



THE SECRET
SKI
SEASONAIRE

*The Beautiful and Barbaric Truth
of an Absurd World*

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Season One

Joy in Chamonix 2005

JANUARY 2005

Eighteen kilograms too heavy. It was 6am. We were stood at a check-in desk at East Midlands Airport rearranging the contents of Jim's splayed suitcase. We received disapproving looks from the early January travellers.

'Do you need all this stuff?' Jim's mother asked flatly.

'Yes. I do!' Jim responded with angst. I couldn't believe the amount of crap he had: the original breeze block PS2, several PS2 games and DVDs still in their cases, a rack of mini-discs, copious cables and batteries, tins of UK food essentials, issues of all the lad mags, and an oversized parka jacket.

'Just put the parka on over your ski jacket. It's the only way,' Jim's mother said as she hastily picked up a can of beans and then dropped it, whereby it rolled comically between the folks waiting to check in. It was embarrassing. We looked like the inexperienced amateurs that we were. We didn't look like skiers, nor the outdoor type. We were mainstream indie kids of the time – neither nerds, nor cool.

Jim and I were 19 and were heading on our gap-year ski season where we'd be bumming it (which means not working) in Chamonix before starting university. Jim took off his new ski jacket and threw it to the floor as if it was

an old rag and pulled on a fleece, put his ski jacket back on, and then squeezed the parka jacket over his shoulders. He couldn't have looked more uncomfortable. The case got down to 15kg too heavy and cost him an extra baggage fee of £75. I put some of his items in my case.

But we were off, and this was happening. We both loved skiing. We had committed ourselves to a season as soon as we heard of the concept a few years earlier, on the last of our three school ski trips – by far the major highlights of my education. We had bought our own fitted ski boots from Sheffield Ski Village and had had two trips to Castleford Xscape to brush up. We didn't know much about skiing, but we were intermediates who could ski red pistes. We didn't know freestyle from freeride, carving from parallel turns, or slush from powder. But we'd learn. By the end of the season we'd be experts. I recall cutely thinking that we'd become some of the finest English skiers.

Prior to the season we'd had little access to any ski-related information. Jim and I didn't have the internet. All we knew was that Chamonix was a town, not a purpose-built ski resort, and that it was the only affordable place for us to bum a season. Our only information came from Jim's cousin who had bummed the previous season in Chamonix and had loved it. Jim booked our accommodation and flights online at his cousin's house. Accommodation was secured through Natives, a company that advertised jobs and apartments for seasonaires. Natives was more of a seasonaire community – they offered holiday-representative style support throughout and hooked you up with other Native seasonaires dotted around the resort. If it wasn't for Natives' existence, I don't think I'd have ever done a ski season. Working the season wasn't considered – we wanted

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to ski all day, every day. This was our gap year and we had both worked long hours at a department store since the end of school. We had saved hard and were rewarding ourselves with the trip of a lifetime. We thought we stood above our friends from our northern town. No one skied. We were way more adventurous. Most of them had started apprenticeships or had gone straight to university, and one lad had hit the beaten tracks of Australia.

* * *

My first glimpse of the Chamonix valley was grimly anti-climactic. I felt trapped beneath low dirty clouds and between steep granite slopes that disappeared into unknown worlds. The packed minibus from Geneva took less than an hour, and Jim snored throughout. His head flopped inches from mine every other minute. Jim was constricted by his multi-layers and double coats, which he hadn't taken off. Stuff like this wound me up. Although he was my best friend, we'd always argue. Jim had a short fuse and was easy to poke fun at. He was uniquely awkward-looking. Jim could be described as a skinny weed at the same time as being labelled a chubster, with his double chin and beer belly. He possessed a wooden personality and drawling monotonous voice, and although he wasn't boring, he'd often drag conversations down, not being much of a listener. I was thankful that I wouldn't be spending the full season with just him: there'd be two other guys sharing our flat as part of the Natives seasonaire deal – a flat and season ski-pass. Our accommodation didn't cover the full season, it started in early January and ended mid-April. The flat next door would be full of four other 'Natives', which I hoped would include a couple of chicks.

