



In My Element

To capture the quiet allure of the winter season, we asked four writers to share moments that stuck with them long after the ground thawed.

BY TRACY MARSH, DAN SIMMONS, KASE JOHNSTUN, AND MARY POLS



Sparks of Comfort

My husband, Dennis, and I have birthdays less than a week apart. When they roll around each November, the leaves in Middle Tennessee are ablaze with color and the nights are crisp—perfect camping conditions. Which is why an overnight with a few close friends at Henry Horton State Park, 50 miles south of Nashville, was how we planned to celebrate in 2014.

As the weekend drew near, though, we hit two snags. First, unseasonably cold temperatures crept into the forecast. I thought, *It's nothing an extra blanket and a pair of long johns can't solve.* Second, we learned we were pregnant.

To say we were thrown for a loop is putting it mildly. In our 13 years of marriage, Dennis and I had talked about children from time to time, but producing (and providing for) a functional human seemed daunting for two anxiety Olympians like us, and we'd quietly settled into "DINK" life—dual income, no kids.

We considered canceling the trip altogether, but ultimately forged ahead in a kind of daze. Whether we did it to avoid flaking out on our friends or to try and distract ourselves, it's hard to say. No matter the reason, I trudged into the woods dreading the night ahead of me. It was frigid, and I felt ill and in over my head.

There were hugs and high-fives as everyone arrived, but no announcement. Dennis and I had agreed it was better to keep our news under wraps so early on. *Just act normal*, I thought as I fumbled through setting up camp. It was a refrain that had been running through my mind for days.

Once we had the fire going, we snuggled down around it against the growing cold, telling stories, laughing, eating s'mores, passing a flask I pretended to nip from, and laughing some more. Hours went by without any of us noticing.

I once read somewhere that engaging the senses is a good way to de-stress, to "live in the moment," as gurus would say. Though I wasn't thinking about that then, the campfire seemed to be delivering its own form of meditation. Its warmth settled on my cheeks and pooled in the folds of the blanket wrapped around me. Its cedar-and-damp-earth smell hung above us, like breathable

nostalgia. It filled conversational lulls with pops and crackles, quick spans where I'd lose myself completely in watching it lap the night air.

In its glow, Dennis' face flickered in the sepia tones of a classic movie. Now and then, our eyes would lock, and we'd silently acknowledge the whopper of a secret we shared. In the unspoken language of people who know each other inside and out, he'd raise an eyebrow to ask if I was OK. I'd smile to tell him I was, and he'd grin back. Same old Dennis ... only not the same. Literally and figuratively, I was seeing him in a new light. (I couldn't have known it then, but he'd wear that same goofy grin the following July when he held our son for the first time.)

I had expected the fire would keep us warm and toast our marshmallows. But I'd no idea it would kindle a peace in me and melt away the tension I'd been carrying for days. It was another of life's surprises. I pulled my blanket tighter around my shoulders and decided, at least for one night, to let my worries rise like the smoke and drift away.

—*Tracy Marsh*



A Spoonful of Sky

Growing up in Minnesota, a winter day had three possible descriptions: It was about to snow, it was actively snowing, or it had just finished snowing. In this constant snowbound state, my siblings and I looked out the window at the falling fluff and saw more than just the possibility of a day off school. We saw “snow pudding,” a treat that, unlike every other dessert, we could eat any time. Even—and especially—in the morning.

My mom got the idea from an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. She gave us each a bowl and we would compete to see who could bring back the tallest mound. Once inside, we'd follow the recipe—6 cups snow, 1 cup milk, ½ cup sugar, ½ teaspoon vanilla—and whisk it into an almost gelato-like cream.

Ideal pudding snow is like good skiing snow: airy, fluffy, not too waterlogged. We don't seem to get snow like it much anymore. But every time we do, the Facebook pages of family members fill with photos of their kids with buckets, collecting a backyard harvest. Recently, on a hot day, my 5-year-old daughter called out: "Daddy, do you remember making snow pudding? It's like sugar, with some snow. It is soooooo yummy!" It struck me. Another generation looks forward to snow just like we did, not as a source of dread but as something to, literally, eat up.

