

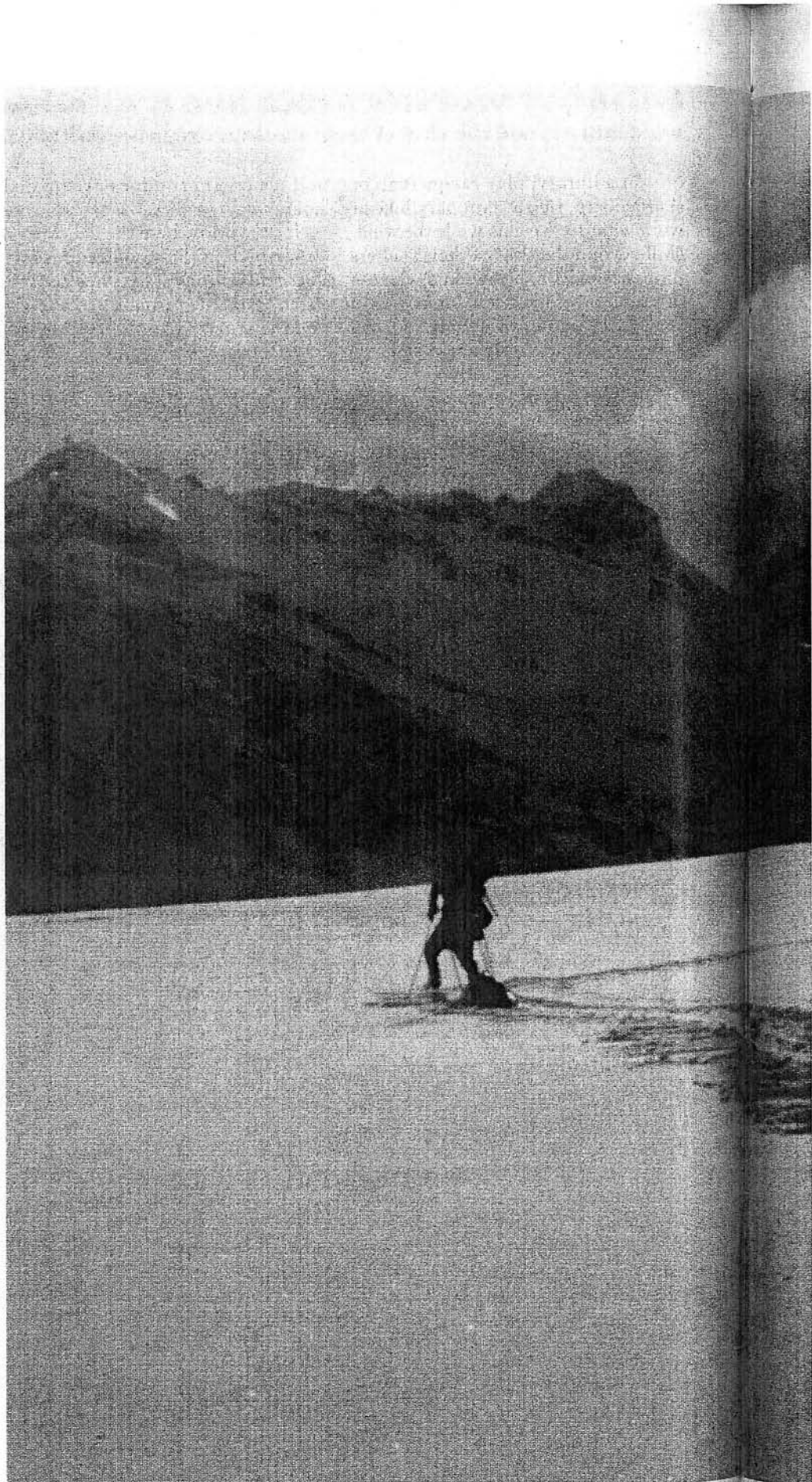
# One-Third Peanut Butter Sandwich per Person per Mile

