

A Few of the Strangest Things



F_{irst} Fright

It was huge. It may have roared or perhaps snarled. I have no recollection of sound, only terror. My mind still holds the image of a huge head, glistening saber-like teeth, and stripes of yellow and black. The eyes are etched into my memory. The beast approached, its massive form filling the wall.

Yes, the wall. This tiger was not in a rainforest or on a savanna, it was coming through the solid pine boards of my tiny bedroom, and the only protection I had was the bars on my crib. There have been some strange things in my life, some of my memories are bizarre, some outlandish, and some fantastic, but my first memory is still one of the most vivid.

Prospect Lake

Jesse Hulse

The late August sun, bright enough to hurt the eyes, was shimmering off the water, still half obscured with ice. We were exhausted when we finally dropped our packs by the shore of Prospect Lake, but a night's sleep, even on the ground, and a granola bar or two had done wonders. At the timberline, wood is scarce but scouring the ground produced enough for a small fire, and that made the dream of a pot of coffee a reality. My cousin and his wife stayed in camp, but with rest and a steaming cup of joe, the wanderlust took me, and even though we were well over 8000 feet, I needed to see the view from the mountain behind us.

I had a walking stick to help me navigate the steep ascent through loose rock and gravel. I liked this particular stick; it was light to carry but strong enough to steady myself. At eighteen, I wasn't too worried about steadying myself; it was more for the cool factor. I'd been carving on it all summer. Lacking the skill and patience for artistry, the carvings looked as though made with a sharp rock, but rustic as it was, I had become attached to that stick.

Near the top, I gazed down at our tents, looking like toy miniatures. With no way to climb farther on that part of the mountain, I started traversing a glacier to the point that would allow me to continue the climb or descend safely.

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The slope of the snow and ice was about forty-five degrees and went down some sixty feet to a sheer cliff. Carefully testing my footing, I slowly dug my right boot into the snow, jabbing the walking stick in to give me a handhold and then moving my left foot and planting it in the snow. Slowly and deliberately repeating the steps, I was steadily progressing.

As I lifted the walking stick and moved it forward, my feet suddenly slipped. Immediately, I forced the stick down into the snow with all my might. It snapped like a toothpick, and I went sliding down the snow field, gaining speed. There was no time to think, no way to stop, and no way to survive the cliff. Then, I hit a solid rock in the middle of the glacier, the only rock there, and I hit it.

Sitting still while my heart rate normalized and my breathing returned to a more natural rate, I took stock of the situation. There were two things I was going to have to do. First, I had to finish crossing the glacier; I couldn't spend the rest of my life sitting on a rock in the middle of a snow field. Second, now that I had no walking stick, I resolved never to have one that wouldn't hold my weight.

Golf Isn't My Game

In my twenties, I played an occasional game of golf badly, but I played. Rod and Mark, cousins of mine who worked in their

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small construction company, were playing one day, and I joined them. Mark and I both hit our balls into some trees, and when we found them, Mark was a little farther away, so he would take his swing before me. Now that his ball was found, he didn't want to take his eyes off it to go get a club out of his bag, "Jess, can I borrow your five iron?" I handed him the club and started moving out of his way.

Mark is a unique individual. One of his favorite expressions was, "Go for it!" He seemed to think anything would work better if you hit it harder. I was still walking out of his way when I happened to glance in his direction and saw him swing. The ball was traveling in slow motion; I could see every detail. What I couldn't do was get out of the way. I tried to go to the ground, it felt like I had already lifted my legs, but my body simply wouldn't drop. It seemed I should reach down and grab the grass to pull myself to the ground, but there was nothing I could do. The ball continued until it hit me in the head, striking just under my left eye. It sounded like the ball had hit a tree with a resounding whack, and the ball bounced back further into the brush. I've been told the cheekbone is the hardest bone in the body, and after that day, I believe it.

Mark thought he had killed me, and I like to think that made him feel bad, but when he saw I was alive and getting up on my feet, he said, "I hate to ask you this but... did you see where my ball

went?”

