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Return

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RETURN

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Abstract

This capstone project is a collection of nonfiction essays that work in collaboration to provide a profile of place. The place of focus is White Pass, the mountain the author has grown up on and experienced for the last twenty-one years. This collection is made up of essays that explore her physical, emotional, and spiritual connection to the land and community of White Pass, while also examining themes of family and identity. Each essay gives a different perspective in regards to the setting. The ultimate purpose of this project is to navigate the complexities of White Pass in regards to several aspects: climate change, family, childhood memory, sport, and community. This collection is one of appreciation, love, loss, and reclamation. It not only depicts the experiences of a girl raised in the mountains, but of a girl who witnessed great change; of a girl who questioned her small world, and, in the end, of a young woman who views her home in a new light. These are stories of returning, and of finding home, even if the journey takes you far from where you initially planned.

I.

When my mother first came to America, she stood outside the house she shared with my father in Lander, Wyoming, and stared at the sheer expanse of the land—rolling prairie and scattered brush. “It felt impossible—,” she told me once in our living room at home, “—the land. When your father drove us out to the house, I stepped outside and asked him who all this belonged to. He said to us.” She says, “I stood and I cried.”

I think of this often, of my mother’s reaction to seeing uninterrupted, rolling hills. Her wonder. Her fear. And her freedom. She was born in Paris, France, grew up in Toulouse and buzzed around through several other countries before the time she was seventeen when she moved out of her mother’s house. When she was living in Paris as an early twenty year old, her apartment was a one room closet. Just enough space to survive; not enough to fully exist.

As a kid, whenever I asked her whether or not she ever wanted to live in France again, she laughed and shook her head. “Never. There’s not enough space.”

My mother prefers America because she can look out and see the sheer vastness of the land. She likes to tell me that I would never thrive living in Europe for this very reason. “You like to roam, Shasta. You like to be able to breathe.” I suppose in a way, she is right. I do. I prefer the mountain air to that of the city. I prefer the outdoor air to that of the indoors. Ever since I was a little girl I would stay outside, spinning cartwheels in a red beaded necklace under our pear tree.

I considered Olympia, Washington home as a child. It was where I learned to run, dance, play; imagine, and create. Our house sat on Etheridge Avenue, three blocks from Roosevelt

Elementary, and two from the neighborhood café, The San Francisco St. Bakery. The house itself, was a small green and white two story building complete with, what I considered to be, a jungle overflowing with mystery for a backyard. Because of the 200 days of rain a year, we had two plum trees, two cherry trees, one apple tree, a pear tree, a blackberry bush, a blueberry bush, and in the middle of it all, a half-alive, wilted banana tree. In all the eleven years we lived in that house, never once did that tree grow anything more than floppy rubber leaves, but I loved it nevertheless.

"Do you think you can touch the leaves?" Olivia grinned as she picked herself up from the grass. It was a lazy Pacific Northwest summer day, one where the air hangs hot next to your face. "Yeah." I rose to the challenge indignantly, as one does when they are eight years old and challenged by their best friend. The leaves in question belonged to the pear tree. A small branch had broken and was hanging precariously from its mother stem. After cartwheeling all around the freshly mown grass, Olivia's sights were now on hitting this small dangling piece. I wound up and threw myself forward, stretching my legs and feet upwards, stretching so far that I thought I couldn't stretch any farther, until I felt the feathery touch of the pear tree against my foot and fell giggling into the grass. Olivia tried, succeeded, and fell next to me, her face red with laughter. We looked at the tree, eachother, and then up at the sky, melting slowly into the earth.

I lived two lives as a child. One, as a water child in Olympia, donning wet suits so I could slip under Puget Sound's surface, and another as a mountain child, raised in the mountains to love the mountains. Parsing the two together felt like joining two similarly shaped pieces from

different puzzles. They looked, to me, as though they would fit, but until I finally came to the realization that they didn't need to, their forms refused to meet.

Until age fifteen when my parents finally gathered enough money to make a deposit on a permanent cabin, we rented throughout the winter months. Each December, my dad, mom, sister, and I piled into our Subaru Outback and made the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Olympia, Washington to Packwood, Washington. As we sped away from the wet greenery of the coast, and towards the dry, crackling underbrush of Eastern Washington, I watched from the window as the blurred images changed in rapid prisms of color.

Packwood, deftly named for its logging history, was home to an odd assortment of people: old wealthy retirees who bought towering monstrosities on the outskirts of the town, multi-generation mill families often seen in Blanton's Supermarket with toddling youngsters gripping their clothes, families of people who had bought cabins years ago and who were now too old or too distracted to care about returning, and then people like my family: middle-class families with kids in the White Pass race program who rented cabins throughout the winter months so that they could continue to do the one thing they loved.

People who have grown up skiing in Washington often share the understanding that White Pass is overlooked because of its relatively small proportions in contrast to those such as Crystal Mountain and Stevens Pass; two sprawling resorts that require pre-paid tickets and ninety dollar parking fees. This idea seems to be true, despite its location. White Pass sits squarely in the Cascade Mountain Range, nestled between the majesty of Mount Rainier and the wild beauty of the Goat Rocks, commanding and disarming all at once. In spring, summer, and fall, droves of elk will make their way through, carelessly munching on budding sprouts, grateful for clearings where grass and flowery shoots grow in abundance. And when winter extends its frost-tipped

fingers, the herds reluctantly leave their simulated grazing for even more domestic avenues, invading the neighboring town of Packwood. There was one bull in particular who would return time and time again to the third cabin we rented, and stare in through the large windows that extended across the back room. My sister and I would watch for him, pressing our small faces against the glass watching for his light brown hide. When he came, we sat stoically, our gazes meeting his. He stared, we stared, he approached, we fought the urge not to open the back door. In all the years I spent in Packwood, this bull, who we named Jimmy for unclear reasons, was the one memory I could summon at a moment's notice. He commanded attention, and my sister and I were willing spectators.

I held the bird in my hand, felt its soft underbelly, the hard spikes of its miniature talons, and the pricks of pain as it rapidly pecked at my fingernails. Boils cascaded over its body, blood erupting from puss. Its feathers were gone, scraped off by a large paw. I looked at this tiny creature, cupped in my hand.

Our family dog stood in front of me, glassy eyes still intent on the chase. Feathers peppered the soft part of her maw, stuck like a game of pin the tail on the donkey. The bird's body shook against my skin, its heart pounding hard and heavy.

"It's going to die honey," my mom had explained minutes ago when she found it strewn across fallen leaves, our one-year-old rescue pup salivating over it.

The inevitability was there. Death lurked. I knew this. But my own small body couldn't help but try and do the impossible.

“Can we please just take it inside? Please, mom?” It was a fruitless campaign, doomed from the time it escaped my lips. But something inside of my nine-year-old self urged me to try. My answer was given in the shape of a small brown box, rescued from the “fire kindling” pile.

Ever so slowly, I lowered the mangled creature, taking care not to touch its razed back. It gave a couple more hollowed squeaks but ceased pecking. I ran to the bathroom to grab some toilet paper, a thimble filled with water, and a handful of pine needles.

Inside the cabin, a fire roared in the wood stove’s belly, blazing heat through the tight quarters. The bird twitched, attempted to place its beak in the pitiful amount of water, and then went still. No long drawn out process, no magical culmination of gratitude. It just stopped moving.

My mom risked no time. Already disgusted by a *wild animal* in the house, and the diseases birds are known to carry, she moved with practiced efficiency; scooped it up, wrapped it in toilet paper, and placed the entire box in the fire. She closed the stove, but not before I caught a glimpse of flames enveloping the feeble coffin.

I sat there on the couch, stunned by the quickness of it all, startled by the fact that I had been holding its quivering body, fresh from rescue just minutes ago.

“Please scoop the ash out tomorrow morning when the fire dies, OK?”

I nodded.

The next morning, as the clouds covered the burgeoning sun, I took the metal fire shovel in one hand, a metal pail in the other. Ash floated through the air with each new scoop until all that was left was the metallic inside of the once-full wood stove.

The elk I had named Jimmy, and the unnamed bird I saw to the end, shifted something in me. I laid in bed and thought of them, even, on certain nights, dreaming of their lives. They

would come to my mind's eye, for reasons unknown, and sometimes, I swore I could touch them, feel the rough fur of past seasons and the soft down encasing a barely beating heart.

The mountain goats of White Pass claim the Pacific Crest Trail as their own, the path they follow winding through and over White Pass. The trail also attracts hikers from all over the country in their search for an "untouched" land. It is a fair assumption to say that those who come get what they look for. With elevations varying from 4,500 feet to 7,500 feet, they are pushed to the very limits of human abilities. A month on the trail, and they wander to Leech Lake, twenty-seven miles from their last stop at Chinook Pass, covered in black mosquito netting, eyes cast to the ground. When they move to speak, no sound comes out. The mountains have stolen their voice. Whenever I passed the PCT hikers during cross country camp, I always gave them a wide berth. They looked "other," like strange beings who had been apart from society for too long. They never spoke, or waved in greeting. They simply plodded onward.

