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Working the Off Beat. @mhmemo

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Bill Johnson Mixtape: (Belated) Requiem for an American Badass

The legendary downhill skier has been gone for over a year, but his impact remains lasting.

Bill Johnson is dead. My childhood sports hero has left the ski hill. This isn't exactly a news flash, although it still feels that way. Depending on when you're reading this, it's been a year, maybe more. He died January 21, 2016. He was 55.

That number haunts me, because when I think of Bill Johnson now, all I can see are those stupid Freedom 55 commercials that blanketed every Canadian television in the 1980s. You don't have to have been a latchkey baby raised by a can opener and reruns of *The Brady Bunch*, *I Dream of Jeannie* and *My Three Sons* for this reference to make sense. Here's a quick sketch: harried 20-something power exec gets zapped into the future to meet his 55-year-old self, tanned and fit and jogging along a beach, enjoying early retirement as a result of smart financial planning. For the hell of it, I did a little research, and it turns out the Freedom 55 marketing team came up with the original campaign in 1984, a big year for their brand.

1984 was also a pretty big year for Bill Johnson. That's when he blasted out of scrappy misfit ski-kid obscurity to win the Lauberhorn in Wengen, Switzerland, the month before the Sarajevo Olympics. It was also his first record, the so-called freak win that made him the first American man to win a World Cup downhill.

And when the ski racing elite of The Greater Alps of Europe were all, "It was a fluke," he talked an unholy amount of shit at them for a solid week of blizzard delays until he made good on all that shit-talking and creamed his not insubstantial competition to simultaneously become the first racer from outside the Alps to win an Olympic downhill *and* the first American man to take gold in an Olympic alpine event of any kind.

Ever.

(As the heads of scrappy misfit ski kids exploded in joy across the globe.)

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I've been writing about Bill Johnson my whole life. Certainly since 1984, back when we all claimed him. I wrote my first piece in grade eight, one of the zillions of baby ski racers in jaw-slung awe of his wild-ass Olympic antics. It was your typical gushy ode—an open fan letter never sent, except to my English teacher, who gave me an A+ and lots of gold stars.

Around the same time, my friend Debbie was applying for a fancy art school in The City, the kind of place you had to audition to get into, like *Fame*. She had the singing and the dancing and the acting stuff down cold, but she wasn't so much into the writing part.

So I sold her my Bill Johnson essay, which, now that I think about it, was my first writing sale. I charged \$5, the rate established by what my older brother had charged a year or two prior for (one-time; non-exclusive) rights to his Remembrance Day poem, which we both got really good grades on. (And gold stars.)

After Debbie got into the program, I hounded her mercilessly for feedback. I finally wore her down: "Well, they said it was pretty good but maybe a little over the top." And I said, "Over the top? That's an A+ essay. With gold stars. Who do they think they are? I want to talk to someone."

It was deeply upsetting, and not only because of my young rager of a writer's ego. I was offended on behalf of my hero. Was it even possible to overwrite the magnitude of what he'd accomplished?

Let's review. Wengen, January 15, 1984. At 2.78 miles, the longest World-Cup downhill in the world. And one of the most treacherous. At that point, Bill Johnson was a nobody. Not even a has-been. A never-was at 23. A juvie hothead who'd burned through much of the goodwill earned off his exceptional early promise. As wildly unreliable on the course as he was off it, he rarely performed on par with his outlandish talent. Sure, he was fast as hell, but he couldn't be counted on to finish his runs upright. Or even show up for practice.

And it didn't help that he was kind of a jerk. He just pissed people off. Jokes he found funny were often at the expense of someone else. He was so arrogant and angry and almost Aspergian in his monumental self-absorption that the other stories of his equally ferocious charm

and generosity got lost in the noise of being Bad Billy Johnson. His continued membership in the U.S. Ski Team was iffy, and the smart money was on him being turfed at the end of his yawn of a season.

