

# **A Grammatical Affair:**

## **A Romance with Language**

A novel

by Stephen Wilbers

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## Excerpt from Chapter 4: Courage

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What I love about Nordic skiing is the beauty and, often, the solitude. What better way than Nordic skiing to be off in the woods, to be comfortably warm, or even too warm, rather than cold in the dead of winter (what an awful metaphor, a comparison that doesn't use *like* or *as*, unlike a simile, a comparison that does use *like* or *as*)? The joy of tracing a white trail through the woods on a sunny twenty-degree winter afternoon while breathing the pure, unconditioned air of winter is hard to describe to anyone who hasn't done it. But as every cross-country skier knows, it's a rousing, exhilarating, intoxicating experience.

I love striding, or classic skiing, in tracks, and I love skate-skiing, a technique borrowed from speed skating and popularized by Bill Koch, to the consternation of his competitors in the 1980 Olympics. When I skate-ski, my heart pounding, the blood coursing through my veins, I think, what could be more exhilarating? When I stride or do classic style, I think, what could be more satisfying than the steady, rhythmic, hypnotic swish swish swish of my skis? With both styles of skiing, I think, what a wonderful way to enjoy the quiet beauty of winter. When I ski the Drummond Lake Trail, not far from Cable, for example, I marvel at the giant white pine where Jackrabbit Trail splits off from Boulevard, the plunging gully at Sally's Overlook, the long, sweet glide downhill from the turnaround point near Lake Owen, the tunnel of thick balsams on the curved descent from Jackrabbit back to Boulevard, and the giant twin pines on the crest of the hill announcing that the parking lot is not far away and my fun for the day is nearly over.

Every time I ski that trail I think of all the good times I've had there, of all the people I've taken there. I think of skiing alone, skiing with Juliet, just the two of us, skiing with our parenting group from church, with my men's group, with the "ski team parents," and with those crazy students from the Washburn High School Nordic team who "trained" there one weekend, using our cabin as a base, laughing, cavorting, horsing around, and reaching up with their poles to knock the snow off the overhanging branches, plastering their teammates with clumps of snow. What's not to like about this marvelous form of recreation?

When I skied the 2006 Birkie with my son, who taught me the finer points of the V1 and V2 skate techniques, who skis with remarkable balance and grace, and who is as beautiful on skis as a well-turned sentence, we paced ourselves nicely up and down the power line hills at the start of the race, climbed the brutal hills to a point not far from the stratosphere called Fire Tower Hill, caught our wind coasting down to double O, the midpoint of the race, survived the hill just past Gravel Pit Road, an affront to the legs, heart, and lungs, and crossed the little wooden bridge over Mosquito Brook, after which we encountered the dreaded Bitch Hill, so named for obvious reasons. Bitch Hill comes at a point near the end of the race when you think your legs cannot kick another kick and your arms cannot lift and plant another pole, and there it is, in all its heart-wrenching splendor, rising toward the heavens, its crest lost in the clouds. The only thing that makes it humanly possible to mount that mountain is the generous, warm-hearted volunteers who line the hill holding signs, shouting encouragement, ringing cow bells, and blowing horns. When you see the men with huge fake knockers and purple and pink mops for hair, and they look pretty good to you, you know you're on the verge of losing consciousness, and you're only halfway up the hill . . .

“Come on! You’re almost there!” shouted a sturdy, red-cheeked Nordic-looking woman brandishing giant pink pom-poms. “You can do it!”

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Well, my son and I both survived Bitch Hill that day. With only three significant hills to go, and after that the lovely, gorgeous, flat Lake Hayward leading into town, and then the grand finish up Main Street, my son, who had been holding back to keep me company, took off.

It was nice of him to have stayed with me for as long as he did. Soon after he left me, I started getting my legs back. I was feeling pretty good, using my V2 technique for climbing the gentle hills and for finishing off the tops of the big ones. On Lake Hayward I settled into my fastest stroke, the open-field, with the momentum of my forward-swinging arms propelling me forward, increasing my velocity with each swing.

I was about halfway across the lake, which no matter which way the wind is blowing at the start of the race features a gale-force headwind, when I heard the swish swish swish of a skier closing on me. Not wanting to be overtaken, I put a little extra kick into my stride, but in an instant the skier was at my shoulder.

