

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER NINE

Something was wrong with the binding of Leo's right ski. As the afternoon wore on the thing loosened to the point that any sudden boot pressure or torque, even moderate, such as that caused by carving a turn, was liable to trigger it and release the ski and send him sprawling. Though the solution to the problem was not complex -- a matter of adjusting a screw on the toe piece -- it was somehow beyond him at present.

An unforeseen side effect.

At day's end, with the sun getting over to the west and the blue shadows lengthening across the snow, he plowed wearily down beneath the Red Chair, coming to a stop on a bluff just above midstation.

Here he rested a moment, looking down at the gondola shed where that morning his brother had parted company so fractiously with DiPuma and considering whether to ski the rest of the way to base or ride the gondola down.

Downloading was surely wisest given his bad binding and the fact that although he was somewhat less smashed than earlier he was by no means unsmashed. He was also very tired though he hadn't skied all that hard today. Had in fact spent as much or more time sitting in the Roundhouse sunk into the big brown couch by the boulder fireplace, grinding his molars and trying to keep a grip as he first watched and then tried to ignore the weird movies and visions abounding in the flames and embers...

On the other hand, the lineup below was long, backing out of the green shed and winding up a path of muddy slush a hundred feet or more. A lengthy wait was assured

and time was of the essence.

Gripping the belt of his fanny pack, he pulled the blue nylon pouch round front under his belly and took hold of the zipper, meaning to go in and retrieve his wristwatch. As he tugged at the slider though the thing first stuck; then, when he forced it, gave way suddenly, the pack gaping wide and strewing its contents upon the snow at his feet.

He swore and freed his hands from the wrist straps of his poles and drove the points down into the snow, then pulled off his gloves and unbuckled the pack and let it drop.

Reaching down, he released his bindings and stepped out and went down on one knee and started recovering the escaped objects, brushing wet snow off each in turn before returning it to the pack.

One red knit headband, two black rubber straps, three bars of racing wax: bottle-green, lemon-yellow, coughdrop-red. Colours so vibrant he got lost in them for a moment...

One wool sock.

Half a Hersey bar, foil-wrapped.

One cheap Mexican wallet, less than thrilling gift from Russ last Christmas.

One pack of Gauloises, shiny with cellophane. Such a lovely shade of blue but no longer quite so charged with mystic energy as earlier nor quite so mesmerizing.

One book of matches. Gold Gothic script on a glossy black cover: HIGHLANDER LODGE, featuring LIVE ENTERTAINMENT WEEKENDS in THE BLACK DIAMOND LOUNGE. He dried them carefully against the threadbare thigh of his jeans, then slid them under the cellophane and tucked the cigarette package into the blue pouch.

One tube Sea & Ski, another of zinc ointment.

One aluminum rat-tail comb, capable of doubling in a pinch as an ice pick or a deadly weapon and likely, he realized, to stick him in the ass if he fell again and landed on it.

One folded topo map of the Garibaldi Park region at a scale of 1:50,000.

One 4B charcoal pencil with no point. Like large areas of his existence these days. High school the prime example – Math 12 and Chem 12 and Geography 12 and in fact all the classes he was sleepwalking through in this his final year, excepting only Art 12 - - at least when Mr. Bamberger stopped rambling on about the glorious Group of Seven and let them work on their projects for the hour. That and his Thursday-night class downtown at the art school were the only bright spots.

Pointless, too, this stressful adventure he had embarked upon today. The combining of two fundamentally incompatible pastimes -- skiing and mescaline. It was like eating a steak while running high hurdles or singing opera while doing the 100 meter medley -- terrific pursuits no doubt each in its own right but in combination ridiculous to anyone in his right mind -- except his brother, if in fact his brother was in his right mind. And he was nuts himself for letting Russ talk him into it.

Sighing, he retrieved the pencil and returned it to his pack and resumed recovery efforts.

One 5 x 8 spiralbound sketchpad with a Rapidograph technical pen hooked to the cover and, laid inside, a brochure from the Aegean School for the Fine Arts on the island of Paros in the Greek Cyclades.

One QUESTION AUTHORITY button, intensely yellow, its pin locked across that of a chipped black F.T.A. button given him last summer by an army deserter from Butte,

Montana who had been staying with them, one of quite a few such freshly arrived, uprooted young Americans (though mainly draft dodgers) who Julie and Alan had put up at the house in the last year or so. F.T.A. apparently meaning not 'Free' The Army, as he had heard it euphemized, but something a bit harsher than that.

