

Part One

Humour on Wry, with Ketchup



Dog-Gone Funny

Some years ago, when our son was a wee lad of seven, we went on our first-ever dogsledding excursion near beautiful Algonquin Park, Ontario's first and most famous provincial park. We went early in the morning on New Year's Day, 1991, the first day that our beloved GST took effect, a "multi-level value-added tax"; an enduring gift from our federal masters. (The nice folks at the sledding company didn't know how to calculate the new tax on our bill. For ourselves, we were at a loss to figure out what value was added to a team of mutts pulling a wooden sled over snow that nature provided. It was the very first time we paid GST on anything. Unfortunately, it would not be the last.)

Our family had a big sled all to ourselves. One of us would drive, while the other sat bundled up with blankets in the sled with our son in their lap.

We were given a crash course in sled management. Directional commands: "GEE!" (Turn to the right), "HAW!" (Turn to the left), "WHOA!" (Stop, *please* stop), and "HIKE!" (Go, dammit, go).

(Apparently, no one says "Mush!" anymore. It's now a cliché, unless you're ordering porridge or describing your brain after a rock concert.)

The most important rule: besides shouting "WHOA!" if you wanted your sled to stop, and stay stopped, you must keep your foot firmly on the brake, a steel claw at the back of the sled that dug into the snow. The dogs were born to run and loved to do just that. Whenever they felt the claw brake release, they were off like a shot.

To the excited cries of the huskies, our convoy of sleds set out. Six sleds followed the lead sled, helmed by an experienced guide. The dog teams following the lead sled ran their hearts out trying to catch it. Our sled was last in line.

We started off with me driving. Actually, "driving" is somewhat of a misnomer. It implies a great degree of control. In reality, I quickly learned that you could shout all the directional commands

to the dogs you wanted, but they were completely ineffectual. The huskies ignored you. They were only focused on following the sled in front of them with the single-minded goal of catching it.

Mid-way through the trip, we stopped for hot chocolate and to change drivers. I had to admit it was rather exhausting standing on the runners, gripping the handlebar for dear life while trying to steer a sled pulled by dogs who were hell-bent to run at top speed no matter what curves and obstacles they encountered.

My wife bravely assumed command of our conveyance for the second half of our journey. With great solemnity, I bestowed my self-appointed title of “The Mad Musher” upon her and got myself settled with our son, looking forward to being a passenger and enjoying the scenery. My wife released the brake and we were off again, flying over the snow with the joyous yelps of the huskies ringing out in the crisp, cold winter air.

Tearing down the trail, the mutts took a curve at Mach 5, causing the sled to swing wide, off the beaten path. Our intrepid driver was shocked to see a low tree stump jutting up from the snow right in front of us! She desperately tried to steer back onto the trail, shifting her weight on the runners to swerve the sled.

We ran right over the stump. It caught in the raised brake claw. Our sled came to an abrupt halt. The dogs suddenly found themselves sitting on their rumps. They looked back at us accusingly. I think one even growled.

My wife stepped off the runners and tried to lift the back of the sled off the stump. She succeeded. However, she forgot Rule Number One. As soon as the sled came free, that meant the brake claw also came free.

The dogs took off like Boxing Day door-crashers, anxious to catch up with the rest of the convoy, now far ahead of us.

The sudden acceleration jerked the sled handlebar right out of her hands. I looked back and was horrified to see that our captain had abandoned ship. The helm was lacking the steady hand of a helmsperson as we cruised on a sea of snow, the dogs at full throttle. Panicked, our son wondered why Mom was being left alone in the wilderness as food for one of Algonquin’s famed wolf packs.

Our boy didn't have long to panic.

Just ahead was another curve in the trail, which the dogs expertly followed. Unfortunately, without a skipper, our sled had a mind of its own. It went straight.

Right into a tree.

We hit that tree with such force that, once again, the dogs found themselves suddenly stopped. All shook up, the tree expressed its displeasure by dumping a big wad of snow onto the occupants of the sled.

Sitting on their haunches, the dogs looked back at we two snowmen. All we were missing to complete the ensemble were corncob pipes sticking out of our mouths. With their tongues lolling out, the huskies looked like they were laughing. They weren't the only ones.

Whoops of laughter came from behind us, up the trail. We swivelled our snowmen heads around. My wife, running after us, had seen the whole thing. She was laughing so hard, she had to sit down in the snow. (In fact, she almost had an accident of her own.)

It took her a long time to regain her composure. It took my son and I a long time to get all the snow off us. Especially the stuff that had gotten down our necks.

We got ourselves and the mutts sorted out and back on the trail. This time, when the brake claw was released, all three Gravels managed to stay aboard. We eventually caught up with the convoy, which had halted when the guide finally realized he was short a follower.

When the guide asked us what had happened, my wife dissolved into helpless laughter again. It took a while for the story to come out.

She kept the title of "The Mad Musher."

Your author, who answered to the name "Frosty" for awhile after that adventure, remains convinced that his wife's actions were deliberate, that we were supposed to smack into that snow-covered tree. The mutts were in collusion for that collision.