

Mountain Times

In the near full darkness of the bunkroom with gentle, regular breathing all around, the couple quietly entered and made their way to my bed. With muted rustlings and giggles their boots thunked to the floor and they threw aside their winter layers. Any sense of privacy for themselves or concern for the well being of others had been washed away by the fourth or fifth cocktail some time back. Now naked in the cold bunkroom they hustled under the covers and I was met with an ample backside just below my rib cage. An odd introduction, this. Closing my eyes more tightly in feigned sleep, I braced for the dance beginning beside me.

A Love Affair

From my first chance encounter, skiing was always a big thing for me. Out on a local sledding hill in Philadelphia where someone had rigged a makeshift rope tow, I clamped on a pair of ancient wooden boards with treacherous cable bindings and tried to make sense of it. On a trial and error basis it was mostly error, yet somehow I was hooked. This was the mid-sixties, when equipment offerings were also trial and error, yet I pored through the ski magazines of the day yearning after this ski or that boot. And through the lens of skiing I glimpsed dimly another world, one of thrills, glamor, world travel and beautiful people. I grabbed onto skiing as my transport to a completely different life.

I had arrived at age 11 with yet-to-be-diagnosed severe nearsightedness, making me a miserable failure at all things athletic. Unable to reliably catch or hit a ball, I was the last pick in any neighborhood game. But skiing started to happen for me. Each time I got out there I figured it out a little more and soon had the new and pleasing sensation of being better at something athletic than my well muscled older brother and the neighborhood louts who thinly tolerated me. Now I fully defined myself as a skier as my pathway to individuality and physical self esteem.

As a high schooler I found my way to the Pennsylvania ski resorts often and my self taught skiing had got me to a point where I could descend steep and moguled slopes with a frenzied showy flare, in reality a series of near train wrecks, and thought myself quite the finished expert. My adolescent pride of accomplishment, my still fragile self esteem and my thin wallet would allow no input from a professional and so I plateaued as an ill informed "dig me" showboat skier. Skiing drove some early life decisions. I chose to attend a very ordinary state school in New Hampshire because of its location in the White Mountains. Fortunately, the 1974 season was very light on snow there, making it easier to reverse course and transfer back home to Penn State with its far more rigorous course offerings.

Instant Instructor

I entered Penn State in the Hazleton branch campus, again in hopes of having ready access to skiing, this time in the Pocono Mountains. Very near Hazleton was tiny Eagle Rock Ski Resort, which seemed to exist mostly as a housing community amenity, and boasted a skiable vertical drop of roughly 250 feet. Tiny. But it was nearby, and the overweight and not overly skilled ski

school director was hiring. Beginner lessons were the only product on offer, and I was capable of that, and so I was hired and presented with a red poofy and belted uniform parka. There I presided as the top instructor, having never had a lesson, attended a training clinic, or otherwise gained any idea how a good ski turn actually worked. Still, I had fun, helped a lot of people find their first wedge turns and gained some popularity.

I expected my role as big-time ski instructor to be transformative, but this was tiny, remote Eagle Rock. I had classes full of the local, ordinary folk, with no high-glam ski bunnies anywhere about.

But there was Hattie. A beautiful woman of maybe 23 to my 19 years, Hattie was in one of my group lessons and she attracted some special attention. She was a few years into teaching high school in Hazleton and we dated briefly. Hattie was a lovely small town girl with small town values and aspirations, and I had decided to let it go as a bad fit.

This red-clad and glorious instructing gig did not pay very much, and so I had kept my other part time job as a sous chef at Hazleton's swank steak house, Top Of The Eighties, so named because it perched on a bluff overlooking the intersection of interstate highways 80 and 81. One evening during a shift I was accosted by Freddy, the busboy, age 16. Turns out he was a student of Hattie's, was quite fond of her, and demanded to know why I wasn't calling on her anymore. He was really indignant and upset about this, and I came to understand that old Fred likely had a crush on Hattie, could not understand why I should not want to rush her to the altar rather than hurt her so, and took it on himself to come after me to make things right. I managed to persuade Freddy that I was not worthy of someone so perfect as Hattie and he went quietly enough. And I learned that this ski instructor thing was maybe more complicated than I originally thought.

Starting Over

For junior year I transferred to Penn State's main campus and my Eagle Rock career was finished. The nearest ski area to State College, PA was Oregon Hill, ninety minutes drive to the northeast. The new owner/operators of the Oregon Hill Ski School lived in State College and came to a pre-season Outing Club meeting to pitch their wares. At the program's conclusion I marched up and presented myself for hire as an experienced instructor. I suppose they could tell that I knew very little of technical skiing, but chose to hire me anyhow as a decent lump of raw material who could be trained to give an acceptable low level lesson. This proved to be very good luck for me.

