

Avalanche

My Inuit neighbor tells me snow has only one word in English, but there are over fifty if you count the mixing of words in his language. For example, *aput* expresses snow on the ground; another one, *qana*, falling snow; and a third, *piqsirpoq*, drifting snow. Today, when I left our house in the Chugach Mountains outside of Anchorage, I sank to my knees and figured this must be quicksand snow.

The impassioned night wind, which roared through my evening dreams, had sculpted the smooth snow into vanilla scallops like our wedding cake fifty-two years ago. I sucked in the crisp air, clean and fresh, like peppermint on my tongue.

Silence floated over the fields and trees as if the snow muted everything, broken only by flapping crows who cawed unspoken truths. This last year, Sylvie expressed her fear of being alone if I should die before her. My heart raced when I thought of my plan. I was determined we would leave this world together, along with our beloved dog, Archie.

Later in the early morning, the heavy snowfall turned into a sloshy rain. Today's February temperatures were rising to thirty-six degrees. I took a deep breath and shivered. At the beginning of January, Sylvie's doctor declared her chemo no longer worked, my dialysis didn't seem to help, and Archie had developed liver disease.

What would the word be in Inuit for avalanche field? Any way you say it, an avalanche can wreak devastation or make death quick and clean.

At that point, Sylvie and I decided on this way out. From all my research and years skiing these mountains, the probability of an avalanche in our mountains was likely.

Back in the house, my bone-thin wife sat at the breakfast table, and my heart warmed. Archie, our black Labrador, came alongside Sylvie and licked her hand. Curly-haired patches adorned his shoulders, and his gray muzzle and limp revealed his fourteen years.

I sat down and pushed Sylvie's pain pills toward her. "How are you doing today?"

She adjusted the white wig on her head. "Much better, but a rough night." She made a slight grimace as if pushing back the pain and looked up. "Donald, your smiling face always makes me feel better."

I leaned over and grasped her hand. Butterflies leaped in my stomach, and I took a deep breath. "Today is the day we talked about. The snow conditions are perfect."

Sylvie's eyes enlarged as she toyed with the pills in front of her. A tear slid down her cheek, and she nodded. "I'm ready. I know Archie would prefer this over getting euthanized at the vet's. He's such an amazing dog."

I nodded and ruffled Archie's fur. I held back my tears. If only I could be strong.

She ate the rest of her muffin. "My mom said something funny about death when she was nearing the end."

"Oh yeah?"

Sylvie swallowed a pill with her orange juice. "She told me that during her life, she never considered she would die until her doctor told her she had only a couple of months to live. I suppose that's why she never did anything significant, like healing the relationship with my dad, having a career, or pursuing her writing. She probably kept thinking she had until eternity to fix everything. If she had contemplated her future death, her life might have turned out differently."

I put my hand on Sylvie's and gazed into her patient, dreamy green eyes. "That's probably why your mom was depressed most of her life. She never fulfilled any of her dreams, unlike you, Sylvie. You kept plugging away at your poems and are now a published author for which you should be very proud." I squeezed her shoulder.

"I couldn't have done it without your critique and encouragement," she said.

"Don't be so modest. Your poems are so heartfelt, they often brought me to tears." I bit my tongue so as not to reveal my thoughts. She could have published another book, but for her limited time here on Earth.

"I'm curious," Sylvie said as she pushed her walker toward the window, "if I can see the sunlight sparkle off the snow." After she looked out the window, she said, "I'm in luck." Her nearness to the window

caused it to fog up, and she drew a heart on the glass with her finger. When she turned to look at me, I formed a heart with my forefingers and thumbs.

She laid her hand across her chest. “Ah, so many happy memories of snowshoeing and cross-country skiing from our front door, or our frequent trips to the national parks. We're lucky to have seen so much beauty.”

I raised my arms. “I especially loved seeing the Grand Canyon and the river meandering so far below. Remember when Archie barked a warning when he saw the deep canyon?”

Sylvia chuckled. “How about the Grand Tetons in Wyoming? Our camping allowed us easy trail access, and we hiked with Archie, taking in all the splendor.”

A lump formed in my throat, and my voice cracked. “Are you ready?” When she nodded, I opened the door, and Archie went outside. Sylvie stretched up her arms, and I helped her to the porch. She grinned. “When we were young, you drove us home from camping at Mount Lassen.”

I shook my head. “The view of the rich farmlands bordered by tall ponderosa pines, orange poppies, and purple spikey lupines are etched into my memory.”

She put her hand to her cheek. “I was awed by the serenity—I wanted to lay my bones down and die amongst all that peace.”

“You said you wanted to be planted under a ponderosa and let its roots blend with your body.”

A tear rolled down Sylvie's cheek. “You remember, don't you? I wanted the tree to enfold my essence as it danced in the wind.”

Sylvie paused as if thinking. “I realize now that this desire affected my entire life. I knew I would die one day, but I didn't fear it. Because of that, I could focus on realizing my fondest dreams.”

