

French Fries and Face Shots

Contributed by Karen Hausdoerffer

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Tweet

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A new black dog sprints circles around us, the old dog buried at the cabin, and my husband, John, and I have finished graduate school and found work at Western State University of Colorado. We've worried our way through four moves and three presidential elections. And today we carry two of our big changes with us: baby Sol and four-year-old Atalaya. Sol sleeps in a pack snug against my back, under the warmth of an outer layer. Atalaya glides up on the Daddy rope tow—an old CamelBak rigged to climbing webbing and tied to John's ski pants. Atalaya leans back in her alpine boots and sings "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" (Christmas songs are always in season for her).

A couple of mid-20s backcountry skiers pass us and turn off into the trees, traversing toward the chutes that John and I skied together before Atalaya was born. Those woods hold elegant lines, but we won't follow them. For us, backcountry skiing has changed. We forego long or steep routes. Partly because of our daughters. Partly because our community has lost skiers to avalanches, so our hearts understand: No risk taking.

As we near Old Monarch Pass, the wind picks up, blowing crystals against our cheeks. Atalaya ducks her chin into her jacket. She doesn't complain, but she stops singing. We push on. We'll reach the top soon enough. To distract Atalaya from the cold we tell stories of our own childhood ski trips (mine feature a trash dump turned ski area in Brighton, Michigan and John's center on mountains in Pennsylvania and Quebec). As we near 11,000 feet, I strain against the extra weight of Sol. I focus on my breathing, fighting my deteriorated fitness after a pregnancy that demanded four months of bed rest.

We reach the pass, and I raise my arms to the sky and give my best summit-reaching bear roar—a tradition that began before I had a kid to roar with me. But with the cold wind we can't linger. So I catch a glimpse of the Gunnison Valley that opens before us—all that open country to explore. To my right the ridge flows into a cornice of sun-baked snow; below me, the softer peaks display their deep green forests; farther down, white speckles the tan of Hartman Rocks; and far beyond, the blue sky silhouettes the peaks and horns of the San Juans.

John unhooks from Atalaya and leads our descent, painting S-turns in the snow. He stops to wait for Atalaya. I give her a shove. "French fries!" John calls out, reminding Atalaya to scoot her skis into parallel turns. She holds her arms in front of

her and carves, yelling with excitement.

“Face shots,” we shout. (It’s easier to get face shots when you’re three feet tall.) Atalaya hits a hunk of ice and screams. Her weight flings forward and back before she crashes onto her side, losing a mitten. I rush toward her, shaky with my own turns, scared of falling on Sol. When I reach her, John has picked her up and is warming her hand in his. He says, “Falling is part of the fun, right?”

Atalaya nods, tears at the edges of her eyes. Sol wakes up on my back and starts to cry. Is she hungry? Cold? Full of poop? I begin to second-guess myself. Is the backcountry a place for kids? Is it worth the work to pack up our gear and come out here each weekend? Is it fair to subject small children to the cold winds, the long climbs, the downhill crashes?

I shift Sol to my front side where she can nurse. She reaches a hand out of the pack, pointing to the trees. I kiss Atalaya’s icy cheek. We try again. Atalaya starts slow, and then gains speed and confidence. John skis beside her whooping encouragement, and the black dog dances around them. I drop my knee into the hill and baby Sol and I follow.

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