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If I Stay

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If I Stay

GAYLE FORMAN

DOUBLEDAY

IF I STAY
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For Nick
Finally . . . Always

7:09 a.m.

Everyone thinks it was because of the snow. And in a way, I suppose that's true.

I wake up this morning to a thin blanket of white covering our front lawn. It isn't even an inch, but in this part of Oregon a slight dusting brings everything to a standstill as the one snowplow in the county gets busy clearing the roads. It is wet water that drops from the sky – and drops and drops and drops – not the frozen kind.

It is enough snow to cancel school. My little brother, Teddy, lets out a war whoop when Mom's AM radio announces the closures. 'Snow day!' he bellows. 'Dad, let's go make a snowman.'

My dad smiles and taps on his pipe. He started smoking one recently as part of this whole 1950s, *Father Knows Best* retro kick he is on. He also wears bow ties. I am never quite clear on whether all this is sartorial or sardonic – Dad's way of announcing that he used to be a punker but is now a

middle-school English teacher, or if becoming a teacher has actually turned my dad into this genuine throwback. But I like the smell of the pipe tobacco. It is sweet and smoky, and reminds me of winters and wood-stoves.

'You can make a valiant try,' Dad tells Teddy. 'But it's hardly sticking to the roads. Maybe you should consider a snow amoeba.'

I can tell Dad is happy. Barely an inch of snow means that all the schools in the county are closed, including my high school and the middle school where Dad works, so it's an unexpected day off for him, too. My mother, who works for a travel agent in town, clicks off the radio and pours herself a second cup of coffee. 'Well, if you lot are playing hooky today, no way I'm going to work. It's simply not right.' She picks up the telephone to call in. When she's done, she looks at us. 'Should I make breakfast?'

Dad and I guffaw at the same time. Mom makes cereal and toast. Dad's the cook in the family.

Pretending not to hear us, she reaches into the cabinet for a box of Bisquick. 'Please. How hard can it be? Who wants pancakes?'

'I do! I do!' Teddy yells. 'Can we have chocolate chips in them?'

'I don't see why not,' Mom replies.

'Woo-hoo!' Teddy yelps, waving his arms in the air.

'You have far too much energy for this early in the morning,' I tease. I turn to Mom. 'Maybe you shouldn't let Teddy drink so much coffee.'

'I've switched him to decaf,' Mom volleys back. 'He's just naturally exuberant.'

'As long as you're not switching *me* to decaf,' I say.

'That would be child abuse,' Dad says.

Mom hands me a steaming mug and the newspaper.

'There's a nice picture of your young man in there,' she says.

'Really? A picture?'

'Yep. It's about the most we've seen of him since summer,' Mom says, giving me a sidelong glance with her eyebrow arched, her version of a soul-searching stare.

'I know,' I say, and then without meaning to, I sigh. Adam's band, Shooting Star, is on an upward spiral, which, is a great thing – mostly.

'Ah, fame, wasted on the youth,' Dad says, but he's smiling. I know he's excited for Adam. Proud even.

I leaf through the newspaper to the calendar section. There's a small blurb about Shooting Star, with an even smaller picture of the four of them, next to a big article about Bikini and a huge picture of the band's lead singer: punk-rock-diva Brooke Vega. The bit about them basically says that local band Shooting Star is opening for Bikini on

the Portland leg of Bikini's national tour. It doesn't mention the even-bigger-to-me news that last night Shooting Star headlined at a club in Seattle and, according to the text Adam sent me at midnight, sold out the place.

'Are you going tonight?' Dad asks.

'I was planning to. It depends if they shut down the whole state on account of the snow.'

'It *is* approaching a blizzard,' Dad says, pointing to a single snowflake floating its way to the earth.

'I'm also supposed to rehearse with some pianist from the college that Professor Christie dug up.' Professor Christie, a retired music teacher at the university who I've been working with for the last few years, is always looking for victims for me to play with. 'Keep you sharp so you can show all those Juilliard snobs how it's really done,' she says.

