

Snow Angels

By Lilwa Dixel

Sometimes I lie. It wasn't always like that. I used to tell the truth.

I've always believed that life throws chances at you, and with each chance there's a decision to be made. The choices can be small, like staying inside and drawing a picture of Santa or going outside and making a snow angel, but they all lead to change. Some of these changes happen gradually, while others...

"Mom! Mom! Evie fell through the ice!"

The frozen lake behind our house looked like a puddle of spilled milk against the dark green of the forest. Shaggy pines struggled to stand tall under the weight of the snow, desperate to follow the posture-perfect example of the frost-glazed peaks in the distance.

Mom didn't even put on her jacket. She just burst out of the house, running toward the shore, leaving me alone on the slippery porch. I'd never heard anyone scream like that. It made me wonder if my choice had been the right one.

Apart from my ragged breath, an intrusive silence lingered in the house. The frozen tears on my cheeks melted. We weren't supposed to go near to the hole in the ice.

What would my sister have done? Squeezing thoughts through my numb mind was hard. Five minutes ago, we had been playing – our snow angels still held hands down by the lake – it felt like someone had taken the ice-saw to my chest and cut out a big chunk.

All I wanted to do was roll up in a blanket and go to sleep, but my sister would've called Dad. That's what she always did when something happened, like the time when Mom painted the guest house and fell down the ladder and broke her wrist. The memory of Dad's proud hand on my sister's shoulder still made me jealous.

'Well done, Pumpkin. Keeping your head cool like that; I'm proud of you.'

With my mind swirling like a bowl of mushy Christmas porridge, I trudged into the kitchen. Each step left a puddle of melting snow, and I tasted blood on my trembling breath. My sniffs to

keep the snot from dribbling out of my nose felt like a desperate attempt to hold onto my innocence. It wasn't fair that I had to grow up, but this was one of those chances that I mentioned earlier. Hesitantly, I lifted the phone and dialed his number. I would show Dad that I, too, could keep my head cool.

"It's Natalie." The words were sharp and flavorless – pine needles with a taste of lutefisk in my mouth.

"Hi, Pumpkin!" Dad said on the other end. "Listen, I'm about to enter a meeting and–"

"We were playing on the lake... Evelina went too close to the edge... she fell in..."

My dad took three deep breaths. The silence of the house seeped like cooling butterscotch into the call, slowly hardening his voice.

"What did you just say?"

"She couldn't get out of the water..."

"Natalie, put your mother on the phone, right now."

"She's outside," I said, watching her dark silhouette kneeling on the ice. "She's by the hole."

"If this is a joke..." His voice cracked. "Lili, baby, please tell me this is a joke..."

The pet name didn't hold the luster I had expected. The enthusiasm with which he usually said it had somehow faded.

"Are you mad at me, Daddy?"

"No, of course not, I'm... I'm on my way."

The phone clicked in my ear, and he was gone.

I dragged myself up the stairs. The first sob made me hiccup so hard that my chest started hurting.

My sister... my best friend... my twin...

All our toys lay dead and colorless on the floor. Her drawing of Santa and the reindeer sat unfinished on the desk, and my plushy giraffe looked at me accusingly as I climbed into my sister's bed, petting her favorite panda instead.

We'd never wanted separate bedrooms. We loved snuggling up together at night, talking about nothing, and letting the darkness merge our voices.

I hugged myself. I just wanted to sleep, but whenever I closed my eyes my sister's pale face would stare up at me from the dark water. The slushy surface separated us like the glass of a broken mirror. Maybe it was me sinking into the murky depths and her looking down.

Outside, the muted sound of sirens echoed across the thick winter coat of the wilderness.

Voices chased away the choking silence downstairs, but up here it only seemed to thicken and expand, pushing into my lungs like icy water. I stared at the ceiling, counting breaths, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did, and I felt the same as before, only emptier.

It took them hours to pull her out of the lake.

Winter in Sweden can be fickle. Everyone enjoys the rare visits of the sun, except the snowmen, who, like Mom that first year, cry and weep during the day, and turn frigid and unpleasant at night.

A week after my sister's death, the skies remained clear. Not one flake had fallen since that day, and our snow angels – mine now with a horned head and tattered wings – was visible from the kitchen window. Mom, still clad in her bathrobe in the late afternoon, busied herself with dinner when I snuck outside.

The chilly air pinched my cheeks and nose red. It was wrong that my snow angel had survived while my sister hadn't. I'd looked out the window every morning, hoping that the weather would erase its warped grin. Today, I'd finally had enough.

