

Fresh.^(on skiing)

Sally and Me

WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR SKIING WHEN YOU ALMOST LOSE A FRIEND. *By Heather Hansman*

I was on the hill, too, when I heard that Sally fell. I was patrolling at Arapahoe Basin, Colo., where we don't get much cell coverage, and around noon a message came through from Jackson Hole: "Sally's been hurt. It's bad. Do you have her parents' phone number?"

That Saturday, March 24, Sally fell down the Once is Enough couloir in the Jackson backcountry. She shattered her helmet, fractured her skull, back, and ankle, and sustained a traumatic brain injury that she's still recovering from. Sally is one of my best friends, but she was also my closest ski partner—on my level, willing to take the same risks I was, and uncomfortable with the same unknowns. I could easily have been in her boots.

Since her fall, I've lost my ability to ski without thinking about consequences. About risk. About life. About me—and a lot about her.

It's been a year and a half, but I still can't drop a cornice and trust that there won't be something below me, that the chute will open out, or that the snow will hold. I don't like the way my body reacts to the adrenaline rush I used to crave. I get backseat and knock-kneed and I bail out of lines I would have joyously attacked before. I shake so hard.

And that's not how skiing works. It's not a sport for people who live in fear. You have to expect the best, not brace for the worst.

That's hard to do when you've seen the worst happen. Or something close to the worst. People talk about calculating risk, but there's no math. No personal calculus. You are either on the edge or over it, making semi-educated guesses along the way. You work with what you know. Part of what I'm feeling, I guess, is called growing up, seeing bad things happen to good people, losing



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your innocence, your naïveté. And part of it is learning what you're comfortable with—and how much you'd be willing to lose.

There is a lot to lose. Sally is in a constant climb to regain her sense of self, physically and mentally. Pieces are knitting themselves back together slowly, but it's a battle. Uphill. I don't ever again want to see anyone that frustrated, struggling that hard to get back to baseline. I don't want my parents, or anyone else's parents, to go through what Sally's parents have gone through. I want to hold everyone I love close and say, "Don't mess yourself up. It is not fair

to anyone."

But that's not how skiing works. Risk is part of why we love the sport. A big part. We do it for that gut rush. If it were all low-angle groomers and hot-chocolate breaks no one would call themselves skiers. We obsess about skiing, spend all our money on gear and trips and all our time recounting stories about finding—or at least pursuing—that rush.

"Sometimes I feel like I don't really know who I am in the summer," Sally once told me. "My whole identity, my friends, they're all tied up in what I do in the winter."

Sally thinks about skiing all the time. She wants to be on skis so bad. She wants a lot of things—a boyfriend, a sense of normalcy, to go back to Jackson—but I think more than anything she wants that sense of effortlessness, carving downhill, right on that edge of risk.

And I want that rush too, even though I've become afraid. If you're a skier, the kind of person whose sense of self is attached to what you do in the winter, you're the kind of person who craves it.

I wonder most about how Sally felt on the lip of that couloir. She says she doesn't remember. The details of that morning are gone, and what she knows about that day on top of Once is Enough is what people have told her. About how she caught an edge up high and ragdolled, how her ski partners stabilized her until the medevac heli dropped in. And how that night in an Idaho Falls hospital they put bolts in her head to drain the swelling.

She doesn't remember, so no one will ever know for sure, but I hope that when she hung her ski tips over the edge and shifted her weight out into her first turn she was feeling unafraid, risk and reward in balance, comfortable with the chances ahead. ●