



Extreme Skiing
and the Art of Chasing Fear

a short story by Jason Matthews

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: The Decision](#)

[Chapter 2: Getting Out There](#)

[Chapter 3: Strange Happenings](#)

[Chapter 4: The Climax](#)

Chapter 1: The Decision

We stood atop the mountain peak at the ski area, leaning over our poles planted in the snow, supporting our body weight as we stared across a three mile stretch of space to another wilderness, one completely untamed by tracks. Subtle looks to each other confirmed a decision made by Sam, Rudy and me; the season would not be complete until we hiked over and skied The Edge.

From our resort, The Edge is the last jagged peak the eye catches before thousands of square miles of desolation wilderness. It's a giant mound of imposing rocks that houses one of the longest and steepest patches of untracked snow you can find for hundreds of miles. One can see it clearly from upper elevations at the ski area, our place of work and play. I must have looked at it a hundred times since December, when I first started working as a snowmaker, barely able to imagine myself making turns down its steep face. Legend had it, The Edge got its name for the feeling you get at the platform on top as you look out over the breathtaking vertical drop.

Sam, Rudy and I worked for the ski area, and although we were no longer making snow, we stayed busy with maintenance and repairs to equipment. It was April of a snow year the locals described as a drought. The rocks were becoming exposed at an alarming rate, even on the groomed runs, and the skiing felt lackluster. But looking across the expanse toward The Edge, all we saw was untracked spring snow—smooth, long and steep. From where we stood, it looked like the last frontier.

Fortunately, one can see from a distance that it's easily skiable. It doesn't even look that difficult. To be sure, it is extreme but only because of its steepness. There are no narrow chutes, trees, cliffs or boulders to negotiate.

"It's just straight and down," Rudy said.

"Very down," Sam added.

I looked over to the off-ramp of the chairlift and noticed Tess exit the ramp and head our way, surprisingly alone. She glided over next to us. We all knew Tess as an instructor with ski school and for being one of the hottest girls on the mountain.

"Hi, Tess," Rudy said.

"Hey guys. How's it going?"

"Good," Sam said, still looking over at our destination. "Just picking our lines for tomorrow."

"Hiking out to The Edge?" Tess asked.

"That's the idea," Rudy said. "Can't just stare at it year after year."

"Sounds good," Tess said. "Can I come too?"

I felt the rush of surprise, desire, gratitude and disbelief that accompanied words like those coming from a girl like Tess. Why was it the hottest women always used the word "come" when they wanted something? Or maybe they were trying to get a cheap rise out of predictable guys like me. The problem was that it worked. My mind instantly went through a myriad of thoughts involving her and me doing things I would only dream of but never realize. *Of course you can come, Tess. You can come anytime you like. Hopefully I'll be coming with you.* Behind the protection of sunglasses, my eyes openly observed her shapely form, curves that showed nicely despite the light jacket and Gor-Tex pants. How could Tess be so athletic and so curvy? It seemed common for female skiers to have tree trunk legs and stout butts, but how could Tess have a nicely rounded backside to go along with large breasts and such a slim waist? She defied

gravity whether dancing to bands in town or bounding down a black diamond slope on skis.

"We're leaving at first chair," I said calmly, not wanting her to sense the near burst of explosion I had in hopes that Tess would *actually* join us.

"Maybe I'll see you then," she said. "I've always wanted to ski there. Got to go. Bye, guys."

"Bye," we all said in pathetic unison.

With that she glided off, gained speed on the cat track and banked a hard left onto steeper terrain. We stood there, dumbly staring at her figure as she ripped some fast and smooth turns through the spring snow.

"Oh God, please make her be there tomorrow," Rudy said. His words echoed my thoughts and probably Sam's too.

The day before, Sam had brought up the idea of skiing The Edge in the locker-room during lunch break. He was the supervisor of our crew so taking a day off from work was no problem. Although we agreed to it fairly quickly, there was a lingering tension in the air. While we were technically "ski-bums" since we worked at the resort for the love of skiing, we were still far from being "extreme skiers."

Sam had worked at the resort for ten years as a snowmaker and groomer. On the clock, Sam easily did the work of two or three men. On snowmaking nights, lugging hoses and guns around in deep snow creating big piles to cover the groomed runs, Sam was a tough man to keep up with. Off the clock, he was skilled on skis but not really the type to push his limits or take unnecessary risk. As the snowmaking department grew and employed younger, more adventurous types like Rudy, Sam began to express more interest in extreme cravings and fun.

Rudy brought that out in everybody. He's half Indian, half French-Irish with dark shaggy hair, a weathered face and a laugh that's bigger than his frame. He's usually saying something incredibly rude yet funny, the sort of person who can crack you up just by looking at him. I saw someone who lived by his own rules in Rudy and everything about him: the creased eyes, the wavy hair, the goofy grin, the attitude. He was a natural for adventure, a magnet for fun and bringing others into the action.

