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Cosmic Sledding

IN *THE TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS*, Nietzsche writes, “If we possess the *why* of life, we can put up with almost any *how*.” But as a matter of fact, he got it exactly backwards. Maybe he said it backwards on purpose just to mess with us. At any rate, the truth is that once you get the hang of the how, nothing else matters.

Looking back, I realize that my little brother, Brian, knew this at a very young age. I used to think he was just plain weird. Turns out he was a philosopher. Me, I’m still getting the hang of the how. But I swear I had it for a moment just the other day.

It happened—where else?—at Murray’s Hill.

Murray’s Hill is not a park or a historic monument; you won’t even find it marked on any map. It is a landmark, but only to those of us who knew what it was for. Murray’s Hill is actually nothing but a strip of lawn. It starts at the back door of the Murray’s house and ends at the creek that runs through my hometown. I was trying to figure out on my recent visit just exactly how wide it is—did we count the area beyond the apple tree or was that just backyard? It seems so much smaller now that I’m big.

Every back yard should have a creek, by the way. Creeks offer an almost endless array of entertainment options for the twelve-and-under set. If you plan on entertaining someone of that age, I highly recommend a creek. Unless of course your charge is a seven-year-old philosopher.

Hey Brian, we’re going down to the creek.”

“Why?”

Why? None of my friends ever asked “why.” Everyone just knew.

Especially in the winter. As soon as the first few flakes of snow drifted tantalizingly down to earth, every kid in the neighbourhood would head to Murray’s Hill.

And with every kind of kid, came every kind of sled.

Have you ever noticed how many different kinds of sleds there are?

There are a lot now, but even when we were kids there were plenty to choose from. They all basically did what they were supposed to do: get you from the top of the hill to the bottom. And that was about all it took to make us happy.

Except Brian. Brian didn't like to go sledding.

Everyone knew about Brian's feelings about sledding. Everyone except Santa. One year, a gift-wrapped tube appeared under the Christmas tree with Brian's name on it. The tube contained one brand new roll-up sled. This was sledding at its most basic. Rolled up and secured with a rubber band, these things could be stored in the space of an umbrella. When it was time to go sledding, you just slipped off the rubber band, unrolled the tube, spread your body across its surface to prevent it from rolling up again, and rode down the hill.

I think I remember the tube it came in having a picture of Aladdin on his magic carpet.

But a magic carpet flies through the clear, smooth air. Maybe you hit a fluffy cloud now and then. Murray's Hill, on the other hand, like any respectable sledding hill, was covered with rocks, tree roots, and jagged patches of ice. You can't steer around every rock, tree root, and jagged patch of ice on the hill. Not on a roll-up sled anyway, which lacked even the simplest of steering mechanisms. If those obstacles are there, and believe me, they are, you're going to feel them.

Hence the need for snow overalls. The snow overall was legitimately designed to keep farmers warm on those pre-dawn treks to the barn to milk the cows. It wasn't long, however, before some enterprising marketer became aware of the obvious similarity between milking cows and sledding, and convinced moms around the country that their children would not survive the winter without snow overalls.

Most of us accidentally lost or damaged our snow overalls as early in the season as possible. But not the roll-up kids. That extra padding was their only hope. So, not only did roll-up kids have the cheapest sleds on the hill, they also had to suffer the disgrace of wearing puffy, candy-hued farmer pants. Maybe suffering made them strong. Maybe they're all corporate CEOs now, making multi-million dollar decisions that affect all of our lives.

Still, in my view, having any sled was better than having no sled at all. Most kids would be glad just to be going down the hill. Not Brian.

Brian refused to use his roll-up sled. He would come with me to Murray's Hill, but stay up on top making snow forts, or stand near the bottom pelting us with snowballs as we flew by. One year our cousins came to visit with roll-ups of their own. I begged Brian to help us organize a neighbourhood-wide roll-up race.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because it's fun."

"But you can't steer. You just go where the hill takes you."

"So? It's a good hill."

"Would you ride a raft down a river without a paddle?"

"Well, if it was fun Besides, you don't need a paddle for sledding."

I was as baffled by Brian's logic as I was by his aversion to sledding. He would watch us screaming and bumping our way down the hill, but he would never join us.

One step up from the roll-up sled was the flying saucer. A lot of kids in the neighbourhood had one or two of these large metal or plastic disks stashed in a corner of the garage. And we used them too. But not always for sledding. If you were playing *Knights of the Round Table*, nothing stopped the Black Knight's sword better than one of those shields. It could save your life.

Like their rolled cousins, flying saucers also lacked any kind of steering mechanism. You started at the top of the hill, sitting cross-legged in your little dish, your mitten-clad hands gripping the handles on either side of your butt, and waited.

"Push me!"

Once started, you went straight down the hill. At least that was the idea. In reality you didn't get very far before the saucer spun around and you were heading down the hill backwards. Laughing and screaming all the way.

