

The hoser on a snowmobile is not a joke if you're related to him—and what drives him is anything but simple

By Cynthia Brouse

# Death by Stereotype

ON A FEBRUARY DAY 13 YEARS AGO, the phone woke me at 5 A.M. and I heard my mother's cracked voice tell me that my uncle, Kenny, her only sibling, was dead at 42. He had spent the day snowmobiling from lodge to lodge in the countryside near Sudbury, finally driving his machine into a birch tree around midnight. Trees don't grow all that big in Ontario's mid-north, where we grew up, but this one's slender bole shattered his forehead instantly. Kenny's 18-year-old son, his only companion that night, took off his jacket and covered his father's body in the minus-30 cold. His fingers too stiff to put his mittens back on, he drove across two lakes for nearly an hour, half-clad in the freezing dark, to get help.

I think of my uncle every winter now, around the time the inevitable news report surfaces about somebody who's lost his life on a snowmobile. I think about Kenny when my colleagues in Toronto make arch cracks about snowmobilers too foolhardy to get off a melting lake. They shake their heads at this brand of outdoorsman (I don't think they imagine any

of them to be women), invoke Bob and Doug McKenzie and joke about guys who sit in fishing huts for hours to get away from "the wife," who drink inferior beer and punctuate every sentence with "eh?"

I think about Kenny, too, when commentaries appear in the media decrying the high number of deaths from snowmobile accidents in the north as well as the irritating noise levels in the pristine woods. One of these appeared a while ago in *The Globe and Mail*; it referred to the "myth" that snowmobiles "allow people to get out of town and into the countryside, close to nature." On the contrary, the writer declared, snowmobiling appeals only to the aggressive need to control a vehicle that can exceed 150 kilometres an hour.

As it happens, I sympathize with this point of view, at least on some counts. I'm a non-driver who doesn't like speed, and the motives of people who race snowmobiles are no more intelligible to me than those of motorcyclists or downhill skiers. But experience tells me those motives are more

complicated than they appear, and that the frail truth on which most clichés teeter never reveals the whole story.

All I can tell you is my own story. I spent many winter weekends of my childhood in the 1960s and early '70s on the back of my father's or mother's snowmobile, exploring the bush around our home town of Massey, population 1,200, an hour west of Sudbury. Sometimes I drove, too, but mostly I was a passenger; I learned to shift my weight from side to side to keep us from tipping into the deep cushions of snow. When we reached a lake, we fished: I remember waiting, along with my brothers and sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles—usually in vain—for the arm of the L-shaped ice-fishing rod to be yanked down by a speckled trout or pike. I remember the point at which I could no longer feel my toes, and the whisky-jacks that swooped down to snatch my lunch, and the smell of gasoline and the feeling of our family being together, a crucible of stress and constancy.

Snowmobiles were the only way to get quickly to the isolated lakes that surrounded us. The southern fashion of constructing a hut on the ice had not yet drifted north; we simply built a fire on the rocky shoreline, boiled tea in a soot-blackened juice can and toasted wieners or peanut-butter-and-jam sandwiches on sticks while we played and fished. Sometimes on Sundays we left home before dawn in order to get back in time for church. The lakes spread out before us like blinding white sheets, and my little brothers buzzed around the surface as fast as my father would permit. We might encounter one other party, the metallic whine of their machines becoming a roar and then, after a visit, receding, leaving behind only the racket of chickadees. It was a way of life to us, not just a sport.

And my uncle was corporeal, of course, not a cartoon. Ten years younger than my mother and 10 years older than I, Kenny had been the older brother I never had, who hooked me on the Beatles' "Twist and Shout" when I was six and pretended he liked burnt cookies when I was learning to bake. Both charming and obnoxious, an alcoholic and spoiled youngest child, certainly not the sharpest knife in the drawer, he was also a generous clown. We loved him fiercely.