I haven't gotten into Juilliard yet, but my audition went really well. The Bach suite and the Shostakovich had both flown out of me like never before, like my fingers were just an extension of the strings and bow. When I'd finished playing, panting, my legs shaking from pressing together so hard, one judge had clapped a little, which I guess doesn't happen very often. As I'd shuffled out, that same judge had told me that: 'it had been a long time since the school had seen an Oregon country girl'. Professor Christie had taken that to mean a guaranteed acceptance. I wasn't so sure that

was true. And I wasn't 100 per cent sure that I wanted it to be true. Just like with Shooting Star's meteoric rise, my admission to Juilliard – if it happens – will create certain complications, or, more accurately, would compound the complications that have already cropped up in the last few months.

'I need more coffee. Anyone else?' Mom asks, hovering over me with the ancient percolator.

I sniff the coffee, the rich, black, oily French roast we all prefer. The smell alone perks me up. 'I'm pondering going back to bed,' I say. 'My cello's at school, so I can't even practice.'

'Not practice? For twenty-four hours? Be still, my broken heart,' Mom says. Though she has acquired a taste for classical music over the years – 'it's like learning to appreciate a stinky cheese' – she's been a not-always-delighted captive audience for many of my marathon rehearsals.

I hear a crash and a boom coming from upstairs. Teddy is pounding on his drum kit. It used to belong to Dad. Back when he'd played drums in a big-in-our-town, unknown-anywhere-else band, back when he'd worked at a record store.

Dad grins at Teddy's noise, and seeing that, I feel a familiar pang. I know it's silly but I have always wondered if Dad is

disappointed that I didn't become a rock chick. I'd meant to. Then, in third grade, I'd wandered over to the cello in music class – it looked almost human to me. It looked like if you played it, it would tell you secrets, so I started playing. It's been almost ten years now and I haven't stopped.

'So much for going back to sleep,' Mom yells over Teddy's noise.

'What do you know, the snow's already melting.' Dad says, puffing on his pipe. I go to the back door and peek outside. A patch of sunlight has broken through the clouds, and I can hear the hiss of the ice melting. I close the door and go back to the table.

'I think the county overreacted,' I say.

'Maybe. But they can't un-cancel school. Horse is already out of the barn, and I already called in for the day off,' Mom says.

'Indeed. But we might take advantage of this unexpected boon and go somewhere,' Dad says. 'Take a drive. Visit Henry and Willow.' Henry and Willow are a couple of Mom and Dad's old music friends who'd also had a kid and decided to start behaving like grown-ups. They live in a big old farmhouse. Henry does Web stuff from the barn they converted into a home office and Willow works at a nearby hospital. They have a baby girl. That's the real reason Mom and Dad want to go out there. Teddy having just turned eight and me

being seventeen means that we are long past giving off that sour-milk smell that makes adults melt.

'We can stop at BookBarn on the way back,' Mom says, as if to entice me. BookBarn is a giant, dusty old used-book store. In the back they keep a stash of twenty-five-cent classical records that nobody ever seems to buy except me. I keep a pile of them hidden under my bed. A collection of classical records is not the kind of thing you advertise.

I've shown them to Adam, but that was only after we'd already been together for five months. I'd expected him to laugh. He's such the cool guy with his pegged jeans and black low-tops, his effortlessly beat-up punk-rock tees and his subtle tattoos. He is so not the kind of guy to end up with someone like me. Which was why when I'd first spotted him watching me at the music studios at school two years ago, I'd been convinced he was making fun of me and I'd hidden from him. Anyhow, he hadn't laughed. It turned out he had a dusty collection of punk-rock records under his bed.

'We can also stop by Gran and Gramps for an early dinner,' Dad says, already reaching for the phone. 'We'll have you back in plenty of time to get to Portland,' he adds as he dials.

'I'm in,' I say. It isn't the lure of BookBarn, or the fact that Adam is on tour, or that my best friend, Kim, is busy doing

yearbook stuff. It isn't even that my cello is at school or that I could stay home and watch TV or sleep. I'd actually rather go off with my family. This is another thing you don't advertise about yourself, but Adam gets that, too.

'Teddy,' Dad calls. 'Get dressed. We're going on an adventure.'

Teddy finishes off his drum solo with a crash of cymbals. A moment later he's bounding into the kitchen fully dressed, as if he'd pulled on his clothes while careening down the steep wooden staircase of our drafty Victorian house. 'School's out for summer . . .' he sings.