One paperback novel called The Outsider by a writer named Camus. Essential reading, supposedly, for the aspiring artiste, though having read it most of the way through he couldn't say why. Nor did he have any better an idea of what an Existentialist was than before he started.

He wiped the cover dry and slipped the book back into his pack and looked down again at the snow at his feet.

One bag of trail mix, two pitons, a small tin of aspirin.

One tube of Chapstick, a pack of Zig Zag papers, a wrapperless pink stick of Bazooka bubble gum.

He picked these up then paused and took stock of what remained: One apple core, withered and rusty. One broken boot lace. Four keys on a rabbit's foot -- his house key plus those to the Volvo and the A-frame.

A shiny centennial penny with the dove-in-flight showing. ‘

A litter of sunflower seeds, peanut shells and fragments, paperclips, lint; a couple marijuana seeds, the size of BBs and olive in colour, that must have found their way in there when Russ borrowed the pack last month; and a sprinkling of unidentifiable particulate detritus a.k.a. dust or dirt.

So where was his watch?

He picked up the penny and the keys and pushed them into the pack and left the

rest, then patted his pockets and located a hard object in the one on his right hip.

He slipped his fingers in and drew out his Timex and had a look. 4:10. Twenty minutes till he was due to meet Russ at bottom. He would be waiting in line that much or more if he rode the gondola down, but could ski it in fifteen if his binding behaved itself (big if) and be inside the lodge at the appointed hour. Which, though the idea of driving his brother to Squamish or anywhere else was no more conceivable now than earlier, he would prefer to be if possible. Russ had a thing about punctuality, in other people if not himself, and younger brothers most of all.

He reached for the pack and zipped it shut and got up and strapped it back round his waist. Looked down at the line-up once more, and again at his watch.

To ski or not to ski? was the question. The decision was rendered less than agonizing by the fact that there was time enough if he did but not if he appended himself to the line-up and rode down.

So okay, he'd give Going For It! another try – whatever 'it' might be -- The Gusto probably -- and recommend himself to all these livin'-it-to-the-limit-on-the-edge mountain folk.

Not that Going For It! had worked out so well the first time today.

He stuffed the watch back down in his pocket, and brought out a dime and hunkered down again and fiddled ineffectually with the screw on his right toe binding for a moment, then gave up.

Straightening, he stepped back into it, then into the other one on his left ski. He tapped his Polaroids into place on the bridge of his nose... and winced. Too much sun. It was tender as his feelings for the sweet and lovely Leslie Clarkson back in fifth grade

at Hillside Elementary in Berkeley. Should have remembered the zinc ointment.

He pulled his gloves back on and took up his poles again, trying not to think about the treacherous binding, and pushed off down the trail, skirting the line-up.

The run down to base was several miles long, arranged around the vertical cut of the gondola, switchbacking along shady trails through evergreen forest and crossing the gondola cut from time to time, thereby affording the option of a more direct, somewhat steeper Point-A-to-Point-B path down the open slopes adjoining the cable-linked towers.

A nice long intermediate cruiser, piece of cake most days. But not today. He soon discovered why so many had elected to line up and ride down, despite the wait. The snow, already wet and heavy at midstation, deteriorated rapidly, growing increasingly sloppy as he moved lower down the mountain. It did at least in those spots exposed all day to the sun. In the shadows though the temperature was dropping and it was surprisingly cold, the rutted surfaces freezing as the afternoon waned.

He slogged down through the slushy, sun-struck patches, with the low-sky late-day sun getting past his Polaroids into his eyes, the resistance of the snow sapping his already weary legs; then, hitting shadows and faster snow -- ice in places -- he would shoot ahead, fighting for balance as he accelerated into dimmer areas, unable to see what lay ahead, blinking away after-images; then out again into another patch of sun and slop, this in turn halving his speed and throwing him forward, dazzled, very nearly on his face.

After fifteen minutes of this he was exhausted, his legs gone rubbery, and barely halfway down. His right ski had come off twice for no good reason and he had gone down hard both times, first in the wet, mashed-potatoes stuff but the second time on ice,

smashing his hip.

Now he stood resting atop a cedar-shaded ridge at the far edge of the gondola cut, leaning forward on his poles, which were propped under his armpits like too-short crutches; head bowed, his breath faintly visible now, the vapour wisping downwards as it dissipated.