So him screaming up from hell's half acre of nowheresville to take the Lauberhorn? Unprecedented. It changed everything. And man, what a run. Just over 4/5ths of the way down the hill, Johnson burned ahead of the top time by over a second, which in itself was astonishing, considering his below-20th seed. But then he caught an edge that popped his skis apart—twice. The second time spread-eagled him, tipping him over onto one ski—the other kicked up in the air like a figure skater who'd forgotten to toe-pick—and then back on his ass. That should have been that, but Johnson sprang up like a defiant weeble, skied actually off that pigdog of a course for a few nerve-shattering moments, micro-corrected his trajectory and roared back into the gates and his perfect egg of a tuck to win the damn thing.

The entirety of Johnson's near-wipeout took eight seconds max, which may not seem like a long time, and, in fact, if you watch the clip of his run it all happens pretty fast. But in downhill, where races don't go much over two minutes and are often won by centiseconds—hundredths of a second—eight seconds is the equivalent of a slow-motion disaster scene. This is likely how it felt to Austria's Erwin Resch, who'd started posing for victory photos while Johnson was still rattling down the mountain like a bag of pissed off cats straight out of hell.

If you listen to tape of veteran ski racer Billy Kidd call the run for CBS, you can hear his excitement: "The time, the fastest so far, but—Johnson is losing it. He's almost lost it right there. He's off the course, he's on the course again. Johnson's all over this hill!"

And John Tesh—a sportscaster before he was the *Entertainment Tonight* guy, before he was the New-Age Christian-pop guy—he got so fired up, he sprang to his feet, long arms swinging wildly, and feverishly backhanded Kidd off his chair. Years later, Kidd, who won silver for the slalom at the '68 Innsbruck Games, called Johnson's performance one of the most incredible recoveries he'd ever seen.

A month later, Bill Johnson beat them all again at the Olympics. It was

not a fluke.

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And by shit-talking at the Olympics, I mean like fellow Olympian Muhammad Ali in his prime, in everyone's face to put them off their game and pump up his own. Granted, Johnson's baiting tactics weren't quite as slick, more on the order of adolescent mouthing off: "There's no doubt that I am going to win"; "Top three? I'll finish in the top one"; "I'm just going to kill 'em here, you know?"; "I don't know why the other guys bothered to show up"; and my personal favorite: "You guys are only racing for second place." To keep with the schoolyard metaphor, in Johnson's defense he didn't actually start it, the Austrians did.

Franz "The Kaiser" aka "The Hammer" aka "The Klammer Express" Klammer, legendary Austrian ski champ—who at the time had an Olympic downhill gold and 25 World Cup firsts under his belt and was the original odds-on favorite to win the race—was credited with calling Johnson a *nasenbohrer* at Wengen, which is German for "nose picker" but which Klammer insisted a) just meant "rookie," idiomatically, and b) wasn't even started by him—he pinned that on Resch.

The press corps, bored out of their minds from a week of delays while the Yugoslav^[1] army labored daily to excavate Mt. Bjelašnica from a four-day blizzard, were delighted by the entertainment quotient offered up by "Brash Billy" Johnson and ran with it in the papers.

But the ski racing community found Johnson somewhat less enchanting, because shit-talking wasn't really part of the skiing experience. That was for the lower classes, who played sports that didn't cost money, where all you needed was a ball and a net, never mind thousands of dollars of ski equipment and a budget to fly you around the world to use it. In those days—and even now, because although the ski scene's roughed up with Xtreme sports and its sk8r boi boarder types, it's still expensive as hell—skiing was very much a gentleman's sport full of rich kids acting like butter wouldn't melt, all with faces just begging to be smacked.

Not that I was aware of Bill Johnson having smacked anyone. (He had, of course. I just didn't know about it then.) But he looked like he *would*. And by that point, I'd had to do some smacking around of my own.

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Quick recap of my racing career: bad skier, decent racer.

It was completely random I'd even ended up in skiing. I was supposed to be in ballet, but the teacher had taken me aside and told me in no uncertain terms that I would never "ever, ever" make it as a ballerina and should just quit. So, I did.[2]

Next came free ski-racing lessons at the local hill courtesy of my stepfather du moment, who worked weekends in the repair shop for extra cash. I was eleven. This may seem young to non-skiers, but think of it like playing the violin. Anyone worth their salt starts by three, four latest. By eleven, the little bastards can hot dog down a mogul field like James Bond stunt doubles in a Roger Moore cold open.