The first kick of my boot sent a puff of snow onto the bottom of the angel's dress. Another buried it up to the neck. I did pack it under a really thick layer, but to this day, I sometimes hear it shrieking in resentment just below the surface.

For a long time, I just listened to the whine of the wind. It was the exact spot where we had admired our angels together. I squinted my eyes, and for a moment she was standing there, brushing snow out of her gingerbread hair, eyes twinkling with excitement.

'This is perfect! Do you think Dad will like them?'

Those had been her last words. Now, only her footprints remained.

At dinner, Mom watched me eat. As usual, her own plate sat empty between the untouched cutlery. She never said anything unless Dad was around, and with his increasingly longer hours, he rarely made it home to dinner anymore. My sister and I had always adored our mother's beauty and strength – she had been the most stunning woman in the world to us – but now, with her bloodshot eyes, lank greasy hair, and hollow cheeks, she too seemed to have lost her shine.

“Did the angel fly to heaven?” she whispered.

The strings knotted in my chest. Mom was supposed to be the strong one – she was Wonder Woman. How could she be like this now? I hated her for it.

“No,” I said and left the table, “she drowned.”

Another week passed, and a lady came to the house. She made me sit on the living room sofa and told Mom to leave the room. With her round glasses balancing on the bridge of her pointy nose, she parked herself in Dad's armchair. She crossed her legs, and her suit pants rode up her ankle, revealing a strip of veiny gray skin.

“Hi, Natalie, my name is Margot.” She gave me a long look, which reminded me of Dad reading the bills. “I'm a crisis psychologist. Do you know what that is?”

I shook my head and stared at my palms. In reality, I knew why she was here – people like her had talked to Mom already – but it felt easier to lie.

“Well, it's my job to help children like you.” Margot opened her notebook and started flipping through the pages. “Let's talk a bit about Evelina, okay? Your mom tells me you're only talking about her when you're angry. Let's talk about what happened that day.”

“I don't want to talk.”

That was a lie, too. I did want to talk to someone, but this lady was so fake – she couldn't possibly know what it was like, and yet here she was, acting like she had a clue.

“It’s normal to want to bury yourself, to shut off your emotions, and try to forget. But to be able to deal with this, you need to open up. What do you feel other than sad when you think about your sister? Lonely maybe? Angry...?” She let the words hang in the air. “*Guilty?*”

“I feel like... like I put a piece of chocolate in my mouth... but it had rum inside...”

“You’re feeling disappointed, I can understand that,” she said, nodding. Her pencil skittered across the page. “You had plans together – goals and dreams.”

She really had no idea. Looking back, it was almost comical. This woman had spent the entire morning talking to my mother, and for some reason, she seemed entirely unfazed by the fact that my sister was dead – I was just a job to her.

“What did Mom say?”

“Your mom says she sees Evelina every day.” Margot sighed and closed the notebook. “Do you feel the same way?”

“Only when I look in the mirror.”

The truth tasted good, but I had long since passed the point of no return.

“I asked Dad earlier if he had preferred it if I had died instead.” My voice was smaller now, barely audible. “But he just started crying – Dad never cries.”

Margot dabbed her forehead with her hand and then shook her head. I could see in her face that she, too, was disappointed. She sighed and removed her glasses, wiping them on her sleeve. Her eyes were small and tired.

“Tell me what happened after you made those snow angels.”

I swallowed hard. “Her angel was prettier than mine, so I chased her. Dad would’ve liked hers better.”

Margot blinked a few times and looked at me sideways. “Then what happened?”

“I called out to make her stop running. She wasn’t looking ahead of her...”

Margot had stopped writing. She stood up and marched over to the sofa, patting my shoulder gently. I hadn’t realized until now that tears were flowing down my cheeks.

“You never... caught up to her?” It was hard to tell if it was a question or not.

I shook my head.

“It was an accident...” she said, sounding more relieved than consoling. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Margot had suspected me of pushing my sister into the icy water, she thought I was envious, and perhaps I was.

Parents aren’t supposed to have favorites, but they still do. My sister knew it, I knew it, Mom and Dad knew it, but nobody ever said it out loud. It’s strange to think that even when you look exactly the same, you’ll sometimes be treated differently.

Still, my love and adoration for her were stronger than anything else, and I would’ve taken her place in death in a heartbeat. Sometimes you don’t have a choice, and you have to settle for the second-best.

I just wanted to spare my parents the grief of losing their favorite daughter. That was my only thought as I stumbled up the shore to our house that day, screaming my throat raw with my sister’s name. And somewhere along the way, that name changed. Things always change.

It had been an accident, but it wasn’t Evie who drowned that day.

Sometimes I lie.