

-- Syntax: Chapter 2

Katia and Walter traveled from Zürich to Schwanden by train. The cabin was a short distance further, in a village outside the town of Elm. With the final distance serviced by bus, they climbed through shadows of rain and fog, passing beneath a series of concrete canopies, which extended from the mountainside. Walter could see that their construction was not for aesthetic purposes, and he inquired as to their function.

"Avalanche," said Katia. "If the snow comes, it goes over. There is soon a place where you will see some trees that have fallen."

So far, Walter had only seen rain, which began as soon as the train cleared sight of the lake of Zürich. This winter had brought warm temperatures and left inadequate snowfall across the majority of the Alps. Outside, rich dew collected on the windows of the bus and the trees were thick and green with lichen. Katia assured Walter there would be snow at the cabin.

As advertised, a great tangle of trunks came into view. The trees by the roadside stood untouched, leading one to believe that the avalanche had swept the mountainside clean above the awnings. Exposed by chainsaws, with trimmings and sawdust stained red by the damp, the pale cores of several victims flashed from the gloom of the wood.

The engine whined and the road cut through rocky soil. Soon they emerged from the climb and into the bottom of a snow-filled basin, the sides rising to harsh peaks. At once, Walter felt the mood of the other passengers lift. The bus turned off the main road and picked its way through a village. Apparently, this was their destination, because Katia signaled the driver to stop. Walter gathered his small duffle bag and they

stepped out into the cold. The bus rumbled away and silence filled the space between the houses.

Anchored to the slope, the village spread out linearly along a narrow crest. Higher up, the houses became sparse and a thin tree line appeared, and above that mark, more snow and raw stone. In Schwanden, the mountains formed an impenetrable wall, but now it seemed they might topple in like waves in a tempest. Just as Walter seemed to gauge their size, he realized the tiny dots he could see were hundred foot fir trees and his eyes would travel down to the base and up again. Katia stirred him from his reverie with a laugh.

"Come," she said, "the cabin is not so far."

A small footpath cut between houses, trailing off into deep snow. They matched the footsteps of someone who passed this way before, and Walter wondered if someone had been Katia since she had brought up her car the day before and returned to Zürich by train. As she explained it, the issue was the size of her car, which was rather small. Along with her skis and luggage, Katia had brought food and a few things her father wanted to store. She also remembered Walter enjoyed the train and thought he might fancy the ride.

The path crossed a stream, which came straight down the mountainside. Long ago, the villagers had raised the banks, and several small bridges spanned clear waters. In winter, the calm brook gurgled serenely, but Walter could imagine the spring thaw roaring down the chute. He stood for a moment at the center of the bridge, following the streambed with his eyes until he lost it in the trees. Katia marched on and Walter had to jog to catch up. They knocked the snow from their boots on the front

steps of the cabin, and Walter noticed the remains of a stone hut tucked under a modern, two-story dwelling. Inside the tight entrance, Walter immediately cracked his head on the ceiling.

"Take care for yourself. The top is very low," said Katia. "This is an old house, and the people were not so tall in old days. It is better in the kitchen."

True to her word, the floor in the kitchen was several inches lower than that of the vestibule, and Walter could stretch without fear of concussion. His reflection stared back from slick, black cabinets, which were hanging above a long, granite counter. The latter ran parallel to bleached plank flooring, which evoked a feeling of aged ivory. Walter's eye lingered on the single natural feature of the room, a tangled grape vine, its fruit preserved, hanging from the knob of the back door.

"That's very pretty," he said.

Sitting at a wooden table in the center of the room, Katia turned to look at the vine.

"Do you think?" she asked. "This is the touch of my mother. My father does not like it so much. He is in love with the refrigerator."

There was not much to love. It was a thin appliance, encased in machined aluminum. Walter could not detect a hum or anything else to indicate understanding of its revered station within the family's social structure.

"I think you would like a coffee," said Katia and she set about to make espresso.

Walter took a seat on a small couch under a window by the back door. The view revealed a courtyard and the remains of a summer garden sleeping. Beyond the fence, the valley snaked away from the village. If Walter craned his neck, he could just see the

tops of the nearest mountains. Patches of blue sky began to appear, dropping shafts of light that roamed with the passing clouds. He followed one of these shafts as it wound along the main road, until the wind pushed the beam off into the snow and then up a thousand feet, where ice formed a turbulent surface on the sheer rock face.

