

Sledding

That weak February sun is hitting my eyes through the windshield as we head north on Route 12 toward Holly's house. Nothing out the window but dirty snow bank, leafless trees, and shadows that can't catch us.

Holly is my mom's friend from way back, but they haven't seen each other in a while. At the beginning of the year, Holly moved back to Vermont from California – her marriage went to shit, or fell apart, as my mom would put it. And she's got her kid, Jason, which is why I'm coming along. She's got another kid too, Mark, but he's at college. Jason's got something wrong with his legs, born that way, walks with crutches. We're the same age, sixteen, so according to my mom we have the whole world in common. Right. I'm dragged along on this excursion because she thinks it would be good for me. I'm dreading this whole day. It's quiet in the car now. I slammed the door when I got in, and my mom's sharp "Katie, please" still echoes off the dashboard.

"You have to think of other people, not just yourself," she says now.

"I'm not selfish."

My mom almost laughs. "What's your definition of selfish, then? Because it seems to me these days you fit the traditional one pretty good. Missing school? It's all about you. Helping around the house? Nope, you're busy up in your room. Leaving and not telling me where you're going? Check. Calling to say you'll be home late? Not a chance. Thinking of me, at all, at any time?"

She isn't yelling at me. And if I have to be honest I would say all those things were true, but she just doesn't understand the reason behind them. I just want time on my own, especially in February.

"So you're going to be nice to Holly and you're going to be amiable to Jason." She takes her eyes off the road to look at me for a moment.

"What about Mark? The normal one?"

"I can't believe you just said that. What's wrong with you? Is that how I raised you?"

"That's not what I meant. It's just, what does Jason do all day? He can't go anywhere, or do anything."

"Lord have mercy," my mom said. "Can't you just do this one thing for me?"

She said the same thing when Mr. Tanner called her down to my high school. I'd been skipping classes, math and science. Tanner and I argued about that a little. He has these glasses that make his eyes look like they're kind of bulging out of his head. When he takes them off he looks normal, but most everyone knows him as Bug Eyes. It's stupid, sure, but for the most part everyone likes him so they don't call him something worse.

I sat in the hard plastic chair across from his desk. Stuff on his desk: coffee mug, blue, with pens stuck in it, papers. One of those giant flat calendars. The last bell of the day rang and through the office window I watched the rest of the students leave. My best friend Sarah saw me through the glass and stopped long enough to make a face. She'd call me later. I looked at my sneakers. The left lace was coming untied, one end working its way out. The left ear of the bunny, I thought. That was my dad, teaching me how to tie my shoes. Bunny ears. Make them tight so they don't fall off.

“It’s not something to be smiling at,” Tanner said.

That’s when I saw my mom, could almost hear her heels click-clacking on the white and gray linoleum. She was at the doorway in an instant, barely even knocked before Tanner waved her in. She was on her cell phone. Her curly hair was pulled back, pinned in places, and she had gold hoop earrings on. My mom always wore jeans. Jeans and heels, leaving her boots in the car. A green turtle neck sweater today, too. Her jacket was unzipped, and her leather gloves were threatening to jump out of the pockets. She slipped the phone into her purse.

“Mr. Tanner,” she said. Then, “Katie?” A question filled with frustration and resignation, all in one word.

I shrugged. “I just don’t like the classes.”

“I just don’t like them?” my mom repeated. “And why have I only heard about this skipping now?”

Tanner waited for me to speak.

“I deleted the messages,” I said. “When they call to tell you I’m not here. I call from my cell and delete the messages at home.” She had to admit it was a little bit genius. Just a little. But none of that crossed her face.

“You’ll go to all your classes from now on,” my mom said. She hadn’t even sat down. “And if you have to you’ll repeat everything. That’s life.” She said that a lot, that’s life. She said that about my father, too. That’s life, Katie. Some people you can count on, some people you can’t. “Anything else?”

She had that look like she had somewhere else to be. But it was late afternoon, nearly the end of the work day. She must be mad because she got called out of work. She works at one of the private medical offices in town, scheduling patients, telling them how much they have to pay,

keeping everything organized. I've seen her at work, her desk in front of shelves of color coded files, though she says most of it's on the computer now. But I like those files, everything in its place.

"No," Tanner said.

We walked out of the office, down the linoleum hallway. As we got to the car my mom held out her hand. She hadn't said anything else to me yet.

