

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER ELEVEN - (TITLE TO COME)

The Black Diamond was a crowd scene. Wall-to-wall apres-ski, with prosperous-looking types predominating -- The Elite out in full force for The Finest In Fun and Entertainment -- but also a fair number of daytrippers, longhairs, ski bums and, Leo was relieved to see, drinkers his own age; that is, underage.

Having finally summoned up the resolve to venture inside, he lingered by the entrance a moment, looking for his brother but not seeing him. Relieved, he headed for the cigarette machine in the near corner and fed it a couple quarters and punched the button and reached down for the pack when it dropped. Then picked his way through the crowd toward the bar.

As he approached, a slight gap opened in the wall of bodies lining it three deep end to end and he managed to slip through and squeeze up front next to a deeply tanned, crewcut man with an expensive-looking camera slung over his shoulder who was in the act of polishing off his pint, head flung back, glass raised high; and who, having done so, set down the empty glass and licked his lips and got up and moved off.

Reacting quickly, Leo managed to get a buttock down on the vacated barstool -- a lightning lateral move -- and scoot over and claim it, narrowly beating out a small fierce-looking woman approaching from the other side.

This achieved, he turned his attention to the blue and white pack of Player's Filter, removing the cellophane and extracting a short white-filtered cigarette which he got lit on the second match, his shaking hands having snuffed the first. He dragged on it hungrily and experienced a degree of relief -- and severe dizziness.

Thirty feet down the bar to his right, Kevin and a co-worker were going flat out, besieged by thirsty apres-skiers. Beyond them, towards the far end of the room, the bandstand was tinged blue by an overhead spot and crowded with

equipment but appeared deserted. A big jukebox adjoined the stage, giving forth The Byrds singing of 'sidewalk scenes and black limousines'.

Having attained the bar, Leo found himself suffering renewed jitters and a painful self-consciousness bordering on paranoia. The proximity of so many jabbering strangers was excruciating. He felt as if people were pressing in on him from all sides, violating his body space and disrupting his mental equilibrium, such as it was; that eyes were boring into him; that he was out of his element, somewhere he didn't belong and glaringly visible, like a poorly disguised agent from the world of childhood trying to pass himself off in this forbidden adult realm.

Hunched tensely on his barstool, he dragged on his P.F. and tried without success to bring his trembling hand under control. To his left a balding man in his thirties was regaling a stocky man in his forties with an account of a vexing root canal he had been called upon to perform recently. The price of accomodation at the Peruvian Lodge in Alta, Utah was the subject under discussion to his right.

Now he raised his eyes to the wall back of the bar and the mirror that ran its length, reflecting his sunburnt, smoke-wreathed face and the tables of drinkers behind him. Alpine memorabilia and local history cluttered both wall and mirror -- photographs, news clippings, posters, cartoons, laminated menus, unlaminated menus, etc; and the ceiling too, which was a crick-neck gallery of collaged resort posters -- shot after sunlit shot of ecstatic skiers up to their waists in powder.

Many other pairs of eyes roved around in the mirror, once removed from reality and thus emboldened perhaps. Some rested on his own briefly before flitting away again. One pair, none too friendly, met his and stuck -- that of the woman he beat to the barstool. She had found a place several seats to his left that seemed to Leo fully as desirable as his own but she was glaring at him nonetheless, apparently holding a grudge.

He cut his gaze the other way, to the reflected image of a nearby table round which was gathered a party of five or six male drinkers, bearded and ponytailed and all of them clearly on the untrustworthy side of thirty -- none of them skiers by the look of it. Nor did it seem likely they were lawyers or doctors or dentists,

which professions tended to be overrepresented among their contemporaries here at the mountain. They looked more like a bunch of hippified bikers and frontiersmen -- a couple were even got up in period costume -- and were comporting themselves accordingly with much beer-swilling and whooping and guffawing and table-thumping. Almost certainly they were the movie folk that Russ had mentioned -- and in fact Leo thought he recognized a couple of them from the Red Dog that morning.

Now one of them -- a rangy, sunbaked guy in a buckskin jacket with a red bandana round his throat and a little braided ponytail -- spotted Leo in the mirror and gave him a what-you-lookin'-at-man sort of glare.

