



When bad weather hit, the Garners kept warm with their dog Medusa's help.

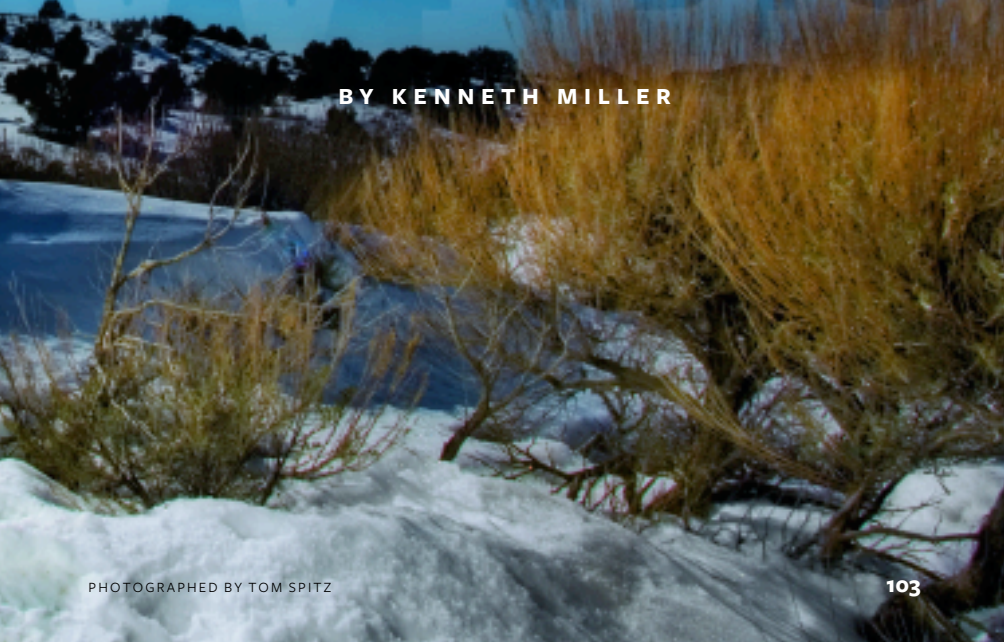
THEY EXPECTED TO BE HOME BY
MIDNIGHT. BUT WHEN A BLIZZARD BLEW
IN, TOM AND TAMITHA GARNER'S
PILGRIMAGE TO PHOTOGRAPH
A HERD OF MUSTANGS TURNED INTO
A FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL.

Into the WILDED

BY KENNETH MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM SPITZ

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In the high desert of southwest Utah lives a band of feral horses known as the Sulphur Herd. These small, tough animals have galloped the dusty hills since the late 1500s, when their ancestors strayed from the encampments of the conquistadores. Isolated for five centuries by the 9,000-foot peaks of the Needle Range, they are nearly identical to their Spanish forebears.

For mustang lovers, a visit to the herd's habitat is an almost mystical journey—a voyage to a time when the West was truly wild. On a Saturday in January, Tom and Tamitha Garner were making that pilgrimage in their Dodge Dakota. The couple turned off Highway 56 near Modena and headed north up a dirt road into Hamblin Valley. Soon they'd entered a stark terrain of sagebrush and red earth. A dusting of snow lay on the road, deepening gradually as the truck climbed toward the mountains.

For about 20 miles, the going was easy. Then the pickup crested a hill, cruised down the other side, and became trapped in a bumper-deep patch of white. Tom, who'd brought along a shovel, could have dug out the truck and driven back to town. But he figured this was a lone drift. Besides, the trip was his wife's 39th-birthday present. He wasn't about to let her down. He cleared a path, gunned the truck over the next rise—and there, in a grove of aspens, stood the horses.

Entranced, the Garners stopped and began snapping photos. When the mustangs trotted off, the couple got back in the pickup and followed. Be-

fore long, they were getting stuck every few yards; the digging grew increasingly difficult. Returning the way they came was no longer an option: The road was too narrow and snowy to turn around in, the hills too slippery to navigate in reverse. It was 4 p.m., and darkness was approaching. "I guess we'll be spending the night," Tom said. "I'll get you home tomorrow if I have to shovel the whole road."

"You better," Tamitha laughed.

Neither knew something else was on its way: a brutal wave of blizzards.

Some people wander into disaster's path at random; others, like the Garners, are led by overpowering desire. In most respects, the two were models of practicality. Tom, 41, was a printing press operator; Tamitha was a nurse's assistant at a home for the elderly. They shared a modest home in Kearns, a Salt Lake City suburb, with their 19-year-old daughter, Krystal. The only hints of their unruly passions were their pets and their photographs.