"Give me the phone." That was it. That was the tone, the you-are-on-thin-ice + I'm-so-mad-I-could-cry = do-what-I-say-or-shit-will-really-start-flying tone.

I fished the phone out of my jeans pocket. She clenched it in her hand, then deposited it into her bag.

As she opened the driver's side door she said, "Christ, Katie, can't you just go to school? Can't you just do this one thing for me?" She started the ignition. "No friends over, no going out."

I didn't even have to ask her for how long.

"Until I say so," she said.

And we were off, one more silent car ride home.

Holly's house is small, a Cape with a little garage off to one side. The front yard isn't much to look at, mostly driveway and dirty snow. There's a front porch with nothing on it now but empty planters and a snow shovel. I can see curtains in the windows, white curtains on the bottom floor, some darker color upstairs. The siding is white, but it looks like it needs to be repainted. As mom puts the car in park, the front door opens, and the woman I assume is Holly steps out onto the porch. She's got this big smile.

I climb out of the car, watching where I put my feet down, but there's no ice in the driveway. I stand for a minute, stalling, fumbling with the zipper on my jacket even though it's only a few steps to the house and there's really no point in zipping it. Mom has already crossed to the front porch, given Holly a hug. Besides the smile, she's got on this gray sweatshirt that says *San Diego California*, and her brown hair is tumbling down her back. I've never seen anybody with such long hair. She beckons me up the front porch stairs and gives me a hug.

"Look at you!" she says. "All grown up." Even though she's never met me before. She smells like cinnamon. About Mom and Holly, here's what she told me. They were friends in high school, and then went to NYU together. My mom always liked science, took those kind of courses in college, but Holly liked literature and philosophy. Mom was always more practical, I guess. Mom likes to say that she lives in the real world, you know? Holly had bigger dreams, wanted to be a writer and a teacher, make a difference in the world. That phrase always makes me roll my eyes.

So they went through college, and then they got married, and Holly ended up moving out to California with her husband. Mom stayed here in Vermont. Holly's first kid, Mark, turned out fine, but a couple of years later when Jason was born, they knew something was wrong. Mom and Holly talked on the phone a lot when I was in elementary school. I even started calling her Aunt Holly even though I'd never met her. My mom flew out to California a couple of times, more often during middle school. She would come back and talk about how wonderfully Jason was doing, about how he was making so much progress, about how Holly was so strong to be handling all of it practically all on her own. I guess the husband was checked out, even then.

"Goodness, well let's get inside where it's warm," Holly says. We follow.

Just inside there are hooks for jackets on the hallway wall, and I pull my jacket off and hang it up. I start to follow my mom into the other room, but she gives me a look that says remember to take off your boots. So I bend down, grabbing at the laces with cold fingers, using the toe of one foot to press on the heel of the other, forcing the boot off. My hair falls into my eyes, and when I finally get my boots off and look up there's a guy leaning against the wall, watching me.

"You could untie your boots," he says. "Just saying, you know, that could be easier." He smiles. He's got dark hair and dark eyes, and I can see a little bit of Holly in his face. But really I think he must look more like his father, whoever that was. He's leaning on two crutches, but turns quickly when he hears his mom call.

"Jason, Katie, come on and get some tea. I've got coffee, too."

"Well," he says. "Come on."

I follow him in my socked feet through the living room and into the kitchen. He moves quickly, and I wonder if it's grace or confidence or just familiarity with this house. The kitchen is warm, the oven's been on, and there are a pile of sticky buns on a plate in the middle of the kitchen table. My mom and Holly are already sitting down, steam from tea cups rising up towards the ceiling.

"How was the drive up?" Holly asks.

"No trouble at all," my mom says. "It didn't snow the other day, like they said it would, so everything was clear."

Holly sees me standing hesitantly near the table. "Let me make the introductions." She laughs. "It's a little silly, now, but Katie this Jason, and Jason, Katie. Did you know you guys almost share a birthday? Just about a month apart. Isn't that funny?"

I smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“Sure,” he says.

I try not to stare at the crutches.

“Have a seat, guys,” Holly says. “Have some food.”

I pull out a chair and sit down.

“Jason, you just look wonderful,” my mom says. “I feel like I haven’t seen you guys in ages.” She’s almost beaming.

“Thanks,” he says. He leans the crutches against the wall and sits across from me.

“Tell me,” my mom says, “How’s school going? How are you classes? Are you still interested in meteorology?”