'Alice Cooper?' Dad asks. 'Have we no standards? At least sing the Ramones.'

'School's out for ever,' Teddy sings over Dad's protests.

'Ever the optimist,' I say.

Mom laughs. She puts a plate of slightly charred pancakes down on the kitchen table. 'Eat up, family.'

8:17 a.m.

We pile into the car, a rusting Buick that was already old when Gran gave it to us after Teddy was born. Mom and Dad offer to let me drive, but I say no. Dad slips behind the wheel. He likes to drive now. He'd stubbornly refused to get

a license for years, insisting on riding his bike everywhere. Back when he played music, his unwillingness to drive meant that his bandmates were the ones stuck behind the wheel on tours. They used to roll their eyes at him. Mom had done more than that. She'd pestered, cajoled, and sometimes yelled at Dad to get a license, but he'd insisted that he preferred pedal power. 'Well, then you better get to work on building a bike that can hold a family of three and keep us dry when it rains,' she'd demanded. To which Dad always had laughed and said that he'd get on that.

But when Mom had gotten pregnant with Teddy, she'd put her foot down. Enough, she said. Dad seemed to understand that something had changed. He'd stopped arguing and had gotten a driver's license. He'd also gone back to school to get his teaching certificate. I guess it was OK to be in arrested development with one kid. But with two, time to grow up. Time to start wearing a bow tie.

He has one on this morning, along with a flecked sport coat and vintage wingtips. 'Dressed for the snow, I see,' I say.

'I'm like the post office,' Dad replies, scraping the snow off the car with one of Teddy's plastic dinosaurs that are scattered on the lawn. 'Neither sleet nor rain nor a half inch of snow will compel me to dress like a lumberjack.'

'Hey, my relatives were lumberjacks,' Mom warns. 'No making fun of the white-trash woodsmen.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' Dad replies. 'Just making stylistic contrasts.'

Dad has to turn the ignition over a few times before the car chokes to life. As usual, there is a battle for stereo dominance. Mom wants the news. Dad wants Frank Sinatra. Teddy wants SpongeBob SquarePants. I want the classical-music station, but recognizing that I'm the only classical fan in the family, I am willing to compromise with Shooting Star.

Dad brokers the deal. 'Seeing as we're missing school today, we ought to listen to the news for a while so we don't become ignoramuses—'

'I believe that's ignoramusi,' Mom says.

Dad rolls his eyes and clasps his hand over Mom's and clears his throat in that schoolteachery way of his. 'As I was saying, the news first, and then when the news is over, the classical station. Teddy, we will not torture you with that. You can use the Discman,' Dad says, starting to disconnect the portable player he's rigged to the car radio. 'But you are not allowed to play to Alice Cooper in my car. I forbid it.' Dad reaches into the glove box to examine what's inside. 'How about Jonathan Richman?'

'I want SpongeBob. It's in the machine,' Teddy shouts, bouncing up and down and pointing to the Discman. The chocolate-chip pancakes dowsed in syrup have clearly only enhanced his hyper excitement.

'Son, you break my heart,' Dad jokes. Both Teddy and I were raised on the goofy tunes of Jonathan Richman, who is Mom and Dad's musical patron saint.

Once the musical selections have been made, we are off. The road has some patches of snow, but mostly it's just wet. But this is Oregon. The roads are always wet. Mom used to joke that it was when the road was dry that people ran into trouble. 'They get cocky, throw caution to the wind, drive like assholes. The cops have a field day doling out speeding tickets.'

I lean my head against the car window, watching the scenery zip by, a tableau of dark-green fir trees dotted with snow, wispy strands of white fog, and heavy gray storm clouds up above. It's so warm in the car that the windows keep fogging up, and I draw little squiggles in the condensation.

When the news is over, we turn to the classical station. I hear the first few bars of Beethoven's Cello Sonata no. 3, which was the very piece I was supposed to be working on this afternoon. It feels like some kind of cosmic coincidence. I concentrate on the notes, imagining myself playing, feeling grateful for this chance to practice, happy to be in a warm car with my sonata and my family. I close my eyes.

You wouldn't expect the radio to work afterward. But it does.

