

The Weight of Snow Crystals

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Translated from the Norwegian by Cathinka Hambro

I

I heard the wall clock in the sitting room strike four times, slowly and clearly, it was Sunday morning. There was a small gap in the curtains, it had stopped snowing. I turned over on my side. The clock struck five times. I gave a start and sat up in bed. I got up and moved towards the window, my eyes squinting. The stars had faded to almost nothing, the night clouds drifted in front of the moon. They were almost white, as if they belonged to the day. The moon lit up the building on the other side of the street. The moonshine and the dark night gave the bricks a bluish tint. The moon shone most brightly on the window panes.

If only the day would start, white and filled with snow. My jumping skis were prepared and lying in the hallway. Four hours to go until Per, my coach, would come and pick me up in his stylish Volvo Amazon, with the other ski jumpers. The apartment was quiet, not even the sound of water rushing through the pipes on the floors above and below. Dad had said he would get up and see me out and say hello to everyone. I didn't believe him, mum and dad usually slept in on Sundays. "Per Stranden is a legend", dad said when I told him early in the autumn that Per was going to be our new coach.

I turned on the light, put on my long socks, found the small flashlight under the bed and tip-toed to the door. Carefully, I pushed down the handle and opened the door. There was enough light streaming from my room to see the two broad jumping skis. They were lying upside down across two kitchen chairs. With those two planks I could fly. The red heel block, the ski bindings and the blue tip were visible in the semi-darkness. I pushed the button on the flashlight forward. I heard a faint click. I turned the light beam towards the grey coating under the skis. Did I hear a sound from mum and dad's bedroom? Just one of them turning over in bed, probably. Then everything was quiet again. With my right hand I moved the light beam over the skis. The fingertips of my left hand moved up and down in the three grooves, following the light beam. The silver wax I had prepared the skis with was rubbed in smoothly and evenly, just right. I had spent three hours preparing the skis. The night before, my mother asked me if I wanted to watch a television program with her and dad, as it was Saturday. She said it was important to spend time together, and

something else I couldn't remember. I didn't watch the program. Preparing the skis was more important.

I tip-toed around the skis. They looked perfect from every angle. The thickness of the wax was just right, and I couldn't find a single scratch on them. The weather forecast had promised temperatures below zero, the conditions couldn't be better at the Linderud Hill. The friction between the cold track and the well prepared skis would be minimal. What if I set a new personal record? Quietly, I put the flashlight on the floor and lifted up the skis with both hands, one by one. I never stopped marvelling at the fact that these heavy skis took off like feathers as I left the edge of the jump and soared down the landing slope. I gently put the skis down, picked up the flashlight and crept back to my room. I switched off the flashlight. What should I do now? Should I jot down an outline for the essay we had to write about the Swedish explorer Salomon August Andrée? No, it was Sunday, after all, and the essay wasn't due for a long time yet. What about the page of notes the pastor had given us to study for the confirmation classes? Not now. I switched off the light and stood at the window. The clouds, lit up by the moon, resembled ribs drifting across the sky. Having confirmed that this day could be nothing but perfect, I went back to bed.

I woke up with a start at eight o'clock. Everything was still quiet in the apartment. My jumping boots, my stretch pants, my parka and the rest of my outfit were on the chair next to my bed. I got dressed and tip-toed into the kitchen, carrying the heavy ski boots in my right hand. I opened the fridge door as quietly as I could and took out the sandwiches I had prepared the night before. My school bag was on the kitchen table with the snow goggles, the ski wax, a thermos filled with cold blackcurrant juice, and a spare pair of mittens, a jumper and a woollen hat. I put the sandwiches in the backpack and carried it out to the staircase. I put the boots on the concrete floor before I crept back in to get the skis. I put them on the floor, upside down, and sat on the stairs and put my boots on. I tied the laces so hard that the leather tightened around my foot. I sat on the cold stairs and wondered why I liked to tie my boots so tightly. Was it because it made me feel I could control the skis beneath me even better? When I walked down the stairs, I kept my left hand on the rail. I looked back a couple of times to see if mum or dad had got up to say good bye. The door was closed.

I was outside in Bjerregårds Street fifteen minutes before Per was supposed to pick me up. I didn't mind waiting. I was fourteen years old, almost fifteen, and I had something to look forward to. It was the first Sunday in advent of 1970.