Leo hastened to direct his gaze elsewhere, down the bar again to where Kevin was hard at work slicing lemons, topping jiggers, salting the rims of margarita glasses. Now he turned to the beer taps and began drawing pints, which he set on a tray for the barmaid, a pretty, dark-haired young woman from Quebec City named Nicole who Leo had met briefly at The Roundhouse last January. When the tray was loaded she picked it up and came down his way and delivered the goods to a table near the entrance.

As she was unloading glasses, the doors swung open and two burly figures came through -- the pair of presumable Mounties last seen peering down at him from the footbridge. Pierre Trudeau's none-too-effectual guardians.

Leo sank down on his stool and hid as best he could behind his dentist neighbour. The pair walked past without spotting him and moved through the bar. They looked a bit sheepish he thought --still in search of their elusive charge perhaps.

"Jeez, mate. What happened to your fuckin' face?"

Kevin had pulled up and was staring across the bar at him with an expression of grave, phony concern: "Looks like you dipped your hooter in sulphuric acid!" He shook his head in phony dismay: "We'd better get you a drink fast." He took a couple steps down the aisle then stopped and looked back: "Big brother never came back by the way. Gave up on you, I guess. The rest of his lot buggered off

to grab a feed. Spurned my generous offer of homecooked cubanettes." He turned and continued on his way.

Gingerly, Leo touched a fingertip to his sun-scorched nose, then ducked his head and kept his hand up to his face, watching covertly in the mirror as the two Mounties, having stopped briefly to talk to someone at a table down by the bandstand came back his way, looking glum, and exited the bar.

Nicole was over by the table of long-in-the-tooth longhairs now, setting down pints to a clamorous reception. She had a good-humoured smile on her face at first but it vanished when the guy in the buckskin jacket placed a hand squarely on her mini-skirted *québécoise derrière* and said something that provoked laughter from all present; all, that is, but Nicole herself, who turned red and picked up her tray and walked away.

Now the doors parted again and another familiar figure came through -- the girl with the blonde ponytail this time, looking shell-shocked. Her eyes were puffy and red and she was still glancing back over her shoulder every few steps as she walked past him towards the back of the bar, where she joined two other young women at the table the Mounties had stopped by. One of them Leo now noticed was wearing a fuschia ski suit and he was pretty sure he recognized her as the girl he saw skiing with the prime minister earlier in the day.

She and the other girl at the table -- a cute honey-blonde -- rose to greet the newcomer with concerned looks on their faces, then the three of them sat down and embarked on an intense conversation, the girl with the ponytail doing most of the talking, leaning toward the other two across the table, gesturing passionately, obviously still upset by her run-in with the big redhead.

"Here we go." Kevin was back, holding in his right hand a glass coffee mug filled with a beverage the colour of weak tea. He set it down steaming on the bar before Leo: "Nice buttered rum, pipin' hot. Just what the doctor ordered. Plenty of fluids, right? Take six or eight of these, get plenty of bedrest -- you won't have any bloody choice, mate -- and ring me in the morning." Grinning, he turned away and started back down the aisle -- but then again put on the brakes and came back, smiling his mocking little smile: "Mustn't forget to check ID, must

we? Almost slipped my mind. Dreadfully remiss. A mere formality." He held out his hand, palm up, looking ridiculously stern: "Let's see it, then."

A long anxious moment as Leo stared back at him, then: "Just jokin', mate. Don't wet yourself." The Australian gestured at the steaming mug: "Go on, then. Try it." Turning away, he moved off. Leo dragged on his P.F. and exhaled sharply and set the cigarette down in the black glass ashtray atop the bar and leaned forward and warily sniffed the mug's contents and encountered a lovely aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg and rum. With trembling hand he raised the mug to his lips, wondering if maybe he should be on guard against unpalatable additives or Mickey Finns or whatever. He took a little sip and discovered that the beverage tasted as good as it smelled -- sweetly spiced and warm and delicious.

He took a bigger sip, then another. There was no missing the rum -- Kevin hadn't stinted -- but it went down very smoothly. So smoothly that in the time it took him to finish his cigarette the drink was gone.

But not his thirst. He looked hopefully down the bar and saw Kevin coming toward him bearing another mug of the amber ambrosia, his timing exquisite. He set it down -- "Nother one just like the other one" -- and kept going. Leo claimed it eagerly and gave it a stir -- it came with a twig of cinnamon that served as swizzle-stick -- then took a cautious sip to see how hot it was. Just right. A bigger one, and another; then he sighed with pleasure and set it down and fired up another P.F. He was starting to feel a bit more relaxed now.

