



YIKES!

PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL

by George Ding

Let me tell you about the time I almost killed myself skiing north of Beijing.

It was five years ago, and a friend of mine had the novel idea of renting a van and rounding up some people to go skiing for the day at a resort in Miyun.

The price was the first sign that this place wasn't exactly Telluride. It was cheap – too cheap to include luxuries like snow grooming or rescue workers. Second, there were only three trails open: two bunny slopes and the advanced course at the top of the mountain.

Third, the rental skis were so crude they might have been fashioned by early humans. No camber, no fiberglass laminate – just two long planks of wood covered in chipped paint.

When I went to grab my rentals, the guy manning the counter asked me if I'd been skiing before.

Had I been skiing before. The only time George Ding runs a black diamond is if the mountain is out of double black diamonds. In fact, I don't care if it's a purple trapezoid or yellow rhombus – if it slopes downhill, I can ski it.

So you can imagine my surprise when the rental guy handed me a pair of 140cm skis, which is like handing Michael Phelps a life preserver. I handed them right back and pointed to the 180s.

Outside, my friend was teaching the others how to ski. Most of them were practicing on the bunny slope, falling and getting up again, then sliding a couple feet before falling again. Amateurs.

The artificial snow withered under the noon-day sun and turned into a nasty slush. It was like skiing on the shaved ice desserts they serve at Bellagio.

I stuck around for as long as I could before ditching them.

The top of the mountain was deserted – no

one on the slope, no one running the lift and no one coming up. *Perfect*, I thought. *I've got the trail to myself.*

As I slid off the lift, I heard a scraping sound. The trail was frozen solid. No powder, just a layer of permaice.

Also, the trail was cut into moguls, you know, those awkward bumps of snow that you only see in the Olympics because, honestly, who wants to ski on awkward bumps of snow?

Most of all, it was as narrow as a gangplank, only two or three moguls across. On the right, the trail ended in a precipitous drop onto jutting rocks and barren trees. The only thing preventing someone from impaling themselves on them was a thin cordon of orange fencing.

Now, at this point, any intelligent person would have taken the lift right back down.

But come on, I had conquered more mountains than Edmund Hillary; I had nothing to fear from this little ski resort in Miyun.

I pushed down the slope. Almost immediately, I regretted it. The ice, along with my long skis, made it impossible to turn. My right ski scraped against the moguls and snapped right off the boot. I faceplanted into a mound of ice.

Watching my ski slide down the trail all by itself, I realized the incline was something like 45 degrees.

Shoulda never turned down those 140s, I thought to myself.

I took my left ski off and stumbled down to where my right ski had come to a stop. I slammed on my skis and tried again. I went past two moguls and ate it. I got up, slid a couple feet, and fell again.

Then, in my frustration, I had the stupidest idea yet: Forget the moguls – I would ski straight down.

In hindsight, I believe I accelerated at approximately 9.8 m/s² on the frictionless ice. By the time warning bells started going off in my head, I was approaching Mach 1. Stopping would have

meant a protracted and vertebrae-crushing fall so I just pointed my skis downhill and let gravity do its thing.

This appeared to work until I careened off a mogul at the wrong angle and flew to the right. For a few moments, I had a birds-eye view of the thin orange barrier and the cliffs beyond. As I hung in the air, I saw my future as a collection of body parts scattered across the rocks and branches below.

I woke up with my left ski jutting through the fencing and my right ski underneath it. The barrier had caught me like a fish in a trawl. There was nothing under my right foot; it was hanging off the edge of the mountain. If the cordon, which was as thin as police tape, had given way, I'm sure there'd now be a charity named after me dedicated to improving skiing safety.

Slowly pulling my right leg up, I made a cosmic bargain that if I could get out of this mess alive I would never again brag about how I had more diamonds under my belt than De Beers.

Once my right leg was free, I shifted back onto the trail before extricating my left leg from the punctured cordon. Then I collapsed on my back and lay, motionless, watching the sun trace its arc toward the horizon. If I had wet myself, I couldn't feel it.

I glanced up at the murderous piste; I had only made it a quarter of the way down.

I played it safe the rest of the way down. I sat on my ass and scooped inch by inch down the mountain. When I finally slid to the beginner's area, hours had passed. My group was there, waiting. They had returned their equipment and were ready to leave.

"Jesus, what were you doing up there?" my friend asked.

What could I say?

I told them I'd been admiring the sunset.