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## The Divide

### Nicholas Evans

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They rose before dawn and stepped out beneath a moonless sky aswarm with stars. Their breath made clouds of the chill air and their boots crunched on the congealed gravel of the motel parking lot. The old station wagon was the only car there, its roof and hood veneered with a dim refracting frost. The boy fixed their skis to the roof while his father stowed their packs then walked around to remove the newspaper pinned by the wipers to the windshield. It was stiff with ice and crackled in his hands as he balled it. Before they climbed into the car they lingered a moment, just stood there listening to the silence and gazing west at the mountains silhouetted by stars.

The little town had yet to wake and they drove quietly north along Main Street, past the courthouse and the gas station and the old movie theater, through pale pools of light cast by the street lamps, the car's reflection gilding the darkened windows of the stores. And the sole witness to their leaving was a grizzled dog who stood watch at the edge of town, its head lowered, its eyes ghost-green in the headlights.

It was the last day of March and a vestige of plowed snow lay gray along the highway's edge. Heading west across the plains the previous afternoon, there had been a first whisper of green among the bleached grass. Before sunset they had strolled out from the motel along a dirt road and heard a meadowlark whistling as if winter had gone for good. But beyond the rolling ranch land, the Rocky Mountain Front, a wall of ancient limestone a hundred miles long, was still encrusted with white and the boy's father said they would surely still find good spring snow.

A mile north of town they branched left from the highway on a road that ran twenty more with barely a bend toward the Front. They saw mule deer and coyote and just as the road turned to gravel a great palewinged owl swerved from the cottonwoods and glided low ahead of them as if piloting the beam of their lights. And all the while the mountain wall loomed larger, a shadowed, prescient blue, until it seemed to open itself and they found themselves traveling a twisting corridor where a creek of snowmelt tumbled through stands of bare aspen and willow with cliffs of pine and rock the color of bone rearing a thousand feet on either side.

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The road was steeper now and when it became treacherous with hardpacked snow the boy's father stopped so they could fit the chains. The air when they got out of the car was icy and windless and loud with the rush of the creek. They spread the chains on the snow in front of the rear wheels and his father climbed back into the driver's seat and inched the car forward until the boy called for him to stop. While his father knelt to fasten the chains, the boy stamped his feet and blew on his hands to warm them.

"Look," he said.

His father stood and did so, brushing the snow from his hands. Framed in the V of the valley walls, though far beyond, the peak of a vast snow-covered mountain had just been set ablaze by the first reach of the sun. Even as they watched, the shadow of night began to drain from its slopes below a deepening band of pink and gold and white.

They parked the car at the trailhead and they could see from the untracked snow that no one else had been there. They sat together beneath the tailgate and put on their boots. The owner of the motel had made sandwiches for them and they ate one apiece and drank steaming sweet coffee and watched the shadows around them slowly fill with light. The first few miles would be steep so they fitted skins to their skis to give them grip. The boy's father checked the bindings and that their avalanche transceivers were working and when he was satisfied that all was in order they shouldered their packs and stepped into their skis.

"You lead," his father said.

The journey they had planned for that day was a loop of some fifteen miles. They had made the same trip two years before and found some of the best skiing either had ever known. The first three hours were the hardest, a long climb through the forest then a perilous zigzag up the northeast side of a ridge. But it was worth it. The ridge's south face was a perfect, treeless shoulder that dropped in three consecutive slopes into the next drainage. If all went well, by the time they reached the top, the sun would just have angled onto it, softening the top half-inch of snow while the base remained frozen and firm.

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These backcountry ski trips had become their yearly ritual and the boy now looked forward to them as much as he knew his father did. His snowboarding friends back home in Great Falls thought he was crazy. If you wanted to ski, they said, why not go someplace where there's a ski lift? And in truth, on their first trip four years ago in the Tetons, he feared they were right. To a twelve-year-old it had seemed like a lot of effort for precious little fun; too much up and not enough down. At times he had come close to tears. But he kept a brave face and the following year went again.

His father was away from home on business much of the time and there weren't many things they ever got to do together, just the two of them. Sometimes the boy felt they barely knew each other. Neither of them was much of a talker. But there was something about traveling together through these wild and remote places that seemed to bind them closer than words ever could. And little by little he had come to understand why his father enjoyed the uphill as much as the down. It was a curious formula of physical and mental energy, as if the burning of one fueled the other. The endless rhythmic repetition, sliding one ski past the other, could send you into a kind of trance. And the thrill and sense of achievement when you reached that faraway summit and saw a slope of virgin spring snow reveal itself below could be close to overwhelming.