy, I'm getting cold too fast. I don't think snow caves will work." Immediately, I climbed out and began running in place while slapping my hands together.

Roy had not crawled into his cave. He stood a yard from me. Both of us were on flattened, packed patches of snow surrounded by spruce boughs and powder deeper than our chests. The snow caves were empty, gray holes in the flashlight beam. My boots crunched in place. More than an hour had passed since we had clambered out of the stream. Our toes moved, our minds worked, and our legs pumped in place. The water had drained from our polypropylene underwear and polyester pile, so our pants were damp rather than sopping. The dread that had seized both of us when we had climbed out of the stream had given way to weary determination.

"This is going to be a long night," I said.

"Yeah. I don't think I want to know what time it is." Roy marched in place thoughtfully for a couple minutes. "How much would you be willing to pay if a helicopter could fly in and pick us up right now? I'd give a thousand dollars without thinking very long."

"Man, I'd pay ten thousand. Even more. I would shoulder a pretty big mortgage on the house to be out of this."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'd go that high. But I think that's the difference between an Adventist teacher's salary and a doctor's salary. I want out of this pretty badly."

Roy reflected for a few minutes while we marched in place. "I remember you talking about miracles in the car this morning," he said. "This could be a good time for a miracle. . . . Maybe God could make the night shorter. He lengthened a day for Joshua." Roy chuckled. "He even ran time backward for Hezekiah. Remember when the shadow went backward on the sundial?"

"Yeah. That's how the story reads, doesn't it? I guess it's not asking so much for him to shorten tonight a few hours. He could just make up for those extra hours he gave Joshua. It would straighten out the bookkeeping deficit in his time log."

Both of us were silent. We didn't expect a miracle. Not a short night. Not a warm breeze. Not an angel bringing dry socks, a tent, and a stove. The world would turn at its usual rate.

Roy and I are academics. Our impulse is to dissect the meaning of the word "miracle," not to anticipate personal miracles. We hoped only that God would fling bread crumbs in our direction, or maybe just small pieces of luck. Maybe enough luck to stumble onto a trail that must pass along this gully. Or maybe enough fortitude to stave off lethargy and think clearly. And if these bits of luck come when we want them, is that a miracle? Are these the stuff of prayers? Neither of us had the conviction to develop the proposal for a shorter night into a formal, specific petition delivered after "Our Father in heaven. . . ."

Roy began to sing, "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. . . ." I joined in, nylon mitts and gloves slapped together. "If you're happy and you know it stomp your feet. . . ." Boots crunched in the snow. Next we sang "Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, faces all aglow. . . ." We sang other activity songs—fresh in our memories because of our children, but they might have been chosen solely on the basis of strong memories. The songs asserted confidence and activity while we were uneasy and inactive. They hinted that misery would end in joy. Like naughty children, we had



produced our own trouble by venturing into formidable weather. But, like a naughty child back in Sabbath School after "time out," I felt that if I just sang the songs vigorously, stayed in my seat, and didn't push the chair of the next boy, maybe everything would be alright.

We tired of singing and marched in place without talking. At 1:05 A.M., the last swallow of cocoa glowed briefly inside us. It was still warm. We decided to set out through the snow drifts in the general, downhill direction of the gully, hoping that the push through the snow would keep us warm.

I looked back at our little packed snow platforms and felt anxious as I sank into the first snow drift and pushed into the black space. In two or three hours, I had gained confidence in the place, some sense of safety in this tiny spruce alcove protected from the gusts of wind.

"Dear God," I murmured without reflection, "Help us to get out of this alive!"



## Pinkham Notch Hostel

11:30 P.M.

Standing beside the bunks in the darkened room, Sandi wondered if Roy and I had almost reached the auto road. She decided to check. Cynthia agreed to stay with the sleeping children. Sandi drove the van three miles to the entrance of the road and parked with the motor running. She switched the headlights to high, hoping that the beams might guide us to warmth and rest. Gusts of wind shook the parked van side to side, and Sandi shivered thinking of the cold outside. Finally, at 11:45, she backed out onto Highway 16 and drove back to the hostel.