"Do people climb that?"

Katia came to the window to see what Walter was referring to and shook her head.

"I suppose they must, but there are better places. My father is a mountaineer by hobby, and he has scaled the peaks near here. He can tell you all their names, but I only know a few. That sport is quite dangerous really. I do not recommend it. Skiing is much better."

By late afternoon, the clouds had disappeared entirely and a painful light filled the valley. They began bundling themselves and Walter wished he had remembered his sunglasses. They were sitting on the desk in his hotel room. He could see them clearly in his mind and he could remember reminding himself to slip them into his bag but they never made the journey. In general, Walter was poorly prepared for the weekend. First, he had never skied. He told Katia this but she said he would find something to do. Besides, she was only skiing on Saturday, so maybe he could take some lessons. Second, the sunglasses had been a major oversight, and Walter knew the light would be even brighter outside. Lastly, his hiking shoes were low rise and better suited to warm weather trekking. Katia pulled on heavy black boots that came just shy of mid-calf. She frowned at his shoes.

"You have brought nothing other?" she asked.

Walter shook his head and she began to hunt through boxes in the mudroom. As she searched, Walter admired her profile. She was wearing a tight shirt made of Lycra and pants of similar fabric. It would be a shame to cover those legs with snow pants, and their parkas remain hanging on their pegs. The mood took hold, but just as he was about to reach out, Katia turned around with a pair of nylon sleeves in her hand. She noticed that Walter had been watching her, but did nothing more than toss the sleeves to him.

"These you put over your boots. They will keep your legs dry."

Katia stepped into her snow pants and zipped up the ankles, leaving a dumbfounded Walter to flip the sleeves this way and that. They had elastic encircling one end and straps on the other, and Walter tried to picture which end his foot might enter, but a small clip near the straps mystified him. He considered the operation spatially, creating a three-dimensional model of his leg and positioning the sleeve in any number of positions without success. He was fixated on the clip and could not get past probing its function. After Katia pulled on a sweater, she was ready to go, but Walter had made minimal progress, sitting with the sleeves in his hands pretty much as he had caught them. She took one and knelt down next to his leg.

"You see, it is really quite simple. This goes up over the leg. You put your foot on the wire so it comes to the bottom of your boot. Tighten the strap and you are done."

"What about the clips?"

"Well, they go onto your bootstrings, of course! This keeps the tops of your feet dry."

"Ah."

Once Walter's foot was through the second sleeve, it would not budge. He tried to force it by tugging until he thought the nylon would tear. Then, looking at the underside of his shoe, he saw that the wire had wedged itself between the rubber treads. The model of his leg was still spinning in the invisible space above the mudroom, though now its twin, prepared for a romp in the snow, joined the vision. As he tossed the legs together seeking a graceful escape, he noticed Katia leaning against the radiator trying desperately to stifle her amusement.

"Okay, so what did I do wrong?"

"You are forgetting to make the strap loose before putting your foot inside."

Walter undid the strap and his foot fell free. Now that he could see the mechanics of the operation, he could do it in his sleep. If Katia had given more than cursory instructions, Walter might have noticed the consequences of failing to address the gateway property of the strap. Clearly, there was no need to resort to diagramming such a straightforward workflow, so Walter promptly deleted the rendered limbs and tried his best not to look cross.

"It helps when you fully explain the process."

"I thought it was obvious," said Katia.

"Not to me."

"Yes, well, there you have it. Perhaps you would like it better if I provide detailed notes?"

"That will not be necessary."

They filed out of the mudroom, and Walter bumped his head against the ceiling again. He was going to have a crick in his spine from hunching about all weekend.

Katia put on her coat and bounded outside while Walter cursed softly and rubbed his skull. When he finally emerged, she hit with a handful of powdery snow.

"Wake up! There is no cause to be such a grump!"

Walter stood for a moment, blinking through the sudden chill, and then reached for her. She darted out of his reach and ran back up the footpath they had taken to the cabin. He may have been unaccustomed to physical activity, but Walter was quick over short distances. She did not make it far before he caught the back of her coat and pitched her sideways into virgin snow. She rolled away laughing and Walter dove in next to her, breathing hard.

"Hey!" said Katia. "I hope you are not tired. The snowshoeing will be hard work."

"No, I'll be fine, just getting warmed up."