I have hiked up the Pass more times than I can count, and repeatedly I am reminded of this delicate balance between the safety and comfort of a man-made resort, and the abounding freedom of the wild. I hike most frequently in the summers, but also on midwinter days, when rain pelts the ground, melting snow by the inches. Staring at a motionless chairlift, momentarily suspended, with no one to carry, feels strange. Whenever, I do so, I reach out instinctually for the cold metal, as though to prove to myself that this massive structure rearing from the ground, is, in fact real, and not a figment of my imagination. It looks so out of place. Dark green streaked with sprays of rust against the varying blues and grays of a mountain wearing its winter coat.

The absence of human activity stands stark against raven calls and wind gusts. At the top of Great White, the view is both expansive and sheltered. The flat topped plateau of Spiral Butte shrugs upwards, covered in deep green swaths of Ponderosa Pines while dark gray clouds sit patiently above. In all directions, this wave of green continues until it meets the hourglass shape of Rimrock Lake to the East, and Mount Rainier's jagged crest to the West. This view has become habitual for me, a canvas repeatedly viewed and admired, but not necessarily understood.

When I peer outwards, I can't help but wonder about the wildlife held within the vibrant canopy of pines: cougars, elk, marmots, squirrels; all going about their daily duties: hunting, grazing, sheltering, gathering. *Is it tiring?* I wonder, repeating the necessities for staying alive, day after day, week after week; if they're lucky enough, year after year. Every winter, for as long as I can remember, a snowshoe hare has made its tracks under the shelter of darkness, leaving a winding, erratic trail in the morning. As a kid, I would ride Great White with my friends, and search for the hare's exit point in the snow. Often, its tracks led directly off of the 911 cliff, paused for a few feet and then resumed at the bottom in bounding strides. I always wanted to catch it, to finally see the face of this unseen, cliff-jumping force.

White Pass came into fruition on January 11th, 1953, following the opening of Highway 12. Before this, the mountains were virtually impossible to reach during wintertime. Snow storms rendered the landscape its own world, apart from the human, and the mountain that we now call White Pass remained an unknown opportunity for mountaineers. According to the Yakima Herald, in an article dedicated to the remembrance of 12's history, the highway itself was proposed as a way of connecting the Clear Fork to the road on the Tieton River through White

Pass. The hope was that this would complete a scenic loop around Mount Rainier, arguably Washington state's most revered natural marker. People who drive over White Pass from the East, will find that on a sunny day, Mount Rainier rises from the earth, so close that she feels within reach. On my way home to Olympia, I often stop at the scenic byway to allow myself the simple pleasure of bearing witness. I find that sometimes, we skip over the power that comes from doing such a thing. The act is an inherently passive one, something that pales in comparison to action. And yet, how are we to understand and appreciate a thing without taking the time to sit with it?

Over the years, White Pass has changed, shifting with each new season, and so have I. The White Pass that existed from my sixth birthday to my eighth, is incomparable to the one of my sixteenth and eighteenth, which is in turn that to the one of my twentieth, as I am to myself each new year. With each changing season, the place I call home, shifts, shaped by the incessant demands of consumers and ever-evolving politics of the alpine world. People, attracted by lower prices, and the "local" feel that has vanished from many popular ski areas, come in swarms. Lift lines that used to take ten minutes at most, now extend for half a mile. Our lodge, the one that I grew up playing cards in with my teammates, now becomes so crowded that when the new racers come in for their hour-long lunch break, each table is burdened by heaps of ski gear, rendered unusable. This evolution is not necessarily bad. It comes from a desire and yearning to be outside, to feel that which comes from being in the mountains. But, as all locals will say, no matter the hypocrisy, it stings to see a place that was once "yours," swarmed by "others."

In a way, I see myself in this evolution. I used to come here out of duty and obligation, because, as all kids are told, there are some things that we must do. And when I inevitably aged

out of this mindset, I found myself returning for other reasons. Often, to reconnect with a part of myself that for some reason was much more easily accessed here as opposed to at home in Olympia.

As a kid, I hated the Expansion—a portion of White Pass clear cut to create more space for the resort—for this very reason. It represented a shift, an opening that expanded my world more radically than I was prepared for. When the discussion around its proposal was occurring, I didn't understand why we couldn't just be happy with our mountain as it stood. Why add more? As a young adult, I still have not grown out of this mindset. I'm starting to think, perhaps I never will.

Ultimately, the decision was approved in 2008 after a twenty-four year wait. It came after a federal judge rejected environmental groups' multiple attempts to stop the deal, stating that the environmental impacts were carefully considered. To offset the loss of wild space, 23,000 acres were added to other areas of the Goat Rocks wilderness. By 2010, the Expansion was featured on every resort produced map, advertising the "thousands of new acres" that extend past previous boundaries. Of course, at eight years old, I had no idea about the logistics of the decision, my sole concern was the fact that skiing the Expansion required a ten minute slog on an ungroomed, undulating track.

To say that now, as an adult, I am less opposed to change is wishful thinking. As much as I recognize the economical advantages of selling out of tickets weeks in advance, something will always feel lost. White Pass is a refuge, a home, and a place of magic. Long before white settlers came, indigenous nations like the Yakama knew the land now called White Pass with intimate understanding. The dips and rises of Goose Egg Mountain and Kloochman Rock hold memories of history erased but not forgotten. Looking out at the top of Tieton Dam, it becomes much too

easy to see what could have been if not for this constricting concrete structure. The Dam itself is an impressive beast, able to provide 198,000 acre feet of water to the Yakima Valley and beyond. Its customers stretch as far as California where it provides electricity for Burbank Water and Power and Glendale Water and Power, near Los Angeles. But, when observed intimately and carefully, its presence reeks of ecological damage.

I have been coming to the Dam ever since I was twelve years old when my family first bought our cabin. For me, it's a place to vent and release. And sometimes, when the wind blows just right, a place to be heard. Each Friday afternoon, no matter the weather, I rushed out of the cabin, leaving my duffel bag sitting on the front porch, with my dad's green puffy jacket wrapped around my shoulders and sprinted under the bridge towards the Dam's mouth. The actual ascending road is technical and winding, but seems tame compared to the metal staircase that runs directly up the Chute that delivers water into the Dam itself. Thirty feet from the ground, and gripping onto the shaking sides, you wonder just how "safe" this one hundred year old edifice actually is. A quick prayer and then the climb continues. Because of the fact that the metal turns into a slip and slide of certain death when it rains, I only ever went up it when I needed to feel a burst of exhilaration. For the most part, I always followed the twisting gravel path through the forest. It was much more peaceful anyways.

Emerging from dark pines into a sphere of light is dizzying and intoxicating. The azure blue waters of Rimrock Reservoir lap piles of graying rock mixed with old timber. Looking outward you can see the Cascades extend over the horizon, beckoning. When I come here as an adult, I do just what I have been doing for the last ten years: Jump onto the thin concrete slab that is lighted with lamps and sit crisscrossed with my back to the river, my face to the wind. It is always windy here. Sometimes I simply sit with my palms turned up to the sky, other times I

stand and lean forward, asking the wind to act as a barrier between myself and the ground. And still others, I jump upwards with such force I think just this once I might be able to fly. When my feet connect with the concrete it's always a small disappointment.

Being here, I get much the same feeling as when I stand atop the peak of White Pass. I am free and constrained all at once; able to savor the vigor of the natural world and to confront the restraint of human construction. *How am I to understand this balance?* I ask myself. *To move forward with activism and preservation while also coming to terms with my recreational desires?* The answers, I suspect, are to be found here, where these two worlds intersect. White Pass is my home, but it is also so large, and so mythic, I struggle to understand it. Struggle is good, my parents tell me. To struggle is to seek to understand. It is to attempt and challenge yourself over and over, until all conception of what you once thought has disintegrated. I had a race coach once tell me, "The only way to truly understand the mountains is to rid your mind of all inconsequential thoughts and then to accept that you never will."

Much like the elk that graze this land, I move through on my own seasonal instincts. In the summer, I swim and fish, bathing in the icy cold of glacial melt waters. In winter, I ski, relying on the winter weather vortex to deposit fresh flakes. With the warming climate, this diminishes each year, but, nevertheless, my love and admiration for this place, my home, only grows. Life around White Pass and Tieton cycles slowly. Sometimes, it seems as though it grinds to a halt, but even then, those who choose to see, watch as the gears turn steadily in preparation for what comes next. I always look to the skies, and if the dark shadow of a raven floats above, I know that there will be something to come.

II.

The White Pass race shack sits at the bottom of Lower Roller in a small grove of half-collapsed pines. Below runs Highway 12, and behind climbs the proud head of Mt. Rainier. As kids, we called it "The Shack," a rickety old one-room hut that rattled when the heat turned on and creaked every time the door shuddered open. We met here every morning at 7:45, carrying bags on our backs full of gear. Hard-plastic boots, shin guards, colorful buffs, mouth guards, arm guards, speed suits, jackets, bibs, were pulled out like ribbons from a magician's hat.

The T.V. always ran here. Whichever older boy knew how to turn the television on would do so, and choose a worldcup race, usually in Switzerland or Mammoth. Until a coach would walk out of the back room and shut everyone up, the voices of announcers narrating various world cup skiers' runs permeated our slight chatter. It was somewhat of a comfort to have constant noise. Everything else faded to the background.

"There is no place for me in this world," were the words my mother used in our basement when her sickness reached its height. She looked small, her hands tight around my head, holding me as if I were her anchoring force. Curled against her, my face pressed into her wool sweater, my breath rose and fell, hot against my face, remnants of dinner sour on my tongue. I was in a close world that revolved around her heartbeat; a return to the womb.

