**The Avalanche**

When he had his first fight with Simon, Jake's instinct was to defend. It happened decades ago, when they were still at school, but Jake has convinced himself recently that it was a significant moment. Defence is his first reaction here as well, as the avalanche overtakes them. He falls and realises what is happening, hearing Anna call 'Avalanche!' three times, so he puts his hands over his face.

 It creates a small cavity in the snow around his mouth, which means he can breathe more easily then the others, which in turn gives him the strength to push upwards and break through to the surface. He is still unable to get out, because he is in a diagonal position and the snow is packed on top of him, but he can breathe fresh air. He can see the sky which has no colour and in the very corner of his vision one of Simon's skis.

 Anna is only just behind Jake, less than three feet at the closest point. She has been at the back because she is the best skier. She is buried no deeper than Jake but her head is two feet beneath the surface and she cannot move. She is in no pain but feels anaesthetized and is aware of the cold without feeling it. Her complete immobility seems to have brought calmness, although in any case she is the member of the group temperamentally most capable of dealing with danger. When she was younger, she did relief work and saw death close up. Aware that the oxygen will get poorer very quickly, she concentrates on the possibilities. She and Jake are both carrying bleepers and there were at least three other groups off-piste when they set out. There is hope.

 Jake has thought about the bleepers too, though he is defending himself from thoughts of dying in the way he defends himself from everything, by considering the material. Jake is a writer who works mostly from his imagination. This is one of the few occasions when he could be living the story to be written. He is aware that he is in mortal danger and that there must be more practical and honourable thoughts to be having. He tries to think of Anna, who he supposes must be close by, though he doesn't realise the distance is less than three feet. He wants to get properly caught up in this terrible moment, but the story is on his mind.

 Anna doesn't know which way she is facing, but it is not towards Jake. Gerard is twelve feet to her right. If there were no snow they would be staring directly at each other. Gerard grabbed onto a tree, which saved his life as he was being carried down much faster than the others. He is the least experienced skier and Anna has taken the time to train him. He is however the best at making the most of the holiday. His German is good and he has led them into a social scene which they would never have found without him. He is now physically the least damaged but is more sensitive to the pain than the others and he can't help thinking of the cosy boarding house where they are staying, of the immense breakfasts with porridge, eggs, cold meats, strong coffee. If it wasn't so shockingly cold, Gerard would weep.

 Simon, who lost that school yard fight in spite of his bravado, is almost upside down. His mother told him when he was young that when falling it is better to allow the body to relax, because that way you won't break your legs. Simon is not fully conscious and is not aware of his mother's or anybody else's words, only of short, flashing dreams. But he did not attempt to resist when the avalanche came. It happened only eleven minutes ago but the rapidly changing dreams are disorientating and he could have been here for hours. He didn't put his hands to his face like Jake, or grab out like Gerard, he just allowed himself to be lanced into the snow, almost head first. He knows that there is snow and that he is in trouble, but he doesn’t know he is upside down. There is little space around his face and the excess of carbon dioxide is already worsening the situation. For a few seconds he dreams of Anna.

 Jake strains his eyes sideways towards Simon's ski. He can't see enough of it to realise that it is a ski, but it is his only reference point. What would it be like beneath the snow? Dark? He will ask the others. He assumes, rightly as it happens, that he is the only one whose head is above surface. He has tried shouting, but the sounds are tiny and drain away to nothing. When he shouts, he realises how hard it is for his body. The snow is packed tightly around him, as if he is bound up like a mummy.

 So he thinks of his story, yet to be recorded. His wife, Anna, has some kind of feeling for the friend Gerard, the man who it is impossible to dislike. And the other, older friend, Simon, has feelings for Anna. Jake is more sure of this, he can see it in Simon's soulful brown eyes when he looks at her. So Jake could be cuckolded twice over. Anna is too good for him, that is the prosaic truth beneath his literary artifice. From the foot of the mountain yesterday afternoon, he watched her descend with such grace, leaving a track like a ribbon. Others watched too. He looks at the ski again, hoping for a movement in a world so silent and still that it could be dead.