“Hey, Doc, remember me?” he said. “After dangling my modifiers for years, you finally cured me.”

“I do remember you,” I said, trying to make my stride appear effortless, “but it was *you*, not *I*, who dangled those modifiers.”

“Sorry, Doc. I wasn’t thinking. I meant to say, ‘After dangling my modifiers for years, *I* was finally cured.’”

“Good,” I said. “Always be sure the two parts of your sentence connect sensibly. And thanks for remembering the mandatory comma before *Doc*, which you used as a form of direct address.”

“I knew that,” he said, slowing down a bit so that I could keep up. “I can’t stand people who flaunt the rules.”

“You mean *flout* the rules,” I said, struggling to get my breathing under control as I skied beside him. “*Flaunt* means to show off; *flout* means to show contempt for. You *flaunt* your good looks, and you *flout* the rules.”

“Thanks, Doc. I’m flattered you noticed.”

The change was nearly imperceptible, but I could tell he was picking up the pace, perhaps testing me, hoping to tire me before he broke away and sprinted to the finish.

“You know, my friends are disinterested in good grammar,” he said, “but me, I’m anxious to appear well educated.”

“*Uninterested*,” I said, breaking into a pant despite my effort to control my breathing.

“You are?”

“Your colleagues are *uninterested*. *Disinterested* means they’re neutral or unbiased; *uninterested* means they don’t care. And you’re not *anxious*; you’re *eager*.”

“That I am,” he said, and with two quick kicks he moved a meter ahead of me. I gave it everything I had, every last ounce of energy in my body, to close the gap.

When I caught up to him, he said, “I just wish they were more enthused about avoiding common errors.”

“*Enthusiastic*, not *enthused*,” I said between gasps.

“Yeah, that too,” he said. “But no matter how much I try to orientate them towards making the right choices in regards to good usage, they don’t seem to care. It’s a real dilemma.”

“Stop,” I gasped, my heart pounding, my lungs bursting. “I can’t keep up with you.”

“Sorry, Doc. We can slow down if you like.”

“No,” I said, “I can’t keep up with your errors. You meant *orient*, not *orientate*, and *problem*, not *dilemma*. *Di-* means ‘two,’ so to have a *dilemma* you must have two options. And you don’t need those *s*’s at the end of *toward* and *regard*.”

“Whatever you say, Doc. Anyways, it was good skiing with you.” And with those words, he was gone, toasting me, seemingly without effort.

Despite this humiliation, I had a good race. Just when I thought I could go no farther, I heard the cheers of the crowd lining the snow-laden Main Street, my adrenaline kicked in, and I reached deep down inside myself and kicked it in. It was a glorious finish. My son and Juliet were there as I crossed the finish line, and never have I seen a smile brighter or more beautiful than my wife’s. A volunteer, a young girl, asked if I needed help getting my skis off.

“Yes, please,” I said. “If you don’t open the clips on my bindings for me, I’ll just have to stand here. I can’t bend over.”

I was just about to make my way over to Juliet and my son when I noticed a crowd was forming around me. What’s this? I thought. I wasn’t *that* fast.

“That’s him,” a man said, pointing toward me. It was Lester, my nemesis, the man who calls me Doc, dangles his modifiers, stacks his nouns, uses the wrong words, and humiliates me on my day of glory. “He’s the one,” he said.

Suddenly the crowd fell silent (the opposite of getting up noisy).

“Is it true?” asked a burly bearded man wearing a blaze orange hunting cap. “Are you the one who told this young man he used the word *flaunt* when he meant *flout*?”

“Not just *flaunt* and *flout*,” said Lester. “He said I used *disinterested* for *uninterested*, *anxious* for *eager*, *enthused* for *enthusiastic*, *orientate* for *orient*, and *dilemma* for *problem*. Tell them what you told me, Doc.”

The crowd was now dead silent (a phrase I prefer to *the dead of winter*). The only sound was the swishing of skis, along with the moans and gasps of the racers crossing the finish line, as well as the occasional *kerplop* of a racer collapsing face first into the snow.

