All Parents Are Cowards

By MICHAEL CHRISTIE
FEBRUARY 12, 2015

GALIANO ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA — I have broken my wrists, fingers, a tibia, a fibula, chipped a handful of teeth, cracked a vertebra and snapped a collarbone. I have concussed myself in Tallahassee, Fla., and Portland, Ore. I've skittered across the sooty hoods of New York cabs and bombed down many of San Francisco's steepest avenues.

For many years I was a professional skateboarder. I first stepped on a skateboard at 11. The nomenclature — switch-stance frontside tailslide, kickflip to nose manual — was the language of my first friendships, with wild, strange boys who were as ill-suited for school and team sports as I was. They were from broken homes. Poor homes. Group homes. We were like little cement mixers, keeping ourselves in constant motion, our skateboard's movement the only thing preventing us from hardening into blocks of pure rage.

It was through those friends that I first realized the oddity of my own home. Skateboarding gave my mother panic attacks. She bought me helmets and pads (which I never wore), and gasped at my scars and bruises. She would have forbidden me to skateboard at all if she believed for a second that I would comply.

This might sound like typical parental anxiety. But with my mother, it was something deeper.

My mother was agoraphobic, which means she was often housebound, terrified of stores, cars and crowds. Vacations were impossible. As were jobs, and simple errands. She cut our hair, made us clothes, prepared us complex meals. Together we painted and drew, watched movies and read. She taught me to build a bookshelf, reattach a button and piece together a quilt. She worried that school stifled my creativity. So she encouraged me to stay home whenever I wanted. Which was often. School couldn't compare with the bright spotlight of her attention, and besides, I knew she needed me close by.

I felt uneasy around other kids until that day when I was 11, and I saw a boy outside my house perform an ollie (that magical, clacking leap by which skateboarders temporarily glue their board to their feet and vault into the air). To my mother's horror, I rushed outside and begged him to let me try. From then on, I realized I needed to be skateboarding in the streets as much as she needed to be safe in the house. I stopped coming home except to shower and sleep.

At 17, I left for good, and spent a decade and a half on the other edge of the continent. I seldom called her. When we talked it felt as if she was trying to siphon something vital from my cells, so I parried her inquiries about my welfare with sharp, monosyllabic replies. It was a time of great anger and resentment, a time I'm not proud of.

But in 2008, when I was 32, my mother got sick with Stage 4 lung cancer. I went home to care for her during a last-ditch chemotherapy regime, and found her in the process of throwing away everything she owned. To prevent some artifact of our family history from being accidentally lofted into the trash, I presented her with boxes and three options: keep, donate or trash. There was plenty of clutter to sort. Mostly it was liquor boxes of paperbacks and her artwork and crafts — the accumulation of a life lived predominantly indoors.

Eventually I dragged a box from her closet and found it was stuffed with skateboard magazines, bookmarks peeking out from their pages. I leafed through one and discovered a picture of myself, five years younger, atop a skateboard mid-tailslide on a wooden handrail, my mouth open and my eyes fixed wide with both terror and joy.

"I didn't think you could look at these," I said.

"I took out subscriptions," she said, avoiding my eyes. "You never sent any photos over the years. These were the only ones of you I could get." Then she sighed, "Keep."

A few weeks after her chemotherapy ended and I returned to Vancouver, I woke late one night to a call from my father. My mother had died. I remember sitting at my kitchen table, weeping, clutching my stomach. I had to get outside. I grabbed my skateboard and rolled for hours in the orange streetlights, aimlessly ollieing manholes and weaving between parked cars. Fresh-faced people were power-walking to work by the time I got home.

Five months later, my first son was born. My love for him was instant, soul-flooding. I had trouble taking my eyes off him. We went on long walks while my wife slept. Out with his stroller in the midday traffic, I found that I had suddenly become attuned to the world's menace, to the human being's naked vulnerability in the face of it. The city throbbed with dangers that I'd long been insensate to: veering cars, potential kidnappers, toxic exhausts, carelessly discarded needles. It was as though the world had turned double agent and become my enemy.

I developed a Border collie-like attentiveness when it came to my son's safety. When he stood at the coffee table like a cute little drunk bellying up to a bar, I'd be hovering there, his personal safety net. After my long acquaintance with the physics of crashing, I knew exactly what whap his forehead would make if it hit the lamp, what thunk his cerebellum would issue on the hardwood if he tipped back.

Or perhaps, I worried, it was because of my mother. My inherited brain chemistry, my angst-ridden genes taking over.

Things got worse. I kicked a dog at the park that looked as if it was going to bite him. I complained to my wife that his day care workers were inattentive. If my son choked on something at the table, even momentarily, it would take me an hour and a few drinks to smooth out my nerves. Sleep became impossible.

I never imagined that parenthood meant learning to live with this unrelenting, impaling fear. With the question of when to catch your children and when to let them fall. To date I've watched my son's precious body bounce off concrete, wood and brick. We had another son last year, this one more fearless than his brother. Someday I may be forced to hear their bones snap and see their blood gush. And then, after all that growing and falling, they might move away, far beyond my protective reach. My mother was ill, but she was also right: It is terrifying to be a parent.

It is a cliché to say children teach us about ourselves and about our parents, but it's true. My sons are teaching me to calm down. I've seen pain shape them for the better. I've watched a trip to the ground leave them incrementally stronger. I even recently bought them both skateboards, which have yet to interest them.

I'm learning to forgive my mother, for her life lived inside, for her inability to cope. My mother was afraid of everything, yet she was brave. I used to fear nothing, but parenthood has rendered me a coward. I wish I could tell her that now.

But when I picture her leafing through those skateboard magazines she'd collected over the years, skipping over the interviews and advertisements, searching for her reckless, angry son, only to find me falling from the sky in some place she couldn't follow, I'm certain she understood how I felt then, how I'd feel now.

A skateboard is the most basic ambulatory machine. It has no gears, offers no assistance. It will protect you from nothing. It is a tool for falling. For failure. But also for freedom. For living. On a skateboard you must stay balanced in a tempest of forces beyond your control. The key is to be brave, get low, stay up and keep rolling.

~Michael Christie is the author of the novel "If I Fall, If I Die."