



BARE TRUTHS

THE BEST WAY TO BEAT MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS AND BREAST CANCER? KEEP LIVING THE MOUNTAIN LIFE THAT FEEDS YOUR SOUL AND DON'T BE AFRAID TO TAKE YOUR SHIRT OFF ON THE SKIN TRACK.

by DINA MISHEV

It's a beautiful early spring day on Olive Oyl, a mountain just shy of 10,000 feet in Wyoming's southern Tetons. The skies are cloudless and Smurf blue, and my upper body is completely naked (and pasty white). This is not the first time I have skied Olive Oyl before—but it is the first time I have done it with my bare breasts exposed to the world.

I have been on this peak twice before, which seemed like more than enough. Olive Oyl has good skiing but it can be tricky: The most direct line back to the base, its east face, is littered with double fall lines, terrain traps and deadfall so big it's often

only barely covered by snow, even in late winter. The first time here, 12 years ago, I even encountered a particularly nasty pile of that deadfall. Combined with a big dip in the terrain—I blame flat light rather than my skiing ability—it trapped me.

I spent ten minutes dangling upside down before I could extricate myself, first from my tele bindings and then from the deadfall. It was the best (ok, and worst) ab workout I've ever had. I arrived at the bottom of the peak, my face the color of a beet and puffy as a zero-degree sleeping bag, and promised myself, “never again.”

Never turned out to be six years later when I returned to Olive Oyl with my friend Carol. Skinning up, a vague negativity niggled at the back of my mind, but the beauty of the top 1,300 feet of Olive Oyl's east face—

an open, pyramidal slope of nearly perfect pitch—drowned it out. Also, when the image of me entangled in that mass of deadfall appeared in my mind's eye, I told myself, “It couldn't have been *that* bad, right?” And then I'd go immediately back to staring at that perfect pitch above me. “That slope really looks killer. I'm an idiot for not skiing Olive Oyl more often.”

Skiing Olive Oyl with Carol did not involve bare breasts or run-ins with deadfall, but, after the top 1,300 feet, we suffered through 2,200 feet of erratic terrain. I'm probably exaggerating, but I don't remember stringing together more than three turns before

having to traverse. To get around a mess of obstacles, we zigged and zagged across much of the mountain's east side. When we finally arrived at the bottom, which ended up being no faster than it took to climb the peak, I again swore to myself, “never again.”

THE GOOD PARTS: DESPITE ALL THE DEADFALL AND DOUBLE FALL LINES, OLIVE OYL DOES HAVE SOME GOOD SKIING, TOO.
photo by DEREK STAL

Here I am a third time, however, talked into it by my boyfriend Derek. The memories of the suckage, annoyance, and suffering of the prior two times have dimmed (again). “It really can't have been that bad,”—I tell myself. (again) Also, this time we're planning an exploratory descent of the back side rather than skiing that nasty east side. From the backside, we're going to exit via a canyon to the north instead of to the dreaded east.

Talking me into this the night before, Derek sweetened the deal with some non-skiing activities—a back rub, a dinner out, cleaning the litter box. Despite these bonuses, a quarter of the way up, I realize things are about to go sideways. But I can keep them on course. By taking my top off.

Toplessness is not part of any deal with Derek. Our negotiations the night before did not include me saying, “Add cleaning the cat box to the mix and I'll skin up without a

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shirt on.” When I take my basest base layer off, Derek is actually surprised my breasts are right there. “Oh, you mean really strip down,” he says.

Yes. I’m skinning up Olive Oyl half naked because that’s the only way I can skin up Olive Oyl, at least without parts of my left leg going numb, the vision in both eyes blurring and eventually disappearing, and increasing the chances my latent lymphedema becomes active lymphedema. I’m skinning topless because of a perfect storm of circumstances that no one could have planned if they tried.

