

# The Skiing Life

## *An appreciation*

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*Wives endure, snow melts.*

—Irwin Shaw

I took my title from James Salter, who wrote a celebrated essay in *Outside* magazine in 1992 about the skiing life. It seemed an important distinction to make, between simply skiing and a life on skis, and some of us are, or have been, obsessed by it. Tourists ski. What we did is something else, elevated and more profound, of course; such is our snobbery. It's like the tourist-versus-traveler dichotomy my onetime writing students sometimes mentioned as if they discovered it themselves, but there is no good word for the skiing traveler. The closest term is *ski bum*, but most of us who have been one are tired of it, and it doesn't apply to Salter, already a mature man and ace fighter pilot when he took up skiing, and an accomplished writer moving in an elite social set by the time he took up the skiing life: following the circuit with Robert Redford for the movie *Downhill Racer*, the script of which he wrote; visiting Irwin Shaw and his high-society friends in Shaw's chalet in Klosters; moving in the late 1960s to Aspen, where he still lives some of the time; skiing the Streif with Toni Sailer in Kitzbühel. Ski bums, while not necessarily younger, are certainly poorer, and live mostly by mooching off the beautiful people with whom Salter associated, although whether he was one of these beautiful people is problematic. His memoir, *Burning the Days*, talks obliquely of its author as a solitary, obsessive man, often tantalized and tormented, most comforted when in the air—no one I know has written more expressively about flying—and in thrall to the power and mystery of women. Even his brief essay on the skiing life mentions, à propos of nothing, this beautiful elusive woman or that one: a Swiss in a “close-fitting ski suit” as they skied the Lauberhorn in Wengen; the movie-producer's girl in Aspen who

leaned over to whisper in his ear; the turbulent Meta, who died in an avalanche, like her father before her. In the one letter Salter wrote me, a stranger, seventeen years ago in response to something I had sent him about life in Kitzbühel—the Aspen of Austria and a place he knew well—he wrote of Steffi, who ran the bar at the Goldener Greif hotel. “She knew a lot of stories,” Salter wrote, “and it was a comfort to talk to her.”

My own skiing years, which were spent in the Alps, in Kitzbühel and various places in Switzerland in the years following my college graduation in 1989 are marked by memories of unattainable women: some tourists, some locals, and some, like me, ski bums from various English-speaking countries. My Steffi, perhaps, was Eveline, an extraordinary teenage beauty, not quite eighteen, at the Weisses Rössl, who seemed destined for the arm of a count or a shabby German movie star, such was her glamor. She was likely to meet this man at the hotel where she worked as a receptionist; I would come in to talk to her fully expecting that she might, just that afternoon, have been swept away to Biarritz or Monte Carlo. I used to buy my stamps from her—she was younger and better-looking than the girls at the post office—and sometimes we met for a coffee, until a chance tirade about Kurt Waldheim, then president of Austria, being victimized by Jews soured her to me, and we didn’t speak again that winter. At the end of the season, my friend Billy Matthews, who had played hockey at Yale and then played for Kitzbühel in the Austrian league, told me about her remarkable effect on Roberto, the hotel’s proprietor and a hockey fan. Billy used to take his meals in the Weisses Rössl, and was often joined by Roberto; each time he saw Eveline, he put his hands to his cheeks and gasped. Once he shot his arms, Nixon-style, into the air in triumph: “The most beautiful girl in Kitzbühel, and she works for me!” he shrieked. “She works for me!”

Given the opportunity, eleven years ago, to give a talk on the skiing life to a small gathering at Harvard, I spent the fall going through things I first read some time ago, and was struck by how little litera-

ture there is on skiing, and how it is nearly all written by men, and when it is not about skiing is frequently about women. Some of the most moving—also perhaps the oddest—passages in Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* are near the end, when the author, his wife, and baby son are in Schruns, in the Austrian Montafon, and already another woman, who would become Hemingway’s second wife, has entered the scene. The skiing, lavishly described, is superb; the inn, the Hotel Taube, splendid; but hovering over everyone’s head like a black cloud is the return soon to Paris. Caught between two women, Hemingway writes of himself: “One is new and strange and if he has bad luck he gets to love them both. Then, instead of the two of them and their child, there are three.” John Updike’s story “The Rescue” is about two women sharing a chairlift, then skiing down past the scene of an accident. Updike being Updike, it is, of course, about adultery, or at the least the hint of it: another fantasy of men being competed for by women. A John Cheever story, “The Hartleys,” depicts an unhappy young married couple from Manhattan and their seven-year-old daughter, who is killed in an appalling freak accident on the baby slope outside their New England lodge. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, writers on skiing cannot resist ski accidents; most shattering of all is Graham Greene’s *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*, his darkest novel, in which a lonely middle-aged man named Jones, a translator at a chocolate factory in Vevey who knows a brief happiness for the first time in his life, loses his young and beautiful bride in an accident much like Michael Kennedy’s, without the touch football. Accidents, death, women, and skiing all seem connected through the precariousness of life: All are in some way about thrills and thrill-seeking, despair and glory, the pride that comes before a fall, as if the essence of the skiing life could be distilled in the form of Greek tragedy.