"Hey Brian, try this!"

"Why?"

Here we go again.

"Don't worry. The metal shield will protect your delicate little ass."

"So? You can't even see where you're going."

"You don't need to see. You'll probably shut your eyes anyway."

"Would you walk across a busy street with your eyes closed?"

"What does that have to do with sledding? That's stupid."

"I'm telling mom you said 'ass'."

It was fun just to watch the flying saucer kids. Murray's Hill was fairly long and you could get a decent ride just going from top to bottom, but sometimes we wanted more. Sometimes we built jumps. These weren't jumps that required ramps or any kind of real construction. They were just great big mounds of snow set up right in the middle of the best runs on the hill. The saucer kids would speed toward these mounds. Backwards. We would hold our breath. They would hit the jump and go straight up. I

mean, they would catch some serious air. I never saw a saucer kid stay on the sled after hitting a jump. I don't think it would be possible. They would just soar into the air, hang for a moment, just long enough for the rest of us to whoop and cheer, then they would crash back down to earth in a tangle of limbs and saucer. And if they had a metal saucer they might get a nice dent in it.

We would laugh our heads off. I don't think we ever got tired of seeing that.

At the high end of the economic spectrum was the toboggan. My neighbour Marci had a real toboggan from somewhere in Europe where these things were supposedly invented and kids our age rode them to school or something. Each year around Christmas her family would proudly haul it out, wax and oil it, strap it to the top of the station wagon, and head to some park far too far away to make the trip worth it. Marci's mom even had special sledding mittens from the same country as the sled.

I remember being thankful that my mom knew that moms aren't supposed to sled.

After the novelty of the Euro-gear began to wear off, Marci was allowed to take the sled to Murray's Hill on her own. That was how Tory broke his finger.

Tory was my best friend. Tory was cool. Tory wore ski masks. Ski masks are positively scary-looking in a burglar sort of way when you pull them down over your face and still tough-looking when you fold them up and wear them like a hat. Not only that, but Tory's dad worked for John Deere, which meant that Tory got a new John Deere snowmobile suit every year.

And, should you be confused, allow me to point out that the snowmobile suit is nothing at all like the snow overall. First of all, it's almost always black, with a few sporty stripes here and there. Second, it has a long zipper that runs from one foot to the opposite shoulder for easy entry and exit. Third, rather than conjuring up the image of plough and pitchfork, it conjures up the image of a snowmobile, which is definitely the next best thing to a motorcycle.

The only problem with Tory in the winter was that he had a sinus condition that made his nose run. And we're not talking clear trickle here folks, we're talking bright green globules. This made the full-face ski mask routine a little complicated and Tory definitely ran the risk of being an easy target when the sledders were looking for someone to pick on. I mean, there was "Serious Problem" potential here, almost a deal breaker as far as kids are concerned. But Tory was a real pro and after a fresh noseblow, there was no one on Murray's Hill that looked cooler than him.

Unlike the roll-up sled and the flying saucer, the toboggan is designed for multiple riders. The advantage of this was that the extra weight could get you moving pretty fast. Some four or five of you sit on it, lined up in a row, with your legs wrapped around the waist of the person in front of you. Then you wait at the top of the hill.

“Push us!”

The disadvantage of multiple riders, however, taught us a lesson that would help us later in life.

It was like going to a dinner party or other event that required sitting down with a group of people around a big table. There's a trick to it and it's all about placement and timing. If you get there first, and take a seat at the table, you could be committing social suicide. You never know who is going to arrive next and sit down beside you. And then you're stuck with them. For the rest of the evening. You can get into similar trouble by arriving too late. If you walk into the room and only one seat remains unoccupied, that's where you have to sit. Once again, you have no choice about with whom you will be spending the entire evening.

The same holds true for the toboggan: it's all about placement and timing. You have to make sure that the tall kid doesn't get on in front of you and the fat kid doesn't get on behind you. It isn't cruel. It's self-preservation.

Tory learned first hand that group dynamics on the toboggan can quickly take all the fun out of an otherwise pleasant afternoon of sledding. Tory was sitting about mid-sled when the toboggan hit the jump. The sled and all its riders went up. Then they crashed back down. Unfortunately, some shuffling had gone on up in the air, so when they landed the riders were a bit out of order. Tory was on the bottom, sprawling face first down the hill. The kid who originally rode behind him was a bit more graceful. He actually landed on his feet. The problem was that those feet were clad in heavy boots and one of them came down hard on the pinkie finger of Tory's left hand. Maybe Tory would have fared better if he'd had a pair of those special sledding mittens from Toboggan-land in Europe.

Tory tried to keep his cool as we escorted him off the hill but he was a kid and his little finger was sticking out at an extremely uncomfortable-looking angle. It was weeks before Marci could entice passengers onto her sled again.