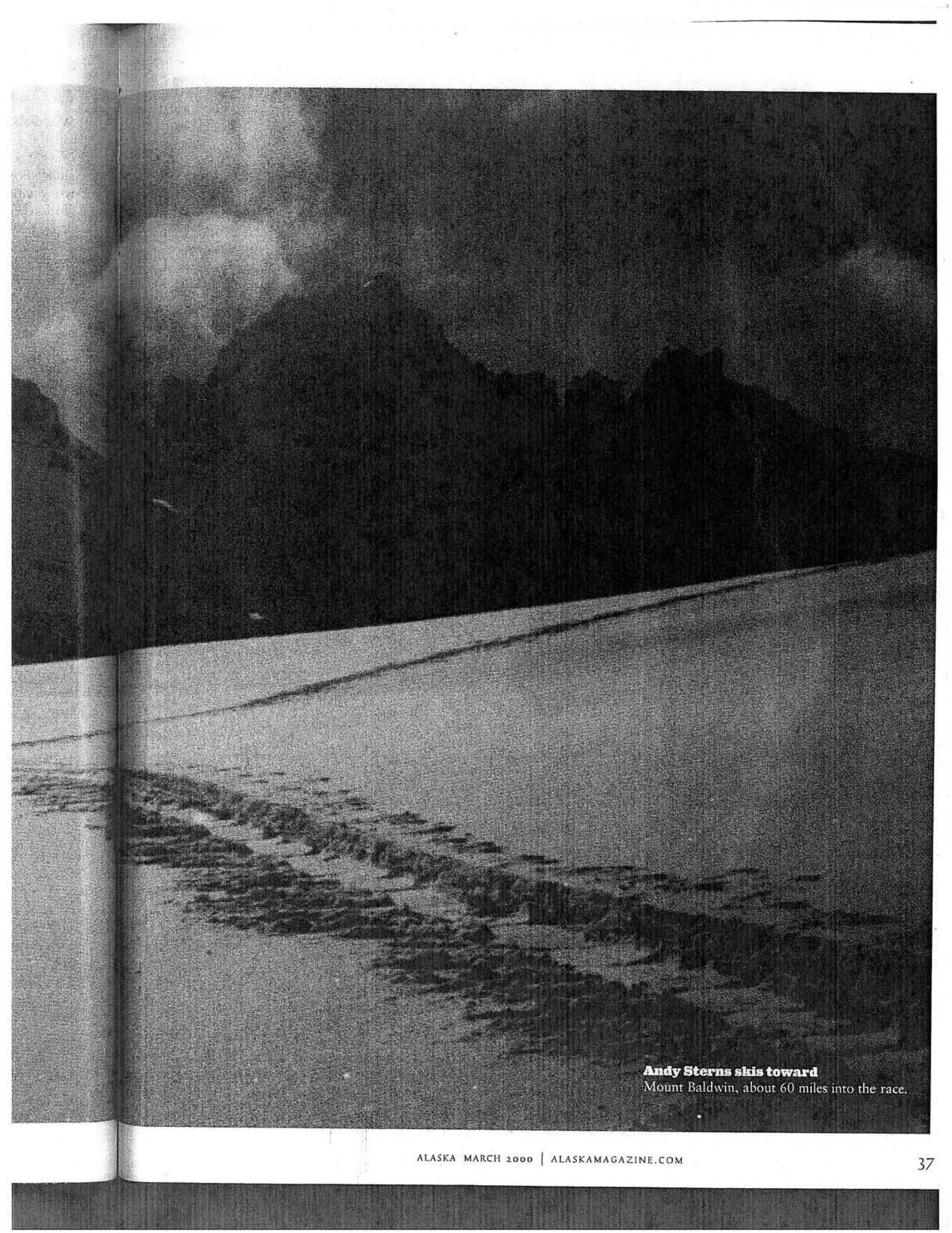


One hundred and two peanut butter sandwiches. Peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and honey, peanut butter and marshmallow cream. Peanut butter on wheat bread,

peanut butter on raisin bread, peanut butter on nut bread. That's what my friend, Andy, and I packed on the 150-mile Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race. And we never got sick of eating peanut butter. In fact, by the ninth day of the race, when the sandwiches were gone and we ate a tube of Tom's Peppermint and Baking Soda Toothpaste, peanut butter would have gone down like strawberry shortcake. It seems that the main ingredient of Tom's, chalk, is a poor substitute for fat and carbohydrates during hard winter travel. This was just one of the lessons we learned during the 1999 Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race.

