

## White Noise

By Pierce Ellinwood

I sit in the car, rubbing my hands together and blowing into them, the vents of the heater working double-time against the single-digit temperatures outside. A crack in my windshield seeps cold air and fog begins its slow creep. Beyond, I can see my dad standing in the lone light of the kitchen window, pouring black coffee into travel mugs and shushing the dogs. Too early for barking. Too early for most things.

I run through the mental checklist of things that I need like I do every time, like my dad taught me to do the day we showed up to Cannon Mountain when I was ten, and I told him after a two-hour drive that I didn't have my ski boots. I take inventory from my feet to my head. *Ski socks? Boots? Snow pants? Jacket? Gloves? Helmet? Goggles?* I check off each, patting my legs and torso as I go, my brain slowly warming up with the car's engine.

My dad ducks out of the kitchen door and slips into the basement. Skis line the walls down there, twenty-something pairs in all. From the pipes overhead hang the many season-passes the Ellinwoods have collected over the years, a slideshow of the winters of our family that clatter like windchimes. A workbench is pressed up against the granite foundations where we stood late last night, hunched over skis tightened into vices, slowly dripping wax onto their bases, the extra wax slipping over the edges and falling in gooey dollops onto the concrete floor. The raspy singing of Jerry Garcia trickled from a lone speaker as my dad played through the Grateful Dead catalog that has been the soundtrack of so much of my time with him.

When he joins me in the car and places the two travel mugs into the cup holders of the center console, I tell him *thanks* and put the car into gear, creeping out of the driveway of my parents' home and into the still cold of the sparse four o'clock hour. We turn left and begin the

twisting drive through Contoocook, Hopkinton, Henniker. I pull lightly at the bottom of the steering wheel to avoid places where frost buckles the pavement below. The drive to Pat's Peak, the local ski hill, is one that I've made a thousand thousand times: as a passenger in the back of my mom's green Suburban surrounded by brothers and the slippery friction of nylon jackets, as a reckless driver of the tiny red Jetta I was gifted in high school, as a ski coach in a leased Civic, bleary-eyed from grading papers for my English classes the night before and building momentum for the all-out assault of 10-year-old energy from my athletes. Following the familiar curves of the roads, I slow to thirty where the cops will pull you over for doing thirty-one and turn off of Route 202 to sneak through the local's shortcut that's no longer reserved for locals in the age of Google Maps.

It's dark, and grippingly so. Having grown up skiing at mountains strewn about New England, the freezing darkness of a ski morning with my dad is comfortable, the full blast of the warm-aired vents tucking me into my seat. We don't need to talk much. Instead we watch the dark world pass by the frosted windows and listen to *Abbey Road*, turned low to match the frozen grumble of the engine. Words aren't much needed.

When we pull into the parking lot at five, there's just one other car. The lifts open in four hours, but we won't need them. Sitting on the edge of the gaping maw of the sedan's trunk, I kick my feet into the cold plastic and slam the heel into the icy dirt of the parking lot. The boots soaked up warm air while tucked next to my dad's feet in the passenger side, but the ride was too short for them to have acclimated fully. The outside plastic is warm to the touch, but the icy bones of my ski boots still don't want to yield. Snapping the buckles shut, small shocks of pain moving through the tops of my arches, my toes. My dad stands at the side of the car, pulling our skis from the rooftop rack and leaning them against the passenger door.

Six years old, I stood in the same patch of parking lot on a rainy day in March when the rest of the skiing public had decided the conditions were unfit for the effort. I was buckled into my boots and skis, but was only excited about a clam chowder lunch in the lodge. I'd have rather been at home parked in front of the woodstove with my Gameboy, and I told my dad as much. *But Dad, it's raining, we're going to get soaked.* I whined. He leaned into the trunk of the car and produced a roll of black trash bags, held it up to me, and tugged one loose. I watched as he went to work, ripping a hole in the bottom, one in each side. He slipped the bag over my head and I popped out the other side, my arms quickly following suit. He did the same for himself, and soon we were standing there in our makeshift ponchos, mine hanging past the top buckles of my boots, his settling at the back of his knees. *All set? Let's ski.* So we skied.