We passed the Mont Blanc tunnel and soon pulled into the Cham Sud complex – a mixture of private accommodation, seasonal lets and weekly rental apartments – on the edge of town, which was reminiscent of any estate from any depressing city. A bus lot full of knackered 1980s vehicles, a dodgy pizza takeaway, and a battered graffiti-covered Spar greeted us. It wasn't the winter wonderland I had imagined. I'd also yet to see a single flake of snow. We picked up our key from a low-budget reception and headed up to our second-floor flat in the Grépon building of Cham Sud. An abundance of ski shops, restaurants, bars and bakeries occupying the ground floors let you know that it majorly caters for holidaymakers.

Our flat was tiny and run-down. It possessed a threadbare carpet, stained whitewashed walls, and tacky early 1990s sofas that smelt of damp grime. It retained its original sickly green tiled bathroom. A shower head attached to the taps was provided so that we could hose ourselves down like dogs. There was zero storage space. It was too small for four people on a week's holiday, let alone for seasonaires with more gear, especially as there was no basement ski locker. Cases would spend the whole season stacked in the corners alongside four sets of skis, a snowboard and our clunky boots. We never left any equipment on our balcony because it was a bit too low for comfort.

All the activities of four people would take place within the space of the average living room. There was one double bed that could be isolated from the rest of the space by a flimsy sliding door. Two sofas lined up in an L-shape doubled as single beds, the remaining bed was a sliding pull-out, which, once pulled out, left no room to

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walk around. The kitchen was postage-stamp sized, and could be observed through the hatch that most of these flats contained. A table and four chairs were pinned beneath the hatch. Our balcony looked out towards the Brévent mountain; directly below ran the street and the river Arve.

However, this budget lodging was clean enough and more than acceptable for Jim and me. It was our first place, it was in the mountains, it was in a different country. I instantly felt settled. My poor first impression of Cham Sud disappeared upon calling this place home. I was more than excited; this was seriously exotic territory.

Our flatmates soon joined us; Charles and Steve who were 17 and 27, respectively. They didn't know each other, so Jim and I felt more comfortable, politically speaking. They proved to be decent guys after a first night on the drink. The night ended with a round of steak hache and chips – sliced burgers wedged in a baguette and smothered in sauce – from Midnight Express, a fast-food hole-in-the-wall that became our regular. Jim and Charles had been shouting like louts, which drew plenty of looks. Charles should still technically have been in sixth form; he never told us why he had dropped out, or how he had financed his season. We couldn't work out if he had attended private or state school, despite him referring to everyone as 'this old boy'. It didn't matter though; we were on the same youthful wavelength. Charles was from the Home Counties and spoke with the crafty slang of a streetwise posh kid. With longish blonde hair he looked unmistakably Swedish. He was a typical-looking snowboarder but had his own way of wearing peaked beanies in an aggressive manner. His clothes and snowboard gear were torn and battle-scarred from skateboarding and snowboarding at Wycombe Summit

dry slope. He had the oppressed snowboarder attitude of the time; he detested skiing and at every opportunity he took a shot at those who skied. This never caused offence. We skiers thought the snowboard-skier argument was overplayed; we had no issue with snowboarding. We let Charles rant unchallenged, but it soon got tiresome.

Steve was a property lawyer who worked and lived in Newcastle. He was a working-class lad from London who'd done well. He was between companies so had taken to the snow. I thought it was weird that this responsible adult, who had a steady girlfriend and owned a flat, would now be living in a shoebox with three single teenagers who had just left home for the first time. But Steve had known that most seasonaires would be young. He wanted to relax and party, and to escape the humdrum existence that working life offered. He regretted not doing a season before real life. At 27, he was still young, yet at the time he seemed ancient. Steve was an endearingly great guy. He was a small man, softly spoken, and was always enthusiastic. His warm, bearded face was often awestruck when you spoke to him. He'd skied many a week's holiday prior and said he was up for skiing some *extreme* off-piste. After our first night out, we'd often bellow the word, *extreme*, to take the piss.

