

The Whiteness of the Mountains

The mountains were white. Every morning the impact of the view of the Teton valley hit Tim like a fistful of packed snow straight in the face. He wasn't sure if it was the expanse of the snow covered valley, or the imposing jutting of the Teton Mountains that ripped up on all sides – the Grand Teton a giant rock thrusting angrily and mightily into the sky. He knew the mountains weren't really white. If you looked closely they were black, blue, brown, and rocky. But the effect of the snow always gave the impression of white. Four winters Tim had been out in Jackson and it still took his breath away.

"That's why I can't go back east." He had tried to tell his younger sister who lived in New York City.

"I don't get you." She had responded, and later said to her friend, "I don't know when he's going to grow up."

Tim knew his family didn't understand why he craved this openness and freedom, but out here that fact – like most things – didn't seem to take on as much meaning as it would have back east. He took a final glance at the mountains before walking inside his cabin to grab his ski gear.

He placed his wide-brimmed wool hat atop his jet-black hair and walked outside into the white. In habitual fashion, he threw his skis and boots in his truck and plowed through the freshly fallen snow of the route to the mountain. Mid-week in mid-January meant no tourists and some good backcountry powder.

On the first lift up all his feelings of annoyance at his family disappeared efficiently into the thinning air. He was on a 2-person chair, which he normally rode alone. This morning a girl had gotten on with him. He noted her hot pink ski pants, racing gloves, and neon goggles – all things which meant she was a *real* skier.

"You from around here?" He asked.

The girl looked over at him and he noticed straw colored hair poking out of her black helmet.

"No, I'm just visiting for a week. I'm from Massachusetts."

Tim got that uncanny feeling of looking into a mirror. He'd prefer to stay as far away from his native state inhabitants as possible. But they always showed up – like him, looking for escape.

“Where’s the good skiing today?” She asked.

“Well, I’m gonna cut into the backcountry, opposite face of the mountain. With the fresh pow it should be nice.”

“Would you mind company?”

Tim did a double take. Backcountry was no joke.

“I’m a good skier.” She said, reading his thoughts. “I took a few backcountry skiing classes over the past few days, originally I’m a racer, but I’d love a guide and you seem to know the mountain . . .”

“Yeah. Look, I’ll take you, but it’s no fooling around, you really got to know what you’re doing. You got to be strong.” He almost patted her pink thigh when he said that, but refrained at the last second. “And you don’t want to fall, that’s how you get hurt.”

“I won’t fall. I just want a guide, to make sure I don’t go over a cliff.”

They had reached the end of the lift and summit of the mountain. They got off into the white whistling wind.

“I’m Kyle.” She yelled over the wild din.

“Tim.”

They both leaned down to adjust their boots. They couldn’t speak in the wind, so Tim waved her over to the orange out of bounds tape.

Before he ducked under the tape into the backcountry he locked eyes with her in a moment which they both knew meant: This is it – be careful now, no games. It was a look that said, I’m not in charge of you, and it seemed to reverberate between them in the thin windy air.

She returned the look with equal severity, and for a moment Tim felt a jolt of . . . something.

But before he could wonder what it was his skis had hit the snow and the world was disappearing. With expert sense of direction and precision he cut fresh tracks down the mountain. He didn’t look back for Kyle. He felt the blood pumping through his veins, his leg muscles straining wonderfully at every turn through the deep snow. He felt his heart beating

and his body warming, with each turn down the temperature and weather became more mild and with a final swoop, his legs reaching their limit, he pulled up fast at what he knew was the edge of a steep cliff.

Kyle pulled up hard beside him. They smiled, exuberant and fresh-faced, at each other. Her pink pants gleamed out against the glaring white all around, human and extreme and, Tim thought with surprise, incredibly sexy.

They turned their gazes out, out over the valley and across to the mountains. Their gazes swept the landscape like fine-tuned radars and they devoured the view like sustenance.

They stood still and perched on the edge.

“When you stare too long at the mountains you can become paralyzed to move.” Tim finally said into the air between them.

“What do you mean?”

“The perspective, the magnitude, when you start to internalize that you’re a tiny speck 10,000 feet up on the side of a mountain.”

“With no one’s tracks to follow.”

