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Eastern Bluebird

BY BRUCE PRATT

WHEN I HEARD TOMMY HIBBERT'S raspy, rhythmic taunt, "Look who...waits for Eastern Blue...to join the crew...it's Lazy Pru," I dropped my skis and ducked for the snowball. I dodged the first, but the second grazed my helmet. "Prudhomme, you slacker," Hibs shouted as he skated toward me. "Time you got off the couch, pinhead."

"Go back to bed," I said.

Hibs slid to a stop. "Working the race or poaching fresh corduroy?"

"I'm TD," I said.

"Figured you'd given up officiating. Got too soft to play outside, you goat roper."

I tugged off my right glove. "Hand surgery. Couldn't ski until late January. This is the first race I knew I could make."

"We had ten events in February," Hibbert said. He stuffed a chew into his jaw.

"They let you do that?" I asked.

"Think they'll fire me the week before Nationals?"

Hibs is the last of the ski bums from the winter of '92-'93 who still works at the mountain. His crew's average age can't be twenty-two. He's fifty-three, same age as me. Five-ten, 165, wind-creased, and greying, Hibs can accomplish more than any two of his charges and will work all day in subzero temps to ensure a race is run by the book—for three bucks over minimum wage.

"Don't know, Hibs," I said. "They should can you so the guests can't see your ugly mug."

He arched his eyebrows. "Sandy Miller doesn't think it's ugly," he said. "I'm living at her place in Little Creek."

"You swore you'd never live off mountain."

"Love works in mysterious ways, Pru, and it's rent-free."

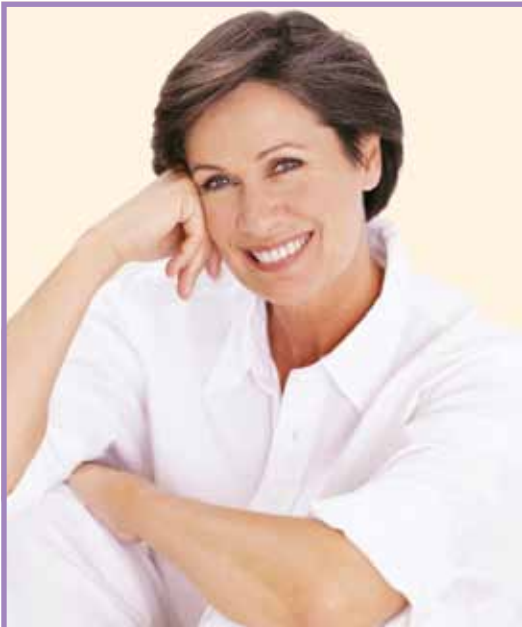
"Sounds more like mooching than love."

Hibs slipped on his aviators. "Don't fret, there's plenty of loving. Making it legal this spring. Don't be a pain in my ass today, and you might get invited."

"Don't know whether to congratulate you or offer Sally my condolences," I said.

"Your call, Pru, but listen up. Betsy Rounds is setting first run. She takes forever. Make her send them straight as you can so we get done before Reggae Weekend." Hibs tapped his chest pack. "Jury channel's three. Don't wear it out." He skated toward the lift.

For March events, you ride the chair in the light instead of cramming into a box-cat at O-Dark-Thirty, and even with a rash of falls and gate repairs, the race is done before the light gets sketchy. And though wearied from a long winter, the crew is re-energized by the Eastern Bluebird days—full sun, highs in 30s—soft-but-stable snow and more time to free ski. With National's looming, Hibs would give his guys time off and rely more on volunteers to work the kid's races. The youth coaches would be winding down or "halfway to the beach," as Hibs liked to say, and most of the lower-seeded kids would be looking forward to sleeping



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FICTION

in on weekends.

When I worked at the mountain, I hated the end of the season Last Rites Party and was one of the few who didn't head to The Cape or MDI in the summer, preferring to guide rafts on the Penobscot.

I slid off the lift and skied down to where Betsy was setting gate five. Hibs's crew was setting fence while he set up the timing and start wand. For a higher-level race, he'd delegate that chore so he could keep an eye on the course setter, but Hibs trusts me. Trust had cemented our friendship, and, for a while, sundered it.

Winter '93-'94 was bitter. January never saw a high of ten above at the base or zero at the summit. Three-speed events were canceled when brutal winds shut down the lifts. When two guys quit, Hibs and I were put on salary. We were assigned to assembling, organizing, and distributing gates and fencing for major events, which were hauled up the mountain at night on a snow sled—a lowboy on skids—behind a groomer and dropped off at intervals along the course. In theory, we got a raise because we still got paid when events were canceled, but with the extra hours, we didn't gain any ground.

One night, Hibs and I were perched on bundles of fencing when the cat slid backward on Headwall, and the sled jackknifed. We both reached for the sled's high side railing, as it tilted thirty degrees and rammed into the hillside with a shudder. Gates flew off and a roll of event fence snagged on Hib's boot buckle, taking his feet out from under him. I let go of the rail, dove on top of him as we slid overboard. We rolled to a stop 100 feet down the hill.

