GARY PAULSEN

Winterdance

The storm broke with a sudden viciousness that startled, frightened me. I had left camp with eight dogs and a lightly loaded sled just after midnight. They were my 'problem' dogs. In all teams there are good dogs, some not-so-good dogs, and then there are 'problem' dogs: dogs that might be a bit young, or like to fight too much, or spend too much time looking back to see what the sled driver is doing. They require extra effort, the problem dogs – more time to understand, time to know, time to learn how they think and act and work.

So, once every four days or so I would harness the problem dogs and head up a mountain and try to learn from them and about them. We were in Alaska to train three months before my second Iditarod race, and I was learning as much as the dogs.

The difficulty came because of a headache. Simple things, small things change lives. My winter cap had fallen in the fire and burned. I bought a new one but it had more bulk, a thicker weave. When I left camp I put my battery pack on my waist and the band for the headlamp around my head and over the cap so the light was centered on my forehead. It was too tight because the hat was more bulky. The band was adjusted as far out as it would go, and to fix it I would have to sew on a piece of cloth to extend it.

But the dogs were already harnessed and hooked in the gangline and screaming to run in the high-pitched keening shrillness that demanded hurrying, so without changing the headband I stood to the sled and unhooked from the birch tree that held it.

They ran well at first, excited by the run. I left camp and headed north and east, up into the mountains that marked the end of the Alaska Range. As the trail steepened and the snow grew more powdery with altitude, the dogs slowed and settled in for the long haul over the pass.

An hour passed, whuffling along in the dogs' breath, the runners sighing. Everything – everything with the dogs, with the country, with my life, with each breath, everything was beautiful. But I didn't, couldn't see it.

I was in agony. My head was throbbing from the tight band on the headlamp and I wasn't seeing beauty, dogs, sled, country – any of it. The Chinese have a proberb that says a man with a toothache cannot be in love and that concept was very much driving me.

My temples ached and the pain worked around my head, warping my thinking to keep me not only from enjoying the run but from watching

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warning signs, paying attention to the dogs, and when I finally started to see things it was too late by far.

They tried – the dogs, the trees, the wind. When I stopped to check dog feet and work in ointment a big, white, slab-sided dog named Crackers started fidgeting, smelling the breeze that was now and then gusting into wind. I didn't understand it, didn't see it for the warning it was.

Flakes of snow – not large and fluffy but small and mean, driven – started to appear. They were a sign of weather coming, as was Crackers's restlessness (he hated storms and liked to be well holed up before they hit), but I ignored the snow as well, finished working on their feet, and called the dogs up as soon as I'd finished.

I had in mind finishing the run. Making some kind of loop – eighty or ninety miles – and getting done with it and back into camp and comfort where I could sew a new band for the headlamp (or the goddamn headlamp, as I was beginning to think of it) and I had, in my misdirected focusing on my own small problem, completely forgotten some of the basic tenets of running dogs. The most important: your home is where you are with the team, the sled. You cannot outrun weather. Or, as I had heard one musher say: you've got to dance even when the music sucks.

The music was souring. The wind was increasing exponentially. It had lacked purpose for a time, wallowed this way and that, but now it had direction and some force. And the sleet had increased as well; not completely obscuring vision yet – I could still see the team pretty well in the yellow/white spot of the headlamp – but definitely more than it had been. Another warning.

And still I ignored it and worse, far worse, by ignoring it I did things to compound the error.

I went through a tight stand of dense spruce. They were set thickly and blocked the wind completely, and some of them were dead and would make wonderful firewood. I could have stopped here and tipped the sled and pulled a tarp over the top to make a nearly perfect shelter; could have made a fire at the mouth with wood enough to last a week all within easy reach; could have laid out a foam pad, pulled a few dogs inside with me and ridden out the storm in complete comfort. I had four cans of beef stew and forty-five pounds of meat for the dogs, and we could have lived well even with storm rationing.

Could have.

Instead my head was getting pinched and I passed through the trees without noticing them, or at least without thinking of what they could mean to me and to the dogs. Shelter, warmth, hope . . .

Life.

