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A Man of Power, with Spikes on His Boots

Clouds kept Whitney Valley tightly covered for weeks that winter. Snow fell and stopped falling and fell again, until we had three feet of snow on the ground.

Home schooling used some of our indoor time. Our daughters, Juniper and Amanda were the main learners and my wife, Laura, and I were the teachers, though we adults usually learned as much as our daughters. We played games together. We read and worked at creative projects. We stayed happy enough through stormy days, when snow and wind caressed our ramshackle house, and through grey and cloudy days between storms. We knew what Whitney winters were like when we first set up housekeeping there, so we weren't surprised by the weather nor particularly discontent.

Nonetheless, when clouds blew away over the mountains surrounding the valley and the sun shone, reflecting intensely from new, white snow, we stampeded outdoors. We couldn't go far in the soft, deep snow, but we reveled in the sunshine, played, even worked. We shoveled snow from the path in front of the house and from the wood pile. I split firewood, and Amanda and Juniper helped me carry wood into the house.

Warm sunshine melted the surface of the snow. The sky stayed clear. Brilliant stars shone from a deep, cold, dark sky that night, and the temperature fell to twenty degrees below zero in Whitney Valley. The surface of the snow froze to a hard crust of ice.

The sun rose above granite bluffs east of us and cast dazzling shafts of light in reflection from the hard surface of snow. After breakfast, we went outside. The crust frozen on the snow's surface bore our weight. It also cast us slipping and sliding. We

skated along in short strides and often fell to the hard surface, padded enough by our layers of clothing to keep from getting hurt but still a little frustrated by finding it so hard to walk.

I thought of my caulked boots. Locally pronounced “cork” boots, they are leather boots made for logging, with many short, sharp metal spikes protruding from the soles. I had worn them when I cut dead trees into firewood. The caulks, or spikes, sticking out of the bottoms of the boots made it possible for me to walk on down trees without slipping off while I limbed the trees and got into a position where I could cut them to length for firewood.

I slipped and slid toward the house, “Where are you going?” Laura called as she walked across the top of a barbed wire fence, now buried under snow, slid, sat down without really wanting to, and slid onward to a low spot in the snow, quite out of control, spun around toward me, and settled to motionless in bright sunshine.

Juniper said, “Don’t give up. This is fun, too.”

I said, “I’m not giving up. I just had an idea. I’ll be right back. Don’t go away.”

It took me a few minutes to change. The caulked boots came almost to my knees and required some time to lace up.

Then I left the porch and gained the surface of the snow, and I was a man of power as the sharp spikes bit into the surface of ice and held me steady. I walked. I ran. My spikes said, “Click, clack, squeak, crunch, click” as they bit into the hard surface above more than three feet of snow and kept me from skidding. I danced around Laura, who had fallen again. I gave her a hand up and helped her stay up, her feet slipping and sliding but my feet staying solid wherever I placed them. We danced our surface-of-the-snow dance. I left her to stand, then walk, then fall. I danced with Amanda. I danced with Juniper. We laughed in the bright, still-quiet-cold sunshine.

Laura looked frustrated, almost angry at her clown of a husband who stepped so sure with every footstep, never slipped while she couldn't even stand. I said, "I will tell you a secret that will disarm your feeling that it's unfair. The secret is, winter rapidly takes its revenge on my smart-aleck antics. These boots are one thickness of leather, with leather soles from which metal, very-quick-to-transmit-cold, caulks protrude, and it is still below zero. They are summer boots for sure, and my feet are cold cold cold, and it's past time to fancy dance my way back to the fire."

I had nearly stayed too long. My feet hurt by the time I got back to the house, stripped off the icy boots and hobbled to the fire. But I wasn't frostbit, and after a while by the stove, I slipped back into winter boots and joined the outsiders in all our slipping and sliding.

But for a few minutes, for a run, a dance, a walk, and two more dances, I had been a man of power, briefly unaffected by winter forces that would bring us all down, and I would never forget that time of freedom, that time of sureness on my feet above the hard, slick ice in cold and brilliant winter sunshine.