

# STAYING ALIVE

Stranded nine days in a snowy Nevada wasteland, a brave young family survives on faith, love, grit—and a little basic training



**A Jim and Jennifer Stolpa feed 5-month-old Clayton at a Reno hospital as the family recovers from their ordeal.**

**In the wilderness, this proved to be a sign of hope. The landmark helped rescuers find Jennifer and her baby.**



HEEL CREEK

A black signpost stands in a vast, flat, light-colored landscape. The sign is rectangular and has the words "HEEL CREEK" written in white, uppercase letters. The signpost is a simple black pole. The background is a uniform, light-colored expanse, possibly a salt flat or a desert, with a very low horizon line. The lighting is even, and there are no shadows cast by the signpost.



## Lost and freezing, they fought for their lives

**S**LOGGING THROUGH THE HIP-deep snow on frozen feet, icy flakes stinging his face, Jim Stolpa could think of only one thing: the wife and baby he'd left behind in a tiny cliffside cave. It had been two days and 48 torturous miles now since what might have been their last goodbye and a week since their pickup had gotten stuck in the blizzard lashing this desolate northwestern corner of the high Nevada desert. Out in the darkness the coyotes were howling. One, two; one, two. The 21-year-old Army private forced his steps into a comforting cadence. One for Jennifer, two for baby Clayton. One, two; one, two. He began to chant: "I gotta make it . . . I gotta make it . . ."

Back in the cave, clutching her 5-month-old son as he nursed, Jennifer also heard eerie howls. The sounds seemed to be drawing closer, like messengers of death. In some ways, it was as if she and the baby had already passed on: The cave was a cryptlike space, too shallow to sit up in, and she and Clayton were wrapped like mummies beneath layers of clothing and sleeping bags. But the cold was still numbing. Would they freeze first or starve, wondered the shivering Jennifer. She wept. And she prayed. "I just kept asking God to give Jim the strength and energy and the will to make it," says the 21-year-old mother. "I was just begging God to help him." Finally she drifted into sleep.

It had all begun nine days before—what now seemed a lifetime ago—on Monday, three days after Christmas. Leaving their dog, Pooh, with friends, the Stolpa family piled into a borrowed dark-blue Dodge Dakota pickup and headed out of their apartment in Paso Robles, Calif., near Camp Roberts, where Jim worked as a satellite-equipment repairman. Ahead lay an 800-mile drive northeast to Pocatello, Idaho, for the New Year's Eve funeral of Jim's maternal grandmother. Jim, always close to his mother, wanted to be there for her.

The family stopped for the night at the house in Castro Valley, Calif., outside Oakland, where Jim's divorced



◀ "We have a lot of range cows up here, and I thought this was one of them wandering home," says rescuer David Peterson of the dark shape in the road that turned out to be Jim.

mother lives with second husband Kevin Mulligan. (Jim and Jennifer had met nearby at San Lorenzo High School, in first-aid class.) They found warm clothing at the house, but no boots. Both were wearing tennis shoes.

Jim's mother, already in Idaho, called to urge the couple to postpone the drive. She'd heard that several roads were closed because of the fierce snowstorm battering Northern California. "Don't do it, don't drive in this weather," Muriel Mulligan pleaded. Then in words that would haunt the couple, she said, "I don't want to go to three more funerals."

The next morning they set off. Interstate 80, the route they had planned to take northeast, had been closed. But instead of turning back, the couple bought maps at a gas station and plotted a course on smaller roads. Jennifer, who had been in the Army Reserve until shortly after her marriage in April 1991, served as navigator.

Late that night the Stolpas passed the one-house town of Vya, Nev. (pop. 2), near the California border. Trying to hook up with State Route 140, they continued east on County Road 8A, a two-lane dirt road that was that night choked with snow. The farther they drove, the deeper it got. Soon they were hopelessly stuck.

In the morning the couple tried digging out the truck, but stiff winds made it impossible. All they could do was wait for traffic—which never came. They were stranded in a wilderness area so remote that there are only six homes within 500 square miles.

For three days and four nights, as the snow continued to fall, the Stolpas stayed as upbeat as possible. "I told myself," says Jennifer, "If you can

make it through basic training, you can make it through this." They nibbled on corn chips, coconut cookies, a bottle of Jennifer's prenatal vitamins and fruitcake. They played with baby Clayton, napped, periodically started the truck and turned on the heater and listened to gospel music on the only radio station they could get.