As cold weather settled in and Oregon Hill prepared to open for the season, we all met up there for the first time. Aside from the three co-owners who were highly trained, fully certified professional instructors, the rest of us roughly fit my description. Raw recruits all of us. Bill, Paul and Bob had their work cut out as they sought to build their newly formed ski school up from nothing.

Hiring in as a new ski instructor is an exercise in humility, but also constitutes intensive ski training free of charge. We were a herd of unschooled hotshots, and now we were finding out that we knew almost nothing, and what we did know was mostly wrong. For me training required tearing out years of incorrect, deeply imbedded muscle memory and building back up from nearly zero.

This would have been very tough on my age 20 ego, but I found I was having better luck than most in grasping the new ideas and successfully demonstrating them. I was making the sincere effort to lay a fresh foundation, and progressed rapidly as we trained long and hard each weekend. The landscape of progression rates shifted daily, but as the holiday rush season approached, three of us had popped out as most promising of the new hires: Rusty, Jake, and me.

This was heady stuff. Now I belonged to a real ski school, was proud to wear the uniform, gathering knowledge and skill rapidly, and was maybe on the path to a top professional status. And Rusty, Jake and I were the three amigos.

Rusty was a salt-of-the-earth fellow studying forestry. He was a totally stand-up guy, utterly trustworthy, and concerned about how his actions might be received by others. A very likeable young man and a solid friend.

Jake was a bit more into what was good for Jake. A bit prone to manipulation and scheming, Jake had no reservations about bedding any young lady who was agreeable, and might tell her any number of things to make her so.

I like to think I was a good bit more like Rusty in general, and particularly where women were concerned. This was mostly because I had regard for how someone might be feeling tomorrow based on my actions, and reined in my behavior accordingly. But there was another driver of my virtue. Some early sexual outings had revealed that I might well be far too hair-trigger with a new lover, making me leery of leaping into bed with someone that I had not taken time to know well. A good friend and *then* lover was what I needed in order to bridge over a likely early disappointment.

And so our first season of true ski instruction moved along. Some aspects of the life were quite basic. We were poor college students needing to scrape by on as little as possible until this teaching gig started paying regularly. Sometimes several of us could stay for free in the cabin of one of our ski school directors. Sometimes eight of us would rent a single motel room and stack ourselves in there like cord wood. We ate whatever came along and in general were above nothing when it came to a roof and a meal. And it was a total blast.

Breaking Hearts

One of my first year group lessons was composed entirely of Penn State students, two of whom were Ricki and Cindy. Both upbeat and quick to learn, they were having a nice time and we

connected after the lesson. Best friends and roommates at Penn State, Ricki was jaw-dropper cute and powerfully attractive, to the point where many guys would take a pass rather than reach out to such a force of nature. Cindy was also attractive and fun and a good bit more practical, but she was no Ricki, and she was used to seeing young men swoon over Ricki while scarcely noticing her. Rusty and I started spending platonic time with Ricki and Cindy on and off the mountain. Like so many others, we were each a little afraid of Ricki and took too little notice of Cindy, and so platonic it was.

Toward the end of the Oregon Hill ski season Ricki and Cindy announced that they had signed onto the Penn State Outing Club's spring break trip to Waterville Valley in New Hampshire. That sounded really good to Rusty and me, but we lacked the funds and were going to pass, when Ricki and Cindy offered that we could come along, and sleep in the living room of the condo unit they would be in. And we could maybe trim our lift ticket cost by flashing our ski school credentials, seeking a courtesy lift pass for the week. All this was perfectly in line with how we had navigated our entire winter, keeping roof and meal expenses to a minimum.

Not everyone sharing this particular condo with Ricki and Cindy were in favor of our occupation of the living room, the trip leaders were notified, and they collared us and extracted the trip cost we were seeking to avoid. I had acquired a stomach bug towards the back of the week, and so endured this humiliation with diminished energy. A relatively gentle rebuke, but still I learned quite directly that the low road was no place for me.

Right about then, with the ski season behind us, Rusty thought he was getting signals that Ricki was ready for more than friendship.

We see what we want to see. In a fit of deep infatuation he made his heart known to her. And was rebuffed. Poor Rusty was hurting so bad that for a few days there he could hardly breath. I tried to console him, but had no such experience to draw on.