“Sure,” he says. “Everything’s going really good. The school is fine, and I like my teachers. I have a few AP classes so that keeps me pretty busy.” He takes a bite of sticky bun.

“Definitely still interested in meteorology. And, man, the weather here is so different than California. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to deal with all this snow.”

“Do you mean with the crutches?” I can just imagine him slipping, breaking his neck. “I mean, you could probably sink into the snow or go flying on the ice. The black ice especially.” There is silence for a moment. My mom’s smile seems frozen. I look down into my mug of tea. I should probably take the tea bag out or it will be too strong.

Jason regards me quizzically for a moment, maybe amused. Then he continues, “I actually kind of like it, the snow. It’s just different, having to put on five layers in the morning.”

My mom recovers. They keep talking. They talk about Mark, about how he’s doing at college. They talk more about Jason and his aspirations. They talk about the flight, the move, the real estate agent. Like I said before, I’ve never known anyone who couldn’t walk right, and I

keep wanting to somehow get a look at his legs. I wonder if I can touch him under the table with my foot. I decide against it, but I wonder if his legs look like my broken arm did. I was ten years old, jumped off a swing. By the time the cast came off my arm looked small and shriveled next to the good one, and I was so scared for a minute that it would never be normal again. The cast came off when my dad had already left. The divorce came through, and I've calculated this, during fifth grade earth science at about eleven in the morning, in February. That was when my dad signed everything, us, all away. That was the moment he chose his other family, the one I've never met.

Jason's got dark hair and those brown eyes, like I noticed before, but as he talks to my mom I start to notice other things about him. He's still got some freckles left over from California, sprinkled across the bridge of his nose and the tops of his cheeks. He gestures a lot with his hands, making his points bigger. And when he's listening he puts one fist under his chin while he takes in everything else with his ears and eyes.

I notice the tea kettle is empty. So does my mom. "Katie, start some more tea, please."

"I don't want anymore," I say. I sound like a six year old, and I know it. I want my phone back. I want to text Sarah, to commiserate on Facebook, to send a tweet to the world: *stuck in woods, cornered by #angrymother, hope fading fast. survival unlikely. send #help b4 it's 2 late.*

"Katie." The tone is there again.

"I don't want to stay here and play happy family." I'm in for it now, and I know it. I stand up. Holly looks concerned.

"This is not what I asked from you." My mom does not want to make a scene. She doesn't want to fight with me, not here. Her face is pained, her lips stretched tight, everything she doesn't say out loud she says with her eyes. And then Jason stands up.

“Why don’t we go watch some television,” he says.

I stare my mother down in the silence, stare past her out the window above the sink. They have a sloping backyard, a hill that runs down into a little bit of forest, the forest kind of separating one lot from another. And the mountains rise up again in the distance. I bet if you watch a sunset from the back porch, watch the sun melt on a clear day behind, slowly behind, those mountains, that would be something.

My eyes meet Jason’s for a minute, and I wonder what he sees in my face. I watch Jason with his crutches. He picks them up so easily and moves so quickly it almost seems like an act, like maybe he doesn’t really need them. “Come on,” he says, and I follow him out, leaving something cold and biting in the air behind me.

The living room is comfortable, with two chairs and sofa. There’s a television in the corner, and the sofa faces it. I sit down on the sofa, Jason leans his crutches against the side of it, and sits down next to me. For a moment we look at the blank television screen instead of looking at each other.

“Want to see what’s on?” he says.

“Sure,” I say.

He grabs the remote and the television flicks on.

“We just get three channels,” he says. “Only three with the antenna.”

“You don’t have cable?”

“No, it doesn’t run up here. Satellite service sucks too, I checked into it.”

I groan in my head. It takes fifteen seconds to flip through all three channels. He leaves it on the last one. It’s the end of a sports talk show, something about hockey.

I steal a couple of glances at his legs while he's busy with the remote. I guess they seem normal, but it's hard to tell. I mean, they don't seem shorter than normal, or too skinny, or anything like that. But it is hard to tell. He's just wearing regular jeans, jeans and a sweater. I guess I kind of imagined him as an invalid, that he'd be walking around in hospital clothes, hospital robes, something like that.

He notices me looking at his legs.

"I'm sorry," I say, quickly. If only my mom were here. She's always telling me to apologize.

"Don't worry about it."

"It's just," and here I go again. I cannot stop myself from talking. "Are they shriveled? Like, no muscle?"