The bricks that the moonlight had given a bluish tint a few hours earlier were now reddish brown. The clouds had drifted away. My bag was on my back, and the white skis rested against my right shoulder. Per came at ten past nine. Ola sat next to him in the front seat.

- I can see you're excited, Per said and fastened my skis on the roof rack.
- Jump in the back with Even.

The first three jumps were a bit shorter than I had hoped for. Before the fourth jump, I concentrated for a long time at the top. I checked the ski bindings several times, adjusted my goggles, crouched, stood up and adjusted the bindings and the goggles one more time.

- Are you going to jump before the day's over or what? shouted Even, who was standing behind me.

I set the skis in the tracks and pushed off with my right foot. Per stood on the jump to check the take-off. He had told me to crouch even lower in the upper run to reduce air resistance. As the heavy skis reached the beginning of the jump, I pushed the upper part of my body forward and fixed my eyes on the edge. I caught a glimpse of Per's boots out of the corner of my left eye. My toes, the balls of my feet, my calves, knees, thighs, hips, and my arms which I pulled backwards, leapt like a feather as my boots left the edge of the jump. I could feel that I soared higher over the brow than before. Below me I could see the tightly packed snow on the landing slope, and further down: the depression in the snow where most people landed. I pressed my arms against my body. I kept my skis together. I leaned forward. My stretch pants flapped in the wind. I opened my mouth and held my breath. My heavy skis and I flew forward, beneath the sun and the blue sky, in an arc, high above the landing slope. I adjusted the jump towards the left, using my right hand like a tiller. I flew another few metres, weightless, before my legs automatically began to prepare for the landing.

I touched down at the bottom of the slope and turned on the flat. Per had climbed down from the jump and was racing down the steps. I skated towards him.

- That's the best jump you've ever done! he cried.

- It wasn't too bad, I admitted and nodded at my skis. - They were well prepared, even if I say so myself.

- Well, it's the man *on* the skis who's the most important, Per said and patted my shoulder.

After we had eaten our sandwiches and I had finished my blackcurrant juice, I started to walk back to the top again. I felt something strange in my left thigh.

I raced down the upper run. As I took off at the edge of the jump, my right leg gave way. I couldn't stretch it out fully over the brow. My thigh felt numb. My body rotated towards the right, I fell on impact and rolled down the landing slope. My shoulder hurt. No wonder, my shoulder had hit the ground with great force. But what had happened to my right leg? Per helped me up and supported me to the car. He took my skis off and helped me on with my parka.

- Get in the front seat. I'll turn on the engine so you'll keep warm. We'll go home as soon as Ola and Even have jumped. Sorry, I must have pushed you too hard, all of you.

I shook my head.

- It is not your fault, I said.

The pain in my shoulder got worse during the evening. I said nothing to mum and dad, but decided to go and see the nurse at school the next day if I didn't feel better.

I had met the nurse three times before. Every time, she had been really nice and helpful, whether I had come for a vaccination or for a regular examination.

- Take your shirt off so I can have a look at you, she said.

I unbuttoned my shirt and put it on the desk.

She gently squeezed my shoulder.

- How did you get those bruises? Do you have more?

I took my trousers off and showed her the other bruises as well. She examined me thoroughly, looked at my thighs and my calves, and examined my shoulder and my shoulder blades once more.

- Have you been falling a lot lately?

- Maybe a bit more than normal.

- You haven't felt any pain in your legs?

- Maybe a little, no, I don't think so.

- You can get dressed now. Go and wait in the hallway, she said and picked up the phone. - I'm going to phone a doctor I know and ask him to examine you more closely. I'd like you to have a proper check-up. Better safe than sorry.

I nodded.

- Ask if I can get an appointment during school hours.

- I'll try, she said and laughed.

I sat down on the only chair in the badly lit hallway and started to think about how great it was that the jumping season was finally underway. I wasn't more than three when I started to jump over the small ski jumps my father built for me with snow and a spade. There is a big difference between jumping two metres and more than twenty metres. At the age of eight I landed a twenty-one metre jump. It was all about flying, and if not very far, it lasted long enough for me to remember it. Whilst flying, head and body became one and I forgot what I otherwise was. Every thought was fixed on take-off, flying and landing.

The door opened, the nurse came out and gave me a note.

- You have an appointment with Doctor Lange at ten o'clock on the fourth of December.

- Thank you, I said, put on my jacket and left.

