

The North Country

BY SEAN DONOVAN

I grew up under the watchful eye of Mount Washington, the king of all peaks in the great Northeast. Its summit was visible from just about every town and village throughout the Mount Washington Valley, an ever-present monument to the sublime beauty that resided in the Great North Woods. With snow falling every month of the year, the white-capped peak is the defining landmark of my childhood.



My family had embarked early one August morning for our annual vacation to the exotic locale that was Errol, New Hampshire. Located in the northern-most county in the state, Errol was a tiny village that probably had a larger moose population than human. The two-hour drive took us right past the base of Mount Washington, and the car slowed so that we could “ooh” and “aah” at the sight of it.

As we came into town, on the left side of the road, we noticed somebody had constructed a one-floor warehouse, and strung up a cheap vinyl banner screaming “FIREWORKS!” The bright red paint adorning the clapboard walls assaulted my eyes, leaving me straining in order to examine the sketchy-looking character that I presumed to be the owner. He sat in a plaid folding lawn chair on the front lawn, surveying each car as they passed his fine establishment. His scrutinizing gaze cast a guilty feeling as the car crawled past the building, and my dad put on his left blinker.

“Wait . . . What are you doing, Dad?” I asked nervously. But I knew the answer before he said a word; any place that sells a product that blows up or catches on fire is a haven for my father. Granted, I was as into fireworks and explosions as the next thirteen year old boy, but this place was a dump. There was a fat chance that I would trust anything we might buy here. Unfortunately for my family and I, that was Dad’s philosophy; the more backwoods the location, the better.

Dad hopped out of the driver’s seat into the dirt parking lot with a goofy grin on his face. He greeted the balding man with a handshake and introduced the family as we approached reservedly, already looking anxious to leave.

“This is my wife, Mary,” Dad began. My mom gave a slight nod of her head towards the man, and he reached out his right arm. Her eyes darted to his grubby

hand and a panicked look swept fleetingly through her eyes. Never one to be rude, my mother took his hand and gave it a brief jerk. Then, after we had been introduced, she turned to my brothers and I and offered to take us to the gas station across the street for a snack. Thankful for the excuse to leave, the three of us mumbled a farewell, and strode across the pavement.

After half an hour, Dad reunited with our family, carrying several bulging plastic trash bags, dopey smile bigger than before. *Great*, I thought, *that bick gave Dad his garbage*. But Mom recognized in an instant what the bags contained.

“Oh my God, Timothy . . . How much did you spend?” she demanded. She proceeded to harangue my father about how much money we had spent just to go on vacation, let alone on the fireworks he now clenched between his fists.

“Relax,ayah,” he addressed Mom in his wicked thick New England accent. “I talked to the guy, I know his fathah, he gave me all this for real cheap. Five-hundred dollahs worth for two-hundred.” He beamed with pride, and we all beamed back. “It’s gonna be a pissah night.”



Six thousand two-hundred and eighty-eight. A number so infamous, it’s a cardinal sin *not* to commit it to memory. Six thousand two-hundred and eighty-eight feet tall, and six thousand two-hundred and eighty-eight reasons to revel in the contrast of monstrous elegance only Mother Nature could possibly generate, a transfixing beauty manifested by Mount Washington. The summit loomed omnisciently above me; each step I took brought me that much closer to the one point in New Hampshire that is closest to the heavens. An inexpressible wave sweeps over me every time I view the mountain, and this time was no different. A few short paces behind me walked my dad, panting a bit but chugging right along, reminding me of the Cog Railway making its way up Washington. The two of us, outfitted for the gloomy weather, hiked without talking along an arduous stretch of incline. When we crested the banking, a tug on my pack told me to stop.

“I just need the Nalgene, kid,” he told me.

“How many people would you say have died on this mountain?” I asked him, more or less to make conversation. We each took a seat opposite one another on a couple of rocks.

“Look, man, I might be getting oldah, but I ain’t dyin’ up heyah today, let me tell you what,” came the reply. I gave him a punch in the shoulder and let out a laugh.

"That's not what I meant, moron," I shot back, deciding not to use the word I had intended to call him.

"Moron . . . I'm a moron?" he asked with mock-incredulousness. He screwed up his face and threw me the goofiest expression I had ever seen, and I burst into laughter.

"Yeah, one hell of a moron, let me tell you what," was all I could say.

"Ya know, we really need to get down to the Shop, pal. I've got a lotta work I need to get done by Monday," he said. *Big surprise*, I thought, *when doesn't he have work to get done?*

"Okay, fine, but we're going to the base of Tuck's, at least, right?" I asked in earnest, sure that I knew his reply.

"Uhh . . ." he began. Uh-oh; not a good sign. "I don't know if we'll get there," was what he said, but his eyes told me all I needed to know.

"Yeah, sure, next time maybe," I stammered, upset but understanding, and I resolved to head back to base. I tucked the water bottle back into the side mesh pocket of my backpack, unzipped my Northface a few inches, and followed suit as Dad began the mild descent. I looked back to the peak once more; *I'll get to you next time*, I told it. *Next time.*



The kitchen door swung open gently. It hadn't been closed all the way, and through the crack I could smell the warm tartness of toasted oats and cinnamon fresh apples in the oven. Pie crusts, casserole dishes, flour, and rolling pins littered the counter.

"Smells delicious," I complimented my mother, her blonde hair held out of her face by one of those alligator-looking clips. "Where's Dad?"

She sighed.

"At the Shop again. Mark couldn't come in so he had to finish the Lagnese's truck instead. That's what we get for owning our own business I suppose," she told me, all of a sudden looking more haggard than motherly.

"Oh. Guess he doesn't want to go skiing with us then," I said, disappointed. I motioned to my younger brothers, decked out in all their ski gear, sans helmets. "We're headed out without him. Tell him to come if he gets home early."

"He's never around anymore," complained the younger of the two boys. But there was nothing any one of us could do.

"We just need the money, boys," Mom tried explaining.



Incomprehensible rap lyrics wash over the Subaru as it speeds through Bartlett. Me and two of my buddies cruise along towards off-season Attitash Resort, and, once there, abandon the Outback in order to don our ski- or snowboard-boots and begin the climb. The hike itself is uneventful; just another hike-and-ski trip. The view, however, is spectacular. From the top of Ptarmigan's, the beryl April sky is reflected upon the grainy snow, which is also caked into the lip of my ski boot.

"Dude, check the summit," one of them tells me. They know how keen I am to a new view of Washington. And it truly is a wonderful sight from this abandoned ski trail, untouched save for a few footprints, due to a severe lack of a sense of adventure in tourists.

Boy, I think to myself. *What a place to live. If only I could share this experience with my family too.* I start to feel bad for myself, but I quickly remember where I am. *Let's do this,* I think, and, with Dad and the rest of the family miles away, somewhere in the Valley, I begin down the slope. I catch edges and take sharp turns as I plant my poles, and the snow-covered peak of Mount Washington gives me that sense of wonder once again. *Dad will come next time,* I silently wish. *Next time.*