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Probability

ELLIE PICKED UP A FLAT stone and flicked it towards the sluggish water of the Blindman River. It skipped across the current, two, three, four times. Wow, Ellie said aloud. Lucky! Then she thought about Will, the reason she was back in Alberta. Imagined him next to her, his plodding voice explaining, “It’s not luck. It’s the shape and density of the rock, the angle and speed of the throw, gravity, wind direction and speed, the surface of the water.” She tossed another stone. It sank at once, the little plop like a scalding jar of preserves sealing itself tight.

Ellie glanced at her bulky sports watch. Four hours till Will’s funeral. Four hours to write the eulogy the minister asked her to deliver. He phoned yesterday afternoon, almost as soon as she arrived at her parents’ house.

“I know you haven’t kept in touch with Will,” he’d said, his voice warm, “but Will’s mom said you were his closest friend when you were children.”

“I guess so. I don’t know what I’d say though—I haven’t seen him in about eight years.”

“Just share a few of the good memories,” the minister said.

Ellie had laughed, a short, harsh laugh. “OK.”

Now she took a pen and a pad of lined paper out of her leather backpack. She doodled a tiny maze in the margin. What to say? The only thought in her head was, how? How could Will, of all people, die in an accident? Rock climbing, her mother said when she phoned with the news. Impossible, she had thought. Impossible.

The watch, waterproof and shockproof, jutted from the pink cashmere sleeve of her sweater, its enormous black face covering the top of her slender wrist. I could begin with the watch, she thought. I could say, “I bought this watch because of Will. I wanted a delicate gold watch or a silver one with a pearl-beaded band. But when I went shopping, I heard Will’s voice in my head”

“You might fall in,” Ellie imagined Will saying. Her eyes moved upstream and focused on the more jagged rocks and steeper bank there. She remembered the spring she and Will were thirteen. Will’s growing peculiarity and unpopularity were, she feared, contagious. So, though they were in the same grade eight class and rode the school bus together from their neighbouring farms, she ignored Will at school and avoided him on the bus. But after school, when the bus lurched to a stop halfway between Will and Ellie’s long driveways, she and Will clambered off the school bus, crossed the road and scrambled down the path to the river, to put off the chores that awaited them at their homes.

On those afternoons at the river’s edge, Ellie jumped from rock to rock while Will paced on a wide rock, a safe distance from the water, watching her. A narrow face and alert green eyes. Plaid cotton shirts, the wrong brand of jeans. And in his back pocket, she recalls with a queasy shiver, he kept a tiny notebook circled shut by a fat rubber band. An ordinary little lined notebook that traveled with him everywhere.

It’s uncanny—yesterday on the plane to Edmonton and then the two-hour drive in the back of her parents’ car, she kept trying to picture Will, but she couldn’t—at least not clearly. But here on the shore, it was like he was with her. She could see him pull out the notebook. Hear his voice—cracking that spring, beginning to deepen, a bit nasal. Intense. When he found the right page in the notebook, he read her a question, a new one almost each afternoon. All of them concerned potential calamities. “If your house was burning and your mother and your baby sister were asleep, and you only had time to rescue one of them, which should you choose?”

She remembered. “Both,” she had said.

“You don’t have time.” Will had sighed and waited. He always gave her time to think about the questions. While she thought, he took off his glasses to clean them or to adjust the safety strap. If he turned his head, Ellie could see a dented line in his hair from the strap.

“I’d scream and wake up my mom so that she could run and get Sandra from her crib.”

“But what if your mother couldn’t hear you?” Will said evenly. “What if your house was really big?”

Ellie remembered her anger rising. Her home, a grey stucco farm house about a half a kilometre away from the river, was average-sized, and Sandra’s room with its crib and rocking chair had lain right next to her parents’ bedroom. Will’s scenario couldn’t happen, at least not in her house. But then, Will hadn’t really been interested in her opinions anyway. Though he made her think up answers, it was only to test her replies against his own answers, the ones he recorded in his notebook after hours, or days, or even

weeks of hand-wringing reasoning. How she had loathed his assurance and his proprietary hold on the right answer. Yet she had stayed, and came back the next afternoon and the next one too. The problem was that, once he posed a question, the crisis seemed not just possible but imminent; in this case, the house had blazed in her imagination, and she needed to hear his reasoning. So she gave in. “What would you do?”

“Well,” he said. “Most kids would want to save their mothers. But, that’s not right.” Will had looked earnestly at Ellie, his mouth curling into a quick, grotesque grimace. This tick appeared whenever he got tense—it happened often at school, especially during recess and gym classes. The other kids called him Prune Face or Creepo.

