Happy Avalanche

My Submission to the Big Closet Christmas Contest

By Maryanne Peters

Nordic skiing is not so popular in the United States as downhill skiing, which seems strange as we have plenty of suitable country. When I say “Nordic skiing” I am not just talking about cross-country skiing, but that is a favorite of mine. I like ski touring as well. You put on a backpack, and you take to the snow trails. I used to do that as soon as the big snows came in, and try t get in a few two or three day trips before Christmas.

I decided to go further afield that year, and look for somewhere suitable for what is called “Telemark” – cross country in more rugged country with a bit of downhill. I mean, I could always travel to ski proper downhill slopes but I lived in flat wooded snowy winter country. I knew what an avalanche was, but I had never seen one before that winter.

The start of the trail was near an established ski field so I took transport to there and I set out early, maintaining height around the side of the mountain to slide through a high pass and keep skiing well outside the boundary. I found wooded area with room to fashion a snow cave and I laid down my skis and some foam to sleep on, warmed by a small gas stove and hot soup. I was happy.

To be honest, I was not looking forward to Christmas. It would be with my folks. My mother would ask why I still did not have a girlfriend. My father would ask why I had a shit job. They would both point at my successful older brother and his beautiful pregnant wife. Uncle Keith would go on about me not working out and building muscle on my tiny frame. Uncle Cole would talk about football and I would try to sound interested. Aunt Hannah would complain that there were to many men in the room.

I suppose Christmas is like that for many more than me. You can avoid your family for most of the time and then the double punch of Thanksgiving and Christmas comes along to ruin things. Thanksgiving had left me bloodied and now I was waiting for the next blow.

The following morning I got up early and made good progress up easy slopes and down slightly steeper ones. It seemed that I would have no trouble getting to my destination the following day. I had thought that it might be harder but I was relieved as I was well isolated in an alpine valley miles from anywhere. I was also aware that bad weather was expected in a few more days, but my plan to be out by the next day looked solid.

The trail then narrowed and the sides of the valley closed in – high mountains and steep slopes of snow on either side. It was avalanche country, but the thought never crossed my mind. Snow can be deceptive too, especially if there are no trees on the slope to check the angle against. Snow and rock can look flatter than it is. But now I know why there were no trees.

In fact, even when the rumble started, it did not register. My head was down looking at the rhythm of my skis, and keeping pace. I thought I heard thunder and at the sky ahead but it was clear. Then I saw the wall of snow coming. I turned immediately to stay ahead of it, but let me tell you, no skier can outrun an avalanche.

I had no time to look behind me, and that was just as well, but snow ball tracers over my head showed that it was too close so I just turned in behind a rock and turned up to stop. Everything went white. Everything did not go black, so I was not dead – not yet anyway. Everything went white. I was buried in snow. But the rock had created a small void that I could push snow into and make myself a hollow.

I now know that this was pure luck. To be buried completely is to be immobile, and you may we suffocate , especially if there is pressure on the diaphragm. The good luck is that I was alive. The bad luck was that I was in an empty valley high in the mountains. An avalanche without a witness is just snow, like a tree falling in a forest – did it even happen? Or it would have been bad luck if there was not witness, but there was.

Paul took a good few hours to cross the valley to where he had seen the tiny figure disappear under the snow. And then he took several more hours to dig through the snow. He had kept an eye of the distant figure and was able to take bearings on peaks he knew to locate the rock and dug down to that before he called out. So, by the time I heard his muffled voice I had surrendered myself to death.

It is a curious feeling. They say that your life runs before you in those moments before death, so I learned of myself that I had lived no life at all. It was empty. But at the same time, after you realize that the fear of death is a waste of time (it is just to trigger adrenalin, now passed through the system) you find a peace in the inevitable.

Then, I heard his voice as if shouted through a pillow: “If you are alive call out so I can find you”.

If I was not alive, quite obviously I would not be able to call out, so I cried – “I am alive!”

I could hear him digging. For the first time I saw the sense in digging myself – upwards. I could force snow down past me and compress it. I must have dug upwards two or three feet. He had shifted one hundred times more snow in digging down to me.

Honestly, when I first saw him, I thought that he was a god. He was so big and strong and handsome. His snow tanned face looked golden in the last rays of the setting sun. I wonder now if I fell in love with him even then, although I had never been interested in men before. But to say that I owed this man my life seems such a shallow statement. My life could never be of that value.

