

BY MORT GERBERG

ALTERED STATE

Thinking back, I probably always wanted to be At One With Nature. Especially in winter. I was a street-smart kid in New York City, and even as I'd scoop the white stuff off car fenders for snowball fights, I secretly longed to shake it out of pine trees. Sometimes I'd dream about going on an Ultimate Winter Adventure to Somewhere Over the Skyscrapers. And who knows, maybe it was this yearning that somehow contributed to my extraordinary transformation.

It was February. I was in Central Park on my cross-country skis, sliding over a cover of snow that was thinner than a slice of turkey in a midtown diner sandwich. I felt the familiar scraping of my skis over rocks, tufts of grass, and clumps of frozen doggy do. I heard the usual cacophony of car horns, hovering helicopters, and cell phone chatter. But I didn't see the abandoned water bottle. My ski twisted and I crashed to the ground.

Angrily, I grabbed it and flung it against a tree. "Dopey bottle!" I cursed. "You're supposed to be recycled!"

The cap popped off and, with the sound of air expelled from a whoopee cushion, white vapor streaked out and morphed into a small old man with a grizzled white beard, wearing a red ski jacket and woolen hat with earflaps.

"Thanks," he grimaced. "But did you have to throw so *hard*?"

He rubbed his back and wagged a finger. "Don't even ask why I was in there! Better you shouldn't know!"

"No problem, Groucho," I smirked.

"Listen, Sonny," the old man snapped, "you'd be kvetchy, too, if you were cooped up in a bottle without any heat or hot water in the middle of winter, yet! Anyhow, I'm the Genie of Terrific Winter Experiences," he said as he tipped his hat, "and you get one wish."

"Only *one*?" I said.

"Hey, this is New York," growled the little man. "It's too expensive, three."

So the Genie of Terrific Winter Experiences, intuiting my inner desire to become At One With Nature, belched twice, and in an instant we were on a beautiful peak at Copper Mountain—12,000 feet up, with 200 inches of powder, skiing through quiet evergreen glades, under a cloudless blue sky and blazing sun. My eyes widened and my chest heaved as I inhaled crisp, pine-scented air.

"Not so bad, huh?" asked the Genie, pointing to the pristine scenery.

"Maybe," I said. "But this'll take some getting used to. I don't usually trust breathing air I can't see." I carved a wide turn, kicking up a slow-motion spray of white. "Or skiing on snow I can't hear."



"A real Easterner," sneered the Genie. He burped again, and suddenly we were snowboarding down a double-black-diamond trail at Keystone, bouncing from one mogul to another at breakneck speed, yet in absolute control in the perfect conditions. "I never knew I was this good!" I shouted elatedly. "You're not!" the Genie roared back. "But I am!"

He hiccupped, and in a flash we were snowshoeing up a silent snowy slope at Steamboat, peering through binoculars at wildlife prowling through green forests, at birds gliding through an azure sky. A little cough, and the next moment we were ice-skating at Vail, spinning through more double axels than a sixteen-wheeler on I-95.

The Genie's sigh then brought us to a luxurious soak in a steaming Aspen hot spring, where we sipped white wine with people who looked like models from glossy magazine ads. A blink later, we were on a horse-drawn sleigh, riding to a restaurant atop Beaver Creek for what must have been a nine-star gourmet meal.

"A true Ultimate Winter Adventure, Genie," I purred, dabbing my mouth. "But what is this winter wonderland, that's put me in a state of euphoria?"

"Not *euphoria*," grumbled the Genie. "It's the state of *Colorado*."

He gulped a last drop of Cognac. "I have to go," he scowled. "Your freebie junket is over."

I wanted more, but the Genie of Terrific Winter Experiences said I'd had my wish. His gig was up, and he was moving on. He'd agreed to write an on-line blog on Colorado winters for *The Puffington Flash*. I had to choose my next trail on my own. A cloud of vapor and he vanished.

I worked it out. I know which side of the mountain my snow falls on. I'm now the Western Winter Consultant for Colorado's tourist office. Call me. I'll show you how to be One With Nature, too. It'll be absolutely magical.

Mort Gerberg's "Last Laughs" cartoon collection was published recently by Scribner.

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