“Well?” said the burly man. It was then I noticed the inscription on his cap: “Don’t shoot idiot.” Talk about the significance of a mandatory comma with a form of direct address. It was unclear whether the inscription was an illustration of ignorance or a candid admission.

“In my defense,” I said, “I normally don’t correct errors made in conversation, but . . .”

“But you corrected him?”

“I did. His errors were so numerous and egregious I thought some sort of intervention advisable.”

“Advisable?” said the old man. “And so you intervened?”

Lester stepped forward. “He also told me to drop my *s*’s from *towards*, *regards*, and *anyways*,” he said.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd. One woman hurried her young child away from me.

“Where are you from?” demanded the burly man.

“Minnesota,” I said.

“And how long have you lived in Minnesota?”

“Twenty-two years,” I said.

“Long enough to know Minnesotans like to put *s*'s on the ends of *towards* and *anyways* and *somewheres*.” He paused for emphasis. “As do Wisconsinites. We also like to use *disinterested* for *uninterested*, *anxious* for *eager*, and *enthused* for *enthusiastic*,” he continued, “not to mention *real* for *really*, as in ‘I’m real glad to know that.’”

“You make it sound as though Minnesotans and Wisconsinites don’t care about correct usage,” I said, “but they do. They don’t, for example, say ‘noo-kyu-ler’ for *nuclear*.”

“No,” he said, “we leave that one for our President, the leader of the Free World, and other Texans.”

I started to object, but he held up his hand.

“And what other errors do we folks in the North Woods make?” he asked.

“You say *borrow* for *lend*, *less* for *fewer*, and *bring* for *take*.”

“Are you aware that the screenplay for the movie *Fargo* was written by two Minnesotans?” he asked.

“I am.”

“Well, that’s the way we talk around here, too. Have you read Howard Mohr’s *How to Speak Minnesotan*?”

“Of course,” I said. “Every Minnesotan has. In Minnesota, one doesn’t say, ‘Would you like to go out for lunch?’ One places a *so* at the beginning of a question and a *then* at the end, and one says, ‘So, would you like you go out for lunch then?’”

“Who the hell is this *one* you’re talking about? I’m not talking about *one*; I’m talking about Minnesotans speaking Minnesotan. Are you unaware that Minnesotans don’t use the word *take*?”

“Yes, I’m aware that Minnesotans avoid using the word *take*,” I said. “But they shouldn’t. Like *throw* and *catch*, the words *take* and *bring* indicate direction away from or toward the speaker’s present location. We should *take* something to work in the morning and *bring* it home at night.”

“But they don’t like the word *take*,” he said. “Maybe they use it in California – or ‘Ca-lee-for-nia’ as they pronounce it these days – but not in Minnesota. In Minnesota and Wisconsin, we *bring* it here, we *bring* it there, we *bring* it everywhere. We don’t *take* it anywhere.”

“But . . .”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, stepping nearer and putting his arm around my shoulder. “We North Woods people are friendly folk. We’ll give you another twenty years to get it right. Right folks?”

At his prompting, the crowd cheered, then turned their attention back to the race. When Juliet and my son located me, Juliet wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tight, while (not *whereas*) my son slapped me on the back.

“Great race, Dad!” said my son.

“Way to go, Bjorn!” said Juliet. “You were awesome!”

I’m a lucky man to have this young man and this woman in my life. What a wonderful family I have. What a blessed life I lead. Next year I hope our daughter, who teaches ballroom dancing on weekends, can take time off and join us.

“Let’s eat,” I say. “I’m famished.”

We headed for Karbs Restaurant, which has an amazing ability to serve tens of thousands of people on race day, offering fine food and great service. Talk about a fast kitchen. After making our way through the billowing blue clouds of tobacco smoke in the bar, we were immediately seated in the dining room. I was raising a cold Leinie’s Red to my lips when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Say, Doc, hope you didn’t mind my toasting your butt the way I did, but you were laying it on pretty thick about my incorrect word choice.”

Luxuriating in my post-race high, with all those endorphins and other endogenous opioid polypeptide compounds coursing through my veins, I was determined not to let this man’s presence spoil my mood.

“I see you cut your lip there,” he said.

“Yeah. I had a little accident around 45 K.”