And when I say bad skier, picture a chimpanzee on two-by-fours, knuckles dragging as it shrieks its way down the hill in abject terror, stopping only when tackled by coaches into hay bales at the bottom. Now make it less fuzzy and cute. That was me. And by decent racer, I mean fast and stupid, which can take you a fair stretch in ski racing, right up til you catch an edge and rip the ACL halfway out of your kneecap when showing off for the cute ski instructor guy during night training.

This was around the time Bill Johnson started making a name for himself on the Europa Cup in early winter 1983, laying the groundwork for his glorious 1984 season after the holidays. I can't remember who told me about him. It must have been one of the coaches, since this predated the Internet and cable TV in every house.

Before my accident, some people said I reminded them of him. There was the obvious wrong-side-of-the-tracks element: both of us scholarship kids having to claw for every piece of equipment, bindings and up, win them in races or beg them from sponsors.

And there was a style thing: glider, hardboiled tuck, generalized stupidity. Of course, he was way better, but every now and then when I was out there flailing down a course, one leg would figure out what the other one was doing, and I'd instinctively know to shift my weight onto my downhill ski and cut the turns early and high for the straight line and fold myself in half and lift the bottoms of my skis off the snow to minimize friction and fly across the flats.

That's when I'd notice the exquisite, perfect silence, when everything went [off], and no one was screaming at anyone to "Shut the fuck up" or calling me by body parts ("Hey, Lips! Hey, Face!") or slamming doors or cranking Leon Russell downstairs with all their hippie leftover friends, yipping and hollering like a pack of teenaged coyotes until three in the morning.

I didn't know then what I do now about Johnson's childhood family dynamics—absentee father; freebird mother; rumors of alcoholism, abuse, neglect—but if I had, it would have been a startling revelation. It's not something I would even have thought to discuss. It was simply the shame I carried.

I only ever fought in defense of my mother's honor. Three marriages, three divorces, four baby daddies—the presumption around my redneck, backwoods little town was my overly-articulate, hippie throwback, bohemian arteeste, single-mother mother was a whore. So people would say things. And then I'd have to fight.

The first time was on the T-bar with a girl on the team who went to my school. She'd asked why my sisters and I had different last names, and when I explained the different fathers, she said, "Wow, your mother sure gets around."

I punched her right off the lift, ski pole wrapped in my glove like a roll of quarters in a sock. I think I was as surprised as her. It was the polar opposite of the cold, peaceful silence I felt when I raced, instead this whoosh of heat and fury that overtook me.

The second time was in the après-ski bar, where the age limit was never enforced. The other girl was an instructor, one of the weekenders that drove up north from the city with their families to vacation cabins plusher than most of our full-time (and only) homes. I don't remember precisely how it started, but it ended with me dragging her out by the hair and then someone pulling me off her and tossing me into a snowbank.

It seemed like the sort of thing Bill Johnson would have understood. And when you're a weirdo teenager with marginal social skills and fewer friends, because you spend your free time alone in your room memorizing B-sides of Beatles 45s or sounding out iambic pentameter or teaching yourself to Charleston by hanging onto the side of the bed frame for an entire day or avoiding free-ski afternoons at the hill because you're an idiot-savant loser who can race but can't actually ski—when that's the flavor of freakball you happen to be, it sure is awesome to find a hero who flies his flag loud and proud and doesn't back down, no matter how scared he gets.

It would have made far more sense to worship someone from my own country—any of the Crazy Canucks, for example (Podborski, Booker, Erwin, Reed), or Laurie Graham, who'd been representing the Canadian sisterhood proudly at the time—but I bounced off their shiny, clean-scrubbed images and was drawn instead like a

dysfunctional little magnet to Bill Johnson's tribe of misfit fans.