Walter batted some snow in her face and jumped up. He jogging along the path to the village center, but as they entered the space between the houses, Katia passed him and led the way through snow packed streets, maintaining a constant pace. Though not swift, Walter still strained to match her. When they stopped, he doubled over, struggling to get air into his lungs. His thighs were burning and he was sweating profusely. A chill breeze slipped down his jacket and he gasped.

"You are warmed up now?" asked Katia.

Lacking the oxygen and several additional gasses critical for a proper response, Walter straightened himself as best he could and tried to smile, but he was sure his face lacked certain charms. They were standing in a parking lot flanked by a wooden building, more of a barn really, with thick cables running from somewhere inside and up the mountain and over a ridge. Walter stiffly followed Katia to a stall outside the barn

where they could rent snowshoes. She helped him select a sturdy pair along with hiking poles, and assured him that she would provide comprehensive guidance in their proper use before they took off into the backcountry.

Inside the barn, the cables held aloft a substantial gondola. Other passengers were waiting to board, but only Walter and Katia were carrying snowshoes. A small man came forward to take the equipment and placed it in a basket attached to the lift. Katia paid the fare to the man and it occurred to Walter that she had paid with cash for both the snowshoe rental and the lift. Without a credit card or signature, there was no way to track the shoes or hold the rental party accountable. Even if the majority of patrons were honest folk, the likelihood of shoes from one company falling in with those of another must be rather high. How many shoes did this little business lose each year? Walter guessed there must be half a dozen places in this valley alone renting snowshoes; plainly, there was a desperate need for a tagging system. An ideal system would include a bar code for operational efficiency, not only would this clarify ownership, but it could also match pairs. The tagging system would feed a database, allowing the individual owner to track their inventory. If the developers were slick about it, they could mount a radio-frequency identification tag to the base of the shoe, with receivers stationed in strategic locations throughout the valley. In conjunction with topographical maps and a link to the inventory database, the subscribers would have a means for triangulating positions in real-time and monitoring their assets. To be sure, safety officials would have a stake in such a system. It would be an easy task to generate a visual representation of all snowshoeing entities, which would be vital for identifying the distressed.

As Walter debated units of measure – hectares or square kilometers, the packed lift pulled them out of the barn and ever higher. At first, the people were quiet, but the valley came into full view and people began discussing the beauty. As they were using local dialects, Walter understood only a few words. In any case, he kept himself busy, settling on hectares but retaining kilometers for measuring the direct vectors between monitoring stations and individual snowshoeing customers in the field. A jab in the ribs reminded Walter that Katia was standing beside him, and in his opinion, she could have shown some consideration for his personal space. Walter tried to ignore her prodding, but then he noticed that all the chatter in the lift had stopped and most of the people were staring at him. In particular, an especially formidable man, his width encompassing the two women who stood in front of him, was staring at Walter with raised eyebrows. The man had said something to Walter and he had not responded. It was entirely possible that the man had repeated himself, perhaps even several times.

"Entschuldigung?" asked Walter, begging the giant's pardon.

The man repeated the question. His eyebrows arched at an angle Walter found threatening. He looked to Katia for assistance.

"He wants to know if you are frightened," she said.

With teeth as thick as Walter's thumb and the mouth to hold them, this man could easily swallow one of the heads of the women in front of him. Even so, the capacity of the gondola and the strength of the cables drew Walter's immediate concern. From the specifications posted above the door, he extracted the data for a rough calculation. However, when he tried to estimate the weight of the crowd, the conversion rate to kilograms evaded recall. This failure of memory, precipitated by the potential for

physical violence and manifested in the presence of this ogre, caused Walter great stress. Yes, it was safe to say that Walter was terrified. In his most proper and correct German, Walter confirmed that the man was indeed a large and fearsome specimen, punctuating his awe by spreading his arms as wide as the crowded space would allow and flexing his muscles. Silence followed this demonstration, but after a moment, everyone erupted into riotous laughter.

Katia elbowed Walter again and whispered harshly in his ear, "No, silly! He wants to know if the height has frightened you. You have stood there staring at the floor since the lift began moving."

Walter looked out of the lift and noticed the scenery. At the neck of a turn in the valley, he could discern the form of a small town, which he concluded must be Elm. The sun would soon retreat before the approaching evening, and the snow-covered mountains would find slopes blanketed in rich, golden light. A few clouds had arrived, but they held their positions on the periphery of the northern horizon. There was no response to the question except to shrug, which made the passengers laugh even more. The man reached out, clasped Walter's shoulder, and gave him a friendly shake.