The car is eviscerated. The impact of a four-ton pickup truck going sixty miles an hour plowing straight into the passenger side had the force of an atom bomb. It tore off the doors, sent the front-side passenger seat through the driver's-side window. It flipped the chassis, bouncing it across the road and ripped the engine apart as if it were no stronger than a spider web. It tossed wheels and hubcaps deep into the forest. It ignited bits of the gas tank, so that now tiny flames lap at the wet road.

And there was so much noise. A symphony of grinding, a chorus of popping, an aria of exploding, and finally, the sad clapping of hard metal cutting into soft trees. Then it went quiet, except for this: Beethoven's Cello Sonata no. 3, still playing. The car radio somehow still is attached to a battery and so Beethoven is broadcasting into the once-again tranquil February morning.

At first I figure everything is fine. For one, I can still hear the Beethoven. Then there's the fact that I am standing here in a ditch on the side of the road. When I look down, the jean skirt, cardigan sweater, and the black boots I put on this morning all look the same as they did when we left the house.

I climb up the embankment to get a better look at the car. It isn't even a car anymore. It's a metal skeleton, without seats, without passengers. Which means the rest of my

family must have been thrown from the car like me. I brush off my hands onto my skirt and walk into the road to find them.

I see Dad first. Even from several feet away, I can make out the protrusion of the pipe in his jacket pocket. 'Dad,' I call, but as I walk toward him, the pavement grows slick and there are gray chunks of what looks like cauliflower. I know what I'm seeing right away but it somehow does not immediately connect back to my father. What springs into my mind are those news reports about tornadoes or fires, how they'll ravage one house but leave the one next door intact. Pieces of my father's brain are on the asphalt. But his pipe is in his left breast pocket.

I find Mom next. There's almost no blood on her, but her lips are already blue and the whites of her eyes are completely red, like a ghoul from a low-budget monster movie. She seems totally unreal. And it is the sight of her looking like some preposterous zombie that sends a hummingbird of panic ricocheting through me.

I need to find Teddy! Where is he? I spin around, suddenly frantic, like the time I lost him for ten minutes at the grocery store. I'd been convinced he'd been kidnapped. Of course, it had turned out that he'd wandered over to inspect the candy aisle. When I found him, I hadn't been sure whether to hug him or yell at him.

I run back toward the ditch where I came from and I see a hand sticking out. 'Teddy! I'm right here!' I call. 'Reach up. I'll pull you out.' But when I get closer, I see the metal glint of a silver bracelet with tiny cello and guitar charms. Adam gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday. It's my bracelet. I was wearing it this morning. I look down at my wrist. I'm still wearing it now.

I edge closer and now I know that it's not Teddy lying there. It's me. The blood from my chest has seeped through my shirt, skirt and sweater, and is now pooling like paint drops on the virgin snow. One of my legs is askew, the skin and muscle peeled away so that I can see white streaks of bone. My eyes are closed, and my dark-brown hair is wet and rusty with blood.

I spin away. This isn't right. This cannot be happening. We are a family, going on a drive. This isn't real. I must have fallen asleep in the car. *No! Stop. Please stop. Please wake up!* I scream into the chilly air. It's cold. My breath should smoke. It doesn't. I stare down at my wrist, the one that looks fine, untouched by blood and gore, and I pinch as hard as I can.

I don't feel a thing.

I have had nightmares before – falling nightmares, playing- a-cello-recital-without-knowing-the-music nightmares, break-up-with-Adam nightmares – but I have always been

able to command myself to open my eyes, to lift my head from the pillow, to halt the horror movie playing behind my closed lids. I try again. *Wake up!* I scream. *Wake up! Wakeupwakeupwakeup!* But I can't. I don't.

Then I hear something. It's the music. I can still hear the music. So I concentrate on that. I finger the notes of Beethoven's Cello Sonata no. 3 with my hands, as I often do when I listen to pieces I am working on. Adam calls it 'air cello.' He's always asking me if one day we can play a duet, him on air guitar, me on air cello. 'When we're done, we can thrash our air instruments,' he jokes. 'You know you want to.'

I play, just focusing on that, until the last bit of life in the car dies, and the music goes with it.

It isn't long after that the sirens come.

9:23 a.m.

Am I dead?

I actually have to ask myself this.

Am I dead?