At the end of the stand of spruce the trail left timberline and headed into the snowfields of the high country. In truth there wasn't much of a trail – more just a line or more often no mark at all in the snow and I was depending on the lead dog, a tiny female named Duberry, to find the way. She

was good at it, sometimes going by feel as she trotted, quick and alert, her little black and white form tugging out front like a beacon

Just as the trail left the trees it moved into a shallow depression and went along the side of the mountain for two miles or so, angled so that I had to stand on one runner and pull the sled over at an angle to keep it from sliding down the mountain.

This put my parka back to the wind and that, coupled with being in the depression and having the headache, made me not notice further warnings. The wind was much stronger now, straight in line and with no eddies, getting force from somewhere, going to somewhere, reaching the point where small things would start to become very, very important. Little ignorances, small sillinesses, a loose bolt, a dropped mitten could cripple, could kill.

At the end of the depression the trail moved out into partial open, still slight around the side of the mountain, but where there could be no shelter and anybody except a complete idiot would know the seriousness of the wind, the storm.

But I hunkered with my back to it all, my head thunking away, staring down at the runner next to me, while I stood on the other sideways and wished to hell I had taken time to make the headband longer for another mile, then another, then another . . .

Seven, eight miles out into the snowfields above timberline, away from shelter, away from heat and comfort, away from rest.

And into madness.

I had turned three-quarters away from the wind, not just back to it but looking to the rear down the trail, half bemused that our tracks were blowing and filling before the sled had gone eight feet, which was about as far as I could see in the blowing snow and wind.

Here some survival code kicked in, some nudge in my thoughts that if the tracks were filling that fast the wind must be getting worse ...

Right then Duberry took the team out around the side of the mountain and it was like passing around the end of a wall.

Duberry simply vanished.

I had swung around and looked forward as we came out into the true open just in time to see a churning cloud of white hit her from side like a bulldozer. For an instant I thought she was merely obscured by snow and squinted, trying to see through the roiling mass and the suddenly shrieking wind, but it was impossible.

She was gone.

Blown away to the side, and in a heartbeat the sled and the rest of the team were carried by momentum into the roar and were gone as well.

I grabbed, snatched with my hand as the wind hit but it was too sudden, too wild, and I was torn from the sled, taken by the wind, tumbling end over end down the mountain.

Velocities, technical terms are meaningless. I knew a man who tried to

make a winter ascent of Mt McKinley who was blown off the mountain, lost and dead and gone and the body never found and some estimated that the wind had to be one fifty, two hundred miles an hour to carry a human body sideways off a mountain.

I do not know how fast the wind was blowing. I have never – including two typhoons in the Philippines – been in anything remotely like the force that took me now; I had, literally, no control over my life.

It simply blew me sideways from the sled. I tried to hook my elbow in the handlebar but I missed, and I had a glimpse of the sled swinging like a weather vane, hanging downwind from the team, and then nothing.

I tried to stand but the wind kept knocking me down, tumbling me end over end down the mountain. I would try to grab hold but there was nothing to catch and I just kept rolling and bouncing. I'm not sure how long it lasted. I was completely disoriented, had only the vaguest idea of up and down and could see nothing, hear nothing but the scream of the wind.

It could have blown me anywhere it wanted, blown me to hell, blown me off the world and I wouldn't have known it.

Instead it fetched me up against a rocky outcropping covered with ice. I hit with a thump that knocked the air out of my lungs, burying my head in a mound of snow. I hung there for seconds, perhaps half a minute, held by the pressure of the wind pushing me against the ice and rock and thinking started to come back in jerks.

Dogs. The dogs. Where were the dogs? Were they all right?

'Duberry!'

I tried to call, yell her name but the wind tore it away. I was still on my side, half raised, and I used my mittened hands like claws to hold to the rocks while I edged around to the side, searching for a place that was out of the blast.

Inches at a time. Once my foot seemed to hang out over space and the wind lifted my leg, floated it up and I jerked it back down, slithered a bit and came around beneath a slight overhang and for the first time caught my breath and felt as if I might be able to hold the position.

It was, I thought, the way people died – what I was doing. Little things, small things, kill. I was partially out of the wind but I had no gear apart from my clothing, no food, no fuel, no . . . anything.

It happened just this way. Caught in wind, cold, blowing snow, confused enough to forget life, and death came. Winds in high country sometimes lasted days, weeks, and I was locked in, caught in back of the small rock face, lost.

