

And so in mid-January of 1954, when the Minnesota winter had settled its icy hand on the north country, it came to pass that four of us, all thirteen years old, went to a Saturday matinee showing of a really interesting and informative film about how radiation from nuclear testing (known then simply as A-Bomb experiments) had caused a species of common ant to mutate and grow to be huge, forty-foot-tall monsters. The radiation also made the ants develop an overwhelming need to eat human flesh. The movie was called *Them!* and we all agreed it was well worth the fifteen cents' admission and the extra dime for popcorn and another nickel for a box of Dots.

We were also impressed by how the giant ants, which made a sound strangely similar to small, peeping chicks, could suck all the flesh from a cow's skeleton (or a human's, come to that) and leave the bones intact. As we exited the theater, we argued about how *we* would have handled the ants. As I remember it, the government invaded their nests and very brave men attacked them with flamethrowers....

That is, we all discussed the film except Carl Peterson. He had been strangely quiet since the showing of the newsreel and a short sports film about a man who had gone for the world speed record on skis and exceeded seventy-four miles an hour.

We walked along in the steam from our breath, talking about giant ants that sucked flesh from bones, and Carl stopped dead and said,

"I can do it."

"Do what?" Pete Amundsen asked.

"Break the speed record on skis."

There was a pause. Then, from Pete: "Here? There isn't a hill for a thousand miles—maybe two thousand. How are you going to get up any speed?"

Carl shook his head. "I don't need a hill. It didn't say anything about a hill. It just said you have to go fast on skis. Well, I've got these old army trooper skis and we can smooth them up."

"I don't care how smooth they are, on flat ground they won't move—"

"Archie," Carl cut in. "We get Archie to pull me

with his car. He's got a hot car, hasn't he? We just get him to pull me faster than seventy-four miles an hour and bingo, I've got the record." And then he said the one thing he should never have said.

"It can't miss—what can go wrong?"

Every single one of us knew at least one very good reason not to do it—it would break the skis; it would break the car; it would break Carl; it would *kill* Carl. But not one of us said a word.

In all of us was the thirst for what can only be called scientific knowledge, the need to know the answer to the question:

What exactly *would* happen to Carl if he went over seventy-four miles an hour on a pair of army surplus skis?

Of course, there were many logistical problems to be overcome. Carl had the skis, that was true, but the rest of the equipment was lacking.

Nowadays, it may be hard to realize how difficult it was then to get simple things for outdoor use. There was no L.L.Bean or any other specific outdoor supplier. There was the Sears and Roebuck

catalog, and they would send you a shotgun or a tent that the famous baseball player Ted Williams said was the best in the world.

There really wasn't much in the way of equipment available anyway, nor were there any real sporting goods stores. Hardware stores sometimes sold roller skates with metal wheels that locked on to your shoes with clamps. Ammunition for .22 rifles was sold in grocery stores.

Which left army surplus.

The Second World War had just ended nine years earlier and clothing, rations, ammo, guns, jeeps, even some explosives could be bought for almost nothing from the government. A 30/06 rifle went for seventeen dollars, a .45 automatic pistol was eleven dollars, a jeep cost a hundred, a fighter plane went for three hundred and you could even buy a tank or a battleship. It was said that John Wayne had bought a destroyer or minesweeper and turned it into a yacht, and there was a bachelor farmer out east of town who bought a hundred or more *tons* of high

explosives to use for clearing stumps. (It didn't work out so well for him because he'd stored them in his barn and as near as they could figure it a mouse or rat chewed on a blasting cap and set them off, making the whole farm vanish. The crater smoked for days. All they found of the farmer was his left boot but Archie said that didn't prove much because it could have been anybody's foot in the boot.)

So we went to the army surplus store and for seven dollars and eighty-one cents we completely outfitted Carl for his world-record speed-skiing attempt. For those who might think we weren't serious about his effort, let me point out that this was not an inconsiderable sum. A man working in a factory was paid a dollar and five cents an hour and a Dairy Queen cone was a nickel—ten cents if it was dipped in chocolate.

By pooling all our money we spent nearly a man's daily wages on Carl. We got him the best equipment we could find.

We found flight goggles—the kind with the large, soft rubber wraparound frame—and a leather flight helmet. A leather flight jacket used up four dollars; it was on sale because it had three holes that were kind of stained. We did not say the jacket might bring him bad luck even though some of us were thinking it.

Then came sheepskin flight pants, only half a foot too long, sheepskin-lined flight boots just two sizes too large and a jumbo pair of genuine sheepskin gunner's mittens with a separate trigger finger.

When Carl was fully dressed, standing there in Bruce Carlson's garage, he looked like a large leather ball with tinted green eyes.

"It must have taken four or five sheep to make his outfit," Bruce said.

"I can't see through the goggles," Carl said. "Should they be all fogged up like this?"

"Don't worry," Bruce said. "Once you're outside and moving in back of Archie's car they'll clear right up."

"Should the pants legs be bunched like that around my ankles?"

"Don't worry," Bruce said. "Once you're outside and moving, the wind will tighten them up."

"Should the jacket be this loose around my neck?"

"Don't worry," Bruce said. "Once you're outside and moving..."

And so, with all Carl's worries completely covered, we walked down to the Texaco station and approached the second most important ingredient in the record attempt: Archie.

"No," he said. "Absolutely not."

He was adamant until Bruce said, "We'll give you five dollars."

We all looked at each other, then gave Bruce the evil eye. *What five dollars?*

"Cash?" Archie asked.

Bruce nodded.

"In advance?"

Silence.

