

Yamhill Street

PENNY KITTLE

I can hear dribbling—I can almost feel the vibration as a basketball hits the street. I tie my shoes, yell a g’bye to mom and fling open the back door. I hear muffled voices from the game drifting down the alley near my house. I leap from the porch to the sidewalk, clearing our two cement stairs with ease, and briefly worry about crushing a few ants as I sprint towards the hoop. I step on no cracks. I’m missing the game; they’ve started without me. I *love* this game. I hit the hill with arms pumping. I’m moving so fast I can’t feel my feet against the pavement.

I hear footsteps behind me, then my father’s voice yelling, “Penny!” and turn to see him charging up the hill behind me. What did I do? I anxiously take in the silence of the empty street. Where’s the game? I’m in my nightgown, shivering, and it is black all around—except for the glow of the streetlight over the basketball hoop and the distant shine of the moon.

I fall to the grass near the curb. I’m confused and frightened: I’ll hide. I close my eyes and grab fistfuls of wet grass, trying to huddle close enough to disappear between the blades.

He’s beside me, shaking my arm. “Penny, you’re dreaming! Wake up! You’ve been sleepwalking; c’mon.” Wet grass clings to my arms and knees as Daddy holds my hands and lifts me up, “Come on, now.”

I don’t know why I’m here on Yamhill Street, but Daddy’s here: he’ll take care of me.

Years later, it’s night again, but magical: beneath the muffled glow of a quarter moon, the snow has been falling for hours. We have enough piled up to go sledding down the alley and sidewalks that connect Yamhill and Belmont Streets.

I’m on a toboggan at the front, the snow pummeling my face like an explosion almost—gathering on my eyelashes, collecting in my open mouth, coating the front of my jacket. My friends Julia and Cynthia are behind me and a neighbor dad I hardly know is at the back. He came out to join us when he heard our shrieks zip by his window and across the lawn opposite his house. He’s the daredevil: the one who said, “Let’s see if we go faster from the very top of the hill!”

I had answered “Yes!” feeling so daring and frightened at the same time.

Now his snow-encrusted boots are wedged between the plastic sled and my hips and we gain speed as the smooth sidewalk angles toward busy Belmont Street and we're headed straight for the stairs, but we all lean left and the sled follows, speeding across the grass lawn, still shooting through the snow with the combined weight of our toboggan and the four of us sliding across the worn path, increasing our velocity—and we're not stopping and the wind freezes the snow against my cheeks and I grip the sled with my wet mittens, feeling the bumps of the lawn as we near the edge, 15 feet above the street, and I'm screaming and screaming and we're not stopping—we're going over.

I see the street coming and I know there's nothing but air between the retaining wall this lawn rests upon and Belmont Street. I'm racing towards air. This is going to hurt.

"Yes!" the neighbor man yells, "We're going over!"

I watch the asphalt glisten in the glow of long-necked streetlamps as our sled skids across the last bit of snow and lifts off into nothing. I imagine us caught there in the flash of a camera: joy, magic, fear.

Slam.

I feel the street rush through me—a shock of pain that zaps up my spine to my forehead as I lie pig-piled beneath our portly neighbor. "Get off of me," I plead. I peel myself from the sled and glance at the lights of my house.

I am cold, sore and flattened.

I'm going home.

Later as I lay near sleep snuggled beneath my blanket, I remembered only flying. Over and over we lifted off just for a moment, suspended in joy.

I wake to the sun and I'm on my Schwinn ten-speed within minutes, racing to my best friend's house. I shake off the chill of morning as I near the big hill. My front wheel drops as I ease off the brakes. Within seconds I'm ready. I steady the frame beneath me and straighten my back, extending the tips of my fingers to the edge of the handlebars—cold aluminum where the yellow tape has unraveled. Almost there. The road bumps beneath me but the bike wobbles only a little between my knees.

There's a rush when I finally let go, my hands hovering in the air above the handlebars. I lift my hands a little, then extend my arms straight out from the sides as my blonde hair whips in a stream behind me. Perched on the slim bicycle seat I stretch my spine, reaching taller, embracing the wind. The speed terrifies me, but I'm exhilarated by the bike, the road, and my balanced frame hurtling down the hill to the hum of my spinning tires.

This is what it means to fly, I say.

I own the heavy-shaded darkness of this hill on Yamhill Street.

The years spin by: middle and high school and college, one moment at a time. I pile memories upon each other. I buried a friend, I fell in love, I learned to fly-fish and ski and crush an opponent on the tennis court. I grew taller and tougher. I finally became a teacher.

I lean into the window, studying the tarmac as my plane taxis to the runway. I've packed a suit for my interview; I've practiced the questions they'll likely ask; I've prepared myself to leave Oregon. I grip the seat as we gather speed and watch our plane rise into scattered clouds. Portland drops away quickly: Yamhill Street is a thin line and the cars, dots, as we climb higher. The Willamette Valley uncoils in a wavy ribbon of green.

I can't see much beyond the familiar white snow cone of Mt Hood in the east.

I'll awake in an unfamiliar place tomorrow. No hands.

But joy. Magic. Fear.