My mother's depression was a beast all its own. Sometimes it broke her down, leaving her unable to get out of bed. Other times it drove her into a rage, consuming everyone around until our family was nothing but ashes. It was a beast I didn't understand, and one, I suspected she didn't either. It was a force that felt both foreign and familiar. I had lived in close proximity

to it for as long as I could remember, attuned to the subtle shifts and changes of a mind at war with itself. I blamed her until I realized she did too.

In the course, it was just me; my body composed of muscle and sinew, flesh and bone, and two heavy strands of material attached to my feet. In the starting shack, worry about daily life dissipated. All that remained was the steadily rising beat of my heart.

Poised in the starting gate is a time of odd clarity; the mental image of the course crystallizes into real-life, and one becomes acutely aware of every tensed muscle. It is also when one becomes aware of the sheer insignificance of life, of everything that weighs on a person. When I would wait in the starting gate for the time keeper to signal the clock was ready to begin, the anxiety that usually clamped on to my heart, loosened. I was far more concerned with the physical feat of maintaining control in the course than in whether or not I was falling behind in life. This moment of clarity, of control, in which one realizes that everything about to happen in the next fifty seconds is under their control, and their control only, is quintessential to the wellbeing of a person. I lived for this moment.

And then it would be over, relief washing over my body each time I crossed the finish line; thighs spasmodically seizing, sweat beading under my POC helmet, breath escaping in short gasps forced in and out from constricted lungs.

My earliest memories of skiing vary. They lay in the murky depths of childhood memory, often obscured by the passing of time. I have no recollection of what it felt like to teeter-totter over my tiny yellow Fischers, or of how it felt to fall for the first time, sliding on the weird semi-solid, soft-hard substance that is snow. Granted, I was two years old when both of these events occurred, an age infamous for chaos and confusion. But nevertheless, what I do remember

is racing. I remember the first time I decided to taunt gravity and point my skis straight down Lower Roller, the steepest groomed run at White Pass. I remember the feeling of weightlessness that lifted my stomach into my throat when I sailed off my first downhill jump, and the *thwap* of my skis as they connected with the carefully cultivated ice-snow that race coaches live for. I remember when I was taught how to "hit gates" in slalom, and the boy who taunted my refusal to hit any with my right hand, even though I am right-handed, making me an oddly off-balance slalom skier.

Racing consumed my life for twelve years. It ruled every wintertime decision from age six to eighteen. Saturday, Sunday, sometimes Friday and Monday were spent waking up to the automated sound of an alarm clock, brewing coffee, and pulling layer after layer of Spyder leggings, shirts and socks on, all while violently shivering because as my dad loved to say, "There's no point in making a fire if we're leaving anyway." I can't say that I disagree, but understanding his logic didn't make those cold cabin mornings any easier.

Training lasted from 7:45 AM to 3 PM, only varying when our coaches wanted to take a smoke break or watch the Super Bowl. There were several occasions when I felt the icy tendrils of frostbite and hypothermia slide down my limbs, but was unable to retreat inside the lodge because we had "just two more runs before video." On days when my turns linked up, and my runs were met with optimism rather than criticism, I happily ignored the physical pleas of a frozen body, pushing discomfort to the back of my mind, focusing solely on the feeling borne from positive feedback.

I was a downhill racer, although I always said Super G was my favorite event because it didn't have the high stakes that downhill did. This was a lie. I loved downhill. I loved every part

of it. I loved the way fear gripped my body in the starting gate, the way my skis refused to bend unless I put every ounce of strength into the effort, the way I felt: complete, whole.

When I was around fourteen years old, my family rented a cabin from my summer ski coach Van. He was a leathery man, the kind of person whose skin has thickened from years of elemental exposure into a thick slab of impenetrable crust. A pair of twinkling blue eyes peered out from this great canvas, although they were usually hidden behind a pair of reflective sunglasses, and tufts of blonde hair rose like slumped palm fronds from his pink scalp.

I had met him at NASC, National Alpine Ski Camp, after attending with Lily. He was energetic and kind, albeit eccentric. I still remember how his face lit up when he started handing out his latest t-shirt creation: a graphic image of a snow plow pushing snowboarders off a cliff. Some of them had their faces contorted with speech bubbles saying, “No! Please don’t hurt us!” or, “Ahhhh!” And directly above in bold, black letters were the words “Death to all Snowboarders." They came in two colors: pink and blue. NASC was where I first embraced the adrenaline of speed events, where I considered that there might just be something I could excel at.

Fourteen meant I was considered a U-16, which also meant that I was finally able to train the event that I discovered, energized rather than depleted me—Downhill. Contrary to Slalom, Downhill doesn’t rely on quick transitions. You still have to move quickly in initiation but the movement is longer, demanding of more power.

By this time I had graduated from “Buddies” to “Juniors.” Or at least for speed training I did. I wasn’t old enough to be on the team, I wasn’t a freshman in high school. But my coaches saw something in me I hadn’t quite acknowledged yet, a spark, an ability and willingness to embrace a feeling that was out of the ordinary.

Matt and Kevin always had us train Downhill the last few weekends before Sun Cup, a speed series hosted at Mt. Bachelor in Bend, Oregon. No matter rain, shine, sleet, hail, we met at the top of Lower Roller, set the course, and started training. Training for Sun Cup, especially on Roller, was not meant to prepare us for the physical technicality of the long radius Downhill turns, but rather, for the sensation of coming close to the edge, of losing control. The pitch rolls over after the first turn into a steep track of two turns before swooping to the right around a chair pole. Going around, it's a right footer, relatively simple other than the fact that the middle of the turn is interrupted by a divot in the snow. In order to stay in the course and not spin out, you have to maintain pressure on the outside ski without letting your outside ski skid out. The result is a constant repetition of weightlessness, of trusting your body enough to hold its own. The gamble complicates further when the weather refuses to cooperate. And White Pass, situated in the Goat Rocks, rarely accommodated ideal conditions.

The clouds had rolled in before the sun rose on Sunday morning. By the time we were loading the lift, Roller was shrouded in a thick robe, dark conifers acting as silent sentries. Gazing at it, I tried calculating what would come within. Setting the course, we spoke only when spoken to. Our voices reverberated back to us, trapped in a milky vacuum.

Standing at the top of the course, I could not see the starting gate but for a dim red tint. It retreated farther within the more I stared. The radio that was tied to a thin bamboo pole, emitted static, followed by Kevins deep murmur "Ready when you are."

I entered the fog almost immediately, my vision expanding with each meter traveled. I relied primarily on my mind, remembering the curvature of the slope as I had when setting the

course. Each gate came, at once, faster than I anticipated, and slower. The distance between each turn progressed naturally, allowing for a fully formed transition. I moved forward, fighting forces of both compression and elongation, each muscle doing what it was designed to do. I hurtled forward through the fog, forcing my way into a different kind of space, one where my body began and ended within the radius of each turn. There was no emergence at the end, only a culmination of what was meant to be. The fog remained, hanging low, and I stood at the bottom, blindly peering upwards.

"I've decided to quit ski racing," my teammate told me on Saturday afternoon. She spoke matter of factly as she usually did. I had known Josie since I was eight. She was just a year older, but our gap always felt larger because of her combined skill and ambition. It was no secret that she was the best, that if anyone on our team was going to make it, it would be her. Put simply, she was a winner. I was not.

"Is that a good thing?" My response felt thin, asking her a question I didn't fully understand.

"Yeah, yeah I think it is. I—I just can't do this sport anymore." She paused, shaking her head. "It's fucking crazy bro, fucking crazy. I mean we put our lives on the line out there. Literally. Even if you're not a FIS racer or an Olympian. Every time we buckle our boots up and push out from the gate, every time we could die. It's as simple as that."

Silence stretched out between us for a few seconds. Both of us equally surprised and impressed with her ability to open up. We weren't close, in fact, I had rarely ever rode the chairlift with her, much less spoken. She had always seemed two stages above everyone else. I

couldn't bring myself to offer any words of advice, any tidbits of information. When I found my voice again, I asked what anyone would have.

"What happened?"

Her features went slack, but when she spoke, there was an underlying emotion, a fight to live, a struggle with herself. She was grappling with the realities of the lifestyle she had been brought up in, and thus was delivering judgment on something that had become larger than a simple "sport." It was a breaking of barriers.

From what I could tell, it went something like this: She was in Mammoth a few months ago at a speed series, racing her favorite event, Downhill. She had run the course just an hour or so before, and following race day etiquette, it was her duty to take the guys' clothes down after they stripped into their speed suits for their training run. Girls go, then boys, then girls again, and so on. In her case, she was in charge of her friend's clothes, a boy who's name I do not know. Just seconds before she left, she joked around with him, wishing him good luck, swapping a few words of advice. She skied down to the bottom of the course, his pants and jacket swinging over her shoulder. It only took a minute or two for her to arrive, and deposit his clothes in a heap where he would exit the finish area. She waited, looking up at the finish chute, watching for his bib number on the slope. Minutes passed, and he didn't come, there was no flash of his racing suit, nothing. Static on a nearby coach's radio and then the unmistakable sound of sirens. He never came down. It was only hours later when she found out what had happened. Coming onto one of the top pitches, he had looped his arm through a gate, going around sixty miles an hour. He didn't have time to fix his mistake. In less than a second, his arm was partially ripped from his body, his torso torn in two. He was airlifted to a nearby hospital, but there was never any hope, he had already passed.