The Garners had two dogs, two rabbits, four cats, and several terrariums full of tarantulas. Their computer's hard drive was crammed with snapshots of wild beasts—winged, clawed, and hoofed. Tom and Tamitha were as crazy about animals as they were sane about almost everything else.

Their favorite subject was wild horses. Tom was drawn to their beauty; for Tamitha, they represented freedom. Several times a year, the couple would load their cameras into the pickup and head for mustang country.

For this trip, they'd driven 400 miles to central Nevada and spent Friday—Tamitha's birthday—shooting horses they'd visited on previous outings. The highlight was to come on the way home, when they would meet the Sulphur Herd for the first time. They'd

they'd be fine. But the wind was already beginning to blow harder.

Night fell. Tom and Tamitha ate a granola bar apiece, snuggled under the blankets with Medusa, and tried to sleep. They ran the heater periodi-

TOM GUNNED THE TRUCK OVER THE NEXT RISE—AND THERE STOOD THE HORSES.

left their daughter with a rough idea of their itinerary, but the plan had been to stay for a few hours and be back in Kearns around midnight. Now they'd need to bed down in the truck instead.

They tried to call Krystal on their cell phones. No signal. Rummaging through the pickup's cab, they took inventory of their supplies. To eat: two dozen granola bars, a jar of peanut butter, and a jar of jam. To drink: 36 small bottles of water. They also had two afghans, two reflective emergency blankets, and a bag of dog food for Medusa, their basenji mix. A suitcase held jeans, sweatshirts, and tees. Tamitha had an insulated denim coat, but Tom's jacket was unlined. Their only shoes were the sneakers on their feet. If they could get out in the morning,

cally, but it didn't do much good. The temperature outside was dropping; soon it reached five below zero.

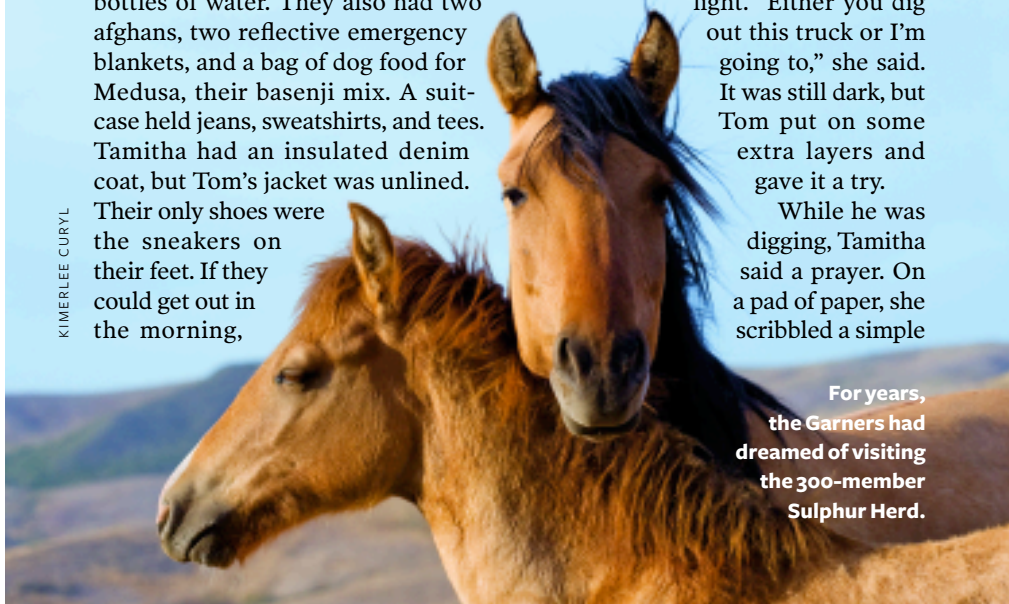
By 2 a.m., 50-mile-an-hour gusts were buffeting the pickup, and the windows were blanketed with snow. Tamitha, who had diabetes and ulcers, began to tremble. Tom held her, and they dozed off. When they awoke around five, the storm had entered a lull and Tamitha had recovered some

fight. "Either you dig out this truck or I'm going to," she said. It was still dark, but Tom put on some extra layers and gave it a try.

While he was digging, Tamitha said a prayer. On a pad of paper, she scribbled a simple

For years, the Garners had dreamed of visiting the 300-member Sulphur Herd.

