Prologue

"Get off the court, punk."

I was playing H-O-R-S-E with my friends on our grammar school basketball court, a big black slab of hardtop with metal chain baskets.

I was attempting a lay-up when I heard the gang of eighth grade boys. They were approaching on their thin-tire bikes with decked-out handlebars, pedaling hard, aiming directly at us. My girlfriends ran for shelter inside the school building. I stood my ground.

"We were here first." I held my head high.

"But we're here now, so get lost."

"I'll make a deal with you. The person who can gross-out the other one the most can have the court."

"Fine!" And with that the biggest eighth grader, Rick, pugnaciously pulled his eyelids back on themselves, revealing the bloody insides of his upper lids. He leaned down to my face. His breath smelled of Bazooka bubble gum.

"Gross enough for you?"

I held back a smile. I had been having these contests with my twin brother for years: who could suck back the longest gob of drool, who could make the other one puke with blender drinks made from refrigerator leftovers, who had the nerve to poke around road kill and throw guts on the other one. (Which is done with a forked stick. You twirl the guts up like spaghetti. That's in case you don't live where there's road kill.)

I turned my back on Rick.

"So, you give up or what?" he chortled. The bully stood a full head taller than me,

his arms crossed.

I pulled back my eyelids in the same fashion that Rick had done and pushed hard at the side of my nose. Having the fortuitous proclivity of weak nasal capillaries this caused an immediate nose bleed. I tilted my head backwards and let the salty, tepid blood run down the back of my throat until I had a mouthful.

I slowly turned around, lifted my head so Rick could see my inverted eyelids and proceeded to spit a mouthful of fresh bright red blood at his feet. It spewed into a plate size coagulated mass that splattered across his white US KEDS high top sneakers.

He turned pale, as did his posse and they left shrieking. I finished my lay-up.

I didn't hear from Rick again until my freshman year of High School when he asked me to the prom. I never will understand boys.

As far back as I can remember I have had a superiority complex. I always thought I could fight any foe, especially ones bigger than I was (which is just about anyone since I am only 5'2"). Maybe my mother shouldn't have read me the story about David going up against Goliath – and winning.

It was most likely the thrill of the underdog that attracted me to the Old Testament battles in the first place and that led to the New Testament martyrs, and before I was thirteen I had converted to Christianity to the sheer bewilderment of my agnostic family. And while I do not apologize for my faith any more than one would ask a Muslim, Hindu, Jew, Scientologist or a member of Church of the Nectarine to soft pedal their beliefs, I must quantify the term "Christian".

I am a socialist leaning democrat, anti-war pacifist who is quite sure most conspiracy theories have a grain of truth (think Anne Lamott with a New Jersey attitude).

I am certainly not a southern style 'born again' type like some cosmic refried bean dip requiring first a lobotomy and next a dollop of self-righteous salsa.

Nor am I 'a new age feminist Goddess Mary worshipper; which requires an even heavier scoop of revisionist history. I've seen these females everywhere I travel: Stonehenge, Easter Island, Machu Picchu, Athens, the Mayan ruins. The antiquities are crawling with them; ensconced sun-worshipping gargoyles poised on ledges, crossed legs (preferably unshaven ones), new age music streaming into ear buds, arms raised in worship of mother goddess earth. Hello? The 'goddesses' in the temples were sex slaves not princesses. The vibes you are picking up are cries of innocent blood from women and children who were murdered at the whim of a few vicious leaders.

Okay, have I alienated everyone? Wait. Maybe I can do better.

I am quite simply the best Christian I know, based solely on the fact that I am the worst Christian I know. I cuss*, I whine, I question God's wisdom and timing constantly. I vacillate between thinking I am God and acting as if there is no God (and I regularly ignore any far reaching consequences of my actions). I have sworn oaths of allegiance to God as often as a kid says the pledge to the flag in grammar school, and just as often I have ignored my oaths.

The only hope in any of this is that it appears I am in excellent company. In the Old and New Testaments people were called righteous, not because they were sinless, but because when they were busted for their crimes they admitted they were wrong. (That much I can do and must do often.)

Take for instance Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: all liars and betrayers. David (after the Goliath thing) was an adulterer and then had his lover's husband murdered. Saint Paul was a mass murderer, having killed thousands of early Christians. Don't see that in the ol' stained glass windows in church do you? Peter betrayed Jesus big time; that's right Pope numero uno 'upon-whom-I-shall-build-my-church', that Peter. Did I mention Rahab the harlot, the Samaritan woman at the well? Seems Jesus reaches out to losers, screw-ups, rebels and the incurably ill. Talk about a match made in heaven.

So let me begin my tale of woe with the understanding that I am an in-your-face survivor who has little patience for hypocrisy (except my own, duh?) and less time for platitudes. I do not suffer fools lightly, but I do like fooling lightly with my suffering.