About a week later I thought I was getting signals from Ricki that I was the one. I started feeling a deep flood of infatuation unleash within. Rusty noted this, knew what he was seeing, and tried to talk me off the ledge. He warned me that I was going to get hurt, and that it was not going to feel good.

We see what we want to see. Now I revealed my feelings to Ricki, and was promptly rebuffed. Ah, the black, chest crushing weight! I felt like I could barely move. The fact that Rusty had tried to warn me helped not at all. A first heartbreak is a spectacular high water mark that hopefully is never repeated with quite the same intensity. But youth is a time of resiliency. After a few days chained in the dark I found my way back up into the bright sunshine. And again I learned that this ski instructor thing was maybe more complicated than I originally thought.

A Second Season

In my senior year at Penn State, my coursework was going well and I had clear indications that I would finish strong and have excellent job prospects in my field of study. And the coming second year with the Oregon Hill Ski School was looking great. The directors had told Rusty, Jake and me that we were progressing quickly enough to try for full professional certification with the Eastern Professional Ski Instructors Association, and we were slated for more intensive training to prepare us for the testing if we were interested. This was very bright and shiny stuff! If all went well I would get to choose between immediately launching a career in corporate finance or maybe first taking a few years to teach skiing professionally. Who knew where that might lead? Saying I was happy does not quite capture it.

As soon as Oregon Hill opened for skiing, Rusty, Jake and I were hard at it every weekend, taking extra clinic time whenever we were not teaching. Our directors were pleased with our work and told all three of us that our chances of passing were looking good.

And this year the ski school owners had leased a house near the mountain with the first floor apartment for use by the mid-week director, and the second floor set up as one large hostel-style bunkroom loaded with an assortment of mostly single but some double beds. This was great! The cost of a night's stay was nominal, and we no longer had to scrape and scheme to find a cheap roof each weekend. Add to this the fact that experienced instructors got steady work and better pay, and the new season was looking good indeed!

Jake resumed doing what Jake did, and he several times found a new friend at the resort bar and would bring her back to the bunkroom for the night. Privacy simply did not exist, and it did not seem to matter. Other staffers would sometimes spend the night there with lady friends of varying tenure. Folks would mostly wait until the room was asleep and then quietly chase their paradise in the dark.

Rusty became very fond of Katie, a local high school senior who worked some weekend shifts in the ski lodge snack bar. She was very pretty, as pleasant and stand-up as Rusty, and could slip you a free cheeseburger if the conditions were right. Mostly Rusty got the cheeseburgers. I was a little troubled by the four year age difference between Katie and Rusty, but neither of them seemed to mind much, and Katie sometimes logged a little bunkroom time. As the early weeks of the season spun by it became clear that I was the only regular inhabitant who had yet to entertain a lady in this very open forum and I started to catch a little good natured noise around this.

After a Christmas day spent at home in Philadelphia with my family, I hustled back up to Oregon Hill to grab as much mountain time as possible during what remained of Penn State's winter break. My first morning back it was single-digit cold and the sky a deep blue. Some cars were not starting but mine fired up readily and I drove the five minutes to the mountain to jump on the chair lift before the mountain was open to the public.

The snowmaking and grooming crews had done their work the night before and the surface was a frozen corduroy, kind of noisy and very fast. The main slope at Oregon Hill was contoured like a set of steps, with a steep section followed by a relatively flat section and then another steep and a gentler slope down to the lodge. Cautious skiers would often stop at the edge of a steep, and these frequent stops in the same area would routinely carve out a distinct lip, and the grooming crew sometimes left this natural jump in place. So it was this cold fast morning.

With the lifts not yet open to the public, I knew the slope was completely empty, and so it would be possible for me to take a big jump without fear of harming anyone unseen below. And I was twenty-one and certain that I was indestructible. I went straight down the first steep gathering big speed that I held across the upper flat. Approaching the lip at the top of the second steep I scrubbed a little speed, but not much. I had been jumping a lot lately, and had become very comfortable with big air, sometimes carrying sixty feet or more before touching down. With these fast conditions I might go farther than ever. The lip was taller than normal and it really kicked me up. At this speed I should have held a tuck position like a downhill racer, minimizing air resistance and enjoyed the flight.