After downing the dregs of our coffee, my dad and I walk to where the man-made snow has drifted onto the parking lot and toss our skis onto the ground. They slap the hardpack with a bounce and a rattle of the bindings. We're using climbing skins, strips of synthetic fibers stuck to the undersides of our skis. Originally made from animal skins, they grip the snow and provide traction to prevent your from sliding backwards as you climb. With these and bindings that hinge at the toe, we can climb step after step up the mountain, a slow and sweaty preview of the turns we will make when we come back downhill in an hour or so.

We set off up the mountain on hiker's left, skier's right. We set a rhythm, snow creaking underneath skis, crushing the honeycomb grooves left by the Snowcat groomer hours before. I look to him on my left, checking to make sure that I don't move too quickly or leave him behind.

Stepping forward, a *click-clack* of plastic bindings and plastic boots joins the instrumentation of the trek, a cacophony in the quiet of the pre-dawn trees.

For the first five minutes, our headlamps illuminate the path in front of us, the bulbs casting their light wherever we turn our heads. There is no talking in these moments as we both begin to suck cold air and our breathing gets heavier. In these early moments of our climb, we stop at points to adjust this or that, straighten the pole strap that digs into his wrist or reposition my bag to even the load across my back. We wait for one another silently before trudging forward once more.

*Turn off your headlamp.* The words crack the cold air and I reach up to click off the light. Blindness. Once my eyes adjust, I understand why. Overhead, stars dot the sky with nothing to hide behind. The lights of nearby Henniker are too weak to pollute the night sky even in waking hours. Looking up, the evergreen trees on either side of the trail frame the sky's canvas, standing blacker than the cosmos with its pinpricks of light. Beside me, my dad leans on one of his poles with his chin up and his eyes wide. After a brief pause, we continue to send step after step after step up the shallow incline. I hang my head to focus on the climb, to steady my breaths. *Click-clack. Click-clack.* With every step forward on the hinged bindings, we drag our skis across the snow and the fibers on the skins cry out short rasps against the frozen earth. *Fzzz! Click-clack. Fzzz!*

The trail that we climb is one of the widest on the mountain; at its broadest, it spans fifty yards. The creators of the trail, artists with chainsaws for brushes, left small clusters of trees at intervals throughout. These islands sit oblong in the middle of a river of white, and as we approach them, my dad takes lefts around them while I take rights. At each junction, we silently part ways for fifteen or twenty yards before coming back together at the islands' far ends.

Though we lose sight of one another for a minute at a time when the trees come between us, we always reach the other side at the same time, our rhythm undisturbed, a slow and methodical synchronization.

Before long, sweat begins to gather underneath my hat and I stop for a short moment to shove my jacket into my backpack. Bent at the waist and fumbling with buckles that I cannot quite see, my dad continues upward. When I stand, he is nowhere in sight, and it is only in this moment of isolation that I recognize the hum and hiss of distant snowmaking guns a few trails over. Soft enough to blend into the quiet noise of the place, but loud enough to sweep over the sounds of his bindings and cover them like wind blowing snow over footprints.

I call out to him but do so softly, not wanting to disturb the quiet of the place. When I don't hear anything in response, I throw my backpack onto my shoulders and continue on, making out the trail by the dull white of moonlight-drenched snow. I've skied the trail more times than I can guess at, but it always looks different moving uphill, somehow obscured by the change in perspective. Though I know my dad can't be far ahead, this disorientation lends an air of urgency to my movements. Trucking forward, I catch up with him shortly and nestle back once more into his quiet companionship.