—*Dan Simmons*



Backyard Playground

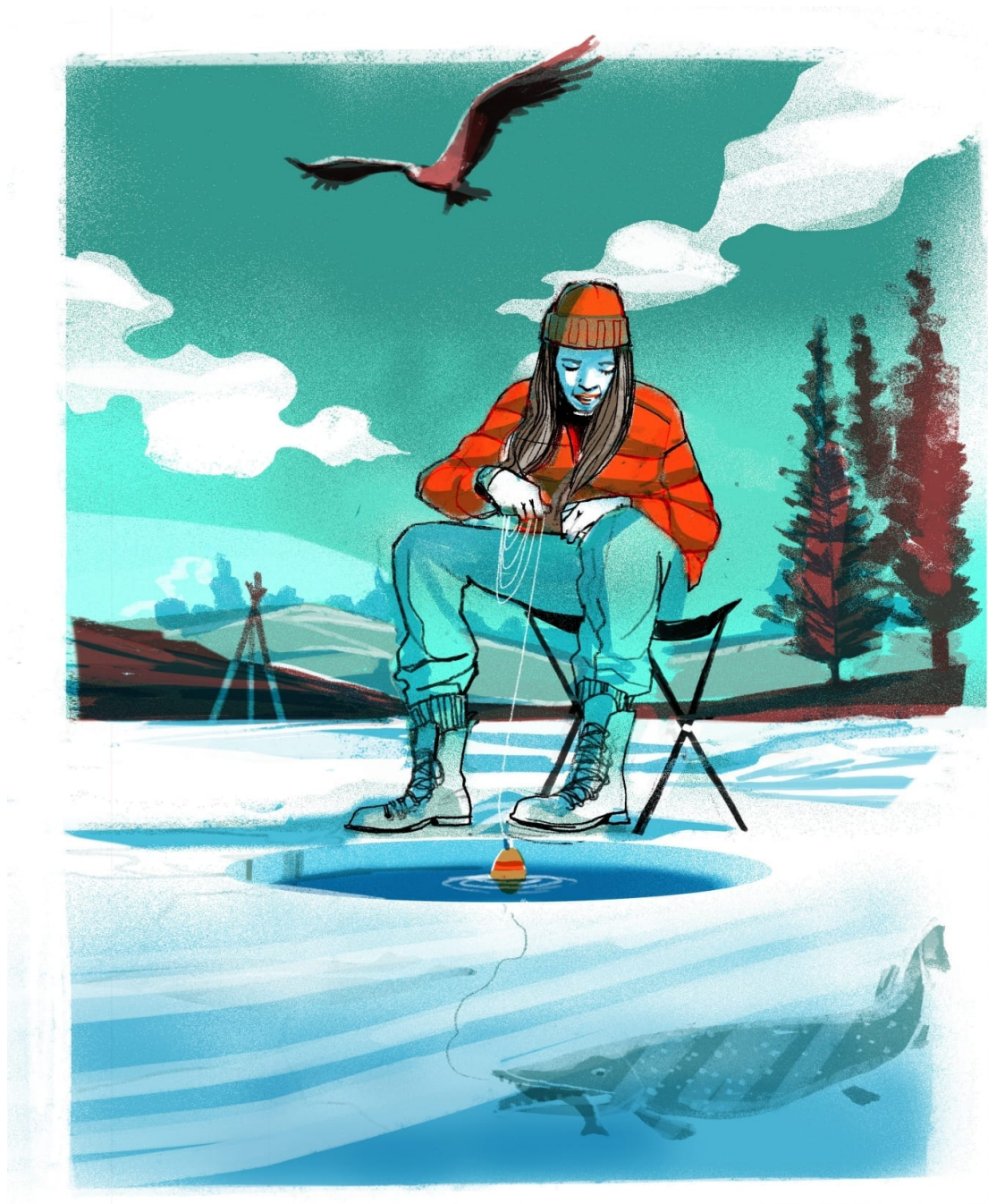
As soon as I step out of my car, my running shoes sink into soft powder. Ahead, the Bonneville Shoreline Trail wiggles 100 miles along the Wasatch Range, the Rocky Mountains' western edge, which cradles Logan, Utah, between its jagged cliffs and the bed of the Great Salt Lake.

It's 10 degrees and still dark. Yet I'm joining a few friends for a 7-mile run—our weekend tradition since 2015.

I strap spikes on my shoes, flash my headlamp, and fall in line. The frozen air seizes our burning lungs. We're missing our beds, but within a few short minutes, we start to climb the rocky earth, forced up by the clash of tectonic plates. We pass sagebrush and the bare branches of cottonwood and aspen trees. The blanketed valley sleeps below. In the city, on the plowed streets, my mind can safely drift among life's worries. On the trails, mental wandering is risky. Every step must be plotted.

The thaw comes when the sun climbs to the top of the mountain peaks, and I'm reminded why it's always worth it. It might be the slices of sunlight cut by a tree's shadow or the sprinkle of ice particles in the air or the steam rising off our skin. But something illuminating will inevitably catch our eye and hold us for a long pause before our legs begin to move again.

—*Kase Johnstun*



Catching Magic

The pond was a sheet of white, the sky a dome of January's deepest blue. Waiting for a bite, I hopped from foot to foot above the hole we had carved with a chainsaw. On the shore, an eagle shifted on the limbs of a big pine, equally eager to see what I'd pull up.

The eagle and I were both there for survival, but mine was psychological. He wanted a pike; I wanted to participate instead of hibernate. In Maine, the first ice arrives unwelcome in late fall, barely a skim on the pond where I walk my dog. I put my head down and think bleakly of rising fuel prices. But then winter's ice thickens, until one day the shacks appear on the river, and my head comes up again. I admire the beautiful pluck of mankind, how we make houses so we can crouch over holes in frozen landscapes, looking for life.

“It is like fishing up moonbeams through the kitchen floor,” the poet Robert P. Tristram Coffin once wrote of ice fishing. There is exactly that component of magic. You have won the right, through your endurance of this hard winter, to walk on the world of fishes and invite them up into your house. The catch tastes of magic, too, cooked on the improbable fire built on ice. On that day, I ate enough to get full on the hard-won delicacy and then tossed the still-meaty bones to the eagle, my companion in winter, who snatched them up.

—Mary Pols

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