Held in late March, the Classic is a ski, walk and wade from Nabesna to McCarthy, through the Wrangell Mountains in eastern Alaska. In its 14th year, the race appeals to mountaineering types who run their fingers over topo maps to choose their own paths through the wilderness. The rules are spartan: no motors, no food drops,





**Andy Sterns skis toward**  
Mount Baldwin, about 60 miles into the race.

**Skolai Pass,  
a narrow  
pathway**  
between  
mountainous  
walls and  
Russell Glacier,  
is just a sample  
of the dramatic  
scenery that  
racers  
encounter.



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no littering. First prize, awarded to all participants, is a T-shirt. The direct line from Nabesna to McCarthy crosses glaciers and high country, much of it in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, the largest in America. Twelve of the 14 racers opted for the lowland route of mountain passes and river valleys that skirted most of the glaciers but added about 30 miles. Race organizer Dave Cramer and his friend, Rourke Williams from Fairbanks, were the only two-person team to choose the glacier route.

Rourke, a stocky wilderness classic veteran with a weathered face, hinted at what lay ahead of us. As we checked our gear in Cramer's workshop during the night before the race, we talked about dogs. I asked Rourke if a dog had ever completed the event with its master.

"A race like this would kill a dog," he said.

Oh.

Any dog would have loved the first day, though. As we filed down a snow-machine trail from Devil's Mountain Lodge, the sky was blue, the temperature was above freezing, and the sun released just a hint of earth smell from the melting snowpack. Racers double-poled down the glare ice of the Nabesna River. Some removed their shirts, exposing the pasty white skin of winter. The leaders began skate skiing on their metal-edged skis. Soon, everyone was skating. As I worked up a sweat in heavy leather boots, I noticed a tickle on both of my ankles. I ignored the feeling; after all, Andy and I were cruising.

But when we awoke on a rock shelf above the ice of Cooper Creek the following morning, my socks were pasted to my ankles with dried blood. Andy had experienced his own foot-related problem the night before—his frozen bindings wouldn't release his ski boots until we fired up the stove and poured hot water on them.

Buoyed by fresh socks and thawed bindings, we actually took a brief lead in the race as we passed through Cooper Pass. Our moment of glory lasted about two hours, after which we looked back to see Gabe Lydic swooping down on us.

Gabe, the winner of the race for the past two years, wore wrap-around sunglasses and a brown ponytail.

"You guys havin' a good time?" he asked.

His wife La-Ona, whose name is

aply an Alaska Native term meaning "the Rock," followed close behind him. She and Gabe would be the eventual race winners, crossing the finish line with another team that would share the event's low key "victory." They looked graceful and efficient, skiing with packs balanced neatly on their shoulders. I envied them as I looked at the \$10 sled I was towing. A new crack in the bottom had the irritating tendency to fill the sled with the wilderness equivalent of shaved Italian ice.

We watched Gabe and La-Ona ski

**I asked Rourke if a dog had ever completed the event with its master.**

**"A race like this would kill a dog," he said.**



down Notch Creek toward the town of Chisana. It was the last we'd see of them, though their ski tracks were a comforting sight in the days ahead as we followed their path toward McCarthy.

The metal clamp that connected Andy's sled to his waist threw a bolt on the upper White River. I tried to hide my glee when he suggested camping. We were five days into the event by then, and six other racers had already passed us. My urge to compete was dead. The fire in my belly faded in the face of the heat from my bleeding blisters.

Andy allowed no such change of heart. He'd spent the past few months covering a third of Alaska on skis, finish-

ing both the Iditasport 100-mile and Iditasport Extreme 350-mile races, and spending a few nights under spruce trees at 30 below in the process. He was the engine of our team. I was the brakes.

I wanted to slow down and absorb the sights and smells of the country through which we'd been rushing. Skolai Pass, a narrow path of rocks shoved to the side by Russell Glacier, was just ahead. Beyond that loomed the colossus of Russell Glacier itself—walls of dirty ice bigger than a WalMart stood on one end. As we set up the tent in a hobbit

**Andy prepares a snow cave to provide shelter from the wind in Solo Pass.**

forest of dwarf willows, the full moon crawled over the mountains. Snacking by the campfire on greasy strips of smoked salmon, one of the few non-peanut butter-smear items in our sleds, I felt that dangerous inner calm that makes me want to repeat whatever I'm doing, even if the other 90 percent of the experience is hell. Andy knows the drill. When he runs races like the classic, he says he's "feedin' the rat."