Within our group, I had the least experience on skis, by then about a hundred days. I wasn't necessarily a thrill seeker, but I had entered a period in my life where a small degree of fear offered more fun than anything else. We could all ski the steeps competently, or at least negotiate the steeps. We mostly talked about the snow quality, hoping it would be smooth and soft enough to set an edge.

We did some planning in the break room at the end of the shift, then left for our homes. I made a spaghetti dinner and drank beer while watching TV in my tiny studio apartment. A few hours later I began a restless night in bed, my mind tossing ideas around and trying to get thoughts of Tess to pass, knowing how disappointed I'd be if she didn't show.

Chapter 2: Getting Out There

The weather that morning was typical for early April, clear and calm. The forecast was for mild temps and no wind, so I planned to dress light with just a t-shirt and a windbreaker. It would be about a three-hour traverse and hike from our mountain's summit to The Edge, a very long but mostly flat, skate-hike across a five mile crest of ridgeline with assorted stops for boot hiking. Most of it would be over snow but parts would be over rocky areas as we had heard from others. Only Rudy had a backpack that carried skis, but Sam and I said we wouldn't mind hauling ours on shoulder when necessary. We figured on loading the chair at 8am and skiing around eleven-thirty, depending on how fast it warmed up from the sun, hopefully turning the snow into a firm yet carve-able entity. Then we'd hike out the valley for an hour or so to the nearest road, where Sam left his Jeep waiting. The plan was for a nice and simple day trip, really not that extreme at all.

Jovial voices signaled enthusiasm from a distance as I was about to enter the locker-room. Rudy was psyched; his smile beamed through adrenaline-filled chatter that emanated well beyond the lockers.

"Oranges, chicken salad sandwich fixings," Rudy said as he showed us the contents of his supplies. He held up a small green bottle. "A little Jager to calm Josh's nerves. Should we partake in some now?"

"It's not even eight o'clock," I said.

"So?" Rudy opened the Jagermeister, the licorice tasting 70-proof liquor that allegedly had traces of opium due to the added ingredient of poppy seeds. He took a swig and handed the bottle to me expectantly. "It's got to be noon somewhere, Josh."

"Alright." I shook my head and took a weak sip, which resulted in facial protests from both Sam and Rudy. I took another deeper chug.

"That's the spirit," Sam said. Then he drank and gave the bottle to Rudy who proudly put it back in his sack of goodies.

"I brought some trail-mix," Sam said. "Sun-block, lip stuff if anyone needs any."

I opened my backpack to display additions to the trek. "Mars bars and four cans of ice-cold Budweiser for the victory toast at the end of the run."

"Four? Nice," Rudy said.

"Has anyone heard from Tess?" Sam asked.

We looked blankly at each other, not wanting to voice our real concern that she wouldn't show.

"She'll make it," Sam added.

"She'll probably show at 8:15," Rudy said, "fashionably late."

We collected our things and walked out toward the base of the ski area. The sun was just climbing above the ridgeline, already starting to shine on the frozen snow and warm things up. I checked the wind speed by looking at the uppermost ridge tops, barely seeing a trace of snow spirals in vortex below the largest cornices. Minimal wind and sunshine—a perfect day for spring skiing.

We put on backpacks and stepped into ski bindings to take our place in line at the Summit Express chair at 8am as planned. Now that it was well into spring, the resort opened an hour earlier than normal and closed at 1pm. We watched the first skiers and boarders glide forward

and load the chairlift while scanning around for any sign of Tess. The minutes ticked away as riders approached the chair, assembled their gear and loaded. Some knew us and said hi. 8:15 went by and then 8:20 passed as our hopes diminished.

"Typical female. Builds you up then doesn't show," I said, finally breaking the silence.

Sam and Rudy exhaled breaths in disappointment. I began to shuffle my skis, moving slowly toward the chairlift. Sam and Rudy followed while Rudy kept glancing back over his shoulder. The riders in front of us loaded their chair as we started moving forward.

"There she is!" Rudy said.

I figured he was joking. I turned around and was stunned to see Tess approaching from fifty yards away, already in her skis and skating powerfully toward us. She waved from a distance, wearing a backpack and a huge smile. My heart raced with adrenaline.

"Thanks for waiting," she said upon arriving.

"We were just about to leave your ass," Rudy said.

"Sorry. Complicated morning but I'm here now. You guys ready?"

Everyone nodded and we shuffled forward to take seats on the chairlift.

High fives flew among the group as we sat on the Summit Express chair heading to the top of the mountain where the long traverse would begin. As we rose in the moving chair above familiar terrain, I felt my backpack pushing me uncomfortably forward in the seat. Not wanting to fall off the chairlift, I asked the others to watch out for the safety bar coming down.

"I told ski patrol we'd be hiking there," Sam told us. He was our supervisor, after all, and knew enough to inform the right people should anything happen.

"Smart," I said. "Very smart." I never would have thought of that. I was already in a daze trying to see myself skiing down The Edge. *Will I fall? Might I get hurt? Can I impress Tess? How will I keep my confidence up?*

"I also told Julie," Sam said. Of the guys in our group, he was the only one with a girlfriend.

"Perfect," Rudy mentioned. "We should have a rescue party there by nightfall if Josh breaks his legs."