“How much room do you have down there?” he said. “It will be dark soon and we may need to stay here. Are you hurt?”

“I have twisted a knee,” I said.

He pulled me up onto the snow just as the sun dropped away behind the mountain range. He said – “It is too cold to look at it up here. Let me check out your bear hole.”

In a moment of confusion, I thought that he wanted to examine my naked asshole, but with what came later that might have been a Freudian portent. Instead, he made busy with one of his skis in widening the hole and then sliding down to look.

I had not said a word of thanks by then and now found myself shouting my gratitude down to him, while he made busy.

“Yes, your backpack and skis are here too, and I have made room. Can you slide back down? Drop down my rifle, but leave my skis.” Next to his skis standing up in the snow was an expensive hunting rifle which I dropped down to him.

“Do we need to call for help?” I asked. Re-entering the place I had thought I would die in seemed a hard thing to do.

“No coverage in this valley,” he said. “We will need to walk a distance before we can call, and we cannot do that in the dark. Come on. Slide on down. Let’s look at that knee.”

I followed his instructions despite my irrational fear of that place of death. I probably would have put my hand into fire if he had asked. I was already his, I just did not know it.

When I got down there, I saw that he had made a surprisingly large void. He had unpacked my sleeping bag and my stove, and my small LED lantern had lit up the void. His own supplies were limited. He had only a day pack. It had a poncho shelter, a survival blanket, a sold fuel stove, a flask and some energy bars – everything that could be folded into a bag smaller that a tablet sleeve.

“We will get some warmth and you take of your snow pants so I can check the injury,” he said.

I was a little reluctant. I shave my legs in the fall, as I wear long pants until the spring. But I did as he told me, and he did not remark upon it. He looked at the knee, and suggested that I use my other pants to strap tightly to compress the swelling. He had a knife and he cut up my spare pants to do that, securing it with knotted strips.

He blocked the entrance to our snow cave with my backpack and used his small stove to get some warmth.

“You don’t have a sleeping bag. You can share mine if you like,” I said. Even as I said it, I hoped that he would not say no. His jacket looked warm, and he could have slept a little, but he looked at me in the dim light as if trying to work me out.

“That is a good idea. There is not much room in here anyway. We can use our outer clothing for extra layers. We can share body heat.”

As I explained, I had never been interested in men before. I had dated and had sex with women, but I did not have an active sex life, preferring my own company. So, all of these feelings were new and confusing, but the idea of sharing body heat sounded like the best thing I could have imagined. I think that I smiled, and although the lantern was off and the only light was from the small blue flame, I think that he saw that.

I faced the dying flame and he curled up behind me, his back to the wall of compressed snow. He had to put his arms around me. I felt such comfort in that moment. My mother’s arm around me was beyond memory, but I was sure that this was better.

I was exhausted. We both were. We slept. Just the two of us – total strangers cocooned in snow, miles from anybody, in an embrace necessary for survival. So why did it feel like love.

When I woke up we were still lying like that, but with something extra in our bed. He had an erection and I could feel it against my butt cheek, as hot as a bar heater. I could have recoiled away from it, but instead I pushed into it. I might have told myself that it was for warmth, but that was not the reason. I remember thinking that he was happy, and that made me happy.

But the movement made him stir, and then roll away from me, to my inexplicable disappointment.

“Are you awake?” he asked. “It looks light enough to get started so we should start out for my cabin which is fairly close.”

He had a cabin. I should not be surprised. I had worked out that he was only equipped for a hunting trip so he must have at least a camp. But a cabin would mean a road in and out.

The strapping was good but it seemed that travel would be slow if I was to try to walk. After only a mile he decided to use my pack and skis to make a sled, lashed with cloth rope fashioned from strips torn from my packed clothing. I agreed of course. It was clever work. I lay on the sled and he pulled it using a harness made of the same cloth rope.

I am not sure how long it would have taken us if I could have walked, but after building the sled and dragging it down the valley and around a bluff, we came to his cabin looking down towards flat land in the distance.

The cabin was very small. Effectively there was only one room although there was a separate washroom and toilet. It was built around a cast iron stove which provided a fire, hotplate and oven, and also water heating. The only bed was a large double bed. There was a wardrobe and bookshelves with old paperbacks and boardgames, and two empty chairs. It was cold but he set about making a fire.

“I love it up here,” he said. “Since my wife died, I come up here more often than I used to. She came here but never liked it. That wardrobe is still full of her stuff.”

