

# The last run on Broken Bone Hill

J.C. Murphy

In my office on the 30th floor of the Northwestern Mutual Tower in Milwaukee, I have an unusual piece of wall art. It is a mostly flattened piece of raw metal, roundish in shape. Visitors to my office, be they interns, customers, colleagues or company muckity-mucks often inquire after it.

"Who is the artist?" one might ask.

"What does it represent?" another may inquire.

"The artist," I always say, "is a little-known multi-media specialist by the name of Kenworth. And the piece represents a brief glimpse at our own mortality...and of how you should never waste second chances."

Inevitably, my visitor will look a bit confused, nod and say something along the lines of, "Ohhh... I see."

It's a game I play with the city-folk I live with. They're all nice enough people, but a far cry from the folks I knew growing up in Forest County all those years ago. City-folk can be haughty...not at all like the people I grew up with.

My children have heard the story of my "wall art" dozens of times. The story used to thrill them immensely, but over time, as they've grown into adulthood, the tale has become a cautionary one. My beautiful wife Pam, who has never liked the story, has asked

me never to tell it again in her presence.

"It makes me queasy," she says.

The story is unsettling to me, too. But I shall write it down, this one last time, not simply because I am the protagonist of the tale, but because it might help someone someday. And like all of the most terrifying stories in the world, this one is true.

In a lifetime of cold winters, the winter of 1978 stands out in my memories as the coldest. I don't know if meteorological records will confirm my memory, but it was certainly the coldest winter that I can recall. Of course, that didn't mean that we children of the seventies weren't still outside most of the time.

I was twelve-years-old that year and I had received two prized Christmas presents, which I used whenever I could. The first of these gifts was a blaze-orange snowmobile suit, which offered both warmth and visibility. The second was a saucer sled...my prized possession of that year.

Many of the kids had saucer sleds but mine was special. Mine was not painted bright colors with cartoon characters on it. And it didn't have one of those stupid names that the other saucer sleds did. Mine was no "Fancy Flyer" or "Super Saucer." No, my saucer was merely metallic in appearance; no paint, no ropes, no frills. My father had made my saucer sled him-

self in his workshop, with his English wheel and scrap aluminum. Dad had fashioned only a small handle on the front, so that I wouldn't fall off, providing I hung on with a death grip. My sled, was built for speed.

We kids called our sled area Broken Bone Hill, for obvious reasons. At least three kids had broken something the previous winter - all fingers if I recall correctly. I was chagrined that I was not among them. The hill was west of Crandon, just

his pinky finger the previous year, held the distance record at Broken Bone Hill, something he never let us forget.

"I think it's unbeatable," Gary liked to say.

I would always argue with him about this. But after I received my Christmas present, I kept my mouth shut. I was certain that I now had the sled that would crush his distance record.

We kids all knew how the record was marked. There was a blue spruce tree that Gary had

my pellet gun in our yard. But that's another story.

It was a busy day atop Broken Bone Hill that Saturday. The outside temperature had struggled to reach zero and it was windy; really windy! But we were heartier then than we are now, I think. Also, about 400 yards away was Pammie Hoffman's home, where we were allowed to warm up in her garage. Sometimes, Mrs. Hoffman made hot chocolate.

But I digress. Gary assessed the conditions ahead of any runs. As the record-holder, he was considered the expert of the gang. "The snow is good and packed," he said. "And the wind is at our backs. I think we'll see some good runs today," he said, before adding, "but no new records."

I smiled and thought, maybe, Gary. I guess we'll see. I played possum on my first few runs down the hill. I picked the slow side of our track, just to get a feel of my new snow vehicle. Right away, I could tell she was fast. Even on the slow side of the hill, I was outdistancing everyone else. And by quite a bit, too.

Gary was not fazed. He examined my saucer. "Nice ride," he said. "Where'd you get this?"

"My dad made it," I said.

He nodded his head slowly. "After an ice storm, you might have a chance," he concluded. "Not today, though."

I smiled and moved over to the faster side of the hill. It was time to shut Gary up, once and for all. I lined up my run. Down at the bottom of the hill, about twenty-five yards short of Gary's rec-

ord, was a frozen incline, which went up about two feet. Only Gary and one other kid had ever even reached the incline. In the summer time, depending on how much rain we had, a small creek ran through the land. The incline had been built by older kids who jumped their bikes over the water. I aimed, the best I could, for that ice ramp.

My next two runs were failures, only because I wasn't used to the speed of my new saucer. On both runs, I bailed out before the bottom of the hill. I was going so fast I scared myself.

"Your dad should have put a rope on it," Gary said.

But it wasn't for lack of a rope that I bailed. It was a lack of intestinal fortitude. I had simply chickened out on both runs. Pammie Hoffman, who wore a cute pink snowsuit, bid me to follow her to her garage and we commiserated over hot chocolate.

"I wish Gary would just shut up," Pammie told me. "He acts like he knows everything."

"Well," I said, "he does have the record."

Pammie scoffed. "Ice aided. There should be an asterisk next to it."

I don't know if it was the hot chocolate or Pammie's company that fortified me, but my next run was mythic. Not only did I make it to the ice ramp over the frozen creek, I jumped over it, only letting go on landing, a mere ten yards short of Gary's record. When I had hit the ramp, the saucer felt as if it was still accelerating.

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*Even on the slow side of the hill, I was outdistancing everyone else. And by quite a bit, too.*

past where the Big House now sits. The hill was owned either by Forest County or the Rathman estate - some sort of dispute over unpaid taxes, I think. But we children didn't care about the ownership question. It was a steep, sixty-yards-wide hill nestled between two large groves of pine trees, which shielded us from the worst of the wind-chill factors that year. At the bottom of the hill was a long straightaway that reached all the way to Highway 8.

My friend Gary Grothman, who'd broken

reached, about fifty yards short of Highway 8. There were about a dozen witnesses to the event, me among them. Gary had achieved the record a day after an ice storm had made the hill as slick as it had ever been. He'd been lucky, because shortly after his record run, a sheriff's deputy told us to get off the hill because it was too dangerous that day. The next day, a brief thaw followed by a foot of snow destroyed the fast conditions. Gary would have bragging rights forever it seemed.

It was the middle of January before I could get on Broken Bone Hill to test the saucer. One weekend was wasted visiting my aunt and uncle in the Fox Cities. Another week was lost due to my being grounded for discharging

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