

Winter Rescue

Paul and Foxy set off as soon as the Sunday dinner dishes were cleared. Walking down to the frozen creek with Foxy was one of Paul's favorite things to do. Days were short in January, but very beautiful. They must make the most of the daylight.

Paul stumped along the road beside Foxy in falling snow being blown by a fairly strong wind. Cars churned up the gravel and dirt along the road, but when he and Foxy slipped down the path to the creek, human noise and movement ceased. Snow lay everywhere and obscured the sky as it fell. Willows looked like a kind of tall pale grass with snowy fronds hanging over the creek bed. On the banks the lacy branches of leafless oaks were outlined by fallen snow.

The ice on the creek itself was windswept, different colors where it had marbled, freezing and then thawing and freezing again into a thick opaque plate. It was solid. Line and Marty skated on it at Christmas. In the places where the water pooled, Paul knew bloodless fish swam below the ice through the dark, freezing months. The ice was too thick to see them though.

Ahead of Paul, the creek meandered frozen through the fields. What he liked about the winter was that he could cover more ground. In the summer, all sorts of rocks and vegetation impeded travel, but when the creek froze, it was a long, smooth icy pathway. Paul could see different things in the winter. He and Foxy pushed on up the creek into the wind. Coming home the wind would be behind him, though without any sun, the world was directionless.

The only tracks Paul could see in the falling snow were those of a recent rabbit, crossing from one side of the creek to the other. Foxy followed them, snuffling along the banks. She loved being out in the wind also. The winter birds Paul could see were those which came to the parsonage feeder, small nuthatches, chickadees and raucous jays, but their tracks were obscured.

At one point along the bank, water falling off a hillside had made an ice waterfall. Paul looked closely at its structure. Winter beauty was all due to water, the steam in the air, the frozen water of the creek, the falling crystalline snow, and the light on these things, or the lack of it. Not much sky light today. Foxy in her thick fur overcoat and Paul in his woolen one, followed the line of the creek in the bitter wind.

All of a sudden, Foxy emitted a low growl, surprising Paul.

"What is it girl?" he said, loudly. Foxy stopped, then headed toward the edge of the creek. Paul looked for tracks but could see none. Foxy started yipping, but Paul couldn't see anything unusual. He hiked along the edge of the creek. All of a sudden his leg went down, almost to his hip, in some kind of hole. Pain snaked up through his spine as he tried to pull his foot out. It was caught on roots and branches, but he managed to get it out. It was painful, though.

Foxy stood beside Paul, growling and then whining. Paul tried to stand up, but the injured leg was his good one and there was nothing to hang on to. He did manage to stand, but pain ripped upward along his good leg. Not broken, he didn't think, but certainly sprained. Paul looked back down the creek. They had come a good way.

Paul considered. He could try to cut a willow stick and walk back using it to prop himself up, except that his weak leg wasn't used to his weight. Or he could crawl back. Paul tried it. He made some progress, but there was a long way to go. Nothing to do but get to it, he thought. It felt funny, like he was an animal for sure now, making weird plowing motions

with his hands and knees in the snow on the creek. Foxy watched him. Paul was sure she was skeptical.

“I know you think I’ll never make it,” Paul said to her. “But I will.” He plodded on, his hands wet, dragging his feet behind him.

After a hundred yards or so, Paul crawled to the edge of the creek and, finding his knife in his pocket, cut a willow stick just thick enough, he thought, to hold him. He pulled himself up and tried standing. Every step was painful as he put weight on his good foot. He couldn’t tell how far he was from home, but it was surely too far.

“What are you looking at,” he said annoyed, to Foxy. “Go home and get Dad!” He pointed forcefully in the direction of home. The wind was gusting behind him. Foxy whimpered. Paul pointed again, “Go home!” And Foxy did go. Paul began plodding slowly along, dragging himself on his ill-mannered feet.

“Go home! Go home!” Paul shouted. When Foxy was gone, Paul got down on his hands and knees again. He crawled forward, dragging his stick, inching along, the bitter wind at his back. His hands felt like cakes of ice in their wet mittens. He had no idea how far he must go, but he would keep going. After a while he stood up again with his willow stick and painfully stepped forward. Slowly, slowly. Was it getting darker? Paul couldn’t think. He just kept going. Snow was falling on his cap, on his arms.

