

Note: Part of a book-length memoir that I'm writing about my experiences as a professional snowboarder. Submitted as part of my MFA Thesis at Columbia University.

Kodak Courage (excerpt)

Jeff, my snowboarding coach, likes to tease me about how I tend to work harder when I know I'm being filmed. He calls it "Kodak Courage". Sometimes, he'll whip out his GoPro and film me during the more mundane moments of our daily training sessions to achieve this effect; it doesn't often work. These aren't professional photoshoots and they don't feel like it either. There's nothing quite like the fear of failing in-focus, of having a five-thousand-dollar camera follow your body down a cliff, knowing your actions are the only variable between a wasted day or a paycheck for the photographer. I'm not one of those pros who gets the shot in five tries, but what I lack in style, I attempt to counterweight with stamina. After each take, I'll ask the photographer if he got the shot. If he doesn't answer with an absolute affirmative, I'll hike back up to try again. If he does, I'll look at the shot he thought he got and often hike back up to try again anyway until my vertebrae turn to evil, hot twine. Some might call it having a strong work ethic; I call it vanity.

It's April and we've been location scouting the last few areas of the backcountry that still appear to be in the throes of winter for what could be my last photoshoot of the season. We found something suitable in the Vail backcountry—a fifteen-foot cliff surrounded by picturesque frosted pine trees. My photographer, also named Jeff, is perched atop the cushy, black seat of my snowmobile looking at the test shots he's just taken and muttering something about the natural light making me look "washed out" on camera unless I can block out the overhead sun with my body in each shot. The fact is, we are deep in the Colorado backcountry and it hasn't snowed for over two weeks—this is the best venue we'll probably find in these sparse conditions that won't take us higher into avalancheville. So, in the interest of capturing any potentially marketable photo we can before spring turns into summer, it's decided that I'll be jumping off of this sizeable rock-face into a predominantly flat landing area in order to showcase the base of my snowboard, which the company has given me in a show of good faith that I'll "get the shot" for them. I don't love the idea but agree that it's now or never. The board, next year's prototype, would've been great fun to try out almost anywhere else but, truthfully, when filming a cliff jump of this nature, it wouldn't have made a difference whether I had next year's gear or the first snowboard ever constructed; no one could ride away from a landing this shitty, we were sure of it.

Knowing I'm about to temporarily sacrifice the ligaments in my neck for a good chance at a half-page advertisement in a snowboarding magazine, I begin my solo hike

up the cliff. The hike, while short, involves both navigating around and up a large tree while attempting to maintain two points of contact with either my hands or feet in two feet of sandy, recalcitrant, tree-rotted snow. The 156cm snowboard I'm carrying is conspiring with the wind to throw me off course. On a typical hike like this, I'm able to set a bootpack into the slope, allowing me to carve out my own snowy staircase for repeat ascents. Today, I can hardly bear my full weight on one side because of the icy ball bearings underfoot.

A quick digression before I reach to the top of this cliff. A worrying number of burial-related deaths occur each year when the victim falls into a tree well. These victims are friends, friends of friends, and mountain-town lifers alike; the mountain does not care about your resume. Tree wells form when air pockets are created around the comparatively warmer trunks of trees. Water vapor rises from the base of the trunk and turns the surrounding snow into icy sand. Because tree wells are not part of the larger snowpack and thus cannot be accurately predicted, backcountry riders are taught to treat every tree like a potential black hole. Of the twenty-eight times I'll climb around this tree today, I'll consider my own mortality for about seventeen of them.

At the top of the cliff, things look different. Bad different. Most of the upper portion of the rock is bare. Before we can even get started, I'll have to construct a run-in ramp and a small lip out of the most uncooperative snow I've dealt with to date and I'll have to do so using only the small, collapsible shovel I carry with me in the backcountry in case I have to dig out the body of an avalanche victim; it's scoop is the about the size of a magazine. I begin shoveling with the altered proprioception of a passive-aggressive mind, huffing, clanking, and walloping the snow into temporary submission as the Jeffs have snack time down below.

"Did you bring your Kodak Courage today?!" Jeff 1 calls from the bottom of the cliff, smacking and chewing his way through a backpack-browned banana.

I don't respond, partly because the wind is whipping surface frost up the mountain and into my face, partly because I'm concentrating on chipping compressed ice out of the footbeds of my bindings, and partly because it really grosses me out when Jeff eats weird, old fruit he finds in his car. In any case, I'm not sure Jeff needed an answer to a question he already knew the answer to. The mountain can make rhetoric out of even the most direct questions—once you're on top, there's only one way down.