I was thinking that he had a wife, but she was dead – perhaps because no woman deserves to have a man like this for a lifetime. How lucky she was to call him husband.

“It looks nice,” I said. “I like a place like this. That was why I was up here.”

“Well, we may be here for a while. That is that weather coming in over in the distance. We won’t be able to drive down the valley with that on the way. We maybe stuck here. Have you got plans for Christmas?”

Oh yes. My mother nagging me, my father criticizing my choices; Uncle Keith, Uncle Cole and Aunt Hannah. I had plans but not of my making.

“No,” I said, in the sudden realization that it was only days away.

“Well, you can make a call now. You can tell people that you are safe, but we will likely be weather bound for a while.”

I called the Park Ranger where I had left my car, and then I called my mother. As luck would have it she was out so I left a voice message explaining my situation and suggesting that she call me back. But I switched off the phone.

“I am sorry about your clothes,” he said holding up the harness that had pulled my sled – just rags now. “I cannot offer you much but you may find something in the wardrobe.”

I hobbled over to it. I opened the door and was met with the smell of perfume. It was filled with clothes that had no place in a cabin high in the mountains. There were no pants but there were leggings and winter tights. There were long warm tops. I chose some things but they were clearly women’s clothes. Still, there was just us.

The fire was going, and he shed his jacket.

“We have been together for a whole day, and I have yet to introduce myself,” he said. “My name is Paul – Paul Harden.”

“My name is Joseph, but wearing this I look more like a Josie,” I said. I had put on one of his late wife’s long tops, but because of the strapping I could not get the leggings on.

“You look good … Josie,” he said.

We just stood there, he and I. I think that we both knew it even then. Fate had thrown us together, forced us into a loving embrace, he was all man and I was … something less than a man as I now understood. He needed somebody to look after, and I desperately needed to be looked after. The only thing wrong with this picture was that he was a man and I … I at least appeared to me a man. But only just, and that was a fact that he was aware of when he called me “Josie”.

Almost at that moment a gust of cold wind blew the first snowflakes of the blizzard up against the window closing the trap on us. But I think that we both knew that it would be a happy trap, or I would be that.

The cabin was well insulated and the stove was very effective, with a ready supply of chopped wood inside or just outside on the sheltered side of the cabin. We could stay there for days, and we did. There may have been the prospect of us driving down out of the mountains in his jeep parked out back, but the idea never entered either of our heads.

He had no plans for Christmas except a bottle of whiskey, and such things are always better shared.

And we shared so much else. There was a larder and I baked. There were games that we played. There were cans of food and meat he had killed. We were not short of what we needed to survive.

But there was so much more. Christmas is supposed to be a time with people you love and who love you. I think my Christmases as a child were like that. But as lives become complicated and people come to expect things of one another, love seems to be replaced by other things. Christmas cannot be that same until you find yourself again with somebody you love and who loves you.

And Paul’s Christmas gift to me? That was womanhood. Sometimes the best gifts are those that you do not expect or do not even know you need, until you get it and finally understand that you had been missing it all you life.

We laughed quite a bit as I learned all about his gift – at my coming to grips with underwear, and applying makeup for the first time, and curling my hair, but he wanted me to be as feminine as I could be and for him I needed to be that and more.

Because he gave me so much for that Christmas, and all I could give back to him was me. I said it before that the old me had no value, but the new me – Josie – was something that he would later call – “precious beyond all measure”. That is the man I am taking about.

But that was last Christmas. This Christmas I am complete and Paul is going to spend it with my family at my parents house. I will be able to tell my mother that she can start planning a wedding, tell my father that Paul earns 10 times more than my brother, and tell Uncle Keith that I now have the body I want, thank you very much. Uncle Cole can talk football with Paul who played to high level in college, and Aunt Hannah will be pleased to have another woman at the dinner table.

I find myself looking forward to Christmas!

The End

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**The theme for this year's Christmas Contest is a Wonderful Christmas Holiday! The meaning or spirit of Christmas and acts of kindness from the heart are also inclusive.**

**The Contest requirements are:**

1.The story must be longer than 2,000 words minimum.

2. Stories *must be brand new* and never posted anywhere else on the Internet or published.
3. Stories can use existing characters and universes as long as the story itself is entirely new.
4. Stories may be chapterized or a single submission.
5. Multiple submissions are allowed with only the top voted one to claim a prize.

**Label your submissions on the ++Fiction page box “Contests” and select:**

*December 2021 Christmas Holidays Story Contest Entry*