Ellie crouched down now and picked at a green-grey lichen with her pen. Was he tense when he answered his questions because he was second-guessing his reasoning, or because he had to imagine the scenario as he talked through it? And what motivated all that worry, all that logic? Maybe it was living alone with anxious, doting parents. They were conservative, church-going people, a farming family who belonged to that Dutch Reformed Church on Third Lane. Maybe the certain answers of his faith made him feel there should be certain answers for everything. Or maybe it was simply Will’s intellect that prompted the reasoning, or an overactive imagination.

I’ll never know, she thought. Her eyes moved to a rippling pool between two rocks. For the first time since she heard the news of Will’s death, she sensed the permanence death brings. It was a fleeting impression, like seeing the damage of a car wreck as you shoot past in the opposite direction, but she felt unsettled nonetheless. The magpies were squabbling in a poplar above her, and a cold breeze rattled the remaining leaves on an aspen tree nearby, sounding like nervous hands rubbing together.

Stashing the notepad and pen into her backpack, Ellie climbed up the narrow, sandy path toward her parents’ farmhouse. It was the dreams, she realized, nightmares really, that kept her following him to the river all those days after school. So often that year, she had tossed in her narrow bed, dreaming of accidents and disasters. In the dreams, if only she knew what to do, she could save her family, or herself, or the strangers in the sinking ferry, the children in the burning school. But she was missing a crucial piece of information. At the end of each dream, she woke with the sickening awareness that people were dying because of what she didn’t know.



At her parents' well-polished dining room table, Ellie read over her draft. Maybe I can do this, she thought. Describe Will in a way that's based on truth, but lighter. The way she described her life in Toronto to her mother. Leave out all the uncomfortable bits, like the snickers and jeers that followed Will. That sometimes came from her.

Yes, maybe some people would smile fondly if she recounted the anecdotes of Will at Driver's Ed, Will asking the kids at break time: "If you came around a corner and a child stood on the road in front of you and you had to choose whether to hit the child or drive off the road, which would you do?" Maybe people would chuckle. But then again, thought Ellie, maybe no one will. They'd stare numbly at her, frozen by the excruciating irony of Will's death. Frozen by the knowledge that Will, who took every precaution, who thought about every eventuality, was lying dead in the coffin in front of them.

It was a freak incident, one that the Alberta Alpine Club, who meticulously analyses the causes of climbing accidents, had already classified as "bad luck." She felt vaguely comforted by this. Her mother told her, "What I heard was that Will did everything right—stuck the wedges deep into the rock and attached the rope with those things that close around the rope. The weather was fine; they had all the right equipment—Reggie, his climbing partner, said Will followed the rules by the book." Her mother had twisted the dish towel as she spoke. But, she explained, a rock had fallen. The size of a sofa. Broke off from a crest about ten metres above him. It missed Reggie, and would have missed Will too, if only he had been a few metres down or to the left or the right. When Reggie got to Will, there was nothing he could do.

Ellie had seen only one dead body, her grandfather's. That was different, though. He rested on blue satin in a coffin, carefully preserved, and more placid and composed than he ever had been in life. The only other funeral she'd attended had a closed casket. Kevin Welland, a classmate. He was killed in late September of her grade twelve year. He had been ploughing his uncle's field, and, as he turned the corner, the tractor tipped. Kevin pinned beneath the massive tire. She shuddered and fidgeted with her pencil, trying to recall Kevin's funeral.

All that comes back is how, a day or two after Kevin's death, Will sought her out at school. Strange. By grade twelve, they rarely acknowledged one another anymore. Yet Will spoke to her that day as if continuing a conversation that had only just been interrupted. He found her near her locker and thrust a sheet of looseleaf paper on top of the binder and textbook Ellie had in her arms. "Look at this," he said. His face twitched,

and he seemed tense, fraught. Ellie had looked around to see if any of her friends were watching.

“Here, come here,” she said, steering him into a small corridor between two sets of lockers. She glanced at the sheet he had given her. The notes from that day’s English class. They were studying Hamlet. What is a tragedy? They had copied the note from the board. Beneath it, Will had scribbled, The readiness is all. Vaguely, Ellie remembered Mr. MacMillan, their English teacher, talking about that line in the play. “What? I have these notes.”

“No, not that.” Will sounded impatient. “My calculations. Here!” He tapped his finger frenetically on the margin of the notepaper and she observed the lightly penciled equations.

“I don’t know what it means.”

Will grimaced again. “It’s about Kevin’s accident. Look—” He pointed to the notes:

v = speed of tractor
 r =radius
 μ =coefficient of friction
 g = acceleration due to gravity.

The calculations, in his meticulous printing, marched down the margin.

Value = 9.8 m/s².
 Assume $\mu = 1$, since tractor is in a field.
 If $r=5$ m, then $v = 7$ m/s (25 km/hour)
 If $r=2$ m., then $v = 4.4$ m/s (= 15 km/ hour).