A distant roar begins to echo through the frosted pines. As the sound gets nearer, I see light married to the noise. Through the copse of trees that separates trail from trail, I can make out the blurry shape of a snowmobile whisking through the cloud of ice crystals that shower from snow guns fifteen feet overhead. Without speaking, we stop to watch. The shape of the machine and its rider are amorphous behind the frosted glass pane of the man-made storm.

On the back of the snowmobile, a single red light blazes. An antenna of LEDs sticks up from behind the seat, aglow with a warning of its presence. The snowmobile's light, a few

hundred yards away, illuminates the icy mist. The glow is brightest at the center, softer at the edges like branches thinning out as they escape a tree's trunk. The rider turns and heads down another trail: up or downhill is hard to tell, direction lost in the vertigo of nighttime.

In the echoing silence of 5:30am, I imagine I hear the ghosts of the lodge's bar from the night before. Eight hours earlier, I'd sat at one of the too-small wooden tables in the Sled Pub, drinking beer with my teammates in the Thursday-night adult race league. My dad had been on teams in the beer league throughout my childhood and his friends used to clap me on the back and say their hellos over the rims of pint glasses.

Thirteen years old, I sat in the lodge playing video games on my dad's computer while he nursed a beer with his teammates, snuck a bowl of the bar's over-salted popcorn out to me when the bartenders looked away. I had subbed for one of his absent teammates in the start gate of the racecourse that night, the worker in the timing shed giving me a knowing smirk as my dad told him that, *yes, of course, this is Mr. Wheeler, 46-year-old father of three*. My older brother and I had been beating my dad down the hill for years, and he beamed with laughing pride as I landed in the top five that night.

After an hour of climbing, we reach the top of the chairlift in a fit of labored breaths. The sun still sits snug and asleep beneath the horizon, but its first telltale signs begin to creep up into the New Hampshire morning. We free ourselves from our bindings and walk, poles still in hand, to the top of the offloading ramp where a chair hangs frozen in time on the flywheel. In a few hours, when the lift operators rouse the machine, the chair will be the first to make the turn back downhill. We set our backpacks down on the frosted padding of the seat and stand quietly,

working to catch our breath. Though I'm just a few feet from him, my dad is just an outline in the still-dark morning, wearing the pure black of a silhouette in front of the impending sunrise. We stand there idly admiring the first moments of the day, the sky fading from its midnight dark above us into blues, reds, and oranges over the hills in the distance.

Ten minutes later we're peeling the skins from our skis and doubling them over the mesh that keeps the glue sides from sticking to themselves. Folding them tight, we shove them down into our backpacks and click back into our bindings, this time locked tight to our skis. We don't bother with helmets or goggles, our slow meandering back down the mountain not worth soaking the pads with sweat.

We reach the bottom of the lift on the backside of the mountain and must climb once more in order to ski to the parking lot. On this second hike, we pass by the tracks that we'd left half an hour before. In the ballooning light of the early sun, the packed snow of the tracks shines with ice crystals. Looking down the cross-trail that we'd come up earlier, we see where our old path swayed back and forth from our fatigue. Because the path was laid ski length by ski length, its lines are angular and fractured compared to the clean arcs that we'd made with our turns coming down.

In short order, we arrive at the true summit of the mountain where we linger to watch the clouds of snow bursting from the guns perched upon their stanchions. Rolling hills form where the snow settles, broken only by the jagged tracks of the workers' snowmobiles. Two of the men pass by us on one of the machines as we pack up our skins once more, my dad and I returning their nods.

As the sun begins to creep further towards the day, we work our way down at the clip of a slow jog, my dad setting the pace. It's the slowest we ever ski together. Since I was little, I've

blown by him on my way down the mountain, waiting at junctures and crossroads for him to catch up. This morning, I follow slowly in his tracks, letting him lead the way back to the car. He turns his head and watches the tips of the branches that hug the trail on both sides. Our pole plants are slow and deliberate; I turn where he does, watching him carefully.

Usually we make it down the tiny mountain in under a minute, but today we stop together where trails meet, watch the sleepy light filter through snow-caked trees and cast long shadows.

