

8

COURAGE

Love, Joy and Sheer Terror

It was a match made far from heaven – my mother, the world's most cautious woman, and ski racing. Yet there she stood at the starter's gate in her canary yellow ski togs like Franz Klammer at the 1976 Olympics in Innsbruck. Today, many years later, I marvel that it ever really happened. But it did – five times in fact – right before my eyes. Only now do I understand its impact on me.

My mother hates to be cold – always has. When you go to the beach and see a woman under a blanket warding off the chill, that's her. She also hates going fast. If you've been stuck behind the driver who refuses to go more than 55 mph no matter how much you tailgate or honk your horn, you're familiar with her work and will understand why her former stint as a competitive downhiller is so confounding at first glance.

The blame lay with my father, an avid skier who relocated (some say kidnapped) her to Rochester, a city at the center of western New York's snow-belt between Syracuse and Buffalo. After teaching my mother the sport at various scattered venues, he set about finding a convenient and inexpensive place where they could regularly enjoy *his* favorite pastime. The birth of two children temporarily slowed his progress, but as soon as my sister and I were old enough to tackle a bunny slope, the search resumed.

Hunt Hollow, a ski club located in Naples, New York, was set amid the beautiful Bristol Hills in the Finger Lakes Region. Less than an hour south of Rochester, Naples was semi-famous as the birthplace of New York's wine industry and the home of the annual Grape Festival. It also offered the some of the state's best skiing west of Lake Placid.

My father signed up for a family membership that allowed us to ski as much as we wanted and, at first, enthusiasm was robust. The scenery was beautiful, the skiing was fun and my mother could escape to a chair by the fireplace in the club's lodge whenever her hands and feet began to turn blue. There was also an abundance of families just like ours who contributed to the palpable camaraderie in the lift lines and inside the lodge, a spacious, pinewood expanse, where people cooked up large vats of chili to share and cracked open oversized thermoses containing coffee and hot chocolate.

Soon we were going every Saturday and Sunday throughout the winter from 7:00 a.m. until dusk. Although I was too young to appreciate it then, Hunt Hollow was a protective bubble of sorts – a place that provided parents with two days of respite from the ever-worsening economic news of the late 1970's and a chance to move freely; unchained to kids who were anxious to ski with their friends but willing to circle back at

lunch time. I remember walking into the lodge around noon on many occasions to find a makeshift Dixieland jazz band playing with my father out in front singing; a beer in one hand and a microphone in the other. His bulky yellow parka and voice were unmistakable as I came through the door, walking awkwardly in ski boots, and I could only stop and watch in amazement as he showed me what enjoying life was all about.

Unfortunately, the peak experience of Hunt Hollow couldn't last - and it didn't. By the third winter, the novelty was gone and my family's solidarity on ski weekends began to splinter. My father still wanted to go every Saturday and Sunday, but my sister and I, thirteen and eleven respectively by then, had other ideas. Getting up at dawn had lost its allure and our gratitude for how lucky we were to be skiing and not working in a coal mine began to be lost on us in our adolescent state. Invitations from friends to do other things began to compete with and intrude on our regular trips to Naples, creating friction with my father who wanted the world to remain as it had been.

My father's intentions were good. He knew that skiing got us out of the house and away from the television, and forced us to break a sweat. Hunt Hollow, however, meant a lot more to him than that. For my father, these ski weekends represented a final frontier in his efforts to keep his family together as a cohesive unit. On the cusp of having two teenagers, he felt the tenuous grasp of parental control being wrested away by outside forces and he wasn't going down without a fight.

My mother remained silent, but she was thrilled by the prospect of a bit less skiing. As we ate breakfast by the television and listened to the weather report at 6:00 a.m. on a typical Saturday morning, her body language alone told me she was rooting for road closures due to inclement conditions. Still, whenever conflict over our weekend plans arose, she stayed neutral; mediating between the parties to reach a compromise that would satisfy both her husband and her children. And this approach worked for awhile until the number of times my sister and I begged off began to frustrate my father.

In addition to all the implications for family togetherness, this was also an issue of economics. My father had paid a few thousand dollars for his family's ability to ski on an unlimited basis and, like Popeye at an all-you-can-eat spinach bar; he was going to get his money's worth.

"I've signed us all up for the Lovejoy Series," he announced excitedly as we drove home one weekend after skiing together for the first time in a few weeks.

"The what?" my mother asked.

"The Lovejoy Race Series. You've heard me mention it before," my father said, pretending to be surprised it hadn't crossed my mother's radar before while she was stirring vats of chili in the lodge.

The Lovejoy Race Series was a ski racing competition between members; spread over seven consecutive weekends at the club. Named for Frank Lovejoy, a doctor and

the visionary behind Hunt Hollow, the series required skiers to participate in no less than five of the seven races in order to qualify to win. By entering the whole family, my father, in a plot the CIA could admire, guaranteed himself at least five more family weekends that winter.

“Dad, are you serious?” I asked. “I don’t want to race.”

“Dad, get real,” my sister said, trotting out her favorite catch-phrase.

“You guys are going to love it,” my father insisted.

“You signed up all of us?” my mother asked, still hopeful she’d been spared.

“Yep. We’re all racing.”

To put things in perspective, this was akin to being enrolled in the Marine Corps without your consent. And the equivalent of boot camp at Parris Island began the next week with the arrival of the first race. Naturally, blizzard-like weather was expected.

