

Alice Della Rocca hated ski school. She hated getting up at seven-thirty, even during Christmas vacation. She hated her father staring at her over breakfast, his leg dancing nervously under the table as if to say hurry up, get a move on. She hated the woolen tights that made her thighs itch, the mittens that kept her from moving her fingers, the helmet that squashed her cheeks, and the big, too tight boots that made her walk like a gorilla.

“Are you going to drink that milk or not?” her father insisted again.

Alice gulped down three inches of boiling milk, burning her tongue, throat, and stomach.

“Good, today you can show us what you’re really made of.”

What’s that? Alice wondered.

He shoved her out the door, mummified in a green ski suit dotted with badges and the fluorescent logos of the sponsors. It was 14 degrees and a gray fog enveloped everything. Alice felt the milk swirling around in her stomach as she sank into the snow. Her skis were over her shoulder, because you had to carry your skis yourself until you got good enough for someone to carry them for you.

“Keep the tips facing forward or you’ll kill someone,” her father said.

At the end of the season the Ski Club gave you a pin with little stars on it. A star a year, from when you were four years old and just tall enough to slip the little disk of the ski lift between your legs until you were nine and you managed to grab the disk all by yourself. Three silver stars and then another three in gold: a pin a year, a way of saying you’d gotten a little better, a little closer to the races

that terrified Alice. She was already worried about them even though she had only three stars.

They were to meet at the ski lift at eight-thirty sharp, right when it opened. The other kids were already there, standing like little soldiers in a loose circle, bundled up in their uniforms, numb with sleep and cold. They planted their ski poles in the snow and wedged the grips in their armpits. With their arms dangling, they looked like scarecrows. No one felt like talking, least of all Alice. Her father rapped twice on her helmet, too hard, as if trying to pound her into the snow.

“Pull out all the stops,” he said. “And remember: keep your body weight forward, okay? Body weight forward.”

“Body weight forward,” echoed the voice in Alice’s head.

Then he walked away, blowing into his cupped hands. He’d soon be home again, reading the paper in the warmth of their house. Two steps and the fog swallowed him up.

Alice clumsily dropped her skis on the ground and banged her boots with a ski pole to knock off the clumps of snow. If her father had seen her he would have slapped her right there, in front of everyone.

She was already desperate for a pee; it pushed against her bladder like a pin piercing her belly. She wasn’t going to make it today either. Every morning it was the same. After breakfast she would lock herself in the bathroom and push and push, trying to get rid of every last drop, contracting her abdominal muscles till her head ached and her eyes felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets. She would turn the tap full blast so that her father wouldn’t hear the noises as she pushed and pushed, clenching her fists, to squeeze out the very last drop. She would sit there until her father pounded on the door and yelled so, missy, are we going to be late again today?

But it never did any good. By the time they reached the top of

the first ski lift she would be so desperate that she would have to crouch down in the fresh snow and pretend to tighten her boots in order to take a pee inside her ski suit while all her classmates looked on, and Eric, the ski instructor, would say we're waiting for Alice, as usual. It's such a relief, she thought each time, as the lovely warmth trickled between her shivering legs. Or it would be, if only they weren't all there watching me.

Sooner or later they're going to notice.

Sooner or later I'm going to leave a yellow stain in the snow and they'll all make fun of me.

One of the parents went up to Eric and asked if the fog wasn't too thick to go all the way to the top that morning. Alice pricked up her ears hopefully, but Eric unfurled his perfect smile.

"It's only foggy down here," he said. "At the top the sun is blinding. Come on, let's go."

On the chairlift Alice was paired with Giuliana, the daughter of one of her father's colleagues. They didn't say a word the whole way up. Not that they particularly disliked each other, it was just that, at that moment, neither of them wanted to be there.

The sound of the wind sweeping the summit of the mountain was punctuated by the metallic rush of the steel cable from which Alice and Giuliana were hanging, their chins tucked into the collars of their jackets so as to warm themselves with their breath.

It's only the cold, you don't really need to go, Alice said to herself.

But the closer she got to the top, the more the pin in her belly pierced her flesh. Maybe she was seriously close to wetting herself. Then again, it might even be something bigger. No, it's just the cold, you don't really need to go again, Alice kept telling herself.