There were moments of self-pity and anger at how stupid I had become. To compound my problem my batteries were going down fast and my headlamp was very dim. I had fresh batteries in a bag on the sled but . . .

Then instinct took over and I tried to make the best of what I had. In the slight yellow glow and eddying snow, dumped by the wind as it came over the rock, I saw that the opening went back in slightly – a foot and a half –

beneath the overhang. The hole was filled with hard-packed snow and I started digging, making almost no impression in the frozen snow, when I felt a presence.

This had happened before, when hallucinating, and it was all in my mind. In truth I was tired and not thinking straight and I looked around once and then decided it was just that, my dreams catching up with me again, and ignored it.

But the feeling persisted. Something was there, was close. Something or someone. And I couldn't ignore it. I stopped digging and turned, tried to see in the wall of snow and wind but couldn't and yet felt if I just stretched, just moved away from the shelter a little bit, a tiny distance . . .

Insane. To leave the shelter. If anything the wind was worse and if I moved into the open it would take me again, sweep me away.

Yet I couldn't resist the pull. It was there, something, something close – I knew it absolutely and I scrabbled around on my stomach, pulled away from the shelter a few inches, a foot, hung on the edge of the wind with my left hand and the toe of my left foot dug into holes in the snow to hold me, teetered there and was about to give up when I saw it.

A shape. A triangular shape in the snow, sitting there, wobbling and weaving in the wind.

The sled.

Sitting upright, taking the full force of the storm and not moving, the sled was right in front of me, not four feet away. It simply couldn't be there, should have been blown for miles, but it sat there, as if waiting for me to ride.

For a second I couldn't believe it – laws of physics were being challenged. A goddamn tank wouldn't have been able to sit there in that wind.

Yet it was there and I crawled on my stomach until I could touch the end of the runner to convince myself it was real, and when I was close I saw what had happened.

Luck. All luck. As the sled tumbled, the snowhook – the sharp anchor tied into the gangline to hold the dogs when the sled is stopped – had bounced out of the leather carrying pouch and dragged along the snow. It was the kind of hook that is self-burying, like an anchor on a boat, biting deeper the harder it is pulled, but it had not set in the snow. Instead it had skittered along in some way until it came to the rocks and then caught in a small crack that captured both sides of the hook.

The team was there as well. I couldn't see them but they were still tied to the sled, strung down the mountain with the wind pulling at them, and I had been given life where there was almost no hope.

But to live, to make it work, I would have to leave the shelter and work down the team and bring them back up to the rock and all the while I would be dependent on the hook holding. If it popped loose it would all start over, the wind would own us, and we would be gone once more and there couldn't be the kind of luck again that would catch the hook just

where it needed to catch. I lay looking at the rope and the hook, trying not to think of the risk, the gamble, but thinking of the other things that were important and I knew that it wasn't me, it wasn't just me anymore.

It was us.

I could take the pad and sleeping-bag and food out of the sled and drag them back into the hole and make a shelter and live through it. I would be all right. I would even perhaps be comfortable. I.

But the dogs were out in it. Out in the wind. And with their backs to it the wind would blow the hairs open, drive snow and sleet down into the hair and closer to their bodies, and their body temperatures would go down. I had been told by other dog drivers. If their body temperatures went down they could start building fluid on their lungs, get pneumonia – it could kill them. They might get me home but they might die even then.

And there came a moment – lying on my stomach looking at the hook that I was holding in place with my hands in the faint glow from my dying headlamp – came a moment when I knew I couldn't allow that. In some way we had gone past where that could be allowed, gone past where I could have lived with myself, gone into an area where it had become we, instead of I.

For another minute my body rebelled. Everything in me fought against getting up, depending on that hook caught in the crack, and working my way down the team to pull them back in with me. It was not a sensible act.

But it happened. My legs moved, pushed me half up – still almost against my will. I hammered at the hook with both hands, trying to set the point deeper in the crack, grabbed the sled, and moved out into the wind.

It had, if anything, increased in ferocity. It worked inside my parka hood, seemed to pluck at my eyelids and drive snow under them and it tore me loose once more, drove me down along the gangline, clutching at the main rope as I moved through the dogs, who were in an unholy mess. They had tumbled in the wind themselves, blown ahead of the wind, and had tangled and retangled until some of them were upside down with all four feet caught in their tugs.