To his left the conversation continued in a dental vein -- highlights of a recent professional conference that the stocky man had attended in New Orleans. Local real estate was the subject under discussion to his right.

This was just the third time Leo had seen the inside of a bar and now that he was starting to calm down he eyed his surroundings with interest: the hundred shining bottles lining the wall in five rows behind the bar to his right; the big, lazily spinning propellor fan overhead that put him in mind of old Bogart movies as it drew the smoke of fifty cigarettes ceilingwards; the gleaming stemware hanging

above the bar down near the far end, upsidedown in their wooden racks like little glass bats or himself so recently.

Shuddering, he ran a hand across his brow and down over his face and winced, his sunburn smarting. When he shut his eyes a barrage of mortal imagery flashed through his head, filling his mind with pictures of death: his grandfather in an open casket; dead cat by the railway tracks; the Zapruder footage of JFK's Dallas motorcade; blue bodies buried in the snow; slaughtered women and children in an Asian jungle...

He opened his eyes in response to a flurry of whoops and whistles from the rowdy table behind him. They were looking down towards the table near the bandstand, where one of their number -- a little guy in a huge, ankle-length fur coat -- bearskin, possibly -- was standing next to the three young women. He had a big smashed grin on his face and was gesturing back toward his home table, evidently inviting the ladies to join them -- this precipitating a raucous demonstration of support and encouragement from his associates.

The comely trio firmly and unambiguously declined, looking annoyed and attempting to resume their conversation. The guy persisted though, placing a hand on the back of the chair occupied by the girl with the blonde ponytail and leaning down to say something to her. Something similar maybe to what his buckskinned buddy said to Nicole because the girl jumped to her feet and started taking him to task, her voice shrill and angry; then when he stayed put, grinning at her stupidly, she turned and fled the lounge in tears.

The room quietened. Leo became aware of the cash register ringing up a sale and, on the jukebox, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks posing the musical question, 'How Can I Miss You When You Won't Go Away?'

Now the girl's companions pushed their chairs back and stood up and said something very stern to the fur-swaddled pest -- he got the message finally and withdrew -- then gathered their belongings and those of their friend and hurried out after her.

The pest's associates sat in silence, some of them looking a bit chastened, as the first girl stumbled past their table, but when her companions went by there

were wise-cracks and wolf-whistles. The girl in fuschia was moved to give them the finger, which in turn inspired catcalls, boos and jeers.

By now many heads had turned. Frowns and looks of disapprobation were being cast from all quarters and censorious mutterings being muttered, but nothing much shaped up in the way of overt rebuke or action and after a moment the heads turned away again and conversations resumed.

Leo, too, faced back around and sipped his drink and dragged on his cigarette and blew smoke rings at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar while keeping an eye on the rowdy table. The rings emerged from his puckered lips fat and round, but immediately were pulled out of shape and drawn ceilingwards under the influence of the overhead fan.

The guy in the buckskin jacket was slumped in his chair at the end of the table nearest the bandstand, arms folded across his chest, staring down the room with a crooked little smile and an avid, covetous expression on his face.

Leo followed his eye to a table across from the bandstand by the window, not far from where the three women had been sitting. There, impaled on his predacious gaze like an exquisite butterfly on a straight pin, sat the girl from the gondola.

She was by herself, looking pale and underfed and quite lovely as she stared out the window in profile at the fading sunset. A pair of skinny old hickory skis with beartrap harnesses was mounted on the wall adjoining her table, crisscrossed like heraldic weaponry of yore.

Leo was swept by a tide -- a tsunami -- of powerful, tangled feelings. Elation and chagrin... hope and fear... desire and dread. He wanted to get up and run over to her table; he wanted to flee the bar; he compromised and stayed put, sucking on his P.F. and sipping rum, his ambivalence resolving itself into a strong antipathy towards the guy in the buckskin jacket, whose visual violation continued, his expression now resembling that of a ravenous wolf contemplating a juicy cut of prime rib. What was it, Leo wondered, with these old guys today anyhow? Couldn't they find girlfriends that were at least half their age? Didn't they have wives? Daughters?

Now the swinging doors to his left parted once more and the two Mounties strode back in. They were accompanied by a third guy, burly and crewcut like them, a brother officer no doubt. Leo remembered now counting three of them when he first 'hallucinated' them that morning skiing past in pursuit of Trudeau and the girl in the fuschia snowsuit.