After crossing the ridge, there were a number of houses and dense trees crowding the rising slope. The cable terminated near a low hut, and they disembarked. An unexpected distance separated them from the peak, for Walter had assumed they would be rather close to the top but this was not the case. Most of the people said something humorous to Walter or gave him a wink. A woman approached Katia, and though Walter did not understand their exchange, they sniggered in his general direction and his face burned. When he went to gather the snowshoes from the front of the

gondola, he found the other passengers retrieving archaic, wooden sleds more suitable for children than adults. He tried to picture the giant riding one of these sleds, but Walter thought he would be more comfortable strapping one to each foot like skates. There was no sledding nearby so he assumed there must be a designated area beyond the village.

Katia carefully explained how to put on the snowshoes. Walter listened intently as she demonstrated the use of a bar attached to the rear of the shoe. Once snapped into position, the retractable heel provided a means for creating a level platform on steep inclines. Only one of Walter's shoes had the bar so he would have to make due, but the poles provided welcome traction as they climbed a trail cut by snowmobiles. He lifted each foot deliberately like a child wearing his father's wingtips. Their pace was not so brisk as to seem tiring, but the effort soon had him sweating again.

Crunching steps cut through the stillness. For a time, Katia and Walter separated. He chose a route through the clean snow while she continued along the trail. He followed the tree line, listening to the sound of running water from an unseen stream, and eventually the trail ran across his path. Katia came along after a moment and they stood together breathing softly. Their ship had risen to the crest of the waves and a sea of peaks rolled on towards sundown.

"These houses are pretty high up," said Walter, nodding to the few dark cabins he could see.

"Nobody lives in them. Mainly they are used in summer and some keep the grass for the cows. There is not much flat ground as you can see so the farmer grows

the grass where he can and stores it here. In winter, they come and pull it down to the cows in the valley."

"So that's what the snowmobiles are for."

"Correct," said Katia, smiling at Walter's understanding. "In old days, they used to ride them down on sledges. You know, like the kind the people had at the lift?"

"Really?" asked Walter, imagining a surly Swiss farmer riding a wheel of hay down the side of the mountain. They were not far from the edge and he could see the drop. "They didn't go down this, did they?"

"No, the sledge for the grass is big. They would go an easier way, by the village. You will see when we finish our walk."

She explained that they were going to go higher and stop at an old barn and then they would turn down and go to the village. If they maintained a good pace, they would make the barn just before the sun finally dipped under the mountains. As they marched, Walter found a comfortable stride, arms and legs working together like a machine eating the snow in his path. Katia remarked on how well he was doing and Walter tried not to allow this to disturb his coordination.

Consistent with Katia's estimate, they arrived at the high shelter just in time. A stone ledge lay bare before rough double doors, allowing them to sit down and remove their snowshoes. Before the light was lost, Katia slipped off her backpack and produced a bag of mixed nuts and a bottle of wine. Walter offered to open the wine, but she waved him off and handed him the nuts. The clouds to the north had drifted off towards the west and seemed bound to disappear with the sun. A few stars had made an appearance in the night, blue and thick above their heads. Katia served the wine in

small plastic cups and they toasted each other and the view. They kissed and drank the wine. After a solid hour of slogging through the snow, the nuts had been satisfying. Now, the wine was in his belly and Walter felt it would be a perfect time to retire to the cabin, for a sleep of all things. The dark continued to press in, but the stars fought their way through to illuminate the valley.

They enjoyed a second cup of wine, and then Katia began to organize her things. She gathered the cups and the nuts, cleansing the former with snow. After inching the cork back into the neck of the bottle, she carefully placed the wine in her pack and zipped it shut. They continued to sit after fastening their snowshoes. Walter was worried that his legs might stiffen and he stomped his feet.

"Shall we go now?" asked Katia.

"What's next?"

"When we pass the trees, you will see the village. There is a nice restaurant there, not so fancy, but they have good fondue if you like."

Of all the time he had spent in Switzerland, Walter had never done fondue. The prospect of fondue with Katia in a small village atop a mountain in the heart of winter sounded idyllic, so naturally, Walter approached the situation with cautious optimism. In fact, aside from a rather poor experience with fleischkäse, a sort of slab-like bologna, Walter had precious little food considered Swiss, or even Germanic for that matter. Röstli was one example that came to mind. Commonly described as broiled cheese served with potatoes, thin slices of sharp mountain cheese arrive solo and potatoes served family style. The plate is hot from the oven and one can get a serious burn just by brushing a wrist against it. This is a cold weather dish but Walter had insisted on it in

summer, forcing his fellow project members to endure the heat of the plates under an outdoor canopy in the middle of July.

