Solitude in Snow

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Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong, ding dong, smack! I violently smash my fist into the large snooze button on my obnoxious alarm clock. *Damn you red blocky numbers!* I snuggle deeper into the cocoon of down and pillows. My muscles relax back into the bed. What seems like only a moment passes before another ding dong, smack! I take a few moments of inner struggle before I finally decide that it is in my best interest to get my lazy ass out of bed. I let out a groan and hoist myself into a vertical position. Groggy, I rub my eyes and open my blinds to let in some light. As I look outside my window, something clicks in my half-asleep brain. *Snow!* Outside lays a blanket of white that covered everything. That's when the realization hits me, *I am going skiing today.* Suddenly the exhaustion that had enveloped my mind dissipates and is replaced by excitement and anticipation. I leap out of bed and immediately begin the search for my snow clothes. I cannot wait to get outside and into the winter wonderland. As I am rummaging through my closet for my snow pants a beep comes from my computer. Some of my snow-induced bliss recedes as I am reminded of the homework that lies unfinished on my hard drive. Even my room, a sanctuary from the crazy world, holds constant reminders of my commitments. Determined to enjoy my day, I continue to dig through my closet. Before I reach my water resistant gear, I come across some bike gear. A wave of guilt sweeps over me. I should have done more this winter to stay in shape for the upcoming season. My success from last year feels like false advertising. I was good, I did do well, but it is doubtful that I will do as well next year. You do well to use “triggers” in your room to transition to these other ideas about responsibilities…

As these gloomy thoughts flash through my mind, I am swept back in time to the moment I crossed the finish line of the National Championships in Sun Valley, Idaho. In that instant, my mind was muddled by the fatigue and adrenaline. When I race I get into a rhythm, almost a trance-like state, where the world around me blurs and all that is clear is the trail, my lungs and my legs. The end of a race is normally a welcomed but abrupt awakening from this trance. This particular race had a harsher awakening than usual. Normally I would be greeted by a crowd of people all caught up in their own worlds, I would get a hug and congratulations from a few people and I would make my off the course. This time it was just me when I crossed that line. I vaguely remember my name announced on the loud speakers. My mom is jumping up and down saying something indistinguishable. I am then rushed by people with cameras and recording devices. I am suddenly self-conscious about the dirt and sweat I can feel all over my face. They ask me a flurry of questions that I try to answer without saying “like” or “umm” and then they are gone . I approach the tape separating me from the spectators, dismount my stead and then duck under the tape. I am greeted by hugs and pats on the back, then concern from my mom: "Why is your lip bleeding?" I reach up and feel the rough flesh. "I think I have road rash on my lip?" I say. I remember the crash-- it was on one of the tight turns. I was coming in a

little too fast and my back wheel washed out. *Road rash on my lip is a weird affliction.* I remember thinking to myself. My leg and arm are bleeding too but not badly. Despite my protest I am dragged to the first aid tent to get disinfected. My coach then walks up to me and plainly states, "India, do you realize you are the national champion?" The next day, I would win another national title.

The vision recedes. I am lucky to have experienced this kind of success, but as I recall the experience I feel all the pressure that comes with success. There is now an expectation that I will do well. People believe in me and are proud of me. These are all good things, yet, despite best intensions, it gives me another weight to carry. All that faith in my ability creates a void between my reality and their expectation that I feel I am obligated to fill. I need to train more, I should be road riding more, and I should be going to more races. To be fair, it is not the people around me that are creating this pressure, but my own demands of myself. I take a deep breath, let the knot in my stomach untie itself, and then continued on the search for my snow pants.