On my way to Doctor Lange's office in the centre of Oslo I was thinking that all this snow would make conditions in the ski jump ideal for the training session on Friday. The bruises were fading and my shoulder felt fine. I looked at my watch, I had to hurry to make the appointment. I tried to walk faster, but couldn't.

Only the bigger streets were ploughed. On the pavements, the snow came up to my ankles. I was sweating and out of breath by the time I rang the doorbell at the doctor's office. A grey-haired nurse came out. There was no one in the waiting room. She told me to hang my parka on the hall stand and go straight in to the doctor.

- Can I wait just a minute? I said and sat down on the nearest chair. - I got a bit tired on the way here.

I tried to take a deep breath.

- Take the time you need.

She went back to the doctor's office and closed the door carefully. The sun was peeping in, surrounded by just a few clouds.

- Would you ask him to come in? I heard a male voice say behind the closed door. The door handle was pushed down. I stood up.
- Good luck, she said and stroked my shoulder lightly.

Doctor Lange looked at me from behind thick lenses. His eyes were small and grey beneath his black tousled brows. I'd never seen anyone with a back as bent as his. Even when sitting down it was striking. He smiled briefly, shook my hand and pointed at the vacant chair. We looked into each other's eyes. I nodded and sat down. He nodded back, took a breath, and looked at his notes. For what seemed like an eternity, he stayed down among the rows of words on the typewritten pages. Had he forgotten I was there? I looked around. Two charts and a framed picture were hanging on the wall. One of the charts had the letters A R S on it and L O P U in smaller letters, but the smallest ones weren't easy to pick out. A white chart was hanging next to the window, representing an orange coloured man with knuckles, sinews and muscles in blue and red nuances. I looked out of the window. The white curtains were pulled aside. A snow shovel was leaning against a brick wall. I turned to Doctor Lange again. He was still reading his notes. Was there something he didn't understand? Suddenly he noticed that I was staring at him.

- So, here we are then, he said while he continued to look at the sheets of paper. He pushed his glasses up on his forehead and looked at me.
- How's your shoulder?
- Fine.
- Could you take your clothes off, please?

- How much?
- Are you wearing long underpants?

I nodded.

- And I have short ones underneath.
- Everything but the short ones would be good.

I undressed, I had goosebumps on my arms.

- Sit down, I'm going to check your reflexes, Doctor Lange said.

He got out a hammer with a rubber head and beat it gently against my knee caps and elbows. He mumbled something I didn't understand.

- Could you stand up, please?

He examined my shoulders, chest, hips and legs.

- You're not fat, exactly.
- No, I don't suppose I am.
- Do you have any hobbies?
- Ski jumping, and I play a little chess. Why?
- Just wondering what you're doing in your spare time. That's all.

Lange went around the desk and bent over the papers. He turned a few pages before he walked over to a bookshelf and took out a big volume and looked up something in it. His finger moved along the text. He closed the book and put it back on the shelf. He stood in his own thoughts for a moment before he walked over to me.

- Turn around.

I obeyed.

He felt my shoulder blades and my thighs.

I was cold.

- You can go out to nurse Gunvor, she'll do a muscle biopsy. She'll stick a needle in your calf and pull out a tiny bit of your muscle tissue which we'll send to the laboratory at the hospital.

- Why?
- Let's talk about that afterwards, Doctor Lange said.

I wanted to ask him something, but I forgot. Only now did I realise that Lange and the nurse knew something about me that I myself had no idea about.

I went out to the waiting room. Nurse Gunvor was ready with a big needle.

- Here, you can sit on this chair. It's going to hurt a bit, but it'll soon be over. I promise to be quick.

She spoke the truth.

Afterwards I was sent back to Doctor Lange.

- You can get dressed, he said and put his glasses on his nose. He hadn't shaved. His cheek bones were sharp, his forehead was wrinkled. He had ruddier skin than any other grown-up I knew. Why did he say so little?
- Is it possible to phone your parents?
- They're at work.
- Where?

I answered hesitantly.

- Do you have their phone numbers?
- I don't normally phone them at work.
- I see.

Lange got up from his chair again, reached the book shelf in two steps and took out the same book he had consulted a few minutes earlier. He looked up the pages I presumed he already had studied thoroughly, turned on his heel and walked out to the waiting room. After a little while he came back.