Alice suddenly regurgitated rancid milk. She swallowed it down with disgust.

She really needed to go; she was desperate.

Two more chairlifts before the shelter. I can't possibly hold it in for that long.

Giuliana lifted the safety bar and they both shifted their bottoms forward to get off. When her skis touched the ground Alice shoved off from her seat. You couldn't see more than two yards ahead of you, so much for blinding sun. It was like being wrapped in a sheet, all white, nothing but white, above, below, all around you. It was the exact opposite of darkness, but it frightened Alice in precisely the same way.

She slipped off to the side of the trail to look for a little pile of fresh snow to relieve herself in. Her stomach gurgled like a dishwasher. When she turned around, she couldn't see Giuliana anymore, which meant that Giuliana couldn't see her either. She herringboned a few yards up the hill, just as her father had made her do when he had gotten it into his head to teach her to ski. Up and down the bunny slope, thirty, forty times a day, sidestep up and snowplow down. Buying a ski pass for just one slope was a waste of money, and this way you trained your legs as well.

Alice unfastened her skis and took a few more steps, sinking halfway up her calves in the snow. Finally she could sit. She stopped holding her breath and relaxed her muscles. A pleasant electric shock spread through her whole body, finally settling in the tips of her toes.

It must have been the milk, of course. That and the fact that her bum was freezing from sitting in the snow at six thousand feet. It had never happened before, at least not as far as she could remember. Never, not even once.

But this time it wasn't pee. Or, not only. As she leaped to her feet she felt something heavy in the seat of her pants and instinctively touched her bottom. She couldn't feel a thing through her gloves, but it didn't matter—she had already realized what had happened.

Now what, she wondered.

Eric called her but Alice didn't reply. As long as she stayed up there, the fog would hide her. She could pull down her ski pants and clean herself up as best she could, or go down and whisper in Eric's ear what had happened. She could tell him she had to go back to the lodge, that her knees hurt. Or she could just not worry about it and keep skiing, making sure to always be last in line.

Instead she simply stayed where she was, careful not to move a muscle, shielded by the fog.

Eric called her again. Louder now.

"She must have gone to the ski lift already, silly girl," a little boy said.

Alice could hear them talking. Someone said let's go and someone else said I'm cold from standing here. They could be just below her, a few yards away, or up at the ski lift. Sounds are deceptive: they rebound off the mountains and sink in the snow. "Damn . . . let's go see," Eric said. Alice slowly counted to ten, suppressing her urge to vomit as she felt something slither down her thighs. When she got to ten, she started over again, this time counting to twenty. Now all was silent.

She picked up her skis and carried them under her arm to the trail. It took her a little while to work out how to position them at right angles to the fall line. With fog that thick you can't even tell which way you're facing.

She clipped into her skis and tightened the bindings. She took off her goggles and spat inside them because they had misted up. She could ski down to the lodge all on her own. She didn't care that Eric was looking for her at the top of the mountain. With her pants caked in shit, she didn't want to stay up there a second longer than she absolutely had to. She went over the descent in her head. She had never done it alone, but, after all, they had gone only as far as the first ski lift, and she'd been down this slope dozens of times.

She began to snowplow. Just the day before, Eric had said if I see you doing one more snowplow turn, I swear I'm going to tie your ankles together.

Eric didn't like her, she was sure of it. He thought she was a scaredy-pants and, as it turned out, events had proved him right. Eric didn't like her father either, because every day, at the end of the lesson, he pestered him with endless questions. So how is our Alice coming along, are we getting better, do we have a little champion on our hands, when are we going to start racing, on and on. Eric always stared at a spot somewhere behind her father and answered yes, no, well . . .

Alice saw the whole scene superimposed on her foggy goggles as she gently edged her way down, unable to make out anything beyond the tips of her skis. Only when she ended up in the fresh snow did she understand that it was time to turn.

She started singing to herself to feel less alone. From time to time she wiped away her snot with her glove.

Keep your weight uphill, plant your pole, turn. Lean on your boots. Now shift your body weight forward, okay? Bo-dy weight for-ward. The voice was partly Eric's and partly her father's.

