

The End of the Slide
By: Jack LaValley

Somehow Bernie wasn't there even when he was. I hardly knew him at all and he didn't talk. I would call him a shadow except that he always made sure he was in front. He seemed to want to lead but he put so much distance between us that it often seemed like he was trying to get away.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Let's slide on that!" He came part way back from the center of the trestle to have a look but said nothing. Okay. Stay there, I thought and I dropped onto my bottom and crab legged over the shoulder of the railroad bed until gravity drew me down plowing the powdery snow with my crotch and cramming it up my back.. I shook it out and looked up the thirty feet toward Bernie who was leaning over the edge of the trestle with his hands on his hips staring down at me.

"C'mon down! That was great!" I yelled, but he just stared, the sun glinting off his yellow matted hair and his light windbreaker flapping in the freezing wind off the river. His wrists were red, and he wore no socks.

I led with my right foot sideways and pushed with my left like a beginning skater and was surprised at how fast I began sliding. Then I realized I was actually going downhill on this flat piece of ice and couldn't stop. Slowly I twisted around toward land and lurched forward to brake myself with my hands but still plowed toward the water helplessly backward with my heels until I dropped off the edge into the river. Bernie was on the bank in front of me now. Like sagebrush in a hurricane I tumbled in a black foaming wind that I couldn't breathe. I clawed like a cat to stay upright. Just as my eyes broke the surface the edge of an ice shelf rushed into my face. My hands came up and suddenly I was gripping it as the raging current drove the rest of my body underneath and tore off my boots. I screamed "Help!" and when the ice in my hands broke off I followed my galoshes under the frozen roof of the Racquette River. It seemed to take forever to get to the bottom because I was being blown downriver sideways. I planted my feet, squatted and bursting upward, crashed through the windblown ice sheet above with my head.

"Help!" I screamed and plunged back down through the hole into the waiting current. Again I found the bottom and hurled myself upward like a poseidon missile exploding through another place in the otherwise flawless icescape. What a sight it must have been from land. A wet screaming puppet popping up through a perfect white and empty stage. That was the whole play. Two bobs and "that's all folks!"

On the way back down, water streaming off my face, my left hand fell upon something soft and instinctively clutched it as I sank beneath the surface again. It was the sleeve of a jacket, an empty sleeve, but somehow it had power and it tugged. It tugged very hard and I tugged back. Then it tugged my arm right back up through the hole and onto the ice.

There Bernie lay on his stomach staring at me with the biggest blue eyes I've ever seen in my life. We crawled on our hands and knees through the drifts of snow on the ice until our palms were like stumps of soft wood with no feeling. When we finally crawled to our feet on land our pants were frozen barrels around our legs. We stumbled down the tracks together to my house and I must have said "you saved my life," fifty times in half a mile. Bernie just listened. He didn't talk much.