Jason doesn't answer, but reaches down and starts to roll up his jeans. There's something almost illicit in it, like he's undressing for me. I feel the color start to rise in my cheeks at the thought. I peer at his flesh. He's rolled the jeans up mid-calf, they won't go much further. His leg looks like any other leg, the ankle a bit bony, the curve of his calf disappearing under the jeans, the same dark hair, even some leftover tan from California. Without asking him I put my hand, palm down, on the exposed skin. It's warm, and I let it rest there for a second.

"Don't tickle me, now," he says.

Embarrassed, I pull my hand away quickly.

The sports talk show has changed to some kind of X Games, and skiers are flying down this hill, taking jumps, flipping in the air, landing upright. It switches to snowboarders, who seem to be doing the same thing.

I look at Jason, watch him watching this.

“It’s pretty cool,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Do you ski?”

“No, not really. I mean, not since about the fourth grade. I think that’s the last time I went skiing. My dad took me, chaperoning a school trip.”

“He left you guys.”

I’m surprised he knows that.

“Yeah.”

“That’s shitty,” he says. “My dad did the same thing. You miss him?”

I nod. “But he didn’t choose me.”

“Or your mom.”

It’s funny, but I hadn’t felt it that way, really. Not until now. I look back at the television, but I see my mom in the kitchen just a few minutes ago, that look on her face. I feel Jason watching me, but then he turns back to the TV again, too.

“How is it?” he asks.

“How’s what?”

“The skiing.”

“It’s okay.”

“Oh.” He sounds disappointed, like he wanted to hear something more exciting.

“It’s kind of scary at first,” I say. “Takes a lot of balance, and then when you start going fast, things get kind of crazy.” I feel like I’m saying all the wrong things. I start at the beginning.

“You’ve got to take the chairlift up, you know?”

He’s looking at me like he’s interested.

“So, I mean first, you strap on your skis and ski boots, and then you have to wait in line, and when it’s finally your turn you have to be ready as the chairlift comes around. Because it doesn’t stop moving, you see. You just have to be ready to sit at just the right moment. And then, all of a sudden, you’re being lifted up, and you have to pull down the metal bar to keep you from falling out. Kind of like a roller coaster.”

Can he go on roller coasters? I keep going, afraid now of the silence. I can still feel his warm skin on my palm. “So you have to jump off at the right time too, when it gets to the top, after you go up and over all these other skiers and the mountain. It seemed really high to me at the time, but I don’t know, maybe it’s not, really. Maybe I just remember it that way.”

“It sounds fun,” he says. “Cold but fun.”

“Sure. Cold but fun.”

The event has switched to a bobsled race, the men, or maybe they’re women, hunched over and careening down the track.

“Sledding is great, too,” I say. “It’s not as crazy as skiing, but I always liked it. My dad used to take me sledding when I was a kid.”

“Yeah?”

I nod.

“Hey,” Jason says. “I think there’s a sled out in the garage. I saw one in there when we moved in, and nobody’s thrown it out yet. Mark wanted to keep it, but of course he hasn’t used it.”

“Um,” I say. “Okay.”

“Let’s get it.”

“And do what?”

“Go sledding.”

I look at the crutches. “I don’t know.”

“Come on.”

We head out to the hallway, pull on our boots and gloves and jackets. Mom and Holly are laughing in the kitchen. I suppose she’s forgotten about me. I wonder if I’m doing the right thing.

I hold the front door open for him, and he goes out first. I close it quietly. We cross the driveway over to the garage. The snow is crunching under my feet, and I’m worried about ice I can’t see. I look at Jason but he’s not worried. He’s smiling. The garage has one of those automatic doors, but Jason says to go ahead and just give it a tug, it will pull up on its own. So I tug, and push up, and with a little bit of a creak the door starts to move upwards. The garage is bigger than it looked from the outside.

“Is all of this your stuff?”

“No,” Jason says. “We just haven’t cleared it out yet.”

There are boxes and bins, an old bicycle bereft of its tires, other assorted junk, empty cans of motor oil. It’s dark except for the daylight casting our shadows in front of us. I look across the floor, looking for the sled. Then Jason points up, and I see it. One of those cheap red plastic ones that you can get from any hardware store, the rectangular kind, not the circle kind. I reach up for it, but I can’t reach it. Jason steps forward.

“I’ll give you a boost.”

I look skeptical.