Tess laughed and nudged me with her elbow. I didn't even hear the joke, completely lost in thought. I stared in a daze at my ski tips dangling from the chair. *Rossignol, do it for me today.* I clicked the tips together, causing the small buildup of slush to slide off and fall below. *How steep could it really be?* I felt the first waves of anticipation, the adrenaline and, most importantly, the fear.

Sam broke my silence. "Here, eat some of these," he said.

I looked over at the little sandwich baggie he held, carefully protecting it from the breeze on the high speed chair. He opened it, and to my surprise there was a fair amount of psychedelic mushrooms. I hadn't seen any for a couple of years since college. The thought of shrooming my way down The Edge must have put a mixed reaction on my face.

Rudy noticed the bag too. "Oh boy, shrooms!" Without hesitation he grabbed a small handful and began munching on them. As he chewed, I saw black and gray pieces stuck between his teeth and attached to his lips. "Never quite get used to the taste, do you?"

Rudy smiled at me, his teeth speckled with mushroom bits that I assumed would be there for hours.

"Tess, what do you think?" Sam asked.

"Sure, I'll do some," she said, reaching into the baggie and selecting a smaller amount than Rudy had. She popped them in and chewed quickly, then swallowed fast. Rudy laughed at her

method.

Sam put the baggie in front of me and politely said, "You don't have to if you don't want to, Josh."

"No, no. Shrooms. Sounds great," I managed. Rudy and Tess looked at me expectantly. "It's just a surprise. I can't believe we're going to shroom today. This is great. Thanks, Sam."

"Yeah, thanks, Sam," Rudy said as he continued to munch on his.

I hesitated while inspecting the little psychedelic caps and stems. I had taken mushrooms several times before and always hated the rancid taste. It had nearly made me vomit more than once. I tried LSD as well during that phase of my life. For a while I had sought to trip, to transcend reality, to go across the borders of sanity and experience something my normal brain was incapable of.

But I never went all the way. I never lost control. I never sat on a car hood holding a large rock insisting it would die if it touched the ground. I never talked to people who weren't there, or licked the living room furniture, or stared at my hand for hours on end. I never took the high doses that meant once you did it there's no going back, though I witnessed others doing those things, and it scared the shit out of me. On one occasion, I came pretty close to that level and fought with all my strength to keep my marbles. I respected the shrooms as a powerful drug, one that could keep you laughing all night or one that could place you in another zone altogether. I was afraid of them, but now that everyone else was eating shrooms, even Tess, I really had no choice.

I reached my hand into the baggie and grabbed some stems and a couple of caps. I pinched my nostrils shut with one hand and shoved them into my mouth with the other, chewing efficiently while making an effort to taste nothing.

"Interesting method," Rudy observed. "Similar to Tess, but I can tell Josh is even more repulsed."

"Hate the way these things taste," I said with my mouth full of them.

"Yeah, but it's worth it," Sam said as he munched a couple of caps.

I swallowed mine half-chewed and rinsed my mouth with water, desperate to rid myself of that horrible taste. My head shook. My whole body shook. I fought off the urge to vomit over the side of the chair. Tess and Rudy watched every reaction from me and began laughing wildly. And then the feeling passed.

Chapter 3: Strange Happenings

"There, now." They were down the hatch. I felt better instantly. A good dose of fear does wonders.

We reached the top of the chair and headed out, the four of us skating across the crest of the mountain ridgeline, away from the safety and confines of our patrolled ski area toward the destination. The initial pace was moderate with Sam leading the way, Tess following, me next and Rudy thirty yards back. There was no need to hurry. We had a long hike to do on a beautiful day, and we were going to enjoy it. I immediately knew if Tess stayed five yards in front of me with her shapely butt on display in thin black pants, I could go for hours on end.

We skate-skied across our familiar traverse past the friendly backside of the resort, overlooking the ungroomed terrain of the sun bowls below us. We peered over the final wave of cornice, a six foot drop that I once thought was something I'd never ski over. In the past four months my skiing had improved so much that by then I wouldn't hesitate to point my skis right over and go, easily catching twenty feet of air. Looking back on the things that used to scare me, I had to laugh. And twenty minutes later, when we passed the OUT OF BOUNDARIES/NO PATROL BEYOND THIS POINT sign, I laughed even harder. As I giggled, I got that familiar creepy feeling that the mushrooms would soon be taking effect.

The look-what-I've-done kind of feeling I got during my first roller coaster ride as a child, while it climbed to the initial peak and was about to drop off the other side. For a nine-year-old, being locked in to a giant moving hunk of metal that's about to go from zero to a sixty in two seconds was plenty scary.

Once when I was twelve on a skateboard, I got going way too fast, losing all control going downhill and had to point it through an intersection hoping there'd be no traffic. That was truly scary.

Or the time in college when I first set a hit of psychedelic acid on my tongue and let it dissolve. These were all trilling moments for me because of the unknown, which is the birthplace of fear.