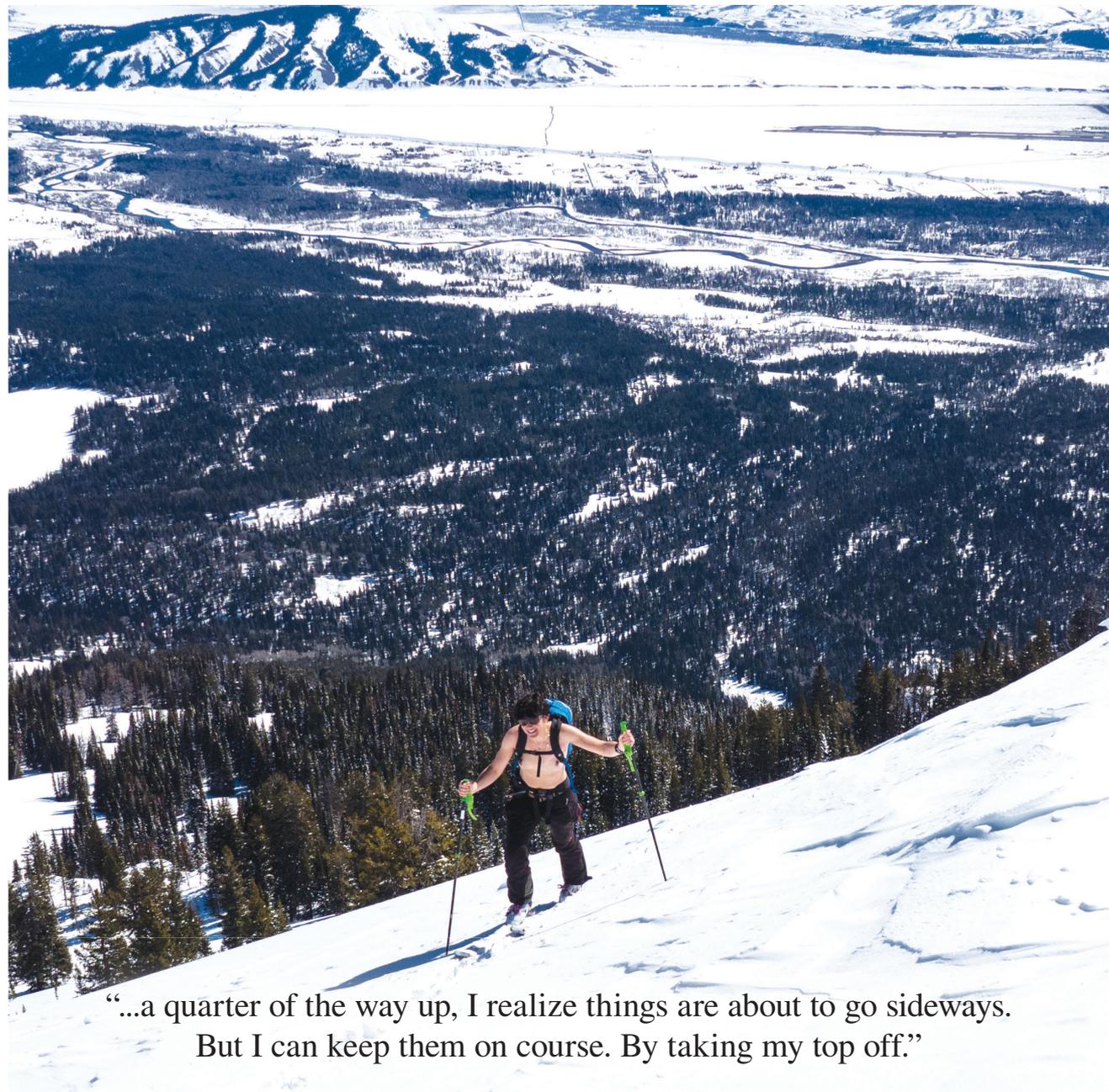
In 2006, at age 30, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. In the decade since I’ve known I have this degenerative neurological disease, which no one knows the cause of or has a cure for, I’ve been doing quite well. Except when I get hot. This is true for many people with MS: Heat exacerbates symptoms of the disease. So I’ve been stripping down for some time. But it’s only been in the last year that I’ve stripped down and I was not even wearing a sports bra underneath.

In December 2014, I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. Treatment included a double mastectomy and right axillary dissection.

The former, of course, means the removal of breast tissue on both sides. The latter is medical speak for “removing a shit-ton of lymph nodes in the right armpit.” Once you’ve had lymph nodes removed, you’re in constant danger of developing lymphedema, painful swelling in a limb (in my case, my right arm) due to an underperforming lymphatic system. Wearing a sports bra, mostly because the tight band around its base impedes the movement of lymphatic fluid, increases the chances of developing lymphedema. Since 17 lymph nodes were removed from my right armpit in June 2015, I don’t wear sports bras.

All this is to explain exactly why I am now one-quarter of the way up a peak I have said “never again” to twice before thinking I should stop and apply sunscreen to my chest. I don’t want to have gone through the last 18 months of treatment and surgery only to end up with skin cancer on my reconstructed breasts.

I have no problem with toplessness—on beaches in Europe



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and South America, I’ve taken off my bikini top and loved the feeling of sun on so much skin. (Except for that one time I neglected to put sunscreen on.) But on Olive Oyl, it’s not something I want to do; it’s something I *have* to do. Much of my life with MS, and especially cancer, is about doing things I don’t want to.

Until several years ago, the only treatments for MS were injections (daily, bi-weekly or weekly) or a once-a-month infusion that had the possible side effect of a deadly brain infection. I stuck needles into myself for years before starting the monthly infusion. Because anecdotal evidence shows diet can affect MS, I altered mine, cutting out my favorite food group, baked goods, among other inflammatory foods like alcohol and red meat.

But these paled next to the things I suffered through to treat breast cancer: the double mastectomy and axillary dissection, radiation, hormone drugs that put me into

early menopause while my peers are planning play dates, reconstructive surgery, chemotherapy... Chemo was the worst. The side effects included not only anemia, chronic explosive diarrhea, hemorrhoids, near-constant bloody noses, and the need for a blood transfusion but also losing 15 pounds of muscle and a severely compromised immune system. It’s a long, long slog.

Skinning without a top on, though? It’s neither better nor worse than skinning with one on. It takes less than a switchback for me to get over my toplessness and get back to being annoyed by my AT bindings, which, this winter, has been a usual distraction from the effort of skinning. Half a dozen more switchbacks and Derek and I are at the bottom of the perfectly pitched final 1,300 feet. It’s quite warm, but the five inches of fresh spring snow are not sun-affected as we had feared. “How about we ski this?” Derek asks. My reply is quick: “Sure, it looks

THE PAYOFF: AFTER MONTHS OF CANCER TREATMENT, BARING YOUR BREASTS TO THE MOUNTAINS IS WELL DESERVED—JUST REMEMBER TO USE LOTS OF SUNBLOCK.
photo by DEREK STAL

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amazing!” And the turns are so good I forget the un-amaze-ness of the 2,300 feet below. Almost.

As I type this, it’s been almost a year since my last dose of radiation. Radiation was the last part of my major treatment. Skinning back up to do a second lap on this face, I realize two things: My memories of the physical suffering of MS and cancer treatment are—like my memories of how horrible the skiing can be on Olive Oyl—fading. And, here, topless, in a place I keep saying “never again” to, I know that life isn’t just about doing things we don’t want to do. It is also about figuring out what we can do so that we can continue to do the things we want to. And sometimes that means topless skinning. ▲

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness month. Find out more about how to get involved here: nationalbreastcancer.org