Her father would probably fly into a rage. She had to come up with a lie, a story that would stand up, no holes or contradictions. She didn't even dream of telling him what had really happened. The fog, that was it, blame it on the fog. She was following the others onto the big slope when her ski pass had come off her jacket. No, that's no good, no one's ski pass ever blew away. You'd have to be a real idiot to lose it. My scarf. My scarf blew away and I went back to find it, but the others didn't wait for me. I called them a hundred times but there was no sign of them; they had disappeared into the fog and so I went down to look for them.

And why didn't you go back up? her father would ask.

Of course, why hadn't she? On second thought, it was better if

she lost her ski pass. She hadn't gone back up because she'd lost her ski pass and the man at the ski lift wouldn't let her.

Alice smiled, pleased with her story. It was flawless. She didn't even feel all that dirty anymore. She would spend the rest of the day in front of the TV. She would take a shower and put on clean clothes and slip her feet into her furry slippers. She would stay inside, in the warmth, all day. Or she would have, if only she'd looked up from her skis long enough to see the orange tape with the words TRAIL CLOSED. Her father was always telling her look where you're going. If only she'd remembered that in fresh snow you shouldn't put your body weight forward and if only Eric, a few days before, had adjusted her bindings better, and her father had been more insistent in saying but Alice weighs sixty pounds, won't they be too tight like that?

The drop wasn't very high. A few yards, just long enough to feel a slight void in your stomach and nothing beneath your feet. And then Alice was facedown in the snow, her skis pointing straight up in the air, and her fibula broken.

She didn't really feel that bad. To tell the truth, she didn't feel a thing. Only the snow that had slipped under her scarf and into her helmet and burned her skin.

The first thing she did was move her arms. When she was little and woke up to find it had snowed, her father would wrap her up tight and carry her downstairs. They would walk to the center of the courtyard and, hand in hand, would count to three and fall backward like a deadweight. Then her father would say make an angel, and Alice would move her arms up and down. When she got up and looked at her outline sculpted in the white, it really did look like the shadow of an angel with outspread wings.

Alice made a snow angel, just like that, for no reason, just to prove to herself that she was still alive. She managed to turn her head to one side and start breathing again, even though it felt as if the air wasn't going where it was supposed to. She had the strange sensation

of not knowing which way her legs were turned. The very strange sensation of no longer having legs at all.

She tried to get up, but she couldn't.

If it weren't for the fog, someone might have seen her from above, a green stain splayed at the bottom of a gully, a few steps from the spot where a little waterfall would start flowing again in the spring, where, with the first warmth, wild strawberries would grow, and if you waited long enough they'd ripen, as sweet as candy, and you could pick a basketful in a day. Alice cried for help, but her thin voice was swallowed up by the fog. She tried to get up again, or at least to turn over, but it was no use.

Her father had told her that people who freeze to death feel very hot and, just before dying, have an urge to get undressed. Almost everyone who dies of cold is found in their underwear. And hers were dirty.

She was starting to lose feeling in her fingers as well. She took off her glove, blew into it, and then put it back on her clenched fist, to warm it up. She did the same with her other hand. She repeated this ludicrous gesture two or three times.

It's your extremities that get you, her father always said. Your toes and fingers, your nose and ears. Your heart does everything in its power to keep the blood to itself, leaving the rest to freeze.

Alice imagined her fingers turning blue and then, slowly, her arms and her legs. She thought about her heart pumping harder and harder, trying to keep in all the remaining warmth. She would go so stiff that if a wolf passed by it would snap off one of her arms just by stepping on it.

They must be looking for me.

I wonder if there really are any wolves around here.

I can't feel my fingers anymore.

If only I hadn't drunk that milk.

Bo-dy weight for-ward.

Of course not, wolves would be hibernating now.

Eric will be furious.

I don't want to race.

Don't be stupid, you know very well that wolves don't hibernate.

Her thoughts were growing more and more circular and illogical.

The sun sank slowly behind Mount Chaberton as if nothing was the matter. The shadow of the mountains spread over Alice and the fog turned completely black.