KIM LEE CURYL



will, followed by a goodbye letter to Krystal. "I'm so proud of you," she wrote, "even if we argued sometimes. Tell Grandma and Grandpa and my brothers I love them." She hid the documents in the glove compartment.

After an hour of shoveling, Tom started the engine. The truck lurched forward ten yards, then foundered. And despite the garbage bags he'd

highway patrol. No one could offer any information. And no one was willing to mount a search-and-rescue operation for a couple who seemed to have taken an extra day of vacation.

In Hamblin Valley, the blizzard worsened, the wind piling drifts around the pickup. Tom, who'd been an Eagle Scout, knew it was best to stay put and

GETTING WET WAS THE GREATEST DANGER—A SHORTCUT TO HYPOTHERMIA.

wrapped around his socks to keep them dry, his feet were soaked.

"Too much snow," he said. "I'm so sorry I got you into this."

Tamitha hugged him. "We got into it together. We'll get out together too."

Back in Kearns, Krystal was frantic. Usually, Tamitha phoned or sent text messages several times a day. Now Krystal's calls were going straight to voice mail. "Mom," she said, "where are you? Are you hurt?"

By Sunday evening, Krystal had alerted other family members. Her grandparents and an uncle, Tamitha's brother Jack Retallick, set up a command post in the Garners' living room. All they knew was that Tom and Tamitha were somewhere near the border of southern Utah and Nevada.

Krystal contacted the Salt Lake County sheriff's department, which alerted authorities in the Garners' last known locations. The relatives began calling hospitals, ranger stations, the

wait for rescuers. Besides, getting wet was the greatest danger—a shortcut to hypothermia. He and Tamitha spent Monday huddled under the blankets, smoking cigarettes and listening to the radio—talk shows and weather reports, all bemoaning the storm.

Tamitha grew weaker by the hour, occasionally vomiting blood. After Tom found her will, she persuaded him to write his own. That night, when he ate a granola bar, she left hers untouched. Once he was snoring, she stashed it under the seat. Tom might need it later, but she surely wasn't going to live until morning.

To her surprise, she woke on Tuesday feeling stronger. The blizzard was petering out, and a crowd of mustangs peered at the truck through the trees. "Look, Tom," Tamitha whispered. "Our guardian angels."

The Garners didn't know it, but searchers were now trying to track them down. Jack had found a file

marked “Mustangs” on the couple’s computer, with downloads showing locations of various herds. He’d passed along that data to the authorities. Hundreds of volunteers—along with members of several county sheriff’s departments and the Utah and Nevada Civil Air Patrol—were combing 5,000 square miles of frigid wilderness.

Although the wind was still howling, the couple could hear airplanes flying somewhere over the cloud cover—one every 50 minutes or so. Tom, remembering a scouting survival tip, cut the vanity mirror off the truck’s visor. When he heard an engine, he leaned out the window and flashed a signal. After sunset, he used the headlights, flickering them in sets of three.

The rescue efforts were so widely scattered, though, that few searchers came near the Garners. Most of the passing aircraft were commercial jets. Even when a search plane circled half a mile away, it was easy to miss a gray truck buried in snow.

That night, while her husband slept, Tamitha tried a handful of dog food. Tom would never eat it, she thought, and it wasn’t that bad. She’d leave the rest of the granola bars for him.

As the days passed, and the cycle of storm and clearing continued, the Garners realized that their best hope of survival was to abandon the truck and walk back the way they’d come. But they knew they couldn’t hike 20 miles wearing only

sneakers. “We might make it,” Tom told his wife, “but we’d lose our feet to frostbite and spend the rest of our lives in wheelchairs.” He’d seen a Discovery Channel documentary in which a couple in similar straits had made snowshoes out of their car seats.

They spent Saturday getting ready and planned to leave the next day. To make one pair of snowshoes, Tom cut two squares of foam out of the backseats. He and Tamitha crammed necessities into their suitcase and a garbage bag. Along with dry clothing, blankets, and the remaining food,

“We had to get home for her,” says Tamitha of daughter Krystal.



they packed a tool kit, three umbrellas, and their camera equipment—they couldn't bear to leave it behind.

On Sunday, it snowed. Tamitha groaned at the delay, but the couple spent the day communicating in a way they hadn't since their courtship. They talked about favorite movies and music. They made plans to renovate their house. Tamitha wanted a purple bedroom; Tom wasn't so sure.