Earlier that first evening, the Natives representative came round with our pre-prepared ski passes. The rep chilled and told us some generic resort information. He said that alongside the group of four Natives staying next door, there'd be another three lads lodging down the corridor, as well as ten other Native bums dotted around town. There was an upcoming party at a bar in town where he'd introduce us all. The rep said he'd pop round every few weeks to check on us and give us free tickets to various

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events however, this was the first and last time we ever saw him. After he left, Steve humorously said that we'd all been ripped off. We'd paid a fair sum for this place, €1,300 each, which totalled €5,200 to rent the flat for three and a half months, bills and maintenance included. Season ski passes were an additional €400 each. How much of a cut were Natives taking? It didn't matter at the time, neither does it now: what else were we going to do? It cost two and half times as much for the same package in the next cheapest resort that Natives operated in.

Even though we were like sardines in the flat, no one moaned, we were fuelled with adrenaline and couldn't wait to get skiing. On those first few mornings I'd stand out on the balcony and enjoy a coffee and cigarette, I'd never been so content or felt so elated. I was overwhelmed by the vast blank canvass of the Chamonix season that lay ahead. I'd love to again experience that limitless potent energy of early adulthood.

* * *

We decided to rotate beds weekly. The luxury of the semi-private double bed – essentially a mattress on the floor – was a four-weekly treat. But after seeing Jim spend the first night on the pull-out, I didn't fancy the rotations. I sometimes liked to get to bed early and didn't want to lie on the pull-out with people's stinking feet hanging over the edge of the sofa and resting on my sheets. I took my chances and stayed on the sofa beneath the window all season.

The first things we did was hunt for skis and a TV. Chamonix is an old valley town with a population of about 9,000. Quaint pedestrian streets lined with aged alpine buildings and a pretty town square and fountain give it

grace and elegance. You respect the place; history breathes around every corner. Chamonix resides at 1,035m and serves as a base for hardcore mountaineers. Piste skiing is split over four smallish separate areas (Brévent, Flégère, Grand Montets and Le Tour), which need to be accessed by bus. However, the backcountry is vast. The Chamonix region mainly caters for backcountry riders (of skis or snowboards) and climbers, those experienced enough to head way off the beaten track. Chamonix isn't up there as a top resort for the casual holidaymaker, but it is busy nonetheless. With hindsight, Chamonix was, and still is a fantastic place to do a season. I didn't work there, and I can see how having to hook a bus between shifts to catch a few runs could be problematic, but it does have its advantages. Because it's a town, there's a sense of normality and the isolation and entrapment of a purpose-built resort never arises. There's an abundance of things to do, it's generally cheap, and it's a good place to travel to and from. However, this doesn't detract from it being a seasonaire's resort. A large seasonaire community exists. In later seasons colleagues would often escape to the cities of Grenoble or Lyon on their days off to reacclimatise with the real world.

After being charmed by the town we visited several ski shops, although Charles made an excuse and headed back to the flat: he wouldn't be seen dead in a ski shop. Steve spoke French and bartered for seasonaire's discount. I was impressed with Steve's level of French and his bluntness in asking for deals. I didn't have the confidence to do such things. I was intimidated by the mountain-weathered staff and didn't want to come across as a novice. This was a feeling that weighed heavy throughout the season, a feeling of embarrassment and guilt that I was a seasonaire virgin

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and rookie skier. *What right did I have to be here?* With hindsight, such feelings were ridiculous; everyone has to start somewhere. But I'd suffer envy when someone my age would regale tales of ski holidays and adventures down at their local dry slope.

Regarding skis, we weren't dummies. We had shortlisted some all-rounders to try. Such skis would enable us to ski powder when the time came. We all rented Rossignol B2 Bandits and poles and walked back through town with them slung over our shoulders – noting that there is a correct way to carry skis, as Steve informed us. As for the TV, we found a small electronics store and purchased a 12-incher for a Steve-bartered €80. As soon as it was back, Jim plugged in the PS2 and fired up *Vice City*.

