

The one-two punch

What if assaults are cumulative?

Study the art of science. . . . Learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else.

Leonardo da Vinci

This was the moment he lived for. Perched on a single snowy peak surrounded by a formidable range of peaks yet to be conquered,

Billy surrendered to gravity. Leaning forward, he slid quickly down the slope, faster and faster, casting plumes of powder in his wake.

With so little effort—less than a thought—Billy was back where he belonged, carving up the mountain with carefree pirouettes, deep into the powerful compulsion that he and his snowboarding tribe called shreddin’ the gnar.

Like most 14-year-old snowboarders, he was still considered a “grommet,” but Billy Kass could hold his own. His parents had given him his first Never Summer board when he was 5 and his brother, Travis, was 8. Like some kind of rite of initiation, Travis introduced Billy to the secrets of the mountain. Nodding for Billy to follow, Travis had shown him how to ride a slow S-curve to the bottom. He’d been following Travis ever since.

The 3-year lead Travis had over Billy gave him a distinct advantage. At 16, Travis was all flash and fury. Billy was more wry and understated—not that he couldn’t have been the one making noise, but that riff was already taken. So Billy played counterpoint.

Gliding down the slopes together, they wove in and out like a perfectly syncopated song. Travis would line up a 180 “fakie,” a 360, a 180, and Billy would intuitively echo the moves.

Gillian, the boys’ mom, had almost gone pro back in the day, and their dad, David, had managed to build a meaningful career in environmental science that kept him on the mountain and made skiing a constant part of his life. Travis and Billy dreamed of one day making their fortune together with an environmental tech start-up.

At 14, Billy was more of an idea guy than Travis. As he swooped down the mountain, Billy realized that, of the two of them, he would probably be the one to come up with the brilliant tech idea they needed. He decided to mention that to Travis when they reached the lodge. The

idea might not come to him for years, but there was no reason he couldn't start lording it over Travis now.

First, he wanted to “jib” the 20-foot rail up ahead with an enticing 10-foot drop to flat. Leaping on the rail, he rode it all the way down, planning a smooth 180 at the end, but he didn't quite make the full revolution. His hand slammed into the rail on the way down and he landed hard, twisting his back and almost wrenching his knee from its socket.

Inexplicable Pain

The emergency medical team at the ski resort stabilized Billy's broken wrist and sent him to the hospital. Doctors there confirmed that he did not have a concussion and set his wrist. His left knee was very swollen and tender to the touch. If he tried to stand, his knee wobbled so badly he nearly fell.

When the orthopedic surgeon ran an MRI, it showed an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear. The ACL is one of the four major ligaments in the knee. It emerges from inside the femur itself. An ACL tear is a common injury in athletes, and the ligament is so vital to the stability of the joint that it has to be repaired as soon as possible.

The surgeon scheduled surgery for a month later. In the meantime, Billy would have to keep his knee immobilized in a brace. He couldn't even use crutches. When the doctor rolled out the wheelchair, Billy's heart sank.

Travis reminded him that sports injuries were a drag but only temporary. Still, Billy counted the days till he could take off the brace and get back on the slopes. By spring, he would be back to normal again. Or so they said.

After surgery, Billy had to wear the knee brace for another month. On top of physical therapy, he spent an hour every day locked into a continuous passive motion device to keep the knee moving in a controlled way and help it regain its full range of motion.

The physical therapist explained that his knee would gradually become more flexible as it healed, but that isn't what happened at all. As the weeks went by, the swelling in Billy's knee continued. The slightest pressure caused an unusually painful reaction.

Eight months after surgery, Billy was only one wrong move away from full-body pain at any time. Horsing around with his friends in the living room one day, he bumped into the doorjamb with his shoulder. A jolt of pain shot through his arm with startling intensity. After that, Billy had what his doctors described as generalized pain—his whole body ached all the time.

In almost imperceptible increments, he gradually started to move like his elderly grandmother, feeling fragile, afraid of being hurt. Travis tried

to tease him out of it, but Billy's discouragement was too deep. He lost all interest in hanging out with friends.

Despite his family's concern, he was sliding down a precipitous slope into depression. Travis couldn't even interest him in daydreaming about their future in environmental tech. If snowboarding wasn't going to be a part of that life, Billy wasn't interested. Under the assault of the constant pain, Billy reeled and couldn't catch his balance, just as he couldn't save himself in the fall. Increasingly, he was in danger of letting that fall become a metaphor for his life.