

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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Pushing It

PROLOGUE:

After the excitement of having spent an unbelievably cold winter night camped in the Great Gulf Wilderness, my friends, Cincinatus, Pete, Greg and I had set our sights on a day climb up the Sphinx Trail to the summit of Mt. Clay. Once at the top, we would have an unsurpassed view of the Great Gulf and the surrounding mountains of the Presidential Range. Winter was a great time to be up there. There were none of the crowds, bugs, or mud that were the factors in the other seasons. However, the big factor in winter was the cold, and it was cold: the snow was cold, the air was cold, and at the start of the climb my boots had been cold. During the climb, the cold got to my feet. I thought that the physical exertion would get my blood pumping and they'd warm up. However, with the better part of an hour's climbing behind us, I realized that the cold wasn't going to go away. I told the guys that I was having some trouble and thought it would be best if I turned around. They volunteered to come back too, but I insisted that they continue on up the mountain. I would be all right, and I'd have a fire going and hot coffee waiting for them...

The almost knee-deep snow that covered the trail made a hissing sound against my Gore-Tex gaiters as I walked along, trying to lift the right foot, hisssss, step, lift the left foot, hisssss, step, lift the right foot, hisssss, step... the fine powder had gently abraded the wax sealant on my boots, putting a shine on them that made them look pretty good for a pair of ten year old hiking boots. They had been on my feet for every trip into the Gulf, up Mts. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, across the Carter Mountains, and beyond. When they were new, they had been a decent pair of three season boots that in a pinch could get me through the fourth season, the harshest season, winter. But now they were rather worn and battered. Their sentimental attachment kept them as my traveling companions for this winter trip, although common sense would have had me retire them before now.

The attention I was giving them was totally apart from the fact that the feet in the boots were numb, and had been for the almost half an hour since I had turned around. It was my own fault. You don't let your boots get cold before you put them on. And you don't push it by wearing a pair of beaten old boots whose best years were behind them. They just aren't meant for that potentially dangerous fourth season. As I continued my way down the trail back toward camp, I was thinking that winter was an especially bad time for poor judgment, and now I was paying the price for it.

The hike up into The Great Gulf had been fine, under an overcast sky with the temperature in the low twenties. We had packed up our gear in the parking lot off of Route 16, crossed the suspension bridge over the Peabody River, and entered the base of the Gulf from the east side. We put in a few miles of uphill grade through several inches of fresh snow, then took a break at "The Bluff" to consult the map and get an idea of how far we were from the designated campsite.

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We used to stay in the three-sided log shelters that were once in the Great Gulf, but they had been taken out several years before to preserve its status as a federal "Wilderness Area". We continued for another half hour, and found that we had either gone too far, or not far enough; the campsite with its tent platforms was nowhere to be found. The gray light of day had deepened into gathering dusk, convincing us that it would be best if we pitched camp right where we were. We chose a spot off the trail, sheltered on three sides by a growth of trees, with the open side commanding a beautiful view of the southern wall of the Gulf with Mt. Washington rising above it. We proceeded to kick and push away the surprisingly deep snow from a six foot by ten foot rectangle. Almost two feet of snow had accumulated at this higher altitude, and we had excavated a nice little sunken room, over which we strung our nylon trail tarps from overhanging branches. We then covered three sides of the shelter with snow. The fourth side we had facing the open view of the Gulf, and left it free to crawl under and serve as a barrier we could drop against the outside cold. Ground cloths were laid down inside, and we lined our packs along the back wall. We put down our foam pads and unrolled our sleeping bags on top of them. Greg lit his stove and left it on a low burn to get some warmth into the shelter. If primitive ancient Eskimos could warm an igloo with a seal oil lamp, a modern gas-fueled stove could do the job for us.