“That’s right. The longer you wait the harder it is to get going. The mountain can start to look steeper, or more imposing.”

“You just have to go for it.”

“So go ahead.”

Tim pointed his pole, “Stay between that tree and that rock, see?” He waited until she had nodded in understanding. “Let me see what you can do, girl. Shred it.”

And she was gone. Swift and sure as an eagle. He heard her call out in wonder as she cut her tracks and he smiled, remembering the feeling of his first backcountry run – all freedom and courage rolled into one.

By the end of the run Kyle had become something other than a stranger on the lift. She had become a part of the mountain, like him, a person characterized by such athleticism, spirit, and hunger that the mountains accepted her wholly and easily. The mountains were made for people like us, Tim thought, three hours later as they stood staring for a final time that day at the view.

They swooped down the mountain, two streaming eagles, and at the bottom were both

heaving with fatigue.

“My legs are killing me!”

Tim snapped off his skis, ignoring the milling tourists at the base of the mountain, and motioned to a bar across from the lift, “Let me treat you to a beer, you were great today.”

She took off her helmet and her blond hair came spilling out.

“Okay.”

Tim had lived out here four years, and he’d never seen the base resort fade so completely before his eyes as he walked through it. He’d never seen such simple red cheeks look so lovely, or such long blond hair blow like that in the breeze.

“I should thank you.” She said as they sat down at an outdoor table and he ordered them two beers. “You were an excellent guide and you took a chance letting me tag along.”

Tim shook his head, “You weren’t tagging along – you were shredding it.”

He’d never seem a smile light up the 4 o clock sky that way.

Who is she? He thought, taking a long sip of beer the waiter handed him. Why is she here? What if she leaves?

“So.” He said. “How long you staying in Jackson, can’t be really just a week.”

“Afraid so.”

“Why not stay? Life is so much better here than back east.”

“There are things back east I need to . . . attend to.”

He raised his eyebrows, “What brought you out here?” He asked, and they both knew what he was asking was, “what are you running from?”

“It’s just the general mayhem of the east. It’s so crazy out there.” She turned her gaze back up the mountain, up to the Grand Teton, “I do like it here. There’s so much space, so much openness. It’s just,” She glanced at him, wary, “I need to end a relationship.”

Tim felt something lock and tighten at the word. He tried to refrain from frowning as she rushed on.

“I don’t want to bore you with my life details. I came out here really to think. To think about Marcus and if I want to stay with him. I know I can’t. And yet the hardest thing is telling someone that.”

He didn’t want to ask, but he was: “What’s the problem with Marcus?”

“It’s the same problem with the whole east coast, he’s unhappy and overworked. He’s a good person, but I feel like his depression overflows onto me.”

We were just skiing, he thought, how did we get to depression so quickly?

“Maybe after I end it I will move here though. You never know.” She smiled and she was quickly the girl on the edge of the mountain.

He felt a powerful feeling of warmth rush through him when he looked at her, and he wanted to see her again. He said goodbye to her though when she had to run to get the bus back to her hostel.

Later, after another beer, he drove the cold white road home. The mountains towered over him in dark blue dusky shadows and against his will he heard his younger sister once more as he stared out at them,

“When are you going to grow up?” That’s what her questions always said. Now that she was married her voice had taken on an even more condescending tone, bordering on ridicule, “Can’t you stay with a girl longer than a month?”

A cold feeling overtook him. The mountains seemed to make him cold in their darkness and he tried to recall the warmth he had felt when with Kyle.

Do we all come out here to escape ourselves?

No, he thought, *no*. But the thought took hold of him and rattled him like a giant hand was enveloping him and shaking him in a steel grip.

Slap bare feet on wood floor. *Shiver* cold snaking up his ankles and legs. *Splash Brrr* cold water in his face. *Scoop Spill* coffee grinds into the pot and on the counter. *Drip Splash Hiss* eyes sweep from the coffeepot out the front window. Eye-splitting blue. *Inhale* coffee. *Exhale* that icy hand that had him fast last night. *Inhale* Kyle.

How did he know she’d be waiting at the bottom of the tram? Her pink neon figure emerged at the base of the mountain as he walked through the parking lot with his skis.

“Hey!” She stood before him - her blue eyes staring hard into his face, her presence solid and immediate. He took his skis down off his shoulder and returned the gaze.

