

FALL

by

B.H. James

Bob Sanders bought new boots for his family's snow day. But he didn't buy snow boots.

"Why buy a ninety-dollar pair of boots for one day?" Bob asked his wife, Linda. "What about these? I could wear these all year."

"But they're not for snow," Linda said.

"Sure they are," Bob said.

It was a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Bob forgot to pack the snacks that Linda had prepared, so by the time they arrived at the snow park, Little Stevie and Just Teddy had been howling for over an hour.

As they pulled into the parking lot, a man in an orange vest waved his arms at them. Bob had recently watched a television program about mythical heroes. Since watching the program, Bob had imagined pretty much all his activities—making copies, grocery shopping—as heroic quests. Bob was always the hero of these quests. On snow day, Bob was the hero again, and Bob imagined this parking attendant to be what the television program had called a threshold guardian.

Bob hated parking attendants. When Bob was a boy, after his father had died, Bob spent a summer with his Uncle Mark, driving up and down the state in Uncle Mark's pulled-pork wagon. Uncle Mark had told Bob that even the smallest crumb of power goes to a man's head, and that

no man exhibits this more than a parking attendant, and that there was only one way to treat such a man.

The parking attendant at the snow park seemed nice, though. He smiled as he waved Bob and his family toward the next open spot. But Bob parked in the opposite row.

“I think he wanted you to park over there,” Linda said.

“What does he know?” Bob said.

“He’s probably out here dealing drugs,” Aunt Sue said.

Aunt Sue was a drug dealer. She’d started out selling her own medicinal marijuana, prescribed for her knees, then had expanded from there. Since becoming a drug dealer, Aunt Sue had begun assuming everyone else was a drug dealer, too.

As soon as Bob stepped out of the car in his new boots, he fell. He got up and fell again. Bob fell so many times in the icy parking lot that he finally just leaned against the car while Linda and Aunt Sue, in their snow boots, got the boys bundled.

Bob had assumed that Little Stevie and Just Teddy would chicken out. They’d trudge up to the top of the hill, sleds in tow, and there they’d stay, whimpering. Bobby Junior, who was now twenty and who neither Bob nor Linda nor Sue had seen for nearly four years, had chickened out when he was six. Bob finally had to just push him down the hill. They’d driven all this way, etcetera. Bobby Junior had screamed all the way down, then ran into the fence and scratched his ear. When Bobby Junior saw drops of blood in the snow, he passed out.

But Little Stevie and Just Teddy didn’t chicken out. They had trudged up the hill, sleds in tow, behind Bob, Bob falling every few feet, and though they each insisted on going down the

first time with Bob, they each loved it and each went again and again and again, all by themselves.

The program Bob had watched on television that had talked about mythical heroes had also, the next night, talked about tragedies. The program told Bob that the heroes of tragedies often “missed the mark.” They came very close to no tragedy, but then overreached.

Little Stevie and Just Teddy had worn themselves out trudging up and sledding down. Their cheeks were red and they were smiling. Linda and Aunt Sue had sipped hot chocolate and taken a lot of pictures. It was time to load up and have some lunch and head back. Maybe take a little snooze while Daddy drives. But Bob, who had been clinging to a T-post for half-an-hour, wanted the boys to go one more time, with him.

“Get a good picture of us,” Bob said.

“But your boots,” Linda said.

“It’s fine,” Bob said.

Aunt Sue didn’t say anything. She was too high. She’d eaten a handful of medicinal peach rings while sipping her hot chocolate. Linda had eaten one, too, but she didn’t know it was medicinal. Linda also didn’t know that she was high. She just felt happy.

Bob didn’t fall once, going up. The path was slick, from all the people, but Bob set his feet and squinted his eyes and willed himself up the hill.

But as Bob and Little Stevie and Just Teddy stood at the top, Bob dropped the sled. He had been gesturing to Linda—thumbs up, thumbs down—to be sure the camera was ready, Linda

not understanding because she didn't have her glasses and was high. The sled went down the hill, empty.

So they had to walk back down. The only way was the way they'd come up, along the slick, narrow path, now downhill and now against the tide of sledders coming up.

They were still near the top when Bob fell the first time. He was holding each boy by a hand and jerked both to the ground. A man passing said, "Ooh." Both boys started to cry. When Bob got up, he waved to Linda and Aunt Sue at the bottom—a distress signal—but they didn't see him. They were both laughing at something.

The next fall was Bob's hardest of the day. Bob fell fast and flat and right on top of Little Stevie. The people passing gasped. Bob rolled off his son. The left side of Little Stevie's face was planted in the snow. He howled in pain. When Bob lifted Little Stevie out of the snow, he expected to see blood, but there wasn't any. He carried Little Stevie, howling, and grabbed Just Teddy by a hand. People offered help, but Bob ignored them. This was his hill, his ordeal, and the hero must face his ordeal alone. Just Teddy slipped, but Bob kept going, staring ahead at Linda and Aunt Sue, closer now, still laughing. Bob was now dragging Just Teddy. A woman said "Stop" and reached for the little boy, but Bob pulled him away.

When Bob set Little Stevie at Linda and Aunt Sue's feet, half his face and one ear bright red, they stopped laughing and asked what had happened. Little Stevie told them through his sobs that Daddy had fallen on him.

"Time to go," Bob said, and he picked up Just Teddy and walked toward the parking lot, not looking back.

On the way to the parking lot Bob fell again, and again. The third time he fell on top of Just Teddy, like he had done to Little Stevie. When Bob got up, Just Teddy howling in pain, a woman who had watched Bob's entire descent reached for Just Teddy.

"Here, I'll carry him," she said.

Bob twisted to keep Just Teddy from her, and fell again. When Bob again got up and pulled Just Teddy onto his feet, the woman told Bob that Just Teddy was bleeding. Bob looked at Just Teddy. His mouth was surrounded by bright blood.

"You're hurting him," the woman said. She reached for Just Teddy again.

Bob held up a hand, as if signaling the woman to halt.

"Don't put your freaking hand in my face like that," the woman said. "I'm trying to help you."

"We don't need any help," Bob said. He took Just Teddy by the hand and walked on. Blood dripped onto the snow and left a trail behind them.

The woman muttered that Bob was a real a-hole, but then hollered after him, when he fell again, "You need to set your feet."

And when Bob fell once more, a little further on, she hollered, "And you need snow boots."

END