

Don't look now

If you are brought up in the mountains it's something that never leaves you.

I had grown up in Echo Falls and even when I was six hours away at McGill I couldn't keep away. As soon as I graduated I returned. One by one my friends followed, my sister among them. Her accelerating career in Toronto's finest hospital just couldn't compete with the addictive immersive feeling of riding the peaks and gullies on a powder day.

I was stuck in a bleach soaked room feeling hard done by when Marcy told me about the mixture of excitement and dread which was spreading through the hospital corridors. The latest storm was reaching its peak

"Have you heard?"

"Yeah." I tugged the light blue paper shift down, sulkily rearranging myself on the unforgiving bed. "It's going to be epic!"

"Don't worry, if the forecast is right the powder will be around for a while."

"I suppose you're going out?"

"You betcha, my shift ends in a few hours." She grinned, her eyes dancing with excitement. "I promise I won't go out until you're back in recovery though."

I looked away. "I wish this was all over and done with."

Marcy gently perched on the edge of my bed and engulfed my thin frame in her arms, squeezing my fragility compassionately.

"Not long now. You're first up, so they will do your pre-ops in a few minutes. The silence between us was filled with the urgent noise of an engine outside my window. Marcy moved to prise open the blinds with two fingers.

"It's getting busy."

"Will they still go ahead?"

"Of course. They'll only delay if there's a serious RTA."

A nurse broke the spell in the sterile room. As she quickly and brutally fixed a line into the back of my hand, Marcy involuntarily winced at the nurse's

heavy-handed manner. My sister's eyes had a soft, sympathetic expression as she slipped her hand into mine and the count me down began. 10....9....8....7....

The overhead lights stung my eyes as my returning consciousness forced my heavy lids open. I raised myself with unexpected ease and ran my hands over my body. Pulling the paper shift aside I revealed no sign of an iodine smudge and no stitches. I swung my legs down to plant my bare feet on the cold linoleum. Muffled sounds seeped through the frosted glass doors beyond me as shadowy figures rushed past. I wobbled unsteadily towards them, like a toddler venturing into the new. A mass of blue and red jackets were rushing to deal with the chaos of full gurneys and blood-soaked patients. The smell of gasoline and burnt flesh accompanied them. I withdrew to the familiarity of the bed in sickened shock.

It was the repetitive flickering ping, ping of the strip lighting bursting into life that woke me, not the presence of the orderly standing over me. I looked up at him shifting uncomfortably.

"What's going on?"

"The storm has knocked out the power. The generators have just kicked in." He looked at me puzzled, "What are you doing here?"

"I was scheduled for a minor op. I guess it's been cancelled."

"You're Marcy's sister ain't ya?"

I smiled at him, vaguely recognizing his unruly dreadlocks.

"I'm heading out soon. I could drop you somewhere if you want?"

"Sure. Have you got a phone? I should really let someone know where I am."

"No can do sister, mine got lifted and I ain't replaced it yet." He looked down at my feet.

"You ain't goin to get far in those babies, are you."

I pulled my thin blue gown closer.

"It's at least a metre deep out there. I'll try and find your clothes."

His van was rammed with ski gear and kit. I gratefully took my place on his passenger seat, gently pushing aside discarded candy wrappers so as not to offend

him. He smiled apologetically, his blue eyes sparkling like the sky above us, which began to clear. He hung his head out of his window.

"I'm going to hit the woods before the townies get up there. Do you wanna to come?"

"I'm tempted."

There was quite a crowd up at the ridge, but no familiar faces were among them. Tipping onto my back foot, my board surfed effortlessly under my command through the fresh loose white crystals. We stayed high in the dense pungent pines until the timber playground gave way to a vast untouched bowl of virgin powder. Grinning we launched ourselves into acres of dazzling white ecstasy.

The wood smoke from an old trackers cabin filled my nostrils before I saw it nestled invitingly at the edge of a dense forest. The orderly guided me down and rested his board on the already cluttered porch. He beckoned me to follow and my boots soon accompanied the dripping collection inside the first door. I cautiously tiptoed in socked feet between the puddles into a vast living room of threadbare sofas and a roaring open fire. Comfortably seated, sparsely dressed in long johns and thick woollen jumpers, other riders continued their conversations undisturbed by our presence. I stripped down to my dad's green bagging army thermals and approached the fire to warm myself. A pretty girl with short dark hair shifted to make space on the nearby sofa. I took my cue to settle in.

"Hi. You're among friends here." Her smile was warm and genuine.

I looked around searching for a familiar face. "I thought I knew every inch of these forests, but I've never seen this place or any of these people before."

"I only found out about it a few years ago." She said dreamily. "It's such a special place."

The atmosphere was cosy and the rhythm of the chatter almost a chant.

It was dark when I awoke. The living room was empty except for my guide. He had been being watching me and moved across the room to sit beside me.

"I'm sorry I didn't wake you. You looked so far away, so peaceful." He followed my gaze around the room. "Everyone went out for a final session." He answered my anxious gaze. "We can head straight out in the morning."

"I really need to get in touch with my parents. They will be worried. Is there a phone here?"

He shook his head. "You left a note though right?"

"Yeah," I said puzzled. Did I tell him that? I wasn't so sure I had.

"I'm sure they will be fine." He looked into the fire. "I shouldn't have stayed either, but, well I kinda felt responsible for bringing you here. I mean it's miles from anywhere, and if you don't know the way back, it's easy to get lost." He picked awkwardly at his sleeve.

The sun streamed through the brown hessian curtains and warmed my face in the morning. The living room was still deserted. The fire was still blazing. A smell of bacon was leaking into the room. I followed the sizzling to find my guide flipping small thick pancakes on a black oiled surface. Strips of bacon twisted in the heat alongside them.

"Are you hungry?"

"Strangely not, but it smells fantastic".

He plated up and placed the aromatic stack on the table next to a bottle of maple syrup, gesturing for me to sit down.

"Looks like you'll get another great ride today."

"I really need to get back home."

"Of course, of course," he said hurriedly to soothe me. "But while you are here you might as well enjoy the miracle. After all, you don't get conditions like this every day."

My urgency to return was soon lost in the thrill of riding knee deep through the unresisting particles of ice. Whooping and laughing we plunged into banks and drifts until our day ended near the falls which gave the town its name. A frequent haunt for teenagers desperate for adventure and a chance to cool off in the summer, it was familiar territory to me and I knew the nearby road would take me back into town.

The chaos in the hospital had dramatically subsided as I slipped into Marcy's IC ward. As I moved towards the nurse's station I caught a glimpse of something very familiar. The shaggy salt and pepper hair was unmistakably my father's. He sat stiffly at the end of a bed partly obscured by a pale blue curtain. I moved closer and recognised my mother's favourite blue snowflake fleece. I pressed my palm against the reinforced glass window of the isolation cubicle and glimpsed toes peaking statically under the thin white hospital blanket. Panic flooded my mind. No, no, no, not Marcy. A respirator breathed life down a tube into the unresponsive shape. Short cropped hair, slightly tanned skin with a faint discolouration across the face from a winter wearing ski goggles. It was me.