While we had been setting up the tarp and gathering a good supply of firewood, the overcast sky had been clearing, and now stars were sparkling in the winter sky and a rising, three-quarter moon rode the ridge line before us. With no cloud cover to keep in what little warmth there had been, the temperature began to tumble. We got a fire going and lit our other stoves to prepare dinner. On my stove, a venerable, old Optimus 8R, a pot of water was heating for tea and hot chocolate. Over the other two, a larger pot held boiling water, into which went lentils, rice, beans, and dehydrated vegetables. A frozen package of hamburger was cut into chunks, and along with some bouillon cubes, it went into the pot. Real meat was a luxury when it could be a part of the menu, something not possible during warm-weather adventures. Greg went into the shelter and lit Pete's and Cinci's candle lanterns, giving the tarp a warm, yellow interior glow. He came back to the fireside and joined us as we stood around the stoves, the beams from our head lamps shining down into the steaming pot. Before too long, we had dinner ladled out, and were in the shelter, with our backs up against our packs. There was just enough room for us to stretch out and enjoy the meal in comfort. I opened a package of pilot bread and passed it around. In any other setting, the hard, sturdy crackers wouldn't be the first things you'd want to set your teeth into, but they had an uncanny resistance to age or freezing, and were the perfect accompaniment to our steaming bowls of trail-side stew. After second helpings and another round of hot drinks, we went back outside to sit by the fire. I tossed on some more wood to get it blazing. Cinci, reaching into a warm, inner pocket, removed a flask that contained some fine Tennessee sipping whiskey. We lit our pipes, took turns with the flask, and the conversation turned to past trips we had taken, along with some talk about an Alaskan adventure that had been on our "Things to Do List" for a while now. The sky above us was deep and full of stars, and in our imaginations, we were camped on the banks of the Yukon River, the night echoing the call of a lone wolf and the aurora shimmering in the sky above us. The Jack Lon-

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don mood was broken when, due to the three cups of tea I had with dinner, I had to get up to answer a different kind of "call of the wild".

The fireside had been warm enough, but as I moved off a respectable way into the darkness away from the fire, I noticed that the cold intensified quicker than I thought it would. I could feel the cold affecting my hands the moment I took off my gloves to unzip. In the thirty or so seconds that they were exposed, the cold had laid hold of them, making the "zip up" a difficult operation. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets and moved back towards the circle of light and warmth, I unsnapped the pocket thermometer hanging from the zipper on my parka and left it hanging on a branch.

As the night wore on, the conversation slowed and the fire burned low. Pete poked at the glowing coals with a stick, and our eyes followed the shower of sparks as they rose in the night air. I got up and I flashed the beam of my head lamp at the thermometer. It read minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit; fifty-two degrees below freezing.

"Look at this," I said and held out the thermometer.

Greg said it didn't matter to him.

"Cold is cold, and knowing how cold wasn't going to let me sleep any better."

With a yawn, he tapped out his pipe and crawled into the tarp.

Pete cupped his pipe, using it as a hand warmer and looked over at Cinci, who just grinned out from under his balaclava.

"How low do you think it'll go? Pete asked.

I shrugged. It was only eight-thirty, and the night was young. The cold of space was radiating right down through that cloudless sky and there we were, under its full weight. I broke a dead branch off of a tree and pushed it into the snow just outside the entrance to the tarp, and hung the thermometer on it. We attended to some pre-bed chores, which included boiling the water from our water bottles, and pouring it back into the bottles. We would then put the hot water bottles into our sleeping bags to help warm them up. It would also prevent our water from freezing solid over night. Finishing this task, we crawled in and hunkered down for the night.

At some point, Greg's stove had run out of fuel, and now our breath was visible in the candle light. A light frost had formed on the inside of the shelter due to the steam from dinner condensing and then freezing on the cold surface of the tarp.

I took off my parka, and then removed my boots, intending to wrap them in it to use as a pillow and keep them from getting as cold as the air temperature. Cold boots in the morning were no fun. I put them on the ground behind me and changed into fresh long johns, wool socks and a hooded sweatshirt. I was comfortable enough once I got into my winter mummy-style sleeping bag. We left the candles burning, and the flickering candlelight was the only warmth on the scene. I knew the cold was creeping up from the ground. A foam pad was the only barrier between the frozen ground and my sleeping bag, and the cold was already beginning to

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force its way through. During the night, that creeping cold worked its way into my sleeping bag, and every half hour or so I had to roll over, getting the slightly chilled side of my body into the warm air trapped in the loft of the bag's insulation. During one of those rotations, I looked at my watch. It was three AM and I decided I would check on the temperature. Staying in my bag, I squirmed to the entrance of the shelter and made a quick grab outside for the thermometer. I hastily drew it inside and looked at it. Pete had been awakened by my moving around and slid over next to me. We both saw that the red line on the thermometer had fallen and landed with a thud at minus -30 degrees. I woke Cinci up, knowing that he'd want to know. His face quickly appeared in the hole at the top of his mummy bag "Oh man, you sure? This is great!", and then just as quickly he disappeared back into his bag.