The day of the funeral came and went. When the Stolpas failed to show up, Jim's stepfather, a media consultant, alerted radio and TV stations and newspapers about the missing family, pressuring authorities to find them. But the problem was that nobody knew what route they had taken.

When Saturday, Jan. 2, broke clear and bright, "we had to decide whether to stay put and die or do something," Jim says. They decided to head northeast toward Route 140, which they figured would be about 20 miles. In the truck the pair left a note written on what had been Jennifer's Christmas list. "To our Potential Rescuers," Jim wrote. "If we are already dead don't mind the rest of this letter. But if we are nowhere to be found, we have started walking to 140. . . . Sincerely, The Stolpa Family." Jennifer added, "We are carrying with us a 5 mos. old baby. HELP!!!"

Then the couple pulled on almost every item of clothing they had brought: gloves, panty hose, three pairs of sweatpants, four sweatshirts and two long winter jackets each. They slid plastic garbage bags between layers of socks. They tied sweatshirts on their heads. Jennifer laughed when Jim moaned, "I think I've got a run in my nylons." They bundled up Clayton inside two sleeping bags and stuffed him into a maroon garment bag, along





◀ "That fella should get two medals," says Peterson of Jim. "One for stupidity and one for saving his family."

► Just after their rescue, the Stolpas showed the strain of their nine-day ordeal.



STYLING: JESSICA WILSON

with the little food they had left. Jim tied the bag to his belt and towed it through the snow like a sled. The motion seemed to soothe the baby; he only cried when they stopped.

To pass the time, the pair fantasized about what they would order once they made it to a restaurant. When one

lagged behind, the other would cheerlead. "Come on, you can't stop now," Jim would urge Jennifer. "We have to make it out of here for Clay." To help herself, Jennifer quietly recited cadences from basic training. Sometimes she reverted to something even more basic, from childhood: the man-

tra of the little engine that could: "I think I can . . . I think I can . . . I think I can . . ."

They walked clear through the night. Late Sunday morning they stood on a hill and searched the horizon for Route 140. It was nowhere in sight. "Oh, my God," Jennifer exclaimed as



Dusty Ferguson kneels by the cave where he found mother and child.



she started to cry, "we're not going to make it!"

In desperation the couple decided to hike back toward the truck. But as the afternoon wore on, the temperature dropped and the wind began "blowing so hard it would mess up your balance," Jennifer says. She told Jim her hips were so sore from pushing through the snow that she could hardly walk. Following Hell Creek, an old cattle trail, they found a small canyon. They spent the night huddled in a sheltered outcropping.

By morning it was snowing again. "There's no way I'm going to be able to walk today," Jennifer told Jim. "I'm going to try to find a cave where we can stay." Moments later she found a tiny indentation barely big enough to crawl into. Jennifer squeezed inside. Jim handed her the sleeping bags and Clayton and wedged the garment bag over the entrance to block the wind. Then he told her he was going for help. "It was tough to leave them, but I had to," Jim says. "There wasn't any other way."

"Saying goodbye to him was the scariest thing in the whole world," Jennifer remembers. "I didn't know if that was going to be the last time I'd ever see him." Promising he would get help within three days, Jim kissed his wife and child goodbye. Jennifer didn't want to watch him go. But she heard him shout, "I'll make it, Jennifer, I know I'll make it!"

Jim walked the 14 miles back to the truck that night. By 7:30 the next morning, Tuesday, he was on the road again, pushing through an endless white sea that was broken only by sagebrush and meandering coyote and rabbit tracks. Whenever he felt hungry, he would shove snow into his mouth, and every so often, when he just couldn't make his frozen feet go another step, he would flop down onto a sagebrush for a catnap. He kept moving through the night.

Late Wednesday morning Jim spotted something. "I started screaming at the top of my lungs and jumping up and down," he says. "Jesus Christ!" thought David Peterson, the driver of the white Dodge Ram pickup coming down the road. "There's a cow wandering out there!" When Peterson, 52, Washoe County's road supervisor, pulled closer, he saw a man who was shuffling instead of walking, his "feet



◀ Jennifer dips her hand in a therapeutic paraffin bath while her frost-bitten feet soak and husband Jim catches up on his rest.

