

SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

CHILDHOOD GAMES

Carolyn Light Bell

It started out fine. At breakfast, we'd stoked away enough banana nut waffles to batten us down for a full day of cross country skiing. We had to feed Maggie's horses first, inhaling the rich blend of winter coats, hay and manure, cracking the ice on top of the water tank, stroking their velvet muzzles. In our backpacks were tuna fish sandwiches, fruit, and plenty of chocolate, which we planned to eat after our climb to the top.

As we were leaving Maggie's ranch house, Penelope picked up the pistol Maggie left lying by the sink, and turned it over in her palm, handling it like a string of pearls.

"Put it back. It's only for when I go out alone," Maggie said.

"Really?" I said. "What do you need it for?"

"I never use it except to shoot it up in the air."

"You don't want to just take it along?" said Penelope, laying it slowly, reluctantly, back down.

"No, not today. They won't mess with us in a pack. They'll only take someone solo."

"Who's they?" I said.

"Oh, mountain lions...moose," Maggie said.

Penelope shrugged. "Live dangerously, I guess," she said.

"You're sure you don't need it?" I said, following closely on Maggie's heels. "I got pretty cozy with a grizzly in the Rockies a few years ago. Brushed up against some big, fat hippopotami and lounging crocodiles too."

"Hmmm," said Maggie, "Where?"

"Kenya, when I was snorkeling in the Indian Ocean. Swam into some sharks."

"What are you saying?" Maggie said.

"I'm saying I've been close enough to the edge, Maggie."

"We've got what we need. All set?" Maggie patted her pack, and led us out the door to her truck.

We parked our vehicle along the snowy shoulder of a road, close to a little summer cabin, nestled at the base of a steep hill. "We'll be sitting on that cabin porch in a few hours, cooling our heels," Maggie said. "Let's go!"

Her laughter sprinkled across our shoulders as we leaned over to tuck hand warmers into our mittens and snap on our skis. Thus, the four of us mounted our trek up the steep, snowy mountain trail. Today was to be a calm conclusion to our annual week of downhill skiing, one last day to cross country

ski in the Crazy Mountains, where the sun's face was rimming over a ridge, spreading fiery light through fir trees, turning white to bright yellow, striping the hills.

Gazing up at the steep incline, I wondered momentarily about our descent. I'm unaccustomed to cross country skiing in the mountains, the only one living at sea level, and don't adjust quickly to altitude. "Let's ski conservatively," I said to Maggie quietly. "For your fly fishing trip to Mexico and my trip to the Galapagos, we need all limbs intact."

"Right. I'm with you!" Maggie said.

Upward we pressed, one ski in front of another, through magnificent, tall trees. My breath sped up, clanging inside my chest. The rest of the group was charged with energy, and I detest being the slow one, the last one, or the liability, so I pushed through it.

An unwritten rule of our little group is "Keep up or drop out."

Deepok Chakra, the world's current authority on diet, breathing, and blood type, advises not to breathe too hard during exercise. It makes sense in theory, but our group's pace forced me beyond Chakra's judgment.

"Did you know The New York Times rates women ranchers among the highest percentage of women CEO's in the country?" Maggie said to Karen.

"Great to know, but where are they at calving time?" Karen said. "I could use a few extra hands at roundup."

My three skiing companions and I are childhood friends, still playing childhood games with the same old rules. We've skied together for years. Now in our mid sixties, we've advanced from playing "Horse": Karen and her partner run a flourishing Arabian stud ranch. Maggie, a divorcee, maintains her cattle ranch nearby and cares for her elderly father, who owns the acreage. When it's time for her to corral new calves for auction, Karen brings in hands to help – women helping women. Penelope, who used to play "Banker," now owns a bank in New York. We used to play "School", and I've spent a lifetime in academia. We've all worked hard, grown older, and stayed strong, despite dying friends and relatives, unemployed children, surgeries, and a sucking sense of duty. Maggie long ago declared our gathering a "no groan zone," and so it is. We bully gravity, daring it down.

I kept marching like a foot-soldier, up, up, up. Left, right, slide. Left, right, slide. My skis kept slipping backward.

"You need the new, shorter skis," Maggie said. "See," she stuck a ski out. "how short they are?"

Though I was dying to lift my eyes on the meringue-covered hills, spruce limbs laced with heavy snow, and bright, blue sky, I was forced to focus on my skis. After more than an hour, I was ready to step out of line.

"Take little steps," Maggie advised. "We're almost at the top!"