The rat began to get very hungry two days later, when we tore apart our last peanut butter sandwich on Nizina Glacier. As Andy handed me half of our final ration of food, we both wondered how we were going to fuel ourselves across the remaining 40 miles to McCarthy.

Physiologists say that body fat really matters in the cold, that a spare tire around one's middle is not a bad thing to have along when winter camping. Andy has the body fat of a pencil.

I eat a lot more Ben & Jerry's than he does, so I pulled what was left of both

off. After a few minutes, Andy's engine sped up again. We skied together, glad for the boost but knowing it couldn't last.

About 20 miles shy of McCarthy, we set up the tent near Spruce Point, hoping sleep might help us move a bit faster the next day.

In the morning, Andy found three almonds in the bottom of the food sack They'd spilled out of a fist-size bag another skier had given us a few days earlier.

I put one in my cheek, letting it linger like chewing tobacco before grinding it between my molars. Unless a cabin appeared, the almonds would have to provide the fuel to get us to McCarthy. As we started skiing, I looked back at Andy and saw a dark figure loping toward him. There, trotting along the ice of the Nizina River, was a wolverine. The animal approached to within 30 feet. Then, running into a wall of scent from overused polypro, it turned and bounded away.

That was April 6th, two days after

to take them off. They were surprisingly stable in the current, and the cold water felt good on my ankles.

Darkness fell just as we reached a road that led to McCarthy. The surface had been recently graded, exposing gravel, covered by an inch of new snow, that prevented our skis from gliding. The rocks jerked us forward against our bindings, abrading my ankles miserably on downhill.

With frozen boots that moved only at the hinge points, we limped along on our skis under the bobbing light of Andy's headlamp. Snowshoe hares bounced away like furry hallucinations. Andy kept me awake by telling stories of the Iditarod. Once, when we paused to paw inside the peanut butter jar and lick our fingers, I literally fell asleep on my feet.

Andy's headlamp died at 2 a.m. Shuffling through starlight, we smelled wood smoke. McCarthy appeared as dots of light in a broad valley. We limped into the sleeping town, wondering where the official finish of the race



**One more** peanut butter sandwich for the road.

sleds down the Nizina River. I'd never seen my teammate move so slowly. Without food, his engine was sputtering. I put my head down and skied forward, trying to pull him along by example as he had pulled me earlier. Behind me, Andy became smaller and smaller.

I dreamed of peanut butter, of finding a cabin with a bag of rich, fatty, dog food within. Or bad mayonnaise. Anything. That's when I remembered the toothpaste. I offered it to Andy and he sucked down half the tube. I finished it

### **I'd never seen my teammate move so slowly. Without food, his engine was sputtering.**

the date when the race organizer would officially consider skiers overdue. A few hours later a small silver airplane banked steeply and landed on the river; the first we'd seen or heard on the whole trip.

Pilot Gary Green of McCarthy stepped out.

"You guys made the front page of the *News-Miner*," he said.

Andy and I looked at each other. The only thing worse than putting yourself in a bad situation is being rescued. But a more powerful force dulled our embarrassment. Green pulled out a bag of tortilla chips, raw hot dogs, bread and a four-pound jar of peanut butter. We attacked the hot dogs first. "Well, you can ski in from here. McCarthy's right around the corner," Green said. "Take that food with you."

We nodded our thanks to the pilot, who later charged us \$125 for peanut butter delivery services. It was a bargain.

We had full bellies, but we still had to get to McCarthy. The lower Nizina River had broken up by April 6, forcing us to wade. We crossed the main channel of the river five times. We waded with our skis on, simply because we were too tired

might be. To our surprise, we saw Elizabeth's truck.

Elizabeth, who splits her time between Fairbanks and McCarthy, had helped us make the 102 sandwiches at my cabin. Busting through the door, we woke our friend, hugged her, and collapsed into warm chairs. I gorged on fudge. Andy ate three peanut butter sandwiches.

Back in my Fairbanks cabin a day later, Andy and I stood by the wood stove talking about the race. He munched a peanut butter and marshmallow creme sandwich. As the cabin warmed, I felt the burn of my ankles and numbness in my frostbitten fingertips. Andy's nose was scarred from a fall on Nizina Glacier. On the floor, he saw a copy of a newspaper article in which a Fairbanks journalist predicted Andy and I would "join an elite fraternity" of wilderness racers when we finished the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race. He picked it up, and laughed.

"If it's a fraternity, I think we just got hazed."

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