Maybe my sister was right. I probably was dropped off at the door step by a band of bikers and my mother only took me in to stop my whining.

Looks like *that* plan was a bust.

*While I am proficient in swearing in several languages I will refrain from putting such gems into print here for two reasons. First of all, I said I cuss, I did not say I was thrilled to be so uncreative in my pejorative speech. Secondly, I rather hope some of my church youth group will read this and I don't want to be accused of corrupting minors (most of whom are well equipped to do the job themselves given I-pods and the internet).

1. A Grinding Halt

No clouds at all. I remember that. And I remember I hadn't seen blue that intense since scuba diving Cozumel's 90 foot wall of coral. Of course what with a week's worth of Margaritas coursing in my veins and the blood-gas-nitrogen-exchange-thing that far below sea level, I was probably half-baked. Can't you just hear Dorey singing upside down, "Keep on swimming. keep on swimming, ooo it's so beautiful down here."

What else do I remember about that day?

The edges of the sky. Everywhere the blue touched, it popped against the silhouette of pine needles and rugged mountain peaks spackled with white sequins. And under my skis, dear Lord in heaven, under my skis there was this delicious compacting and squeaking of perfect snow. Not one granule of ice, just powder. Picture this: double black diamond trails…no tracks but mine…cold sharp air kissing my face so hard I all but had whisker burns. I took a deep breath, inhaling pure joy.

After all the whack-a-doodle boyfriends and bosses over the last seventeen years, I'd made it through. I was recently remarried, having left a Madison Avenue marketing career. I was now a respected 'Family Minister' at my California church, had money in the bank, and in tip-top shape. Hey, even both my kids were talking to me. I sighed, "If this is the last day I ever ski in my entire life, I will be a happy camper."

You remember stuff like that.

On my second run with a few of my "church kids" I felt a tingling in my left toes.

"Must be the new boots, I should have broken them in." By the fourth run there was numbness up to my left knee. I reached into my ski pants and started tearing off

the elastic waist band of my pantyhose. That felt better.

By the time I was at the top of the next lift, the pins and needles sensation had returned and reached up to my left hip. I pushed my way over to our group.

"I'm going to catch up to you guys at lunch. I think I've pulled something. I'll go get some ice and take care of this. Not as young as I used to be, ha, ha."

"Great timing," I muttered, "the day before my 54th birthday. But of course, the warranty must be out on all my working parts." I headed toward the base lodge.

Out of nowhere I fell. It was about 10 A.M. Okay, that may not mean much to you, but I don't fall, not unless I'm jumping a half-pipe and then it's a full out yard sale. But simply falling had not happened in the last twenty years. And being that early in the day, it was not even possible.

Then things got completely weird. I tried to get up on my downhill left ski but my leg was having a private mutiny. It had not just gone to sleep, it had slipped into a coma.

And while I could not feel my muscles, there was a strange sensation on the surface of my leg. It was like bee stings on top of a bad sunburn. Yet strangely, I couldn't sense the coldness of the snow under me.

Then the out-of-body, third person, slow-mo thing started taking over. I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears as if the entire cast of 'Stomp' was pummeling my ear drums.

Hel-lo crisis mode.

Self-diagnosis ensued. At last, all those hours in front of General Hospital would be of use. Sprain? No. Shin splints? No.

Soon my internal Shame Gang commenced to spew. My mind was awash with self-ridicule.

“Way-to-go, lard butt.”

“Told you ya shoulda eased up on the Christmas cookies, but nooo.”

The entire left leg was definitely DOA. I ignored the voices and flailed around to my right side.

But the voices only got louder:

“It’s those new fancy-schmancy way too expensive boots.”

“It’s arthritis. Whadda you expect at your age?”

“It’s frostbite, high altitude, heartburn, the heartbreak of psoriasis.”

I hoisted my weight onto my poles, slapped my good ski over the ski with the bum leg, and snowplowed wide sweeping turns using only one leg. Not an easy task, but life has a way of preparing one for the future.

I thought back to 1968…

I had learned how to ski on one leg back in High School. Every week for winter gym class we got to take a bus to Vernon Valley Great Gorge Ski Resort after school. Then we would ski under the lights. You got to be pretty good at responding to bumps after you hit them because the lighting was a bit spotty at best. We skied with a partner, just like swimming at camp, using the buddy system to make sure someone would notice if you slipped out of view. (In this case, off the mountain, in the dark. This happened on a regular basis.)

But we were kids; we thought it was funny. That is until one kid had to have his leg amputated after he had taken a toboggan ride down a slope in the pitch black night and slammed into a tree crushing his leg.

That was the end of my dreams of becoming an Olympic racer. I was a total chicken on icy slopes after that. My senior year I opted for the ballet classes on skis. Nice and slow and pretty. One leg on the snow, the other one out behind you like a figure skater. Those were the days. Who woulda thunk I'd ever need those random skills again?

