

Cliffs

The paramedic slid the skier into the red rescue toboggan. His neck was bent at a funny angle. The downed skier was totally silent. It would have been better if he had been groaning. Something about the silence was eerie. There was no way past them, and no way to turn back.

The toboggan started to skid down the mountain, with the rescue team barely holding it from falling down the chute. Behind them, snow and ice began to sheet.

“Jolly Rancher?” Owen asked, holding out a red, wrapped candy. “You might need two, actually.” Jolly Ranchers were what Owen always offered before we would do something steep. Then we’d let them melt all the way down, and it was almost like the Jolly Rancher was a kind of life line. Or something magical that would get you down safely. I loved Jolly Ranchers.

This Jolly Rancher was a red one, and it reminded me of my first day with Owen. Owen was my ski instructor, and somehow it had ended up with just he and I even though it was supposed to be a group lesson. We had a week in Nevada. Turns out it was just pure luck that we were skiing Nevada. Nevada was...just Owen and me.

Owen. Six feet tall, dirty blond hair, blue eyes. But all you really saw was his skiing. He glided over moguls, over cliffs, through powder, off jumps; Owen skied anything. Owen skied 300 days a year. Half in Nevada and half in New Zealand. He said he could even juggle when he skied, though I hadn’t seen that yet. Owen was a powder hound. He would hike up cliffs for powder. He would climb the mountain when it closed for powder. He pretty much lived for powder. I was not so good at powder yet. Tended to just STOP in it and have to clamber out. Cliffs...I had executed some pretty steep stuff, but not actual cliffs. Owen

wanted to do chutes. Chutes are a kind of cliff - they are so steep that if you fall, you'll go right to the bottom of the cliff, sometimes without touching anything. Of course, powder, deep, soft snow, sometimes helps with chutes. At least, that's what you tell yourself. And what Owen told me.

Here's what Owen made me feel: all the other teachers I've had have treated me like a 'lesson.' Owen treated me like his best friend. There was no 'lesson' and no 'lesser.' I would have followed him anywhere. And Owen said I needed to concentrate on steeps and chutes. So that's where we went.

Here's what Heavenly made me feel: pretty okay until Owen showed me the chutes and the cliffs. Those were the out of bounds areas. Where there were avalanches, and no-fall zones, and cornices, and who knew what else. And I was only eleven, barely. Just-turned eleven. Not almost-twelve. More ten than eleven. I think I weighed seventy pounds, maybe, with my ski gear. Just enough to tip lightly off the edge and disappear. Never to be found again. Even just going off trail could mean disappearing under the powder. MIS. Missing in Snow.

I try to remember at these times why I like skiing. What were the reasons? The intense cold? The fear of dying or maiming or breaking of limbs? The performance anxiety? I couldn't seem to recall what it was that I liked about skiing.

I seized one Jolly Rancher from Owen.

"You might want to take another," he remarked.

My stomach seized. I looked down the slope where the paramedics were clearing out the last, and only visible skier. We were now in the expert only, behind the rope area, so they wouldn't come back unless someone else needed a toboggan. Namely me. Frankly, I felt a little

light-headed. With somewhat shaky fingers, I took my gloves off to unwrap the Jolly Rancher. Red...watermelon...the rarest of Jolly Ranchers. I took that as an omen.

Jolly Rancher in my mouth, we set off across the top of the gates. There are gates (narrow passages that feed you down into the cliff) leading down to the chutes. They're numbered. They have warning signs. Cliff. Avalanche. Experts Only. Pictures of people seeming to fall off an edge. I figured we would stop and go down an 'easier' one before the super-hard ones.

We get to the first gate. We've already done it. I peek down. Here's what I see: a clear run. Skiers on it. Skiers actually upright. No medics. Looks good. No butterflies here. I'm ready for it. Don't even need the Jolly Rancher. I shove it behind my teeth.

Owen skates past the first gate. Hmm... On to the second. We've done that one already too. I peer down. Loose snow, plants, shrubs. Getting narrower. Still some skiers. Thinking I still don't need the Jolly Rancher. Good thing, because it's starting to melt.

Owen skates past the second gate. Then the third gate. Then the fourth...fifth...sixth. Then, he basically disappears into the trees. Now I need the watermelon Jolly Rancher *and* another Jolly Rancher. I pull the one in my mouth forward, and pop a second one in.

