

Nonfiction Passage

“Renewing America,” Excerpt from President Bill Clinton’s First Inaugural Address (1993)

When George Washington first took the oath I have just sworn to uphold, news traveled slowly across the land by horseback and across the ocean by boat. Now, the sights and sounds of this ceremony are broadcast instantaneously to billions around the world.

Communications and commerce are global; investment is mobile; technology is almost magical; and ambition for a better life is now universal. We earn our livelihood in America today in peaceful competition with people all across the Earth.

Profound and powerful forces are shaking and remaking our world, and the urgent question of our time is whether we can make change our friend and not our enemy.

This new world has already enriched the lives of millions of Americans who are able to compete and win in it. But when most people are working harder for less; when others cannot work at all; when the cost of healthcare devastates families and threatens to bankrupt our enterprises, great and small; when the fear of crime robs law-abiding citizens of their freedom; and when millions of poor children cannot even imagine the lives we are calling them to lead—we have not made change our friend.

We know we have to face hard truths and take strong steps. But we have not done so. Instead, we have drifted, and that drifting has eroded our resources, fractured our economy, and shaken our confidence.

Though our challenges are fearsome, so are our strengths. Americans have ever been a restless, questing, hopeful people. And we must bring to our task today the vision and will of those who came before us.

From our Revolution to the Civil War, to the Great Depression, to the civil rights movement, our people have always mustered the determination to construct from these crises the pillars of our history.

Thomas Jefferson believed that to preserve the very foundations of our Nation, we would need dramatic change from time to time. Well, my fellow Americans, this is our time. Let us embrace it.

To renew America, we must meet challenges abroad as well as at home. There is no longer a clear division between what is foreign and what is domestic—the world economy, the world environment, the world AIDS crisis, the world arms race, they affect us all.

Today, as an old order passes, the new world is more free but less stable. Communism’s collapse has called forth old animosities and new dangers. Clearly America must continue to lead the world we did so much to make.

While America rebuilds at home, we will not shrink from the challenges, nor fail to seize the opportunities of this new world. Together with our friends and allies, we will work to shape change, lest it engulf us.

But our greatest strength is the power of our ideas, which are still new in many lands. Across the world, we see them embraced—and we rejoice. Our hopes, our hearts, and our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America's cause.

The American people have summoned the change we celebrate today. You have raised your voices in an unmistakable chorus. You have cast your votes in historic numbers. And you have changed the face of the Congress, the Presidency, and the political process itself.

Yes, you, my fellow Americans, have forced the spring.

Now, we must do the work the season demands.

To that work I now turn, with all the authority of my office. I ask the Congress to join with me. But no President, no Congress, no government, can undertake this mission alone.

My fellow Americans, you, too, must play your part in our renewal.

I challenge a new generation of young Americans to a season of service—to act on your idealism by helping troubled children, keeping company with those in need, reconnecting our torn communities. There is so much to be done—enough indeed for millions of others who are still young in spirit to give of themselves in service, too.

In serving, we recognize a simple but powerful truth: We need each other. And we must care for one another.

Today, we do more than celebrate America; we rededicate ourselves to the very idea of America:

An idea born in revolution and renewed through two centuries of challenge;

An idea tempered by the knowledge that, but for fate, we—the fortunate and the unfortunate—might have been each other;

An idea ennobled by the faith that our Nation can summon from its myriad diversity the deepest measure of unity;

An idea infused with the conviction that America's long heroic journey must go forever upward.

And so, my fellow Americans, as we stand at the edge of the 21st century, let us begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline, and let us work until our work is done.

Fiction Passage

“The Mountain”

There are four peaks to climb until Manny reaches the top of the mountain. Each ledge is thinner and more dangerous than the last. Thankfully, he has a strong cane. He uses the cane to pull himself up. The climb is cold and snowy.

Day turns to night and back to day again. A strong gust of wind threatens to blow him off-course. But he persists.