- We've tried to phone your parents. Nurse Gunvor found the numbers.
- You didn't get hold of them? I asked, wondering if he noticed my relief.
- Your mother was taking a class, and your father's business was engaged.
- What are you going to tell them?
- I'm fairly sure you have a rather rare muscular disease.
- What do you mean? I asked.

He took off his glasses and put them on the desk between us, wiped his wrinkled forehead and leaned back in his chair. He had more hair on his eyebrows than on his head.

- I'm not very good at this. Nor am I a paediatrician. I'd prefer your parents to be present.
- I'm not a child, I'll be confirmed in spring.

Lange put his glasses back on and looked at me again.

- I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but I'm afraid you've made your last ski jump. The test results from the hospital will tell us beyond doubt. I will also talk to some of the specialists at the hospital, just to make sure. Then I'll send a letter to your parents.

I wanted to leave, I didn't want to hear more. When I tried to stand up, I realised how dizzy I was. I had to sit down again.

- Can't I go ski jumping any more? I said out loud.

Lange pulled his chair closer and pushed his glasses up on his head. A few seconds passed.

- I'm sorry, Doctor Lange said and took a deep breath, - but the places where your musculature is weak are considered to be a fairly strong indication. I'm afraid you'll gradually become more and more paralysed.

I closed my eyes, stood up, opened my eyes, and looked past him.

He stayed in his chair.

- Can I go now?

I held on to the back of the chair.

Lange looked down at the desktop.

- I should've waited to tell you this, he said slowly and looked up at me.

- No, I said, shaking my head. - Can I go now?

- Yes, replied Lange, - but please tell your parents to call me as soon as you've talked to them. I don't mind if they phone me at home.

He gave me a business card from a pile in an open glass box on the desk. I put the little card in my back pocket.

Lange held out his hand. I didn't take it. He patted my shoulder. I walked to the door. My hand reached for the door handle.

- Good bye, then, I heard behind me.

My feet moved slowly down the stairs while I was trying to sort out my thoughts. Without knowing why, I started to walk towards Karl Johan's Street. The sky had become high and blue. I noticed that the ground beneath me was about to disappear. What was happening to me? My head was like a satellite with two cameras. The distance to my body and everything happening around me was kind of bigger than before.

The snow banks lined the pavement. The traffic signs stood straight up and down. I understood some things. The snow was light and grey. There were no icy patches, only dry snow. I could see. The streets were as straight as arrows. My steps moved me forwards. I didn't slip. I could walk. The traffic lights worked. Red, yellow, green, yellow, red. I could tell the colours apart. Where was I going? Here? There? I stood still. There was a green rubbish bin next to me. I had teeth in my mouth. My tongue assured me they were still there. I opened my mouth. I shouted. I didn't understand what.

I took the business card from my back pocket, tore it to pieces and threw them in the bin. I stood next to the bin for a long time before I remembered that I was supposed to be at school. I could still get there for the fourth lesson. After walking a few metres towards Møllergata School, I decided to go home instead. I started to think about what to tell mum and dad when they came home from work.

As soon as I opened the front door I called out. I knew I wouldn't get an answer. I put my school bag in my room and went to lie down on the sofa in the sitting room. When I woke up it was dark outside. It was ten past four, it was Tuesday and my turn

to make dinner. I started boiling potatoes and carrots. When the steam from the saucepan began to fog up the windows, I started frying the fish cakes.

It was impossible to see anything outside, except the lights from the petrol station on Alexander Kielland's Square.

I recognised the old Opel Record from the sound of the engine. As always, they parked the car outside at precisely a quarter past five. Dad normally picked up mum outside Ullevål School at five pm.

I heard them open the front door, and I had decided what to tell them. Even before mum had got her green coat off, she opened the door to the kitchen and asked:

- How did it go at the doctor's?
- I've made dinner.
- Great, but what did he say?
- It was fine.

She stroked my hair.

- Was he nice?
- Yes, very nice.

Mum and dad sat down at the dinner table. I placed the food on the table and wriggled down between them. They helped themselves to food and ate. They joked and laughed. They talked to each other for several minutes. I looked from one to the other. Their voices became distant, as if they were sounds from bubbles in an aquarium. I looked up at mum, at the curly blond hair, the straight nose, the green eyes, the freckles on her cheek.

- You're hardly eating, mum said suddenly.
- Doesn't the cook usually eat less than everyone else? my dad mumbled and pushed my fringe away from my eyes.

