



When Jonathan and Iona unlock the door and enter the apartment, the first thing she does is throw herself onto the sofa and search for the wifi signal on her phone. Labouring with the suitcases, Jonathan tries not to dislodge pictures from the slatted-pine wall. He wishes she was more thoughtful, more aware of the world around her, but says nothing. They are both dehydrated after the flight.

“Dad, can we have pizza,” Iona says without looking up. He agrees, feeling disinclined to translate a menu. He drops the bags by the toilet door and out of habit taps his pocket, feeling for the corners of the Blackberry. It beckons to him but he does not switch it on, knowing that his time with Iona is more important than what is happening in the department he manages. While she kicks cushions onto the floor so as to lie down, he turns on the light and inspects the fridge. On the kitchen counter is a tall wickerwork bread basket with a cotton cover embroidered with the word *Pain* in a red, cursive script. He tells her that he’s taking the room and she can have the coin montagne, the fold down bed in the corridor. She starts to argue and for a while he is afraid that her sulking will spread like a rain cloud over the start of the holiday. He gets them both a tall glass of the salty mountain water. “Come on,” he smiles, “let’s go get dinner.”

In the morning his body clock wakes him at the normal time. He remembers that it’s an hour later on the continent and that there is still time to go back to sleep, but he can’t. He rises and treads silently in his creased, cotton pyjamas through to the living room to open the shutters onto the small veranda. Light pours into him as he fills his lungs with crisp, sweet tasting air, curling his toes on the cold concrete. A thin layer of mist hangs half way up the mountains but it will be burned off within an hour. At the end of the valley the peaks glow with a luminescent blue as they catch the rising sun. He is keen to be up there when the lifts start working.

He showers, pulls on the green, one-piece skiing suit that Iona teases him about, then walks down to the village to buy juice, croissants, butter, and jam for breakfast. Walking back up the hill he’s afraid that she will have to be dragged from her bed but when he unlocks the door she is bent over, tying her shoelaces. Where the arch of her spine is sharpest there are two small mounds where her bra strap is fastened. Perhaps he should have given her the room after all.

In the lounge, at breakfast, she giggles when he slides a long baguette out of the bread basket. “It says ‘pain’,” she says. He thinks about offering a summary French lesson but shakes the idea away, “It does,” he says, wielding the baguette over his head like an axe, “would you like some?” Her laughter is bright and penetrating as she holds up her arms in



self-defence, making him glad the next door flat is empty. He heats the croissants in the microwave but she refuses hers, taking only juice. "It gets stuck under my braces," she lisps, and he apologises for not thinking. There are spots around her nose and he feels, for the first time in a while, a sense of time accelerating.

They get to the slopes at half past nine. He has forgotten lip-salve but says she'll be ok with sunscreen. The car park fills quickly, the French cars overtaking others in the rush for a place. He leaves her sitting on the back bumper, unstrapping her boots, while he goes to the kiosk for the passes. When he returns she has one boot on and is kicking the other against the tarmac, her foot jammed in the opening, "I can't do it." He stoops, undoes the bindings, and allows her to press against his thigh until her foot slides in. She doesn't thank him and moves with a sagginess he finds comical. At least now she's old enough to carry her skis.

They start on a blue run to ease themselves in. The lower slopes have not been pisted and a thin layer of powder makes turning easy. He is glad as it takes him a few minutes before it all comes back: the planting of his poles and the rise and fall of his hips. Iona follows behind, her head lolling and her jacket undone to the zip catch. When they stop for a rest she slouches on her poles with her mouth hanging open. In certain positions he can see through the visor of her goggles to catch the glint of light on her lashes. He thinks he can see the sort of woman she will become. "Are you ready?" he asks. She pets her lip. "I want to stay with you," she says. The flattery nearly punctures his resolve but he has already paid for the classes and will not waste the money. "It's only three mornings. You're too good now to take advice from me. You need a professional coach."

He is pleased with the turn of words. She doesn't challenge him but nods as she wipes her nose on the back of her mittens. He'll get her a new pair at the end of the week, he thinks, if she's good.