Ahead, the trail dropped sharply then cut across a short footbridge spanning a pale-turquoise creek, its banks drifted deep with snow.

On the far side in the sunlight lay the gondola towers, and the aluminum cabs gliding silently down-mountain.

He straightened and stretched and took a deep breath – a whiff of burning cannabis reaching his nostrils from some unknown quarter -- then pushed off.

As he did, the sun flashed gold off a gondola at the edge of his vision. Glancing up and over, he beheld in the open window of the descending cab -- and for the third time that day – the ethereal face of the pale girl. She was gesturing in his direction and calling out something that he couldn't understand.

This was gratifying but distracting. The hill before him was shadowed and icy, and he gathered speed quickly. Self-conscious beneath her eyes, and wanting to exhibit his expertise (minimal, unfortunately), he plunged gracefully down the slope, his overriding concern being to keep his skis tightly parallel no matter what.

Arriving at bottom, he leaned into his turn, skis chattering, and as he came out of it approaching the footbridge, the binding released. Once again his right ski was off, dragging behind him by the safety strap as he sped along on the left -- still quite gracefully -- until he was a little more than halfway across the bridge.

At which point he lost balance and pitched over the side.

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Floating down... feet higher than his head... looking skywards back at the bridge...

Tusks of ice lining the edge... beautiful translucent stalactites...

A drop of water stretching like liquid glass from the tip of one, detaching now and accompanying him down a few feet distant as time gears down... way down... the moment opening... elastic and capacious...

So leisurely is his descent, so arrested the moment, so wide open the doors of perception, that there is time to study the shining bead, to contemplate the speck of light dancing at its heart, to marvel at its lucid purity as he drifts gently downwards, like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Time, too, to realize that he is falling; time to consider this fact without alarm; to wonder why it is taking so long to reach bottom; to reflect with irony that he is probably outdoing the kamikaze schussboomer they watched crash and burn earlier in the day (could it really have been just a few hours ago?) for claim to most spectacular wipe-out of the day.

*Time even for a fitting musical selection to pop up on his inner juke-box: '5-D':
Trippy little ditty by The Byrds, with their trademark harmonies and jangly twelve-string and lysergic lyrics:*

'Oh how is it that I could come out to here

And be still floatin'?

And never hit bottom and keep fallin' through

Just relaxed and paying attention...'

And simultaneously the view back past his companion water drop through his splayed, booted feet at the underbelly of the bridge: wet black wood glistening with damp and ice, and mottled with pale-green, weakly phosphorescent foxfire.

And above, the boughs of a cedar, dark green against an amazingly blue sky ruled in two by a diagonal slash of white, the contrail of a jet.

And from out of that blue, in the instant that the sequence ended -- a scream.

Then an explosion of colour and rupture.

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A dim blue place.

Some time had passed, he had no idea how much or how little.

A chill fluttering agitation against his scalp and the side of his face... a cold caress.

Chest and throat aching with the strain of held breath. When he let it go and inhaled, a terrible, icy substance invaded his mouth and nostrils. Choking, gagging, he wrenched his head to the side and managed to lift his face clear of the substance and cough it out and gulp down air, shocked and gasping.

Eyes wide open now but he couldn't make out anything, just the dim blue fog that seemed to surround him.

The sound of moving water, and memory: The unexpected face in the window of the gondola... the girl waving and calling... screaming as he pitched off the bridge.

And fell. Fifteen or twenty feet. The icy substance tickling his scalp was the water of the creek rushing down the rocky bed beneath the bridge.

A surge of fear and also embarrassment. A sudden accession of blood warmed his face; his head felt light, as if he were going to black out again -- though this likely had more to do with the position he had touched down in than it did his chagrin.

He remembered reading in an old National Geographic about some remote tribe -- African? South American? (The women, he remembered, had spectacularly saggy, fallen breasts) -- that buried the corpses of vanquished foes vertically, head down in the earth, the slain enemy's soul consequently unable to quit the body, condemned to a version of limbo. And it seemed that he was himself positioned similarly at present, his head and upper body driven like a pile into the bank of snow adjoining and partly covering the creek, his face very nearly immersed in the freezing water.

He tested his limbs and found that aside from a twinge in his hip they were pain-free and responsive -- the snow had cushioned his landing. They were also all four virtually immobilized though, the skis and poles fastened to his extremities firmly embedded in the heavy wet snow; his feet tangled at the ankles and pinned by the deep penetration of his left ski, the one attached still to his boot. One arm was pulled up behind him in a hammerlock, the other jammed against his side; both were bound at the wrist by the twisted leather straps of his snow-anchored poles.