## Gully Above Great Gulf Trail

Approximately 2 A.M.

Warmth engulfed us. Hiking through snow drifts and pushing branches aside generated body heat. Roy and I slowed our pace to avoid sweating. With each step, I pulled up and pushed down with all my toes, trying to enhance the flow of blood in my feet. Both of us could feel the water sloshing in our boots, so there was no

frostbite. Our progress, marked by landmarks on the gully banks, was snail-like. We clambered out of drifts, pushed under branches, and took tentative steps on the crusted snow . . . again, and again, and again. My thighs ached each time I stepped onto a rock or the crust.

We had to cross the stream. A fallen tree gave us a handgrip and we placed my sled over the longest expanse of ice. This time, there was no cracking sound, only the thump, thump, thump of my heart.

On the western bank we found a sign. "Reforestation Area. Do Not Camp or Build Fires," it warned in the flashlight's beam. The sign implied that a trail was hidden nearby, under the snow. When hunger gnawed in my belly—for the fourth time—Roy and I shared the Power Bar. Afterward I looked at my watch. It was 4:56 A.M.

"That's surprising how fast the time has passed. I thought it was only 3 A.M. Dawn will come in half an hour," I said.

A slight purple hue spread across the streak of sky that covered our gully. The grays of the snow and the black of spruce boughs became more distinct. Suddenly, I stopped, disbelieving the track that swooped down the western bank and followed the stream. It was a snowshoe trail, packed by hikers since the recent snowfall.

"A trail, Roy! We can really hike now."

My watch said 5:26. We had traveled approximately two miles down the gully between 5 P.M. and 5 A.M. We began to hike briskly. For a time, I quit worrying about pacing ourselves. If we just hiked far enough and fast enough we should be able to get out today. Sandi would be so relieved to see us. . . . Jonathan and Eugene would hug me. . . . I pictured food spread out before me: fried potatoes, waffles with strawberries, poached eggs, everything in the breakfast buffet at the



## Pinkham Notch Hostel

6 A.M.

Pinkham Notch Lodge.

Sandi awoke startled, surprised that she had slept. Eugene rubbed his eyes and asked, "Did Daddy come back yet?"

"No, Sweetie, not yet."

Sandi, Cynthia, and the children pulled on jackets and hurried to the lodge. In the basement, the search and rescue party stuffed radios, parkas, thermoses, and



warming packets into their backpacks. Sandi introduced herself, then listened while the eight men discussed the weather, snow, physical condition of Roy and me, and probable mishaps that had delayed us.

Shortly before the rescuers hiked up the trail, Sandi overheard the head ranger talking with one of the rescuers, "... then we can use the Snow Cat to bring the bodies out. ..." The words stunned her. She ran into the restroom sobbing, washed her face with cold water, then filled a handful of tissue with fresh tears.

"Oh God," she whispered, "help them to come out alive."

Eyes red, she went out to the dining room to see if the children would work with her on a crossword puzzle.

At 7:15 A.M., the rescuers clung to the Snow Cat as it chugged up the trail. Riding would save them an hour of hiking, and the extra energy could be used for searching.

The wind flexed the trees in the cloudless morn-

## Great Gulf Trail

8 A.M.

ing. Only rarely did sunbeams brush our parkas deep in the gully. The first gully joined a second, then a third; the stream grew wider and noisier. By 8:30, we had hiked three hours on the snowshoe trail. We could not see any familiar landmarks. Would we eat anything by noon? My head felt light and I was hungry. I flopped onto my sled beside the trail and felt the gloom rise inside.

Oh, for a thermos of coffee or cocoa—even water. The water in my boots had quit sloshing. I couldn't move my toes up and down; the wet socks had frozen. One-by-one, I wiggled my toes. Each hurt, indicating that they weren't completely frozen. I pushed myself up and began to hike. With sudden inspiration, I tried to raise our spirits with humor.

"Roy, we had better get out of here today," I said. "Otherwise, you're going to have to pay another day's rental on that ice ax and those crampons."

Roy laughed.