They looked like they meant business this time. Purposeful and pissed off. Obviously they had had an earful from the three young women, at least one of whom was probably supposed to be under their protection.

He ducked his head and took cover again behind his neighbour and made use of the mirror to watch them as they approached Kevin, who happened to be down at that end of the bar presently mopping up some sort of spillage. He engaged them with an earnest, concerned-innkeeper sort of manner, very grave and phony, exchanging a few words with them and directing their attention with a slight lifting of the chin and shift of gaze toward the table of longhairs, where all eyes were on an arm-wrestling match now in progress between the guy in the buckskin jacket and the one in the bearskin coat.

The former had the latter's forearm nearly all the way down on the table, but before he could pin him the grim trio had intervened and were vigorously interrogating him. Berating him, in fact -- Buckskin, that is, not Bearskin. A case of mistaken identity, it seemed. The new reinforcement -- he was a little older than the other two and seemed to have taken charge -- was right up in the guy's face, shouting at him from a distance of about three inches and pointing a finger at the exit, while the pair from the bridge waved their badges and kept the guy's buddies -- there were five of them -- at bay.

Buckskin responded with anger and defiance. He pushed his chair back and tried to stand up but his interrogator pushed him back down, then the next instant yanked him back to his feet and gave him a shove towards the exit.

The guy and a couple of his friends took strong exception and there was a flurry of shoving and shouting and cursing and use of the word 'pig' but the Mounties soon got their man (albeit the wrong man) in a hammer-lock and frog-marched him towards the exit past, among others, a

shocked-and-appalled-looking Kevin and a delighted Nicole. A spontaneous round of applause broke out as he disappeared struggling and fuck-you!-ing through the swinging doors.

His associates milled around for awhile shouting outraged objections and insults and threats at the Mounties' backs and glaring around challengingly but after a couple minutes they simmered down and drank up and left, the little one in the bearskin coat -- the true culprit -- stumbling out last by himself, looking subdued and pensive.

Leo watched them go, sipping his drink thoughtfully. Looking down the bar, he managed to catch Kevin's eye and the Australian came over again, looking chipper and innocent, this time with a spigotted twenty-sixer of Bacardi Dark in his fist, which he smacked down on the polished oak countertop separating them: "Well, mate, you know what they say: Better a free bottle in front of ye than a pre-frontal lobotomy. As well you can attest, eh?"

Leo glanced over toward the jalousied doors, still gently swinging.

Kevin shook his head soberly: "So regrettable. But the chap was dreadfully out of line."

Leo raised his eyebrows and dragged on his P.F.: "So those guys were really the movie guys?"

"They were."

"The ones from L.A.?"

"Right. Cast and crew. Mostly the latter. There's some overlap, actually."

"And they actually make movies?"

"They do. Not very good movies, mind you, but they do make movies. You look surprised."

"I would have thought they'd be... different."

"You were expecting what, berets and fancy cigarette holders?"

"I dunno."

"Riding breeches? Foster Grant incognito? Glamour?" "Something like that, maybe. I mean Russ told me about last night but I thought maybe he

was exaggerating. I thought... I don't know what I thought... that they'd be something besides a bunch of sleazy old freaks, I guess."

"Well, that's what they bloody are, a lot of 'em. That's them to a bloody T: Bunch of sleazy old freaks. Very aptly put."

"They look like the Manson family or something."

"Deed they do. Similar social graces, too, some of 'em. That bloody Curt makes Tex Watson look good."

"Curt?"

"Guy in the buckskin that got 86ed so very deservedly, a real piece of work. Count yourself lucky you don't have to work with that bastard."

"Work on what?"

"The production."

"You're working on the movie?"

"In a very minor capacity."

"Writing something?!"

"No, not bloody writing. Just a bit of navy work and joe jobs... Listen, I've already had this conversation with Big Brother, if you don't mind." Kevin reached for the Bacardi bottle and tipped it forward and freshened Leo's drink, a liberal shot: "Speaking of lobotomies, did I ever tell you 'bout the guy with the candle in 'is cranium?"

"Uh yeah... a couple times."