Thirty minutes after our set departure time, my dad, my brother and I begin the drive up into the mountains. We make good time and are soon skinning up the trail. It started to snow the moment we got out of the car and has been steadily getting thinker and falling more rapidly. I am the last one up the hill. The ends of the skis of the person in front of me are barely visible. I am hypnotized by the rhythm of my steps. The only sound is the slight swoosh of nylon against nylon. Without my permission, my legs become sluggish. My pace slows to a crawl and then a stop. Now, even the ends of the skis are gone. I am completely alone. Surrounded... Encased in a blanket of white. Utterly trapped yet completely free. I am in a white out, which normally holds a negative connotation, but is one of my favorite experiences. When the world is blocked out and invisible to the eye one could become panicked, but instead I feel a sense of peace sweep over me. Nothing can touch me. Not school, not biking, not even myself. The flakes begin to fall more slowly and the girth of the flakes grow larger. Bulky bundles of ice fall onto my black gloves, coating them in white. It is cold enough that the snow does not melt immediately. I bring the flakes closer to my face for further inspection. I cannot make out individual flakes but instead observe a cluster. They look so round as they fall from the sky that it is a shock when, on further scrutiny, they have sharp angles that look as though they could cut through a diamond. Jagged crystalline angles jut out at random intervals. Where one flake ends, two more begin. Unified in their inevitable demise, tiny angels swirling down from heaven to purify the world. Of course, when spring comes and the region warms, the sharp edges of the wings will be dulled as the flakes morph into droplets to feed the ecosystem around it. As the flake melts, it loses its shape and is absorbed into the surrounding environment. Transformation from solid to liquid, liquid to life, life to death, and the cycle goes on.

I can feel this cycle all around me, but how am I, this hairless creature swathed in synthetic, brightly-colored material, part of this cycle? I am not the prey to feed the hungry predator, nor am I a plant that feeds the prey. Even my body, when the life leaves it, does not feed the grass. Our culture and the need to be separate and superior has made it so the norm is to

pump a decaying body full of preservatives, stick it in a wooden box, and then lower it into a concrete cage. Why must we be so stubborn in our struggle to remain separate? We are a part of this world just like every other biotic and non-biotic entities. We depend on the resources provided by the earth just as much, if not more, than all the other organisms on this planet. Despite this irrefutable fact, the human race still clings to the idea that we are superior and that the earth is here for our pleasure and our use only. We think of our species as the most advanced and intelligent life form on Earth yet we continue to destroy our life source. By cutting down forest, polluting the air and water supplies, and pumping green house gases into our atmosphere like there is no tomorrow, we are essentially poking holes in the IV that supplies us with everything we need to live. Our death is not immediate, but if we keep poking those holes it will become inevitable. In humanities, when we were studying the Cold War we talked about mutually assured destruction or MAD. Essentially, MAD was the idea that if one nation was to use its nuclear weapons then the others would follow, causing mutual destruction. Throughout the duration of the study, I couldn't help but connect it to the concept that diversity equals stability, which we were learning about in biology. Every time I heard about another endangered animal I would be reminded that we are mutually assuring our destruction by destroying the creature that makes our environment sustainable. We are intelligent life forms that insist on being stupid. As I stand here enveloped in a blanket of ice, free from all pressure, I am heart-broken by the thought of global warming and the potential loss of my tiny angels. My internal dialogue is interrupted by a loud "Indiiiiiaaaa!" that comes from somewhere up the skin track. I am reminded that I am not alone in this blizzard. I take another minute to soak up the feeling of freedom and protection brought on by the white balls of fluff surrounding me before I flex the muscles in my legs and urge my body forward.