I nodded.

- I had a sandwich just before you came home, I said.
- That explains it, said dad and fixed his brown eyes on me. - You shouldn't eat between meals. Are you going to do your home work after dinner?

Mum looked at him. She cupped her chin in her hand, a hand with long fingers ending in bright red fingernails.

I forced myself to eat. Every now and then I looked up. They wanted to be by themselves and I was in the way. That was fine by me.

- Can I please leave the table? I said. - I've got quite a lot of home work to do.

Perhaps this was the evening I first realised that my parents were truly in love. I couldn't help feeling surprised. Dad always said she was beautiful. Doesn't everybody who is in love think their beloved is beautiful? Perhaps, but I suppose dad was right in a way -

that is, if you can call a forty year-old beautiful. I'd been in love myself once, in summer, one and a half years ago, she was four years older than me.

In the sitting room, I read the spines of the books on the shelf. I took two books out, one about polar history, which I put on the coffee table, and the encyclopaedia volume with the letter M and quickly turned the pages to the word "muscles". The entry was brief and general. Doctor Lange had said it was a rare disease. The books he had been looking at were probably medical textbooks. I heard mum's voice and quickly put the book back on the shelf. I sat down in dad's armchair and started to read the book about polar history. Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen were given the longest chapters. There were only a few lines written about Andrée. I closed the book and put it on the table. As soon as I took out another volume of the encyclopaedia, I noticed I could hardly keep my eyes open. I put the book on my lap and looked up the letter A.

I woke up with a start. The book fell on the carpet. Mum was standing in front of me pulling my arm.

- He is dead, Otto, come! Come! she screamed.

Dad came running out of the kitchen. Mum held her cheeks with both hands.

- Relax Turid, he just fell asleep.

- What's the matter? I asked confused.

- I'm sorry, darling, I got so scared, I'm sorry.

Mum picked up the encyclopaedia and put it back on my lap. Dad patted her cheek and went back to the kitchen, where he started doing the dishes. Mum held my right hand in both of hers. The nail polish was perfect, she hadn't missed a stroke. She breathed heavily and squeezed her eyes shut. I had never noticed how long her brown eyelashes were. After a short while she opened her eyes again and looked at me. Her face twitched a little.

- I'm sorry I reacted the way I did, she said and sat down in the arm chair next to me.

She smoothed her deep red pleated skirt. Her blouse was black with buttons in the same colour as the skirt. Her red lipstick was put on with the greatest accuracy. Her face was mild and calm again.

She stroked my cheek.

- I'd better go to my room and continue my homework, I said and stood up.

- You're sure you don't want to start ice skating instead? said my mother. - Think about the Dutch ice skater Ard Schenk. What if you've got even more talent as an speed-skater than a ski jumper?

- Turid, you've never even seen him jump, dad shouted from the kitchen.

- Why don't you come along next time, and you'll see how good he is.

Mum moved to the kitchen door.

- You know I've always been against his doing it.

She came back to me and held my wrist in a firm grip. Her slim fingers were strong.

- Every single time you walk out the door with those skis I am terrified that you'll fall and kill yourself.
- Ski jumping's what interests me, I said and walked towards the door with firm steps.
- Ice skating's cool, my mum said. - You know, I bought my first pair of skates the year before you were born.
- Let go of me, I said and, clutching the encyclopaedia, I marched to my room and closed the door.

I could hear my parents' playful and flirtatious voices coming from the kitchen. I lay on the bed and looked at the photograph under the window. A ski jumper was floating in the air, his skis perfectly parallel, his arms out to both sides. Dad had given me the picture. I opened the heavy book and looked up the name of the Swedish engineer and explorer Salomon August Andrée. After having read about the Swede's second attempt to reach the North Pole in a balloon in 1897, I fell asleep.

I woke up with the light still on, half past eleven, and stumbled out of bed and switched the light off. I stood in the darkness and listened to my own breath. If only the darkness could obliterate everything and no one could see me? What on earth was I going to tell my coach?

I pulled off my clothes and crawled under the duvet. If only I could dream myself far away. A car changed gear outside. Then I heard something that sounded like a scream. Or perhaps it was a sob? Was it my mother's voice? I jumped out of bed, cautiously opened the door to the narrow hallway and tip-toed to my parents' bedroom door. It was utterly quiet. It was dark beneath the door.