"The one thing they always said to us after was, at least he died doing what he loved. Made me realize, I don't want to die doing this sport. Fuck, I want to live my life. I want more than this."

She gazed off into the distance. Her daily word count was exhausted, and now all she could do was sit in the rain, on this chairlift with a girl who she wasn't entirely close with, reliving something only she could relate to. As most people do when faced with a confession, I wanted to console her, wrap her in a hug and tell her she made the right decision, but we both knew I didn't have the answers.

It wasn't until a few years later that I learned Kevin, one of our ski coaches, had been the first person on the scene. He had put his hands over the kid's chest, just adjacent to the breast bone, where the arm connects, and sat there with him as he passed.

I quit a year after this conversation. My closer friends had all left the year before, and I no longer felt the same nervous exhilaration I had in earlier years. The old peeling brown walls of the Shack, etched with our names from when we were six years old felt sad, callings from a past time. I didn't have anyone to share my shortcomings with. Bad runs were just that—bad.

Many people I've talked to in college who ski raced throughout their adolescence have told me similar stories of how they loved it, then suddenly, as though by divine intervention, hated it. They say that one day they became too immersed, too wrapped up in the need to prove their worth. Racing is mechanical, rational and above all tactical. The product is a culture dependent on physical aesthetics. Each day, my team and I would watch two to three videos of ourselves skiing through a course, analytically observing each detail: the edge angle, measured by a coach's ruler aligned with our boot on screen, the angle of our shoulders to the hill, the position of our pelvis in relation to our hips, the position of our hands, the angle at which our

head was positioned so that we were already looking two gates in front of every turn. When I write out each of the physical markers, I recite them with a mechanical voice in my head. The list appears in front of me, and I go down it linearly.

The first few months after quitting were spent alone. I wasn't obligated to wake up early and meet in the Shack, I no longer had to think about my form when skiing. I didn't have the tight community that had given me so much comfort through my adolescence.

Up until this point, I had only understood White Pass through racing. My thoughts were formed around time schedules, the number of runs I had completed, and the "correctness" of how I moved through the snow. Free of these concepts, my mind was also free of direction. I completed runs one after the other, without stopping and without breathing. I didn't know how to step back and *exist* in the mountains. It wasn't until three years later, in a different state, that I felt the urge again; the urge to try, the urge to return.

It was early spring of 2022, and a couple of friends agreed to accompany me up to Idaho resort Lookout Pass. This wasn't a new occurrence, we did it almost every weekend as a way of escaping the monotony of class at the University. The conditions were perfect for groomer skiing. Firm but not icy, carvable but not too forgiving. A few runs in, I noticed a course being set up on the main face, the familiar silhouette of red and blue gates standing tall in my peripheral. Giant Slalom based on the gates used—two poles joined by red and blue fabric. I was skiing my all-mountain skis, 187 centimeter Segos, 115 underfoot—much too long and wide to be considered course appropriate. At first, I turned my attention away, telling myself that I was going to get yelled at anyway if I tried and "poached" it, a term we would use in training when a skier or snowboarder would try their hand at the gates. But after three runs, the blue and red of

the course become brighter and brighter. From above, I could see it perfectly. The line was straightforward, not too straight or wide, the pitch was simple, made for speed but not to the point where it would be a battle to stay in the course, and from the looks of it none of the racers were stripped down to their suits so I figured they weren't timing. In the moment, it looked perfect, enticing. I gave in. I skated off, flexing my boots forward, pressuring my outside ski, and made sure my shoulders were leveled. The gates came quickly, just like I remembered, the tempo came as I had expected. I was surprised only by the fact that everything flowed without incident. Each time I passed by a gate, I turned my shoulders to the side and hit it, relishing in the fact that it bent easily. One run turned into two, then three, until an hour and a half had passed and seven runs had come and gone. By the eighth, I knew I was walking the line. A figure waited below, one I didn't notice until I was half way down, and when he raised his hand, flagging me over, my heart dropped in the same way it had in training. *Shit.* "Hey!" The figure waved me over. I could already feel the lecture that was to come. Unable to find an easy escape, however, I complied. "You from around here?" I shook my head quietly. He already knew. So did I. "Well, please don't run our course, it's uh, for safety reasons." A pause, "You're skiing pretty damn well though." Too embarrassed to reply, I skated off, and loaded the lift. It wasn't until that night, as I ran my thumb over my elbow, already swollen from the gates' impacts, that I thought of his ending words. "You're skiing pretty damn well though." I couldn't help but smile. I had felt it. It was still there.

III.

Skiing is language. To ski is to be in communion with the earth; it is to listen to the smallest intonation—shifts in snow density, high and low angled inclines, pressure points in the base layer—and respond. My preferred method of accessing this feeling of connection is through the backcountry. I delve into the forest, and climb ridgelines to discover and explore, to chase a feeling of complete and untethered freedom.

When I was younger, my dad would take me to the Banff Film Festival each year that only the tiniest theater in Olympia, Washington showed, bribing me with heaps of overpriced popcorn dunked in Cholula. On other fall nights, he would prep the downstairs so that it resembles a sort of theater and play DVD after DVD of Warren Miller films. Each night as the ski season was just getting geared up, he would sit me down on our downstairs couch and put on the latest, convincing me that even though there wasn't any explicit mention of magic, wizards, or other fantastical elements in these films, they would still be, in his words, "awesome." He cast the line, prepped the bait, and waited. I bit. Like a fiend, I began to look forward to these special movie nights, watching as skier after skier launched themselves into oblivion off of cliffs that were bigger than my small mind could fathom. Wrinkled faces from years of alpine work, smiled at me invitingly through the screen, beckoning me to join. Their joyous whoops and hollers ruled my dreams, effectively drawing me in once and for all. There was no question, my fate was sealed.

I was twelve years old when he first took me out into the backcountry. We rode the Couloir lift up to the ski area boundary line, unloaded with all our packs, and after several tedious minutes of laying skins, shedding a few layers, and packing back up, we started skinning up. In retrospect, the skin up wasn't bad, although I had been sweating profusely at the time,

constricted by layers I had awkwardly put on in the cold. Slowly, with stiff movements, I hiked upwards. I was like a machine that was somehow missing a gear. My small frame, overburdened by a bright orange pack, shuddered with each step. I recall thinking, *what am I doing? How is this worth it?* The skin track led up a moderately steep incline for what proved to be fifteen minutes, weaving through small patches of saplings, until it ultimately came to a thin ridgeline.

When the view unraveled in front of me, I received answers to my half-realized questions. Glaciers with stained-glass archways and glittering walls decorated the undulating ridgeline, equally lovely as they were menacing. The sky, a clear blue, stretched above, absent of dark clouds. Dark swaths of forest swept across the mountains to my right, blanketing the valley in shadow. To my left, the slope fell away curving into an untouched bowl. It was beautiful. Serene and deafening all at once.

I stood there, perched on the ridgeline for what felt like an eternity, smacked by the surrounding view. The wind whipped my face, rough against my dry skin, and I felt my skin crinkle as I moved to smile.

When we dropped down from the cornice we had been situated on, my skis made contact with the untouched snow, and for a moment I felt it. The adrenaline, and freedom that I had previously thought only came from racing, coursed through my body, powering me down the bowl. Whoops and hollers burst from my throat, and with each turn my body became buoyant. I was floating on an impossible cloud. I had found my antidote.

But skiing, and backcountry skiing, in particular, is territory rife with hidden risks. Risks that felt far away and removed from my own world, but that soon came barreling down with uncanny speed.

The reality of an avalanche is enough to stop most rational humans from ever contemplating scaling a mountain, and quite frankly, I don't blame them. Massive tons of snow, triggered by a hairline fracture, made increasingly more dangerous by erratic wind and snow patterns, bearing down on you with god-like speed until you become encased in a concrete coffin of crystalline mass. Your screams go unnoticed. Perhaps you struggle. In the end, it doesn't matter. Death by avalanche is no new reality. Ever since I could comprehend where snow came from, the resulting understanding of what happens when that snow becomes unsteady followed not long after. I had attended avalanche training, practiced finding a beacon buried in the snow, and had done everything in my ability to prepare myself if the unthinkable were to happen. And yet, my naivety had created a bubble of safety, one that thrust me into deep reflection when it finally popped.

When it happened, I was incredulous, unable to fully wrap my head around the thought of a person—one I knew no less—smothered under several layers of snow. At sixteen years old, the thought was jarring.

And yet, during my sophomore year of high school, Adam, a kind, goofy local who somehow knew just about everyone at White Pass, was killed in an avalanche. I remember riding the Great White lift with him and my dad, watching as they chatted away, talking about their plans for the season. My dad had looked over at me, introducing us, and although I was shy, Adam had flashed a smile, holding out his hand. "Nice to meet ya Shasta."

The conditions weren't ideal on the Saturday he went out: wet snow, built upon by a combination of rain and several new inches, shifted around by high winds. My dad mentioned that he had decided to split up with his partner, decided to go down the chute without backup. It

was said to make me feel better: Never split up before picking a route. I knew that rule, I followed it, no need to worry.

That same year, just a month later, my dad, along with some of his ski patrol buddies took us on the route that Adam had followed.

