

When danger comes,
can reflecting
on it be far behind?

A DVENTURES IN THE SKI TRADE

MIRCEA ELIADE wrote that the sacred is an eruption of reality into the world, myth is that eruption's re-telling, and ritual is myth's reenactment so that experience may be ordered, the world refounded, life regrouped to press on. I thought that was just a nice theory for interpreting Greek tragedy—until I took a shortcut in my Isuzu Trooper over Stratton Mountain last year. Now I know better, and that shortcut has become part of my personal myth.

Catastrophe was not supposed to happen in southwest Vermont, a land of hills bunched like cattle, dotted with spires and covered bridges. It was certainly not supposed to happen on a bright March day whose temperatures nudged 50, with snowmelt cutting its gullies and crocuses parting the stubble in the fields. We were there just for spring skiing, my wife, Jean, and I and our friend Nancy and two teen-aged offspring, playing hooky for a week from larger cares. And we had had four good days of it at the tail of the season, the kids carving moguls, their elders taking the long Mt. Snow intermediate runs in stride.

So when the fifth day dawned drizzly, we decided to Poke Around, leaving the kids to mush down the softening slopes in their rainsuits. "See you at 4:00," we called after dropping them at the lift gates. Then we headed south on Route 100, west on Route 9 through the Green Mountain National Forest, and north on Historic Route 7A, poking happily among antique barns, Grandma Moses knock-offs, and maple candy shoppes.

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But suddenly, it was almost 3:00, and we had a problem. We had meandered far north to the hamlet of East Arlington. We could take two hours to retrace our route, or find some way to reach Mt. Snow in an hour. We tried Highway 313, whose lanes swept east through Arlington but ended in a cul-de-sac ringed with murrain. We tried East Arlington's Main Street, which fizzled in pinewoods at the edge of town.

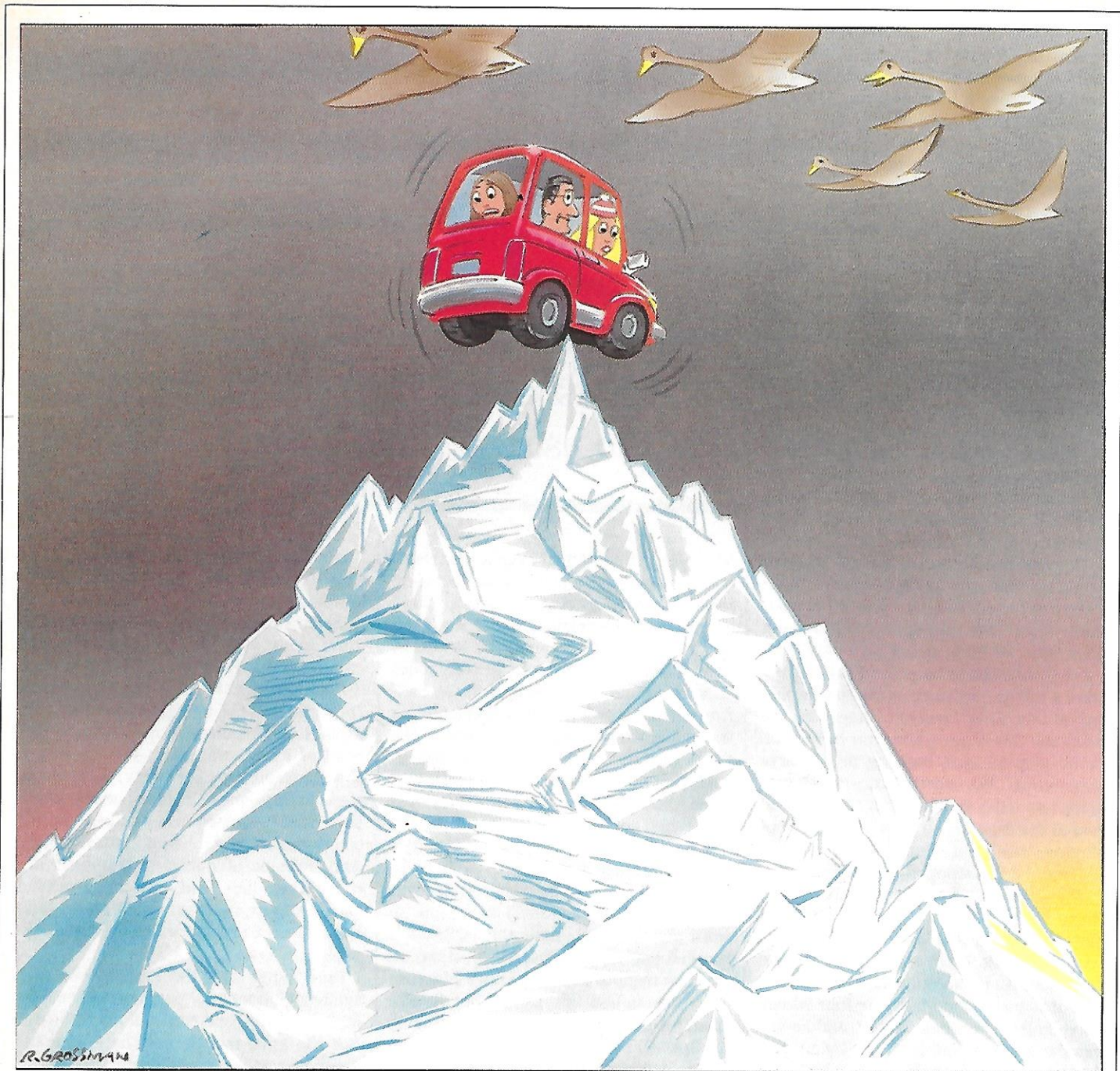
Then Jean the navigator began to wave her map, pointing to a thin black line that swerved north of Main Street, then east through the national forest. "Straight past Stratton Mountain, then right down 100—it's only 20 miles." She measured the scale with her fingers. "Less than half an hour. We can meet the kids early. C'mon!" Nancy and I demurred: the road was unnamed, its conditions unpredictable. I especially demurred, being allergic to shortcuts, their improvisational uncertainty and risk. The only clear fact, I noted from the map, was that Stratton Mountain towered 3,300 feet above Arlington, with nearly all that rise in the first few miles. Why not take paved highways we knew?