"Well, I'll tell you again. It's right up your alley." The Australian launched into an anecdote culled from Ripley's Believe It Or Not! or some similarly dubious source concerning a tormented Englishman of the Victorian era who for reasons that were deeply personal and delusional bored a hole in his skull with a carpenter's drill and in the perforation fixed a candle, which he endeavoured to keep burning at all times and all costs. Some sort of demented beacon or Eternal Flame, it seemed.

Fortunately the narrative was interrupted by Nicole: "Monsieur K.!" She was down by the beer taps, holding up her empty tray.

Kevin waved back at her: "Looks like I need to go jerk some

soda." He retrieved his Bacardi bottle and headed back down the aisle.

Leo dragged on his cigarette and took a swig of the warm rum concoction and shuddered. It was very strong for Kevin's having topped it up. 'Just what the doctor ordered' he had said, and Leo was indeed noticing some definite medicinal -- or at least sedative -- benefits. The stuff was doing wonders for his nerves as it burned pleasantly down his gullet, easing the grinding tension that earlier had gripped his body. He raised a hand from the bar and held it up and looked at it. Red and chill-blained still, but steady as she goes, nary a tremor. His right eyelid too had stopped jumping.

Down by the bandstand, the girl from the gondola was gazing out the window still, sipping now from a styrofoam cup. The chair across from her remained unoccupied though she was being intensely checked out now by several ski instructor types at a nearby table. Leo took a last drag on his P.F. and ground it out in the ashtray. He picked up his fanny pack and soggy gloves and glass mug and slipped down from his barstool -- instantly it was claimed by a girl who looked about fourteen -- and made his way, none too steadily and with racing heart, over to the table by the window, arriving just a few steps ahead of one of the instructor types, who gave him an evil look but withdrew.

She didn't notice him at first, or chose not to. Alternately toying with her hair and sipping from the styrofoam cup she continued to stare out the window, seemingly transfixed by the sunset.

Her hair was loose now, unplaited, and it fell halfway down her narrow back, wheat-blond and glossy as a Breck girl's. Precisely cut, it looked as though it had been sheared with a single machete stroke.

Now she raised the cup to her mouth and again he noticed and wondered about her bitten nails and the red lines scoring her pale forearms. He stood patiently by the table, mug in hand, warm against his knuckles as he waited for her to acknowledge him. When it became apparent that this was not going to happen he cleared his throat softly and coughed a discreet little cough.

She grimaced but kept her eyes determinedly directed out the window.

Leo followed her gaze and got caught up in the view, which was gorgeous. When he looked back she was regarding him with wary dark eyes, widening now in surprise: "You!"

He smiled -- it felt forced, false -- and, though she was just a couple yards away, raised his arm and displayed his palm in greeting, Hollywood Indian fashion, then felt stupid: "Me. Hi."

She looked away and muttered something he didn't catch.

"Pardon?"

"I said I thought maybe you were another one of those persons down there." She tossed back her hair and rolled her eyes in the direction of the movie table, now occupied by six ruddy Nordic types.

"They left."

"They kept staring and acting gross... That little drunk one in the big coat told that girl she could sit on his face, that blonde girl who got upset. Like as if it was some kind of really great offer. God!"

She swiped at her mane with her long, nail-bitten fingers then gave him a keen look: "So anyway... are you alright?"

"Uh yeah, fine. Thanks."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally."

She nodded doubtfully: "Nick said you were but I don't know how. I thought you'd killed yourself!"

She seemed to be getting upset. Leo attempted a reassuring smile but it felt as false as the first one: "I'm fine. Really. No problem."

"What happened to your face?"

"It's a bit sunburned."

"A bit? God, your nose is scary. It's incredibly red. Maybe you should sit down?"

"Thanks." Leo stepped forward and set his drink on the table and pulled out the chair across from her and lowered himself into it. Her hand was trembling, he noticed, and when she spoke her voice was too: "God! You scared me, that was

so awful! I was frantic till Nick got here. I was beside myself! I told the lift guys when I got down, and the ski patrol guys, I told them to go help you, I thought for sure you'd at least broken something, but Nick sent them back, he said you were okay."

"Uh thanks. That was really--"

"God! I thought you were going to drown!"

Her voice had risen to a wail, the memory of her distress seemingly reviving it.

"Sorry. I uh... take it easy."

She looked away, blinking rapidly, eyes bright.

His turn now to ask: "Are you alright?"