Sometimes you know your ass is hanging on the line, and you're just going to have to perform and take what happens. As we settled into our pace, traversing along the uppermost ridgeline and feeling the preliminary tingles of psychedelic mushrooms about to kick in, I realized the strangest part is the fact that I make these choices for myself and don't know why. I willingly ask for a dramatic change to see how I'll deal with it. The mushrooms were a gentle reminder that I was going to receive my request for change whether I liked it or not. I just hoped I wouldn't do something stupid in front of the others.

As we continued with poles in hand, legs working, hearts beating, lungs pumping oxygen, I felt a slight comfort thinking the shrooms might pass through my body faster than usual from all the physical exertion.

Sam stopped for a break, allowing the rest of us to catch up and regroup. "Are you guys starting to feel anything?" he asked. His purple fleece jacket and severely weathered face matched so much in color I was surprised I hadn't noticed it before.

"I'll say," Rudy hollered as he caught up. "I was wondering if I was the only one!"

Tess nodded. "Definitely starting to feel it."

"Oh yeah, me too," I said.

"We ate them an hour ago," Sam added.

"Has it been that long?" I was clueless. I was entering another world already, a trip for me that started in the locker-room that morning.

"No need to get there too early," Rudy said. "It's not even ten o'clock, and we're nearly halfway."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Let's take a pit stop."

We clicked out of our skis and walked over by some rocks and shrubs that offered seats and protection from a slight breeze. Everyone drank water as Rudy handed out orange wedges. I broke two Mars bars in half and shared them. Rudy took a swig of his Jagermeister and passed it around for the rest of us. Sam and Rudy each had a stash of pot and loaded two bowls. Sam's pipe was standard and simple brass, a bowl like many others. Rudy's was a flamboyant glass pipe with a variety of swirling colors mixed into the bowl and stem.

"Your pipe may be cooler," Sam admitted, "but who's got the better weed?"

"Only one way to find out," Rudy said.

The pipes were lit and passed around. Tess took a hit from Sam's pipe and had barely exhaled while Rudy was pushing his in front of her face. She coughed and started laughing as she said, "Wait a second, I can hardly breathe."

Rudy took a deep hit and held it in until he nearly burst from coughing. He exhaled a field of smoke toward me then patted the rock next to him. "I love how the shrooms bring out the color in the limestone. Normally it's just gray, but now there's all this purple and blues and greens. Am I the only one seeing this?"

"Are you sure that's limestone?" Sam asked.

"I dunno, maybe. Sandstone?"

Everyone began to laugh slowly at first but then deeper at the combined sound of laughter, a sure sign the shrooms were taking effect.

"Do you want to eat some more?" Sam said, holding out the baggie. "I brought a half-ounce. There's plenty left."

"I could handle some more," Rudy said, taking delight in the tiny morsels. He popped some in his mouth and began chewing.

"Okay, I'll take a few more," Tess said, following Rudy.

Sam split the remainder on his palm into two equal halves of stems and caps, then placed it before me. I somewhat reluctantly grabbed the side that looked the tiniest bit smaller and held them in my hand while my brain was doing math. I determined I'd be tripping on close to three grams of psychedelic mushrooms, an amount that was more suited for an outdoor rock concert with a designated driver or a safe night at home with trusted friends.

Part of me felt resistance though I said, "Sure, sounds good." Something inside me said, '*Go for it*' even though I already had a nice buzz. This time I decided against the no-taste method and simply tossed them in and chewed.

"Josh, how do they really taste?" Rudy asked.

"Not quite so disgusting this time."

"This time? Like it's a different batch. Good man."

Rudy punched me in the arm and Tess gave me a look of approval as we stood from our rock seats and walked back to our waiting skis and poles.

Soon we were en route in the same line-up. I think Rudy sensed how much I wanted to follow Tess for the view, but he didn't seem to mind as he trailed behind a good way back. He

smoked pot and cigarettes daily so he probably didn't want to feel the need to keep a certain pace.

As we continued, The Edge was bent outward, always in our view. Every five minutes I turned around to spot our resort's mountain summit, which made it easy to gauge progress. My breathing was deep but not labored. I'd been skiing and working at the mountain all winter. My legs felt strong, and I no longer doubted my ability to complete the hike in good fashion.

Locked into our skis we went along, skating across the mostly flat traverse, poles planting steadily, Sam, Tess, me, then Rudy. The talking shut down and the thinking inevitably took over. I found myself doing some hard-core philosophizing.

My brain had a mind of its own. *What is this experience all about? Why are we here anyway? Is this all really happening?* The combination of the shrooms, the pot, the Jager, the exercise, the lack of oxygen, the sexual attraction to Tess and the fear within me activated a mind set that was far from normal. My thoughts became random, bizarre and fast moving. I felt like I bordered on insanity, yet I found it strangely enjoyable. I laughed out loud—maniacal laughter. Just a few yards in front of me, Tess didn't seem to notice, probably stuck in her own bizarre thought patterns. To a degree, I worried that the shrooms would overtake me, and I might do something completely odd or dangerous. But I didn't dwell on it. There was so much fascinating nature happening around me. The way the snow ripped up like frozen waves on the ridgeline. The lime green color emanating out from the granite rocks. The shine energy force of the all-mighty sun, warming my cheeks. Anyone who's tripped on psychedelics would probably agree that it's good to be outdoors when you're losing your mind.