We stayed in drinking stubbies that night. Steve, being nearly ten years older, had many stories to tell, which he engagingly told. However, I was amazed that Charles had experienced similar, always knew someone who'd done that, had been there too, or done things much better – I fell for his bullshit. I felt despondent with my life experience – I had nothing to offer the chat.

* * *

The next day Jim and I were up super early. I ran to get fresh baguettes. The smell of our local bakery was heavenly; carrying warm 70¢ baguettes whilst walking back in the crisp morning air couldn't be beaten. In near darkness – respect for Charles and Steve – we wolfed the bread with soft cheese and cheap coffee made from a pan of water. We innocently snapped our ski boots fully tight at the dining table. Steve said he'd meet us at the top of the Flégère cable car at noon. Charles couldn't be bothered getting out of bed.

By 8.15am we were on the bus and soon up Flégère. I was nervous, this would be the very first time Jim and I had skied alone together, i.e. without an instructor or schoolteachers. By the time we got to the top of the 1970s Index chairlift, known as Darth Vader, my heart was pounding some seriously tense blood. There weren't many people out. Snow conditions were atrocious, more rock than snow. Only holidaymakers and fools had ventured out. Jim looked the part. He'd decided to fork out on decent gear. I looked a mish-mash in cheap Asda salopettes, a garish desert camo jacket, a schoolkid's backpack, and M&S goggles that my mother had gifted me for Christmas. We both wore beanies; helmets weren't common back then. Charles had told us that he wouldn't be seen dead in a helmet, and in the same sentence curiously asked what brand my goggles were.

I let Jim take the lead and he took us down an empty red piste. We hit it too fast, our sketchy parallel turns on steep ice sheets lacked care and control. But after a short stop to assess our progress we pelted it to the bottom. The recklessness of our speed was all too apparent to the few hardy souls who were also out. I juddered all over and my muscles burned. But the feeling was exhilarating. I couldn't believe that I had a full season of this. We hit the piste a couple more times but toned it down after I stacked chest-first on the hard packed snow. Upon impact my ribs cracked as if they had received a shot of CPR. My beanie and goggles flew off and I slid down the ice and rock-strewn slope for some distance. I clambered to my feet, completely winded, and took a while to compose myself. I expected to have broken a rib or two. Yet to walk away unscathed felt strangely arousing; it was a weird sort of achievement.

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We enjoyed gross salami baguettes whilst we waited for Steve, who didn't show. By mid-afternoon, after we had rinsed the few pistes that were open, we called it quits. We didn't want to push anything; we had all season.

We met an apologetic Steve later on. He'd ventured to Flégère later than planned. We supped post-ski beers and chain-smoked as we recounted our *extreme* piste adventures. Charles was still in his sofa bed; he hadn't moved all day. He was in his boxer shorts and was intensely playing *Vice City*. He wasn't the slightest bit inconvenienced by Jim sitting tight next to him in his sweaty ski pants, on top of Charles's pillows. Charles commented that it was pointless going up the hill when snow conditions were so poor.

That first day was to be representative of our general ski days over the course of the first month – Charles and Steve half-arsed, Jim and I keen as. In reality, Charles avoided hitting the mountain with us – he couldn't be seen with skier goons.

We soon banned smoking in the flat – mainly for Jim's sake, who was only a social smoker – except for when we had a party. It's prehistoric to think that we considered it acceptable to chain-smoke in there; it was like the Olympic torch relay: there was always a lit cig.

Each morning, the trek to the bus was a painful experience for Jim and me, as we wretchedly ached from the skiing, until our bodies adapted after a few days. But as soon as we let rip down the hill, the aches disappeared. The exception to these days was when we met the Natives from the flat next door. Charles had struck up a conversation, balcony to balcony, whilst the rest of us were up the hill. The first thing he told us was that there were three lads and an 'old woman'. I was instantly disappointed. The 'old

woman' was Reanne, a 32-year-old working-class nurse from Halifax on her first season. She'd taken a £5,000 bank loan to 'do up her kitchen', but had then 'cunningly' quit her job, boyfriend and previous life. She was starting again. She told her life story with honesty and excitement. It was inspiring. People can start over without any resentment towards the past.

