

First published in *The Writers Post Journal*. February 2005. 61-62.

Glissade

by

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You hear of it often. The loneliness of writing. The clichés: blood, sweat and tears. The urge to do anything else—scrub the toilet or scrape gum from beneath cafeteria tables—rather than spend one more second in front of a blank screen typing out words, erasing them, rearranging them, only to finally sit back and despair because you couldn't even write a grocery list.

You retreat from your desk, wanting to quit, knowing the words are too flat to capture the rich texture of the story in your mind. And you're running out of time. The story is unraveling away, the beauty of it turning into a tangle of nonsensical—if colorful—threads.

You hear it often.

And yet writers inevitably return again and again to the self-professed agony and disappointment.

Why? For what? Why write at all? Why not go see a play? Learn to rock-climb or make decadent pastries or play the guitar? Read someone else's book? What draws writers back over and over to what can only be called, given the above description, agonizing drudgery?

The fact is, although you hear it repeated with the regularity of a religious chant, this scenario isn't entirely accurate. Sometimes it is, and as writers, we cling to these moments even as we fear them because they are necessary. We repeat the horror stories out loud, knowing they are true, but not the complete truth. We reiterate and emphasize those dark moments for fear of trickster sprites who resent hubris and who may curse us, stealing our stories, our poems, our words. Behind these oft-repeated refrains of blood, sweat and tears, hides a knowledge of the preciousness of what we are permitted, even paid, to do.

Imagine being on top of a mountain summit. The sky is twilight purple. A thick beam of light slips through the velvet clouds making the snow sparkle like a field of white fire. The wind buffets you, snatching your breath right out of your mouth, catching your hair, tangling it in your eyes so that you can hardly see. Snow billows around your knees, and from the tree line a moose and her calf eye you with ponderous curiosity.

You are so high up that your lungs ache. You flex your fingers on the handles of your ski-poles. Your skis jut into open air, the slope dropping away beneath them at an angle that closes your throat and ices your blood.

There's only one way down. There are no trails to follow: no one has ever been here before. You are absolutely, intolerably, alone on the mountain.

But if you stand much longer, you will freeze, the wind will steal your last breath.

You gather your courage.

Then, with a spurt of fatalistic courage, you give a gentle push—just enough to ease you over the lip. A slow start, so that you won't lose control, so that you will see the rocks and gullies and avoid them. So that you will not crash and die on that slope, alone, with no one to see and no one to help.

But the mountain has other plans. The snow is thick and light and fast. You plunge down, like a falling rock. A sickening drop. You scream, but the sound vanishes. You have outrun it. Terror seizes you. You cannot move, cannot turn or stop. You are going to crash. Your body is going to shatter into a thousand pieces.

And then . . .

And then—

Something inside of you twitches. It shrugs and rolls, prodded from its hibernating slumber. It peers out from your eyes and sees your peril, your impending doom. And it laughs.

It laughs!

Gleeful, joyful, it reaches into every part of you. It has you now. You can't escape it. Nor do you want to. Is this the end? Who cares?

Oh, but no. This thing loves you. This thing sees where you are and knows what you can do.

You make a turn, and then another. Then you are slipping back and forth, over and under, leaving behind you a lovely, scrolling line of filigree. But in your path humps an enormous a rock. For a moment your heart stops.

Here it is then. The death you've been expecting.

But no. You hit it and your legs shove up powerfully, automatically. Now you are flying. The wind catches you like a dandelion seed. You spin, you pirouette, you flip. And then you drop back to the slope. Your speed increases. Faster, faster. You stitch patterns, you make

a tapestry of your tracks, an embroidery of intent. You don't have time to think, only to act, only to follow your heart and your life and your being.

You stand at the bottom, and you don't remember how long you've been there. You look back behind you. There, wrought huge on the side of a mountain, is you. It's your truth, your story. It's your bliss.

You are exhausted. You are panting and your body trembles. Sweat drenches your clothing and freezes. But you grin at the mountain and your story and you cannot stop. Meanwhile, the thing inside, the thing that saw the potential of the slope, that you invited by flinging yourself into danger, that thing curls back up to sleep, to dream, to wait for you to climb the mountain again.

Is writing hard? Oh, unbelievably. Would you sometimes rather clean a toilet? Scrape gum? Undoubtedly. But will you keep doing it, keep slogging up the mountain?

Oh my, yes. Yes.

Because when you write, there are moments of pure crystal, of rising to heights beyond which any drug can lift you. If writers cling to the blood, sweat and tears, then it is only because those things mark the path up the mountain, those things wake our sleeping creativity. Clearly it is no easy hike. But it doesn't matter. We do whatever necessary to get there, to make the run again and again and again.

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