I felt the need to share my thoughts and caught up with Tess. For a while we skated side by side, talking about the effect of the shrooms and such random and unrelated subjects from grade school teachers to beer quality. Rudy trailed even further back, well beyond conversation distance. He had eaten a little more than the rest of us and probably didn't mind the time to himself.

I finally got up the nerve to ask her. "What's up these days? Are you seeing anybody?"

"Why do you ask?" she said, mildly interested in what prompted my question.

"I don't know," I stammered. "I didn't mean it like that."

She seemed to enjoy watching me squirm. "Not really," she said. "Dating in the official sense usually complicates things that were once good. Know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah," I said, wishing I had those problems. She probably saw right through me.

"Are you seeing anyone?" she asked.

"Nah, I like my life uncomplicated. Don't want to feel tied down."

Tess shook her head and laughed. After a moment, I did too.

As we got closer to The Edge, Sam had pulled over and was clicking out of his ski bindings. It would be necessary to boot-hike into it by going around its back side, across and up a rock-strewn area that extended several hundred yards all the way to our destination. I hadn't foreseen it since this part of the terrain is hidden from the view back at our resort area. Tess took off after Sam as Rudy caught up to me and began clicking out of his bindings.

"Guess we walk from here," I said to Rudy. He glared at me and grinned wildly. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He laughed like I had just said the most ridiculous thing possible. "Never better!"

Great, I thought. At least he hasn't completely lost his mind. Hope I haven't either.

Carrying my skis and poles while rock-jumping in my plastic boots proved to be quite tricky and dangerous, especially since the shrooms created slight hallucinations. The visual patterns of

the rocks blended into each other with moving waves of fluidity that made them seem more like liquid than solid objects. My brain tried to remind me, *the rocks are not liquid because rocks are not liquid.*

Sam blazed ahead with Tess a ways behind him. I took my own sweet time and concentrated through every step, reminding myself that rocks are not water and how easy it would be to get hurt there. After twenty minutes of climbing this awkward terrain, I looked up to the final destination. What I saw was so amazing, a series of tingles cascaded down my spine.

The rock field we were climbing led straight through two pillars of granite that housed a small platform of snow that overlooked the abyss. And to the right of these pillars was a gigantic rock formation, which looked exactly like one of those annoying monkey dolls that plays cymbals when you wind it up. Except this monkey had no cymbals.

A giant Buddha monkey overseeing the palace throne, the keeper of The Edge, a guard to the sacred temple of fear reminded me; *this is a special place indeed.* Wondering if I was shrooming too hard and imagining more than was really there, I turned back to Rudy and asked him if he saw anything peculiar ahead. He glanced up for a second.

"What? You mean Binkey?" he replied.

Yes, Binkey! He saw it, too, exactly as I had. I found it phenomenal this rock formation was the last thing to pass as we approached The Edge. It added a sense of holiness and meaning to our mission. This was a sacred place, an area not to tread lightly. And there's a giant granite Buddha monkey named Binkey at the entrance to prove it! I bowed my head to Binkey, showing my respect and hoping not to piss off any snow spirits for poaching their slope. I climbed the remaining rocks and was greeted by a cozy platform of packed snow, about twelve by twenty feet between the mighty pillar walls. Sam and Tess were waiting and excited.

"You know, there are actually two places where you can drop in," Sam informed Rudy and me as we arrived.

"Two?"

"Yes." Sam pointed to the left, "If you walk around this mound there's another spot to enter from. I've already had a look at it. It's definitely easier than this way."

I inched out uncomfortably to get a glimpse over the edge. I couldn't believe how far out my head had to be before I could see the field of snow-pack below. The world seemed to disappear beneath me. It was, by far, the steepest run I had ever looked over.

"Jesus Christ," I uttered. No other words came to mind.

"It's not steep, is it?" Rudy joked as he approached to get a view.

"Doesn't look too bad," Sam said.

"Oh my God, that's so steep," Rudy said. "We're going to fall off the edge of the world!"

"Are you guys still shrooming?" Tess asked.

"I am like a demon. I don't know about Josh."

"Hell yes, I'm shrooming. I'm peaking right now!"

"Good, that'll ease your nerves," Sam said. My nerves didn't feel at ease.

Tess grabbed some snow from the ground, formed a little ball and tossed it over. We watched as it plunged down the slope at breakneck speed, sending dozens of mini snow trickles following its wake. They went a long, long, way very fast. I couldn't help imagining that could be me tumbling in similar fashion.

"Still looks kind of firm," Sam observed. "The sun's on it. Better give it another twenty minutes to soften up."

We agreed and patted out seats in the snow. We drank water and shared Sam's trail mix and

slices of my apples. Looking at Rudy as he sat with his back against the jagged rock, my brain started feeling crazy again as I imagined how it would look if suddenly the platform gave way and fell desperately downward, dragging us with it. I shared this concept with Rudy. He told me not to think of such things.

