

## Thomas the Engine

A TINY HAND COVERED the train engine and pushed it around the small oval track. The young boy's imagination was completely absorbed, his face alight with joy.

"What's put a smile on your face?" Joe asked. He was relieved that LJ was awake, though LJ's half-open eyes still seemed to roll under the weight of exhaustion.

"You thinking about the route or are you home with the wife?"

"My son," LJ said. He half lifted himself in

his sleeping bag. "As a boy, he loved his train set more than anything in the world. He used to call it Thomas...treated it like a little brother."

"Yeah. What's e'up to now?"

"I doubt he still has Thomas, but that smile of his warms me every time I think about it."

"Well, you'll be wearing a big enough grin when you tell him about the route we've done."

The two men's faces, barely visible from within down-filled cocoons, pressed close as they strove to hear each other over the ceaselessly beating wind. Gusts slammed and ripped at the tent. Their voices had a painful-sounding rasp from the high altitude and the crystal air.

"Mind you, my feet are still cold," LJ said. "Seems his smile didn't quite reach them."

Joe croaked a laugh. "I'll put a brew on."

Slowly, Joe maneuvered around to reach out into the maelstrom and scoop up snow to melt for water. Transfixed by the purring cooker, he thought he could smell freshly laid carpet and hear the heavy mechanical breathing of an engine. Joe rubbed LJ's feet. They felt wooden, but Joe was gentle, as if he were bathing a child.





Moving his hands in slow circles, he pictured the quiet evenings at his own house, the glow of the lamplight on his wife's face, the pools of darkness beyond. He feared contentment, the possibility that the inertia of comfort would keep him at home, away from the wild tumult of the heights. But after eight years of marriage, maybe it was time to commit. He saw tiny feet and sticky little fingers; giggles and tantrums rang in his ears.

As the last grains of snow became liquid, Joe dropped a boiled sweet into the pan. A few minutes later, the hum of the gas coughed, paused, coughed and then gave a final *psst*. Even over the rattling and flapping of the tent, this noise hit Joe as a loud clang, the tolling of

the last of the gas.

"Hey you're in luck." Joe's whisper seemed to tear at his throat. "I found some candy this morning. We can have a proper brew with some flavor."

A muffled reply drifted out from the other end of the pile of down.

Moving with the slow deliberation of a bomb-disposal expert, Joe turned around with the precious liquid.

"Come on LJ, here you go, a nice brew."

LJ eventually got up onto his elbow, and Joe put the brew to his lips. After a few sips, LJ held the mug himself.

The roar of a nearby avalanche overtook the wind, but faded into the tempest as it fell

to the valley.

"Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Did you ever have a train set? My lad would just sit and watch it go around for hours. I'd sit and watch him, with that smile, watching it."

Joe strains to listen for another release of snow. "Nah mate. I was never into trains. It was bikes for me, always out an' about at all hours. What's your lad doin' now?"

"He builds jet engines for Rolls-Royce in Derby, but I think it's trains he really loves. I guess he thought aerospace sounded sexier.... I tried to be closer, to understand more, but I couldn't get him into the hills." LJ's voice becomes a faint stream of sounds drifting against the gusts.

Darkness falls.

The wind whips the tent without pause, and snow hisses as it sloughs off the thin fabric. LJ's rhythmic rasp and rattle tell Joe he's asleep. It's not the noise of the storm keeping Joe awake but the throbbing headache he's had forever. Or at least since he'd begun working and thinking for both of them. After they'd crossed the last crumbling rockband, the summit loomed into sight—a gleaming, iridescent beacon, otherworldly, irresistible—but retreat was no longer possible. By the next morning, fatigue had started eating away at LJ. At first, his feet stumbled only a little; LJ was sure he'd just been having a clumsy off day.

As Joe falls asleep, he tries to recall whose decision it was not to turn back sooner; he'd been so certain they had enough food and fuel to get to the top and to descend the southern slopes to the sanctuary of the next valley. There, they'd find the shelter and safety of other teams' camps.

Joe wakes with a start. Another day. The tent is still being battered, but something is different. Some quality in the sound and the light. It feels as if it takes him hours to move. Despite the roaring cacophony outside, there's a peculiar stillness around him, like the empty quiet of an abandoned house. The sharp tang of bile creeps into his nose. His senses respond to the smell before his consciousness. Eventually, he puts his head out of the tent, his face is assaulted by the wind, but it has stopped snowing, and there is the tiniest crack in the heavy sky. Somewhere behind him, above the clouds, the summit continues to flash its inviting warning.

—Ian Wyatt, Birmingham, England