THIS SNOW, THIS DAY

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The doctor wore a navy blue blazer, his outfit for giving out bad news, which he scheduled for Fridays. Good news, would there have been any, was delivered by a phone call from his secretary, a thing that might happen any day of the week. She's a mumbler, but you can still get the gist from her tone—or from the fact that it's her on the line. Those times that the doctor didn't wear the suit jacket, he wore scrubs, changing them at lunch, whether they were soiled or not. Occasionally he'd forget that he was still wearing them at the end of his long day, and then he could be seen in the wild in his green drawstring pants and matching V-neck that showed too much chest hair. He moved about town as if not covered in blood.

There was a tunnel from his office to the hospital, which people in town referred to as The Habitrail. Every now and then, he'd run through the hall from surgery and put the blazer on over the scrubs. This was his emergency news-delivering outfit, which he thought, incorrectly, was a reassuring look. I can promise you, it was not.

My appointment was on a Monday. Because I had been on vacation, I missed the usual Friday. The delivery of my news threw us both off schedule.

I wore ski pants, just in case. Not one for meditation, at least the sitting-still kind, I prefer to hit the slopes—just eight miles from my home—when I have something to think or not think about. I remember feeling obtrusive when the swishing broke the waiting room stillness as I walked down the hall to his office. The pants were magenta, a color I am not at all drawn to.

"Cancer," he said only once, and would manage to never say the word again, thereafter using the word *malignancy* and eventually, simply: *it.* In his jacket with all of that chest hair showing, my doctor informed me that intestinal surgery was in order. He slid a square box of tissues across his desk towards me. "It is a big surgery," he said, twice. I wondered where the line lay between big and little surgery. I felt like a robot for not crying, but I was not raised to be dramatic. My people are stoics and cynics, the kind of people who would deny such a thing as a *little* abdominal surgery.

"I'll show you if you want," he said, pointing to his shelf of thick books. They appeared to have been well read, which could only be good. Unless, of course, they'd come from a garage sale and were published in the 1930s.

"Yes, please," I said, not because I didn't have a basic understanding of how my insides were arranged, but because I wanted very much to see what a hunk of intestine separate from its person looked like. I pictured penne pasta or rigatoni, but pinkish-red. Whoever had his office before him must have been substantially taller, because my doctor had to stretch so much for that huge book that I almost stood up to get it for him—and I'm not tall at all.

"Do you get queasy?" he asked. I told him that I once bagged a digit when my brother lopped off part of his finger in the spokes of a dirt bike, so not to worry. You put the piece in a bag, and then that bag inside of another one filled with icy water. I was fifteen, and to this day I have no idea how I knew to do this.

He opened the book—very large and official looking—and pointed to a black and white illustration that was almost-lovely, like an etching. I looked at his fingernails: short, but not chewed, and very clean. My own had been nibbled—gnawed upon, as if by a miniature beaver—a behavior I had developed within the last week.

I had thought it would be a picture, a photograph of the real thing. "That's a drawing," I said. "A cartoon." This was a great disappointment.

"You don't really want to see what it looks like," he said. I felt a wall go up, a thin one, but still. Doctor on one side, crackpot on the other.

I did want to see it, very much so. I felt that if the procedure and my insides could be made more real to me, if I could see those parts to which I had no access, then I would have some sort of agency. No, not agency, but

understanding. I've always been a visual person. Language has never come first to me, so my way of grasping the elusive has always consisted of a ricocheting translation between the two modes.

He then said a bunch of not-too-helpful medical words, followed by talk of a hose being sliced in two spots and then the openings stapled together. What I took away was that he'd be cutting a section out of my intestines and rejoining the two ends. It felt logical.

On his big calendar festooned with Georgia O'Keefe-ish watercolors of the Southwest, we scheduled the surgery for the only day available for several months: Christmas Eve. "I do not want anything sitting there in me for that long," I told him, pleased that he wasn't letting a holiday get in the way of the thing in my belly.

He unskillfully acted out the calming measures that he had been taught in medical school, despite my absence of hysteria. He talked about my relative youth, as compared to other patients similarly afflicted, and my excellent physical condition. *Except for that rotten part*, he didn't add. "You shouldn't need more than three or four months to be back to normal," he said, looking down at his hands. "Five, tops."

I'd been thinking two weeks.

"How much intestine will you remove?" I asked, counting in my head until February, then April, and picturing that hose.

"You'll still have plenty," was his weird response.