She nodded yes and raised a hand to her brow as if shading her eyes, which however were squeezed tightly shut; then in a shaky, barely audible voice: "Someone I was close to... drowned. In our pool." Her thin shoulders convulsed and she let out a single gasping sob and an electric shock ran down Leo's spine as he flashed on that fearful night three summers ago at the DiPuma pool surely the same pool? -- when her mother told him he had her dead son's eyes -- the eyes, that is, of this girl's twin brother.

She raked her hair back again and her shoulders went down: "Actually you kind of remind me of him... you look like him." Her voice was still little more than a whisper, but calmer now: "Your brother, too. You both look like him. It's so strange... He was here earlier but he left. Your brother." She drew the knuckle of her right forefinger across her right eyelid from inner to outer cantus, then the adjoining thumb across the left; then took a deep breath and let it out: "Sorry." She lowered her eyes and smiled without looking at him, as if there were something amusing about her own foot; then looked up at the drink Leo had brought over with him; then over towards to the bandstand, where Russ's tenor gleamed on its stand under the blue spotlight at the edge of the tiny stage, next to Ritchie's amp: "Is that your brother's saxophone? He's the horn player, right?"

"Right. Tenor."

She said something he couldn't make out.

"Pardon?"

"My father was a musician."

"Yeah? Like in an orchestra or something?"

She didn't reply, gazing over still at the golden instrument, blinking rapidly.

Leo reached for his cigarettes: "And you said he was in a movie too, right? It's on TV tonight?"

No response. He plucked out another cigarette and placed it between his lips. And lit the filter. Flustered, he glanced over at her but she was distractedly gnawing a cuticle and seemed not to have noticed. Relieved, he broke off the ruined filter and fired it up.

An uncomfortable silence had set in, as that morning on the gondola. This time though they were soon rescued by Nicole, who arrived bearing two more steaming glass mugs, which she set down on the table before them.

Big friendly smile: "Dey are from Gav-in."

Leo blinked at her a moment, then twigged: "Kevin?"

"Oui, Ga-vin. On top of de 'ouse." She gestured towards the bar, whence Kevin was beaming over at them.

Leo reached for one of the mugs and called after her as she moved off: "*Merci, mademoiselle.*" He raised it and saluted their benefactor, and his companion did likewise, smiling warmly over at 'Gavin' and perking right up: "Wow, that is so nice! Who is that guy?"

"Kevin."

Not much of an answer but it seemed to suffice. She raised her mug and sipped the steaming amber beverage: "Yum!" Smacking her lips, she smiled at him too. Then another sip, bigger this time. "Actually, I'm not supposed to drink," she confided.

"No?"

"My doctors say I should stay away from alcohol 'cause my mother is an alcoholic, like a recovering one, and it runs in families. Plus I've been sick..."

Another sip: "But sometimes I do anyway."

Leo raised his eyebrows, noting the plural and wondering how many doctors she required: "Well but maybe you shouldn't?" Remembering too the shape the

woman -- her mother -- had been in that night at the pool: "Maybe you should listen to them?"

She tipped her head back and laughed merrily, as if he had just told a good joke, then took another sip: "My father drank too -- my real father -- but he wasn't really an alcoholic." She smiled a pained smile: "Actually he was a..."

"What?"

"Nothing." She looked down at her drink and began twisting a finger into her hair.

"So was that your mother you were with in the lift line? The blonde woman?"

"Right.

"She doesn't look like an alcoholic."

"No."

"I mean, she looks really young and... good."

"Yeah, she's pretty amazing, she always looks great, even when she's messed up, which she totally was for a long time. But she's doing a whole lot better now, she doesn't drink anymore, she went and stayed at this... place a couple years ago, this hospital sort of place, and got sober and healthy and she looks really fantastic now, she's doing really great."

She sipped her drink then set it down and looked at him directly with her big, dark and in fact beautiful eyes: "So what happened up there, anyway?" She gestured out the window towards the gondola barn and the mountain above.

He was surprised by how self-possessed she suddenly seemed. Her voice was stronger, her hand steady, her manner transformed. He dragged on his cigarette, the unfiltered smoke burning his throat: "I uh... I was really tired and the snow was terrible and my ski kept coming off... like my binding was all messed up. Then I looked up and saw you waving and I thought you were trying to tell me something and I guess I got sort of distracted... I should have just downloaded like everybody else."

She frowned: "But your brother said you took something? Some drug?"

He hesitated, not much feeling like getting into it, but she didn't wait for an answer: "How come you're not wet?"

