

The Jump

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I watched as Evel Knievel attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon with an awe that had my pupils dilated and my breath held for so long that it must have been a world record for eight-year-old boys. He was the bravest man in the world to do that, and everyone on the planet knew it. How many times had he proven it? How many barrels, and cars, and trucks had he soared over on that gleaming motorbike? And this was the ultimate proof: The Snake River Canyon. It sounded like you had to be brave just to visit the place.

I had an Evel Knievel lunchbox, an Evel Knievel action figure, complete with bike, an Evel Knievel comic book, and an Evel Knievel pillowcase. As I watched him sail into the sky, only to crash (again) and break several bones (again), I decided that I was going to be the next Evel Knievel. How heroic he looked being pried from the wreckage! Nothing could stop the man for longer than it took a bone to heal.

I couldn't wait 'til the morning came when I would begin my training. All night, I made my plans.

I grew-up on a farm. There were fields on all sides of our huge yard, (I once ran away from home by trekking the whole way out to the maple tree at the furthest corner of our yard). We had a semi-paved lane that ran straight as an arrow from the winding country road, past the house, to the barns. One barn sat on top of a steep hill. Behind the barns there used to be a corn crib, but all that remained of the building was its cement foundation: about twenty yards long, and two yards wide - the one end having a small ditch running between it and the fields.

My runway. My Snake River Canyon.

I spent the entire morning practicing. I rode my bike off the porch steps, across potholes, and this bump in the lane that was particularly good for getting airborne. By afternoon, I felt that I was ready to attempt that first historic jump.

Donning my blue wind breaker (it was the shiniest thing I owned) and my regulation, plastic, G.I. Joe helmet, I walked my bike to the edge of the runway. My two younger sisters - Missy, age six, and Treecy, age four - stood by

as my emergency medical team. The red wagon, filled with rags for the blood, served as the ambulance.

“Why are we supposed to stand here?” Treecy asked, breaking my concentration, and nearly ruining the appropriate tension.

“For when I crash.”

“Are you going to crash?”

“Probably,” I said, with just the right amount of fatalism.

“Do you want to crash?”

“No.” She was threatening the whole atmosphere of the moment!

“So, what are you doing this for?”

“Because...” What do you say to make a four-year-old understand the magnitude of what I was attempting? My Father’s wisdom came to my rescue. “Because I’m a man.”

I could tell by Treecy’s baffled look that she had failed to grasp the profound truth of my answer. But I was growing concerned that this was going to deteriorate into an argument that only Mom could resolve, so I took my bike for a “test lap,” leaving the finer points of the “why’s and what-for’s” to the more mature Missy.

“Because men are stupid.”

I was ready. My bike was ready. My sister had shut up. Everything was ready. I decided at the last minute to include a countdown.

“Five, four, three, two, one, blastoff!”

I do not know why I was expecting to suddenly achieve flight speed with the first pedal stroke. In actuality, I nearly fell over sideways (I always did have trouble balancing the bike until it built up momentum - then again, it had been less than a year since the training wheels had come off). For the first third of the way down the runway, I weaved like a drunken man, and as I approached its end and the jump, I knew with a certainty that I didn't have half the speed needed to do even a mediocre hop over the bump in the lane. There was nothing to do but abort. Hoping for at least a satisfying screech of the brakes - and not getting it - I back pedaled and stopped the bike.

“Aren't you going to crash?”

“I need more speed!”

Clever Missy, two years older and wiser than little Treec', saved the day. “What about the hill, where we race the wagons?”

Yes! The hill! I had nearly killed myself rolling down it once in a barrel - couldn't walk straight for hours. The hill was the answer.

So, up the hill I trudged the bike. It was not a direct shot down the hill and onto the runway, but I figured that there was more than enough space to navigate the arcing turn. Strapping down my helmet once more, I gave the thumbs-up sign, and began my countdown.

“Five, four, three, two, one, blastoff!”

This time, all I had to do was push off, and let gravity do the pedaling.

Gravity. When you are eight years old, it is still just a fancy word. You really do not fully grasp all its nuances, or its impact on reality.

On a one gear, direct chain bike, the faster the wheels go, the faster the pedals go. By the time I had reached the bottom of that hill, my pedals were a blur, and I couldn't even begin to attempt to put my feet on them. All I could do was keep them out of the way of the whirling plastic and metal, try to steer, and scream.

I was halfway down the cement foundation before I realized that I had made it on to the runway. Still unable to put my feet on the spinning pedals, I began to seriously reconsider whether Evel Knievel was the man I wanted to emulate. But I couldn't stop the bike if I wanted (later - I would deny that the thought had ever crossed my mind).

I remember looking over at my emergency team and seeing them scream that wide mouthed, terrified, little girl scream. I remember seeing the end of the runway. I remember screaming with renewed vigor.

Then, I closed my eyes.

I do not remember seeing the ditch pass beneath me. I do not remember the sensation of being in the air. I do not remember landing. The next thing I do remember is opening my eyes and seeing the sky through the slowly spinning spokes of my back tire. The other wheel wasn't spinning, because my arm was sticking through its wire spokes.

I had crossed the ditch and was lying in the field with my bike squarely on my chest.

It was fantastic! Spectacular! I could not have painted a more dramatic looking ending to my jump. The only thing that could have made it a better crash was if I had remembered it happening.

Treecy's wailing brought me out of my reveling.

Quickly, I assessed my injuries, and was somewhat disappointed to discover that I was completely unharmed. That wouldn't do. I had my ambulance waiting; I had the hysterical women; I had all those rags. As my sisters ran up to me, weeping, with the wagon in tow, I began moaning pitifully. And just for good measure, I put my arm through the other wheel too.

They pulled the bike off me.

"Is he dead?"

I moaned louder.

"We need Mom."

Both of them started running for the house, but I cried out, "The wagon! Help me into the wagon!"

If my legs had been broken, I could not have struggled more mightily to get into that wagon. It was truly a heroic effort.

"The rags," I gasped. With grunts and weak flails, I indicated where I needed the rags to be applied. Treecy was perfect - she refused to stop crying.

With rags wrapped around my legs, arms, and head, we started off for home. Now, I understood - why men did these things. They were my sisters, but those tears of a woman were for me. That concern in their eyes... for me. That mixed look of wonder, hope, and pain upon their faces... me. I was in my glory.

I wonder if Evil Kenevil had a mom.

An eight-year-old's acting ability can fool his two younger sisters most of the time (which I often proved to be fact). But it is truly the rare talent that can consistently fool a Mom - especially a mom who has birthed seven other children. Was it my inability to squeeze a tear out? Was it my "wounded-soldier-dying-in-the-lap-of-the-beautiful-nurse-whom-he-loves" method of groaning? Something gave me away the moment she saw me. I thought that maybe my blubbering sisters' account of the horrible crash would sway her, but she just became "flabbergasted" with me.

So, I leaped to my feet and excitedly recounted my bravery. I don't know whether she could make up her mind to be angry, relieved, proud, or just to start laughing on the spot. My sisters, however, definitely knew what they were feeling (well, Treecy did after Missy explained it to her), and I could tell that it would be several days before I could even think of them willingly participating in another of my adventures.

I never did jump that ditch again. In fact, I hung up my crash helmet for good after that. I don't think it was because I was scared, or that it didn't appeal to me anymore.

I just knew that short of keeping my eyes open, there never was going to be a more perfect crash.