Their cell phone alarms rang at six the next morning. Tom cut up the front seats for the second pair of snowshoes and fastened both sets to their feet with bungee cords. Snow-

The technique worked, but it slowed their progress even more. By late afternoon, their energy was spent. They'd made it only a couple of miles.

They set up camp in a pine grove, laying their blankets beneath the canopy of branches. After gathering a pile of twigs, they sprayed it with flammable deodorant and ignited it with a cigarette lighter. They propped their sneakers near the flames to dry. Then, sheltered by their umbrellas and using the snowshoes as cushions, they sat by the fire until they stopped shivering.

When Tamitha took off her gloves, Tom saw that the fingers of her right

BY AFTERNOON, THEIR ENERGY WAS SPENT. THEY'D MADE IT ONLY A COUPLE OF MILES.

drifts blocked the truck doors, so he heaved the suitcase and garbage bag out the window. Medusa jumped out, and the Garners squeezed out after her.

The snow in the roadway ranged from knee- to hip-deep, but Tom's improvised footwear kept him from sinking more than a few inches, even with the weight of the suitcase he carried. Tamitha, dragging the garbage bag, wasn't so lucky. The snowshoes fit poorly on her smaller feet; they kept coming loose, and after an hour or so, she tore them off in exasperation. Tom strapped them to his back for later use.

"I'll make you a trail," he said. He walked sideways, tamping down the snow by putting his left foot where his right had been, then using the suitcase to flatten the space between.

hand looked blue—a sign of frostbite. Again he told her how sorry he was. "Don't be," she said. "If we come out of this alive, what's a few fingers? I'll just learn to brush my teeth differently."

They spent most of the night at the fire. Before dawn, the sky cleared and a shooting star streaked overhead. "See that?" Tom said. "I think we're going to make it."

By the second Tuesday after Tom and Tamitha's disappearance, authorities had given them up for dead. Investigators, suspecting foul play, were checking pawnshops along the Nevada border for the couple's possessions. Searchers were looking for corpses.

Meanwhile, the Garners—hungry and exhausted—kept walking. The day

was sunny, in the 40s, and the slushy snow made every step a chore. After a few miles, Tom wanted nothing more than to lie down. Tamitha saw him wavering. "Come on," she shouted. "Krystal's waiting! Can't you hear her? She's yelling, 'Daddy, I need you!'"

To lighten their loads, they transferred a few essentials to the garbage bag. Before long, however, they were both too tired to continue. As they made camp, they heard coyotes howling. They hoped their fire would keep predators away.

On the road Wednesday morning, the snow began to thin, which meant Tom could abandon his clumsy snowshoes. Tamitha, though, began to hallucinate. She heard laughter, smelled sizzling steak and baking cookies.

And she found herself growing angry. She quarreled with Tom about which way to turn at a fork in the path; they clashed again when she spotted a No Trespassing sign on a fence post and wanted to see if there was a house beyond it. He won both arguments, and she stormed off ahead of him.

Tamitha was alone when she heard the sound of an engine. "That damn wind," she muttered. Then she rounded the bend and saw a beautiful sight: a road grader, laboring uphill with its snowplow lowered. She ran toward it, waving the emergency blanket and yelling, "Thank you!"

As Tom and Medusa straggled up, the driver asked, "Are you the couple everyone's been looking for?"

"Yes!" Tamitha shouted, wrapping him in a bone-crushing hug.

Even when everyone else around her was losing hope, Krystal had stayed optimistic. "I knew how bullheaded my mom and dad were," she recalls. "I figured they'd come back home. I just didn't know when."

She drove 300 miles with her uncle Jack to a hospital in Cedar City, where the extended family gathered at her parents' bedside. That evening, Tom and Tamitha ate a hearty dinner, their first in 12 days. They were diagnosed with dehydration as well as frostbitten hands and feet. To the doctors' amazement, they were otherwise unharmed and unlikely to suffer any permanent damage.

The couple were discharged from the hospital the next morning. They didn't go straight home, however. First they attended the funeral of a stranger: Leroy Davenport, 37, a local volunteer who'd spent the previous Saturday searching for them. He'd gone to bed feeling ill and died in his sleep of an undiagnosed heart condition. The Garners embraced Davenport's widow and offered tearful thanks.

Within two weeks, Tom and Tamitha were back at their jobs. But their sojourn in the snow had changed them. In the future, they would travel more carefully and cherish each other—and their daughter—more deeply. In fact, they planned to revisit the site of their ordeal after the spring thaw, to see the wild horses once again and renew their wedding vows.

"Our bond is stronger than ever," Tamitha says. "We've been to hell and back and lived to tell." ■