She had pagan-like brown hair and wore old T-shirts and battered jeans that trailed filthy threads beneath her heels. On the piste she looked like a child who'd lost her parents. She was always puffed up in too many layers, with mittens dangling from her sleeves. Her hair flared wildly from a lop-sided beanie, and wrapped uncomfortably around her head were child-sized goggles that obscured her view and were always steamed up. She pretty much snowboarded blind. Accompanying this danger were her snowboard boots. They were the oldest and tiniest things, that didn't fit into her bindings correctly. Those and her board were late 1990s ex-rentals from the Halifax dry slope. Reanne was a decent rider, yet her unsafe set-up, and inability to tame her speed, meant that she was always a danger on the hill.

Despite being sharp-minded, Reanne failed to look after herself. She was always sunburnt or peeling, and was constantly covered with cold sores and zits. This wasn't helped by her diet. She existed on coleslaw, plain pasta, baguettes and beer. This acted as armour to keep the guys away, which was useful in a town, and at a time where it felt like the female sex didn't exist. Yet Reanne was super cool, she had good chat and nothing fazed her. She had the best seasonaire personality, attitude and mindset. Attributes like these were critical when you'd signed up to the Natives deal

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completely blind to the other occupants of your flat, which was, in Reanne's case, a flat of doom.

The guys next door included two friends, whom we called (behind their backs) Finchy and Brent after the characters in the BBC series, *The Office*. They were both 28, single, and from London. They were confident and competitive know-it-alls who both carried extra kilograms. Finchy looked intimidatingly psychopathic. He had thick, short and scuffed hair with piercing, accusatory eyes set in a pudgily aggressive face. Brent was tubbier, which allowed Finchy to call him a lazy fat bastard. He had a round face that shone with an innocent childlike smile. Brent's hair was thinning all over and looked like the roughed-up felt of a well-worn tennis ball. We'd soon find out that these guys played the role of master and servant, bully and victim. I initially didn't like them. They were from the world of bull-shitting big-hitters who would eat the likes of me if I ever entered into conflict with them. They were doing a season as a chill before starting up their own recruitment company. Finchy had to do some preliminary work on his laptop (something of a novelty back then), therefore he wasn't fully focussed on his snowboarding. They said that they were rad riders and Finchy proudly stated that he could front-flip. They'd responsibly driven from England in an old Mercedes that had failed its MOT and hadn't been insured.

The other guy next door was Daine, a 20-year-old outdoors type from Cumbria with short curly hair and a mountaineer's beard. Alongside snowboarding he was a mountain biker, climber and outdoor survivalist. He was a genuine guy and was the poster boy winter bum. He was fully committed to his boarding, looked after his gear, kept in good health – being the only person who didn't smoke,

barring the odd joint – and cooked well. His only downside was that he suffered from anger management issues and had received therapy. He told us this immediately with an openness that suggested he'd need looking out for, which I found unnerving – it was only a matter of time until he'd explode. I was cautious to never offend him, not that one could; he was the nicest guy around.

* * *

The Natives' intro party was a textbook introduction to seasonaire parties. It was held at The Terrace and was in full swing when we arrived. The 'best' band I'd ever seen up to that point in my life were playing – a trio composed of a DJ, a bongo player and a Santana-like guitarist. I was introduced to my first coat mountain piled high in one corner and was horrified when a group of people entered and just threw their expensive jackets carelessly on top. The Terrace was full of us Natives plus many friends, mostly Brits and Aussies. We chatted to the other Natives who shared our corridor, three posh skiers from Sheffield (actually a plush village in the Peak District), who were the same age as me. They were a cold bunch who stuck to a corner of the bar. They were rigidly clad in expensive Arc'teryx gear and seemed as sober as judges. They were serious off-pisters. One of them was a ski-cross rider who'd be entering competitions. They clocked us for what we were: novices and of no use to them. Despite this, the friendliest of them, Edd, said he'd show us some nice off-piste. No phone numbers were exchanged; it was simply a matter of giving each other a knock.

