I IN QUESTION

hand. She stood there and looked at them. She couldn’t
think what to do. Finally she went over to another nurse
and took her aside. “I’m going to need a little something
after all,” she said.

The other nurse looked around. “I don’t have any.”

“[Name],” she said. “Please.”

“Don’t ask, okay? You made me promise.”

“Look,” she said, “just this trip. It’s all right—really.
Beth, I mean it. It’s all right.”

During a lull later on she stopped and leaned her fore-
head against a porthole. The sun was just above the hori-
zon. The sky was clear, no clouds between her and the sea
below, whose name she loved to hear the pilots say—the
East China Sea. Through the crazed Plexiglas she could
make out some small islands and the white glint of a ship
in the apex of its wake. Someday she was going to take pas-
sage on one of those ships, by herself or maybe with some
friends. Lie in the sun. Breathe the good air. Do nothing all
day but eat and sleep and be clean, throw crumbs to the
gulls and watch the dolphins play alongside, diving and
then leaping high to show off for the people at the rail, for
her and her friends. She could see the whole thing. When
she closed her eyes she could see the whole thing, perfectly.

Powder

Just before Christmas my father took me skiing at Mount
Baker. He’d had to fight for the privilege of my com-
pany, because my mother was still angry with him for
sneaking me into a nightclub during his last visit, to see
Thelonious Monk.

He wouldn’t give up. He promised, hand on heart, to
take good care of me and have me home for dinner on
Christmas Eve, and she relented. But as we were checking
out of the lodge that morning it began to snow, and in this
snow he observed some rare quality that made it necessary
for us to get in one last run. We got in several last runs. He
was indifferent to my fretting. Snow whirled around us in
bitter, blinding squalls, hissing like sand, and still we skied.
As the lift bore us to the peak yet again, my father looked
at his watch and said, “Criminy. This’ll have to be a fast
one.”

By now I couldn’t see the trail. There was no point in
trying. I stuck to him like white on rice and did what he did
and somehow made it to the bottom without sailing off a
criff. We returned our skis and my father put chains on the
Austin-Healey while I swayed from foot to foot, clapping
my mittens and wishing I was home. I could see every-
thing. The green tablecloth, the plates with the holly pat-
ttern, the red candles waiting to be lit.

We passed a diner on our way out. “You want some
soup?” my father asked. I shook my head. “Buck up,” he
said. “I’ll get you there. Right, doctor?”

I was supposed to say, “Right, doctor,” but I didn’t say
anything.

A state trooper waved us down outside the resort. A
pair of sawhorses were blocking the road. The trooper
came up to our car and bent down to my father’s window.
His face was bleached by the cold. Snowflakes clung to his
eyebrows and to the fur trim of his jacket and cap.

“Don’t tell me,” my father said.

The trooper told him. The road was closed. It might get
cleared, it might not. Storm took everyone by surprise. So
much, so fast. Hard to get people moving. Christmas Eve.
What can you do.

My father said, “Look. We’re talking about five, six
inches. I’ve taken this car through worse than that.,

The trooper straightened up. His face was out of sight
but I could hear him. “The road is closed.”

My father sat with both hands on the wheel, rubbing the
wood with his thumbs. He looked at the barricade for a
long time. He seemed to be trying to master the idea of it.
Then he thanked the trooper, and with a weird, old-maidy
show of caution turned the car around. “Your mother will
never forgive me for this,” he said.

“We should have left before,” I said. “Doctor.”

He didn’t speak to me again until we were in a booth at
the diner, waiting for our burgers. “She won’t forgive me,”
he said. “Do you understand? Never.”

“I guess,” I said, but no guesswork was required; she
wouldn’t forgive him.

“I can’t let that happen.” He bent toward me. “I’ll tell

you what I want. I want us all to be together again. Is that
what you want?”

“Yes, sir.”

He bumped my chin with his knuckles. “That’s all I
needed to hear.”