After a while he saw a dark figure up ahead and Foxy came running toward him, arfing loudly. Dad was coming toward him and was soon upon him. Paul shivered, falling sleepily into his arms.

“Come on, son,” said Dad. “We have to get you home!” Dad wrapped him in the blanket he brought. “Sit on this,” he commanded in a voice Paul had never heard him use before.

Paul sat down on the green fiberglass saucer. Turning it around with Paul’s legs splayed out behind him, Dad pulled the saucer on a rope as if Paul was a little kid. Foxy ran along beside them. In what seemed to Paul like minutes, they were out in the lane that led to the road. Dad had parked the car there and pulled Paul into it, turning up the heat full blast as they drove the short distance home.

“So glad you came,” said Paul sleepily, taking off his wet gloves. He couldn’t stop his teeth from chattering. He shivered and shook. “Good girl,” he said to Foxy at his feet. “Good girl.” He put his hands next to the warm body, under her fur.

When they got home, Dad commanded Paul to take off all his clothes. Mother brought down Paul’s pajamas and some blankets, while Marty followed her with more quilts. Paul lay on the sofa, the heavy pile of warmth on top of him.

“I’m less worried about your foot than about hypothermia,” said Dad. “Mother’s making you something hot.”

Mother thrust a mug of hot cocoa into Paul’s hands and he sat up to drink it. He was still shivering. But relief was all around him. Kristen and Hanna on her little legs stood at the edge of the couch, uncertain what had happened. “Okay Paul?” asked Kristen.

“Yup, okay!” Paul said. “Foxy came and got Dad to help me!”

Dad sat down beside Paul and held the offending foot in his hands. “I’m not going to put ice packs on this!” he said, wryly, relief in his voice. But the ankle was very swollen. Marty stood beside him looking helpless.

Mother was so worried she hadn’t said anything, but Dad now seemed to think everything was fine. “This is going to take a while to heal,” he said. “Weeks, in fact. We’ll have to get out those crutches again. But it will heal. And you are home safe and warm. That’s the important thing.”

Paul felt blessed. The fear that he had not felt while he crawled along the creek in the chilly wind rose up only to remind him that all was well. He was home, warm and safe, not lost in the snow trying desperately to get home. The radiators hissed beside him and lamp light illuminated his small sisters, standing beside the couch in their little corduroy pants and sweatshirts.

He also felt vaguely ashamed. Perhaps it wasn't his fault that he had stepped in a hole while out on a walk he often did, both winter and summer, but perhaps there was something he could have done to prevent it? Been better prepared? Paul didn't feel that anyone was going to scold him. He was just ashamed that he had not been a better woodman and naturalist, unable to get home by himself.

Gradually Paul warmed up. "Will you read to us?" asked Kristen.

"Sure," said Paul. "Bring me *Wind in the Willows* and I'll read it." He was thinking about Ratty rescuing Mole in winter in the Wild Wood. He identified with Ratty. He wondered whether it was a muskrat hole he stuck his foot into. Softly, to himself, he sang Toad's little song, "When the Toad came home ..." He was celebrating, but, like Toad, under his breath.

When Kristen brought the book, he turned to the pictures of winter. "Here," he said. "This is a little like what happened to me." He began to read to the two little girls, who sat on either side of him. In the kitchen, he could hear the sounds of Mother and Marty making supper.

School was an effort that winter. Paul struggled around on his crutches as his foot healed, but at home he stuck his foot up on a chair and let Marty wait on him. She seemed to enjoy it! She was also willing to play chess with him during the long, dark evenings.

Months before, Dad noticed Paul's wrapt attention to Ricky Nelson playing a guitar and singing on television. Dad bought a guitar for the family at Christmas and no one was surprised when Paul took to it, especially now when he was having a hard time getting around.

The folk music phenomenon was beginning to reach into the more remote areas of the country and for once, Mother and Dad supported this popular music. Paul played the Kingston Trio album over and over. Some of the songs were wry and comic and touched the Norwegian funny bone, like the story of Charlie on the MTA who couldn't get off for lack of a nickel. Others came from history, ballads showing what happened to someone or work songs shared by whole communities.

Paul lay on the couch one afternoon before dinner, his foot up and the guitar on top of him, strumming chords and humming "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." His fingers were strong. He liked the sound of the guitar much better than the sound of his trumpet.