The stream grew to a river with sparkling white islands. Snow floats spun, tipped, and banged against them. Above us stood spruce branches, deep green under sparkling white layers. Shafts of sunlight highlighted the boughs and penetrated the green river.

"Under other circumstances this would really be

beautiful," Roy said.

I nodded.

"But beauty has a harsh edge," I thought, half expecting to see a frozen deer.

"Sleigh bells ring, are you listening. ..." Roy broke out singing "Winter Wonderland" while I trudged ahead silently.

Again, I flopped down on my sled. Roy broke his last frozen peanut butter and banana sandwich in two and handed me half.

I declined: "It's your sandwich. I ate mine yesterday."

"Come on," he said. "Think of it as a sacrament."

Which sacrament? I didn't ask, but accepted.

We crossed two bridges and passed through three trail junctions. The junction signs told us the name of the trail and that we were hiking toward Highway 16, but did not tell us the distance. Still, we pieced together our approximate location. During the whiteout, we had crossed the auto road and now we were hiking on its far side down the Great Gulf Trail. At 10:30, we reached a parking lot.

"Thank God," I murmured.

We flagged down a passing car and rode four miles to the Pinkham Notch Lodge.

## Pinkham Notch Lodge

11 A.M.

As Roy and I walked from the car to the lodge, Sandi and Cynthia ran to meet us. Tears glistened on Sandi's cheeks as she threw her arm around my neck and kissed my cheek.

The head ranger held the door open and directed us into the cafeteria.

"Sit down," he said watching intently. "Are you all right?"

Roy and I nodded.

## Melrose, Massachusetts

Sabbath, March 13, 1999

The events of the night on the mountain were jumbled in my mind. I could not stop thinking about



them. Why did we get lost? What had we done wrong after getting lost? What had we done right? Had we been lucky or unlucky? What was the meaning of our survival?

To my surprise, I felt nostalgia for the long hike down Mt. Washington. What, exactly, did I miss? Not the cold. Not the pain in my feet. Not the gnawing in my stomach. Not the dread of disaster after we fell into the stream.

I missed the intensity, clarity of purpose, and comradeship with my cousin. My memory of those 24 hours on Mt. Washington were bold and distinct. The objective—survival—was precise and consuming, the effort maximal, and the joy in the eyes of Sandi, Eugene, and Jonathan, when we arrived intact, was grand.

On Sabbath afternoon, Roy and I talked by phone, trying to understand what had happened. We reviewed our plans, the weather, our disorientation, our decisions. We talked briefly about my frostbitten, blistered toes and the worse things that could have happened.

We also talked about why we survived. Was our survival the product of chance, choices, and conditions? Or had a miracle occurred? The night on Mt. Washington seemed short—shorter than other nights when I have stayed awake to drive a car or care for a patient. Maybe God had shortened the night of March 7, 1999. But a shortened night implies acceleration of the earth's rotation, and my well-honed skepticism prevented me from taking that possibility seriously.

Perhaps the miracle was one of insight. The descent from Mt. Washington reminded me of the centrality of Sandi and my sons. It showed me how my life is shaped, in part, by power beyond my control. Both Roy and I discovered that we could find strength and comfort in our Adventist religious tradition. Now I realize that, in addition to my well-developed reflex for skepticism, I carry a reflex for personal prayer. Perhaps survival itself qualifies for inclusion in the category of personal miracles.

The Boston Temple  
Sabbath, March 20, 11:15 A.M.

Twenty-three children seated themselves on the carpet in front of the pews. Eugene wore my balaclava,

goggles, hat, and Gortex anorak to illustrate a mountaineer's preparation for severe cold. Jonathan crouched on toes and hands to show how Roy and I had crouched in the 90 mile-per-hour wind gusts; I flipped him over on his back to illustrate how the wind had flipped us. I told the children of falling into the stream, digging the snow caves, and singing the children's songs to ward off the cold and the long dark night. We wanted the night to pass quickly so we could be out of the cold. We remembered that long, long ago Joshua told his children that God had made a very important day longer than the other days. The day was longer so that Joshua and the Israelites could win a battle. We had hoped that God would do just the opposite for us, make the cold night shorter.

And he had.

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