For all practical purposes he may as well have been hogtied.

Again he experienced a sense of urgency and struggled briefly, which only caused him to slip nearer to the water. He averted his face, turned it as far to the side as he could, but still the current massaged his scalp and ear like a bolt of cold steel.

It occurred to him that drowning was not out of the question. So far as he knew, he had been alone on the hill; the only witnesses to his fall -- the girl and whoever else may have viewed

it from the gondolas -- would at this moment still be descending the mountain in their aluminum cabs, several minutes yet from base.

A stab of fear now as for the first time in his sixteen years he succeeded in conceiving -- vividly -- of death as a real possibility, as something that could happen to him. He hadn't given the matter much thought -- hadn't had occasion to -- and now considered it with full concentration, his efforts yielding the insight that this was something that could come quickly and casually and unceremoniously.

The impact of the realization was in no way softened by its banality.

Until now his experience of mortality had been limited to the deaths of a couple childhood pets -- his hamster Lucky, his turtle Yertle -- and the corpses of small birds and mice and shrews that Mungo, the family cat, deposited on the front doorstep; and, in the human realm, the passing of his maternal grandfather, from whose wake he had come away vaguely regarding death as something akin to a wedding: Both Grampa McConnell's passing and his cousin Miriam's marriage last summer had been events seen on the horizon well in advance of their arrival. Plans had been laid, preparations undertaken, ceremonies scheduled and performed. Family and friends had convened to honour the principals, both of whom had considerable time to ponder and presumably come to terms with their approaching passages (his cousin, certainly).

His present situation though had nothing in common with these precedents. The only wedding this death might resemble was some sudden shotgun affair or

spontaneous elopement, some impulsive city-hall quickie: casual, unwitnessed, over before you were ready to begin. He was bewildered by the speed with which it had overtaken him... and outraged... it was so rushed... unfair!

Shock and indignation gave way to panic now as he considered the newsworthiness of this death and the potential for posthumous embarrassment and damage. The media would eat it up: STONED SKIER DROWNS IN WHISTLER CREEK ... MOUNTAIN MISADVENTURE ... NORTH SHORE YOUTH 'HIGH' ON MIND DRUG ... 'SENSELESS, NEEDLESS, FOOLHARDY' --RCMP

Now it was flashing before his eyes, not his life but his death: Visions of his family swarmed by reporters, his parents and sisters, their faces anguished as on that night the roof caught fire and for a terrible ten minutes they had thought Russ dead... Interviews at the high school with classmates and teachers who would recall or invent instances of subtly deviant behaviour: 'quiet' ... 'seemed pretty normal but kept to himself' ... 'didn't have a girlfriend' ... 'didn't go out for any teams' ... 'belonged to the Art Club but that was about it' ... 'an American, wasn't he?'...

His photo on the front page of The Sun, a risible ninth-grade version of himself: bland smile, absurdly cleancut, smooth complexion (the airbrush having succeeded where Clearasil never could) -- subtly weird in hindsight; sinister even, like some All-American loner-assassin...

Story picked up by national and global media! Sixty seconds on The News Hour! Thirty on The National! Twenty on Cronkite! Stern commentary (his imagination outstripping any remote likelihood now) from Severeid! Rolling Stone team of gonzos

headed by Dr. Thompson dispatched to Whistler for in-depth feature exploring implications for youth culture! Mandatory urinalysis introduced at leading ski resorts!

A wave of panic now -- a tsunami! Adrenaline pumping, lights exploding in his head. Desperately, he struggled to free himself but to no avail, his efforts serving again only to bring his face closer still to the freezing water.

IN the freezing water.

Another surge of terror, fear like he had never experienced before. He was choking, gagging, drowning!

But now something was gripping his right ankle, dragging him upwards, clear of the water. He wrenched his upper body to the side and managed to loosen an arm and wriggle his hand free from the glove binding it to the strap of his buried ski pole.

Thrusting down into the stream, he touched bottom and pushed up with all his strength as the unseen hands continued to tug at his ankle.

Seconds later he was free, face down in the snow beside the stream with a load of slush stuffed up the front of his sweater, hacking and retching and gasping for air.

When he got his breath -- it took awhile -- he flopped over on his back and squinted up at the dark figure looming over him. The sun was in his eyes but he could make out a nimbus of light-struck silver hair framing a dark face, his nose simultaneously catching the distinctive musky-lemon scent of Brut Aftershave For Men.