And good lord, was he lovely. Tan and blond and aqua-eyed, with a crinkly smile and a flat blade of a nose, his was the sort of golden beauty that belonged behind aviators, in a fastback Mustang, blazing down an oceanside highway. To a girl from backwoods Canada weaned on spun-candy surfer boy fantasies from the *Sweet Valley High* books and every Gidget movie ever, Bill Johnson represented all that was grand about the Golden State, so much so that it didn't even matter that he was actually from Oregon.

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Of course, Bill Johnson never really made it past 1984, even though it took a few seasons for that to sink in, and I didn't either. According to the doc, I hadn't severed my ligament, but it was hanging by a thread. My career, though. That was cut straight through.

When I quit skiing, I walked away from everything: I left my expensive, hard-won skis and boots in my unlocked locker and Bill Johnson on the pages of my diary.

It was one of those random things, like looking up an old boyfriend, when I popped Johnson's name into The Google and hit enter. It never occurred to me that anything bad could have happened to him. My divorce from my own skiing past had been so total that that entire world had ceased to exist for me. And Johnson would have been long-retired. I just wanted to see what else he'd done before hanging up his skis.

The details of his Greek tragedy of a life were painfully easy to find. As Jennifer Woodlief wrote in 2005's *Ski to Die: The Bill Johnson Story*, after his "15 minutes of fame ended, his 16th minute got off track." It was a bleak fast-forward from Sarajevo to the millions in blown business deals, the accidental-drowning death of his 13-month-old son, the friends he drove away, the trainwreck family dynamics, the divorce, the estrangement from his two other sons, the self-sabotaged ski career that could have been among the most brilliant and storied, and the doomed comeback attempt that didn't kill him but maybe

should have.

On March 22, 2001, at Whitefish, Montana, Bill Johnson slammed face first into the side of the mountain. It was the Kandahar Cup, only a few races into his ill-advised comeback bid. Two thirds of the way down the course, after skiing what many called a surprisingly tight run, nailing a jump younger skiers had mangled, he caught an edge—it's always an edge—and his skis slid apart much the way they had 17 years earlier in Wengen, the day of the stunning recovery and subsequent win that launched his championship '84 season. For one agonizing moment, it looked like he might get his skis back together. But he didn't.

The impact smashed Johnson's teeth all the way into the back of his throat, filleting his tongue almost in half and bludgeoning his head so hard his brain detached from the skull casing and rotated half an inch inside his cranium.

The crash left him permanently brain damaged, physically disabled and, in the end, utterly dependent on his mother and state aid workers for the most basic of his needs. It was a fate arguably worse than death, particularly for someone who'd inked a flaming skull and the words "Ski to Die" into his right delt shortly before launching his comeback. Not like that was a new credo for him. In an interview with a hometown paper three months after winning the gold back in 1984, a reporter had asked Johnson if he'd been surprised by his win.

"Not really," he said. "I knew at the starting gate I was going to win it. I was going to win it or die."

At first, Johnson seemed to make a reasonable, if altered and diminished, recovery from his accident, but then he was hit by a series of mini strokes and infections and then some bigger strokes, eventually losing the ability to walk or even care for himself. He moved from his own trailer to his mother's place to a full-care nursing home, finally, and his days revolved around episodes of *Sports Center*, reruns of *Iron Man*, infrequent visits from friends and family, and the occasional smoke that someone else would have to set up for him with a straw.

After a major stroke in 2010, and then a massive infection that

attacked all his major organs and put him in intensive care for two weeks in 2013, he instituted a DNR order into his health protocol. If he coded again, he wanted to be allowed to die.

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I met Zeke Piestrup when trolling around online for a downloadable copy of his film *Downhill: The Bill Johnson Story*, a bluntly compassionate documentary of Johnson's meteoric rise and subsequent fall that's trapped in distribution limbo despite a glowing debut on the 2011 festival circuit. We bonded over a shared hero-worship, and Zeke sent me a copy.

While making the movie, Zeke spent a lot of time with Bill and DB, Bill's mother and primary caretaker. "Billy's brain is totally there," Zeke said. "Other than the memory loss. Conveniently, the worst 10 years of his life are gone."