I catch up to Owen. I'm wondering where we're going.

"Where *are* we going?" I ask Owen. He just smiles.

"Have another Jolly Rancher," he says. Now I get some butterflies. I'm a little freaked out as to where exactly we are going. I seize two more Jolly Ranchers.

"Now we climb," Owen announces. We take off our skis, sling them over our shoulders, and start hiking. Owen is a lot taller, so he's way ahead. I'm thinking maybe this is a strategy to

keep me from getting afraid. I'll be too out of breath to worry. I'm saving my new Jolly Ranchers until I see where we get to.

"Now we ski," Owen says. The final chute. I look down. Here's what I see: NO FALL ZONE sign. Paramedics. One skier, and he's not upright. He's in a toboggan.

When you're anxious as a skier, here's what it feels like: your form disappears. Everything feels tight and horrifying. Your stomach starts to hurt. You've got this 'I'm so scared' feeling right in the pit of your stomach. It feels like the whole world shrinks to just you, and the cliff that is falling away below you. You're pretty sure you are going to die. You start to think about helicopters, and rescue teams, and if there is any way to get off the mountain without actually skiing.

"What is that toboggan actually like?" you wonder. "How do you get a toboggan?" "How badly do you have to be injured before they ride you down in a toboggan?"

I am anxious now.

Owen, though, seems totally cool. Of course, it's not really that steep to him. He *juggles* when he skis.

Owen explains the path I'm supposed to take, through the 'No Fall Zone.' I try to pay attention through the toboggan hallucinations. I do hear him say, "DON'T FALL." I find that when Owen is blunt, it's better.

Then he says, "Go." That's Owen's signal for go, and for...don't mess this up.

I put both Jolly Ranchers in my mouth. Think for a moment of not going. Think of toboggans. Then...

I go. The first turn is always the hardest. That's when you're pretty sure you're going to fall. And sometimes you do. My mom had a garage sale on her first turn on a chute, one she

had done before but that had turned icy, and she shattered all sorts of bones. That wasn't that encouraging for me.

I go...I'm going straight down...I know I have to turn...I think about turning...I'm pretty sure I'll wipe out...I tell my feet and my knees to turn...then...I've turned. And I'm still up and I've dropped height...and mostly, I know I can do it now. Jolly Rancher magic.

Piece of cake, I think. This is cool. It's not that hard...

I emerge on what I think is going to be the easy part. There are piles of soft snow, and some trees, and Owen has already beat me to this part. Then he goes down first. Which I'm pretty sure he would only do if it's not that hard. But just before he goes down, he says, "What you have to remember is, this cliff is about a five foot drop. You have to just drop that. Then you have to turn out of that or you'll go straight down. So you have to do a GS turn, fast. You can't miss it or it's all over. Then you'll be fine. Watch me, then GO."

It turns out that's where the cliff really disappears. Everything drops off. You can't even see the bottom. And I don't have any more Jolly Ranchers.

Owen is below me. I can't even see him because the drop is so steep and the turn out shoots the skier out. First I imagine being stranded here forever. I'm sort of a pessimist. I think about the toboggans again, and the helicopters. I think about freezing here, and being discovered in the spring.

I decide to imagine Owen saying, "Go." When Owen says "Go," then I go. It's like Pavlov's dogs, those hounds I've heard of who learned to obey instinctively. So I imagine Owen saying 'Go,' and...I go.

Right as I go, I stumble. I put my weight too far forward. Later, I found out that was a

good thing. At the time, I'm pretty sure it is all over. I sort of fly through the first five feet. I tell myself to turn, turn, turn. Then somehow, I'm there behind a tree, next to Owen.

Owen just nods, which is somehow better than a 'Good Job.' As if he were sure all along that I would do it. As if I didn't even need Jolly Ranchers, or him.

One thing I learned on this day was that when people you admire have faith in you, you find yourself doing things you didn't know you could do. And then you have more faith in yourself.

It's not as if I'm always on a ski slope or finding myself looking over cliffs. But you do sort of find yourself on cliffs in ordinary life – anytime you're afraid, like the first day in a new school, or when kids are testing you, or right before the ELA exam. Anytime now when I'm anxious, I sort of imagine Owen saying 'Go.' And then I go.