"You okay, kid?"

Leo shaded his eyes and blinked up at Nick DiPuma. The Realtor King. None other.

"Yeah?" said DiPuma.

Leo nodded numbly, unable to speak quite yet.

"Christ, you scared the crap outta me! I thought for sure you broke your fucking neck. Lucky I was right behind you ... Hey, aren't you one of those kids from the ride up this morning?"

Leo nodded again: "It wasn't me yelling at you though."

"Good thing. That other little fuck I might have had to throw back in. Might have had to hold his fucking head under the fucking water." He smiled the scary smile he had shown Russ earlier in the gondola shed.

Leo gazed at him calmly, oddly unfazed.

His rescuer peered down at him intently: "Did you maybe crack your head?"

"I don't think so." Leo sat up and pushed the wet hair out of his eyes and wiped his face on his sleeve, the one that wasn't soaked.

"No? You seem kind of punchy ... So that kid you were with, punk with the shades, the fucking ponytail, breakin' my balls, that was your brother or what?"

"Stepbrother."

"Yeah? Hard to tell you two guys apart. You look like identical twins practically."

"Yeah, people always say that, it's weird 'cause we're not even half-brothers, like we don't have the same mother OR father, neither one... like real mother or father." Why was he confiding this? Why did he feel so placid and unperturbed and in fact half-asleep?

DiPuma grunted: "So what's his fucking problem?"

Leo shrugged: "He acts like a jerk sometimes. He's got a bad temper."

"Fucking kid's got a mouth on him, that's for sure, I couldn't fucking believe it, he needs to watch himself, it's gonna land him in trouble, that mouth, bad fucking trouble, he pulls that shit on the wrong fucking people ... What? That's funny? What's funny?"

Leo stopped trying to suppress the smile that was tugging his mouth over to the side and making his lips twitch. He felt strangely giddy: "So you were the right people?"

His rescuer looked briefly taken aback, then briefly fierce, then relaxed and laughed loudly: "Good one, kid."

Leo smiled back serenely.

DiPuma subjected him to another probing look: "Sure you didn't hit your head?" He held up a gloved hand, fingers splayed: "How many?"

"Three."

"Okay, good ... Christ I can't believe you didn't break your fucking neck ... Maybe you oughta stand up and see if everything works."

Leo took the suggestion, though it took him awhile to get his safety straps undone and his skis off.

DiPuma meantime brought out one of his gold-filtered black cigarettes and his gold lighter and lit up.

When Leo was on his feet he felt light-headed and shaky but more or less alright. Upright, he noticed again how short the man was, five two or three at most.

DiPuma expelled smoke and looked him over and frowned: "You're pretty wet, looks like. Said the monsignor to the actress." Big grin.

"Just a little. My sleeve and hair. And front."

"Yeah? Well you look half-drowned."

Leo pulled his sweater away from his belly and shook out the slush. His left arm was soaked to the shoulder and both his gloves were sopping. He stripped them off and wrung them out as best he could and likewise the arm of the sweater.

Now a voice from above: "...down there?"

They looked up to the bridge. Two skiers were peering down at them. Big guys in their early thirties, one of them fair – the speaker -- and the other dark, but both the same basic model: burly, short-haired, both wearing dark shades and neither of them in the vanguard of on-the-slopes fashion elegance for male skiers.

Beyond them the sky: intensely blue and ruled in two still by the contrail of the jet, though it had gone blurry and crooked.

"Things okay down there?" repeated the guy to the left with the blond buzz cut. Leo was pretty sure he recognized him, in fact recognized both of them as two thirds of the beefy trio he saw earlier trying to keep up with Pierre Trudeau -- what he thought at the time might be a hallucination thereof.

The speaker leaned out a little farther over the railing: "Is he alright?"

DiPuma shaded his eyes with a hand: "He says he is."

Leo nodded: "But thanks."

The blond guy looked doubtful: "Okay, that's good. It looked pretty bad... it looked REALLY bad. You sure you don't need some help? Ski patrol?"

DiPuma cut his gaze Leo's way and raised a bushy charcoal eyebrow.

"No, it's okay," Leo said. "Thanks."

"Okay. If you're sure." The guy glanced sidelong at his partner, then back down at them: "Uh by the way did either of you happen to see a young lady in a pink snowsuit go by? Brunette? About twenty? Quite pretty?"