"I am. Feel my sweater, my sleeves." He held them up to her: "Look at my hair."

"But shouldn't you be totally soaked? There was a river under that bridge!"

"Uh actually it was just a creek." A fine distinction.

"Well, you can get just as wet falling in a creek, can't you?" "I landed beside it sort of... part in, part out."

"And Nick helped you get out?"

He nodded yes.

"Really?"

"I think maybe he saved my life."

She said nothing.

"So uh he's really your stepfather?"

"Unfortunately."

"At first I thought maybe he was your boyfriend or whatever. Like this morning."

"He's twenty-five years older than me!" She sighed. "But I can see how you might think that... he thinks he is too a lot of the time."

"Yeah he doesn't seem like the fatherly type."

"Fatherly! God you must be joking! He's always trying to come on to me, it's so gross. He pretends he's joking but he's not, it's creepy. And he cheats on my mother all the time, it's awful. She pretends she doesn't care but it really hurts her a lot. He's probably just right at home with those creepy old hippies. Well, except the one in the buckskin jacket that got thrown out maybe... they almost got in a fight... That's probably why he got involved with the movie, just so he'd have a bunch of disgusting guys his own age to hang out with and hit on young girls and hippie chicks."

"Involved?"

"He got talked into putting a bunch of money into it... otherwise it would have had to shut down... which probably wouldn't have been a bad idea at all. Like I

don't think it's gonna be cleaning up at the Oscars." She flipped back her hair abruptly -- glint of silver in the lobe of her right ear -- and glanced towards the bar, then back again at the table and the drink Leo brought with him when he came over. There was an inch or so of rum in it still: "Can I drink that?"

Her own glass was empty.

"Uh... sure. But it's probably pretty cold by--"

"Oh!" Looking past him now towards the bar, her face lighting up: "Oh wonderful!"

Turning, he saw Nicole coming their way again, bearing two more drinks.

His thirsty companion beamed at her: "Thank you so much! Merci beaucoup!" She waved at Kevin, smiling radiantly; then, to Leo's amazement, blew the Australian a kiss. Again her resemblance to the woman at the pool, her mother, flashed startlingly, unmistakably forth.

She took a big sip -- "God that's good!" -- then returned her attention to Leo: "So anyway... you were saying that Nick helped you get out?"

He nodded. "I don't think I would have if he hadn't been there."

She frowned. "That's pretty surprising. He's not very well known for helping people. Usually he's more likely to be pushing them into rivers than pulling them out." Glancing around the bar: "I don't know where he went. Like he brought me in here to calm down and then as soon as we sat down some guy came over and said something to him and he jumped up and took off. He said he'd be right back but that was like half an hour ago."

"Actually I saw him get in an ambulance with this other guy who was hurt. Over at the gondola. And that woman you and your mother were with this morning, she was--"

"Anita?"

"The big redhead. She was freaking out at that girl that was freaking out at the guy in the coat."

"So what did the guy who was hurt look like?"

"Old, like forty or fifty or so... sort of beefy, with a little grey Peter-Paul-and-Mary goatee-type thing... well, not Mary."

She nodded. "That's Bernie. This friend of his... actually I guess you'd say he's more like an associate, Nick doesn't really have friends... Bernie's this big-shot movie guy, like he's the producer... Actually Anita is his wife... she's pretty scary, she and my mom don't really get along at all but they have to act like they're friends 'cause Nick and Bernie are friends or associates or whatever... Anyway, what happened to him?"

"I'm not sure. He might have broken something. They brought him down on one of those tobaggan type things... plus the redheaded woman -- his wife -- was freaking out at him and that blonde ponytail girl."

"She's always freaking out about something or other."

"No I mean really freaking out."

She nodded. "So anyway, Nick took off and then about two seconds later your brother walked by so I called him over and told him what happened."

"What did he say?"

"It was strange, it just seemed to make him mad... he acted like he was insulted or something, he said you were supposed to have met him and that you stood him up and you're always late. Then he got up and left... he said he had to call some girl. Is he always like that? He seems really intense... like the two of you seem to have really different personalities."

"Well we're step-brothers, not twins."

"Twins don't have the same personalities either, you know!" Leo belatedly remembered her brother.

She looked pained. "Actually I forgot you said he was your step-brother."

"Yeah. We don't have the same parents, like we're not even half-brothers."

