

My older brother, Cliff, and I knew that tonight everything was set for an epic sled ride. Over two feet of medium powdery snow had fallen a week ago, and the temperature had stayed below 20 every night and not gone over 38 during the days. The top inch or so of snow slightly melted during the day and then froze at night, forming a crust on the snow thick enough to walk on. This afternoon flurries brought a light dusting of dry snow like confectioner's sugar. Light breezes blew it around in whimsical puffs and left it lying in the shallow dips of the crusty snow.

The light snow from this afternoon crunched underfoot as we went over it on our way up the hill. Our breaths left wispy trails in the arctic air which had blown the afternoon clouds away and now burned our nostrils. It was around 20 below. Over the hilly pasture, through the pine woods, then the apple orchard, then into the peach orchard. Now we were at the top of our land and over three-quarters of a mile from the road below the house. The stars were so dazzling that the gibbous moon barely held its own. Everything in the heavens was just out of reach. If only we were a little taller. Cliff and I, invincible boys of 10 and 11, lay on the snow in the broken shade of a peach tree and contemplated the vision above us. The Milky Way arched across the sky from horizon to horizon. There were stars all the way down to the horizon. The silence crashed all around us.

Then a vision appeared. Ephemeral. There, and not there. Luminescent green curtains billowing in great arcs surrounding the North pole, crossing each other. Almost imperceptibly dim at first and then growing in brightness until some rivaled the moon before fading away and being replaced by others.

Cliff was the first to speak, "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Shut up and listen."

I clearly heard a soft whispering. So soft, I wasn't certain if it was the sound of the aurora or the blood coursing through my freezing earlobes. It was like the sound of a gentle breeze wafting through a pine forest. But there was no breeze, and the pine woods were a quarter mile away.

"Do you suppose that's what God sounds like when he speaks?" Cliff wondered.

"That still, small voice?" I replied.

"Maybe."

We lay there for a half hour or more just feeling how small we were, and yet how we were an integral part of the whole universe. It was all right there in front of us.

The aurora dimmed to nothingness. We lay there for a while to see if it would return. The show was over, so we got ready for the great ride. We wove the tow ropes through the slats of our Flexible Flyer sleds so they won't tangle under a runner and cause a wreck. We decided I would go first, and Cliff would follow fifty feet behind. Sometimes we would tie a ten-foot rope from the rear of one sled to the front of the other, but not tonight. That tactic made for a lot of excitement when sledding on regular packed snow (especially when weaving among trees in the woods), forcing the following sledder to react very quickly to maneuvers of the lead sled. But on an ideal crust like tonight it could be disastrous, causing both sleds to flip out of control.

I lay face-down on my sled and pushed off. With my face only inches from the ground, the sense of speed was intensified. I started my run between a row of peach trees, their shadows skittering past me as I gained speed. Turning to go through the gap in the barbed wire fence to the apple orchard, the story of my oldest brother flashed through my mind. He had been sledding with friends on another hill and couldn't stop before getting to the barbed wire fence at the bottom. He made it between the strands just fine, but his jacket was an inch too high. Mom was none too happy when he got home with four slash cuts down the back of the brand-new jacket. As I finished my turn into the apple orchard, I caught a glimpse of Cliff behind me; he was slaloming between the peach trees. Pretty cool!

There was not much to do in the apple orchard because it had a gentle slope, so I headed straight for the road through the woods. This was not paved, in places was only eight feet wide, and had several curves in both directions. The woods were quite dark, even in the daytime. It took several somewhat scary seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the three-quarter moon filtering through the dense pines. The first curve came up faster than expected, but I made the turn just in time to barely avoid a tree. Now my eyes were really wide open.

Cliff called from behind me, "Almost went barking up that tree!"

The road had rocks that stuck up through the snow in places. There were even some in the tire tracks, so sledding on the road required quick maneuvering. I banged

up against a couple of rocks, but the blows were glancing, and I kept on going, gaining speed.

Breaking out of the woods, I was almost blinded by the bright light in the open pasture. I took a serpentine route down a hillock to gain speed and then up another until I nearly stalled before turning downhill again, over and over. I was making a roller-coaster of the hills and extending my ride.

Whenever I encountered a small dip where the dusting of snow had accumulated, the runners got a good grip and turning was easy. Turning on the frozen crust, however, was tricky. The runners had to tilt so the edges would cut into the crust, much like the edges of skis cut into the snow to turn. I had to shift my weight to the outside of the turn and pull the inside runner up. For sharp turns, I'd slide almost completely off the sled. Once I slid off the sled to the inside of the turn. Bad move. The runners grabbed and the sled turned, but I kept going straight causing the sled to flip over with the thin runners sticking up in the air. I slid over the runners, and the sled and I tumbled over each other for several yards. It felt like I had cracked several ribs. I only did that one time, but not tonight.

At the bottom of the pasture is a long flat area that ends with an embankment where the road is raised above the field. I went straight down the steep last hill before the flat to go as fast as possible. As I approached the road, I swerved side to side to slow down. It didn't work. Water from a spring just above the flat had frozen solid. I just slid across the solid smooth ice. The road had been plowed, of course, so the snow from the road was piled on the embankment and it, like all the other snow, had partially melted then froze. I ran right into the piled-up rock-like snow. It was rough stopping as I used the sled to shield me from the worst of the miniature icebergs. When I finally stopped, just short of going into the road, the sled and I were miraculously still in working order.

Cliff saw what had happened to me, so he found a route that avoided the ice. He managed to find a small gap in the snow plowed off the road. With little to slow his progress, he went airborne across one lane of the road, and he was stopped by landing in the snowbank on the far side. Just after he got up, a car drove by beeping its horn.

As Cliff came over the snowbank on my side of the road, I called out, "Hey! That was a great run! We must have gone a mile or a mile and a quarter! Wanna go again?"

"Yeah, a great run. Kind of a rough ending, though."

“We can fix that on the next run.”

“You really want to hike all the way back to the top tonight?” he asked.

“I guess not. But it was a great run!”