"Gone to graveyards every one," he sang. The guitar strings were a little out of tune. He twisted the tuning pegs to try to get the chords to sound better. He liked everything about the guitar, holding its golden wood in his arms, listening to the strings vibrate as he played. The song was about soldiers, but Paul knew people with polio didn't go into the army. That was one thing he did not have to worry about. Like Dad, he was expected to finish college and go to the seminary, becoming a Lutheran pastor.

"You sound really good," said Marty as she strode through the room. The two of them sang together some, now that Line was gone. "Is there any harmony to that?" Marty loved to sing alto, the lower parts.

But Paul didn't have a book, he was just sounding out chords, trying to figure out which were the right ones for the song. Marty stood beside Paul, singing the well known words. "When will they ever learn? When will they eh-eh-ver learn?"

“Supper!” sang out Kristen’s six-year-old voice from the kitchen where she was laying the table.

When Paul’s sprained ankle was somewhat healed, Dad made an appointment with Dr. Cousins, who looked at Paul’s legs every once in a while. The clinic was only a couple of hours away and Cardinal, the town where Line was going to college, was on the way. They must go on a week day, though, when Dr. Cousins had office hours.

Early in the morning, the whole family got up and packed themselves into the car even before Marty left for school. She wanted to go with them badly, but the senior class play was coming up and she couldn’t miss school and play practice. Three-year-old Hanna in her red snow clothes trailed after brown-haired Kristen, who trailed after Mother out to the station wagon. Paul said goodbye to Foxy in the dog house where she spent the day. Dad was the last to come out to the garage, where Mother and everyone else were waiting in the car.

The misty early morning twilight gave way to sun as they drove north. The car was warm and winter clothes felt excessive. Paul unbuttoned his coat. The highways were clear and dirty snow was thawing in humps along the road.

Paul was apprehensive. He could walk on both legs now, though twinges of pain bothered him now and then. Going to the clinic was scary, memories of the painful reconstructive surgeries and the long months in physical therapy surfacing. But he was feeling strong and was sure, as Dr. Cousins once said, that it was up to him now. The surgeons had done all they could with his legs.

He did feel vulnerable waiting in the examining room dressed only in his shorts with his thin, scarred legs sticking out. The nurse weighed him and measured him and made him sit on a thin mattress on the examining table. Paul swallowed, his throat dry. The shiny steel bars overhead reminded him of the day two doctors with pliers had pulled the stitches out of his legs after his last surgery. He had almost bent bars like those with his hands, holding on and shrieking against his will, as the two young doctors bent over his legs, ignoring him, talking to each other.

But when Dr. Cousins came in, he was warm and approving.

“Your weight and height look good, Paul,” he said. “Quite normal.” He flexed Paul’s legs and measured them. “Good muscle too. Yes, you’ve been doing well. Walk to school do you?”

“The high school is out of town and my sister and I walk sometimes, two miles,” said Paul. “But not in the winter. We walk a few blocks to the bus, though.”

“Two miles!” said Dr. Cousins. “You’re a toughie for sure. And how about this sprained ankle? When did that happen?”

Paul recounted the story of his winter adventure. Dr. Cousins probed the ankle a bit and asked Paul to walk around the room for him and do some knee bends. Then he told Paul to put his clothes back on and called Mother and Dad in to hear his verdicts. Kristen and Hanna must stay in the waiting room, the receptionist watching them.

“Paul is doing very well,” said Dr. Cousins. “Everything we could hope for. His right leg is compensating quite a bit, of course, which puts the spine off balance. But there isn’t much we can do about that. I would advise Paul to continue with as full a physical life as he feels he can. Even a little more than you think you can, Paul. Use of both legs ensures circulation and muscle development. Stretching is essential to get blood and oxygen to all of those cells.” He looked significantly at Mother and Dad.

“Doesn’t hurt any of us,” said Dad. “The winter makes us all constricted. I really feel the need to limber up now in the spring myself.”

“Sometimes people who have been through what Paul has, actually become more physically fit than those who haven’t,” said Dr. Cousins. “He was lucky, really. The disease didn’t get to his spine or his lungs.”