Brain was there the day the sled broke Tory's finger. I could tell what he was thinking so I tried to beat him to the punch. Maybe I got a little defensive.

“Just because you can have an accident doesn't mean there's anything wrong with sledding.”

“I never said there was anything wrong with sledding.”

“Brian, you’ve never been down that hill once in your entire life.”

“It’s the sleds I don’t like.”

“You’re being too fussy.”

“I don’t have to like just any sled that comes along. If you like *every* sled, you can’t really say that you like *any* sled.”

“Brain, you *don’t* like any sled.”

This was getting ridiculous. I couldn’t have a little brother who never went sledding. It was embarrassing.

Then one day grandpa came to visit. And he brought a sled.

The sled grandpa brought was long. I could lie full-length on it with just my feet trailing off the back. I think it was my mom’s when she was a kid, but it wasn’t some old rusty thing. Grandpa had fixed it up. The wood decking had been sanded smooth and stained a fresh, dark shade. All the metal on the sled had been buffed with steel wool and painted a nice bright red. A new rope had been threaded through the holes in the handle to make it easy to pull back up the hill.

Brain attached himself to this sled like it was a part of him that had been left off at birth. After that, you couldn’t drag him off Murray’s Hill.

The sled wasn’t much good if there was only a little powder on the ground. The runners were so sharp they would cut right through the fluffy stuff to the frozen grass underneath. But nobody’s sled was very fast under those conditions. We all wanted to get the snow packed down hard, an icy slick surface that offered zero friction and maximum glide. That was when the roll-up and the saucer kids came in handy. If nothing else, at least they could pack the snow down as they ploughed aimlessly down the hill. If the weather warmed up a bit, and that hard-packed surface thawed, then re-froze that night, Murray’s Hill became a solid sheet of ice.

And ice is fast. Very fast.

Brain’s sled, with its extra-sharp narrow runners providing only the slightest scrape of friction, could cut into that surface and fly down the slope. Especially with a running start. He learned pretty quickly that he could start running way up in the Murray’s side yard, sled held tight to his chest. At the top of the hill he would throw the sled forward with his body right on top of it.

Brian didn’t need a push.

The other sledders felt his wind as he sailed past.

But the best thing about a runner sled was steering.

Finally, you could go where ever you wanted. No longer did the circumstances of geography dictate your course. If you had a runner sled you were the master of your own destiny.

And if you got a group together, you could be the master of their destiny too. Sometimes, we would all gather at the top of the hill and form a line. We would all climb on our sleds and each of us would grab the feet or belt of the person in front of us. Then we would start down the hill in a long, snake-like procession. Brian would always be the head. It didn't make sense to have anyone else lead. All they could do was head straight down the hill. It was up to Brian, on his runner sled, to provide the group with direction. He would head down the hill, jerking his steering handle back and forth so hard that riders were flying off the tail right and left. It was like cracking a whip made of plastic and metal, flesh and bone, wool and padded nylon. Kids would fly off their sleds. Hats would fly off heads. Mittens would pull from hands as they stuck to sled handles and continued, fleshlessly down the slope.

Sometimes the kids Brian lost would get mad, but he always said that if they chose to accept the ride, then they had to go where the driver took them.

I found that old sled in my parents' garage just the other day. It was a little bit rusty now and some of the wood was cracked. The rope had rotted away years ago.

Brian came up behind me and handed me a beer. He and his children had also made it home for the Thanksgiving holiday.

We took a walk over to Murray's hill. I zipped my jacket all the way up to my neck. It was getting colder. And it wouldn't be long before those first few flakes would drift down to turn the frozen grass white. Looking down at the creek from the top of the hill I felt a stirring of the same thrill of anticipation I had felt as a child, standing there with my sled in my hands. Then it was gone.

Brian asked, "Do you ever sled anymore?"

"Nope. No one I know does."

"No one?"

I tried to picture the people in my office sledding. I saw old Mrs. Hanacek, who wore the same red dress every day, careening down the hill backwards on a flying saucer. From the top of the hill all you see are boney knees and flailing arms. And here comes Bob Chaney holding down a roll-up sled, eyeglasses rimmed with frost, neck-tie trailing behind him, frozen stiff. Watch out for the secretaries as they swoop by on their toboggan, their perfect hair and make-up smearing into watercolour.

If I tried hard enough, if I really concentrated, I could almost see all that. Then it was gone again.

"Naw," I replied. "They wouldn't see the point."

"What *is* the point?"

And then I got it. "I guess you only ask why if you don't like the how."

He was quiet for awhile. "I'm going to fix up that sled," he said. "Give it to the kids."

"What if they don't like it? What if they want a flying saucer?"

We laughed.

"That's up to them."

And he was right. After all, there are a lot of ways to get to the bottom of Murray's Hill.