It was an intense night of sweltering dancing in my unzipped coat and with my beanie stuffed into my pocket.

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It was a new experience, fantastically cool, and on another level to the generic student nights my friends would be on back in the UK. Reanne, Steve, Finchy and Brent were going for it. Their overdriven enthusiasm was a pure release from professional life. Jim left early, but the rest of us stayed out until 3am and crashed into our place for a nightcap stubby. Charles, Finchy and Brent stuffed cold frankfurters down their faces and took bites out of a block of Emmental – a primal survival instinct to replenish vital salts and fats. We crammed on to the sofas and goofed about, except for Jim who lay sprawled on his pull-out bed on the floor. He was coverless and was wearing loose boxer shorts and an *A-Team* pyjama top. We'd woken him and he joined in the banter. However, his bollocks were clearly on display. They sagged out like slugs down his inner thigh. Reanne's feet were 10cm away. She duly clocked his balls and was disturbingly transfixed by the sight. Only she and I had noticed – everyone else was too steamed – and we'd often joke about this episode.

The night ended with Jim, Steve and I pissing off our balcony, which was followed by Steve puking his guts up over the railing. He hung motionless over the side with an impressively long sick dribble flowing below. I dared Charles to jump off, which he did to rapturous laughter. A sloped grass bank against the building comfortably broke his fall. He came back with his shirt, skin and jeans caked in mud. And then for whatever rock-and-roll reason, possibly another dare, Charles launched an empty vodka bottle into the quiet street below. Incredibly, the bottle bounced up off the pavement before hitting a car at a shallow angle. It shattered upon impact and showered the length of the car. The alarm started and we shit ourselves. We ducked and

fought our way inside to safety, including Steve who had dramatically come back from the dead. We had one last laugh and finally crashed out, apart from Charles, who fired up the PS2 and played until 7am with his muddy hands.

Although we bonded well with the guys next door (everyone except me had taken a shine to Finchy and Brent), we didn't immediately start hanging around or riding together. This only happened after Daine had told us that he couldn't hack it and was leaving.

* * *

There was a desperation to discover the best bars. Steve once went into a place ahead of us, aptly named The Pub, but he immediately came back out and said: 'Rude bitch said I don't look like a seasonaire. I didn't lower myself to show her my season pass. We're not stepping foot in there all season. Fuck that.' The Pub received words from us every time we passed: 'Shit bar!', 'Ooooh The Pub!', or 'Worst bar in Cham!' This event sowed a seed in Steve's head, something that gets implanted into most seasonaires – they have to look the part. They soon turn into skater-looking teens or hardened mountaineers with beards and unkempt hair. I was to be no exception.

We soon discovered 'our' bar, Bar'd Up. It was cosy and genuine. Live acoustic music was played on Mondays, always the same guy playing the same songs at the same time. We joked about him, but we always enjoyed it. 'Mrs Jones' by Counting Crows was the soundtrack to those evenings. Without fail we'd get Bar'd Up'd every Monday, beginning at 4pm for power hour, any pint for €1, and staying until we couldn't drink any more. They served delicious pizzas that we often devoured. We'd get tanked on Kronenbourg

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or Beamish and would mostly crash out in the flat by 10pm. If we were up for it, we'd hit Chambre Neuf and have milky cocktails, which would cause grave sickness the next day.

Monday was our favourite day. We'd wake early, ski hard, and then race to Bar'd Up. All of us from both flats would make the pilgrimage, barring Finchy, who'd often stay back to work and wank. My only regret from those times was that we never struck up conversation with anyone else. I rue the chances we missed out on. But we were a solid group of eight and were contentedly socially self-sufficient.

* * *

After testing various skis, Jim and I settled upon the B2s. They were the most flexible and responsive. Steve opted for the Dynastar 4800s. We found a good deal with bindings from a side-street shop that were selling them €100 cheaper than anywhere else. On advice from the shopkeepers I bought 182cm lengths, and Jim 190cm. They looked way too long. I had doubts. Were they ripping us off? Who was I to question them? But with hindsight, this was a good move. Their length gave great stability at our reckless high speeds, and when the time came, they floated gorgeously on the powder. My B2s would live at the end of my sofa bed, and over the following days I'd constantly stare proudly at them.