I worked dog to dog, going by feel. My light was gone now, not even a glow, but I had unharnessed and harnessed enough to know how the ropes and tugs and necklines should feel to the touch. As I untangled each dog it stood, its back to the wind, and waited and at last I came to Duberry, the only one not tangled. She was curled in a small ball in the snow and was reluctant to get up but I pulled at her collar and started up the slope, dragging her with me, clawing, heaving until at last I was back in the small shelter of the overhang with her.

Duberry's tug was hooked back into the gangline and she had been pulling the other dogs back and around and up with her. I put her to the side and kept pulling, putting each dog down next to her as they came to me until we were all there, crammed in the small space.

They were demoralized by the wind and two started to fight, which triggered more fighting, and I cursed and screamed and cuffed until they were relatively quiet once again.

Then I grabbed the main gangline and pulled the nose of the sled back and around and to me – all still in the dark – and tipped it on its side so the body of the sled would block some of the wind coming around the edge of the rock.

We now had the start of a shelter, the rock making the biggest wall, the sled stopping the eddies on the upwind corner, and the dogs forming the rest on the downwind side.

I unzipped the sled bag and took out my sleeping bag and foam pads, pulling them under me, then tucked myself into the sleeping-bag and pulled dogs around and in and on top of me until I was covered with a living mass of fur.

Of course they would not all fit but I jammed the ones I could in on top of me and huddled in. They were at least out of the wind and comfortable on the sleeping-bag and foam pad and we settled in to ride out the storm.

All of this took less than half an hour, just reacting to weather and wind, and I had not actually tried to think things through. In the shelter with the dogs on top of me I started to think and I realized that if the storm lasted for a long time nobody would come looking for me for two or three days, if then, and that if there was a solution to my problem – if, indeed, I had a problem – it would have to come from me. From the dogs and me.

I was alone.

Always in my life there had been something else, someone else. There had been bad times, rough times, but there had somehow always been other people. But not now.

It was, at the very first, frightening and then a secondary feeling came, a kind of liberation that I did not understand. It made no sense. I was in a snow shelter in the Alaska Range in the middle of the worst storm I had ever seen with no possible chance of external help and I felt liberated.

The dogs rested for a time but they were not tired and being jammed one on another when it was not time to rest or stop made them uneasy. They have definite likes and dislikes and will often hate each other – especially females – for no apparent good reason. Jamming them in one on another, tangling them, is sometimes dangerous when they aren't tired. They started to fidget and fight and within moments my clothes were torn and I was bleeding where I had been bitten. I bellowed at them and swore and they settled again – with uneasy growls at each other – and I returned to my thoughts.

I decided the reason I felt liberated was that there is a kind of freedom in being alone. It was true I could die, the dogs could die – we had food for three days and maybe I could run another four or five with no food, but if the storm dropped several feet of snow and it was soft I would have to

move in front of the dogs on snowshoes to make a trail and it would be too much work for too long. Eighty to a hundred miles, at best a mile an hour, maybe half a mile an hour breaking trail . . .

Maths while covered with dogs in a show shelter waiting out a storm: If you broke trail with snowshoes at half a mile an hour and it was eighty miles to camp – where there was food for the dogs – it would take 160 hours.

Scott of Antarctica, who didn't believe in dogs, died eleven miles from food.

The dogs moved and scrabbled again and I growled at them. I was starting to growl more and more at them and talk less. Speaking in grunts.

So, if it took 160 hours in normal weather, what would it take if you were truly alone and free and another storm came up while you were trying to get back?

It was still too soon in my dog career for me to begin to go mad while running them. That would come later. But the initial phases of the madness, the focus and primitive sharpness, the instincts were there, and when time became long beneath the dogs, hour after hour and the storm had not stopped, my thinking began to roll by itself, tumbling and falling until the heat from the dogs and my bag caught up with the strain and tiredness and I slept.

I'm not sure how long I slept. Initially it was light and the dogs kept hassling, but soon I went into deep REM sleep and was aware of nothing until I felt pain in my eyes.