“Looks sore.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

“Hey, Doc. Mind if I offer you a word of advice?”

“What?”

“If you don’t want a face full of handle,” he said, “tuck your pole under your arm before you put your thumb to your nose and blow. You catch your point in the snow when you’re zooming along, you got problems.”

Juliet grimaced, and my son laughed. I touched my hand to my swollen lip. Good thing it was my lip. I was lucky I hadn’t broken my nose.

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s good advice.”

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It’s early March now. The 2009 Birkie is behind me. I didn’t achieve my goal of skiing 4-minute kilometers, but I averaged 4:05 minutes per kilometer, two seconds per kilometer faster than last year. I’m getting closer. Despite my advancing age, I’m still getting faster. This morning I read a story about Jackie Lindskoog, the only woman to ski the first Birkie in 1973. She skied the Birkie again this year. Her assessment at the end of the race: “Well, I’m glad that’s over.” That made me laugh. She wasn’t fast – it took her nearly seven hours to stride it – but she finished, and I admire her for that. She’s still skiing. After all these years, she’s still skiing.

I boot up my computer and check the trail reports for Wirth Park, where I like to ski. The first report I read is entertaining but not encouraging:

“Driving by the front 9 this afternoon it looked like better conditions for golfing than skiing. More than half green, lots of brownish puddles, the trail was water over slush. The man-made loop held up a little better, but not much. Large puddle (small pond?) at the bottom of the sharp right makes that section unpassable. Small stream crossings on two of the other downhills; one gives you a nice splash up to your knees as you go through it. Two sections leading up to banked turn are down to the dirt. The rest real slushy snow, if you can call it snow. Skiing was of an exercise in stubbornness than an actual sporting activity.”

A week goes by. The ski season is nearly over, and then it snows. More snow falls in two hours than fell during the entire month of January. With the rising sun and the warmer days of March, however, I know the snow won’t last long. The past few days the temperature has soared into the forties in the afternoon.

There's something sweet about the last ski of the season, and I don't want to miss what may be my last opportunity to get out there, so today I get up early and head for Wirth Park. Deciding to skate rather than stride, I start at the park building beside Wirth Lake, take the underpass to the golf course, and head for the front nine, which has less challenging hills than the back nine. With no more races to train for this season, no more hills to climb at a certain pace to keep my legs in shape, I take my time and just glide along. At the little wooden bridge spanning the creek that separates the woods from the gold course, a groomer sits hunched on his snowmobile. He pauses in his grooming to let me cross. I wave my appreciation to him, and he gives me a quick business-like wave in return. I'm skiing; he's working. But I hope he enjoys his work. I hope he's enjoying the beauty of the morning. I hope he appreciates the solitude of his employment. I hope each day, when he finishes transforming the icy snow into a soft, skiable blanket, he hops off his machine, snaps on his skis (not straps on, these days), and skis a loop, perhaps being the first person to mark the perfect, ribbed surface he has created. We skiers owe a debt of gratitude to groomers and to the funding that supports them, only part of which comes from our fees. To think, here he is, on what may be the last day of the season, when the snow may give way to brown spots this very afternoon, grooming a perfect trail for a handful of skiers who don't want to miss the last day of winter. I hope there's a special place in heaven for groomers, a place where they can stretch out in luxurious comfort on big fluffy pillows, where scantily clad women (or men) pop grapes into their mouths, and where they receive full-body massages anytime they want one.

I ski on, I take my time, with no guarantee my life will go on, I just float along, skimming across the still firm surface, reflecting on what a memorable ski season it has been, pulling

images from my head of different places I have skied this year, of people I love, of people I have lost, people who have shared my adventures with me, people who feel reverence for the beauty of the trails and the woods as I do, who understand the muffled magic of snow and the quiet beauty of winter, and now at the end of the season, my legs at their strongest, my balance at its best, I savor the effortless glide of my skis on the near frictionless surface beneath me, I give myself over to the flowing rhythm of my movement, first one leg poised in the air above the snow, holding it holding it, then the other, holding it holding it, first one, holding it holding it, then the other, holding it holding it, making it last, barely pushing with my poles, expending the least amount of energy necessary, just flowing flowing, knowing this may be the last time I will ski for a long time, perhaps ever.