

Foreword

In order to bring this book into the now, and connect it to my present life, I want to tell you about two incidents.

First, my own wonderful madness: I was twelve, living in a little northern Minnesota town that had a river and a small dam with perhaps a twelve-foot fall of water across the spillway. Remember these facts: waterfall, twelve-foot drop.

I had read an article in a men's magazine called "The Fools Who Shoot the Falls," which described several men who tried to achieve fame by going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

There was . . . something . . . about it that

drew me. I completely ignored the fact that the idea of falling a hundred or so feet in a barrel was incredibly stupid. If you proposed just to jam a man in a barrel, take him up on a rope and drop him a hundred feet into a duck pond it's probable that there would be very few takers.

But for some reason the waterfall changed everything. Oh, sure, you'd still drop a hundred or so feet, still achieve terminal velocity, still probably die. Almost all the people who have tried Niagara Falls have been killed. But that waterfall . . . that made it worth doing.

Or, as I later told my best friend, Carl Peterson, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

And so I found an old wooden pickle barrel with oak staves, and after carefully reinforcing it by wrapping it with about two hundred feet of clothesline and miles of electrical tape (this was before duct tape) I lined the inside of it with an old quilt, set it on the bank near the top of the spillway, climbed into the barrel, wedged the lid in place over my head and threw myself back and forth inside until the barrel wobbled off the bank.

I'm not exactly sure what I expected. I might have had a thought that the barrel was made of wood, which floats. Therefore the whole craft would float, bobbing to the edge of the spillway and then over to drop to the water below, and would lead me to everlasting fame as the first boy to go over the Eighth Street dam in a barrel.

Instead the barrel sank. Like a stone. Straight to the bottom, which was about six feet down, where it bumped around a bit while I panicked. To my horror, I discovered that the lid had swelled enough with the water to be sealed in place, that the barrel was fast filling up with water, that pickle barrels were amazingly strong and you could not kick them apart from the inside, and that I would gain fame only as the first boy stupid enough to drown himself in a barrel.

But because there is a fate that sometimes protects idiots, a swirl of current caught the barrel and lifted it to the edge of the spillway, where it teetered once or twice before it dropped off the edge to fall the twelve feet to the river below. There it would merely have sunk again had not the same fate intervened to cause the barrel to slam down on

a sharp rock exactly the way it needed to in order to break into fifteen or twenty small pieces and leave me stunned, with a bleeding nose, sitting on the bank below the dam contemplating the fickleness of fate, which endowed me with an uncanny, lifelong ability to identify with the hapless coyote in the Road Runner cartoons.

The second incident shows that nothing really changes. I had written a book about my life with my cousin Harris and talked about Harris peeing on an electric fence. The shock made him do a backflip and he swore he could see a rainbow in the pee. Many readers, especially women, were amazed that a boy would be insane enough to do this and didn't believe that it had happened. However, I did get many letters from men saying that either they or a brother or cousin or friend had tried the same stunt, with some exciting results. One man said it allowed him to see into the past.

I was sitting writing one day when my son, then thirteen, came into the house with a sheepish look on his deathly pale face. As he passed me, I couldn't help noticing that he was waddling.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Sure . . ."

"Why are you walking so funny?"

"Oh, no reason. I was doing something out by the goat barn and thought I'd try a little experiment. . . ."

"Pee on the electric fence?"

He studied me for a moment, then nodded.

"How did you know?"

"It's apparently genetic," I said, turning back to work. "It's something some of us have to do. Like climbing Everest."

"Will I ever stop doing things like this?"

And I wanted to lie to him, tell him that as he grew older he would become wise and sensible, but then I thought of my own life: riding Harley motorcycles and crazy horses, running Iditarods, sailing single-handed on the Pacific.

I shook my head. "It's the way we are."

"Well," he sighed, tugging at his pants to ease the swelling, "at least I know what *that's* like and don't have to pee on any more fences."

And he waddled into his room.

A Note of Caution

While extreme sports have advanced incredibly since I was young—people do things with skateboards and snowboards in the X Games that are so hairy it's hard to believe anybody lives through them—I want you to remember two important facts:

1. We were quite a bit dumber then.
2. There wasn't any safety gear.

There were no helmets, for instance, other than old football helmets made of stiff leather or army surplus ones made of steel (some with bullet holes

in them), and they were so heavy that they caused more trouble than wearing nothing. Harvey Klein had some luck wrapping his head in cardboard with electrician's tape wound around it; that worked fairly well until his bike hit a bump and the eyeholes rotated so he couldn't see anything and he flew off the road and took out most of a pretty good stand of cucumbers with his face.

Even hockey was played without a helmet—which might explain the way many of the hockey players in my town talked. Or grunted.

Elbow and knee pads were nonexistent, except for hockey and football gear.

So, in our adventures in extreme sports, we were shredded and torn and road-rashed until it was hard to tell where road ended and boy began, and if there is one thing we all learned from this it was that if we'd had the safety gear we would have used it.

Oh, and of course that none of what we did should be done by anybody except heavily insured, highly trained professionals under adult supervision on closed courses with ambulances, doctors and MedEvac choppers standing by.

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How Angel Peterson Got His Name

He is as old as me and that means he has had a life, has raised children and made a career and succeeded and maybe failed a few times and can look back on things, on old memories.

Carl Peterson—that's the name his mother and father gave him, but from the age of thirteen and for the rest of his life not a soul, not his wife or children or any friend has ever known him by that name.

He is always called Angel.

Angel Peterson, and I was there when he got his name.

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