"Great!" I said, hungry for lunch. I was starting to obsess about chocolate – chocolate chips, chocolate cake, chocolate frosting. Soon there'd be an end to

this heart-pounding huffing and puffing. As we climbed, I was reminded of our playground game “Captain, May I?” I almost asked, “Giant or baby steps?”

The aim of “Captain, May I?” was to reach a certain goal by taking small or big steps. Captaincy belonged to whoever seized it with the most premeditation, talent and élan. We had to ask our captain’s permission to move by naming the number and type of steps we wanted to take. Our request was followed with “Captain, May I?” If we forgot the magic phrase, the captain could send us reeling backward. Even if we used all the right words and the captain granted our request, we were still at her mercy. She wasn’t obliged to be fair. Whoever got to goal first was captain.

We used specific adjectives to describe the types of steps we wanted to take, for the purpose of her entertainment and persuasion. “Big” and “little” didn’t do it. I tried important words such as “colossal” and “miniscule” for effect. Groveling helped, of course. But not too much. “Pretty please with sugar and cream on top” was a useful expression. “Please, please, please, oh, please,” was overdoing it.

Years ago, Karen was captain for the longest, showing little etiquette and less equity. When she was captain, we could move just a few baby steps in five minutes, depending on the length of recess. Maggie often forgot what she had just promised and decreed liberal judgments on everyone. Penelope was so busy counting out the steps and calculating how long it would take for us to reach goal, she, too, was captain briefly. I was more concerned with the words my friends used to describe the types of steps they wanted to take. In Captain May I, we learned courtesy, vocabulary, respect, humility, and the subjective nature of power.

Another less civilized game we played was “Queen on the Hill.” Whoever climbed first to the top of a hill, staked her claim, “I’m queen!” The object was to remain queen as long as possible. Our assault against her began immediately. Shoving, pushing, kicking, any means of brute force, were legal. Insinuation, undermining, sneering – getting the queen to laugh or cry - were also legal. The strongest girl, the one with the longest arms or the loudest mouth, usually Karen, was queen the longest. From this game, we learned rules of the street and of corporate America.

On our ski tour, today, Maggie’s leadership was automatic, due to her familiarity with the territory, but she kept stopping to tell stories. Just when I thought we were at the top, it turned out we’d arrived at another mound in a series of peaks that went on and on.

We didn’t ask permission. We took whatever steps we wished – sidestep, herring-bone, or a combination of the two. Sidestepping was tricky because the path was precipitous. With long skis, I teeter-tottered on the ridge of several steep switchbacks. Looking down a snowy precipice, at a path I’d just side-stepped, was harrowing, so I alternated with herringbones. My legs grew tired, my breath was labored, and I paused frequently. Penelope and Karen,

behind me, were forced to stop. Although they didn't comment, I knew my pace was too slow.

Finally Maggie said, "You know, I've only been to this picnic ground once before. If someone wants to lead, go ahead." Karen was itchy to speed ahead, so we reverted to a modified "Queen on the Hill." Maggie stepped aside for Karen to lead us. We were, after all, a smidge older, entitled to bend the rules, with well-defended feelings and behaviors.

Eventually, Karen turned and waited for Penelope to take over. Since we paid lip service to democratic principles, it was soon declared time for me to lead. I relished sculpting fresh tracks, stealing an occasional quick peek at the hundreds of spruce saplings, their tops bent over from shrouds of snow, like old women, their trunks bursting with vitality. When I could manage it, I gaped at the tops of full-grown fir, laden with the bulk of newly fallen snow. No signs of felines, just an occasional scrub jay, cawing.

Finally, at a plateau, Maggie peered in all directions and relented that there didn't seem to be any "top" to our climb. "I don't see the picnic ground, but let's keep on. I'm not sure which trail we should take down."

No one objected, at least not aloud.

"Let's find somewhere to sit down," Karen said, sliding back into the front of the group. We skied down and around switchbacks for another half hour or so.

"I think I know a different place to picnic," Maggie said, slipping ahead again.

Arriving at a stream, littered with fallen timber. Maggie stopped to examine tracks. "I've lost our path," she said. We were forced to ski back and forth across the stream, balancing on icy logs, with millimeters to spare on either side of us.

Some paw prints were round, small punctures in the crust, and some were long, almost human. "Are there two animals?" I asked her, noting fresh, criss-crossing trails. I pictured a mountain lion or two, gracefully stretching their long legs across the streamlet.

"The long tracks are where they extend their forelegs out to jump," Maggie said.

"You're not sorry you didn't bring your gun, right?" I asked Maggie. Maggie said nothing. We clambered over a few more logs and forded the stream again. I checked my watch.