Descending in snowshoes requires constant forward motion. If Walter tried to slow his progress, his inertia threatened to pitch him forward and he ended up sitting in the snow rather than take a header. Katia was well ahead of him, using her poles to balance her body like a set of parallel bars. She ran most of the way, taking great leaps when the angle was too steep. About halfway down, Walter got a handle on the technique and he too began bounding through the snow. Nimble and elegant he was not, but Walter found grace in the cover of darkness.

When Walter entered the restaurant, heat broke over his body. Katia had shed her coat at the entrance and was now pulling off her sweater. Several men turned to stare at her and a few watching some far off soccer match nudged each other. Walter joined her at the table and they ordered some wine.

"You enjoyed it?" asked Katia.

"Absolutely, it was incredible. I couldn't believe how easy it was going up with the shoes on. Coming down was a blast once I got the hang of it."

"I watched you from the bottom. You did well for your first time, even though you were caught in the fence."

"Oh, you saw that," said Walter.

"Yes, it was quite spectacular. You should consider skiing with me tomorrow. It is clear that you have little fear."

"And little sense."

"There is that. It could be very enjoyable for me."

There was a wire fence about three quarters of the way down that Walter had failed to gauge properly. By that point, he thought he was going quite well; the fence was low, the snow high, and it appeared to be an easy jump. He gathered some speed and planted his poles. In retrospect, he wondered if planting his poles on the far side of the fence would have allowed him to clear it, or maybe he should have been further from the fence, though it was possible that getting closer might have helped. The toes of his snowshoes caught in the wire grid and Walter flipped face first into the snow. Sitting in the warmth of the restaurant, Walter could feel a bruise or two, especially on his shins. He drank the wine.

The proprietor of the restaurant pushed a cart to the side of their table. On the cart, a wheel of cheese, the center hollowed out, held bubbling fondue. The man spooned out some of the cheese into a vessel and placed it on a blue flame glowing at the center of the table. Katia forked a cube of bread and dipped it into the fondue. She twirled the spear and then pulled off the cube and ate it. Walter followed her example and they ate their way through two baskets of bread, accompanied by two bottles of wine.

As they ate, Walter asked Katia about the dialect he heard being spoken a few tables away. She told him it was local and that she understood almost nothing. Her family was from Zürich and they had bought the cabin just a few years ago. Skiing in Elm was leisurely and her father appreciated the climbing, but as with other valleys the locals had their own language.

Walter grew fond of the heat in the restaurant and the wine was working its wonders. The fondue sat well in his stomach, and Katia talked at length about skiing.

He felt sorry when they had to leave, especially when he stood up and felt too stiff to move. Outside, the night sky exploded with stars and Walter felt dizzy, unable to keep from looking up as they their gear towards the lift. Katia stopped suddenly and Walter bumped into her.

"So, here we leave the snowshoes and we get our sledges."

They were standing in front of a small stall, not unlike the one at the base of the mountain. There were racks for snowshoes and poles and a row of wooden sleds like the ones Walter had seen coming off the lift some hours before. Katia stacked her shoes and picked out a sled, using some mysterious criteria as they all looked identical to Walter.

"I thought we were taking the lift down," said Walter.

"No, we take the sledge like everyone else. Why would we ride down in the lift?"

"Because it's dark?" asked Walter, though he was sure the question.

"Nei, nei. We take the sledge. Sorry, I thought you knew. Do you feel up to it?"

"I guess I must. Okay, let's do it."

This was the wine talking and Walter knew it. They took their sleds and walked through the village. Walter saw a group of people standing by a fire barrel close to the edge of the road. Their sleds were lying in the snow bank, so Walter assumed that the slope was near, but Katia tossed her sled into the road and checked her backpack.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am checking that all is secure. This is where we go."

Before Walter had a chance to ask her what she meant, Katia demonstrated by sitting on the sled and kicking herself down the snowy street. He could see the ruts of others as Katia disappeared around a corner.

"You've got to be kidding me."