At the ski school he kisses her and sends her off to find the teacher. He is proud that she doesn't need to be molycoddled like some children. From a discrete distance he watches the red coated instructors marshal awkward, giggling pupils into lines for an initial assessment. Like he told her to, she's one of the first to ski the short distance and they put her in the elite class. That will stretch her, he thinks. That's what she needs.

From the chairlift he looks down but cannot identify her among the hordes of bibbed children and arm waving beginners. On the far side, along the tree line, a small gaggle of boarders sit on a snow ledge, laughing. One of them hops upright then accelerates away



leaving graceful, feminine curves down the mountainside.

He takes the chairlift all the way to the top of the mountain. He's warmed up now, his hips open and knees flexible. He picks a red route he remembers from last year. It's empty because it's on the shady side of the mountain. In the grey light it is difficult to see the ridges and he is twice nearly thrown by a frozen rut. At a sharp corner overlooking the treetops, he rests. It is late in the season and there is little snow down in the valley. Perhaps he was too optimistic and should stick to blues? As he ponders, the breath heavy in his chest, a line of boarders glide round the bend in a succession of perfectly judged curves, their bodies angled inwards. They wear tee-shirts over long sleeved tops, baggy trousers, helmets. He waits for the last of them to pass, then follows down the next section, switching his weight to moderate his speed. The route is narrow and to his right is a vertical drop over granite boulders and flattened grass. A little further on, the route joins the bottom of a wide blue run that takes him down to a tele-cabin. The boarders have disappeared but there are many skiers, each seeking their own space. He knows he can pass them and having done so, takes the lift straight back to the top.

By midday he feels loose and happy. Subconsciously he has been thinking about an issue at work and has worked out how to deal with it. He is pleased with himself when he collects his daughter. He smiles as she giggles at the thought of a man who fell over when he was showing off, and how they saw the helicopter lift a casualty on one of the upper slopes. "That's why you have to wear a helmet," he says, making her groan.

They ski together after lunch, an unfamiliar beer enervating him, but by mid-afternoon the snow is claggy and they head back to the villa. They both sleep, him on the sofa, glasses on his chest, and her on the coin montagne, facing the wall. In the evening she overcooks pasta but he praises her for trying. They watch a DVD with her cuddled inside the long wrap of his arm. He thinks the film too violent, but she seems unaffected by the character's alcoholism. She hugs her knees, sucking the sleeve of her cardigan. He brushes her hair with his hand. At the end, the hero dies in order to save the life of a child. "Why did he do that?" she asks. "Why didn't he just get away?" He knows the answer but she's too tired to hear it. He asks if she's cleaned her teeth and she nods. He kisses her on the forehead and says he'll see her in the morning. She's asleep before he has put the plates away.

On the second day Iona kisses him and skates away as soon as they get off the chairlift. He



watches her interacting with those in her group: a man about thirty, two teenage kids - brothers by the look of it - a woman, and another man. The instructor greets them in French. He's silver haired and has a face the colour of *café au lait*.

Jonathan leaves. It has frozen overnight and anything over 1500 metres is now pisted. The snow growls under his edges when he turns. The sound scares him and sometimes he thinks there are boarders behind him when there is nobody. He concentrates on leaning forward, on reaching out to test the snow with his poles: *shoulders down the hill, shoulders down the hill*. He skis with his feet close together, the way he was taught, and finds he can overtake those who use the modern, wider stance. He concentrates on the ski tips, on which one is the more forward as he turns. He practices carving, but this pulls something in his right hip and so he goes back to what he was doing before.

With the sun rising he finds there is an hour, between ten and eleven, when the conditions are so good that he is unstoppable. In the queues he does not let the French barge in front. On each run he does something harder or faster than the last time, becoming so obsessed that he loses track of time. There is a black run he wants to do but realises he has left it too late. "I'm really sorry, Iona," he apologises, "I got stuck on the far side..." She's sitting on the decking outside a café. She has her phone in one hand and a plastic cup by her hip. "You got a chocolate! Well done! Look, I'm really sorry..."

"Dad, you need to give me more money if you're going to leave me like that. This was, like, six-fifty and I only had a fiver. I had to borrow something off this boy..." He feels ashamed and promises to be more generous the next day. He's not worried, thinking the money owed to someone from her class. They go inside to order steak haché and chips. He has a beer again but this time it makes him tired. He asks if she wants to do more, but does so in a way that's clear he does not. "No, it's fine," she says, "let's go."