“Hi.”

“Want to take some runs?”

Inhale sky. Inhale Blue and wide.
Sleek and swift, an all day ride.
Not stopping for a minute,
skiing like their lives depended on it.
A continuous inhale of life.

Later that night, after hours spent in a natural world of glaring white and blue with Kyle, Tim got to thinking. He made a fire in the wood stove of his cabin and sat before it, and as the flames danced and whirled so did his mind. It seemed what he had experienced the last couple days on the mountain with Kyle was so extraordinarily fun that there must be a way to sustain it.

Maybe I could get her to stay. I could convince her that she doesn't need to return east to break up with Marcus; she should stay and ski with me. We could cook dinner here together after we ski, and then I could light a fire and we could sit beside it and tell each other stories from Massachusetts. We could ski all the peaks with no chairlift access, the ones I've wanted to for years but couldn't alone. And after we do all that, in the spring, I will show her how to fish in the Snake River and hike through the green fields that open up when the snow melts. And when she's tired, or cold, I can hold her.

He paused at that thought, his eyes locked on the flames licking the glass of the window on the wood stove; they were red and hot and so close to where he sat that heat reflected on his face. He knew what he wanted most was to hold her. In the flames he saw her blond hair, a thick braid on the back of her jacket as she skied in front of him. He heard her laughter and whooping as she cut fresh tracks. He heard her call her name across the wind-battered summit and he remembered the feeling of recognition. He knew that was a bond connecting them, and surely she did too. *She wouldn't have waited for me at the base today, if she didn't.* He would ask her to stay. *I can have it all, here and now in Jackson.* Tomorrow, at the mountain, he would speak to her about staying with him. Tomorrow, at the mountain.

By the time his thoughts had ceased the flames had dwindled to ashes. It quickly got chilly in the cabin, icy air permeated through cracks at the door and seemingly straight through the glass of the windows. No matter, he thought lurching to his feet and into his bed, soon there will be warmth enough for two.

The next day he met her again at the bottom of the tram. They rode up to the 10,000 foot summit and he ached with wanting to tell her.

“Where’s the good skiing at today?” She asked as she snapped into her skis and adjusted her goggles.

“Headwall looks good, want to climb?”

“Sure.”

He ached to tell her, but was absorbed in the skiing. The sky and snow were everywhere, and she was on his heels all morning. His mind was washed clean with the brilliant action of the mountain. All his attention was needed in those moments, to not lose his balance, to pick the right line, to not ski off a cliff. And most of all to not lead Kyle into any of these dangers. Later, he thought, I will tell her later when we are not moving.

But at 4 o'clock, when the lifts closed, Kyle was already running toward the bus before he was out of his skis.

“Hey,” he called after her.

She turned around, a few yards away, “Yeah?”

“You were great today.”

She smiled, “Thanks. You were too, Tim.”

And then she was gone.

As he threw his gear into his truck and made for home he thought, I will tell her tomorrow. Tomorrow, at the mountain.

But she wasn't at the tram the next morning. Or the morning after that. He looked through all the lodges and even asked the lifties, but eventually as the days turned to weeks, it became clear - Kyle had left. She was no longer on the mountain.

For a few weeks his mind felt frozen, and there was a strange aching in his center. He knew the only thing to do when he felt this way was to go up. As high as possible. He took a night shift driving a snowcat over the mountain to groom it. This was a good idea, for nights

spent comfortably crouched in the snowcat's small cabin with a hot pot of coffee and music blaring made that aching almost obsolete. Best of all, he was at a height with the mountains and could see them clearly out the windows. As the cat crawled higher and higher over the slopes each night the mountain peaks emerged: white and frosty in the moonlight, or dark shadows when there was no moon. He took to finding each peak, feeling reassurance in their stability. When he had a shift alone he sometimes even spoke to them.

He told them about the skiing conditions, what new trails he had found or discovered. He told them about a band he heard at the Stagecoach the night before, and how his friend Pierre had made a fool of himself flirting with the bartender. He even told them about his sister, and how she was pregnant now and requesting him to come home for the baby's birth. But he never told them about Kyle, or the way her blond braid had sat on the back of her jacket. And he never told of the night of the blazing red flames. No, he never told anyone about that.