At first it seemed obvious that I am. That the standing-here-watching part was temporary, an intermission before the bright light and the life-flashing-before-me business

that would transport me to wherever I'm going next.

Except the paramedics are here now, along with the police and the fire department. Someone has put a sheet over my father. And a fireman is zipping Mom up into a plastic bag. I hear him discuss her with another firefighter, who looks like he can't be more than eighteen. The older one explains to the rookie that Mom was probably hit first and killed instantly, explaining the lack of blood. 'Immediate cardiac arrest,' he says. 'When your heart can't pump blood, you don't really bleed. You seep.'

I can't think about that, about Mom seeping. So instead I think how fitting it is that she was hit first, that she was the one to buffer us from the blow. It wasn't her choice, obviously, but it was her way.

But am I dead? The me who is lying on the edge of the road, my leg hanging down into the gulley, is surrounded by a team of men and women who are performing frantic ablutions over me and plugging my veins with I do not know what. I'm half naked, the paramedics having ripped open the top of my shirt. One of my breasts is exposed. Embarrassed, I look away.

The police have lit flares along the perimeter of the scene and are instructing cars in either direction to turn back, the road is closed. The police politely offer alternate routes, back roads that will take people where they need to be.

They must have places to go, the people in these cars, but a lot of them don't turn back. They climb out of their cars, hugging themselves against the cold. They appraise the scene. And then they look away, some of them crying, one woman throwing up into the ferns on the side of the road. And even though they don't know who we are or what has happened, they pray for us. I can feel them praying.

Which also makes me think I'm dead. That and the fact my body seems to be completely numb, though to look at me, at the leg that the sixty m.p.h. asphalt exfoliant has pared down to the bone, I should be in agony. And I'm not crying, either, even though I *know* that something unthinkable has just happened to my family. We are like Humpty Dumpty and all these king's horses and all these king's men cannot put us back together again.

I am pondering these things when the medic with the freckles and red hair who has been working on me answers my question. 'Her Glasgow Coma is an eight. Let's bag her now!' she screams.

She and the lantern-jawed medic snake a tube down my throat, attach a bag with a bulb to it, and start pumping. 'What's the ETA for Life Flight?'

'Ten minutes,' answers the medic. 'It takes twenty to get back to town.'

'We're going to get her there in fifteen if you have to speed like a fucking demon.'

I can tell what the guy is thinking. That it won't do me any good if they get into a crash, and I have to agree. But he doesn't say anything. Just clenches his jaw. They load me into the ambulance; the redhead climbs into the back with me. She pumps my bag with one hand, adjusts my IV and my monitors with the other. Then she smoothes a lock of hair from my forehead.

'You hang in there,' she tells me.

*

I played my first recital when I was ten. I'd been playing cello for two years at that point. At first, just at school, as part of the music program. It was a fluke that they even had a cello; they're very expensive and fragile. But some old literature professor from the university had died and bequeathed his Hamburg to our school. It mostly sat in the corner. Most kids wanted to learn to play guitar or saxophone.

When I announced to Mom and Dad that I was going to become a cellist, they both burst out laughing. They apologized about it later, claiming that the image of pint-size me with such a hulking instrument between my spindly legs had made them crack up. Once they'd realized I was

serious, they immediately swallowed their giggles and put on supportive faces.

But their reaction still stung – in ways that I never told them about, and in ways that I'm not sure they would've understood even if I had. Dad sometimes joked that the hospital where I was born must have accidentally swapped babies because I look nothing like the rest of my family. They are all blond and fair and I'm like their negative image, brown hair and dark eyes. But as I got older, Dad's hospital joke took on more meaning than I think he intended. Sometimes I did feel like I came from a different tribe. I was not like my outgoing, ironic dad or my tough-chick mom. And as if to seal the deal, instead of learning to play electric guitar, I'd gone and chosen the cello.

But in my family, playing music was still more important than the type of music you played, so when after a few months it became clear that my love for the cello was no passing crush, my parents rented me one so I could practice at home. Rusty scales and triads led to first attempts at 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' that eventually gave way to basic *études* until I was playing Bach suites. My middle school didn't have much of a music program, so Mom found me a private teacher, a college student who came over once a week. Over the years there was a revolving batch of students who taught me, and then, as my skills

surpassed theirs, my student teachers played with me.