After I failed to weep or pass out, he walked me to the reception area. I put out my hand to shake his—I was raised to be polite to everyone, *no matter what*—and he gave me a blank stare and tipped his head to the side. It took him about five beats to return the gesture.

"I should learn to ski," he said. "Since I live here."

Yes. Yes, you should, I thought.

I made lists. I tried to picture the surgery. I fell into inexplicable giddiness. I considered my family's medical past, but replaced that with thoughts of monochromatic places lit only by the Northern Lights. I decided it would be an excellent idea to run the half-marathon in Greenland the following June, imaging this goal to be realistic. I would wear clamp-on ice grips on

my impulse-purchased puffy orange boot-sneakers. I could feel the bite and hear the ping and a little squeak as the prongs cut a divot in the ice, my foot twisting a bit with each stride. I considered what it would be like to be on a glacier, and wondered if I'd be able to sleep where the sun doesn't set.

I tried to figure out how many ski days I had left until the big surgery. I made a mental calendar into the new year, guessing for how many alpine races I would need to find a substitute referee, wondered if I would be able to get in enough hours to keep my license and how many of my daughter's events I wouldn't see. My vision of the near future was reduced to mathematics, in an effort to make it more palatable. I did not at that time wish to consider how one tells such a thing to an eleven-year-old, that there was this disease, there would be surgery, that a lot of things could happen.

I was captured in childhood by an East Coast storm with brutal wind and half-hard snow that had felt like tiny electricity on the exposed parts of my face. Because I hadn't been west, I did not yet know winter didn't have to be so tangible.

This is what I knew: we lived in a "berg," as my mother called it, so small that it didn't have its own post office or school district. The landscape was brown and worn in in a way that did not say *rustic*, but rather, *used up.* Snowfall was a relief, a bit of temporary magic.

We were born for the cold, the kind of kids who have one thing on our Santa list: a blizzard. We were a fungible group, my brother, random kids from around, whoever wasn't grounded or running a fever over 101 degrees.

We lumbered toward the outer reaches of parent-approved wandering, throwing hunks of ice at frozen apples. For reasons never made clear, our official perimeter widened when there was new snow, because we were slower or because of the evidence we left—maybe both. Pushing and pulling the shorter ones over a disused cattle fence, we plopped in heaps on the other side. We pretended we were the von Trapps sneaking over the Alps, hoarding snacks in our pockets in case they were our last.

We passed the nuns' crumbling belfry and collectively sighed in relief. We had heard, as well as spread, the rumors of the insane sisters housed there. This site provided fodder for our more elaborate nightmares:

orphan-filled basements, bald 103-year-old nuns wandering candle-lit halls, priests stealthing out of the early morning windows. Our sounds ricocheted off the low walls that had been there since our parents were kids in the snow.

Despite the rules, the terrors, we were there for the sledding. We paused to admire three sets of deer tracks, sneaking behind bushes whose Christmas-red berries, in a less exciting season, had sent two of us for a stomach pumping. We rounded the fishpond that was deeper than a man with his arms held up, or so went the lore. Filled with algae, semi-frozen but still smelly, this pond may or may not have taken the life of a six-year-old-girl, *who was not Catholic*, the nuns had whispered. We flattened ourselves against the wall of the building that appeared to be built from the rocks that lined the shore of the reservoir, another place we had been forbidden to play. The building, pigeon-colored with a lot of points and edges, called to mind a medieval palace. We wished there were a moat.

A quick scoot across an open field, around a line of pine trees planted as a windbreak and we were atop a pristine hill. On this morning, or some other: a broken nose, snow pants ripped apart by the blade on a flexible flyer, my brother crying. On that day, on all of them, we walked inside a snow globe.

Even after the surgery was over, its mechanics remained abstract, at least as presented by my doctor. I was unable to process the good news that, except for the business of being sliced open and rearranged inside, I should expect a full recovery.

During a post-op visit, my doctor talked of wanting to quit being a surgeon to become a screenwriter—a bit of personal intrigue that, THANK GOD, he did not reveal until I was in the ICU and hopped up on morphine. Later, he would tell me the story. While sworn to secrecy, I can reveal that it sounded intriguing.

I was given excellent odds, not at all supported by information available online, percentages about recurrence that in my head made themselves into pie-charts, evenly split. Against character, I remained inappropriately positive. At home, I tried to read, but could not concentrate. I survived on broth and *CSI* reruns.