It was sharp, defined – like needles – and I awakened to a thin shaft of flashbulb-bright white light drilling directly into my eyes through a hole between Duberry, who was on my head, and a dog named Walter, who was across my chest and lower chin.

I moved my head and shoulders and the dogs felt me and yawned and stretched on top of me and then stood and shook, and I saw the world through a shower of snow that had drifted and heaped on top of the dogs.

It had not snowed much but had blown deep drifts here and there and I sat up and saw that the outcropping where we sheltered was between two drifts ten or so feet high.

I unzipped the bag and stood and saw for the first time in daylight where I was.

It was dazzling. Before, above, and out to the north-west lay the whole Alaska Range. It's possible to live a month below McKinley and the range and never see them through the clouds, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky and the peaks looked like they were right on top of me

It was still, not a breath of wind, and deeply, intensely cold. Forty-five, perhaps fifty below. I shook snow out of the bag and zipped it and rolled it, then I flipped the sled up and knocked snow off the cloth sled bag. I had a stove cooker inside and decided since the weather was clear and looked to stay clear for a while I would take time to cook food and feed the dogs.

I pulled out the food bag and the stove and soon had the five-gallon aluminium cooker melting snow and heating meat chunks for the dogs. I fed them and lined them out on the snow and untangled them and rehooked those that had unhooked and loaded the sled and then saw just exactly how close I had been.

Two things, both possibly fatal:

The hook, which I had depended on when I made my way down the dogs to drag them back into shelter – the hook had popped and hung by only one tiny corner of rock caught on the very tip of the left hook prong.

It wobbled there, barely caught, and as I reached down for it the movement of my hand brushing it loosened it the rest of the way and the hook fell away. It had been that close when I went to get the dogs – that fragile a thread had held me.

And when I stood to the sled and called the team up, started working back the way we had come, squinting because I hadn't brought sunglasses, I saw what would have happened had the hook come loose.

Below us, where the wind would have driven us, lay a huge canyon. The wind had been blowing us toward the canyon wall, which dropped several hundred feet nearly vertically to a frozen river.

I would not, could not have survived the fall without serious damage and any damage would have been fatal. Lying in the bottom of the canyon, broken, the dogs gone as well – none of us would have made it.

The hook had caught, blown the team down until they hung on the gangline still attached to the hook – the hook had caught with Duberry not fifty feet from the edge of the canyon wall. Taking into account the drift that hung out over the edge now, she was almost on top when the hook stopped her.

All luck.

Everything had been done wrong. Not fixing the headband on the lamp, not replacing batteries, not stopping where I should have stopped, moving into unknown territory in bad weather – all stupid mistakes, mistakes that had injured and killed people, and luck had kicked in, saved us.

The snow wasn't inordinately deep except in the drifts and we could move around those. I let them run until they settled and immersed myself in the run and the beauty of the mountains. We were high enough to see almost all of the country back down to Willow and Anchorage, spread out like an impossibly beautiful map below us. The dogs were running well, shoulders driving, all the tugs tight and the absence of wind made the night before seem like a bad dream.

It did not hit me until later. Much later. We finished the run and the dogs were tied back in camp sleeping on straw and I was sitting with a friend sipping tea, looking at the fire cooking a fifty-five-gallon barrel full of dog meat and mush. The heat from the fire made my face seem to burn and I raised the cup of tea and my hands were shaking.

'Cold?' my friend asked.

I put the cup down but kept staring into the fire.

'No. Scared.'

'Scared of what?'

I had told him some of what happened but not how close it had been, not how the hook looked hanging by one prong, not how the canyon yawned away forever down and down and how the wind blew and how really, really goddamn close it had been. All of it rushed in now and I looked at the tea, thinking I would take a drink in a minute, when the shaking had subsided a bit.

'Just scared – you know. Life. All of it.'

And because he had been in the military and seen and done those things and had lived long enough to know, he did not ask more. He nodded, and we sat staring into the fire and I thought that any sane man who was in his forties and had a good career going would quit now, would leave the dogs, end it now and go back to the world and sanity and I knew what scared me wasn't the canyon and wasn't the hook hanging by one prong but the knowledge, the absolute fundamental knowledge that I could not stop, would not stop, would never be able to stop running dogs of my own free will.