Archie waited patiently on the porch for his walk. When Sylvie leaned down to pet him, his tail banged against her walker.

“Good old Archie.” I squatted down and hugged him. His warm, soft body radiated love, and I swallowed the hard lump in my throat. I fastened his red and black checkered coat around his thin waist. “We want to keep our old guy warm.” I handed him a clump of hamburger into which I'd shoved his pill. Fighting back a sob, I scratched his head. “Good boy.”

After we donned our coats, I eased Sylvie into the sleigh's homemade chair. I covered her lap with a wool blanket, returned to the house, picked up the double-barreled coach shotgun in the closet, and set it on the shelf under the sleigh. After I put the leash on Archie, he barked in anticipation.

I fastened my snowshoes over my boots. “I guess the three of us are ready.” I took off, clomping on the snow, and pushed the sleigh on the path I had shoveled yesterday. I went slow so that Archie could keep up despite his limp. We passed the thick, dark hemlock and white-barked paper birch that rose on either side of the trail.

As I slogged through the snow, I paused to speak to Sylvie, “You know, when we were taking those meditation classes, my fear of death disappeared. I think it's because I realized our bodies are our soul's temporary home.”

She turned her lighted face toward me. “I'm so lucky to have you as my husband and companion to share this understanding. I love your beautiful soul, and I'm so grateful you chose me to be your wife fifty-two years ago.”

Profound affection welled in my chest—I leaned over and kissed her. “It was my pleasure, my gorgeous woman. You are my sweet eternal love.” Archie stretched and licked us both on the cheeks as if saying he loved us, too.

Sylvie might have regrets, so I asked, “Are you sure you want to do this, my love? We can always go back to the house.” Overwhelmed, panic gripped my gut despite the knowledge of our common fatal maladies.

She shook her head slowly. “I have no regrets for what we are doing. Archie and I are ready.”

She seemed assured we were doing the right thing, so I continued to trudge; the rhythm of my steps and Archie's panting soothed me. “I'm having a good day other than my exhaustion from my dialysis. My ankles aren't so swollen, and the discomfort in my lower back isn't bothering me.”

Sylvie said, “Just think how marvelous it would be to dwell in the spirit and have no illnesses.”

When she said this, a shiny black raven flew over and cawed repeatedly, reminding us that we could experience this state of being in moments. Sylvie laughed, “He’s answering for me.”

The two-mile trail led us through a small valley surrounded by steep hills. Near the base of the craggy southern mountain, I stopped before the trail ended. The snow near the top formed a bowl, and rivulets of powder ruffled the otherwise smooth surface. When I knew this was where an avalanche was hibernating, I trembled and ran my fingers through my hair—I wondered whether I was doing the right thing.

I looked at my Sylvie. Her face appeared tranquil, and determination seemed to glow in her eyes. As if reading my thoughts, she said, “I’m content. It’s been a beautiful life, and I’m glad you chose to share your life with me.”

“I love you more each moment.” I paused, putting off the inevitable. “Let’s do this.”

Archie whined and put his paws on her chair. “No, Archie,” I commanded. He sat down but gave me one of his sad, all-knowing looks.

Sylvie reached toward Archie. “Put him on my lap so that I can cuddle him. I don’t want him to be afraid.”

After I helped Archie onto Sylvie’s legs, his trusting brown eyes gazed at me. She pulled the cover over him, and they snuggled. “You’re so great, Archie. Thank you for being so loving and joining in our adventures.”

I leaned down and patted Archie. “Yes, you’ve been a fantastic dog. None better.” He barked his praise. When I gave Sylvie a long, passionate kiss, she grabbed my hand and held on so tight my ring finger ached.

A bald eagle circled and landed on a nearby white spruce. He emitted high-pitched piping sounds followed by a whistle. Sylvie’s mouth opened. “Wow. What a great sendoff.”

Rough clumps of snow, jumbles of rocks, and tree branches would cover the area beneath the hill, serving as our grave until the spring thaw. The searchers would discover our bodies, but our spirits would evaporate into the cosmos.

I squeezed her hand tightly and then let go. From under the sleigh, I removed the shotgun. Snapping it open, I placed a double-ought buck shell into the chamber, then clicked it into place. After taking a deep breath, I turned toward the hillside, aimed the barrel toward the ominous cornice, and pulled the trigger. Bang! I felt the push into my shoulder and smelled the sulfuric-metallic smoke.

Near the top of the mountain, a massive chunk of snow loosened and gathered momentum as it lumbered toward us. A thunderous noise like a jet engine roared above, growing louder and closer by the second. Whoosh! The snow barreled over trees and rocks, accompanied by cracking and snapping. The ground under my feet shook and rumbled. Fear bubbled up inside me—yet strangely—peace was there, too.

A heavy, cold rush of tumbling snow, then all-encompassing blackness.

As our weightless souls rose above the heavy snow, I glimpsed Sylvie’s spirit float, holding Archie. Waves of joy washed over us, and we merged into God’s warm orange ether.