

Getting The Finger

by Reed Stanbery

I was getting pretty sick and tired of waking up to a smoldering valley. The fires that summer had put a damper on my usual activities of water skiing, floating the river, and basically anything outside. But this morning was different. I woke up with an immense amount of joy. I was looking forward to another adventure of mountainbiking. For the past three years, my dad and I had gone to Stevens Pass bike park on his birthday. This may sound like a strange thing to do with your fifty-eight year old dad, but my dad thinks of himself as an avid thrill seeker. He heli skis, water skis, and loves riding dirt bikes. But really he is just a crazy old man who thinks he is invincible.

Part of the reason I was looking forward to our day of riding was that I had just gotten a new bike and was ecstatic to ride it. I had outgrown my old bike and this one was certainly an upgrade. It was a black and red Enduro bike with suspension that felt like you were riding a marshmallow. I had only had the bike for a couple of weeks and had just ridden it into town and back once. Today was the true maiden voyage for the bike in the mountains with challenging terrain. I couldn't wait to get on the trail and put it through the paces.

It was roughly seven thirty on that late July morning when we loaded the bikes into the back of my dad's truck. As we pulled out of the driveway I was dreading the drive to the Columbia. The recent fires, fueled by extreme temperatures and wind, had devastated the landscape down valley, creating a moonscape of black ash. Whole forests were reduced to nothing but black toothpicks. Power poles lay burnt on the side of the road. Some houses were completely incinerated while others remained stoically untouched surrounded by a little patch of green lawn.

I was a little worried about my dad because he was very tired and he looked as if he was about to doze off. I could hardly see if his eyes were open through his dark and reflective sun glasses. Just as I was about to ask him if he was still awake a gigantic deer leaped in front of the truck. The furry beast leaped out from the bushes on the side of the road and with blinding speed managed to make it across the road without smacking the front of the vehicle. My dad was wide awake after this near collision. Somehow we miraculously made it to the ascent of the long winding road between the small Bavarian village of Leavenworth and Stevens Pass.

The Wenatchee river was rushing in full force through Icicle Canyon as we navigated the windy curves of the road. My dad likes to think of himself as a race car driver as we passed 8 people within a seven mile stretch of road. As we neared the top of the pass I caught a glimpse of the dirt trails that run from the very top of the hill to the bottom. The jumps were huge and the day was perfect for riding. As we pulled into the parking lot I had my seatbelt off and the car door wide open, anticipating the absurd amount of time it takes my dad to get from the parking lot to the ticket booth. There were no lines to buy tickets but we managed to take almost an hour as my dad argued with the man about the ridiculous price of a ticket. We finally had our tickets in hand as we latched our bikes to the back of the chair lift and we were off.

The swift moving chair lift scooped us up with ease, and we were floating above the forested ski and bike runs. This was only the third time for me to ride the lift during the summer and there is a big difference from riding it in the winter. Without snow to cover the trees and the ground, it feels like you are even higher. Luckily for me, I'm not afraid of heights and neither is my Dad; he was too busy making business deals on his cell phone. After about 7 minutes, we were finally at the top of the hill and ready to ride!

For our first run, we decided to take an easy cruiser trail to get our "bike legs". The air was crisp, The foliage was green, the sun was pleasant, and my new bike was smooth and responsive to my every move. Before I knew it, we were at the bottom of the run and loading on the chairlift again. That morning we made about five spectacular runs before lunch. Each time we rode down the

hill, we took a more difficult route, and I was feeling more and more confident on my new bike. We ate in the lodge for lunch and I had the most juicy and succulent bacon cheeseburger.

With food in our bellies we launched off again for an afternoon of thrilling riding. By three o'clock the shadows had fallen across the trails, the wind was picking up, and I was beginning to feel worn out. We had made another five runs since lunch. Each one was progressively faster, with bigger air off the jumps, and required more aggressive navigation of the terrain. There was one jump however, that I had been trying to clear all day, but had been coming up short. It was really bugging me. Dad and I decided to make one last run. I was determined to nail that jump on that last run.

Arriving at the top of the lift, we detached our bikes for the last run. The sun was down on this part of the mountain by that time, and it was starting to get chilly. We quickly took off, and my dad yelled at me to take it easy on the last run. Despite my dad's for once conservative advice, I took off down the hill like a semi truck without breaks. The first turns were amazing, I felt like I was floating effortlessly. It was almost like flying! Before I knew it, I had reached the top of the jump that had been my nemesis all day. This time I knew I would go big or go home. My heart was pounding as I approached the take off lip, still gaining speed. A split second before I launched I could tell in my gut that I was coming in too hot. But at this point, there was no turning back; no slowing down. I accepted my fate as I flew through the air, overshooting the landing by at least ten feet. The second my tires hit the dirt my bike washed out from under me like a bar of soap slipping along on the floor of the shower.