Raising the tarp, I looked out across the Gulf and took a deep breath. Not a good idea. Minus -30 degree air met 98.6 degree lungs and I immediately had a coughing fit.

Impenetrable shadow covered the floor of the valley, but the peaks of the snow-covered mountains that ringed the Gulf were covered in silver moonlight and the frozen slopes on the far side were sparkling like crystal. I told Pete to come over and take a look. He rolled over to the opening and joined me. We both drank in the view, and to my surprise, Pete unexpectedly began to recite some lines from the only poem that I think he knew. Lines from a Robert Service poem:

"...I have clinched and closed with the naked North, I have learned to defy and defend; Shoulder to shoulder we have battled it out-- yet the Wild must win in the end."

The view was spectacular but it couldn't hold back the cold, so we dropped the flap and burrowed back deep into the relative warmth of our sleeping bags.

With the coming of the morning light, we found the temperature was still buried at its low point. The bowl of the Gulf trapped the cold night air and it stubbornly held on in the low spots. Not until late morning, when the sun crept over the surrounding valley walls would the temperature show any sign of improvement.

I waited until well past nine o'clock before I made the first tentative moves toward getting out of my (more or less) warm bag. I rolled over and peeked out. I saw Greg, with just one arm out of his sleeping bag, as he worked to light his stove. It was so cold that he had slept with it in order to keep the fuel warm enough to pressurize and light easily. Once he got it going, he put the water pot on and filled it from his water bottle. I mused on that for a second; it was so cold he slept with his stove. I rolled back into my sleeping bag and began the awkward process of getting dressed. With that accomplished, I shook out my parka, fully expecting my boots to fall out. They didn't. That's when I noticed them sitting side by side next to my pack. I had forgotten about them and they had spent the night in the cold (and I mean *cold*) night air. I put on my parka, slipped on my down booties, and reached into my sleeping bag to get my water bottle.

"I'm coming out in two minutes with hot water," Greg said. "Have your mugs ready."

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Pete and Cinci were already outside, starting the fire and getting the other stoves lit. I threw back the flap and joined them, emptying my water bottle into the pot for breakfast. Pete put it on the stove. I told them Greg would soon have his water ready too, and almost on cue, he emerged from the tarp with his boiling water. We all enjoyed the first mug up of the day, and a half-hour later we were full of hot oatmeal, dried fruit, and chocolate bars. We lifted our eyes toward the summit of Mt. Clay, its snow-covered peak and shoulders framed by blue sky, visible to us through the overhead pine boughs. It was at this point that I remembered my boots, sitting on the cold ground in the tarp. Well, an extra pair of woolen socks should compensate for the chill they would be holding. Once I got moving, things would be OK.

At around eleven o'clock, the temperature had risen to just about ten below zero and seemed to be heading upwards, so we set off, each of us carrying only what we needed for the excursion in our light day packs: crampons, foam pad to sit on when we took a break, one stove and fuel bottle (Greg has lost the toss of the coin and had those in his pack), bags of trail mix, extra socks, first aid kit, and water bottles tied to the inside drawstrings of our parkas. The trail was snow covered, but it wasn't too difficult a climb. We made pretty good time and had traveled about an hour before the cold had seriously gotten into my feet, causing me to question my judgment and head back down to the camp.