Eight weeks and one day after my Christmas-eve surgical event came an epic snowfall. Pristine, brilliant and white beyond white, the morning cruelly teased my sensibilities, my "mind of winter," as Wallace Stevens said.

By four in the afternoon the day before, the schools were ordered closed for the next day, not so much because the roads would be impassable, as we all had high-clearance trucks, but because no one would have shown up. This spectacle unfolded through a prism of icicles, some up to three feet long, which hung outside the window in my living room, where I was two months into my three-month sentence of couch arrest. I watched the storm warnings out of Albuquerque until I could no more.

I had gone back into the hospital several times since December. Violently allergic to the pre-surgical antibiotics—code for they wouldn't stay in me—I caught one infection after another, some interesting, the others dangerous. Whatever part of my body was supposed to take nutrients from the food I ate had declined to do so. Despite this, I was told that my recovery, from a surgical standpoint, was ahead of schedule. I would not be retested until May, so missing this snow, on this day, would have no relationship to my prognosis. It was more about the fact that I could barely stand up.

Compared to being trapped in my house, the physical discomforts were minor inconveniences. I slept ten, sometimes twelve hours a night, just to pass the time. Noises had been made that perhaps I needed antidepressants, which I resisted. The crisis, as I saw it, was this snow already piled three feet deep and so white that it was baby blue. The dagger was knowing this much powder at the 8,000-foot elevation where I lived, equaled five feet, even six, up on the mountain.

I got my ski pants out of the back room, just to look at them. My favorite pair is brown plaid with lots of pockets, including an insulated one for a phone, so that the battery holds all day. Such considered design! It also has a series of grommets to run a headphone cord up the side of the pant, but I'd never gotten the coat that went with. I put them on, just to see, over one of the pairs of long underwear that had been my daywear for the last few months, the waistband rolled down so that there was no pressure on the scar. Those pants fell right down to my knees. I'd lost as much weight as my

visitor's expressions had indicated. Even after I put on my specially ordered extra-small truss, those pants weren't staying up. I found an old pair of my daughter's, suspendered race-training ones, the kind that usually go over a speed suit and can be removed while still in ones skis, tear-away style—another fine piece of engineering. I filled up the space where the muscles should have been with extra layers.

My plan was to drive up the mountain, certain that getting out of the house could only be beneficial—despite my involuntary driving hiatus. I will confess that I put in my contacts. In my everyday life I prefer to wear glasses but they don't fit under my goggles. Even the most half-assed investigator would have known that something self-delusional was afoot. I also picked up my ski mittens, which I can't wear to drive because they are like teddybear paws. So there was evidence, absolutely. But the story I was telling myself was about a quick visit and looking. Only looking.

The drive up the hill was one of the first times I'd been in my truck since the surgery. Just being in it, making my way up the twisty road, felt like a part of myself was returning. The road, the falling rock warnings, the sheeted rivulet along side—everything was as it had always been, as I would soon be, as well.

In the parking lot at the resort, the excitement was palpable. The lot wasn't that big, a person could easily walk in, but I took a shuttle, in order to save what little energy I had. From the bus I could see that the front face of the hill didn't look crowded. Locals always head to the back or the ridge, hoping to make fresh tracks. Not my concern, I told myself. I was just up for a peek.

I thought I ought to take a look in my locker, and make sure my stuff was still there. I could have been evicted or something, for having gone missing for so long. I'd check on my gear, get a fancy coffee and sit at the picnic table at the base of Al's Run with the snow bunnies. Then I'd go home.

I was comforted by locker room three's specific aroma: sweat, wet wool and chocolate. It's next to the candy store, which makes hot chocolate the old-school way: milk and actual chocolate in a blue enamel pot on a hotplate, the drink so thick it's best enjoyed with a spoon. Because we are

in New Mexico, you can get this with chili powder on it. If you have your own, you can put a shot of Kahlua in as well. But I digress.

Getting my ski boots on was something of a challenge. The bones in my feet had relaxed, what with all the couch-sitting I'd done. I couldn't fold into that half-stand-half-crouch position that gives a person the angle to slide into a boot engineered to be tight enough to keep the foot from torqueing on impact. The process, which included flopping down on a bench for a rest, took what felt like an hour. Other skiers came and went, commenting on my absence (about which I was vague) and welcomed me back.