We headed along the side of the Couloir lift, duck-walking up the awful pitch that must be scaled before you can reach the out-of-boundaries marker, and skied the top portion of what we call the "Road Run." The conditions weren't great; a hardpack base layer masked by a couple soft inches of new deposit. I cringed at the grating sound of my bases making contact with small trees and exposed rock. Each turn was demanding. The force it took to transition from one turn to the next felt heavier than it usually would. The sky mirrored this shift; gray, veiled with thin wisps of cloud. Humidity hung in the air, plastering strands of hair to my face. Sweat dripped along my helmet line.

As we continued down, picking our way through the increasingly dense forest of conifer trees, I felt a rising sense of fear build in me. This was new. The fear was spongey, stagnating in my throat with each breath.

It felt like ages before we finally came to the chute, after endless snow checks - letting one person cross a gully, chute, or other potentially dangerous markers, at a time so as not to upset the snowpack. When we finally did arrive, the chords of muscle in my legs strained, and sweat beaded in the space between my skin and buff. The air hung low, smothering us.

A narrow track of crusted snow twisted through a clearing then curled back into the dark shadows of coniferous forest. Above, I saw the steep incline on which tendrils of snow were desperately trying to cling. I wondered what it would feel like if they were to suddenly slip, aggravated by our presence, or jolted by the harsh echo of our voices, and come bearing down on

us, smothering our cold bodies. My eyes tracked the path of a snowball that had done just that. Dislodged by some unseen force, perhaps a curious jackrabbit or small marmot, and broken off from the sheet of snow, its track ran down the length of the slope, and as it picked up speed I noticed spaces in between divets where it had become airborne, propelled by gravity, frantically thrust into the air before connecting once more with the earth.

To our left, I saw a pile of snow, larger than the rest. It looked as if the hill had suddenly slumped over, and compressed itself against the rock wall.

"It happened right here. See that "V" shape?"

I tilted my head, eyes honed in on the chute, noticing how the incline, much higher than forty-five degrees, rose on either side, funneling snow into a one-track path. A path of no escape.

"Damn. He didn't even have a chance." Talbot's voice, the one of the White Pass Ski Patrol Director, was gruff and his words came tumbling one after the other - too fast.

The sloping walls of the canyon once seen as beautiful feats became menacing, stretching far over my head, reminding me of my relative frailty. I could all too easily imagine what a human body would look like buried under that pile of snow. I could imagine how that would feel, trapped in a concrete coffin, suffocating, wondering which breath would be your last.

We stayed there awhile - my dad, his three friends, and I. Before leaving, they stared at the slope once more, some bowed their heads, others didn't, they all had an air of resignation. Words ran out as they tend to do in the mountains. The well dried up, and then we were off again, trekking through more iced tracks littered with tree boughs and rocks.

Before the forest swallowed me, I looked back once more. Maybe for closure, maybe because it felt like the right thing to do, maybe because I knew that I wouldn't return. To this day, I'm not sure.

A pink plastic bow, the kind the Forest Service tie on trees to mark which ones are ready for removal, hung limp on a branch, the one directly above the pile of snow. It looked too pink, too artificial, marking the place of unspeakable loss.

IV.

Growing up, family was a small term. It encompassed the people who lived in immediacy to me: my mom, dad, younger sister, and two dogs. That's it. The line had been drawn years ago when both my parents opted to move thousands of miles away from the places of their childhood homes. My dad, unable to stand the familiarity, and, well, "Minnesota-ness," as he says, of Minnesota, had settled in Olympia, Washington. My mom, a French citizen, had followed her heart to the States when she met a lanky surfer in Guatemala who promised her a life of happiness. Romantic, and profoundly complicated. For this reason, unlike most of my classmates growing up, I didn't have a grandparent on call who could come over to our house on a moment's notice, or pick my sister and I up from school on days that my parents' schedules were too packed. Cousins were relative strangers I saw once every couple of years; for bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, the occasional wedding or a fiftieth anniversary celebration. And aunts and uncles made me nervous because they were the grown-ups who were always commenting on how much I had changed since my toddler days. There's only so many times I can hear "Wow! You've grown so much, but I don't know how you got all the *short* genes!" Instead, I had a different family, one patched together, sewn and resewn as the years passed.

We all came from different walks of life and different backgrounds. It was what made it work. Tao, who owned a cabin with her husband Brad, was from Vietnam. Had actually, as she has told us many times, escaped on a small, overpopulated boat and arrived in America looking for a new life. Brad grew up in Richland, Washington and ran cross country at Western Washington University. I'm still not sure how they met, but regardless, their cabin that they share with Jeff and Linette always had the best food. Still does, in fact. The Hills, Jeff and Linette, were both in Greek life at their respective colleges: Eastern Washington and Washington State.

They knew how to party, something that wasn't taken lightly in our small community. The Mildes were Swedish, well Jenny, the missus was. Her husband, Chuck, was aggressively American with odd European influences like metallic speedos and large oddly shaped glasses. And then, there was Rob and Christina, a couple of affluence to all that knew them. He worked the corporate job, she did taxes, and to all, they were the epitome of sweetness. They hosted our annual New Years party that started whenever the kids got done with racing, and lasted well past the midnight hour. Some of my favorite memories are of stealing sips of glittering champagne from the decorated platter on the dining room table.

Rob also worked up at White Pass as a professional ski patrol. He would often be the first one on the scene of a crash during training, or the one who the kids asked for when they got to the resort's emergency room.

This was my family. Made up of an odd assortment of people who didn't quite fit anywhere else, but who had, over the last decade, learned to lean on one another, to ask for help when they needed it, and to give it when asked.

I received the call in mid-winter of my freshman year of college.

"You might want to sit down for this." I recognized the urgency in my dad's voice, and so I did. The green and white checkered seat pressed against my back, reassuring and steady. The thread reminded me of a quilt I had seen on Etsy. Funny, the things you remember in times of shock. My hands shook slightly as I held my phone in front of my face, more from the cold of university heating than anything else, watching my dad's face pixelate on the screen. His image refused clarity, but I blamed his sordid expression on the overloaded university Wifi.

He spoke. I didn't hear. He spoke again, and I wished I hadn't.

I initially met Rob Jensen through his oldest daughter, Kelsey. We were on the White Pass Ski Team, both in the Buddy Werner program, and although she had joined a few years later than I, time gave way to tentative friendship. We were never best friends, that's quite a loaded term at ten years old, but since our dads had recently started spending more time together at ski races, our friendship naturally followed.

Kelsey was kind and soft-spoken. The ski racing culture that turns some children into little maniacs, seemed to have no effect on her. When we watched video as a team in the race shack, listening as our coaches critiqued every last detail of form and technique, she didn't draw back into herself like most of us. Instead, she sat on the wooden plank benches with a straight back and optimistic smile. While I sat silent, she chatted, wisps of dirty blonde hair escaping from her *soft-ear helmet.* I disliked her at first, lifting my nose at the fact that she wasn't a *real* race kid. She hadn't started with Elysse, Lily, Audrey and I. She didn't own the proper gear (as shown by her soft-eared helmet), and most telling, she was a year younger than I—in ski racing culture there is an odd hierarchy formed around age.

As far as I knew, Rob was her dad—the goofy, skinny, kind man who always gave us high-fives after our runs, even when we knew, deep down, that we hadn't performed at our best. No matter if we fell, skidded out, missed a gate, or simply leaned too far back, Rob was always there, beaming, with a splayed palm, exuding kindness.

Our shift from teammates to friends came about when we lodged together for the U14 championships at Crystal Mountain; Kelsey and Rob, my dad and I. The place was gorgeous; wood paneling everywhere, a large dining area, and complimentary use of the heated pool. As a young girl who was convinced she was a mermaid, this last feature garnered particular interest.

When Kelsey and I discovered we shared this particular interest, thirty minutes later, we were diving into the pool, practicing our dolphin kicks, and seeing who could hold their breath the longest.

I barely remember the actual fall happening, but at some point I fell, bare feet sliding on tile, my left hand went up then down onto hard stone. A crack, and stunning, white, pain.

Quickly, as he was trained to do, Rob rushed over, eyes scrunched in worry. He moved methodically and told me to give him my wrist. When I said it hurt too bad, he said “Don't worry, I’ll grab some bandages” and scurried off into the much-too-fancy cabin. Moments later, he emerged, bandages in tow, bending down and carefully pressing. Soft, and careful, he pressed on my wrist, making small indents, noticing where I winced and where I didn’t.

As he wrapped the coarse material around and around and around, I watched. Steady and reassured. “There you go kiddo, you’re all good to go now” he said with a smile.

Seconds later I was throwing myself off the diving board, Kelsey’s laugh reverberating against the cold stones.

My dad told me there were molestation charges, that Rob’s youngest daughter, my sister’s best friend, had called Child Protective Services one night in November, and he hadn’t been seen since. I was grateful then that I was seated.

There are certain formative experiences in a young person’s life. Times when a pillar of belief starts to crumble. For me, in that moment, the pillar was trust, and as it started to crack, I found myself casting about for something, anything, solid to grab onto.

A brain aneurysm took Kelsey's life. One day she was complaining of a headache, and the next, she had slumped down at the kitchen table, unconscious. At least that's how my mom told the story. The more I think about it, the more I am struck by the similarities between that call—the one after which my mom knelt on my bed and said "Kelsey's gone"— and the one about Rob.

