

The subways didn't run so well at that hour. I had to wait twenty minutes for a train, but I got home okay. I ate breakfast at a diner at 5:45, watched the sky turn blue, and told the waitress I'd been out all night "looking for trouble." I went home around 6:45, slept for ten minutes, and got back on the train. It was Saturday morning, and I had to volunteer at my high school.*

Magic shaped up to be my adolescent pastime, the way video games were my childhood sport. I eased into conversations about it that sounded like gibberish to everyone else. ("Ball Lightning is crap! It always gets Bolted or Incinerated or Black Knight-ed!") My mind slipped into thinking about Magic like hands under a pillow.

See, at the cusp of puberty, I had to make a choice: Magic or girls. And, well, Magic was right there. You know?

*It was Stuyvesant Tour Day or something, when all the kids who passed "The Stuy Test" (pages 14-21) for that year got to look at the school to decide if they wanted to attend. I stood around directing parents and answering kids' questions. I had fun.

GOOFY FOOT FORWARD

I went snowboarding, which I shouldn't have done because the SATs were only five months away and I had yet to crack the big red prep book. Owen called and convinced me.

"Ned, this weekend, you have to go snowboarding with me."

"Why?"

"Because," he articulated carefully, "it is the coolest thing you will ever do."

"Uh . . ." I needed a way out. I had gone skiing once when I was eight. I remembered the ground hitting me again and again. "Owen, I can't snowboard. I can't even ski."

"So? It's easier than skiing, 'cause there's one less ski to worry about. C'mon, dude. You come snowboarding with me, you'll be the monsta mack.* You'll be the shred *master*. All the ski bunnies will flock to you."

"Ski bunnies?"

"Yeah. You know, the hot girls who hang out at ski slopes?"

*A favorite Owen-ism. He also said "the mackinator" a lot.

"Oh. I think I saw one in a movie once."

"Ned, they are real. I tell you, they are *real*."

"Fine," I told Owen, "I'll go, just to try it out or whatever."

We left on New Year's Day. I woke up at 8:30 and packed enthusiastically. For some reason, I felt cool and confident about the whole trip. I wore jeans and a doofy hat, sure, but I was going *snowboarding*, like what's-his-name from the American Express ads. This was x-treme. (Well, not that x-treme—I covered trip expenses with one hundred twenty dollars from my parents.)

Owen's dad pulled up at 9:00 A.M. in a snow-colored car and loaded my stuff (one measly bag of jeans and underwear) into the trunk. I opened the car door and greeted Owen. He was decked out: shiny snowboarding pants, nice gripping gloves, face-hugging Oakley sunglasses.

"You like my gear?" he asked.

"Move over," I said and sat down.

The trip was relaxing for a weird reason: Owen's family* mainly spoke Russian. This freed me from the need to have vapid, claustrophobic car conversations with them (the ones where you talk about how school's going and which colleges you might apply

*Owen has the perfect nuclear family: mom, dad, brother, sister. The sister and mom seemed to be together at all times and were very quiet in the car, except when the sister was making faces or spitting at me.

to). Owen and I rehashed old episodes of *Beavis and Butt-head*.

He laid out his plans for the trip. We'd get to the Poconos by afternoon, rent our boards, get me some pants and a real hat, slide around on the hills for a few hours, and then come back to the Jacuzzi in the motel and score with whatever ski bunnies we'd picked up. I nodded at all these points. They took my mind off vomiting, which was becoming a distinct possibility as we entered our third hour on Route 80.

We reached the Montage ski resort around 1:00. The place reminded me of the city—the parking lot was full, people hurried everywhere, the ski lifts never stopped moving. Owen and I, glad to be out of the car, hopped over to the ski rental shop. It was a family business, run by two generations of scraggly guys. As soon as we entered, the spending began.

"Here, Ned—get these pants, only fifteen dollars for two days' rental. What's your shoe size? The board is thirty-five bucks a day, sixty for two days. You sure you don't want a hat?"

I rented a snowboard and some pants, each for two days, while eyeing a sign that read, "ABSOLUTELY NO REFUNDS." I signed a form stipulating that if I got injured, it was my own fault. Right about then, the store clerk asked me, "Are you regular or goofy?"

"What?"

"Do you put your right foot forward when you snowboard, or your left?"

"Uh, I have no idea."

"Well, if you were running on ice and you had to slide to a stop, when you slid, would you put your right or left foot forward?" Luckily, Owen and I had been sliding around on ice as his dad parked, so I remembered it was my . . . left foot.

"That's goofy," said the clerk.