"I thought we were going to stop for lunch," I said. Maggie said nothing.

Maybe I misunderstood the rules. Or maybe there were no rules.

"Okay, you guys. Karen! Let's stop!" I said. Karen said nothing. Maybe everyone was too cold to talk.

"All right, it's two o'clock," I said to no one in particular. "Since there's no picnic ground, let's eat here!" I said.

"I'm sorry, but I'm turned around," Maggie said. "We probably should stop. It's late." We stopped in our tracks, plunked our packs down, unwrapped

and gobbled up our lunch, without ceremony, standing up. The stream snaked around us, black and wild.

Snow was falling fast, forming small hillocks over the rocks and shrubs. I had a chance to drink in the deep, sharp valleys and tall trees, covered with white shawls. We were all shivering from wet clothes, evaporating perspiration, and cold lunch. "How much farther?" I asked, chewing the last of my sandwich.

"We're definitely more than halfway," Maggie said.

"Only halfway?!" I said, trying not to sound alarmed.

"We're standing right where a mountain biker guy I know was attacked last fall," Maggie began.

We stepped closer to Maggie to hear her. She paused for effect. "He was looking around at the view, ready to ride back down. His heart was pounding so loud, he couldn't hear anything except the rushing river."

A glob of tuna fish stuck in my throat. "So what happened to him?"

"All of a sudden, a mountain lion was on him, clawing down his back, biting into his neck." Maggie paused again and looked around.

We watched her closely. "Then he lifted his bike over his head and smacked the lion with it."

"Amazing!" Penelope said, her green eyes fixed and huge.

"True story," said Maggie. "The lion was dazed by the bike long enough for the guy to get his bearings. Just then, some noise distracted the lion, and he leapt away through the trees."

"So the guy got away?" Karen said.

"Went home, and yeah, he was fine."

"What about moose? Seen any of those?" I asked.

"Once or twice. You gotta be careful of them. They'll trample you with their front hooves," Maggie said, smiling. Her expression changed. She reached into her pocket and held out a tissue. "Did you know your nose was bleeding?"

"No, but I'm not surprised. It's the altitude."

"Better not get too far behind," said Penelope. "Blood has a powerful scent."

"Not funny," I said, with a sudden cold shiver that started at the base of my spine and crawled up behind my ears.

"I'll go behind you," said Penelope.

"Here we go," said Karen, already shoving her reddened hands back into her mitts. We closed up our packs. Karen led out, then Maggie, then me, with Penelope last. We were skiing more tightly together now.

"Most people look out at the trail ahead," Maggie said to me. "I check out the tops of trees."

I scanned the trees. Not a whisker.

Maggie was on a roll. "Some friends of ours were skiing here a month ago and stopped to take a bunch of pictures of each other. When they developed

their pictures, there was a big lion in a tree branch hanging right over their shoulders.”

I was feeling claws and fangs in my neck. “I’m glad I’m not last. All creatures pick the one who’s bleeding or last,” I said.

“We’re close to the end. At the bottom of this hill is the little cabin we saw when we began. See it?” Maggie pointed to what was the longest valley of ice crust I’d ever seen. In fact, it was a series of sloping rills that looked as glossy as a skating rink. “Then we’ll drive home,” Maggie said, a note of promise in her voice.

Karen was already descending, slicing into the dense crust, piercing the ice with her poles, whooping. Penelope looked at me, her eyebrows knotted into a query.

“Go around me. I’ll catch up,” I said. I studied Penelope’s hopping traverse. There was absolutely no way I could copy either woman’s style.

I had neither the experience nor the equipment to conquer this terrain on cross country skis. Walking down was not an option. I had no choice. I could do this. I would do this. This was nothing. Just a little ice.

Maggie looked me up and down. “Try the pole squat,” she said, demonstrating. “Watch!” she shouted, as she made an ess curve down the hill. “Follow me!” Maggie shouted over her shoulder, laughing. It looked like the rounded squat slalom racers take, except slalom racers don’t straddle their poles, they keep them by their sides. She manipulated her poles up and down between her legs, using them as a rudder. Sexy.

It reminded me of Shoot the Duck, an old ice skating trick we did at the school rink, where we hunkered down, arms forward, stuck out one leg, and skated for as long as we could on one skate, balancing. It was my favorite trick, transforming me instantly into a skating star. That was awhile ago. I didn’t stop to consider how many decades. Nor did I consider the important difference between Shoot the Duck and Pole Squat. Ski poles aren’t involved in Shoot the Duck.