I barely remember Kelsey's celebration of life, not because it wasn't memorable, but because, at twelve years old, I simply couldn't fathom how a girl my age could be gone so quickly. It was as though I was drifting in and out of reality on someone else's terms. The service took place in White Pass's main lodge in the back section of the dining area. Massive windows looked out onto the hill, and a thick red-velvet curtain was draped from one side of the room to the other, about twenty feet, I estimated. A lone white piece of paper had been taped to the luxurious fabric:

Private Area

Kelsey Jensen's Celebration of Life

The ceremony consisted of a singular slideshow. Picture after picture of her short twelve years flashed by with melancholy music lilting in the background. I watched as Rob and Christina sat next to one another, Christina with her red hair pulled back into a low pony, and Rob softly holding her hands in his. They were the picture of marital sorrow; one slowly melting into another.

Ski for Kelsey stickers were handed out soon after, a blue and white design in a perfect circle. When I found that there wasn't enough, I walked up to the grieving parents and asked if there were any extras. Two pairs of red rimmed eyes looked up at me. Downwards facing

wrinkles formed along their laugh lines, and white streaked through their hair in shocking blocks of color.

"It's terrible this had to happen to them. Just terrible. They're *good* people" my mom remarked on the car ride home.

I sat silently in the backseat, thinking about the two people I had seen at the lodge. Good people, as my mom had said. Bad things can happen to anyone. That was my takeaway.

"What did Christina do when she found out?" I asked.

"She confronted him. Demanded that he tell her the truth."

"And?"

"He ran. Didn't say a word, just left."

"So, she didn't know?"

"No, she didn't know."

I felt then, both a combination of relief and sorrow; relief that Christina was still the person I knew and loved, and sorrow that she was once again losing a person she loved. A person who had been the love of her life. The man she met in college, with whom she had fallen in love, married, and had two daughters.

I laid in bed that night and hated him. It was an odd sort of hate. One that wasn't fully realized; an unraveling of a ribbon deep in my stomach. I laid there, and I thought thoughts until they all disappeared quietly into a slow slip of sleep.

Dinner parties that rapidly descended into full-blown bonfires were my favorite parts of winter weekends. Parents, tired from shepherding their children all day had a working excuse to drink copious amounts of alcohol, and kids, somehow still energetic after a full day of training filtered in and out of the cabins often clutching towels and snacks to their chests on their way to the Jensen's hot tub.

As soon as people walked in the door, Rob was there handing out beaded necklaces and plastic champagne glasses, smiling and exchanging side-hugs. He had a quiet yet magnetic personality, one that didn't demand attention, but that attracted it all the same. Whenever my family arrived, he made a point to greet us with an enthusiastic "Hey, what's up!" throwing his hands in the air and dolling out hugs like candy.

If someone had asked in the fall of last year who out of my dad's friends I trusted the most. Who I would go to if I ever had a problem, my response would have been quick and easy: Rob.

I trusted people easily, and Rob was no exception. He became a father figure, someone who I knew would have my back no matter what. With him, I felt safe. His eyes never roved and he never filled the room with too much of himself. Whenever he knocked on our cabin door, he entered respectfully, quietly sat down on our rocking chair and asked us how our day had been. I was relieved when he stopped by; he brought a calmness that was foreign to my family, one that always lifted my dad's spirits and made my mom laugh in a way I wasn't used to.

"Best day ever, Shasta. Best day ever." Rob sat in the hot tub, eyes closed with a glass of prosecco in hand. Other cabin kids were milling around, letting out small spurts of laughter

whenever he caught them about to dump snow on his head. I looked at him in surprise, it had in fact not been a good day on the hill. Definitely not the best day. He must have noticed my reaction because he responded quietly.

"Anyday we get to ski is a good day. Don't forget that."

My grief, heavy as a used towel, quickly turned into anger. Hot, tangible rage that threatened to burn me to the ground. Anger at this man for hurting his children; and his wife. Anger for the fact that one of his daughters had died, and we will never know if she had suffered as her sister had. Anger for the fact that he had walked into my cabin with such practiced ease. Anger at his betrayal of our community. Anger at myself for loving him.

For weeks after the phone call, I trudged around campus, side-eyeing every man I came across. The trust I used to give freely vanished. I quietly questioned every man's intentions; those of strangers, professors, friends, even those of my own partner.

If Rob could do this, anyone could.

He had been part of the glue that linked my family together, the one we didn't have by blood, but by choice. And now, all I was left with were shards of a broken bond.

A community is not defined by the people who betray them, but rather, by their response to the betrayal. That is the so-called conclusion I came to.

When I returned to my cabin for summer break of my freshman year, I was conflicted and confused. My last moments with Rob had been exceedingly positive. He had wrapped me in a hug, and wished me good luck in college. "Don't ski too much." These words were accompanied

with a wink and one of his famed high fives. In response, I invited him to visit when my parents were, and walked away excited to ski Snowbowl with him in the winter.

By the time the end of freshman year rolled around, I had done my fair share of contemplating. I did what anyone would in the face of such shock: went over every memory I had with him, scrolled through my camera roll, stared at his face, struggling to make sense of the news, screamed at him in my pillow cursing his actions. In the two months I had taken to process and grieve, my mind was slowly healing. Slowly. Until one morning I woke up and realized I could now at least start replacing the years of memories with a new definition of the man I thought I knew.

My error was not in revising my thinking, but in believing that other people would do the same. They were older than me, wiser, which I assumed would carry over to this situation. I assumed, and deep down, I hoped. What I did not understand, however, is that there were dynamics at work, root-like complexities, that had existed for longer than I had been observing.

The same day that my dad drove me home from Montana to Washington, a group of men on motorcycles pulled into the driveway of our cabin. Dressed in all black getups, complete with large helmets, they guffawed and revved their engines. Plumes of black smoke rose from the vehicles. I recognized most of them by their voices, despite the extensive protective clothing they wore. Jeff, Matt, John, Don, and right there, just to my right, was Rob. His high, reedy voice cut through the air. For the first time, I was speechless around him. Here they were, the men who served as my uncles, who I trusted, who had watched me grow up. And in the midst was Rob, a man who ran from his house in the middle of the night when his sixteen year old daughter called

Child Protective Services. Guilt was etched all over his face, and none of these men were willing to acknowledge it.

"We thought he was going to kill himself," they said.

[insert setting]

"They think Olivia just wanted attention. In their minds she was mad at her dad and tried to get back at him. At least that's what Rob's been saying"

"They *what*? I stared at my mom in disbelief.

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No, not at all. I don't believe it for a second. But the men do." She looked back at me with an air of resignation. The eggs and toast lost color on my plate; pallid and distasteful. I couldn't look at them and I couldn't look at her. Instead, I studied the plastic film extending over the restaurant table.

"She's sixteen mom. *Sixteen*. Her sister fucking died, and they're saying she did it for attention? Are you fucking kidding me?" I snapped.

I loved Rob like a father, it's true. There is no shame in that, although it felt as though there was for many months afterwards. He portrayed himself as kind, gentle, and never once made me feel uncomfortable. He brought me water while I was searing my skin away in the hot tub, he took me waterskiing for the first time at Rimrock Lake, he cooked bratwursts for our team during spring training. But contrary to the belief I had previously held onto, love has boundaries; limits.

When I think of him, my heart still stutters, unable to quite put the pieces of him together. My mind tries to remind me of all our good times: going backcountry skiing for the first time,

parties at The Grotto, hiking to Rimrock Dam, swimming in the summer, barbecues, support at ski races, Thanksgiving, late-night discussions, helpful advice. The list goes on. There will always be something more. Another memory, another nugget of happiness.

And likewise, there will always be reality: the consequences of his actions. The mother of his children, grieving the loss of the man she thought she knew, his daughter, who already suffered the loss of her sister, who survived the unimaginable, who will carry this burden for the rest of her life, who was forced to confront the men who blamed her for her father's actions. These are consequences that will not go away. Despite Rob's timely departure, the emotional havoc he wreaked on the people who called him family remains.

I return to my cabin quite often. In fact, as I write this piece, the sun is rising over the treetops. My dogs—one asleep on the sofa, and the other curled outside—keep me company. I can hear the honk of semi-trucks and Milky Ways speeding down the one-lane highway. It's a fresh morning, one that holds promise. Contrary to years in the past, I have no desire to visit the South Side. The respect I once held for those families vanished around the same time Rob did. It was brutally hacked to death by the excuses given to Rob's actions and the insults aimed at Olivia and Christina. But from this, comes a different, stronger connection. One that runs deep with acknowledgement and understanding, connecting all of us who have stayed together in solidarity and support. Community is home. These people are home. And from one severed system, comes a bundle of new pathways.

V.

The storm came swiftly with an open maw. One day, I was driving fifteen miles from my family's cabin to White Pass with my dog, Tule, to get an evening cross-country ski in before dinner; the next, Highway 12 was buried under three feet of snow.

Here is what I know: three feet of snow fell over three nights on White Pass in the Goat Rocks Wilderness in early January of 2022; one foot per day. On the first night, an avalanche of minor proportions slumped like a poorly constructed snowman over I-90. All traffic was stopped from the sixty miles between Naches and Packwood, Washington. Plows and highway workers were brought in at 7 AM the next morning, and that day, everything—snow, netting, rocks—was cleared. A small trickle of traffic resumed with the road's reopening consisting mainly of people fleeing the pass for the milder conditions in the Eastern valley. That night, the snow could not hold, and another avalanche dislodged from the cliff wall covering the small portion of winding highway that lay between Rimrock Lake bridge and Dead Man's Curve.