He went to the back of the store and returned with a size twelve goofy-footed snowboard and my special boots. I put them on and negotiated the board's buckles, which were like plastic bear traps. Finally, I managed to get both feet in and stand up. I couldn't move, though. Snowboards are made of fiberglass and weigh a good ten pounds; all I could do was jump up and down and make big *fwap-ing* noises.

"All right!" I slapped Owen's open palm. He had gotten on his board, too.

The next order of business was buying lift tickets. Owen explained that Montage's ski lifts were overseen by beady-eyed security freaks who checked everyone for these tiny stickers that went on your jacket. The lift tickets were advertised at thirty-three dollars, but they cost us thirty-eight because of some

holiday loophole. I sighed and paid up. At last, we were ready to snowboard.

We headed for the bunny hill. Owen said I had to do the bunny hill three or four times before I could progress to higher levels like "White Lightning."

And here I learned the sick truth about snowboarding—the *shambling*. Once you're strapped onto a snowboard, you're not going anywhere. A board doesn't let you wiggle around on level ground like skis do. So in order to get to a lift, you have to unbuckle one foot and "walk" with one leg on the snowboard and one leg off. Everyone at Montage was doing this, shuffling around like crippled grizzlies. You never see that on ESPN2.

Owen and I shambled over to the lift, waiting behind a legion of bad snowboarders and skiers—most of them yappy little kids. We got in our seats and rode up the bunny hill, which was forty or fifty feet high. At the top, we restrapped our feet onto our boards and managed, by sliding and crawling, to pull ourselves to the slope's edge. I stood up and looked over at Owen, ready to say something monumental like, "Here we go, dude." He was already heading downhill.

I pulled my weight over the lip of the hill and snowboarded. I don't know how this sport became associated with raucous music; I felt peaceful, pensive. There was a quiet sound of sifting snow, a

soft rush of wind. I didn't even feel like I was moving fast, except when I glanced at the trees.

The problem was stopping. As I approached the bottom of the hill, I realized I had no clue how to end my ride. I knew how the pros did it—they turned their boards sideways—but that was out of the question. My board had no friction; if I turned sideways, I'd hit that many more people as I skidded along into the parking lot. I decided to fall down carefully, easing my butt into contact with the ground, like an old man getting in a bathtub. As soon as I touched snow, though, I spun out—landing facedown in front of a parked snowmobile. I pulled my board out from under me and adjusted my pants.

"Nice job!" Owen yelled. We went up again.

After two or three shots at the bunny hill, we decided to hit the next step—Montage's beginner track, "Cannonball." Cannonball was an entirely different class of slope, thirty or forty times longer than the bunny hill, with a ten-minute trip up the ski lift. Owen was happy. I knew I was going to die.

We reached the top, shook hands, agreed to a manly race, and started off. About a hundred feet down, I realized I wasn't goofy-footed. I mean, that alone would explain my board's tendency to turn right, as if gravitating toward the ski lift's metal support pillars. If I bent my back, I could sort of stay

straight—but not without crossing the paths of good snowboarders, who yelled at me as they whizzed by. I was going much too fast, break-a-leg, break-a-skull fast. I went to the right side of the slope, now going slowly down Cannonball, grabbing those metal support pillars to stop myself every few seconds, but still going. Sort of.

About this time, Owen was breaking his wrist.

I kept hitting trees. People riding in the lift looked down on me and laughed. A few times, my buckles popped and I lay sopping in the snow without my board. After fifteen minutes of hacking around, I reached the bottom of Cannonball, flipping backward and slamming my head into the ground right in front of Owen's family, who'd finished skiing and were waiting so we could get lunch. They asked eagerly, in Russian, then in English:

"Where's Owen?"

"Uh, I dunno." I figured he'd already beaten me to the finish, he'd been doing so well. I turned to see him walking down the hill, holding his board under his right arm. He looked mad.

"Hey, Owen! You okay?"

"Dude, I think I broke my wrist." He held up a limp left hand.

"What?! You're kidding! I thought I was the one who was gonna get hurt."

"Yeah, me too!"

Owen showed the suspect wrist to his dad, who's a doctor. His dad simply said, "Ah. Broken."

Owen yelled profanities at the mountain and began talking to his family in Russian. I politely stood aside and looked for ski bunnies.

Owen's family took him to the local emergency room. I stayed around Montage and got more proficient on the bunny slope, but never learned how to stop. I stayed far away from Cannonball. We drove home that evening, Owen in a splint.

I was happy—I'd wanted to leave early anyway. Owen was happy—he could use his cast to impress girls. Happiest of all, though, was the older guy at the rental store, who tapped his calculator as his goods were returned a day early. Now I understood "ABSOLUTELY NO REFUNDS."