SMACK! THUD! I hit the shale rock and dirt, skidding and tumbling with my bike for about 15 feet. Once I shook off the crash, I went to unbuckle my helmet and realized something was wrong. I couldn't feel my right thumb, and my right hand wasn't working. I could also see a great deal of blood gushing from my left arm, my knees, and my right hand. At this point, I began to panic.

My dad finally rolled up and started yelling at me for disregarding his warning. I stopped listening to my dad's rambling and tried to unbuckle my helmet with my other hand so I could assess the damage. Once my dad realized I was hurt, he quickly called the mountain patrol, and tried to ascertain how severely I was actually injured. By the time I threw off my helmet, I had caught a glimpse of my mangled right thumb and hand. My helmet had protected my head but that was all that remained unscathed. My legs, knees and right hand seemed to have taken the brunt of crash. My legs and knees were scraped raw and a mangled piece of flesh dangled from my thumb. The bleeding was profuse and I was afraid my thumb might have been severed. I began to feel lightheaded and queasy as I laid down on the ground, contemplating the possibility. My dad trying to comfort me wasn't much help, as he gets skittish around blood and is overwhelmed in emergency situations. He keep bumping my thumb and sore areas which really annoyed me.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, as I lay on the cold ground bleeding, the mountain patrol arrived. The first responder did a quick assessment on my whole body. He skillfully wrapped my mangled thumb, dressed my other bleeding wounds, put me into his truck and drove me down to the first aid station by the lodge. At this point, the paperwork started. My dad had to fill out pages and pages of documentation about the accident, our health insurance, and a variety of other ridiculous forms. As I sat in a wheelchair feeling lightheaded, they rambled on. An hour later, they released me and suggested I go to the emergency room for stitches and x-rays. My dad bundled me into our truck, threw the bikes in the back and we took off toward Leavenworth.

If I thought the drive up was speedy, you can imagine how fast my dad drove to get me to the hospital. Just as our luck would have it, a state patrolman passed us coming from the opposite direction. My dad didn't even slow down as the patrolman flipped a u-turn, turned on his lights and siren and followed us. Eventually, he caught up and my dad pulled over. When the patrolmen saw my sorry state, including bloody face, wrapped hand, and oozing knees, he quickly said, "slow down a little sir, and drive safe". At least there was no speeding ticket!

In no time, we arrived at the Leavenworth community hospital. Now, I was born in the Omak hospital and I had a broken arm set in the Sandpoint, ID hospital, so I've seen some small rural health care. The Leavenworth community hospital topped them all. When we arrived, the outside looked like a vacant McDonald's parking lot. Upon entering, we were met with a cranky, unpleasant receptionist. She had my dad fill out even more paperwork. In the mean time, I continued bleeding in the waiting room.

I was hoping to get a comforting, female nurse... when in fact, the most gruff, rough and unpleasant male nurse took me back to the treatment area. He was unhealthy looking with a scrungy beard, unkempt hair, and fingers like sausages. I was doomed. He began to torture me by scrubbing and cleaning the dirt and gravel out of my wounds. Blood was pouring out and I almost lost it. They gave me one Tylenol for the pain. That was all and this torture went on for hours. After the nurse had scrubbed me clean a doctor finally came in to give me proper treatment. He put 15 stitches in my thumb, 10 in my left arm, and took x-rays. 15 stitches may not seem like a lot, but think of how small your thumb is, and then imagine how mangled it must be to get that many stitches.

Unknown to me, my mom had been trying to get ahold of me and my dad for hours. When she did, my dad completely played down the seriousness of my injuries. She began to become distraught when we still had not left the Leavenworth hospital at 11PM. The doctor couldn't decide if he thought my right thumb, hand and wrist was broken. So he kept taking different x-rays. Finally, he decided to put a splint on my hand to immobilize it and send me home. This was at 1AM. Four hours in an ER is agonizing and tedious. Fortunately, someone had finally decided to give me a serious painkiller. In a groggy state, they rolled me out to the truck in a wheelchair, my dad loaded me in the truck and we drove back to the Methow. But I didn't remember much of that drive because I fell asleep the minute I was placed in the seat.

This one day journey to Steven's Pass was one of the longest days of my life. Just like the bike course, there were amazing highs, and one really big low. My hand and thumb took forever to heal. It required several trips to Wenatchee to see the orthopedic specialist, the stitches were painful, itchy and gross, and my thumb is still not fully mobile. I guess I am lucky though. The crash injuries could have been much worse than just getting the finger.....