When we finished eating he went to the pay phone in
the back of the diner, then joined me in the booth again. I
figured he’d called my mother, but he didn’t give a report.
He sipped at his coffee and stared out the window at the
empty road. “Come on, come on,” he said, though not to
me. A little while later he said it again. When the trooper’s
car went past, lights flashing, he got up and dropped some
money on the check. “Okay. Vamanos.”

The wind had died. The snow was falling straight
down, less of it now and lighter. We drove away from the
resort, right up to the barricade. “Move it,” my father told
me. When I looked at him he said, “What are you waiting
for?” I got out and dragged one of the sawhorses aside,
then put it back after he drove through. He pushed the
door open for me. “Now you’re an accomplice,” he said.
“We go down together.” He put the car into gear and gave
me a look. “Joke, son.”

Down the first long stretch I watched the road behind
us, to see if the trooper was on our tail. The barricade van-
nished. Then there was nothing but snow: snow on the road,
snow kicking up from the chains, snow on the trees, snow
in the sky; and our trail in the snow. Then I faced forward
and had a shock. The lay of the road behind us had been
marked by our own tracks, but there were no tracks ahead
of us. My father was breaking virgin snow between a line of
tall trees. He was humming “Stars Fell on Alabama.” I felt
snow brush along the floorboards under my feet. To keep
my hands from shaking I clamped them between my knees.

My father grunted in a thoughtful way and said, “Don’t
ever try this yourself.”
"I won't."
"That's what you say now, but someday you'll get your license and then you'll think you can do anything. Only you won't be able to do this. You need, I don't know—a certain instinct."
"Maybe I have it."
"You don't. You have your strong points, but not this. I only mention it because I don't want you to get the idea this is something just anybody can do. I'm a great driver. That's not a virtue, okay? It's just a fact, and one you should be aware of. Of course you have to give the old heap some credit, too. There aren't many cars I'd try this with. Listen!"

I did listen. I heard the slap of the chains, the stiff, jerky rasp of the wipers, the purr of the engine. It really did purr. The old heap was almost new. My father couldn't afford it, and kept promising to sell it, but here it was.

I said, "Where do you think that policeman went to?"
"Are you warm enough?" He reached over and cranked up the blower. Then he turned off the wipers. We didn't need them. The clouds had brightened. A few sparse, feathery flakes drifted into our slipstream and were swept away. We left the trees and entered a broad field of snow that ran level for a while and then tilted sharply downward. Orange stakes had been planted at intervals in two parallel lines and my father steered a course between them, though they were far enough apart to leave considerable doubt in my mind as to exactly where the road lay. He was humming again, doing little scat riffs around the melody.

"Okay then. What are my strong points?"
"Don't get me started," he said. "It'd take all day."
"Oh, right. Name one."
"Easy. You always think ahead."

True. I always thought ahead. I was a boy who kept his clothes on numbered hangers to insure proper rotation. I bothered my teachers for homework assignments far ahead of their due dates so I could draw up schedules. I thought ahead, and that was why I knew that there would be other troopers waiting for us at the end of our ride, if we even got there. What I did not know was that my father would wheedle and plead his way past them—he didn't sing "O Tannenbaum," but just about—and get me home for dinner, buying a little more time before my mother decided to make the split final. I knew we'd get caught; I was resigned to it. And maybe for this reason I stopped moping and began to enjoy myself.

Why not? This was one for the books. Like being in a speedboat, only better. You can't go downhill in a boat. And it was all ours. And it kept coming, the laden trees, the unbroken surface of snow, the sudden white vistas. Here and there I saw hints of the road, ditches, fences, stakes, but not so many that I could have found my way. But then I didn't have to. My father was driving. My father in his forty-eighth year, rumpled, kind, bankrupt of honor, flushed with certainty. He was a great driver. All persuasion, no coercion. Such subtlety at the wheel, such tactful pedalwork. I actually trusted him. And the best was yet to come—switchbacks and hairpins impossible to describe. Except maybe to say this: if you haven't driven fresh powder, you haven't driven.