The last thing Manny remembers is opening his eyes at the bottom of the mountain. He doesn't remember how he got there. To make things even stranger, he is wearing a fancy tuxedo.

The woman he loves is at the top of the mountain, waiting. He can hear her sweet voice, singing.

He remembers that she is waiting for him, but he doesn't remember anything else. Manny guesses he must have had an accident.

Maybe I hit my head and now I have amnesia! he thinks.

The snow is thick and cold. It gets in his mouth as he climbs. He must be hungry because it tastes sweet like sugar.

“Hello! Is anyone there?” Manny asks.

“Hello! Is anyone there?” he hears back. It's the sound of his own voice—an echo coming back at him.

“I love you! I'm waiting for you!” he hears. Now this, this is not *his* voice. This is the sound of his love calling for him.

He climbs higher and higher. Closer and closer. His arms ache from pulling. His tuxedo is covered in snow. Manny is soaking wet and exhausted. But he is also determined to get to the top.

“I love you! I'm coming!” he calls back.

He hears what he thinks is the faint sound of laughter. Deep and booming. The laughter of the gods?

Suddenly, the mountain is flooded with light. It's as if the sun were behind a door that was flung open suddenly.

The mountain begins to spin, and Manny hangs on with all his might.

“Why is this happening?” he cries. But no answer comes.

The mountain spins and spins. The room spins and spins. It's bright and then dark again. He sees trees and bright lights. Manny closes his eyes and falls off the mountain. He fears this could be the end.

When he lands, it is warm and soft. He feels himself lifted through the air. It is as if fate has saved him. The next words he hears are:

"Whoops, that was a close call. We almost lost our groom!"

"Good catch!" says another voice.

Manny opens his eyes and find himself on top of the mountain. Bella! The woman he loves! He rubs the snow from his eyes. The whirlwind had somehow picked him up and placed him right next to her.

Bella stands in a pile of white snow, wearing a beautiful wedding dress. Manny laughs because he's soaking wet and dirty, covered in sticky snow.

He kisses her and she giggles. "You taste like candy!" she says. "I'm so glad you're back! I thought you would miss the wedding!"

"Wedding?" Manny says. "I don't remember! Are we getting married?"

"Oh no! Not us," Bella says, laughing. "Them!"

She points to the sky, and for the first time he sees everything. There is a skylight and sunshine. There is music playing. And people. Giant people!

Manny screams and falls back into the snow. Giants! As tall as the mountain! Taller! They come by and put their faces, with huge eyeballs as big as Manny's head, right up to him.

He thinks back to the laughter he heard before and the sunlight, suddenly so bright. Gods! It's all the work of Gods.

Suddenly, he is lifted up into the air. A giant hand is coming for him. This is surely the end now. A giant eye, a giant mouth. He is about to be eaten!

And then he sees it, a giant... napkin?

He hears Bella laughing below him as the soft napkin cleans his ears, his face, and his suit. When he is completely clean, he is placed back on top of the mountain's snowy peak. He stands upright next to Bella, and she holds his hand. The giant walks away as if nothing unusual at all has happened.

"You look beautiful," Bella says. "All clean! Are you ready?"

Music starts to play. Manny hears a voice say: "Introducing the bride and groom!"

The mountain is moving through the air, soaring, rolling. Bella grabs his hand tightly and whispers, “Get ready.”

One of the giants leans down and pats his head. He notices she looks just like Bella. She’s dressed in a beautiful white gown. This giant is also a bride.

“You’re beautiful, little man!” the giant says. At that, she takes out a giant knife.

The mountain tips slightly, as if a slice is being cut out of it. He sees the bride feeding cake to the groom. The groom takes a big bite, and she smears frosting all over his face.

That’s why the snow tasted so sweet, Manny thinks. It’s not snow at all. It’s cake frosting!

The snowy mountain is wheeled back into the corner, and Bella and Manny are finally alone together.

“I love you!” Manny says, and he takes her hand and kisses her sweetly. The kiss is every bit as sweet as the cake they are standing on. Two wedding cake toppers in love.