These last three—Greene, Cheever, and Updike—were writing about the travails and tragedies of tourists, holiday skiers, not what I have here called the skiing life. Greene’s ignorance of skiing betrays him in *Dr. Fischer*: As befits someone who never went up the slopes

himself, he shows an inordinate respect for the Swiss ranking system of *pistes* as blue, red, or black, as if somehow the trail classification scheme might have had a hand in the girl's death; as a plot device, he has locals speaking improbably of the ski patrol, as if their exercises were somehow curious and remarkable, rather than monotonous and routine. Updike seems to know rather more—his descriptions of the act of skiing, lyrical as one might expect, ring true—although he was known to be, God help us, a golfer.

By contrast, Irwin Shaw's famous skiing story, "The Inhabitants of Venus" (the title embraces love and living in the same breath), betrays that its author, at least for a time, lived for skiing—for long spells in ski resorts, in Klosters, where Prince Charles was nearly caught in an avalanche that killed his bodyguard. In Shaw's story, Robert Rosenthal, a man rich and attractive to women, of course, is riding the cable car, in Davos, probably. Around him are excitable young Americans, Italians, and Germans—including an older fellow, he realizes with a heart-dropping thud, who had nearly finished him off years ago, before the second world war, when Robert was a small boy skiing on his own one afternoon at dusk and fell and broke his leg. This German, skiing by, removed his skis and offered to get help from the village, but hours later, no help came and young Robert had to struggle down on his own, until finally rescued by a Swiss peasant. He had given his surname, Rosenthal, to the German, and that was enough for the man to leave a small boy to his death, an act that made Robert's parents decide that Europe was no place for Jews, and so they emigrated to America. Now Robert sees the man again, is sure it is him—the icy blue eyes, the frosted hair, the snarl of the lip—and knows he must kill him before that day is out, while they both are on skis.

Shaw's story, published in 1963, or before I was born, showed to me when I first read it that the skiing world I knew had always been like this: the clothes and fashions; the chirpy girls and broad-shouldered, high-spirited boys; the mixing of the populations; the

local's contempt for tourists on whom his livelihood depends. In a passage Shaw explains his title:

The Germans were sun gluttons and could be seen all over the hills, stripped to the waist, sitting on rocks, eating their picnic lunches, greedily absorbing each precious ray of sunlight. It was as though they came from a country perpetually covered in mist, like the planet Venus, and had to soak up as much brightness and life as possible in the short periods of their holidays to be able to endure the harshness and gloom of their homeland and the conduct of the other inhabitants of Venus for the rest of the year.

The Germans of the 1960s have remained, joined by other inhabitants of Venus from grim northern climes, such as the Dutch, who, although they refuse to believe it, behave much like Germans when they are abroad, in groups, and making merry (their children are the worst-behaved in the Alps); young Scandinavians, discovering the pleasures of cheap alcohol; and particularly the British, who bring their own surly proletarian culture to the easy-going habits of the Alps as they do to the Spanish beaches. Americans are no better than any of them, of course, much as we might like to think otherwise. In the skiing life, we become alike. Not so much the Germans, perhaps, who live close by and have money and buy vacation homes; but the rest of us, who stay on, take jobs, perhaps marry, intermingle to the point that—and as a tourist you might never realize this—the man or woman who waxes your skis at night, cooks dinner in your hotel, bartends at the Crystal or Top Pub, or even owns the business itself, is quite likely no local but rather Swedish or British or Dutch, perhaps Australian, possibly Kiwi, or even South African. There are so many more of us than you think, even in these ancient idyllic places, in the old family-owned hotels; in the village of Saas-Fee in the Swiss Valais near Zermatt, say, where everyone is named Super-saxo, Zurbruggen, or Bumann; or in the village of Morgins, not sixty

miles away, still in the Valais but French-speaking, where everyone is named Donnet, Monay, or Gaspoz, and where I spent a very long time myself.