Our mountain immaturity soon manifested itself. We took our new skis up the hill on what can only be described as snow-dusted rock fields. We wept at the scratches and chunks taken out of our bases. We were grateful for Charles's ski technician experience. That night he set our skis up between the dining room chairs and taught us how to P-Tex the holes and wax and scrape. The scraping was

done on the balcony where the wax flakes were crudely kicked over the side. Charles used a Tesco Value iron, which was £5 well spent. We often enjoyed evening wax sessions in the flat. The smell of melted wax was addictive. Charles also taught us how to sharpen our edges to a razor-blade finish. Some evenings were dedicated to watching Jim wax his skis, which made for class entertainment because he was useless at the task.

* * *

Snow still hadn't fallen. Because we wanted to be out as much as possible we decided to hire skis to save ours taking a battering. To save money, we found the cheapest skis – the K2 Omni 3.5s. These were beginner skis and were flimsy pieces of junk that cost €6.50 a day. We didn't give two hoots about the condition of these rentals and skied all the sketchy pistes where we had to do a heck of a lot of dangerous rock dodging. During one stack, my beanie-covered head came mighty close to cracking against a brick-sized chunk of protruding mountain. It was no surprise that the pistes were empty. We received looks from the lift operators that we interpreted as 'English idiots'. But during these quiet days we discovered a fantastic run from the top of Grand Montets. It became my firm favourite. It was an intense leg-burner from the top of Bocharde to the valley floor down Pierre à Ric, a drop in altitude from 2,765m to 1,252m in mere minutes. I called it the 'Super-G Blast' because I thought that Super-G was the fastest ski discipline. You could gun it down there, it was like pulling on to the autobahn; there was no speed limit.

The 'Super-G Blast' was the theatre of a couple of early events: one ridiculous and the other reprehensible. The first

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was during a day with Jim. I initially skied with a rucksack half-full with supplies. Charles had said that skiing with it was fucking lame – he definitely didn't want to be seen on the slopes with us; he only came out with us skiers when snowboarder Daine started to join us. After the final run of the day, I pulled up and breathlessly waited for Jim. He approached, laughing uncontrollably. The contents of my rucksack had flown out all over the slope. I disbelievably removed it to find the zip wide open, revealing a completely empty bag. My stuff, which included boot protectors, spare T-shirt and beanie, and lunchbox, had disappeared across the mountain. Jim had unsuccessfully tried to grab the items as he followed behind. I didn't ski much with my rucksack after that lame incident. I'd cram the essentials in my pockets.

The second was a chilling affair. I had been out with Steve and Jim on the shitty rentals. Skis aren't just planks; they all respond sensitively. Some feel perfect, some are unskiable. This was the first proper time we had skied with Steve and it became apparent why he'd often ski alone. He skied nervously, like he was carrying days' worth of shit in his pants with his salopettes falling down over legs positioned too far apart. But he kept up with our rash pace.

We'd hit the 'Super-G Blast' many times, and for our last blast of the day, Jim and I cranked it up to 11 and left Steve in a different time zone. My hire skis had been clattering and scrapping about, but it didn't stop me from going full on. There's no better feeling than skiing at high speed; it's like you've tamed the mountain. However, when you have ideas above your station, there is always a subtle threshold waiting to be crossed, and when it is, the mountain takes its revenge. On this last run I completely

lost it at a much slower speed than I'd reached on my B2s. The snow was a choppy mess. I leant too far back and it became impossible to wrestle back control. The back of my boots sliced into my calves. The front of my skis slapped like a pinged ruler over the side of a table; they had little contact with the snow, it was like skiing on 40cm ski blades. I was able to initially *skid* on my edges a metre to either side before gravity locked my skis directly down the fall line. I was in the hands of the gods. Luckily the piste was empty and I could just ride it out. The snow became even choppier. I worried that the chop would trip me. My legs burned intensely and my eyelids flitted spasmodically. I was a wreck.

