

“Carry Your Own Skis” by Lian Dolan

When my mother was forty, she took up skiing. Or, more correctly, she and her twin sister took up skiing. They got on a bus, went to ski camp for a week and learned to ski. After that, they'd get in the car and head up to Ladies Day at Powder Hill as often as they could to practice their stem christies. Don't let the name fool you, Powder Hill, which later became the more Everest-like "Powder Ridge," was no pushover bunny slope.

This was in the mid-Sixties, when skiing was work-decades before valet parking, fondue lunches, and gear that actually keeps you dry, warm and safe. My mother and my aunt took up the kind of skiing that entailed wooden skis, tie boots, and rope toes that could jerk your arm out of its socket. This was the kind of skiing where skiers, not the snow cats, groomed the hill in the morning. Ticket buyers were expected to sidestep up and down slopes and herringbone the lift lines. The typical A-frame lodge had a big fireplace, a couple of bathrooms, rows of picnic tables, and maybe some hot chocolate for sale. At the end of the day, there were no hot toddies by a roaring fire in furry boots or glasses of wine in the hot tub of a slope side condo. Instead, my mother and her sister faced the inevitability of a station wagon with a dead battery and the long, dark drive back home in wet clothes.

Why did they learn to ski? It wasn't to spend some quality time outdoors together away from their responsibilities at home. They learned to ski so that they could take their collective children skiing, all seventeen of us. My mother's eight children and my aunt's nine. And learn to ski, we did, eagerly. There was, however, one rule my mother had about skiing: Carry your own skis.

My mother didn't teach us to ski until we could carry our own skis from the car to the lodge in the morning and, this is key, from the lodge back to the car at the end of the day. Even cold, wet, and tired, we had to get our skis, poles, and boots back to that station wagon on our own. No falling behind. No dragging. And no whining. My mother had the responsibility for her gear, the giant lunch, the car, and the occasional trip to the ER for broken legs. We were in charge of our own gear and meeting at the end of the day. These were the conditions to accompany siblings and cousins to the slopes. Carry your own skis or sit in the lodge all day.

No one wanted to get left in the lodge. A cold, wet day on the ice blue slopes of New England, freezing in leather boots and the generation of ski clothes before micro-fibers was far preferable to being left out of all that fun. Miss the lunches of soggy tuna fish sandwiches and Hershey's minis? No way! Sit in the lodge instead of side slipping your way down a sheet of ice disguised as a trail or tramping through three feet of snow to get the pole you dropped under the chair lift? Not me! Forgo that last run of the day in near darkness, cold and alone and crying because your siblings have skied on ahead without you? Who'd want to miss all that fun? Sitting in the lodge all day just wasn't an option, once we reached ski age. We were expected to participate. We learned to carry our own skis.

The lesson was simple, really. Be responsible for yourself and your stuff, or you miss out. No one wanted to miss out. Getting across the icy parking lot and back seemed a small price to pay for the potential of great fun. And even if you dropped your poles or the bindings cut into your hands or you fell on your behind, that was part of the experience. The "carry your own skis" mentality filtered into almost every area of our life growing up.

Doing homework, getting to practice, applying to college-be responsible for yourself and your stuff or you miss out.

I began to notice the people who hadn't learned to carry their own skis when I was as young as 11. I didn't have a name for this concept yet, but I had the notion that maybe other kids operated by a different set of rules. They thought that somewhere, somebody was going to take care of things for them. I remember the girls at summer camp that never signed up to pack out or pack in for a camping trip, expecting that someone else would provide food or do all the clean-up for them. But me? I would sign up to make the PB&Js and to clean up the mess. I'd load the canoes onto the truck and take 'em off again. And the tent? I'd put it up and I'd take it down. I didn't know any different. As a result, I was invited to go on a lot of camping trips. The lodge and back, baby. That was my attitude.

In high school, the kids who didn't carry their own skis called their parents to bring in assignments they'd forgotten or to ask for a ride home instead of walking or taking the late bus. In college, the no-ski carriers all had pink tee shirts-a sure sign that they had never done laundry before-and they complained about how much work they had. Isn't that what college was about? Doing your own laundry and finishing your work? Then you could get to the fun stuff.

The real world is riddled with people who have never learned to carry their own skis-the blame shifters, the no-RSVPers, the co-workers who never participate in those painful group birthdays except if it's their own. I admit it: I don't really get these people.

I like the folks who clear the dishes, even when they're the guests. Or the committee members who show up on time, assignment completed and ready to pitch in on the next event. Or the neighbor who drives the car-pool even though her kids are sick. I get these people. These people have learned to carry their own skis.

In early adulthood, carrying my own skis meant getting a job, paying off my student loans, and working hard for the company that was providing my paycheck. If I did those things, then I could enjoy the other areas of my life. Dull, yes, but freeing, too. When I wasn't responsible for myself or my stuff, I felt lousy. Sometimes, I could get to the lodge, but I just couldn't get back to the station wagon at the end of the day. It was an unfamiliar feeling to let someone down by missing a deadline at work or not showing up for an early morning run. I even felt bad for the people at American Express when my expense reports got a little behind my bills. On days like that, the parking lot seemed bigger and icier than I had anticipated.

Now, I have a life that includes a husband, two children, a dog, a house, friends, schools, and a radio show that involves lots of other people, including four sisters. The "stuff" of my life may seem much heavier than two skis, two boots, and two poles, but it isn't really. Just a little bit trickier to carry. I have to do more balancing and let go of the commitments that I'd probably drop anyway. If I commit to more than I can handle, I miss out. That's when I think of Powder Hill.

The funny thing is, some of the worst moments of my childhood were spent on skis or in pursuit of skiing. The truth is, I didn't really like skiing as a kid. And, I wasn't a very good skier. Most days, skiing for me was

about freezing rain and constantly trying to catch up to my older, faster, more talented siblings. The hard falls on the hard ice. I can still feel the damp long underwear and the wet wool from the endless ride home. But whether I liked to ski or not didn't really matter. I was expected to learn to ski and I did. And I also learned that in life you need to be responsible for yourself and your stuff or you miss out.

The lodge and back, baby.

1. Essential Question: What is Lian Dolan's main argument in her essay and how does she appeal to her audience's emotion or reason to persuade them to agree with her?
2. What perspective does Dolan have on the topic of "carrying your own skis"?
3. What is Dolan's purpose for writing this essay?
4. Are the skis symbolic of some bigger idea?
5. What diction, or words, help you understand Dolan's tone? Give a few adjectives to describe her tone.

6. What is the main idea or argument in the essay?
7. Find two supporting details, or quotes, from the text to back up your thoughts about her main idea.
8. Find a cause and effect example in the essay.
9. Find an example of hyperbole in the text.
10. Do you think this essay appeals more to emotion or to reason? Explain.