Will stood close. His sweat had soaked through the blue t-shirt he wore, the smell rank. Ellie looked near the bottom of the page where there were words instead of equations. “If the turn was gentler, r would be much larger.”

“Do you see?” Will said, his words urgent. “It wasn’t an accident! If Kevin knew how fast he could go for turns, or what the angle could be, he wouldn’t have tipped!”

Ellie had shoved the paper back into his hands. “Well, he did.” Fury swelled inside her, but she didn’t know why.

“You don’t get it,” Will said, his voice weary. He slipped the paper back into his binder and strode down the hall.

The last time she saw Will was at their high school graduation. There was punch afterwards, and Will’s dad tapped her shoulder. “Let’s get a picture of the two of you, for old time’s sake, eh?” Will looked uncomfortable. But

Ellie, buoyed by the evening, by her sleek silk dress under the graduation gown, by nostalgia for what was already becoming the past, had smiled brightly and taken Will's arm. She never saw the photo.

The shrill bell of her parents' old phone startled her. It was the minister with the details about the service. "I'll read a Bible passage and give a short reflection," he said in his gentle voice. "Then a song—'He's Got the Whole World in his Hands'—and then you'll speak."

"OK." Ellie played with the springy telephone cord. She hesitated, then said, "I'm having some trouble writing this. Knowing what to say."

"It's hard when someone dies this way. I'm going to talk about God's care for his creatures. I'll use the verse about God seeing the sparrow fall. You know—though the death was tragic, we can take comfort knowing that Will fell into the waiting arms of God."

"Oh," said Ellie. She had been winding the long phone cord around her wrist. Now she untangled it, noting the pattern it made in her skin. "OK. I mean," she faltered, flustered as his words registered and she grappled with their meaning. Wow, she thought. Does he really believe that? The waiting arms of God?

She switched the phone to her other ear. "But I don't know what I can say. We weren't really that close."

"He was an intense fellow," the minister said. "Did you know he kept notebooks?"

Ellie's throat caught. "Notebooks?"

"Plans and records of his climbs. The police found one on his body. Interesting—looks like he researched carefully before each climb. Wrote equipment lists, made sketches with heights and angles and potential pit-falls—"

"Sounds like Will," Ellie said.

"Every time he started a new climb, he wrote at the top of the page, 'The readiness is all.' Hamlet, you know." The minister spoke calmly. "So maybe he was ready for death. Ready for whatever might happen."

"For God to catch him?"

The minister did not hear, or ignored, the sarcasm in her voice.

"Who knows?"

Ellie hung up the phone. She returned to the table. Her mom had placed a fried egg sandwich and a cup of tea next to her pad of paper.

Into the waiting arms of God. She considered this. Impossible. Or at least, improbable. She picked up the sandwich, then put it down. She shuffled to the kitchen, feeling lost.

"Mom, what if I moved back home for awhile?"

Her mother shut the oven door with a clatter, then slowly set the timer before turning around. “Why, honey? You have a good job in Toronto, and your smart little apartment—I thought you loved it there.”

Ellie thought wryly of the bright, cheerful reports she had given in her weekly phone calls. Her mother was scrutinizing her. “What would you do here, love?”

“You know,” said Ellie with a defensive shrug. “What everyone else does. Maybe get married. Have some kids.”

Ellie’s mother pulled out a kitchen chair and but did not sit down. “I thought you had made your choice.”

“Maybe I’m changing my mind,” Ellie said. Her mother’s face was carefully blank. It couldn’t be that hard to find a husband here and settle down, Ellie thought. And then the rest of her life would be planned. Predictable. The twice-daily milking, the chores, the routines. Planting and harvest. The rhythm of the farm.

“I’ve always liked the name of that company you work for,” said her mother, moving back towards the oven.

“No Worries? It’s just an expression, Mom,” said Ellie, startled.

“Yes, but good. Appropriate for an event-planning company. Your clients pay you to worry for them.”

“We don’t worry, Mom. We plan.” Ellie’s voice had an edge to it. Why was it that being home for more than an hour made her feel about fourteen years old again?

“Worrying, planning. I’m not sure you can untangle them.” Her mother opened the oven door a crack. She adjusted the temperature knob. Her earth-brown eyes found Ellie’s. “Are you ready for the funeral, honey?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Here, back in her childhood home, back in Poplar Grove, she felt like she had stalled after hurtling down the road for years. From this vantage point, stretching behind her and before her, she perceived what she had sensed on the riverbank with Will so long ago: the endless possibilities in a life. The opportunities, plans and decisions. And risks. Like hundreds of crisscrossed lines on a foreign street map.

I’d like to stop where I am, she thought. Stay put for awhile.

Her mother patted her arm. “Say something nice, dear.”

Ellie nodded slowly and got up. It was time to move, in one direction or another. Make a choice. Take a risk. Maybe, she thought, God will catch me if I fall.

