

The Last Descent

FLASH FICTION

YuShu Chai, Grade 7, Jane Lathrop Stanford Middle School, Palo Alto, CA. Educator unavailable; California College of the Arts, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Best-in-Grade Award**

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked, staring down at the dark bottom of the steep bowl. Ice crystals stretched as far as the horizon, interrupted by sharp stones and small scraggly trees. The light of the setting sun cast an eerie glow on the Colorado backcountry, turning the snow to a glowing flame, and silhouetting the trees like black phantoms. For a moment, the trees seemed to form a face—twigs twining into raised eyebrows, clusters of leaves folding into narrowed eyes, a low-hanging branch twisted into a smirk. I blinked, and the face vanished, melting back into the scenery.

Ellen hesitated, gripping her poles tightly as her breath came in sharp bursts. Her gaze flickered to mine—pleading, questioning—before she blurted, “No,” her voice trembling.

With a cry, she pushed off and skidded down the slope, snow spraying in arcs like shrapnel across the frozen landscape. The screech of snow under her skis echoed a warning as she slashed jagged lines into the pristine surface. A single black branch grazed her jacket, a clawed hand bidding farewell. Then, as if the mountain had swallowed her whole, she vanished into the encroaching shadows, leaving only silence and the scars of her descent.

Feeling the reassuring weight of the shovel and avalanche airbag in my backpack, I glided toward the edge of the cliff, soft imprints trailing in my wake. Traces of sunlight filtered through the trees, a golden warmth that battled the shadows. With a deep breath, I plunged over the edge, riding my skis as they danced with the snow, my heart soaring with every curve and turn. The scenery blurred around me, streaks of light and dark interweaving in a kaleidoscope of motion.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, I grinned at Ellen, but found her staring behind me, eyes wide in shock. Before I could turn around, I heard a creaking sound, followed by rolling thunder.

“AVALANCHE!” I screamed. I yanked the handle, my avalanche airbag rising up into a gigantic red pillow behind me. A freezing weight enveloped me like a blanket, cutting off my scream and filling my throat with snow. Cold seeped through me as a torrent of snow carried me down the slope, crashing my body over rocks and into gulleys. A sharp edge hit my arm – a ski? I kicked out, reaching the surface and windmilling my arms, but the current of snow dragged me under, like a crocodile drowning its prey. Where was up? Everything appeared the same, fragments of light reflecting off crystals of ice. The world became a blur of white noise—a cacophony of cracking ice, roaring wind, and the distant rumble of tons of snow cascading downhill. I clawed at the snow, but seemed to sink further and further down.

A towering rock surged into view, its shadow swallowing the light. I clenched my eyes shut, and in that single heartbeat, an unseen string yanked taut—arresting me mid-motion. The roaring flow beneath me faltered, the world exhaling a hush as every ripple and gust froze in place. Walls of snow closed in on all sides. I gasped for air, but it couldn’t seem to reach my lungs, which burned with a hunger that couldn’t be fulfilled. The world spun around me. Everything was blinding and too dark at the same time. One moment the snow looked as brazen as the white hot sun, the next, they looked like abysses of night. I reached around, brushing against my shovel. Shakily grasping it, I thrust it upwards. Blinding sunlight poured in, and I took gulps of sweet air. Slowly, my vision cleared, but these trees weren’t familiar.

What happened? Where am I? Where’s Ellen? I couldn’t register any pain, only a cold numbness. I fumbled for my avalanche beacon, and turned it to receive. My breath misted in the cold air as I knelt, hands trembling, over the snowpack. The beacon in

my hand emitted a steady, reassuring beep, guiding me methodically through the area. Each step was deliberate, probing the surface with practiced precision. I scanned the horizon, searching for any sign of disturbance in the pristine white canvas, but the newly settled snow held no clues. In the deafening silence of a snow-covered mountainside, every movement seemed amplified. If Ellen was here she would have filled the silence. Time blurred into a tense urgency, how long had it been? A minute? An hour?

My probe hit something soft.

“Ellen, can you hear me?” I shouted. No response came –just the empty unbroken silence. Shovel in, shovel out. With each scoop, the snow yielded reluctantly, revealing layers of compacted ice and debris. Time slowed to a crawl as I dug deeper, dreading what I might unearth. Her figure appeared, charcoal hair was gilded by snow, and an unnatural sheen to her amber skin. The brown eyes that had once sparkled with excitement were dull and unmoving. There was a final stillness to her body.

“Ellen,” I whispered, strangely, softly. ■