

matters familiar



e. g. fabricant

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DEDICATION

For Frank and Betty, for the gifts of life and love—theirs,
mine, and ours—and
For M. A.; BeeEss; Tomiss; Jerome; J. L.; Fuffy; and The
Brat, for helping me fill in the blanks.

CONTENTS

1	Ashley Alert	1
2	Boys Will Be Men	24
3	Chosen	34
4	Gemini	52
5	Intentional Walk	72
6	The Jewel of Genoa	100
7	Medalists	139
8	Meridian	145
9	Pallbearer	171
10	Pipe Dream	193
11	Robbin' Hood	225
12	Term Limit	260

9 Pallbearer



Harry clamped his arms around Hank's waist as much as their bulky clothing permitted and sucked in a breath. He buried his cheek in big brother's shoulder blade, knocking his leather visor askew and filling his inside eye with a damp lambs-wool earflap. He knew he'd be mocked, but it would be worth it. He liked the sensation of falling blind but was desperate for the closeness.

"Ready, 'Freddy?' Twenty-three skidoo!"

Hank jerked up his left galosh. The Flexible Flyer shot forward before he could plant the foot on the steering bar; his leg flailed upward, knocking his balance to starboard. They both heaved instinctively off their right buttocks. As they shuddered to the left, Hank saw the half-bare boulder, dead-legged on the right, and set his free boot into position. The left runner fell and bit into the snow and they regained the fall line. Down they hurtled, hitting successive ridges and getting more air with each one as their velocity increased. His legs pinned securely to the seat planks

by his brother's rigid arms, Harry marveled in the weightless intervals and squealed at each impact. The angle started to come out of the hill. Harry grinned to himself in anticipation.

Here it comes!

Hank tapped out the first feint on the steering bar; the only remaining mystery was, *How many this time?* The answer? *One*—but on the same side. He punched his right leg out hard and buried their craft's front edge into a wet drift. The sled bucked and launched them into a crazy arc, like a collapsing seesaw. After a clinging aerial somersault they tumbled head over teakettle to a stop, just short of an icy stump. Hank rolled gingerly off his little brother and they lay on their backs, two heaps of sweaty flesh in sodden wool, framed by snow. They stared skyward through spindly aspen branches at the leaden sky as their heart rates subsided. Slowly, their heads rolled toward one another.

Harry's eyes shone. "Are we dead?"

Hank feigned seriousness. "Pert near."

They erupted, laughing like maniacs. *Perfect!* Harry basked in the unfettered affection, wishing it could endure. He stopped first to savor the sound of Hank's last few *huh-huh-huhs* until there was silence. Suddenly, there was his brother's ruddy face above him, at the other end of a dangling scarf and beyond his extended hand.

"Whaddya say, short-stuff? Once more—in front, this time?" Hank's eyes narrowed in mocking mirth. "Or..."

Harry stifled himself and reached for the hand. *Wait for it...*

Hank hoisted him until their faces were inches apart. "...Are you a 'FRAIDY-CAT?!'"

Giggling, Harry pushed at Hank's face and replied with equal force. "YESSS!"

with equal force. "YESSS!"

"That's what I thought!" Hank really tried to force some contempt into it this time, but as always it didn't take. He brushed at the crystalline cakes clinging to his brother's back then stood apart to get his bearings. He arched his back and looked skyward, wiping clear mucous from his upper lip with a drenched mitten.

"Better get on home—light's goin'."

Harry looked down at steel buckles and black rubber. "Aw—What for?"

The elder Martz examined their "combined" Christmas present with satisfaction; it was his brother who wanted it more, but no chance with Ma that way. He took his case straight to the court of appeals and, in a rare published opinion, Pa took his side. He dug for the Flyer's rope and slung it over his shoulder as he groped for the seven-year-old's hand. They trudged out of the blanketed meadow and slipped into the carved ruts on the road downhill. As they crunched along, Hank's eyes wandered westward and up the silver and aquamarine shoulders of the peak named for Zebulon Pike that dominated their town. He stopped, nearly yanking Harry off his encumbered feet. He scowled.

"What are you doing?"

Hank's mouth hung slightly open; he shook his head slightly.

"Nothin'. Just thinkin'."

"'Bout what?"

"Drivin' up the Pike in an auto-mobile—goin' real fast. Thirty, maybe 40 miles to the hour."

"Aw, g'wan."

"Yes, sir—you'll see. Gonna be in Mr. Penrose's 'Hill Climb' one day." He put his hands on his knees and peered into Harry's face. "Got to dream, little brother. Don't you have a dream?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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writes and lives in San Jose, California. This is his first collection of short stories.

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