“I can stand, you know. I can walk too, just not so easily.” He almost sounds offended, but then he smiles.

He stands behind me, and then I feel his hands on my waist. He's able to lift me just a few inches, and just for a moment, but it's long enough. The sled is hung up by a string that's caught over a nail. I tug it down. With the sled under my arm, we back out of the garage. I remember that the kitchen window looks over the hill, and if my mom sees me I'm never going to hear the end of it.

Pristine snow covers the backyard, fresh and untouched. My boots sink in almost up to the top. There's about a foot of it on the ground here. It's the good sledding kind, light and a little bit icy, not so wet that the sled will just sink into it and not go anywhere. I look at Jason, see how he's getting along with the crutches. He doesn't seem to have a care in the world. We reach the top of the hill, and I'm starting to get a little excited in a silly, eight year old girl kind of way. I'm going sledding, something I haven't done in ages. We stand side by side and look down towards the little woods at the bottom of the hill.

"Well, Captain," he says, "you're the expert. What do you think?"

His breath comes out in a little cloud. It's cold out here.

"Looks pretty good to me. As long you stop before you hit the trees. You might have to bail out."

We've adopted a kind of official tone, something we've both put on spontaneously.

"So," he says. "What's the procedure?"

"It goes like this," I say, and put the sled front facing towards the bottom of the hill, holding it steady with the pressure of my foot on the string.

"And then?"

"And then you jump in, push off, and hope for the best. You can try and steer, but it's not guaranteed."

“Got it.”

He drops the crutches into the snow. Standing up on his own, he stands taller. He looks almost athletic, definitely determined. The tips of his ears are going red from the cold.

“Are you up for this?” I ask.

“Definitely.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“I don’t know,” I say. I watch my own breath disappear in front of me.

“Trust me,” he says again. “You can steer. You’ve got the experience. It’ll be fine. It’ll be fun.”

I take a moment to think about it.

“You’ve got to get in the back.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I sit at the front of the sled, digging my heels into the snow to keep it from moving while Jason gets situated in the back.

“Got to put your legs all the way in,” I say.

He does, using his hands to help him, and in a moment they’re right where they should be, straight along either side of the sled, straddling me. It’s a child’s sized sled, really, and I’m almost sitting on top of him. His legs are touching mine now, and then I feel his hands on my shoulders. Something warm and giddy gets a grip on my insides. I like the feeling.

“Now hold on.”

He lets go of my shoulders and grabs both sides of the sled.

I push off.

The hill is a fast one. I can sense that right from the start. My legs are bent at the knee, and I hold one side of the sled with each hand. The sled is grating against the icy top layer of snow, picking up speed. Jason is yelling “Go, go!” into my left ear.

“Lean forward!”

He does, and I do too, and we pick up more speed. We’re weaving back and forth a bit, left to right, trying to get the balance right. That sun is still trying to soften the snow, to no avail. I feel a lightness I haven’t felt in a while, like the feeling you get when you go too fast over a dip in the road, and something in your gut lifts up for a minute, and it’s strange but wonderful. I’m laughing, and Jason is laughing behind me. I let out a shriek as we weave again, and that’s when I hear the back door slam.

“Katie! Jason!”

It’s either mom or Holly but neither of us turns around to see. The trees are looming up there, and from this angle there seems to be more of them than from the top of the hill. We keep gaining speed.

“We’re going to have to bail out!” I shout.

“When?”

“Not just yet!”

We hang on a little longer.

“Katie!” Again from somewhere behind us. It seems very far behind us.

“On three!” I say to Jason.

That maple has us in its sights.

We count together, and then he bails left and I bail right. I end up rolling over, snow filling up my boots, going down the back of my jacket. I track its cold all the way to the

waistband of my jeans. But I don't mind. I don't mind anything right now, not Tanner, not my mom, not my dad being gone.

I push up so I'm sitting upright, and watch the sled meet the maple. It bounces lightly off the trunk, all the power of us gone from it, bright red plastic against the white snow against the brown tree. I flop back onto my back and have one more look at the sky. Mom and Holly are coming down the hill now. I can hear Jason calling to me, "Let's go again before they get down here!"

I'd like that. I turn my head and I can see Jason trying to get to his knees in the snow, having a little trouble. "I'll be right there," I call to him. I stand up and walk down towards the trees, following the lighter impression of the sled. I grab it by the string, then turn around, starting towards Jason, and the two of us together will go back up the hill.