This continued until ninth grade, when Dad, who'd known Professor Christie from when he'd worked at the music store, asked if she might be willing to offer me private lessons. She agreed to listen to me play, not expecting much, but as a favor to Dad, she later told me. She and Dad listened downstairs while I was up in my room practicing a Vivaldi sonata. When I came down for dinner, she offered to take over my training.

My first recital, though, was years before I met her. It was at a hall in town, a place that usually showcased local bands, so the acoustics were terrible for unamplified classical. I was playing a cello solo from Tchaikovsky's 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy'.

Standing backstage, listening to other kids play scratchy violin and clunky piano compositions, I'd almost chickened out. I'd run to the stage door and huddled on the stoop outside, hyperventilating into my hands. My student teacher had flown into a minor panic and had sent out a search party.

Dad found me. He was just starting his hipster-to-square transformation, so he was wearing a vintage suit, with a studded leather belt and black ankle boots.

'You OK, Mia Oh-My-Uh?' he asked, sitting down next to me on the steps.

I shook my head, too ashamed to talk.

'What's up?'

'I can't do it,' I cried.

Dad cocked one of his bushy eyebrows and stared at me with his gray-blue eyes. I felt like some mysterious foreign species he was observing and trying to figure out. He'd been playing in bands for ever. Obviously, he *never* got something as lame as stage fright.

'Well, that would be a shame,' Dad said. 'I've got a dandy of a recital present for you. Better than flowers.'

'Give it to someone else. I can't go out there. I'm not like you or Mom or even Teddy.' Teddy was just six months old at that point, but it was already clear that he had more personality, more verve, than I ever would. And of course, he was blond and blue-eyed. Even if he weren't, he'd been born in a birthing center, not a hospital, so there was no chance of an accidental baby swapping.

'It's true,' Dad mused. 'When Teddy gave his first harp concert, he was cool as cucumber. Such a prodigy.'

I laughed through my tears. Dad put a gentle arm around my shoulder. 'You know that I used to get the most ferocious jitters before a show.'

I looked at Dad, who always seemed absolutely sure of everything in the world. 'You're just saying that.'

He shook his head. 'No, I'm not. It was god-awful. And I

was the drummer, way in the back. No one even paid any attention to me.'

'So what did you do?' I asked.

'He got wasted,' Mom interjected, poking her head out the stage door. She was wearing a black vinyl miniskirt, a red tank top, and Teddy, droolingly happy from his BabyBjörn. 'A pair of forty-ouncers before the show. I don't recommend that for you.'

'Your mother is probably right,' Dad said. 'Social services frowns on drunk ten-year-olds. Besides, when I dropped my drumsticks and puked onstage, it was punk. If you drop your bow and smell like a brewery, it will look gauche. You classical-music people are so snobby that way.'

Now I was laughing. I was still scared, but it was somehow comforting to think that maybe stage fright was a trait I'd inherited from Dad; I wasn't just some foundling, after all.

'What if I mess it up? What if I'm terrible?'

'I've got news for you, Mia. There's going to be all kinds of terrible in there, so you won't really stand out,' Mom said. Teddy gave a squeal of agreement.

'But seriously, how do you get over the jitters?'

Dad was still smiling but I could tell he had turned serious because he slowed down his speech. 'You don't. You just work through it. You just hang in there.'

So I went on. I didn't blaze through the piece. I didn't achieve glory or get a standing ovation, but I didn't muck it up entirely, either. And after the recital, I got my present. It was sitting in the passenger seat of the car, looking as human as that cello I'd been drawn to two years earlier. It wasn't a rental. It was mine.

10:12 a.m.

When my ambulance gets to the nearest hospital – not the one in my hometown but a small local place that looks more like an old-age home than a medical center – the medics rush me inside. 'I think we've got a collapsed lung. Get a chest tube in her and move her out!' the nice red-haired medic screams as she passes me off to a team of nurses and doctors.

'Where's the rest?' asks a bearded guy in scrubs.

'Other driver suffering mild concussions, being treated at the scene. Parents DOA Boy, approximately seven years old, just behind us.'