But Jean was insistent in the name of adventure, which was why I'd married her in the first place. A woman who'd grown up on shortcuts and *Swiss Family Robinson*, who went to Israel alone at 19, whose

fantasy was to walk 2,100 miles of Appalachian Trail for her fiftieth birthday was not easily dissuaded when hazard spiked the wind. Indeed, I'd never seen her dissuaded since we met outside Bennett Hall in 1963. When, she demanded, would we have another chance to drive such a road, through the heart of wild mountains, spectacular vistas ours, ours alone? Who knew when the last visitor braved this winter path? Why did we have four-wheel-drive anyway? Was the Trooper a symbol of empty machismo? Besides, she added, according to the map, her nameless road was paved; and any route that crossed the Long Trail—the Appalachian Trail's oldest segment, a 200-mile ribbon leaping the peaks of the Green Mountains into Canada—could not be bad.

Five minutes later, we halted in the turn-off, pondering a sign that warned "Local Traffic Only. Road Closed." We checked with local traffic—a woman and her father walking their German shepherd in front of a new Cape Codder on an adjacent lawn. Sure, she replied, the road went through to Stratton Town. It might not be clear up there, but everything was melting and we had a warm day for it. A four-wheel-drive "should do fine."

In its first mile, the road shrank to a graveled dirt lane, churned to gumbo by



runoff. By the second mile, the surface no longer mattered: the forest closed in, the ice fingers in the gravel joined in a solid sheet, accentuated by a small stream racing through snowbanks on the unfenced edge of our path. In minutes, the stream became a torrent, the ice thick and rutted, slippery with melt. We began to climb sharply through balsam firs packed with snow and hung with icicles. The view turned crystal and albino, punctuated only by spruce boughs—a giant, glistening ice palace. Conversation dwindled as enchantment overcame us. Jean had been right for once; this was a different country, the nameless path an unexpected blessing. I tromped the accelerator, showing what the

Trooper and I could do. On other expeditions, the two of us had plowed through mud slides, along creekbeds, up sand dunes. A snow mountain would be just another trophy in our belt. I slapped its dashboard encouragingly. We growled and charged forward, spattering ice.

But soon, the grade approached 30 percent, and the road started weaving in little switchbacks. The stream boiled right, then back again, clawing at the embankment, tossing floes as it passed. Yet, whichever side of the road it foamed up on, the ruts seemed to bounce our wheels toward it, threatening skids into rock pools with each curve we rounded. Steering proved almost useless; like a race bike on tram

tracks, we jumped from one rut to another, swerving unpredictably. The track narrowed further. There was only one way to take it, I realized—straight ahead, through the middle of each curve, keeping up speed so as not to break loose or slip back. *This is fun!* I caught myself thinking. But there was no time for thought. Concentrating fiercely, playing the wheel with my fingertips, I fought to hold the road.

And straight up we went—12 more miles of a stiffening grade—as spruce gave way to gnarled pine, the sun disappeared behind cloud banks, and sheets of gray snowmelt rippled toward us, treacherously camouflaging the ruts. The stream dropped away, leaving deep ravines from which a

crane would be needed to extract us. An eerie silence descended, broken only by the crack of loose ice and the steady chug of our engine, like a heartbeat amplified in some vast, abandoned dome. The road dipped over a rib of the mountain, shrank to little more than our width. We could not have turned around before, since return meant stopping where movement over the ice was crucial. And there was surely no turning back now: the path was increasingly slick, and on every side, scree, drifts, and interlocked trunks choked our view.

But I never thought of turning back. A gauntlet had been thrown, and I had retrieved it. It was merely the latest challenge in a 25-year marriage of dares made and mutually accepted—to learn to ride a bike, run marathons, chant Torah, coach soccer teams, build furniture, even dance despite two left feet working against each other. Besides, my Trooper was behaving like, well, a trouser; I knew we would get through.