He straddled the sled. With no rope to hold, there was no clear way to steer. Walter's hands found a position on the bare rails and he put his feet flat on the ground. The road dipped into the trees, and from there, it was anyone's guess. For a moment, he gripped the rails, breathing hard. Would Katia be waiting at the bottom or on her way back up? The group by the fire looked over and someone sniggered. They were talking about him with Zürich accents, and unfortunately, Walter understood every word. He scooted on the hard packed snow and moved faster than he would have liked.

At the first corner, Walter dug his foot into the curve and he lifted the front of the sled. It seemed the natural thing to do and the turn came off well, but the road dropped sharply and way down at the bottom and he could see a sharp cutback to the right. Failure to control his speed would result in a short trip into a dark ravine. Above the shadowy form of the neighboring mountain, a ghost of a cloud hung in the air. The sky opened up and the stars called for action. Walter lifted his feet to minimize friction, racing towards the embankment at the bottom of the hill. He passed several people climbing back up, but Katia was not among them. When at last fear took hold, Walter dug in his heels and raised the sled, managing to stop a few feet shy of the edge.

"I was beginning to think you were not coming," came Katia's voice. She was sitting on her sled, beyond the turn of the cutback, which turned out to be a plateau of sorts going on ten or twenty meters before diving out of sight.

"This wasn't what I expected at all."

"No? How so?"

"Well," said Walter, "in the States we go sledding on hills but they're wide and you can see the bottom."

"This does not sound like fun," said Katia.

It would be hard to argue about the fun factor. After Walter got over the initial terror of racing down a mountain road in the dark on a rickety wooden sled with no way to stop except with his feet, he was fine. In fact, Walter was indeed having fun. He stood up and began to carry the sled towards the slope.

"Are you coming for another run?" he asked.

"I was thinking we could go down to the bottom. It is more challenging than riding along this children's hill."

Walter could see that she meant to take him through the ravine. He walked over to the side and saw the road coiled in the dense trees. The angle was steep, and there was no guardrail separating the would-be loge racer from the crevasse.

"It'll be a little difficult to see, don't you think?"

"I have brought the torches of course," said Katia

"Of course."

Katia pulled two flashlights out of her backpack and gave one to Walter. He turned it on and pointed it into the chasm. It was a long way down.

"Plenty of rocks," he said.

"Hey, have no worry of it. If you are not stopping, just jump from the sledge."

Fixing his sled on the road again, Walter sighed and sat down. He held the flashlight against the rails and kicked off. Through the first two turns, he kept his feet firmly against the surface of the road, icy spray kicking up into his face. Katia shouted something behind him, but the grinding of the rails drowned her words. By the third turn, he could feel her riding close behind him. Down the straightaway, she zipped past, waving and temporarily blinding Walter with her flashlight. When his eyes readjusted, he noticed that her feet were just barely touching the ground. She cut into a left turn, swinging wide on the exit and gaining speed. When Walter tried the same maneuver, he ended up brushing the rock face of the mountainside but he managed to maintain control. He made an effort to catch up, but Katia showed no signs of stopping and the distance between them grew. Instead of battling back, Walter relaxed and let his body ease through the turns. He knew that his concentration should lie with the course, but his mind took to wandering amid the gentle sounds of the sled gliding on the snow.

A tiny beacon fading down the lane, Katia's flashlight bobbed and wiggled as Walter allowed himself a brief rest by the side of the road. He turned off his own flashlight and enjoyed the silence. From his estimate, they were only halfway down the mountain at most. At this rate, it would take nearly an hour to reach the bottom. Again, the question of the snowshoes and the radio frequency monitoring came to mind, but he pushed these away and thought of nature in the grand way that suburban people do when they experience the wilderness. Walter recognized this idle fantasy for what it was, but allowed it to continue. When he resumed his ride, he braked often hoping that he would not come upon Katia waiting around some bend, as she would surely be angry about his dawdling.

It was not long before Walter came upon her. Katia was sitting on her sled, looking up at the stars. With her flashlight off, Walter almost flew right by her. He left his sled by the side of the road and walked back to her.

"It is nice sometimes just to sit here and look to the stars," she said.

By way of agreement, Walter knelt by Katia's sled and took her hand. Together, they watched the sky. The ghostly cloud had moved on and it was clear in all directions.

Their ride ended near the lift. It was after eleven and the village was deserted. They walked their sleds over to the shuttered, wooden shed and then continued back to the cabin. Exhausted and full, Walter fell on bed and immediately passed into sleep.