Pete finally said, "As soon as we've made it shoveling walks after the next snow..."

Archie thought a moment. He probably knew we didn't have that much ready money, knew we had spent what we had on Carl's clothes. He also knew we would pay him. Not paying a debt to Archie—Archie of the ducktail haircut and hot car, who was said to sometimes carry a switchblade, that Archie—would be something close to suicide for a thirteen-year-old.

He shrugged. "All right—but you pay me right after the next snow."

We were standing in Alan Grenville's garage because Bruce's parents were home and we didn't want anyone to notice us. Carl was suited up. We had opened the garage to let the cold air in—it was fifteen below zero outside—so Carl wouldn't overheat, but he looked a bit sweaty just the same. I thought it might be nerves and he might back out.

"You don't have to do this," Alan said, as

though reading my mind. Still, I had that healthy scientific curiosity about just exactly what would happen to Carl.

We all turned to look at Alan and Carl. Alan's mother was Canadian and that made him somehow more sensible and wiser than the rest of us. Canadians were known to be smarter because they had better schools and even though Alan had been born in the States and had never actually lived in Canada, he had a certain status.

"You can back out now with no shame."

Alan always sounded so... so *official*, maybe because he had some of his mother's accent. He actually said that: "No shame." Just like a Mountie would say, I thought.

But Carl shook his head. "No. I want that record. Call Archie. Now." He looked out the garage door at the Friday evening light. "We still have a couple of hours before dark."

But it turned out that Archie wouldn't be able to make the run until the next day, which was probably better because it was Saturday and we'd have more time. So I slept over at Carl's

house and we spent the night getting his gear ready.

Of course it was as ready as it could be but we kept going over it. Then Carl brought up the fact that he hadn't waxed his skis. I'm pretty sure it was Carl because I don't want to be the one who said it, because everybody later agreed that waxing the skis the way we did might have been where the problems started.

I had heard of waxing skis somewhere but Carl had seen a picture taken in Norway in a *National Geographic* magazine when he was looking for purely educational pictures of naked women in Africa or South America. In this picture some Norwegians were waxing their skis.

"It said the wax made their skis faster."

"We don't have any wax," I pointed out.

"Mom does. Her canning paraffin. She's got tons of it."

Everybody canned vegetables and fruit in the fall and they poured wax over the top of the jars to seal them airtight. One of the best things in the world was opening a new jar of chokecherry jelly,

because the wax had been poured in hot and the jelly had mixed into it as it hardened, so you could chew on the wax and taste the jelly for hours. It was better than candy.

We found the wax and I held a cake of it and one ski, and he had another cake and the other ski. "How do we put it on?" I asked.

"Rub it back and forth on the wood until it warms up and then it should stick."

So we rubbed, and rubbed, and just when I thought it wouldn't work, the wood actually warmed and the wax became sticky and almost seemed to flow onto the surface of the ski.

"How much?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Wipe it all on. The more the better."

And so we did. Each ski had on it what amounted to a good quarter of a pound of wax, nearly a quarter of an inch thick along its full length, and when we leaned the skis against the outside wall of the house and went to bed the last

thing Carl said to me as I curled up on the floor in a sleeping bag was:

"Man, those things ought to be fast."

We didn't know that there was special ski wax, that some waxes made the ski faster and some slower for climbing hills. We didn't know that paraffin was most decidedly *not* good ski wax and that when the temperature was zero or below, paraffin actually gripped the snow.

The next morning we walked a block and a half to meet Archie at ten o'clock behind Erickson's grocery, out of sight of any houses because most parents didn't exactly approve of Archie. And it was a sure bet that if Carl's mother or father saw him leaving the house dressed exactly like a World War II bomber pilot ready for combat with a pair of skis over one shoulder and a coil of nylon parachute cord over the other and saw him get into Archie's hot car, they might ask embarrassing questions and actually might not approve of Carl's going for the world speed record on skis—parents being notoriously shortsighted about such things. As we made

our way to meet Archie, Carl smiled. He seemed confident.

"It's a great day for it," he said, looking up at the clear blue sky. There were ice crystals in the air because it was at least twenty below. "Perfect..."

Archie was grumpy. It was early for him and he'd had trouble getting the car started because of the cold, and the heater hadn't fully started cooking yet.

But the five dollars loomed higher than his objections, since he only made seventy-five cents an hour working at the Texaco. Wayne and Alan soon showed up. Wayne was bundled so thickly his body was almost invisible. Alan smiled and held up a small Brownie camera, the kind you had to look down through from the top.

"I thought I'd get a picture right when you break the record," Alan said, and nobody smiled.

It had to be said of Archie that once he made a decision he was in for the whole ride.

"We'll head out east of town, along that drainage ditch that runs past all that old swamp-

land beyond those farms," he said as we all packed into the car. Three of us sat in back while Carl and Archie sat in front. Archie had tied the skis to the side with some of Carl's parachute cord.

As he drove, he said, "It's flat for miles out there and except for the crossroads, which are iced over, it should give us a great place for the run."

"Good," Carl said. He said only one word, and he was the only one speaking. Alan and I were busy with our own thoughts. Wayne was sitting in back of Archie and was trying to turn his head upside down and see the woman in the steering wheel knob, which was a waste because she was just a blur and you couldn't see her even if you closed one eye and squinted, and usually Archie had his hand over her anyway.

It took about half an hour to get out along the ditch, which was really more of a shallow depression that had been installed to drain hundreds of square miles of swamp and make farmland. The ditch itself was nearly twenty miles long.

At every mile a road crossed the ditch and led