► "Jennifer is just as much of a hero," says Jim (kissing his wife as baby Clayton gives him a hug). "It took all the guts in the world to choose to stay in that cave. She saved my son."



◀ Jim adjusts his therapy "boots," which kept his feet in the proper position for healing. Jennifer found the devices too painful to wear.

frozen up into big balls." Frantically, Jim began telling Peterson about his stranded wife and baby, begging him to go find them. "I thought he must have been a little delirious," admits Peterson, who hadn't heard anything about a lost family. "He was just out there too many days. Nobody could survive that long."

Back home in Vya, Peterson began trying to remove Jim's ice-covered tennis shoes. He radioed a highway maintenance station and confirmed that a family was indeed missing. Peterson immediately began to organize the rescue effort. Jim begged to go along but was in no condition to do so. Over and over he told Peterson to find the Hell Creek sign, then to look for the blue sweatshirt he had tied to a bush—the cave with his family was behind it.

Peterson left with heavy-equipment operator Dusty Ferguson, 41, in Peterson's truck. His wife, Ruth Ann, tried to thaw Jim's feet with a hair drier.

Even after his shoes came off, his feet were frozen solid. But Jim wasn't worrying about them. As the afternoon dragged on, there was still no sign of Jennifer and Clayton.

Inside the cave, Jennifer was drifting in and out of sleep. When morning had broken on Wednesday—the day Jim had promised to be back with help—Jennifer could barely control her excitement. "Daddy's going to be here today!" she told the baby, who was crying because of his sodden diaper. All day she thought she heard the faint roaring of engines. But no one showed up. "I didn't want to see the darkness," Jennifer says. She ate snow, burrowed inside the sleeping bag with Clayton and closed her eyes.

Meanwhile, the rescuers were losing hope. Peterson and Ferguson had been following the snowplow driven by heavy-equipment operator Gary Romesha, 42, for five hours. They had already gotten stuck a few times, and the





weather was turning nasty, with snow starting to fall. Miles behind them stretched a procession of 30 paramedics, deputies, even a dog rescue team. "With the storm coming and the darkness, I knew it was now or never," Peterson says. Just then Romesha radioed that he'd spotted the shirt.

When Ferguson reached Jennifer, "I gave him the biggest hug," she says. "I've never been so happy to see another person." She immediately asked about Jim. "I told her if he didn't make it then we wouldn't be there," Ferguson says. He carried Clayton to the truck, where the baby instantly fell asleep; apart from a case of diaper rash, the infant had survived the ordeal unscathed. Then Ferguson and Romesha returned for Jennifer. She apologized for being unable to walk.

Washoe County Sheriff Capt. Ernie Jesch, who participated in the rescue, says the cramped quarters helped maintain Jennifer and Clayton's body

heat better than a larger cave would have. That choice was an example, he says, of the family's ability to think and stay calm. "Certainly there was a lot of luck involved," he says. "But they created that luck by doing the right thing."

Until at least Valentine's Day the Stolpas' home will be a room in Reno's Washoe Medical Center—a room filled with flowers, a menagerie of stuffed animals in Clayton's crib, and lots of family and friends. Cradling the baby, Jim's mother admits that despite the desperation of her son's 87-mile trek she has to smile when she thinks about what he did. "I was surprised," she says with a laugh. "He couldn't walk to the bus stop in high school without first asking to borrow the car."

Elation over Jim and Jennifer's survival has been tempered by the rough road they still face. Doctors were forced to amputate parts of their se-

verely frostbitten feet. Although both should eventually be able to walk without crutches or prosthetics, they will require a month of recovery before they can begin rehabilitation. Then there will be at least a month of grueling therapy. Their hospital bills are expected to top \$250,000 apiece. The Army will pay for Jim's treatment as well as 80 percent of Jennifer's, but that will still leave a \$50,000 tab. The couple are counting on the slew of film and book proposals they have received to help.

For now, though, the Stolpas are not looking too far ahead. "We're just really concerned about recovering and walking and being able to lead normal lives again," Jennifer explains. Still, Jim is willing to make one resolution. "Never again," he says, "will I not listen to my mother."

• PAM LAMBERT

• JOHNNY DODD in Reno, Vya and Hell Creek