My mother, who’d never been in a competitive bake-off let alone a ski race, was terrified. My father told her that ski racing would require her to abandon all of her inhibitions and fears, items she’d been clinging to tightly for nearly forty years.

“To really be good, you must have a complete disregard for your own personal safety and be willing to live on the edge of calamity at all times,” my father explained, having watched ABC’s *Wide World of Sports* a few too many times.

“What if your goal is just to make it down alive?” my mother asked.

To ease her anxiety as well as my own, I assisted my mother with pre-race preparations by making sure her bindings, boots and poles were in perfect working order, and getting her skis waxed. We then skied together alongside the empty race course early in the morning; stopping every fifty feet so I could show her the trickier gates in the course’s layout. I was familiar with the format of the giant slalom from television and knew the turns were more forgiving than in pure slalom; a small blessing for both of us. We even adopted a theme song for our troubles: Paul Simon’s *Slip Sliding Away*.

When the time arrived to race, we shuffled through the lift line, each step taking us closer to our mutually dreaded destination: the starter’s hut at the top of the mountain. Of course, by now, my sister was nowhere to be found, having brilliantly negotiated her way out of the situation by telling my father she was experiencing female troubles. Atrocious weather, however, was very much with us as we took our seats in a dual chairlift and pulled the safety bar down in front of us. Gale force winds whipped the snow around like a blender shredding coconut and reduced visibility to zero. I was genuinely miserable but my mother, who had a look of terror on her face and was shivering so much her teeth were chattering, was catatonic.

“It’s going to be okay, Mom,” I said, managing to mask my own sense of doom for a minute. “We only have to do this four more times after today,” I added, no doubt making her feel even worse.

At the summit, where my father awaited us, adults lined up to take their turn before the kids. The men went first, each passing through a small wooden hut located on a rise until they stood at the starter’s gate where a wand, once tripped, would trigger a stop clock and time each run. The women were next and as my mother joined the queue, I saw she was one of only two in the whole club who’d decided to participate. Watching her take off down the steep ramp from the starter’s gate and toward the first set of flags, I felt an undeniable pride. As she disappeared into an endless white void, I prayed that somehow, someday, she would make it down the hill and finish the race. And, to my great satisfaction, she did. I did, too, and immediately upon finding each other in the lodge afterwards and exchanging survival stories, we began worrying about the next one.

Before long, after our second, third and fourth suicide missions were successfully completed in the weeks that followed; we finally saw the last hurdle in Frank Lovejoy’s sadistic, snowy track meet: the fifth and final race. For my mother, the stakes were high. As my father had reminded her repeatedly, she would win the second place trophy if she could simply finish since there were only two women competing. Of course, given the notoriously icy nature of New York skiing, finishing was never a sure thing. Each race was treacherous, and with a single slip of a ski, it was easy to post a DNF (Did Not Finish) or a DSQ (Disqualified).

On the day of fateful number five, my mother rode the chairlift with me. She looked more nervous than usual, but when her turn to ski arrived, she passed uneventfully through the starter’s hut and took her place at the starter’s gate, pausing briefly to adjust her goggles. As the final adult competitor, her every move was under the close scrutiny of the forty or so kids, including me, who stood together waiting for their turn to race.

And then it happened. Launching herself through the starter’s gate, my mother skied off the ramp in the wrong direction and smashed directly into a large tree; toppling over and landing down in the well created by the frozen drifts surrounding its trunk. Stunned for an instant, I quickly got out of my bindings and began to climb down toward where she lay to try and help her up. As I did, I heard a sound I will never forget.

All the kids who had just witnessed my mother’s mishap were laughing at her. And as I walked toward her, the sound continued to grow; louder and louder. They found her misfortune entertaining and perhaps I would have, too, if it hadn’t been my mother at the bottom of that tree. But there was nothing about this that I found funny and, unexpectedly, my eyes welled up with tears. I felt so sorry for my mother and it wasn’t just because she had fallen. It was because I knew the back story. I knew how much she didn’t want to be there in the first place. I knew she had only agreed to enter these races to make my father happy and to keep the family peace. I knew she didn’t care one wit about the Lovejoy Race Series or a second place trophy. She only cared about us. In the

face of having to do something she didn't want to do, she never complained. She never quit. And, despite her fears, she was one race away from beating them. In doing all this, she had taught me all I'd ever need to know about courage.

With the clock still running, my mother climbed out of that tree well, stutter-stepped twenty feet back up the mountain and skied off in the direction of the first gate. She finished the race and took second place that year in women's division of the Lovejoy Race Series. If you go to Hunt Hollow today, you can still find her name on the wall.

(Excerpted from the story collection How To Raise A Good Kid, by Starbuck O'Dwyer)

Starbuck O'Dwyer, a native of Rochester, New York, is a writer whose work has been described as "comic genius" by Kirkus Reviews. His novel Red Meat Cures Cancer (Random House/Vintage) won two national writing awards for humor and was a featured selection of the 2007 One Book One Vancouver reading program. His new titles, Goliath Gets Up, a novel about four underdogs trying to rise up and do something meaningful with their lives, and How To Raise A Good Kid, a collection of stories about growing up and the fine art of parenting, are now available in paperback and digitally at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.