Wrestling Fool

Living in North Carolina had its perks, but a growing family and a modest salary made it hard to travel to Eastern Oregon to visit relatives. My mother was planning a family reunion with well over a hundred people. I had missed the last get-together, and this one coincided with my parent’s fiftieth wedding anniversary. Mom was a force to be reckoned with, and she was not going to accept any excuses. Nearly a year in advance, the phone rang, “We are having a reunion next summer; you set the date, so we’re sure you’ll be able to come.”

About three days before the party, family members were arriving steadily. One of my nephews was in the backyard wrestling with my young sons. They were trying to take him down while he tossed them to the side, the kind of roughhousing small boys do with grown men they know wouldn’t hurt them.

Then I heard, “Wow, you’re even tougher than dad.” That hurt, but the next voice I heard was Phil’s who added, “That’s because your dad’s a wimp!”

I said, “Clear the field, boys. I’m going to show this whippersnapper a thing or two.”

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My boys stepped back out of the way laughing at the fun. Phil and I started moving around each other with our feet wide apart for stability and our arms reading for grappling. I grabbed him, and he spun out of the hold seemingly without effort and I said, "You've done this before." He sneered, "I lettered in this sport."

I wrestled one year as a freshman in high school, and during that year, I was pinned in the first round of every match. I might as well have just gone onto the mat and fallen on my back. Phil was twenty-two, in the military, and lifted weights as a hobby. I was about fifteen years older than him and a desk jockey. By any sound reasoning, I should have simply walked away. But the gauntlet had been thrown, and I went for one more takedown. Phil, of course, knew the counter move, grabbed both of my legs, and threw me into the air. When I came down on the back of my head, all my vertebrae imitated dominoes falling in sequence.

I got up and walked into the house with effort and more than a little pain. Lying on the couch didn't work. After moving to the hardwood floor, I wiggled around, trying to find a position that wasn't excruciating. Carolee, one of my sisters, asked what happened, and I said, "I was wrestling and pulled a muscle." She got some olive oil and started massaging my neck. That wasn't helping. She said, "We have to take you to a doctor. You need a muscle relaxant." It was evening in a small town with no doctor. Off we went as she drove me the twenty miles to a small regional

hospital.

As we started, Carolee, who was an EMT, said, “This is really bad form. I should have immobilized you before taking you anywhere.”

I said, “Oh, shut up and drive.”

Emergency rooms always seem cold and humorless. The nurse asked, “What happened?”

“I pulled a muscle.”

“Exactly what happened? I need the details.”

“Well, I was wrestling and got thrown on my head, and then I felt all the bones in my neck pop like dominoes.”

My sister started turning white.

The nurse went on with, “Do you feel any tingling or numbness?”

“Yeh, now that you mention it, my fingertips are tingling.”

I thought Carolee was going to faint. They put me on a gurney and packed sandbags around my head and neck while they called in an orthopedic surgeon and got ready for a CT scan. They also told my sister to call my wife and tell her to bring my toothbrush; they were going to have to transfer me to Walla

Walla, Washington or Boise, Idaho.

Phil's mom, Julia, got family members together and said in her subtle way, "Get over here! We are going to pray."

After examining the CT scan, the doctor decided it was stable enough to do some flexion-extension x-rays for more detail. It was getting late at night when they finally put me in a room. The person checking me in was going through a health survey, "Any family diseases." By this time, my wife, Vanda, was there and answered for me with, "Only congenital stupidity."

Julia told me, "I prayed for you. I prayed very specifically that there would be no permanent damage and that you would be at the family reunion on Saturday. I also told God I didn't know why you were so stupid, and it's OK if you have pain."

The doctor came in and told me, "You broke the spinous process off the sixth vertebra. It's painful but not very dangerous. We'll keep you overnight, and if all goes well, you can go home tomorrow in a cervical collar." Then he added, "It's the seventh vertebra that I'm confused about. It's not square, it's wedge-shaped, but in the x-ray, I can see it's very dense indicative of an old break that has healed. When did you break your neck before?"

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I thought of the prayers and told him, “A few hours ago. This really hurts; I would have remembered if I had ever done it before.”

The family reunion and my parent’s fiftieth anniversary were both great parties. I know because even though I had pain, I was there.