**Skiers struggle to explain to nonskiers the addictive power of** our sport, and why some of us might chuck in the life we know for the peaks we can only aspire to. A gossip columnist in the *Sunday Times* of London once wrote that she never trusted a serious skier for a boyfriend; she saw these people—she was writing about men, but no reason they can't be women—as crippled in some essential way. Skiing was, in her words, “a replacement activity” for the ordinary, everyday difficulties of maintaining human ties or relationships. I dismissed it at the time I read it, but perhaps there's something to that. If I look hard at the person I was in my twenties—the solitary nature of my existence, free of entanglements human or otherwise—I can say that for all those years and winters I was very nearly skiing for my life. It takes a prisoner of uncommon eloquence in John Cheever's novel *Falconer* to describe this euphoria:

It was a very heavy and beautiful snow that, like some juxtaposition of gravity, seemed to set the mountain range free of the planet. We drank some coffee or schnapps in a hut—waited twenty minutes or half an hour—and then there was perfect cover everywhere, perhaps four inches that fanned like spume when we turned, a gift, an epiphany, an unaccountable improvement on our mastery of those snow-buried slopes and falls. Then we went up and down, up and down, our strength inexhaustible, our turns snug and accomplished. The clinicians would say that we were skiing down every slope of our lives back to the instant of our birth; and men of good will and common sense would claim that we were skiing in every possible direction toward some understanding of the triumph of our beginnings and our ends. So when you ski you walk on beaches, you swim, you sail, you carry your groceries up the steps to a lighted house ... you kiss a rose.

We skied that day until the valley telephoned the summit to close the lifts and then ... we swaggered into the bar, where our cups and everything else were brimming.

When I lived the ski life, I knew I wanted to be a writer. A man is impressionable in his early twenties just out of college, and reading Salter and Hemingway and others made me feel that skiing and writing—and everything else—could be, would be, possible, inevitable. At the end of my first winter in Kitzbühel, nearly two years out of Yale, I sat down to write a book about that time in the fashion of Hemingway's *Moveable Feast*, fifteen or so roughly chronological chapters from early December through the end of the season with the same characters surfacing throughout. The first one written, meant to be the last of the fifteen chapters, was published later that year in Alan Ross's *London Magazine*. It was the first of three pieces, all on a traveling theme, I had published in short order in that magazine, sort of a lesser-known *Granta* or *Paris Review* but known for publishing Paul Theroux, Derek Walcott, William Boyd, and others when they were getting started. It was this piece, which I had entitled “Frauensschuh” but Alan Ross renamed “Ski Bums,” that I sent to James Salter at his home in Aspen. “I liked the piece,” Salter wrote back. “I hesitate to call it a story but, of course, you didn't. The beginning of it was especially good, the first three paragraphs with their straightforwardness and evocation. I don't know if you're really 23 years old but the piece seems youthful, ingenuous.” He added he didn't like the term *ski bum*, which seemed weak to him, and he is right; but I still haven't found one better. He concluded with some writerly advice: “Style, structure, authority—those are three words I often return to that are the essentials of good writing. Good luck.” Seventeen years later the book has not been published, but I still think that sometime, somewhere it will be. I wanted to call it *The Ski Bum Papers*, a title I was never satisfied with but felt this was the best I could do. All the good titles had been taken, one of them

*Coming Down the Mountain* by Andy Martin, a Cambridge don and lecturer in French moonlighting for a winter as a sports reporter following the World Cup races. I met him when the White Circus, as it is sometimes known, came to Kitzbühel; he came into the shop where I worked to rent skis for the weekend, and we talked for a while; we were to meet later that night. But, as I found out by reading his book when it came out the next year, a girl got in the way. There, to my surprise, I am mentioned on page 156: "At midnight I had a rendezvous with Eric, an American ski bum with a degree in history from Yale. He'd been in Kitzbühel for months and was writing a novel about American ski bums in Europe. Silvia and I agreed to meet in the Harlequin disco half an hour later. 'Don't be too long,' she murmured and kissed me goodbye." Well, the girl never came; Martin had been stood up. It had been the briefest of liaisons, a stolen kiss and a cuddle and a date for that night, and in the next page of the book he discovers that she spent the night with another man. But none of that interested me very much. What surprised me was Martin's description of me as writing a novel about ski bums. I couldn't remember telling him that; I didn't even think I had conceived of the project at the time. I certainly wouldn't have called it a novel, but there it is in print, so I must have. I believed I was there to ski; I took no notes, but I remembered everything about that winter, and much less about the seven that followed. Salter's letter became my talisman, the laying on of hands from a writer to a young devotee; those early pieces in *London Magazine*, coming as they did in my first two winters, convinced me that I was a writer, not a bum, and this became my conceit, the necessary escape, as I began to see it, from what started, after a time, to be too confining, too boring, even too lonely: a life spent mostly in villages, in mountains.

