

Fun in the Snow

Bill Bryson

For reasons I cannot begin to understand, when I was about eight years old my parents gave me a pair of skis for Christmas. I went outside, strapped them on, and stood in a racing crouch, but nothing happened. This is because there are no hills in Iowa.

Casting around for something with a slope, I decided to ski down our back porch steps. There were only five steps, but on skis the angle of descent was surprisingly steep. I went down the steps at about, I would guess, 110 miles an hour, and hit the bottom with such force that the skis jammed solid, whereas I continued onward and outward across the patio in a graceful Eising arc. About 12 feet away loomed the back wall of our garage. Instinctively adopting a spread eagled posture for maximum impact, I smacked into it somewhere near the roof and slid down its vertical face in the manner of food flung against a wall.

It was at this point I decided that winter sports were not for me. I put away the skis and for the next thirty-five years thought no more about the matter. Then we moved to New England, where people actually look forward to winter. At the first fall of snow they cry out with joy and root in cupboards for sledges and ski poles. They become suffused with a strange vitality — an eagerness to get out into all that white stuff and schuss about on something fast and reckless.

It was at about this juncture that my friend Prof. Danny Blanchflower stepped into the picture. Danny — his real name is David, but he is English, so when he was growing up everyone naturally called him Danny, and the name stuck — is a professor of economics at Dartmouth and a very brainy fellow. He writes books with sentences like ‘When entered contemporaneously in the full specifications of column 5.7, profit-per-employee has a coefficient of 0.00022 with a t-statistic of 2.3,’ and isn’t even joking. For all I know, it may even mean something. As I say, he’s a real smart guy, except for one thing. He is mad on snowmobiling.

Now a snowmobile, I should perhaps explain, is a rocket ship designed by Satan to run on snow. It travels at speeds up to 70 miles an hour, which — call me chicken, I don’t care — seems to me a trifle fleet on narrow, winding paths through boulder-strewn woods.

For weeks Danny pestered me to join him in a bout of this al fresco madness. I tried to explain that I had certain problems with outdoor activities vis-à-vis the snowy season, and that somehow I didn’t think a powerful, dangerous machine was likely to provide a solution.

‘Nonsense!’ he cried. Well, to cut a long story short, the next thing I knew I was on the edge of the New Hampshire woods, wearing a snug, heavy helmet that robbed me of all my senses except terror, and sitting nervously astride a sleek beastlike conveyance, its engine throbbing in anticipation of all the trees against which it might soon dash me. Danny gave me a rundown on the machine’s operation, which for all I understood might have been a passage from one of his books, and jumped onto his own machine.

‘Ready?’ he shouted over the roar of his engine.

‘No.’

‘Great!’ he called and took off with a flare of afterburners. Within two seconds he was a noisy dot in the distance.

Sighing, I gently engaged the throttle and, with a startled cry and a brief wheelie, took off with a velocity seldom seen outside a Road Runner cartoon. Shrieking hysterically and jettisoning weight via my bladder with every lively bump, I flew through the woods as if on an Exocet missile. Branches slapped my helmet. Moose reared and fled. The landscape flashed past as if in some hallucinogen-induced delirium.

Eventually, Danny stopped at a crossroads, beaming all over, engine purring. ‘So what do you think?’

I moved my lips but no sound emerged. Danny took this as assent.

‘Well, now that you’ve got the hang of it, shall we bang up the pace a bit?’

I formed the words ‘Please, Danny, I want to go home. I want to see my Mom,’ but again no sound emerged.

And off he went. For hours we raced at lunatic speeds through the endless woods, bouncing through streams, swerving past boulders, launching into flight over fallen logs. When at length this waking nightmare concluded, I stepped from my machine on legs made of water.

Afterwards, to celebrate our miraculous intactness, we repaired to Murphy's Tavern for a pint. When the barmaid put the glasses down in front of us it occurred to me, with a flash of inspiration, that here at last was something I could do: winter drinking.

I had found my calling. I'm not as good at it yet as I hope to be — my legs still tend to go after about three hours — but I'm doing a lot of stamina training and am looking for a very good season in 2005-6.