The bankrobber-turned-novelist (later to turn bankrobber again) Stephen Reid had been Kenny's childhood buddy. After Kenny's death, Stephen wrote a kind letter of condolence to my grandparents after trying to visit them (in a reversal of the stereotype of the friendly small-town folk whose doors are never locked, they declined to respond to his knock—they never opened the door to anyone they didn't recognize). I sent a thank you note to him in their place and said that I knew Kenny could be a bit of a jerk. "Sometimes," Stephen wrote back. "But he was the kind that never hurt anyone, or took much from the world." Stephen wasn't alone in his assessment: Kenny's funeral was crowded with neighbours whose driveways he'd shovelled and coworkers at the local paper mill whose lunch hours he'd cheered with his jokes. Cards arrived from elderly relatives whom, we discovered, he'd kept in touch with more than I or my mother had.

Yet even this, the image of the yahoo with a heart of gold, seems hackneyed. It's too easy a truism to say that the two-dimensional image of the unsophisticated redneck northerner on a Ski-Doo is only a joke unless he's somebody you know and love, somebody whose character is far more intricate and real than the stereotype could ever allow. Too easy to forget that the stereotypes also run the other way. I know people in Massey who mask their fear of the city with belligerent scorn; they maintain that Toronto is filled with noisy maniacs who shoot their neighbours and who love nothing better than to drive recklessly and at terrifying speeds on the Don Valley Parkway; whose kids aren't allowed to play unsupervised and cannot see the stars in the night sky. They

might be surprised to know that in the city I have neighbours who fix my washer, and colleagues who cook for me when I'm sick.

Let me point to something subtler. That *Globe and Mail* article I mentioned suggested that none of the speeding snowmobilers the writer encountered in northern Ontario "ever speaks of the joy of seeing a spruce tree." But most of the men I knew in Massey are not the type who wax poetic on the beauty of their surroundings, especially not to other men. They don't have to. That beauty is such an integral part of their lives that it doesn't require comment. And it's so important to them that they build their homes right next to it, rather than simply visit it once a year.

Which is why I feel a little sad when my relatives tell me that they now find it too expensive to do what we once did. Today's powerful snowmobiles make my father's old machines look like kiddie cars, and they're not cheap. Using them requires sky-high mandatory insurance and pricey trail licences that limit where one can ride. Those costs and restrictions—and, my parents insist, shorter and warmer winters—are making what was once a sensibility simply a high-priced hobby.

It's true that my family and my home town bear the scars of addictions to alcohol and speed through several generations, and that modern regulations stem partly from the tragedies those addictions produced. Yet I can't separate the impulse that impels restless snowmobilers to break away across a lake at top speed from what I am convinced is their visceral gratitude for the privilege of living in a place of such loveliness, of having space in which to break free. Perhaps people of a different class who ski into trees or are buried by avalanches are better than my uncle would have been at articulating the dual pull of both risk and nature. But in the end they're just as dead.

I HAVEN'T BEEN ON A SNOWMOBILE in 25 years. My youth was spent in a time and a place where an adult who used nonmotorized transportation was not really an adult, and I tried to get away from that ethos as fast as the Greyhound bus would carry me. After I left home, I caught up with the notion that the CB radios we used to communicate with each other on those frozen lakes were really suitable only for corny country songs. I learned to laugh at hoser jokes even as I resented them. I made unfair assumptions about my city friends, too—we all fall into the trap of believing that if something has no meaning for us, it must also lack dignity.

Today, I live in a 95-year-old row house in a cramped, dilapidated part of downtown Toronto. It's different from Massey in every way except in its working-class character—which may explain why I feel safe there. I walk a lot, and the clear, almost painfully bright-blue winter days of my childhood have been replaced by the salty, slushy greys and the dank wind of winter in this city.

On balance, I prefer my adopted home. It provides me with a different kind of freedom than Massey did, the freedom to be anonymous. I embrace that freedom, even as I speed through tunnels in a subway car with my fellow citizens, our grim gazes straight ahead, as silent as the dead.

AT MY UNCLE'S FUNERAL, his eldest son's fingers were bright red. He complained of a pain in his chest as he stared at the coffin with his younger brother, both boys bereft of tears.

I could say that Kenny didn't leave them much, but that's not quite true. Today my cousins live where they grew up and have five children between them. When they can afford it, they love to snowmobile.

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