Zeke put me in touch with DB and urged me to go full fangirl, explaining it was the sort of thing keeping "Hard to Kill" Bill alive.

I sent Bill a care package containing a feeble attempt at a glam shot (my expression halfway between saucy and "I've got sand in my eye"), some milk chocolate soft enough for him to swallow, a mixtape of '60s/'70s/'80s classic rock, and a fan letter in a homemade card onto which I'd photoshopped a cocky-looking blond guy with a shit-eating grin under a banner that read, "They say you are what you eat, but I don't recall eating a fucking legend."

In reply, DB emailed me a picture of Bill. In the photo, Bill was wedged semi-upright in his motorized wheelchair, my photo propped against his torso. I imagined him thinking, "If I had control over my body I'd—," which, fair enough. He wasn't a tourist attraction, even though he of course was.

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Thoughts that could go through a person's head when preparing for a

FaceTime date with their crippled childhood sports hero: *Wear bright lipstick. Make sure your tits look good in that top. Do your hair. That will cheer him up. Talk about his triumphs. Mention the Olympics. All he has left are his memories.*

There aren't any books of etiquette that address this kind of thing. And if there were, what would they advise? I had put off DB's request as long as I could, thinking, "Why would this man want to have some person he's never met, to whom he can't effectively communicate, in his face on his mother's iPad, when he really just wants to watch TV and tune out?"

But then I thought, "Or maybe it would be a nice break from him re-watching *Iron Man*." Maybe it would be a minor distraction from the indignity of being trapped in a broken body that was once so magnificent and powerful. Maybe it would be a small way in which I could be of service. I did my hair, threw on some lipstick, took some deep breaths, reminded myself of the Importance of What I Was Doing and dialed in.

DB ruined the date with my childhood hero-crush like only a mother can.

They were watching *Iron Man*.

Me: Hi, how's it going?

DB: We're watching *Iron Man*.

Bill: ...

(Had I gotten the time wrong?)

Me: I'm so sorry. This is a bad time. I'm interrupting your movie...

DB: How could you be interrupting our movie?

[...]

Me: Right, of course, we have this new technology called "Pause Button" ... ha ha ...

[...]

Bill: ...

[...]

DB: You're prettier than your photograph.

Me: ...

DB asked what I did for a living. I told her I was a writer but really a massage therapist. DB explained the shortcomings of the state healthcare program and how it had screwed them over on massage therapist rates. I couldn't tell if Bill looked embarrassed or annoyed or bored or just checked out.

After some more awkward chit-chat, I launched into a semi-prepared speech reiterating the main talking points of the card I'd sent (childhood hero, brilliant ski god, ongoing inspiration, thank you so much...). I trailed off.

Bill smile-nodded in my direction and whispered, "Right on."

Then he turned to his mother and mouthed: "Movie."

The visit was over.

After that, I sent a few more care packages and letters. Each time, DB dutifully sent back a photo of Bill decorated with my little gifts—chocolates or maple sugar candies or t-shirts. Once, she popped a pair of stuffed reindeer antlers on him, the sort of holiday outfit you'd put on the family dog. I amused myself imagining his inner thoughts: "If I can just focus hard enough, I know I can use my brain power to push the TV off its stand and..."

I could see what Zeke meant, about Bill being all there, not that I had anything to compare it to, never having met the man. But the few times he looked straight at the webcam with his one good eye, I could see the hard layer of intelligence I remembered from interviews and photos back in the day. And it just gutted me. To be all there but trapped in the prison of a body that wouldn't cooperate.

I finally met Bill in person on December 17, 2015. It was very last minute. I was in Seattle visiting family and spontaneously decided to rent a car and pop down to Oregon for the day. DB had urged me to visit, but I'd told her I wouldn't be able to get away: "Next time for sure!"

I dreaded what I feared would be a painfully uncomfortable and possibly unwanted visit, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I had to do it. I didn't want to tell anyone it was because I was afraid he'd die before I got another chance to see him, but of course that's what I was thinking.

