Mom On Skis

BY SIGRID BATHEN

It started innocently enough, a slight turn to the left instead of the right, down a wide sweep of white powder lined by pines.

Then the gentle incline abruptly eepened, extending ahead—and, ıore to the point, precipitously OWN—to a part of the mountain learly not intended for the faint of eart.

It had begun as one of those perfect ıid-week ski days—blue skies, short ft lines, wonderful snow conditions. trictly a fair-weather skier, I had romised my daughter, and myself, ıis one perfect day during our winter reak from school. And so it was, until ıst before lunch when Mom failed to ee the triangular sign noting "More ifficult" on the tree where the ski ıns branched in the woods.

"Just a little bit further," I told my aughter, who was 12 and on only the ird or fourth ski trip of her life. "Just eep doing that snowplow, and we'll e down this mountain before you ow it."

"Mommmm, you don't REALLY ow where we're GOING, do you? /e're LOST, aren't we Mom?"

"We're not lost, just look around; ere are lots of other people on this ll."

Lots of other people skiing much ster and with considerably more skill an we are.

"Uh, sir, could you tell me how to t back to the other trail?"

No response. Just a flash of black andex, skis tight together and /HOOSH! as he went down the hill.

Finally, someone standing still. Jh, sir, is this by any chance an ADVANCED run?"

"You bet!" he said, grinning diabolically as he pointed his tips down the precipice.

I've skied since I was 9—with some long interruptions between 9 and 43—and, although I am hardly an advanced skier, I can generally get down most ski runs. My preference, however, is for gentler slopes, and gentler people, than these.

WHOOSH! Another demon down the mountain. I curb my impulse to trip him with my pole, and my daughter falls again.

A much better athlete than her mom, she was picking up the sport quickly and with some aplomb—to the point where I was beginning to have trouble keeping up with her on the easier runs. With the peculiar arrogance of 12-year-olds-going-on-16, she was urging us to ever greater heights when Mom took the wrong turn.

Now she is in near tears, lying in the snow, skis and poles crossed crazily beneath her, sliding backwards down this cursed trail.

"MOMMM, I can't get UP!"

"You have to sweetie," I said, exuding false confidence, frantically searching my memory for all the things my father, who was born in Norway and INSISTED we all learn how to ski, taught me in precisely the same circumstances.

I remembered him explaining patiently that if your backside and your skis were headed down the hill when you fell on them, you wouldn't be able to get back up until you turned it all around, preferably across the hill.

"TURN!" I told her. "We can't get down if you don't TURN!"

"I CAN'T turn, Mom, I'll run into a TREE!"

When I was growing up, there was hardly a ski resort in Northern California we didn't visit, which I find a daunting thought today, considering the cost of lift tickets for a family of five. And I remember with a wave of guilt the times I quit, wet and cold and whining, after a few runs.

Our father liked to go to Tahoe and Reno, located conveniently near ski areas, and we always went skiing after the Christmas retail rush in his store in Chico. Later, attempting to avoid the inexorable path of ski-resort development, we searched for smaller ski areas, and I'm thinking now about the advice of Odd, the Norwegian ski instructor at Granlibakken near Tahoe City whose name (despite our own ethnic origins) we thought hysterical, who taught me how to turn.

But on this bright, cold day on the wrong side of the mountain with my daughter, I especially remembered the old T-Bar lift on Mount Rose near Reno, about 30 years ago, when I fell and my ski went careening, by itself, down the mountain.

My father, of course, went down and got it, leaving me terrified on top—as much because of the height as the fact that I had failed to attach the safety strap on my boot to the ski. My dad wrestled the ski up that rickety lift, and when he got to the top he didn't say much, but I didn't forget to fasten that safety strap again.

Another time, he was teaching me to ride a chair lift, and in the pressure of the moment missed the chair himself. I remember the horrible sight of my father's ski cap disappearing beneath the chair as I was whisked—alone—to the top of the mountain.

I was thinking about that after I talked my daughter down the mountain, only to discover that the lodge was nowhere in sight because we were on the OTHER SIDE. Which meant we had to go back UP in order to get DOWN.

Having successfully made her way down it once, she was in no mood to do it again, albeit in the proper direction. Wet and tired and hungry—and now definitely 12, not 16—she burst into tears as we waited for the chair, which knocked her over as it perversely picked me up. Fortunately, remembering my father as he disappeared beneath that chair lift 30 years ago, I had the good sense to get off in time to help her up.

So we rode up the precipice, quietly contemplating the steep face ahead, armed this time with reasonably clear directions from the ski patrol. The second trip down, though tough, was nowhere near as harrowing as the first.

She recovered sufficiently, in fact, to worry about her image—a consideration of staggering proportions for preadolescent girls with visions of $200 spandex ski suits and WHOOOSH down the hill.

"That," she said succinctly near the end, "was humiliating."

Back at the lodge, we finally had lunch, and she bought a postcard of the place to send to her grandparents.

She didn't tell them she was scared or humiliated or that she cried.

"Today Mom and I went skiing," she wrote, "and Mom got lost." □

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