After I had left the boys and headed back down the trail, I had stopped and loosened the laces on my boots. The stinging sensation that had signaled the return of some circulation to my feet had quickly disappeared, and now I wasn't sure whether they had warmed or had gone numb. A futile effort to wiggle my toes and I realized that they had indeed gone numb. I had experienced cold feet before, but enough jumping around and jogging in place would pump the warm blood back out into the extremities and all would be well. This time was different. The second pair of wool socks on my feet did no good when they were squeezed into boots that left my circulation constricted, boots that had carelessly been allowed to chill down to air temperature below zero. No amount of jumping or jogging was going to help as long as my feet were still laced into the too-tight boots. Taking the boots off wasn't an option, at least until I got back to camp. I knew that a warm fire would be the answer to my problem, but the pressing issue was time. There seemed to be no connection between my feet and the snow-covered trail. I could hear the "hissing" sound of snow on my gaiters, and the dry squeak the snow made as I walked on it, but I couldn't feel the steps I knew I was taking.

This sort of thing hardly ever happened to us. Although we often tempted fate on these winter climbs, we always managed to walk away unscathed. Accidents happened, but never with any serious consequences. One time, our friend Dave fell heavily, chest-first onto an upturned pair of crampons and the only damage was to his vest, which showed eight puncture holes on either side of the zipper, each hole protruding a tuft of goose down. A leaky fuel bottle had once been the cause of a brief fire in the sheet metal Quonset hut emergency shelter that used to be up at Edmond's Col. No damage done there and the shelter had actually been warmed up nicely by the incident. On this very trip, we had been unable to locate the designated campsite with its tent platforms and had been

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forced to make camp in the snow, sheltered beneath trail tarps with only a ground cloth and a half-inch of closed-cell foam pad between our sleeping bags and the frozen ground. We were hard-core and loved in this kind of winter camping. We looked forward to snow and temperatures with a minus sign in front of them. But here I was, regretting the -30 reading of the night before and wishing that the column of red liquid in the thermometer on the zipper of my parka would show some movement upward. A thought ran through my mind: the minus 30 of the previous night was *sixty-two* degrees below freezing, and it was almost 129 degrees below the temperature of the blood in my body.

I wasn't afraid of dying because of the situation that my bad decision in boots had put me. It was nowhere near being a life-threatening situation; however, the danger of frostbite and losing toes was real, and the thought of more serious injury had started to occasionally rise out of the darker corners of my mind. These thoughts I pushed back down, and I kept focused on taking one step after another, making sure of good footing as I followed the trail back down to camp. I wasn't going to panic. A clear head was needed.

The trail wound its way out of the spruce trees and traveled across an open, wind-scoured stony slope, exposed to the full sun that was shining. There was an outcrop of rock there, and thirty feet or so below was the frozen and snow-covered surface of the west branch of the Peabody River, its water audibly gurgling along beneath the ice. The rock absorbed some of the meager warmth of the February sun, and I could feel a difference in temperature. I looked down at the thermometer and saw that the red line had risen to ten degrees in this pocket of relative warmth. The sun felt good and I decided that this was a good place to take a break and try to work some feeling back into my feet. I took off my pack and removed the foam pad. Folding it double, I sat down on it with the rock outcrop to my back. I brushed away the buildup of frost from my moustache and beard and took a sip from my water bottle. Taking off my boots I placed them inside my parka, relying on the body heat I was generating to warm them. I started to vigorously rub my feet but it felt as if I was rubbing pieces of wood. I stared out into the expanse of the Gulf that lay before me, marveling at how the view hadn't changed in almost twenty years. The mountains remain the same. The consistency of Nature was a comfort, something you could always rely on. But Nature could be an unforgiving as well as beautiful mistress. My current predicament was a reminder of that. After a few minutes there was a tingling feeling as some sensation began to return to my feet. There was nothing close to actual warmth, but at least I could tell there was a foot at the end of my leg. As if it were too good to last, high clouds began to move in, and the sunlight grew thinner. I thought of the character in the Jack London short story "To Build a Fire." His feet had gotten wet and had frozen; eventually he died because he had underestimated Nature's harshness. My problem wasn't as bad as his, and I knew I would live through my own little drama here on the mountain-side.

My feet felt as good as they were going to feel, so I took my boots out of my parka and put them back on, lacing them as loosely as possible. Pins and needles burned through my feet as I got up and started down the trail back into the timber. I had some feeling in my feet for about fifteen

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minutes before they went dead again, but at that point I knew I wasn't more than twenty minutes from camp. I couldn't wait to get the fire going, and get thawed out nice and proper. I could really go for a cup of hot chocolate too.