But with us it was all about show, and I made the mistake of opening up for some sort of stunt, maybe a daffy duck walk or some such. The air resistance was beyond anything in my experience and I was instantly blown back, way off balance, and no amount of windmilling of arms would save it. Worse, my speed was so great that I had mostly out-jumped the steep section, landing some eighty feet down slope in the transition to the lower flat. My ski tails hit first, forming an open V, and my torso slammed down forcefully between them. There was a loud pop, a wild tumble of loose equipment and hard snow as I slid to a stop on my back, the cloud of ice crystals settled back down, and then silence.

This was in the last days of 1976, and magnetic resonance imaging did not yet exist. I did not know what an anterior cruciate ligament was or that I had just severed this vital bit in my left knee. All I knew was that it swelled up to grapefruit size, hurt a lot, felt deeply unstable, and I could not walk. In that time, details of the damage could only be gained by slicing open the entire knee just to have a look, and I deferred. I had it drained to reduce the swelling and after a few days of crutching about I found that I could walk unaided and began to think that my injury was not so serious, and that recovery might be quick. Maybe I still had a ski season. This is called denial, but at least I had on my side an honest ignorance of the facts.

Preparing for professional certification was now lost. And yet, I was doing better and better moving about on the knee. I got back on the snow, skiing very slowly, very carefully, and then was able to deliver low level lessons. Then came a day when I was feeling really good. The swelling was gone and the knee was not bothering me much, I had some free time, and I got with a group of my fellow instructors to take a free run. We rode the lift up to the summit and I was so thrilled to once again be racing down the mountain in a close formation line, one after the next, all in our matching uniforms. It was a deeply moving tribal experience that I savored all the more for its temporary loss. I was at the end of the line as one by one we sailed off the

lip of the lower steep for a little jump. I was in the air before I realized what a horrible mistake I had made. Smooth turns were a mild stress I could manage, but now I was in the air, and the impact of landing was imminent. This would not be a hard landing, easily absorbed with good legs. But I had asked too much of my unstable knee, and it crumbled under me painfully. My little fling with denial was over. I really was seriously injured. Sobering stuff, aging my world view by ten years in the blink of an eye.

I limped off the mountain and drove back to the bunkroom to ice the knee and be alone with my thoughts. So my pro skiing career was really gone.

It was getting late on a Saturday afternoon, and I decided that a night out with the crew at the resort bar was no good. I was simply in too black a mood. I grabbed an early dinner and decided to stay back and read a few required chapters of an economics text. If I could not ski professionally, I had better nail this course work.

A bit after 11:00 pm the revelers started pulling up in the parking lot outside. I was in no frame of mind to deal with so many happy, loud, buzzed friends, and so I quickly snapped off the lamp and feigned sleep.

Amber

She had been a fixture at the resort bar most weekends this season. At bit short, a little heavy, facial features roundish and blunt, maybe twenty-five years of age. Certainly no one's beauty, but not completely unattractive. Amber was acquiring some repute for attaching to some young buck or another from the ski school, and towards last call communicating her interests and making off with her latest conquest. I doubt she was seeking to make her way through the entire ski school, but by mid-season she had made good way. She had seen the inside of our hallowed bunkroom more than once, and never with the same lad.

From my now distant view, I wonder what demons drove her. What had made the hole in her heart that she worked so hard to fill? Surely she must have understood that nothing important could ever come from these conquests, that she was at once the hunter and the joke.

Over the years since, I have developed a facility for compartmentalization, such that I can extend myself mindfully with women without the need of following through sexually. Deep connection can follow and has gained me some of the most important and rewarding friendships of my life. But this is an emotional and spiritual fine motor skill built years later, and of necessity from within a successful marriage. Not having any such tool in my bag in that time, I made no attempt to understand or reach out to Amber, was simply repulsed, and avoided her.

The crew came stomping up the steps in twos and threes, found that I was sleeping and turned it down a click or two. But life goes on and the sleeping cripple in the corner soon forgotten. Beds in the bunkroom were communal property, first come first pick each weekend and the single beds generally went first. Jake and I had rolled in late the night prior and agreed to share

what remained: a double bed. Jake would fuck a stump if times were thin, but I imagined I could fend him off if his passions took a new turn.

Amber and Jake executed the last call ritual over at the bar and crept up the stairs to the bunk room after most folks were settled in and breathing evenly. With a minimum of conversation they quietly disrobed and slipped into the other side of the double bed. Generous to a fault, Jake placed Amber between us for starts.

This was new and a little bit horrible. I clamped my eyes shut, doubled down on my sleep feigning, and rolled as far away as possible. But a standard double bed is only 52 inches wide, and contact with two other adults, particularly as they swing into motion, is difficult to avoid. I have since learned that communal sleeping in close quarters has been fairly common in human history, and quiet love making in the midst of a crowd is really nothing new. But this sort of side show, felt as much as heard, was new to me. My clearest memory of the event was my discovery that Amber had not shaved her legs recently, and I was suffering minor abrasion in consequence.