What made me want to try it had nothing to do with logic. It had to do with the sheer exhilaration of trying something new. Forgotten was the pact Maggie and I made. Forgotten was any form of fear. Forgotten was that it may not have been the best time to launch my debut. Forgotten was the fact that once begun, I couldn’t change my mind. It’s not the first time I’ve hurled myself headlong into situations and weighed the consequences afterward. Actually, I had a certain four-legged feline in mind. I was the last one again and my nose was still bleeding. S/he who snoozes, loses.

Besides, it looked like fun.

“Here goes!” I shouted into the air. The other women were already far down the valley.

Down I went, squatting on my poles, feeling awkward and wobbly. Once on my way down, I realized I couldn’t stand up. It was a treacherous plane. Midway down the first hill, I was out of control.

I was descending an icy slope, against my will, too fast. Down, down, still squatting on my poles, trying to catch up to the other three women. My body, skis and poles were not one.

My skis were headed straight down the hill as I tried to hunker over them, reaching my arms out the way I did in Shoot the Duck, but this slope wasn't flat like a skating rink, and my torso was leaning back. I couldn't press my poles down through the thick skin of ice crust. There was no way in hell I could traverse or stop. Over one ridge and down the next. I exerted every ounce of strength I had in my quads.

Just before the last, long hill, I realized what a dumb idea this was. What the hell was I thinking? Before I reached bottom, I folded my right leg under me, a deliberate act to stop my crazy luge-like recline. Both feet twisted at an abnormal angle. My left leg shot out in front. Trying to twist my body back into human shape, I rolled over onto one pole, cracking and bending it under me. I collapsed onto my side into a contorted heap, several yards from the bottom of the last hill. At least I wasn't moving anymore.

"Are you all right?" Penelope shouted. There the three of them sat, on the cabin porch, stretched out, skis off, boots up on the porch rails, faces toward the setting sun, eyes closed.

"Fine!" I shouted back, peering down the hill at them. I stumbled to my feet, feeling both feet under me, an excellent sign. My left knee sent searing pain up my leg. I undid my skis and rolled onto all fours. I gathered both skis, laced my poles around my wrists and punched through the crust, dragging my ski tips and poles behind, watching the sun lower in the sky, wondering how long it would take me to get to the bottom. I was trudging slowly, inches at a time. I scanned the trees, up and down.

Punch, punch. Punch, punch. This was the tranquility promised. The restful conclusion. I sat back down again. It was too far. I packed snow around my knee, numbing the lightning spears shooting up my leg, then lay on my back, relishing the icy tomb of comfort. The ice felt good.

"You sure you're all right?" Penelope shouted from her perch.

"Just resting!" I shouted back, peering at them, pissed. For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise, made perfect sense.

"Come and have an orange with us," said Karen.

"No, thanks!" I said.

Penelope clambered out of her chair and brought me a section of orange. I gobbled it down. She knelt down and peered into my face. "What's going on?" I could've told her the truth, that I was tired, pissed off, and feeling sorry for myself; that my knee hurt like hell; that it wasn't relaxing, however beautiful; but I couldn't. I just couldn't.

"Nothing," I said. "Just winded." Part of the rules of the game. Act tough when you feel like shit.

"It's just a short hike back to the car," Penelope said. I got up. Everyone skied but me. I was hiding a limp, as I dragged my skis and poles behind me. Maggie slowed down next to me and looked me right in the eyes.

"Godddamn, sonofabitch," I said. "I fucked up."

"I'll carry your skis," she said, gently taking my skis and poles from my hands. She hoisted them over her shoulder along with her own. My one bent ski stuck up, raw as torn flesh.

"I didn't get eaten!" I smiled at Maggie. I pictured myself hobbling about on the Galapagos lava.

We all smiled at each other, triumphant. Karen threw everyone's equipment in the back of the truck. Maggie got in the driver's seat and patted the seat in front next to her, looking at me. Penelope and Karen climbed in the back. The other three women chattered about the afternoon, but no one mentioned my fall. I turned my seat heater to high, tears of pain stinging my eyes. I glanced one last time along the edges of the road, into the branches of a Doug fir, for signs of life. Sure enough, there she was, a sinuous, muscular golden body, slung over the crotch of a lower branch, face as cunning as the stuffed toys we used to pile on our chenille bedspreads. She flicked her tail, twitched the tawny tuft inside one perked-up ear, narrowed her eyes, and ran her long tongue across her upper lip, flattening her whiskers.

"Great day to be alive," I said.

"Next?" said Maggie, eyes on the road ahead, negotiating the next curve.