With nothing for the snow to cling on but layers and layers of itself, the road washed out.

I woke, on the first morning, to a cold that wove tendrils of gooseflesh up my legs and turned each breath into puffs of clouded air. Outside, I could see nothing but blinding whiteness, a lack of color that consumed everything—Ponderosa pines, electrical wires, the gravel of my cabin's driveway. I blinked several times, attempting to expel the weight of waking. The conscious part of my mind knew I needed to rise, if not to start chores, then at least to start a fire in the wood stove. Tule, my two-year-old shepherd mix, was whining at the door when I padded downstairs, the oversized hoodie I had slept in, loose around my shoulders. I could already feel

my skin puckering with gooseflesh as I pushed against the cabin's small front door. Jolted by the force of being dislodged, snow fell in flurries on the mat I had set out the night before. Their cold touch settled on my skin with uncomfortable closeness. I looked out and saw the same unflinching white I had seen outside my window. Tule, his russet brown fur, fox-like in its vibrancy, disappeared like a duck in black water.

Later that morning, I scrolled through the local Yakima news to see the most recent weather alert: **Avalanche Over Highway 12, Eastbound and Westbound Markers Closed Until Further Notice.** *Shit.*

My family's cabin sits just adjacent to Highway 12. Coming from Naches, you take a right hand turn off of 12 and no more than thirty feet from the road is the first of four cabins that reside on the North side of the Grotto—a community of forest service cabins, erected in the early 1920s for the construction of Rimrock Dam. Our driveway is nothing more than gravel over pine needles. From the outside, the cabin looks like a cabin. It's a muddy brown, half A-frame. The topmost section of roof is flat, but tapers in a steep angle so that snow and rain can still be funneled off it. The layout inside is nothing short of messy. A rickety front door, broken time and time again from dogs jumping on it, leads into the main room. To the left: a woodstove, two couches and a shaggy carpet that came from God knows where. To the right: a small kitchen, bathroom, and staircase that leads to a small top floor. This is where the two bedrooms sit. It is by no means a luxury getaway, and, frankly, I'm glad of it.

Being alone in its entirety is not something I have ever craved. In fact, up until I turned twenty, it was a state of being that I feared intensely. To be alone, meant relinquishing all

possibilities of help. Because of this, I had never been truly alone. That is to say, I had never been alone in quite this way: without a foreseeable end. Before, I would often remark to friends and family that I was an "extroverted introvert." Someone who was happy to go to lunch or breakfast with friends, but who would, ultimately, prefer the confines and safety of their own space. And this was true, for the most part. I breathed a sigh of relief whenever I returned home after class, immediately discarding my backpack at the foot of my bed, before grabbing the T.V. remote and scrolling for some sort of "brain dead" show. *New Girl, Friends,* or *Modern Family.* For a few minutes, I would be wholly content, wrapped and warm in one of my roommates' fuzzy blankets. But then I would reach for the comfort of my phone, start watching videos of others at parties or other celebrations and feel something that was uncannily unpleasant. *Should I be doing more?* The glass of wine I had poured sat on my side table, slowly turning sour.

While I shoveled, whistling at times to myself, the snow continued on. Shoveling is not a difficult task when done in small spurts, the monotony and steady rhythm of having a tool in hand while exerting force to clear a path both clears the mind and creates a wonderful comradery between the self and the tool. The wielder has two things: power and most importantly, purpose. Both of these things were of grave importance to me, and yet they dissipated with the snow's continued onslaught. As soon as I struck gravel, smiling as the grating shudder of rock against plastic slid up my shoulders and into my back, large white flakes accumulated, blotting out any brief semblance of progress. It was a game that had no victor. No matter how hard I tried, or how fast I moved, the snow kept falling.

I picked up a chunk of snow that had fallen from the roof earlier in the morning, and felt its heaviness, letting the weight of it balance in the palm of my hand. It felt compact and round, a

physical, tangible thing that I had created from thousands of fluffy crystalline structures. Looking around at the rest of my driveway, I wondered how many snowballs I could make with it all. The thought of a snowball fortress made me chuckle.

Tule, who refused to return inside, eventually sprang up from a burm that a massive slough of snow from a pine tree had created. He shook himself thoroughly, ears pricked to the heavens, before diving again like an arctic fox hunting voles. I stood in the doorway, dressed for the day, watching his joy, with a hint of jealousy I couldn't track. I grabbed my dad's broad mouthed avalanche shovel and resumed digging.

I spent the rest of the day busying myself with a combination of shoveling and reading. When my body tired, I exercised my mind, jumping into worlds that were far away from mine: James Welch's *Fools Crow, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Little Women.* These worlds opened their doors, and I stepped through.

Nightfall descended at five o'clock. After boiling a pot of mac and cheese for myself, and pouring a cup of dog food for Tule, I changed into my winter pajamas—black Target jammies with just the right amount of silk-to-cotton ratio—and rolled into bed. Laying there, shivering under three quilts, I listened to the snow falling in the dark. It was the sound of nothingness, a profound silence. Each flake, at once heavy and light.

When I finally drifted to sleep, no dreams came.

The power cut out on the second day around 2 PM while I was shoveling. The lone streetlamp that stood over my cabin flickered, once, twice, then went dark. Wifi went hand in hand, a luxury that only became a necessity because there was no landline. I couldn't make or

receive calls. I realized then with uncomfortable dismay, for the first time that I was alone. Completely, unutterably alone. It wasn't a revelation—I had been alone for several days at this point, and willingly so, I might add—, but rather an acute observation. One that pressed down on my perspiring body with the same uncomfortable closeness of the snow on the front door. The few cabins that ringed mine sat vacant, dark shelters with jaws locked. No chimney smoke, no clangs of snow shovels or thuds of axes against split wood. I ran inside and poured myself a cup of cold water.

How the hell am I going to get home? It was the first time the thought had occurred to me. Before this, everything had been textbook—chop kindling, fetch logs, shovel the driveway, cook increasingly small meals, and text Mom and Dad in between. Now, the last two were impossible. The stove was electric, not gas-powered, and without a landline the only way I had been able to stay in touch with my family without service was Wifi. My mind started to pick up speed, analytically going through all the possibilities. If I was to hurt myself, or worse, if Tule was to hurt himself, how would I get help? Both the hospital and veterinarian were in Yakima, twenty miles past Naches which was already twenty miles away. Forty miles for help. If I ran out of food, or more likely, if I ran out of dog food, it would still be twenty miles to the nearest gas station, forty to the nearest grocery store, Safeway. My family wasn't supposed to join me for another week at least. Forty miles for help. A week—at least—alone.

I refuse to believe that my cabin is my happiest place, because to do so would be to admit that I like solitude. In the week before the storm, I had basked in it, waking before the sun rose just so I could brew a cheap cup of coffee and watch the dawn break, hand washing my dishes,

scrubbing them clean just to dirty them again, sweeping ash from around the wood stove while listening to Jack Johnson and Ben Harper; their melodies as comforting then as they were in childhood dancing on my front porch with red beads around my neck. It was a blissful time spent utterly alone. Sure, I greeted people at the mountain, and had lunch in the lodge with family friends, but, ultimately, when I came home, unloaded my truck, and settled in for the night, I was alone. Content, complete, and alone. When the storm hit, everything changed. That vast, expansive, and encompassing feeling morphed and constricted, tightening like an elastic around a wrist. With nowhere to go, I became acutely aware of the fact that I was being buried, one flake at a time.

The slow creeping sense of anxiety that had curled at the base of my skull slowly molted into a full-blown animal. It bucked and tore and bit, raising my heart rate in a steady stream of possibility. More than a few times I poked my head out of the front door, craning my head to look at the twisted pine that reared its head over the electric lines above the roof. *Any minute now* I thought. Any minute until it crushes the already burdened roof. *And me.* A thousand different times I was crushed by the electric-line tree, and a thousand different times Tule stumbled in from the woods with bloody fur. I tried to block these thoughts out, but their unwilling presence swelled in an incredible wave of panic-stricken strength.

On the third or fourth day, the water stopped flowing. I turned the sink faucet on to wash my breakfast dishes only to notice that nothing came out. I froze, my hands shaking. No electricity was fine, no WiFi, also fine. No water though. No water was not fine. The pipes couldn't have frozen, I had been keeping the cabin at an internal heat of eighty degrees every

night thanks to the woodstove. The temperature hadn't fallen too far below twenty-five degrees at night; our pipes had endured negative temperatures with ease. No, this was something different. Taking deep breaths, I leaned on the sink's edge. The bones of my fingers stood stark under my skin, fingers whitening as I gripped harder and harder.

I grabbed some metal pails from the kitchen and started collecting snow, punching it down so that I could accumulate as much water as possible. Setting them on the top of the stove, I sprinkled some salt in and covered the pails with lids. It didn't take long for the water to boil. The little bubbles rising to the surface lightened my spirits for a bit. *I can do this,* I reminded myself. The multi-gallon water jug we kept filled was full, and I hadn't been hydrating as well as I should have been so I knew it would last me until I could figure the situation out—a day, maybe three.