“Thank you for your encouragement, Doctor,” said Mother. She stood with her hands folded over her purse, looking on with her intelligent eyes.

“Yes, I don’t think I need to see you for a couple of years,” Dr. Cousins said, smiling. “I’m sure that’s the news you want to hear!”

Paul smiled widely, exhilaration filling his body. He was right! He was his own man!

“We’re very proud of him,” said Dad, the warmth in his eyes visible to Paul and everyone else. “It was a tough row to hoe, but he’s got a life in front of him.” He put an arm around Paul and squeezed his shoulders.

Hands were extended in every direction. Goodbyes were said. Paul felt as if a weight was taken off him. He walked through the door of the clinic as if it were the last time he would ever have to come.

In the evening, the Mikkelsons stopped to see if Line could have supper with them. Mother had sent a postcard, but she did not receive a reply. It was dark, but the little girls quivered with excitement. Paul took Kristen and Hanna up the steps to Larson Hall to find her, while Mother and Dad waited in the car. If they had been his own kids, he couldn’t have been prouder, holding them by their little hands.

At the desk, a young woman buzzed Line’s room and, all of a sudden, there she was, coming through the double doors into the front lounge. Her face shone with excitement at seeing her siblings. She wore her winter coat, boots and a muffler. So she had gotten the postcard. She punched Paul on the shoulder, Peanuts style, and grabbed Hanna, lifting her up.

“You little sweetheart!” Line said. Hanna had a solemn little face and big eyes. She looked almost like a little boy, which people found mysterious and attractive.

Paul and Kristen stood, waiting for Line’s attention, which was entirely enveloped in Hanna. At last, Line put Hanna down and kneeled to hug Kristen. Kristen was stolid and uncomplaining, as usual, but she smiled widely when Line hugged her.

“Do you want to see my room?” Line asked the little girls. “Come on, it’ll only take a minute.” To Paul she said, “We’ll be right back.”

Paul couldn’t go, of course. Only girls could go behind the doors into the dorm. He stood beside the desk in the public lounge. A few people sat waiting on the couches in the big room, lit by lamps. A girl in a bathrobe wandered in and went to the Coke machine in the back of the room, put her quarter in and took the resulting can of Coke. Paul did like Cokes. But he doubted that he would have any extra quarters when he went to college.

At last his sisters came back. In the car Dad asked Line where they should go for supper, and Line said with no hesitation, “Mabel’s Pizza!” There was no pizza in Montauk, but Paul occasionally had it with friends in other towns. He loved the idea.

“Okay,” Dad said. “We’re celebrating, I guess.”

“What are we celebrating?” asked Line.

“Lots of things!” said Mother. “Let’s get settled and I’ll tell you then.”

Mabel’s had black and white tiles on the floor, and booths with red leatherette benches in which the Mikkelsons just fit. It was warm and inviting inside, after being out in the chilly night. Mother sat between Kristen and Line on one side of the booth, and Paul and Dad, with Hanna between them, sat on the other. Paul wished Marty were there. She was definitely missing out. The family hardly ever went out to eat.

The other booths were full and a colorful juke box in the corner was playing a pop song. “Well, I’m the type of guy,” sang Dion in a sort of sing-song rhythm to a loud guitar, “that likes to roam around, I roam around and around and around.”

A waitress popped up as they settled themselves. “I don’t think I’ve ever ordered pizza,” said Dad loudly so she could hear him over the din.

She was a college girl, probably, with a little cap to match the red trim on her dress. She wore an apron with pockets from which she took out her pencil and a little tablet to write down the order. “We have small, medium and large. And you can have one with everything, or you can order the toppings you want,” she explained.

“Toppings?” said Dad.

“Pepperoni,” said the waitress. “Or sausage, mushrooms, peppers, olives.”

“We’ll just get one with everything,” said Dad.

“That’s a large for all of you? And to drink?”

“Water is fine,” said Mother. Just as Paul thought, Cokes were more expensive than what Dad and Mother wanted to pay.

Once they ordered, Line begged. “Okay, Mom. We can’t wait any longer. What all are we celebrating?”

Mother laughed. “Well, to start with, Paul has a clean bill of health. No more surgeries scheduled.”

“Yay!” said Line. “That’s wonderful, Paul! I heard about your sprained ankle. Is that okay now?”