When I climbed up the cleated steel stairs to the base, a bizarre rush of something replaced the malaise I'd been dragging around. Even now, I can't find the words for it. Perhaps one might be conjured: at-home-ness? My body had memorized this place: the combination to the locker room, the way I have to stand on tip toes to get my boots down from on top of the cabinet, how to talk on a cell phone hands-free by tucking it between the ear pads in my helmet. I clipped into my skis without consideration. The way to move about encumbered by five-foot-long planks had become my sixth sense.

The glide over to the lift, only about twenty-five yards, caused me no pain, or none that I remember. Someone slipped in behind me in the queue. I could have ducked under the rope and made my retreat, but I never considered it.

When the attendant scanned my pass, the date of its last use flashed on his monitor. "Where have you been," the dude said. "Jail or something?"

I tried to chuckle back, but I'll bet I just grimaced. The glint off of the mountain was blinding. I had not seen light this bright for many weeks.

I rode up with my friend, Jack, who had taken in my husband and daughter for Christmas dinner while I was in the ICU alone and not knowing to press the button for more pain meds. I had sort of hoped to not run into anyone who specifically knew I was supposed to be doing the opposite of getting on a ski lift.

Our daughters raced alpine together and they were in the same classes in middle school. Both girls were excellent students, but hell-bent on focusing their energies on racing down icy courses at speeds nearing sixty miles an hour. Jack set gates and I refereed, and as such, we had done this ride up the

lift many times at sunrise to prep for a race. Our hill is at its most beautiful at dawn, even when it's fifteen below.

Jack's wife was a medic for the team and my husband filmed their runs, so the two of them had first-hand knowledge of the gnarlier wipe-outs, whereas Jack and I got our news by way of the coaches' gasps on our single-channel radios. We all prayed that these girls would get over it before suffering a debilitating crash or missing so much school while on the road with the team that they lost their chances for the top-tier colleges for which we'd preferred they'd be gunning. Our girls are of this place and there's nothing to be done about it.

At the top of the lift, as I readied to slide onto the landing, I thought, *Now here's a moment when this adventure of mine could go very wrong.* It had only been two months, yet I wondered what muscle memory, if any, had survived. I had straitjacketed my midsection into submission; this day would be, by default, all about my thighs. I knew Jack would sweep me out of the way of the chair if I stumbled. He understood why I was there, while knowing that I ought to have been on my couch. He would neither admonish me if this went poorly nor congratulate me if it ended well.

"You good?" Jack said. "Snowmobile ride back down if you want. No questions." He asked this not because he thought I would take him up on the offer, but because he knew a potential disaster when he was sitting next to one.

I told him I'd make my way around the back of the hill, staying on easy greens, nice and slow. My reasoning for not skiing down the front of the hill that day was supposedly because it was too public, but in reality, it's because it was too bumpy. Instead I took a flat run, barely a slope, over to the lift that would take me to the back side. I shied from areas where there might be a hidden bump or a need to make a quick turn. I moved like I had never before put on a pair of skis. Or something else: I'd never even seen someone ski, and I was a Weeble weighted in all the wrong places. I suspected that if I fell, I didn't have the stomach muscles to get back up. All I was fit for was rolling. For an instant, or ten, I considered mountain lions and hypothermia.

I rode the second lift, an old-school wooden one, with a guy from Texas who'd heard the outstanding weather report while at work in Dallas the morning before. He'd skipped out at lunch, driving through the night to be here, for this snow. He didn't make first tracks, but was ecstatic nonetheless. Because he was a stranger, I could give him my facts. The Texan and I skied the first curve, barely a turn. I was afraid to lean in and I knew I was sitting back, the opposite of what one should do. I righted myself with a jerk that felt like electricity. My center of gravity was nonexistent. For the first time in years I'd need to concentrate and do the things that beginners are told to do to keep from falling. I lied to the Texan, telling him I felt great, just slow and that he should go. He raced off, all powder and euphoria. The truss, too loose, slipped northward, binding my ribcage, making it difficult to draw a full breath.

The flat and wandering run around the back side is over four-and-a-half miles long. I had, in the past, bombed down it in twelve minutes. On this day it took me almost two hours, quite a lot of alone time.

I passed the bend where the previous December my cell phone half-rang and then disconnected, because of the terrain. The message on my voicemail said that my mentor in art school had passed away from the very same kind of cancer of which I might, in four years and ten months, be considered cured—or so said WebMD.com. I am lucky, extremely so. I know this every minute of every day. Yet, my stomach felt like I'd been lowered gut-side down onto a table saw, and I'd have preferred it didn't.