And then I registered the worst possible sight ahead. A parent skiing with two cautious little kids, probably aged five and seven. They were responsibly keeping to the right-hand side of a narrow section of piste, but I didn't have the control to breeze past them. Such a situation was a non-issue to sensible skiers, but I panicked, frozen into top-speed confusion. I was hurtling straight towards them, eyes transfixed on my unfortunate targets. My mind urged my body to the left of the piste. The mountain rolled steeply away to the right. If you went over that edge at speed, you'd fly for a good while before smashing into the trees. I had seconds before impact with the kids. One of them veered into the centre of the slope and instantly pulled back, but then the other kid skied way over to the left. I braced, held my line, and miraculously fluked missing the kid by centimetres. I heard their dad scream out and it was enough to let me know that I'd better get the hell off the hill. If I'd have hit those kids it would have been like a motorcycle smashing into them at 40mph. They could have been wiped

THE SECRET SKI SEASONAIRE

from the piste and down the steep mountain side – killed. This thought still shocks me. It was my first big wake-up call. Yet at the time I blamed the unresponsive hire skis.

It's obvious when someone is skiing out of control. Such reckless idiots adopt a certain posture that radiates 'get the hell out of the way'. I'm ashamed to have fallen into that category. These days social media – particularly Jerry of the Day with 2.1 million followers – is littered with clips of young lads purposefully and criminally launching themselves down the hill. A Google search for the image 'She was 5. You were doing 50' tells you all there is to know.

* * *

Those early weeks in the flat were quality times full of laughter and bonding. It was like an intense stag do. We sunk beers every evening and watched *Father Ted* or Charles's snowboarding DVDs. Charles would play the PS2 into the early hours and we'd all watch, tucked in our beds like kids playing after lights out. *Vice City* was solid entertainment. Steve didn't like this much and would often yell at Charles to 'turn the shit off', which I always found amusing because Charles would blank him and carrying on playing. Some nights we'd get in our beds by 9pm without the TV on and just chat for ages in the dark. Those nights were special, old-time story telling at its best. We all love a sleepover, no matter our age.

Charles would disturbingly sleepwalk when heavily drunk. One night he got up and walked into the kitchen. I thought he was getting a drink until I heard the sharp metallic patter of water against the draining board, which for once, was full of clean utensils. I screamed and dashed over to see piss cascading all over our crockery. Charles was

semi-aware of my presence and turned and pissed all over the kitchen floor. I cowered as if a gun was pointed at me. We laughed like fools. I had to dance around the piss the following morning as I made breakfast.

Our food standards were abysmal – except for Steve and Daine, who cooked well. The only fresh stuff I bought were oranges, potatoes, and the odd tomato to slam into baguettes. We discovered the cheap and cheerful Super-U and made weekly visits for junk that we struggled to carry home in palm-splicing carrier bags. I always ate cheese and ham baguettes for breakfast and lunch. For dinner it was a choice of spaghetti bolognese – the sauce from the cheapest jar –, fried chicken breast and boiled potatoes, tinned ravioli, tinned French cassoulet (similar to tinned English breakfast) or tinned soup and bread. That was it. It all tasted rank but that was the extent of my cooking ability; no one had ever taught me to cook. I always gorged on huge bags of crisps, nuts and chocolate. Charles's diet was worse. It was bread and the cheapest frankfurters, every meal. We ate out at fast-food joints at least three times a week.

We checked our emails once a week. No BBC news or surfing the web, no checking on weather forecasts or snow conditions. It was nice to spend time in an internet café, order a coffee and catch up with friends from the outside world. Jim once showed us emails from a chick at our old work before accidentally deleting them because he couldn't understand the French language settings. He went berserk and blamed Steve for putting him off. It drew stares from the clientele. It was the first time that Steve saw an angry Jim, and Steve infectiously derived pleasure out of it. An angry Jim was one of nature's treats.