To make up for it, he takes her out to a nice restaurant for dinner and, for the first hour, listens while she tells him about school, about her friends, the swimming and the riding. There are so many questions he wants to ask her - but there are more that he wants her to ask him. He wants to fill her with wisdom, prepare her for the world. He asks a leading question but the wine has knotted his tongue and his message tumbles over the cutlery like an avalanche. He asks if she understood. She twists her shoulders and pulls a face. "Sure, Dad. And tomorrow, can I get a new ski jacket as my zip's broken?"

Before they start up the hill he tells her to wait by the estate agents while he pops to the



bank to get some cash from the machine. He orders two hundred, knowing it'll go. While the machine counts his money, he watches his daughter swinging her arms from side to side. She is at that awkward age, ungainly, heavy limbed. She looks at her phone to read a text message and he's grateful that she didn't do so during dinner. He takes his money from the slot and folds the notes into his wallet.

A gang of teenage boys is walking down on the other side of the street with a macho, laid back rhythm he finds disturbing. Seeing a threat, he wants to shout to Iona to keep hold of her phone. He raises a hand to his mouth, but stops when he sees that she knows the boy at the front. Her face ignites with excitement as she lifts a hand in a wave, but the gang slide past without acknowledging her. Her face falls, as does her hand. She watches them disappear into one of the noisy bars he will not take her to. By the time he gets to her she has withdrawn inside herself. He places an arm round her shoulder as they slog up the hill but she shakes it off. He knows it's her braces, her spots, the way her feet are too big. He was a teenager once, too.

The next day she refuses to go to school until he has bought her a new jacket. "What's wrong with the one you have?" he asks, but does not press. It's too old, too orange, just too handed-down to be cool. He balks when he sees the price of the one she likes, but has to admit that she looks good in it and cannot resist her grateful arms around his neck. "Can we go skiing now?" he whispers in her ear.

At the ski school she's gone before he can wish her well and he's pleased that such a simple thing can boost her confidence. Alone again, he skis slowly at first, feeling a little tight after the day before. He sticks to reds, saving the black for when the sun has risen far enough to shorten the shadows on that side of the hill. He times it well and is the only one who dares pass the '*seulement pour bon skieurs*' sign. He stands at the top breathing deeply, his eyes on the edge where the run drops out of sight. This is his moment, the pinnacle of his week.

Letting the ski tips down, he twists in preparation for the sense of falling. He revels in it. At the ledge he sees the fall line for the first time and his stomach tightens. The descent is unforgiving, unremitting, unavoidable. There is no way out of this. If he were to lose control he would spin in a hailstorm of limbs and poles until he hit something hard. He has to focus. He has to be strong. He stretches out with one pole to extend his weight forward, a position only possible in motion. As he turns, the skis flex under his boots and he is sensitive to how



the upper one bends differently to the lower one. He prays that the bindings hold. The left side of the slope is packed ice and he relishes the grating sound as it implies mastery over the forces that are propelling him downwards. He ducks right, aiming for a thin sliver of snow that will help him decelerate, then switches left, scraping over the ruts left by others. To the side, by a route marker, lies a lone pink glove.

He shortens the radius of his turns, tightens them, feels the wind on his chin. His heart rises to meet his joy and he wonders what speed he managed to do: sixty? eighty? In only a few seconds he has descended more than two hundred feet. Finally, thankfully, the gradient levels just before joining a red he has already done. He twists his hips to halt, kicking up a shower of glistening crystals. He stands vertically on his skis, sucking in the air, his heart cartwheeling. That was the steepest slope he's ever done.

There are many people on the red. Some have watched him do the black and he knows they'll respect him. They'll let him overtake, just like when he glides up behind an Audi in the outside lane of the motorway.

He looks again up to the top of the slope. There are three small figures assessing it, deciding if they can do it. Jonathan smiles to himself, knowing he took less time, and it delights him when two of them turn back. But one remains. It is a boarder, judging by how he moves. He hops into position, then swivels, arms out to the side.