I've never been one to ask for help. When I was a kid, I would stay in my room with the door closed, determined to complete all my homework before grabbing a snack. In school, I only ever raised my hand if the teacher had made participation mandatory; when I struggled with a particular problem or concept, I looked up videos online. This wasn't because I believed that I was always right, quite the contrary actually. Every time I thought of asking for help, my skin would heat up, crawling with discomfort and embarrassment.

Craig and Deb, an elderly couple native to Rimrock, lived across the highway in sporadic episodes. You never quite knew when they would actually be there. They were nice enough, acquaintances that became friends, that eventually became more like family. Craig worked at White Pass, plowing the parking lot and regularly patrolling Highway 12 for rocks that may have

fallen from the ascending cliffs. Deb ran what we called “The Store” a small convenience store that always had Ramen and olive oil—two unrelated ingredients you don’t know you need until it’s much too late and your sister is asking what’s for lunch tomorrow. My dad had a tab there, so anytime me or my sister needed a snack or small necessity, we ran across the street and charged it under “Scott.” I loved the Store, but there was always a tense air around Craig and Deb. I never quite knew where I stood. The year before, I had greeted Craig with a cheery “Hey, how are you?”, only to receive a vacant stare back. When I explained, “I’m Scott’s daughter,” he finally recognized me and gave me a quiet smile back. I didn’t go back for some time.

Just before dusk, I pulled on my snow bibs, puffy jacket, and leather gloves, whistled to Tule who had buried himself under a tree, and trekked over to the Store. Inspired by the fact that a trickle of smoke was rising from the chimney, I tried the doorknob, wriggling it once then twice. On the third try it gave with a slight shudder.

“Hello?” My voice came out cracked and nervous.

I didn’t know why I was nervous. Over the last five years my family had owned our cabin, Craig and Deb were one of our most common visitors, often walking over in the evening to share a story and cheap beer. Just two Thanksgivings before, Deb had baked her famous homemade bread—a delectable yellow entity that proved to be fluffier than anything I had ever tasted—and spent the holiday with us unannounced. And yet, I still felt guilty, like an intruder of sorts.

“Shasta? That you?” Craig’s hulking figure emerged from behind the cashier counter, grizzled beard obscuring the better part of his face. He peered down at me, rubbing his greased hands on the only overalls I had ever seen him wear.

"Hi, yeah, my water won't run and I'm not sure what the problem is," I stuttered quickly.

After a few seconds he chuckled, heaving his shoulders up and down.

"You over there all alone?"

"Yeah. I've been up for a week or so."

"You what—?" He shook his head. "—why the hell haven't you come over earlier? I thought I saw your truck in the driveway the other day."

He paused for a second before walking over to the front door, motioning for me to follow.

"Let me get 'er all geared up," he said as he opened his truck's front door.

That evening, I watched from the living room window as Craig cleared the driveway I had painstakingly been clearing over the last few days. I marveled at the ease with which the machine ran; gears all tuned for a specific purpose, and thought to myself how dissimilar it was to me. My lower back screamed when I stretched, and my hands, not used to the consistent rubbing of a shovel, were specked with new bruises. Despite having assured myself that I didn't need any help, my breath came easier when Craig peeked his head in a half hour later to say, "Water's all fixed. Just needed to toy with the pump." Turns out that the summer before, construction workers had damaged the water pipes when they patched up the bridge that runs over Wildcat Creek just behind the cabin. Every once in a while, there were issues; the details of which I'm not sure. I did know one thing though: I had water.

It snowed, and snowed, and snowed, until, suddenly, on the fifth day, it stopped. I stepped outside that morning, to a crystal blue sky, clouds expelled in the face of a sunny winter sky. A great wave of relief washed over me, followed by the inevitable thought: Is this the end?

It wasn't. The wind came not shortly after, whipping trees in vicious frenzies. Snow buries; wind razes, and snaps. The cabin, small in its dimensions, a little under a thousand square feet, convoluted by oddly shaped walls and a strange zig-zagging staircase, sits directly under four families of one hundred and fifty-foot old-growth Ponderosa Pines. Their trunks, thicker than two average-sized adult men, are strong; their limbs, not so much. Weakened by the historic amount of snow, these limbs began to snap in massive cracking episodes.

Tule, ever evasive of the tree confetti ducked and dodged, thrilled by the fact that he could stay outside indefinitely. The crashes of branches on the snow-puffed ground didn't bother him a bit. I watched him in wonder, from the safety of my cabin. He was in his element, I desperately wanted to be in mine.

The mountains have always been home to me, a place free of the typical ties to everyday life—bills, homework, work. My name, inspired by Mount Shasta, the second-tallest mountain in the Cascade Range, only proves it—a childhood assertion I refuse to let go of. When I was three years old my dad put me on a pair of old yellow Fischer skis, drove me to the base of Mount Rainier, and started pushing me down the slope. There's a photo from my first day on skis, wrapped in a blue ski suit, laughing at my dad behind the camera. From then on, "It was meant to be" as my dad always says. I raced for twelve years, and then fresh out of high school, started reaching for the touring world. It was a realm I had dabbled in but never truly embraced. Expelling the rules and structure of ski racing, I dove in. For Christmas on my eighteenth birthday, I was gifted a backcountry set up—skins, a beacon, shovel, and probe. They immediately became my most treasured possessions.

When I take the first step up a skin track, or up a volcano, or other mountainous areas, I feel a certain metaphorical weight roll off. It's a feeling common to many mountaineers. Something about the crisp air unfettered by city pollutants, cold snow underfoot, and no service, combines to make the ultimate stress reliever. But, it's also something more. The mountains remind me of the yellow skis that now hang over my little sister's bedroom and the puffy blue snowsuit, of my dad whooping and hollering, and most importantly, of freedom.

On the day I decided to venture out and grab groceries in Yakima, the wind clocked sixty miles an hour. It howled around the cabin bending trees at unnatural angles. Driving down the Yakima canyon, I tried not to look out the window for fear of seeing the wreckage. More than a few times I worried about the state of my windshield as branches showered down on the highway as though the trees were pinatas being hit by an overzealous child. Despite the violence of the storm though, the sky was a thin cotton candy blue, free of the clouds that had choked it during the snowstorm. As I drove down the corridor, I couldn't help but look upwards in wonder as it rolled by, endlessly expansive. Infinite, cold, and beautiful. It held no malice, and no care. It simply stretched onwards. I knew more snow would come after the wind, and then more wind after that: a winter storm vortex, reliable and steady in its strength. The trees trilled by, and then disappeared as Tule and I emerged into the canyon. Massive gleaming slices of yellow and red shone through where the cliffs climbed too high for snow to cling. This view, one I had seen almost every day of my life, blinded me. I stared until my eyes burned.

There is no secret to being alone, at least not one that I have discovered. In the end, I remained stuck at my cabin for twelve days. I came to know the small space I had spent much of

my teenage life in, with new intimacy. The walls, slanted and plastered in fake “plastic-wood” had protected me; sheltered me. I left with a strange confidence, both in myself, and in the place I called home. When I return now, I consider this place closer to home than anything I have experienced. I have called many different places home in my two decades of life. Of them, however, there are only two that I ever felt connected to. With each new year, Olympia feels more and more significant, the tides of the Sound finding various ways to seep into my consciousness. But Tieton, complete with its mix of people and experiences stands strong. I find new things to learn, new things to laugh about, new things to enjoy.

I remember the day my mother gained citizenship like it was yesterday. It’s a time that I think of often. The whole house came alive with energy and excitement. I was ten years old, busy playing Dress Up Games on the family computer, a clunky orange hulk of a thing, when she burst through the front door, flashing a photo at my sister and I. We gathered around, eager to see the proof, our small hands grasping at hers. In the image, she’s smiling, waving a small American flag in her hand. Its small frame ripples with movement; blue on red on white. Several other people stand around her with similar expressions of joy and relief. All are sitting up straight, faces peering out in unity. Her hair is brushed to a glossy sheen and a small dusting of blush warms her face. I had never felt so proud. In the weeks prior, my mother had thrown herself into the preparations. I remembered everything; the practice tests and sheets of questions that she had memorized, the careful examination of U.S. history, the practice of English writing. I remember my dad quizzing her, and then having to check answers that he, a citizen by birth, didn’t know. I had seen the flashcards, nights spent hunched over my father’s desk with a night

light illuminating a single square inch for writing. There had been a buzz of anxiety in our house that, with this photo, dissipated. She looked at my sister and I with a smile.

"I'm a citizen. An American citizen." She had bridged the gap. She was home.

I am home when I drive through the Tieton valley. When the river meets Highway 12, cloudy and clear, patchy, as we all are. I am home when the flimsy "Rimrock Grocery" sign emerges above the highway's path. When the trees thicken in murky clusters against needled grounds. I am home when I turn into the cabin's driveway, feeling the shale lodge itself in my truck's tires. This shudder of rock against rubber tells me where I am, a physical reminder of coming back, of returning. In racing, I move out of my mind and into my body, allowing one to claim the other. When I return here, I do the same.

There is no secret, no defining factor. Just the land, the mountains, the cabin in all its haggard charm, and me. To return is to remember the memories that have meshed together to create this vibrant entangled web of life and people. It is an act of kindness and self-love. And, when it comes time to leave once more, it will remain, as it always does, slowly changing with the seasons.