DiPuma puffed on his black cigarette: "Yeah I saw one looked like that about half an hour ago under the Red Chair. Great ass, right?"

"Uh... yes. Was there uh anyone with her? Skiing with her?"

"Like who, Trudeau?"

The guy looked distinctly uneasy; he glanced over again at his mute partner.

DiPuma exhaled a lungful of acrid smoke -- his black cigarette was at least as foul-smelling as Leo's Gauloises -- and grinned widely: "Actually she was with some other broad, not Pierre... some blonde chick."

The two on the bridge exchanged yet another look, then: "Okay, thanks." They pulled their heads in and disappeared from view.

DiPuma shook his head: "Do you fucking believe that? Dumb-fuck Dudleys lost the P.M.! Bunch of Keystone Kops! You think the Secret Service would lose Tricky Dick? Forget about it!"

"Actually I think I saw him this morning on Chunky's, Trudeau... and the girl too... but I didn't uh..."

"Yeah I saw them at the Roundhouse at lunch." DiPuma put the black cigarette in the corner of his mouth and pulled his gloves on: "So do you want me to get the ski patrol guys?"

Leo shook his head emphatically.

"You sure? Last chance."

"Yeah I'm sure."

DiPuma shrugged. "Okay, it's your funeral, kid. I gotta go... gotta meet these guys." He reached out and brushed snow off Leo's shoulder then winked and turned away and scrambled nimbly up through the snow to the trail.

Then looked back down at Leo and smiled: "Should get into freestyle, man. Aerials. Some real talent there, man." Russ. Not a bad imitation.

Leo grinned a grin that even as he produced it he realized was of the coprophagic variety. He looked away, down at the crater he had made in the snow bank at the edge of the creek -- he could see the dark water moving down there over the rocks -- and waited for the man to be on his way.

DiPuma wasn't done yet though: "Those tourism guys, Chamber of Commerce guys, they're always talking that bullshit about how you can go skiing in the morning and swimming in the afternoon here in SuperFuckingNatural British Columbia, or sailing or whatever, but I don't think you're supposed to try them both at once!"

Another flash of white teeth in the darkly tanned face, then DiPuma turned his attention to his equipment and stepped into his skis and took up his poles and looked back down at Leo and raised one of them in farewell salute and skied off.

Leo watched him vanish down the trail, wondering again exactly what it was he had shown Russ and what said to him, and trying too to wrap his mind around the indisputable fact -- to the extent that he could wrap it round anything just now -- that this silvery, possibly mobbed-up dwarf, this cradle-snatching bantamweight Brut had just saved his life.

After a moment of stunned wonderment he gathered his scattered equipment and heaved his Standards up toward the trail then struggled up after them through the deep, wet snow, steadying himself with his poles...

The final mile to the lodge at the bottom of the mountain felt like ten. He didn't trust his binding, thus walked the whole distance -- trudged, slogged, staggered -- a ski over each shoulder, poles dangling from his wrists and stabbing his calves. Fortunately it was all downhill but his boots were sopping and his feet felt like they were encased in lead.

Halfway down he came to a sawn stump at the side of the trail and dropped his equipment and sank down for a breather. Ahead the path was muddy, the snow scant and dirty, shot with gravel and twigs and the remains of trailside lunches, some dating back to last fall probably, disinterred from deep freeze in recent days by the spring sun.

As he glanced over at the gondola towers to his left he realized that it was DiPuma she had been waving at and calling down to, not himself. Exhausted suddenly, he let his eyes fall shut for a moment and it all came vividly back to him on delayed replay: His fall: That long, leisurely sequence somehow crammed into the single elastic second between his lateral lurch off the bridge and headfirst splashdown below, now screening itself once again in his mind's eye.

Reopening his eyes, he blinked rapidly, trying to regain traction on the here and now. Suddenly though the hills were alive with the sound of... music? Weird Martian gobblings and ululations that echoed up and down the mountain from the PA speakers mounted on the gondola towers. Alpine yodelling at its most objectionable -- someone's

idea of fitting mood music to mark the day's end and welcome the weary skiers back from the slopes.

Wincing, Leo ran a hand down over his face and realized that his sunglasses were gone. Buried in the snow by the side of the creek no doubt, or beneath the icy water among the boulders at bottom.

Better them than himself.

Wearily, he rose from the stump and picked up his skis and reshoouldered them and started back down the trail, patting his hip pocket, then digging down into it for his Timex.

It too was gone.

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