We got untangled, gained our footing, and surveyed the wreckage. While our skis and most of the fencing and gates were still on the sled, the rest were strewn about the bottom of the headwall. "Pick up tonight?" Hibs said.

"If not, the groomers will grind it up," I said.

"Ever boot-skied the Headwall?"

"If that didn't kill us, what will?" I said

Hibs howled like a drunk in an old Western.

When we reached the spilled supplies, Eddie, the driver, revved up the cat and the sled straightened behind him. He backed down to us, and as we grabbed our skis, he



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bounced down from the cab and said, "Jesus, I about pissed myself."

"You, too?" Hibs said.

Took half an hour to pick up. The stars were strewn across the sky like the broken bundles of bamboo and so bright we skied down without our headlamps.

At the Competition Center, Hibs said, "Pru, we just cheated the devil. We could get loaded, drive to Kingfield doing a hundred, and be fine."

We've each told that story, alone or in concert, hundreds of times. Among old-timers, it's a legend. The story we don't tell is about Sharon Cleaves. She and Hibs had been together for two years. Then one weekend in June of '95 she shows up by herself on my raft.

"Dumped me," she said when I asked about Hibs. "We're living in the same place, so it's really hard."

I found Sharon a gig at our base camp as a replacement for a girl who blew out her knee. At a fourth of July party, we started making out. In August, we rented a place at the mountain. The first problem was, Sharon left Hibs. He came home from a late shift at the restaurant and found a note. The second problem was, he believed I was obligated to find out what happened from him. At orientation that November, Hibs wouldn't speak to me. When I asked why, he said, "Ask Sharon."

When I did, she paid the rest of the season's rent and bolted the mountain for good.

Two nights later at the bar at The Bag, Hibs sidled up and said, "She say goodbye or just leave a note?"

"Stormed out, said what happened between you two wasn't my business."

"What'd you say?"

"Don't like being lied to."

Hibs smiled. "Let's have half a dozen to celebrate."

"I'm two and a half in," I said.

"I'll catch up."

I nursed half a beer while Hibs killed two and ordered a third.

"Been thinking about the night the sled slid," he said. "We could have died, man."

"Eddie hadn't gained traction we might well have."

"Even so, you probably saved my life by jumping on me."

"You'd have done the same."

"Yeah," Hibs said. "You're right about that, anyway." ■

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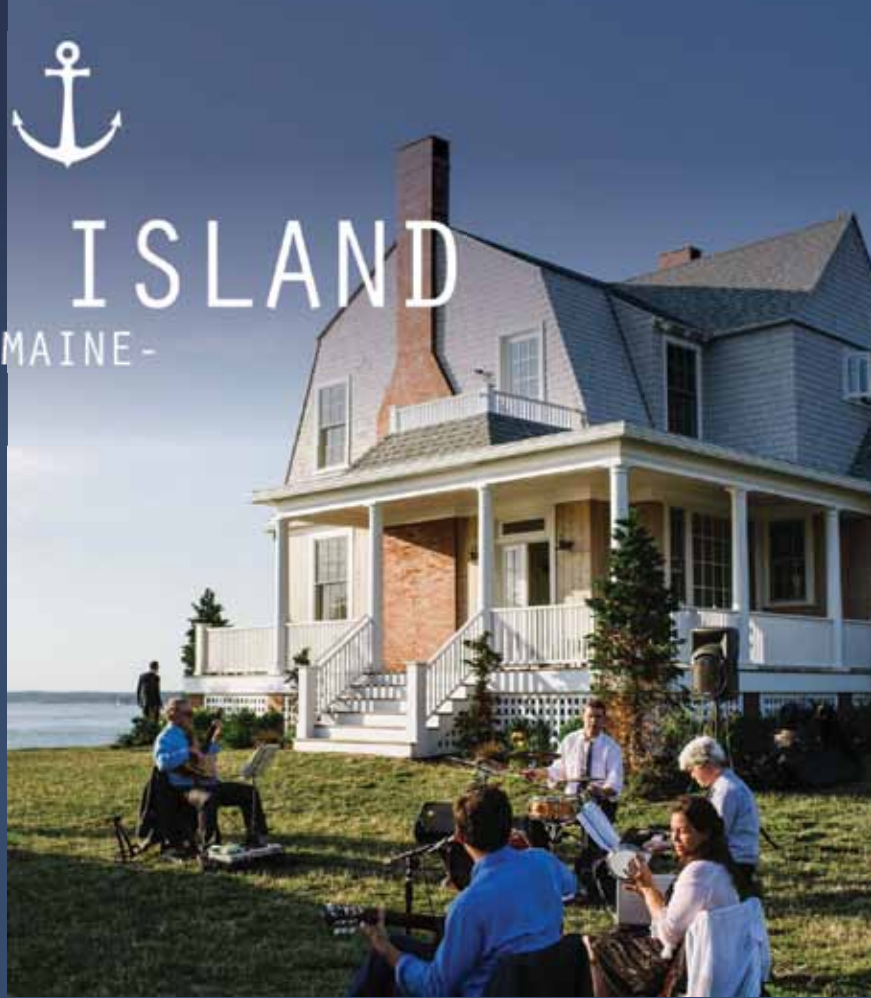
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