 Gerard is the only one who is trying to move, though he cannot free himself. He extends his fingers with the desire to touch. Anyone's hand will do. Only Gerard is free of secret passions on this trip and he is the most generous with his feelings. Now he would gladly be the companion of any one of the others, he would help them unconditionally. Although he is so afraid, Gerard manages to take some comfort in the possibility of them being saved and then sitting around a table together, served with bread and wine before the big meal. He moves his fingers again. Anna is nearest, but if they were aware of this it would mean much more to her than to him. Really, anyone's hand will do.

 Simon, with his ski clearly protruding from the snow, is their best hope of rescue and survival, even though he is now barely conscious. The last dream was about a plane, it was probably bound for America. It is meant to be the next stage in Simon's life, a posting in America. This is why they are all on holiday together, Simon and his oldest friend Jake. It would be more significant as a goodbye if it was just the two of them, but the presence of Anna has unravelled the meaning. Simon has watched Anna with his worshipful eyes and Jake has watched Simon, wanting his jealousy to be fed. And both men have watched Anna watching Gerard; it becomes dizzying. Jake looks at the ski, still not knowing what it is apart from an object which is not snow or sky.

 The thought of America- that it was never really for him- shoots across Simon’s mind like a final crackle of electricity which produces sparks and then is extinguished.

 Anna concentrates on the bleepers. They are carrying phones as well. She wonders if anyone can reach them. She is sure that she is not the only one buried because she saw bodies somersaulting through the blizzard in front of her as she was thrown along. But they could have been lucky, there could be help on the way right now. They could be so close but she just can't hear. In the silence she wonders if this is punishment. She has spent too much time with Gerard, unable to resist the pleasure of being with a man who can talk and find pleasure in every aspect of the world. A morning walk with him can make her happy in a way as simple as she has known since childhood. Yesterday she had a very clear thought: that if he should reciprocate her feelings, if he were to suddenly announce that he wanted to be with her, she would say yes. Even in the act of thinking, it was a shock to realise what she was willing to do. At the moment she feels no pain, no cold, she doesn't know that her back is broken. She wouldn't want to believe that it could be punishment. Not just for a thought, surely.

 Jake thinks that trying to dig himself out could pull him further in, but it is so hard to think with any kind of logic. He knows that an avalanche has something to do with a weakness in the ice-pack. There may be a layer beneath him which will not hold his weight and he will disappear, metres down, suffocating slowly. He begins to panic at the thought of the others, suffocating, waiting for him to save them. He has started to try to move his hands when he sees a shadow near the ski. This seems to be significant. Something must have happened. Then he hears a dog bark and he nearly laughs. The St Bernard with the cask of brandy, he thought that was a myth. He makes himself smile.

 Simon is dug out first, because the rescue groups haven't noticed Jake. He tries to shout. Only when one of them nearly steps on him do they see that he is there. He is released very slowly, the men asking every few seconds whether he can move a certain part of the body, whether he is in pain.

 “There are others.”

 The sound of his own voice, though cracked and high, is a great relief. It feels like life re-starting.

 The rescuers are already looking for the other two. They are well equipped and the bleeper allows them to locate Anna. They search in circles around her and Jake watches their grave faces. Gerard will be in her orbit. They locate him and start to dig. Jake is out of the snow now and refuses to be taken away until her has watched the story unfold. He drinks tea and allows himself to be examined by the medic. Gerard is nearly out, Anna is still half buried and is being given oxygen. Two medics are working together and even then they have to radio for advice. Jake turns around and looks at Simon who has been uncovered. His face is pale and his eyes closed, his long eyelashes frosted.

 They were ten years old and didn't know how to fight, but in the end Jake managed to get a punch in. Simon's skin was very smooth and Jake's fist hit his eye socket, not very hard but it left a bruise. It still makes him angry now, how he got the blame when it had been a fair fight and in any case it was Simon who had done wrong over the girl. Jake can't get this out of his mind, even as Simon is put onto the stretcher.

 He watches the medical team but his eyes are drawn to the horizon. The ground is frozen for miles around and if these acres of ice could be pulled back, the trees and fields would be torn up, leaving a fresh wound on the earth. It would heal differently next time.

 A blanket is laid is over his oldest friend, who is then lifted with great gentleness and carried away.