I found I was rooting for Jake. While I was not in complete sympathy with his decision to bring Amber home, I was now hoping that he was strong, in possession of himself and able to offer her an extended and fully satisfactory dose of what she sought. For I was fearful that if left unhappy, she might well turn on me.

In the event, she did not, and all was well but for a little skin loss.

Ski School Awards

Ski season can end abruptly in Pennsylvania. Even if there is still a workable base of snow on the hill, people don't believe it and they simply stop coming in early March. And so good things must end and we handed in our uniform parkas. Our two-year-old ski school had attracted an entertaining cast of characters who increasingly could offer ski lessons at a very high level of skill. I once again gingerly got back onto my knee and closed out the season handling low to middle level groups where I could offer good product without worrying about another knee collapse. Our directors, flushed with success at what they had built, announced a season's end award banquet. This would be more about roasting each other than taking a meal, and great energy went into preparing props in support of elaborate send-ups.

When my time in the hot seat came, Paul, the youngest of the directors, who was single and so most in tune with what went on in the bunkroom, stood and began. He set out the case for what I had accomplished on the mountain and what was sadly lost in injury. Rusty and Jake had indeed continued to train and improve and had passed through a week of intense testing up in Vermont to emerge as newly minted, fully certified professionals, and Paul speculated that I too would have come through had I not blown my knee.

So now my award. In recognition of my observed behavior in the bunkroom this season, I was presented with a lifetime supply of condoms: one.

Actually quite hilarious, as it was very much on point. I ruefully accepted amid much harangue from the beloved tribe.

An Act Of Redemption

A bit earlier in that ski season, Penn State's Outing Club got rolling on planning another spring break ski trip. I attended the meeting and heard a presentation made by a couple of guys who seemed a little slimy and appeared to be looking to profit from what should have been an all-volunteer effort. The trip would be to Smuggler's Notch in Vermont and I was interested and willing to be an upstanding, paying customer this time, but was really put off by these presenters and their questionable motivations. I waded in, gathered a few facts, and wound up offering to lead the trip for the club on a purely volunteer basis, cutting these profiteers out of the equation.

So. I rose from sketchy trip crasher one year to trip leader the next. A rapid social promotion, but such is campus life.

Cutting out the sales commission these guys were going to take brought the trip cost down noticeably, made the trip a great deal, and I quickly had the maximum 120 student club members signed. This was 1977, pre-email, pre-cell phone, pre-spreadsheet. Everything was manual. Want an alphabetized list of attendees with contact information and payment status? Easy. Just manually alphabetize and type up the list. On a typewriter. Without correction tape.

If you wanted to lead a trip back then you had to mean it. I fielded numerous special requests and complications over the months leading up to the trip, gathered up all the payments, made my lists and checked them twice, and arrived at Smuggler's Notch a day ahead of the group with my records in a tidy binder, everything high and tight.

The manager there was pretty knocked out by my command of the details, and he offered me a management job with the resort on the spot. Nice! Maybe this was another chance for me to enter the ski industry, blown knee and all. But I was still strong in my coursework and I liked my chances in the more lucrative world of corporate finance, so I thanked him, took a pass, and limped on into my role as big daddy trip leader for the week.

Even with my weakened and loose knee, it was so very nice to be at the center of the trip and in the service of the group rather than slinking around trying to avoid notice, as I had the year prior.

Using my knowledge of skiing and facility for organization to deliver a great trip for my group felt really good, and this was an important insight for me.

Early Steps Away

Rusty levered his newly won EPSIA certification to take a position teaching at Keystone in Colorado. The Rocky Mountain big time! Following his season there Katie came up pregnant and Rusty returned to marry her. The next few years he served as mid-week ski school director at Oregon Hill and in the off-season operated heavy construction equipment.

Jake took his professional step up with the Killington ski school in Vermont. Also trained in scuba, he dove for a treasure salvage company in the Caribbean in the off-season.

Two weeks after graduation I started up with GE as a financial management trainee, and never skied in uniform again. But skiing remained a core passion and the source of many of my deepest friendships and brightest moments in life.

After getting by for more than two decades I finally succumbed to the knife, found a great surgeon and had a patellar tendon graft repair of that severed ACL. When I was later able to ski a nice bump line without need of a brace I felt those extra ten years slide off my shoulders.