"It's strange, you look so much alike."

"Yeah, it's weird. And we both look like my dad too. People joke that our parents must have had like a secret romance or whatever and Julie got pregnant with Russ by Alan while she was still with his real dad and they never admitted it. But actually they never even met till Russ was four and I was, like, two."

"He said you'd taken some kind of drug. Is that true?"

"Uh sort of. Just a little."

She nodded: "Your eyes are strange, your pupils are huge. They're like some of these guys' I used to see at this... place. And then you went skiing?"

Leo nodded affirmatively.

"Was that wise?"

He shook his head to the negative.

"I thought when you take that stuff you're supposed to just like sit around and look at candles or flowers or whatever and listen to music, like put Ravi Shankar on the stereo and meditate or whatever?"

"Yeah, well, Russ likes to do stuff. It's a west coast thing, he says."

"Do stuff? Like what? Ski off bridges and die?" Her voice was suddenly sharp: "What about you? Do you like to 'do stuff' too?"

"No."

"God, that is so stupid and selfish! How do you think your family'd feel if you drowned! Did you ever think about that?" Her voice was shaking again.

Leo glanced down at her thin left forearm and formulated but did not pose a harsh counter-question as to how her family might have felt about the angry red lines scarring the pale skin.

Seeing where he was looking, she lowered the arm to her lap and reddened, then picked up her drink with her right hand and took a sip. When she set it down she was calmer: "Sorry. It just really gets me... My brother died in this really stupid accident when he was stoned out of his mind on scotch and reds." She remained silent for awhile, as did Leo; then she sighed: "So is that why you made that sound? Because of the drug?"

"What sound?"

"That strange sound you made on the chairlift."

He winced: "I thought the cable was snapping, I thought we were falling."

"A delusion."

"I guess. Or a hallucination sort of."

She looked away and said nothing for a long moment; then: "I had these... delusions this one time." Her voice was barely audible again: "It wasn't fun at

all, I hated it, I just wanted it to stop. Like I had to go to Emergency at Lion's Gate and get sedated and then I had to stay at this... place. Actually it was the same place my mother went to to get sober at... I mean, I really don't understand why anyone'd want that if they had a choice about it." She looked back at him, her eyes dark and troubled and lovely: "But you're okay now though? Right?"

"Right." He smiled what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Really. I feel totally fine."

And in truth he did. He felt better at the moment than he had all day -- since first thing that morning at least when he turned the key in the ignition and slotted Let It Bleed into the eight-track and cranked up the volume as he motivated over the hill and swung the Volvo out onto Marine and headed west along the waterfront towards Horseshoe Bay and the turnoff for the Squamish Highway with the sun coming up behind him in a perfect blue sky and, ahead, the blissful prospect of Easter vacation and spring and Whistler and their Uncle Jack's swinging-bachelor A-frame all to themselves for the long weekend...

It felt like a century ago; it had been a very long day. But it wasn't over yet and he was beginning finally to recapture the same feelings of elation and excitement that he had experienced on the drive up.

Dimly, he realized that his euphoria might have something to do with Kevin's liberality and all the rum he been pouring down his throat. He lit a fresh cigarette and leaned back and looked round the room. Everything was bathed in a lovely warm light and the company presently gathered seemed merry and congenial and benevolent. He felt as calm and relaxed and warm now as he had felt wired and anxious and hypothermic upon first arriving less than an hour ago.

Outside, the sky was orange and lemon in the west but blue still above and full of vividly pink wisps of cirrus to the south. The hills were inky black.

He looked back at his companion and smiled and she smiled back at him: "Can I have one of those?" She pointed at his cigarette. He held out the blue-and-white pack and she took one and he struck a match and she leaned to the flame across the table, squinting an eye, then sat back and lifted her head

and blew smoke at the ceiling: "Thanks." Her smile widened. "I don't smoke either. But sometimes I do anyway."

Their gazes met and locked and they both looked all the way in for several very long seconds, pulses accelerating, pupils dilating (hers at least -- his were already open wide) as something powerful and thrilling passed between them, a complex, high-voltage communication occurring via the eyes.

Leo was first to look away. When he did he saw Nicole coming their way again, smiling her big friendly smile and bearing on her upturned palm another tray of drinks. He picked up his mug and drained the sweet dregs. Things definitely were looking up. It occurred to him that it might be a good idea to eat something.

*

END 1.11