I continued. I meandered, moving so slowly that it could be called nothing else. The day was too stunning to look at head-on. Each contour was either absorbed below my knees or it was not.

I passed a little tree run that I love, Arroyo Hano, a sort of play on words, a ditch of a run named after the resort founder's son. It's lovely in there, isolated enough that you'd never know there was a terrain park just on the other side. It has the charm of those small triangular plops of public lawn you see in cities, with only one bench, and always a plaque for some unfamous person who had loved that view. I didn't dip in, there was no way I could risk slamming into a tree, but I loved seeing the entrance and its promise to be there for me later. It was nearly too much, being back there. But the

day wasn't about hitting my favorite runs or catching new powder. It was about ingesting this place as if it were a tonic.

I had skied until just before my surgery. On my last day up, light-headed and jittery from the several days of the liquids-only, intestine-cleaning diet, I was sticking to groomers. Prophetic of nothing, but still clear in my mind, were two easy runs, wide-open and flat, that I took, oddly enough, with my doctor. I had, on one or all of our visits in his office, harassed him about living in a ski town and never having skied. And there he had been, in a brand-new ski outfit, a season pass attached to the jacket's zipper. He'd clomped up the stairs to the base lift, evoking both Frankenstein's monster and a toddler, and I'd followed, hoping he wouldn't tumble backwards. He wanted to show me his skills. That day in December, he had just completed his first set of lessons and he wore the scared-witless glow that verified he was hooked.

He wasn't a bad skier, my doctor, but was a stiff and cautious one. That seemed appropriate, given his line of work. *Relax, you can still saw people open if you've ripped your ACL*, I thought but didn't say. He was too new to have developed any bad habits. I skied behind him, which he said made him nervous. He would have been less pleased if I passed him and then forgot he was back there trying to recall if he should press on the uphill or downhill ski to make a turn. He had that look, the one that said he knew that some magic was waiting for him, but that it would take patience.

When we took those two little runs, we did not once mention the surgery, then less than forty-eight hours away. On the lift, he told me what he'd done in his class, and I listened as if I didn't already know what went on, as if the miracle of pressing down on a ski's edge was a revelation to me, as well. There had been a shift in power, or knowledge or something like that. He had his shelf of leather-bound books and I had my eight-year-old scuffed boots, the warped closures held together with duct tape.

Eventually, I found unmarked snow on a gentle glade connecting two open spaces. No one was back there. The pass was too flat to interest experienced skiers—everyone local was up on the ridge. In summer, this is

a good hike-to picnic spot, level enough to spread out a towel and take a nap. I pushed my way through, knees bent, butt out, as if ready to sit. This trail is one that, in other years, I'd zipped through, as it's the shortcut around the back side.

My surgery had given me the gift of slowness and the time to pay attention. It was just: me, some big animal tracks, and the muffled grumble of a lift motor. The view was the best features of sugar, diamonds and clouds, all merged into one—the sparkling negating the feeling that if I dared unzip my jacket, I might see what was left of my insides.

I don't remember the rest of the run. My remedy soaked into me, like a cool cloth on a feverish forehead. I'd bet that I was the slowest one on the hill that day. I suspect that I laughed or maybe screamed. Something loud came out of me, that much I recall. A sound that was spring-loaded, from deep in my gut, where it had been lying in wait. When I got to the base, I was a mess of sweat and shivers, my goggles fogged with condensation. My mind buzzed as if I'd just handled snakes or caused a levitation.

Maybe this foolishness of mine set my healing back, stressing my abdomen more than it was ready for. But here's the thing: I didn't fall. I did this stupid act by myself, not with someone holding me by the elbow, which meant I could hold this, my winter cure, right where I needed it.

Some facts:

My surgeon is now addicted to skiing. While enthusiastic, he is less-than-artful. Three winters ago, he crashed into my husband in a yard sale so phenomenal that ski patrol was called before they even stopped rolling. For whatever reason, this bonded them.

The screenplay, the writer of which finally said, "Call me Rob," has been completed.

December 24, 2013 was my seven-year slice-a-versary. Three days after that, on my birthday, a "lemon-sized mass" (another doctor's words) would be found elsewhere. Thanks to ever-improving technology, its laparoscopic removal and the recovery therefrom was far less interesting. Having the Winter Olympics to watch helped a lot. Nothing beats watching the luge whilst on Percocet.

My tests have all come back clear.