"Seems like an odd time for bats," Rudy said, looking up. "Does anyone else see that?"

I checked the sky but didn't see one. "What kind of bat?"

"The normal kind, a little black one with wings. Over there," Rudy said, pointing at the hallucination.

"No," Sam said, "but I saw a blue snake in the snow earlier that I'm pretty sure wasn't real either."

"I'm feeling a little nervous," Tess said. She echoed my thoughts and probably those of the others.

"You'll be fine," I said, trying to control the trembles in my voice.

"What the hell, Tess? You're the best skier here," Rudy said.

"I am not," she objected.

"Oh yes, you are," Sam said. Rudy and I concurred.

"I didn't mean it that way. You guys are awesome skiers."

"Just hope I'm awesome when the time comes," I said. "Think I'll go check out that other line Sam was talking about."

I got up and hiked over toward the entrance of the second way to approach the slope. Again, it was incredibly steep and took quite an effort to stick my head out far enough to see the field of snow below. The space required to ski into it was very narrow for just a few turns and not quite as steep as the other side, then it joined the main slope. I wondered how I could have missed seeing this from our ski area. I looked over that way, to our resort area, and hoped some bright person with excellent eyesight might see me standing at The Edge. I made a snowball, tossed it in and watched it fall. The snow sounded a bit softer than before. It sounded very skiable. *Has it been twenty minutes already?* I reminded myself that I was on the brink of sanity and not to do anything stupid.

So I returned to the others to declare I was ready and would go first.

"Really? Are you sure?" Sam said.

"Yes. Don't know why, but I want to. I'll be fine."

"Wow, Josh," Tess said, hopefully impressed with my moment of bravery.

"Alright. We'll stay here," Sam said. "It's a much better view from this side."

"Watch and see how the snow looks," I said. "Hopefully it's carve-able but not too slushy."

"Perfect," Rudy said. "We can watch you from here and decide which way we'll enter. If you die, we'll try this way."

"Okay, give me time to get over there and set up," I said, though I stared downward at the snow pack caught in a moment of fear as my body shook once more, realizing what I had just signed up for. The others gazed at me, trying to determine if I was really shaking or goofing around.

Tess grabbed me by the shoulders and held me until I looked up at her squarely in the eyes. I hadn't realized until then that they were hazel brown with a golden tone, happy and warm while also seeing me clearly. I knew then that Tess's eyes may have been her best physical feature.

"Josh, you're going to do great," she said, still holding me at the shoulders. "Just promise me one thing; stay focused, okay?"

"I feel like one of your students," I said, although the attention meant the world to me.

"Promise to stay focused every moment," Tess insisted. "When you're out there, don't think about us watching, don't think about me, don't think about anything. Don't even think about the last turn; just stay focused on what you're doing at each moment."

"Okay. Okay."

She wrapped her arms around my back and gave me a great hug that embarrassed me even though I never wanted it to end.

"I would have gone first if I knew there was a hug in the deal," Rudy said.

She finally let me go.

"Thanks, Tess. I'll stay focused."

I collected my gear and headed back across the rock divider. I took one last look at Binkey and descended to the small platform. I readjusted my boots for the perfect fit as my breathing became more intense along with my heartbeat. I brushed the nooks of my bindings with my fingers to rid them of the smallest snow and dirt particles. I clicked into my skis and pulled the straps tight on my backpack. I cleaned my sunglasses thoroughly, then put on my gloves and wrapped them in the pole straps as I gripped the handles. I cleared my head and began reminding myself how confidence was key, how I was going to go into this thing and just do it, and it was going to be great fun. I reminded myself that I was tripping hard on shrooms, but that it was okay because I would never intentionally hurt myself. I took a few breaths and knew it was time. Time to focus on the moment, as Tess had said. Then I heard something move.

Turning around, I saw two guys standing a several yards behind me. It was startling. They were about my age, dressed in powder suits and telemark boots. They didn't speak, and I didn't know what to say. *Who the hell were these guys? And how did they happen to time this meeting just as I was about to drop in?* We hadn't seen one single person for miles all day, and now there were two guys standing right behind me. The feeling was creepy.

"How's it going?" I finally said.

"Pretty good. You gonna ski this?"

"I'm gonna try."

"Looks intense. You live around here?"

And then the conversation started. I told them about Sam, Tess and Rudy and how we worked at the ski hill down the ridgeline. I didn't tell them about the shrooms, but I wanted to. Because it was taking so long, I yelled across to the others that we had company, but the wind had picked up and the rock was too big for them to hear anything I said. I explained to the telemarkers how my friends were watching for me and how remarkable it was that they had appeared just as I was ready to go. They said they didn't want to hold me up.

"Have a good one. Maybe we'll see you on the other side," one of them said.

That's a laugh, I thought. They were going to ski this on pins? Right.

I went through my mind-calming routine again, and I was ready. I sidestepped my way to the edge and looked over, allowing the tips of my skis to hang freely over the open space. Jesus, it was steep.