After a while I could see the blue trail tarp ahead through the trees and in another few minutes I was in camp and quickly gathering kindling, piling it in the fire circle. Dousing the wood with gas from my fuel bottle, I lit a match, took a step back and tossed it onto the pile. The flames burst forth and bathed my face with their warmth. I heaped more wood onto the growing fire and soon was sitting on my parka, rubbing the warmth of the blaze into my feet. There was no result at first, and I had put my feet so close to the fire that the wool socks had begun to smoke. I pulled them away and rubbed them some more. The socks were nice and warm, as were my hands, but my feet remained stubbornly lifeless. I dragged my sleeping bag out and climbed into it by the fire. I lit my stove and made that anticipated cup of hot chocolate.

As I sipped the cocoa I pushed back thinking about the consequences of not being able to warm my feet up, and instead, I thought about the others and hoped that they had reached the summit and enjoyed a great view before the clouds had come in.

Finally, the familiar tingling returned to my feet, and it grew until it was a stinging, then a burning as the feeling finally (mostly) came back into my feet. About an hour later, I could hear Cinci, Pete and Greg as they came back down the trail and into camp. Suddenly, I remembered about my promise to have a pot of hot coffee ready...

The boys hadn't made the summit. The snow above the tree line was too deep, the clouds had rolled in, and they were concerned about me. We were good friends and they wanted to make sure I was all right. They had enjoyed the climb and had turned around without feeling too disappointed. They were worried about my feet, but upon close examination there were no visible signs of frostbite, and the burning had subsided enough so I could walk without too much discomfort. Considering the circumstances, they didn't hold it against me for not having coffee ready for them.

After a snack of dried fruit, chocolate, and the long-anticipated pot of coffee, we lit our pipes for a leisurely smoke and looked around us. The icy, white silence of winter was beautiful, but couldn't be taken lightly. If you didn't respect it, you were a fool. I had pushed it, taking a risk that could've been a disaster. I was thinking about a North Face catalog that I had seen back at Cinci's house. It was time for an investment in new boots. Pete checked the thermometer and said that the temperature had risen to almost twenty degrees. Above zero that is. That was fifty degrees of difference between then and the night before. Tonight would be better sleeping for sure. While we rummaged through our packs deciding what to have for dinner, a few intermittent snowflakes started to fall. We looked up at the grayness overhead, and decided that the flakes weren't blowing off the mountains; they were falling fresh from the sky. There would be new snowfall overnight.

We decided on another one-pot meal for dinner. Elbow pasta with

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a couple of packets of Cup-o-Soup tomato soup mix thrown in after most of the water was absorbed by the pasta. If you leave just enough water, it makes a passable sauce. We threw in some last bits of pepperoni and some cheese and we had some stick to your ribs good eatin' for a cold, winter's evening. As the snow began to fall heavier, we sat in the shelter of the tarp enjoying our dinner, watching the world outside fade from deepening shades of grey to darkness as evening leaned in on us.

In the morning, we brushed off the accumulated snow that had fallen overnight and had a quick breakfast. We broke camp, packed up, set our eyes down-trail, and once again headed out of the Great Gulf Wilderness. We ended up at Pinkham Notch, as usual, where we cleaned up and bought a hot shower at the lodge. You don't realize how smelly you can get over a weekend of wood smoke and perspiration until you've taken a nice, hot shower and then pick up the clothes that you've just worn for the past two to three days. Oh yeah!

We had written another page into our tales of the White Mountains, and we were ready to go home until the next time that we heard The Call.

As time passed, most of the feeling did return to my feet. Although there had been no frost bite, I did have a case of "frost nip" and suffered nerve damage that left my feet easily susceptible to the cold and even when bare footed, it felt like I was wearing thin socks.

We used to like to say that "our way was north" and as the years passed more pages would be added to our adventures in New Hampshire and in other places. We would take a cross country motorcycle trip to California, a few more 'cycle trips out to Yellowstone National Park and up through Canada, and eventually our journeys would lead us to take a nice little drive to Alaska.

But that's a whole other story.