“Pretty good,” said Paul. “I can walk on it. The doctor said it would twinge for a couple more months as it heals, but it’s fine.” He beamed at Line, recalling how she stayed with him at the hospital, finding baseball games on the radio and reading to him.

“Great!” said Line, her eyes meeting Paul’s, as if she were thinking the same thing. “Anything else? Surprises?”

“Oh yes,” said Mother conspiratorially. “This is about you, Line. I hope you haven’t any plans for the summer, yet. Your sister Ellie is pregnant again. She’s hoping you will come and stay with her this summer. The baby isn’t due until September, but she’s hoping you could help take care of Barbara during the summer.”

“Another baby!” said Line. “We’re all aunts and uncles again!” she said. “Even you, Kristen,” she said, stroking Kristen’s face beside her.

“Big families,” said Mother. “It happens.”

“Well, that’s a surprise,” said Line. “And I’d love to go back to the Cities. Any others?”

“Just one,” said Dad. “Your mother has gotten a job at the high school as a librarian. She has to take summer classes though, to get her certification. She’s going to be enrolled at a teachers’ college at Mason City, so Paul and Marty will be keeping house during the summer.”

“Whew!” said Paul. “I didn’t know that!”

Mother looked a little embarrassed. As the backbone of the family, attention rarely turned in her direction. But Dad said, “It’s wonderful. We need the income with all of you kids going to college!” Paul could almost feel his warmth, beaming across the table at Mother.

“Does Marty know about this?” asked Paul. He wished she were there even more.

“Yes,” said Mother. “It just got finalized this week. We’ve been planning this for a while. I told Marty last night. She’ll enjoy it, I think.”

“That is a big change,” said Line. “I’m proud of you, Mother.” But she looked a little chagrined as well. “I’m sorry for costing so much money,” she said.

“Now, don’t you worry,” Dad said. “You’re helping pay for college and you’ve got loans which you’ll have to pay off later. We’re all doing our best. But next year there will be two of you in school and I am pleased that Mother found a job which is right for her.”

“Yes,” said Line. “It’s amazing. There just aren’t many jobs in small towns, are there.”

“Nope,” said Dad.

“I’m glad Bruce and Ellie want me,” said Line. “I like being in Minneapolis. And it will be easier this year, now that I know it.”

“My good girl,” said Mother. “I know you will start having other ideas, but Bruce and Ellie do need you this year.”

“Yes,” said Line. “I’d really like to do one of the exchange programs that Wittenberg has with Negro colleges. But it wouldn’t be next year. You usually go in your junior year. I’m getting to know this girl from Berea College in Kentucky. But her school is half white and half Negro. She thinks I should get the full experience of being a minority. She thinks I should go to Spellman or Fiske.”

Paul watched Mother and Dad looking at each other. But Line was her own person now and must make her own decisions.

“It sounds interesting,” said Mother.

“How do you keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?” asked Dad. “Sounds like you’ve been thinking about your future too.”

Line looked like a grownup to Paul, all of a sudden. Television news was full of demonstrations in southern states, about integration of schools and restaurants, buses, about voting.

“I do want to see what it’s like to be in a minority,” said Line. “To actually be there. Tommie says she’s never seen so many Norwegians in her life!”

“Norwegians are a minority,” said Dad, “in some respects.”

“Yes,” said Line. “But we look just like Germans, English people, Irish, Swiss. We could be anything. We can pass!”

Paul tried to imagine Line at a Negro college, but it wasn’t easy.

“I want to go to college,” sang out Hanna all of a sudden. “I want to sleep in Line’s room.”

“Someday,” said Dad, kissing her little blonde head. “Someday, but not for a while yet.”

“Thank goodness!” said Mother.

The pizza was delicious. It came, hot and spicy, on a big round tray, with the pieces cut in wedges, like a pie. Paul put one on his plate, but Line picked one up in her hands. “You eat it like this,” she said, biting off the point. “Sometimes our counselors order one for all of us, if we’re having a party.”

“And it comes to your dorm?” asked Mother.

“Of course!” said Line. “We all love Mabe’s pizza.”

All was right with the world, thought Paul. He was in the middle of a bright, busy family, his legs were fine and he didn’t need Coke. The pizza on a cold night was a hot, warm blessing. It felt like the world was expanding. And he would not be left behind.