The first turn's the hardest. The first turn's the hardest. You just have to go for it. PUNCH IT!

And I went over the edge.

Chapter 4: The Climax

With one sharp movement, I jumped in and made a turn to the right, keeping my skis farther apart than necessary, but weighting well on the downhill leg, edging my ski into the snow-pack like a madman on a survival course. I let my skis go briefly and jumped another turn to the left and then back to the right. *Keep your weight forward, Josh. Hold that edge. I'm doing it!* I was making turns down the steepest thing I've ever seen, right and left and right and left. I kept going, knowing I had just come into my friends' view. *'Look at Josh tearing it up,'* they were probably thinking. *Forget them, just stay focused.* And when I heard their hoots and hollers from above, I had to focus that much harder on the moment.

After many turns I pulled to a stop and looked back at the accomplishment. I felt a wave of comfort as gentle laughter escaped from my lungs, full of emotion and relief.

Rudy yelled down, "How's the snow?"

I yelled back, "Perfect corn!" Their faces showed their eagerness, and I guessed they were going to enter the same way I had. I knew they were about to meet the telemarkers.

From where I stood on my skis perpendicular to the fall line, the slope was angled so much that my extended hand could actually touch the snow-pack to my side while standing completely vertical, without bending over. I couldn't believe I felt so comfortable on such a steep pitch. I made a few more turns and then waited for the others.

Sam came first. He made about three turns and lost it. He started sliding fast right towards me from about a hundred yards above. One of his skis came off, but he instinctively grabbed it and then somehow managed to stop himself. He slid fifty yards in two seconds and yet was able to grind his downhill ski into the slope and stop. He quickly placed his other ski above it and clicked his boot back in. It was one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen while skiing. I'll never know how he pulled off that recovery.

Tess came next. She ventured in slowly and after making the first turn she started skiing each one more aggressively. Her body became at ease as she danced from turn to turn, bounding down the steepness with fluid grace. She called out like an Indian warrior, expressing her glee in a high pitched shrill. How amazing it was to watch her. Beauty, grace and power all wrapped into one. She skied right up to me and stopped just above, sending a shower of fine corn pellets across my skis up to my boots.

"Yeah!" Tess exclaimed, giving me a high-five from above.

Rudy followed and made very nice turns, carving up the steep and sending millions of scurrying snowballs rolling downhill. I went back and forth from watching him to the snowballs, delighting in the moment. Rudy made a dozen broad sweeping turns and stopped just above Tess.

"Awesome!" he said. "Even better than I imagined."

And now we were each successfully in, with several dozen of the best turns still to come. We had survived it after all. Now I was going to concentrate on some great skiing. My fear was completely left behind after that first right turn.

So I pointed my skis downhill, made one turn and crossed my tips. I instantly started tumbling. *Shit!*

I had seen videos of skiers flipping uncontrollably again and again. I'd never imagined it happening to me, but now it was. My body cart-wheeled and tumbled over and over with no end

in sight like I was inside a washing machine. The soul thought that ran through my mind was that I was going to die.

In one second, fear had me in its grip.

I went limp in mind and body. I instinctively let myself go dead, arms flying here, legs flying there. *Be calm. Don't fight the fall. Go with it.* I didn't have to think. I just did it. A primitive survival mechanism took over and I just went limp, dying in a way, succumbing to the external, letting myself be at the mercy of the natural forces.

And finally I reached the gentler part of the slope and slid to a stop. Remarkably, I was still clicked into my skis. I held onto both of my poles. Even my sunglasses held fast. It seemed a small miracle that none of my gear had come loose. My mind went through a quick check-list of vital body parts.

"Josh! Are you okay?" Sam yelled.

"I'm alright," I managed to say, not really convinced myself or sure if it was loud enough for them to hear me. I waved a ski pole high in the air.

Unbelievable. I had just taken the worst fall in my life, and it was cake. I had reassured Sam awfully fast, so I rechecked myself. Arms seemed okay. Legs seemed okay. Head seemed okay. And then I felt it. In my back, I felt a leaky sensation, a wet feeling, a soaking of fluids. I knew my entire back was soaking wet. *Blood*, I thought. *Oh, God! What had I done? The flipping!* I breathed slowly and deeply, fighting an attack of panic.

Fear had me again in moments, this time deeper than before.

I carefully slid out of my backpack, easing it ever so slowly off my arms. I inspected it, sure to see fresh blood. There was foamy substance everywhere. It wasn't blood, but what was it. I smelled it. I tasted it. *Beer!*

All four Budweisers had burst during the tumbles. I sighed with relief and laughed. I felt a little shaky, happy not to be hurt but still shaky. I didn't want to fall like that ever again.

The others skied down to me, Tess arriving first.

"Oh my God, Josh. Are you okay?"

"I am. I'm fine."

"That's the worst crash I've ever seen. Are you sure?"

"Really, Tess." I stood up onto my skis to prove it. My legs were a little shaky but they felt fine.

"Jesus, dude, I thought you bit the big one!" Rudy said.

