

Upfront

I left home about a week before you're reading this. My flight departed SAV at 12:35 p.m., and the sun was shining brightly as I lugged my duffle and carry-on from the parking garage to the Delta counter. It was 75, but when you're uncomfortably laden and in a hurry, 75 feels like 90-plus.

It's not 90 now. Not here, as I write in a birchwood nook inside a rustic hotel next to a salmon stream in the middle of an endless snowfield in a place called Hella, Iceland, at 63.83 north latitude, in the fading final moments of today's 7 hours of light. Hella, indeed. Or heaven, if you're a little crazy, like me.

Two nights ago, the "storm of the century" began whipping its way across the southwest corner of this island (hence, the name...the local spelling of the sovereign state's name is I-s-l-a-n-d...which is not about ice, as one might think, but rather – geographical classification) nation. Icelandic authorities had declared a "red travel alert," effectively closing the country's roads. Accustomed to American weather-person hyperbole and prospective superstorms that never materialize, I was skeptical. Until 1 Monday morning, when 70-mile-an-hour winds pelted my windows with sleet.

Thirty-six hours later, the blizzard roars on. Yesterday afternoon, after two group hikes earlier in the day, I set out alone for extra exercise and soothing solitude, hoping to see a darting puffin or grazing sheep. Within 30 minutes, the falling snow thickened and the wind intensified, concealing my hotel, my footprints, and any signs of life other than my own breath, from my view. For the preceding half hour,



snow and ice had been assaulting the open slit between my hat and neck gaiter from the direction that felt like my 10 o'clock. So, I turned and oriented myself to benefit from helping gusts originating near my perceived-4 and hoped. Another 30 minutes passed, ample time for at least thirty bouts of second-guessing, before I saw something that looked like a structure rising from the hazy sea of white.

As a kid, I played in the snow. If you grew up north of the Mason-Dixon Line, you did, too. Few of life's experiences are as exhilarating. Remember the one-piece, zip-front snowsuit your mother insisted you wear over your regular clothes? The stinging cold on your face that turned your cheeks red for the night? The musty smell of a wet wool hat? Those things, and more – the eerie silence interrupted by a whistling gale, the clumsy progression of your irregular gait, the mineral taste of innocence as an oversized flake melts on your outstretched tongue – are manifestations of elemental joy.

This morning, I ran up a steep glacial hill. Most of my steps landed in drifts to my thighs. I was sweating beneath my layers as I reached the top. And then I rolled all the way down, as snow snuck up my pant legs and down my jacket's front. I was soaked, some perspiration, some precipitation, and a hint of grateful tears.

I ran up again. And rolled down. The hill was – best guess – 200 vertical feet, and steep, so I was working hard. But not too hard to prevent me from making a third run at the thing. So I did.

I'm scheduled to play in the snow for three more days. My friend said, "I know why you like this stuff...because it commands your total focus...it removes you completely from your own head."

I think that's true. I'm not thinking about anything pressing (except this magazine deadline), and I'm fine with it.

Checking my iPhone, I notice that the storm is supposed to end at 10 local time tonight. That's okay...there will be plenty of untracked powder in the morning, and a chance to see the Northern Lights tonight. Meanwhile, my longjohns have time to dry.

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