I let out a huge exhale, as though I've been holding my breath for the last twenty minutes. After seeing myself in that ditch, I had not been able to look for Teddy. If he were like Mom and Dad, like me, I . . . I didn't want to even think about it. But he isn't. He is alive.

They take me into a small room with bright lights. A doctor dabs some orange stuff onto the side of my chest and then rams a small plastic tube in me. Another doctor shines a flashlight into my eye. 'Non-responsive,' he tells the nurse. 'The chopper's here. Get her to Trauma. Now!'

They rush me out of the ER and into the elevator. I have to jog to keep up. Right before the doors close, I notice that Willow is here. Which is odd. We were meant to be visiting her and Henry and the baby at home. Did she get called in because of the snow? Because of us? She rushes around the hospital hall, her face a mask of concentration. I don't think she even knows it is us yet. Maybe she even tried to call, left a message on Mom's cell phone, apologizing that there'd been an emergency and she wouldn't be home for our visit.

The elevator opens right onto the roof. A helicopter, its blades swooshing the air, sits in the middle of a big red circle.

I've never been in a helicopter before. My best friend, Kim, has. She went on an aerial flight over Mount St Helens once with her uncle, a big-shot photographer for *National Geographic*.

'There he was, talking about the post-volcanic flora and I puked right on him and all over the cameras,' Kim told me in homeroom the next day. She still looked a little green from the experience.

Kim is on yearbook and has hopes of becoming a photographer. Her uncle had taken her on this trip as a favor, to nurture her budding talent. 'I even got some on his cameras,' Kim lamented. 'I'll never be a photographer now.'

'There are all kinds of different photographers,' I told her. 'You don't necessarily need to go flying around in helicopters.'

Kim laughed. 'That's good. Because I'm never going on a helicopter again – and don't you, either!'

I want to tell Kim that sometimes you don't have a choice in the matter.

The hatch in the helicopter is opened, and my stretcher with all its tubes and lines is loaded in. I climb into the helicopter behind it. A medic bounds in next to me, still pumping the little plastic bulb that is apparently breathing for me. Once we lift off, I understand why Kim got so queasy. A helicopter is not like an airplane, a smooth fast bullet. A helicopter is more like a hockey puck bounced through the sky. Up and down, side to side. I have no idea how these people can work on me, can read the small computer print-outs, can drive this thing while they communicate about me through headsets, how they can do any of it with the chopper chopping around.

The helicopter hits an air pocket and by all rights it should make me queasy. But I don't feel anything, at least the me who's a bystander here does not. And the me on the

stretcher doesn't seem to feel anything, either. Again I have to wonder if I'm dead but then I tell myself no. They would not have loaded me on this helicopter, would not be flying me across the lush forests if I were dead.

Also, if I were dead, I like to think Mom and Dad would've come for me by now.

I can see the time on the control panel. It's 10:37. I wonder what's happening back down on the ground. Has Willow figured out who the emergency is? Has anyone phoned my grandparents? They live one town over from us, and I was looking forward to dinner with them. Gramps fishes and he smokes his own salmon and oysters, and we would've probably eaten that with Gran's home-made thick brown beer bread. Then Gran would've taken Teddy over to the giant recycling bins in town and let him swim around for magazines. Lately, he's had a thing for *Reader's Digest*. He likes to cut out the cartoons and make collages.

I wonder about Kim. There's no school today. I probably won't be in school tomorrow. She'll probably think I'm absent because I stayed out late listening to Adam and Shooting Star in Portland.

Portland. I am fairly certain that I'm being taken there. The helicopter pilot keeps talking to Trauma One. Outside the window, I can see the peak of Mount Hood looming. That means Portland is close.

Is Adam already there? He played in Seattle last night but he's always so full of adrenaline after a gig, and driving helps him to come down. The band is normally happy to let him chauffeur while they nap. If he's already in Portland, he's probably still asleep. When he wakes up, will he have coffee on Hawthorne Boulevard? Maybe take a book over to the Japanese Garden? That's what we did the last time I went to Portland with him, only it was warmer then. Later this afternoon, I know that the band will do a sound check. And then Adam will go outside to await my arrival. At first, he'll think that I'm late. How is he going to know that I'm actually early? That I got to Portland this morning while the snow was still melting?

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