"I fell, too, at the beginning," Sam added, trying to make me feel better. "I was lucky not to slide for long."

"Yeah," Rudy said. "Most of your turns were still on skis, while Josh showed us a new way to go down the mountain, head over heels."

I had to laugh. Rudy was right as usual and he just wanted to see me laugh. Everyone laughed hard when we realized I was fine.

"For a moment I thought I was going to die," I admitted.

"Oh God, don't say that," Tess insisted, reaching out to grab my arm.

"We all thought you were," Rudy said.

"It just happened so fast," I said reflecting on it. "And right after I was sure it would be no problem."

"Glad you're alright," Sam said.

"Sorry I can't offer you a Budweiser."

"It's okay. You still tripping?"

The lights from the snow crystals danced about all around us, and I knew my mind was still far from normal. "Like a madman," I said.

"Good. That's all that matters."

We made the remaining turns without mistakes and skated through the flat sections of the washout and valley. There we began our hike back to Sam's car. We traversed the valley floor for the following hour almost in complete silence, except when we turned back in time to watch the telemarkers ski it. They did pretty well—a few slides but nothing hairball. They were obviously well experienced on pins, or skinny skis.

After an hour of skating out on our skis, I saw a fire hydrant in the middle of the woods and welcomed myself back to civilized reality. Shortly beyond that, we reached the road and saw Sam's Jeep. We packed up our stuff, and Sam dropped us off starting with Tess.

After Tess grabbed her things and gave us each a hug, Sam and Rudy got back in the Jeep. I was just about to also, but I stood there momentarily frozen, watching her.

"Tess," I said, stopping her and causing her to turn back around.

"Yeah?"

I wanted to let her know I thought the world of her. I wanted to ask her out, to do anything to spend more time with her. I wanted to be with her as friends and hopefully as more someday. I was crazy about her, but for some reason the words just wouldn't come. If I said anything, it would only become complicated.

"Thanks again, for reminding me to stay in the moment."

Tess smiled. She said nothing but gave me a relaxed look in her eyes as if she knew what I was really thinking. Her hand made a small waving gesture, and she headed off to her apartment. I sensed that was the closest I'd ever come to asking Tess for a date.

I climbed into the Jeep and rode with Sam as we dropped off Rudy. Then Sam took me to my place and helped me grab my gear. Standing in the driveway, I felt the last energies of mushrooms still in my system fading quickly as Sam drove away. My world was returning to its normal reality.

That night I lay awake in bed. The shroom buzz had long worn off as I recollected on what an incredible day it had been. I had set out to ski the extreme. I took psychedelic mushrooms to make it that much more intense. I entered a kingdom of fear and performed what I believed to be the proper ritual. I took a fall on skis like none I've ever taken, one that I prayed to never take again. I thought I was going to die, so overcome with fear that I went completely limp and let my body be taken by nature, come what may. I put myself in a situation where I had no choice; my life was momentarily out of my hands.

By chance, I didn't get hurt. I was extremely lucky.

But something about it still bothered me. I began to think of all the possible ways we could have gotten hurt or killed. Before long, I had a half-dozen scenes in my head that could have spelled disaster. The weather could have picked up into a freak storm that trapped us. One or even all four of us could have fallen badly and not been able to make it back. An avalanche could have swallowed us up as we sat on top of the platform. The mushrooms could have been strong enough to cause a bad trip, and then anything could have happened, especially getting lost in the back country and freezing to death overnight.

The more I thought of ways in which we were setting ourselves up, the more I felt it again.

The fear was back. It was back as strong as ever even though I was lying safely in my bed. It

was still inside me and probably would be for life. I had naively set out to face my fear and conquer it. I figured that I could go soaring down The Edge out of my mind and come back a better person because I'd have beaten something.

Well, if I defied the face of death without a scratch, was it a success? Some uneasy feeling inside told me there would be another Edge. Fear hadn't gone away. It had enjoyed my company for a time. Now it was waiting to come out and play some other day. There's no beating fear forever. It just gets bored of one thing and waits for another. Today The Edge, tomorrow something else.

The main question is this; does fear want to hurt me or does it want to help me? I could easily argue both sides as the truth remains a mystery. Perhaps if I reach a level of higher enlightenment, then I could live fearlessly. But for now fear is my counterpart, my associate and maybe even my friend. Perhaps I'll never be without it, an intangible piece of me like creativity and intellect.

Fear shouldn't rule your life, but it should be respected. To some degree, fear matters. Fear is important. There's nothing like the adrenaline rush you get when you're truly afraid. Fear is elusive, and it can smack you in the face with all its glory when you least expect it.

I may be able to catch air, but I'll never catch fear.

The End

About the Author



Jason Matthews was born in North Carolina in 1967. He graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in '90 with a degree in film and television. He lives in Truckee, California with his wife, Jana, and daughters, Shelby and Devan. They enjoy soccer, skiing, Texas Hold'em and rooting for the Tarheels. He can be contacted through his websites, thelittleuniverse.com, your-own-free-website.webs.com, getongooglefrontpage.webs.com and ebooksuccess4free.webs.com.

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