The trip was harrowing. It'd been dry as a bone in Seattle until the one day I needed to travel. The straightforward three-hour drive down to Mount Hood became five hours of steering-wheel-gripping terror, teeny compact car hydroplaning like a skip rock on a flat lake, visibility mere feet, RainX be damned. I distracted myself with thoughts of the surreal conversations ahead of me: "Hi, so good to meet you, wow, this sure is awkward, okay, gotta get back on the road so I can get off this godforsaken mountain before dark, byeeee, try not to die before next June!"

When I got to the nursing home, I was shocked by how much Bill's health had deteriorated since I'd last seen him on FaceTime or in photos. No longer able to sit up in a wheelchair, he was confined to his old-man hospital bed with safety rails and had to be dragged back up and onto the pillows. He'd lost the ability to whisper, and it was hard to know what he needed. Communication was reduced to lip reading. At one point, his mother flipped the sheets off him to readjust him in the bed, try to make him more comfortable. He lay there pale and half naked on his side, curled like an unbaked seahorse plucked too early from its father's pouch. His head rolled in my direction, and I leapt from my chair to make a big show of looking at the photographs and cards on his wall, my back to him, not wanting him to see me see him like that. Some things cannot be said properly in English, but the Germans know what I mean here: *fremdschämen*, the shame you feel on behalf of another.

His one good eye was the same, though, bright and ferocious. He

crinkled at me rakishly as I flapped around like a teenager interviewing the captain of the football team. It's like he hadn't gotten the memo that he was no longer Bill Johnson, biggest badass in the room. Another word we don't have in English: *saudade*, Portuguese for the nostalgia one feels for things that have never existed. I forced myself not to indulge in sadness for that time I never got to slap the arrogant grin off his face in some bar somewhere, but all bets were off once I got back to the car.

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I said skiing ceased to exist for me after I quit racing, but that's not entirely true. I still dream about skiing, and not always in a bad way, and not always when I'm asleep. Sometimes just walking down the street, I'll catch myself flexing my legs, bringing my hands up, curving my shoulders forward, breathing out in a hard little O as I angle past a telephone pole. I have bruises up and down the sides of my body from cutting the turns too tightly on doorways. I regularly fall off curbs and scrape up my shins, because I never look where I'm going. I'm always two gates ahead, like I was taught so many years ago. It's strange, the things that remain. I can ignore it, but ski racing will always be part of my cellular makeup. I'm like a baby dragon that cracked out of its shell and promptly imprinted on a set of skis someone left lying around. (Red sleds, no doubt.)

Even then, in the rain, navigating the treacherous drive back to Seattle, I'm looking ahead as far as possible, scanning into the mist for cars and other obstacles, keeping my grip loose but ready, angling my hips into my shoulders in the seat, imperceptibly leaning into the turns along the endless highway.

And then the strangled hiccup of terror as I almost drive up the tail end of a stalled car being strapped onto a tow truck. Outside lane, from seeming nowhere. No flares, not even blinkers. It's astonishing how quickly everything can change, could have changed. I missed them by so little, flicking myself into the passing lane at the last possible moment. That there wasn't a car already in that lane, that I'm alive with all my limbs to tell this humdrum story of an almost-accident is just a detail in the gigantic universe that is the bigger

picture. That Bill lay in his hospital bed, broken and dying, is another. It could as easily have been me.

Because here's the truth, the part that doesn't get included when I drag out my little tale of the almost-was teenage ski-racing star for Show & Tell hour. When they told me my knee was finished and my career over? I was glad. For months leading up to the crash, I'd been plagued by nightmares. It was always the same. Catch a tip. And then pinwheel out of the course, launching off my skis and twisting midair so the center of my back lined up perfectly with the biggest tree on the edge of the run. It was the crack my spine made as it snapped cleanly in half that always woke me, gasping out of bed, sheets drenched. That's the key point at which Johnson and I diverged, apart from the obvious, that he was an infinitely better skier: he was fearless; I was wracked with it. And maybe that saved my life, if that's what we're calling it, this half-life of half doing and half dreaming I've been so fucking blessed to half live.