Then the heartbeat accelerated. We were losing traction; the grade seemed to have steepened again. Hastily, I levered to maximum drive. The tires spun, caught, spun once more, whining in that high pitch winter drivers learn to hate. We fishtailed toward a ravine—unfished at the last second. Out of that slide, I began to steer slaloms, using the tire-edges, giving our hubs maximum grip surface, battling to conserve momentum. We crawled on, going five, going two miles an hour. Half a mile ahead reared the crest of the pass. The tires kept singing, barely bit. But at least we were moving, hadn't stopped.

Then the motor lost power, as though the drive-train were severed. I double-clutched—nothing held. The engine's throb rose to a shriek. An irregular clanking came from beneath us, accompanied by the smell of burnt insulation—had our four-wheel-drive failed? We slued, halted, slid back—came to rest with our bright red snout half vertical, on a smooth sheet of ice far below the crest. The back seat, where Nancy had been jouncing as we thumped through the ruts, became deadly silent. Jean's chatter faded, though she continued to clutch the map and lean forward defiantly, scanning the surface for tire-holds, nostrils flared. The Trooper sighed and seemed to settle in its springs. Off to the left, muffled by snow-banks, an owl hooted, then grew still.

I began to sweat despite the cold. Jean pointed as the owl flew. Nancy and I glared daggers at her. A tag line popped into my head from early in our marriage, when walking to get the Sunday *Times* was a full vacation during law school: *It was a dark and stormy night. Thunder crashed. The wind howled. . . . Suddenly I knew I was embarked on the most exciting adventure*

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of my life! The line had been a joke then, reaction against a place that deliberately scheduled Saturday classes so no one could escape for the weekend. But it was serious now. Even if we could get over that hump above us, there were 10 more miles of road beyond it, all likely to be as bad. And getting over it would be no picnic. No way could we push my bulky steed to the top of the crest, given the lack of footing. And what difference would pushing make, if the steed was crippled? I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wheel, letting the transmission cool for a moment as my temperature rose.

Silently, I cursed Jean's short-cuts. This was not the first time she'd steered us toward disaster, I thought uncharitably. I recalled one race against gravel slides on the back roads of Bootia, another false turn that debouched us from the George Washington Bridge onto Jerome Avenue in the Spanish Bronx. Then there were all the routes taken to avoid extra miles (her preference) versus those that avoided traffic lights (mine)—the great gender divide of our time.

But this was the first time I smelled true catastrophe. We had no boots, no food, no blankets, no extra clothes. Deep in the Green Mountains, we'd seen no houses for miles. It might be days before another car passed. If our gas ran out . . . *We could actually die up here*, an astonished voice whispered. Fog closed on the mountain; the sun kept going down.

Suddenly, I hated Jean, hated the very concept of adventure. How dare she keep birding, faced with freezing or starving to death? Why did I listen to these pleas for unbeaten paths, secret lakes, hidden beaches that turned into ditches or alliga-

tor nests? Who needed such senseless risks? My professional life was risky enough. But this—this was like having cholera on vacation. On vacations now, I asked only to be a couch quiche, to sink into primeval ooze. Whether from laziness or middle age, I sought no more survival tests, no pain in the name of gain. Forgotten were early vows to stretch at any price, to switch fields every five years, to keep metaphysics burning because it taught how to live. "Great road!" Jean exclaimed softly, ignoring the mess we were in. I wanted to strangle her.

Seething, I threw the Trooper into reverse, rocked us off the ice down to a drift where the tires might grip. All seemed normal once more; but down was the easy part. Building enough speed to get over that ridge would be different—if we could go forward at all.

I held my breath, let out the clutch with the delicacy of an eye surgeon. We spit plumes of snow and began to move upward, aiming for drifts by the side of the road. Nancy exhaled explosively—her first sound since we'd stopped. Jean grinned like a basilisk. Ten anxious minutes later, we gained the crest, bumped jubilantly over it, drew even with the Appalachian Trail crossing our path. To our left, Stratton Peak was an indistinct haze. To the right, Grout Pond glittered through a notch in the trees. From the high point, Vermont was a great bowl of ice spears out to the horizon, a New England version of the coming-of-age scene in *Superman*. As blue became black, those spears flashed in sunset beneath the cloud roof, angular, alien, utterly pure. And, miracle of miracles, before us unrolled a two-lane road, paved and plowed all the way to the town of Stratton, built by the Park Service for access to the Appalachian Trail.

Only much later did I notice the map symbols that meant "pass normally closed during winter" and confront my navigator. But the same month, she discovered the creek was called Roaring Branch and our nameless road was nationally famous for wild, beautiful woods and two dozen species of breeding birds. So it was a stand-off as usual. But that did not change what had happened up there.

For what happened up there was an eruption of danger, oncoming and unpredictable, the rough chance that underlies comfortable lives and can instantly transform them, like the charge of a dark beast through manicured gardens, unseen but for snarlings in the night. Yet, that eruption also brought a rush of adrenaline, the sense of man and machine confronting failure and the elements, improvising instinctively, cast free. For we did not fail, we *did* get through. And Jean's shortcut was the means of that prevailing. END