I snapped back to the present just as someone tried to cut me off. I made larger snowplow turns. Being "Joe Cool Skier" had dropped off my priority list. I wailed to anyone within earshot, "Gang way! Injured skier here!"

No, I never asked for help to get down the hill. I've skied since I was two years old. And as any veteran skier knows, you only go down on a first-aid toboggan if you're unconscious. If you have ever heard one go by, you know why. It is nothing but wooden slats chattering on ice, pure case of adding insult to injury.

My Mother's voice joined the infernal dialogue between my very frozen ears.

"You just need to eat some protein, dear. How about a nice peanut butter sandwich?"

The ski condo was coming up on my left. I had to decide in the next three seconds if I would go eat or look for help. I cut through the woods toward the peanut butter.

An electrical spark, much like jumper cables slapping together, shot through my left hip. I screamed loudly, to no one but the trees, the only Dorothy Parker quote I knew, "What fresh hell is this?"

I doubled back to the lodge. At the bottom I careened into a stall of skis which exploded like a toothpick factory. Releasing my Dynastars, I threw my poles behind me and clunked toward the doorway doing an excellent impression of Chester from "Gunsmoke".

My mother's voice reverberated through my mind.

"That is no way to treat expensive equipment, why if your father were here…"

"Not now, Mom!" Several people took note that there was no one behind me as I spoke and I wasn't wearing a headset. I sat down and called over to the lady who was cleaning up the trays.

"Where's the first aid room?"

"No hablo ingles."

"Fine." Then in my best Spanglish, "Donde esta rojo xeis?"

Nada.

"Yo quiero el Ski Patrolo." She nodded and left, probably to laugh where I couldn't hear her. (I could see that my month at the Costa Rican language school was time well spent.)

In a half an hour, or maybe a decade, a man appeared. He carried a royal blue backpack embossed with a red cross made of duct tape. The tape was peeling back and the glue side was covered with lint of all different colors.

"You okay?"

Why do people always ask that when you are clearly not okay?

"No, I am not okay!"

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I can't feel my left leg."

"Did you fall or run into something?" He took off my boots and looked at my ankles. Thankfully I have great ankles, nasty big bubbly thighs, but great ankles.

"No. I was just skiing and then zap. My leg fell out from under me and it's paralyzed."

"Well, maybe if you warm up in the lodge, you know, drink some cocoa." He winked.

This is the part of a traumatic episode when you start hearing sounds come out of someone's mouth, but they are so bizarre, so inappropriate to your pain, that you can't believe you just heard them…so you keep looking, hoping that whatever they did say will reorganize in thin air and make a smattering of sense and re-enter your ears as something sane. I waited. Nothing.

"Cocoa, sure, whatever."

I was still hoping the numb leg thing would be a great story around the fireplace by sunset. Skippy Ski Patrol went off to fetch some cocoa. I knew I was in trouble but I was powerless to communicate what was wrong. And the expert? He was going to apply chocolate. It was like a bad PMS joke.

That's when the tingling sensation started up my other leg. I slipped to the floor in slow motion (picture if you will a candle left in the sun to melt). I placed my boots around my head so perchance the family next to me with fourteen ice-coolers and as many children would notice when they kicked me with their massive swinging boots. I was reliving the terror of my first reading of "The Pit and the Pendulum".

The tingling continued up toward my ribcage heading for my lungs and heart.
All the self-talk stopped abruptly, except for one clear voice, *"Oh, my God. God, Lord, Jesus, not good."*

The Good Humor man returned with a cup of steamy whipped-cream topped chocolate flavored water that ski lodges are famous for. I looked up from the floor. There he was, all smiles. His red silk-smooth jacket billowed above a snug band of red ribbed knit at his thin waist. The jacket's zipper was as thick as an HO-gauge train track. His matchstick legs coated in black spandex loomed over me.

I was now grasping reality in bite size pieces, like a slide show in my head. Here is the beautiful mountain (look at that blue sky); here's the ski patrol dude, and this is the place where my legs became paralyzed. Oh well, the kid sitting next to me will probably kick me in the temple before too long and my life will come to a grinding halt before I have to deal with being a paraplegic.

"Should I call for an ambulance?"

Ya think?

I bit my lip. After all, I was on the floor and he owned the walkie-talkie. I nodded sweetly, which was as much sarcasm as I could muster given the circumstances of being paralyzed and all.

Somewhere between a half hour and a century later the ambulance arrived. Several extras from Baywatch ran into the lodge and lifted me onto a gurney. They wadded my jacket under my head, strapped me down straightjacket tight and carried me out into the light. The snowdrift along the path was a shimmering iridescent-pink catching the alpine glow of the afternoon. The sky was deep blue against the ER workers' crimson jackets and white ski hats. You remember things like that when you think you are dying.