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Bill died a little over a month later. Wednesday, January 21, 2016, shortly after 3 p.m., west coast time. I'd been dodging FaceTime calls from his mother all day the day before, the way you do with an aging relative always wanting to chat at exactly the wrong time. I was on deadline. I was hung over. I didn't have time to have a shower, do my hair, fix my lipstick. I put my phone on silent and got back to my life. Just before I turned in, I saw I'd missed a text: "Bill will probably leave us within the next day or so," DB wrote. "Should you want to see him, we could try to FaceTime tomorrow." English had all the perfect words for me: self-absorbed jackhole.

The next day, I visited with Bill for the last time. He was see-through in his dehydration. He'd lost the ability to swallow, but he'd made his wishes clear: no extraordinary measures, which in his case precluded tubes for food or water. Occasionally, someone would swab his mouth with a moist sponge, but that was it. My childhood sports hero was dying of thirst in the rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, and I had a front row seat.

I rattled my usual inanities at him—“You’ve always been an inspiration to me, you made me feel less alone”—painfully aware I sounded like I was monologuing his eulogy right at him. Me me me in my self-centered discomfort, which existed so comfortably alongside my ferocious sorrow for him, because feelings don’t care if they make sense or not. They just are.

And then Bill cast his working eye in my direction and winked at me. And I laughed. And he did, too. Silently, just the outside edge of his mouth tipped up.

That was the last time I saw him. He died a few hours later.

For days, I existed in a fugue state. I couldn’t work, I couldn’t write, I couldn’t talk. I hadn’t expected to miss him so much. How could you mourn someone you’d never really known? I was undone by the ache I felt throughout my entire body. There was a tangible absence in the world with him no longer in it.

And then it hit me. When Bill died, I died. That baby ski-racer champion-to-be. The girl who maybe might have could. When he left, he took her with him.

Of course it made no sense. Those dreams of winning The Gold were long gone. But deep inside my lizard brain, I’d never gotten the memo. I was still that crazy little racer kid, flying through the gates, where everything made sense, where I always knew what to do, where anything was possible. Where I could finally breathe.

And sometimes I’d sync into a sort of ski-racing disco and the boundaries between my body and the skis and the snow vaporized and I rode the wind down the side of the mountain with an easeful fury that blew all conscious thought out the back of my head like a cannon through tissue paper.

It didn’t happen often, but when it did, my god, it was sublime.

Except now it was gone. And so was he. And that he was 55. Freedom 55, my ass. If I could think of a word to sum up Billy’s last year, it sure wouldn’t be freedom.

Here's how I'd rather imagine him finishing out his run. He's older, sure. Craggy and skin all sun-damaged, but in that sexy way men get to be, the bastards. In this version, he's tanned and fit enough, though there's fuck all jogging on the beach. (He never liked his PT.) No, he's beer-bellied up to the palapa hut bar, touting his exploits to the hot barmaid, picking dumbass fights and talking an unholy amount of shit. I'm there, too, toasting him from across the bar with the crappy glass of merlot he bought me, merlot being the circa-1980s-Bill-Johnson-approved classy drink for The Ladies.

Maybe later he'll go for a sail, if it's warm enough. (He didn't like the cold either.) Probably, I'll finally get to slap him. In this dream, he hangs onto the glory. We all do. In this dream, he just keeps winning. We all do. In this dream, there's nothing left to prove. He's whole and happy and at peace.

It's Freedom 55, baby. Rock on.

. . . .

The Cauldron

[1] Now, Bosnia-Herzegovina. (See: Yugoslav Wars, 1991–2001.)

[2] In my memory, I nodded stoically and marched out of the atelier de danse, tossing my soft leather slippers over my shoulder into the garbage can on the way out. In my hyper-revisionist memory, I tossed a lit match after the slippers, and the can exploded in slow motion fireworks behind me as I flicked my side-pony back over my shoulder and strode, glass-faced, toward the camera. (In reality, there were tears.)