In one breath stopping moment, the boarder falls vertically down the slope, making no attempt to break his speed. He is almost in free fall when the gradient first starts to relent. In less than half a second he whistles past Jonathan, leaving a rush of air in his wake. Only then does he put in some sharp, grinding turns to slow himself down. He whoops, punching the air, roaring across the piste. He's wearing a tee-shirt and sunglasses, but no helmet. It's the same boy he keeps seeing, the one at the front of the pack.

After collecting Iona he buys lunch but does not have a beer. They ski for two more hours and he is pleased with what she has learned. She plants her poles better and is more aware of those around her. Laughing, they float down the meandering green route that switches back and forth through the pine forest to the car-park.

On Thursday the ski schools are taking their better students up onto the higher slopes.



Having avoided the snaking lines all week, he resents their presence and makes a point of overtaking when he can. He's stiff in the waist, more so than yesterday. As it gets warmer the snow becomes gluey, like porridge. He finds turning strenuous and that Iona is matching his tracks with ease. He invites her to lead but finds that he can barely keep up. By late morning, when they are at the point where the lower, more densely populated slopes start and he says his back aches. He suggests getting a chocolate in the bowl where there is a collection of restaurants. "Ok, but let's go down off piste," she says. Before he can agree she is switching through the trees, her back perfectly vertical and her skis sweeping from side to side.

He follows, but is sluggardly in his movements. The ice crust is dimpled and dusty but carries his weight. He's glad, since turning through powder would be difficult. At one point, on a stark descent between some trees and a scattering of rocks, he prefers to side slip rather than ski. Iona waits for him, allows him to take the lead, but then overtakes down the broad fire-gap underneath the chairlift. They swish past the steel columns and across the tops of exposed saplings. Overhead there are people pointing at them, cooing. They ski past dropped poles, gloves, cigarette packets, following tracks that are more than a week old. The route dips and weaves into what will become a stream bed in the summer, then crests. Jonathan shouts a warning but it's too late. Iona drops out of sight with a high pitched gasp. Following so close behind, he cannot stop. He is shocked by the sudden fall, the cold space. He leans forward by instinct but the pressure unsnaps the binding and he dives, headfirst, into a tree.

It takes him a minute to decide nothing's broken. Iona giggles, taking a photo on her phone. There is laughter from the chairlift overhead. Using his pole, he releases the ski that has remained fitted, then wriggles backward as clumsily as a newborn calf. Iona brushes snow off his shoulders. "I only just held it," she says. "It was hard."

As he gathers himself and looks round for his missing ski, there is whooping above them, out of sight. A boarder leaps into view overhead. Finding Jonathan in his path he cries out, "Putain!" then lands hard, sinking low. He recovers with an aggressive grunt to swivel into a sharp halt, a process that showers Jonathan with snow. He is wearing goggles that reflect the sunlight. His mouth hangs open, the nostrils flaring. He looks at Jonathan and then at Iona. "Ca va?" he says, and Jonathan responds, "Oui, merci. Toute est bien." The man nods, then shouts to his friends to take a different route. Looking at Iona, he clicks his tongue, then glides away, his body angled and arms hanging loose from the shoulder. The others appear out of the trees like a pack of wolves and howl past them out of sight.



On Friday Jonathan is so stiff that he fears falling. Yesterday's tumble has upset his confidence and something pinches in his thigh. The snow is hard. The cloud is low, making the upper slopes dangerous. Iona skis only just beyond the point he can shout to. He wants to stop early, but dare not spoil her holiday.

Once, following her as tightly as he can, the gang of boarders rake up behind him and slither past. They float over the snow leaving slender curves in their wake. Jonathan halts to watch how his daughter will react when she sees them. The leader spots her, weaves up behind, and slides by. He glances over his shoulder to attract her attention. She recognises him and immediately twists into a halt to look up the hill behind her. The others have to swerve to avoid the obstacle she has created. Her head turns in an arc. She is searching, Jonathan realises, for him. The boarders disappear away, punching each other on the shoulders. He waves and she sees him. He indicates she should go on, that he'll see her at the next café. She acknowledges with a raise of one pole, then turns to glide effortlessly away, as graceful as a falling leaf.

Author's note: With thanks to Ogo Nwokedi for her advice.

Photo: Ho, Tania "Le Face", the Olympic black run, used under the Creative Commons licence as follows [here](#).