Once reunited with my group at the top of the climb, I begin the struggle of removing my skins from the bottom of my ski. I am determined to do it on my own. I look over to see my dad casually rip the skins off his skis in one fluid motion. My eyes narrow, jealousy and stubbornness now fuel my effort as I attempt to get more leverage by holding the ski steady with my foot. My dad looks over with a pitying glance and takes a step forward to help. I give him a glaring warning with my eyes to stay away. I eventual remove both the skins from the bottom of my skis. The task wasn't completed graceful, but I got it done. We load everything back in our backpacks, snap into our bindings and are ready to roll. On my first powder turn, the bliss of skiing sets in. Weaving through the trees, I let out a whoop of joy. As usual the slid is over much too quickly. It take a special breed for this type of skiing, those who participate must enjoy the up as well as the down. It is no longer snowing and I can see my brother and dad clearly. The moment we reach the bottom, by brother is out of his binding re-skinning ready for another run. I quickly follow, not wanting to be left behind. After a few more runs, we are wiped out and ready for some grub. We find a nice place for lunch and begin to devour the sustenance we brought with us. The sun is out now, showing once again that the weather in Colorado is ADD. I close my eyes to better feel the wind's caress against my skin. As the wind tickles my cheeks,

the past swirls into my present and I am again pulled back in time into another memory.

I have just reached the top of the trail Skyline, my chest still heaving as my lungs absorb the oxygen. It is one of those rare occasions when I decide to abandon my bike and go for a run. A run is usually instigated by the absolute refusal to be strapped into another pair of spandex shorts. This particular run had been the result of an urgent need to get out of my house. I was frustrated by my humanities homework and on top of that the printer was malfunctioning. I had just snapped at my father, who was only trying to help, and was feeling rather irritable. There was no way I could sit and write in this moment so I grabbed my sneakers, put on a sports bra and shorts and bolted out the door. Now I wouldn't say I am a fast runner, but because of my overall fitness, I am able to keep a moderate pace. Some may call me weird but I love that burning sensation in my legs when I work them hard. It's almost as though I can feel their strength. There is something thrilling about pushing yourself to the limit. A run was just what I needed to clear my head. At the summit, I stand and feel the wind on my skin-- an invisible embrace. It invokes a similar feeling to that of the snow surrounding me. I am light, free, and awed. The wind is less of a shield to the outside world like the snow, and more of a cleanse that cleans out all the junk I keep inside. My breath finally calms and my eyes drift shut. At the moment right before my eyes are completely closed, my eye lashes catch the , sending patterns of color like a sorbet drizzled in sunlight across my vision. This trail, where I can run without constraint, experience the wind on my face and hear only that of nature, is my sanctuary.

The isolation of a snow storm, the rhythm of a race, and the purification of the wind are all a safe haven from the modern world of technology and time. Our generation is blessed with luxury and endless supplies of entertainment but with that come a plague of disconnection and expectation. I need my escape from this world. When I am outside surrounded by non-judgmental trees, I can decompress. As Edward Abbey puts it in "Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom, "We need wilderness because we are wild animals. Every man needs a place where he can go to go crazy in peace"(229). This is not exactly what I'm getting at but presents a similar idea. I need a place of peace to prevent me from going crazy, whereas Abbey needs a place to go crazy. We don't just need nature because it provides the essential for life, we need it because it is part of who we are. Technology changes much too fast for us to completely adapt to the new surroundings. There is a part of us that still needs nature to keep us sane.

As I go though my routine day after day, school, bike, homework, sleep, repeat, I am bored by my own life. When I drive a car or turn on my light I am depressed by the way these luxuries were brought to me. Sometimes I wish that I was strong enough to go rogue and live in some hippie TP in the woods. But I'm not, so instead I daydream of a world where there is no distinct line between human kind and nature but instead human kind is a part of nature. We do not regard ourselves as superior but see everything as having intrinsic value. A world where the pressure to achieve does not clutter my trail. In my world there is a balance between advancement and conservation. In fact we use our technology and brain power to coexist with the creatures around us. All houses and building are built to be "green" and energy efficient. In

my world there will always be snow, trees and a place for me to escape. Everyone will have a somewhere to remove the pressure brought on by a fast paced world, a place to feel peace and a place where time is an irrelevant factor. This may seem like an unrealistic fantasy, and fantasy it is, but know I have the power to make my world a reality. I know that we have the power to shape our own reality, we just have to make the decision to change.