Writing and skiing are still two of the things I think most about; perhaps, if I'm honest, they're the only things I'm really interested in. They belong to the private sphere. They can be shared as much as one likes, or not at all. For me there is also perhaps music, but its

rhythms can be found in both skiing and writing; similarly there is scenery or landscape, but the sweep of this can be encompassed in the act of skiing; the lone figure on the hill imposing himself upon the mountain, a futile but touching act, really. Yet as Salter has written, "Though countless skiers have been down these trails before, it seems they are still unconquered." Every snowfield is virgin territory, every skier his or her own pioneer; skiing is the conqueror's art. Skiing, like writing, is a means of remaking and reshaping the world as I would have it, and also like writing it doesn't matter how many have come before. These trails and mountains are mine, for the act of having descended them once or a hundred times. No one can take them away from me. Salter writes in the same passage that "skiing ... is a world unto itself. Its glories are nearly indestructible. It embraces one entirely. It is a journey that follows a journey and leads one through days of almost mindless exertion and unpunished joy." It is when the skiing stops, I have found, that one is in trouble. Those chairlifts back to the top are lonely, cold rides, and I had more of these, alone, than I can count: too many things to think about, too much to unsettle the mind. Then the joy is punished. I left the skiing life because it seemed that if I wanted to be a writer, and have anything to write about, I needed to involve myself among people in a way I felt I couldn't, living in mountains. But while an addict might recover, his addiction marks him for life; there is always the temptation, the fear of relapse. I never forget the thrills, the small excitements, those heady days, pink on my cheeks, goggles crusted over with a light frost that I wipe away with a gloved finger; the setting off, a click of my poles for luck, snow scraping under my skis, the valley floor opening up before me so much that, with only a little effort, I might leap far into space and fly above it. It comes back to me even now, writing these lines, as it often does once the summer ends; it doesn't take much to bring it back. I can be talking with people about Iraq or the high rents in Cambridge, where I live, but really I am thinking about skiing. I'm remembering something

a long way off that lies at the tips of my fingers, in the way downhill racers, before their turn out of the starter's shack, close their eyes and put their hands together and run down the course—bumps, jumps, and compressions—in their minds.

**In his memoir Salter describes a needling doubt spending days with Irwin Shaw and his beautiful crowd at Shaw's chalet in Klosters:**

A circle of interesting people began to appear regularly, people who would not have come there except for him. They were always in a crowd, it seemed. It was the best time of his life, and probably the most ruinous.... Of course what I blamed him for was the very thing I was afraid I was doing myself: living in a world that was not truly mine.

The mountains keep their own, both those who are born there and those who might come later but can truly be said to belong. That I didn't belong, really, I sensed even in my first winter in Kitzbühel, even before I knew that I would be doing this thing for years to come. One of our friends there was an American, Chip Bennett, who taught at the ski school, as I would myself the next year. Always full of grandiose, outlandish plans, always with an eye for the main chance, Chip's latest money spinner was printing cheap sweatshirts with some racing theme, a death-defying slogan and an illustration on the front. "You schuss the Streif, you risk your life," was the one he had, now pink after too many washings with colored clothes; the Streif is Kitzbühel's notorious downhill course. My good friend Axel Naglich always thought this was very funny.

"You know that shirt he wears? 'Schuss the Streif and risk your life?' Well, Chip Bennett never schussed the Streif in his life," said Axel, who had schussed it, repeatedly, as one of the race *vorläufer*, or forerunners, each year since he was nineteen years old.

"I know, but he wishes he had," I said.

"He wishes," Axel said. "He wants to be a downhill racer."

"More than anything in the world."

"How old is he? Thirty?"

"Thirty-two."

"Forget it," Axel said, brushing his hand by his cheek the way he always did when he said *forget it*. "Not a chance."

"Do you think he did?" I asked. "When he was younger, have a chance?"

"No."

"He was never good enough?"

"No."

"And he never will be?"

"No."

There was silence for a while, and then he said, "He should do something serious for a change. Not keep coming here. How long has he been coming here? Ten years?"

"Ten years," I said.

"Forget it," Axel said. And then he pointed his finger at me. "Don't you become like him."

"I won't," I said.

"I mean, do something serious with your life. Not like him."

"I will."

"Ja, you promise?"

I tried to see Axel when I was last in Kitzbühel, for a day in January twelve years ago; but we missed each other and now I doubt we'll meet again. But for that season he was my closest friend, a native Kitzbüheler and still the best, most thrilling, and extraordinary skier I have ever seen, talented in so many ways: an artist and graphic designer, a hang glider, a student of architecture at the university in Innsbruck, a champion Austrian moguls skier and a downhiller who could have gone far had he been willing to devote his life to skiing, to forswear his ferocious all-night partying, to properly train. You see him in the news sometimes, if you follow

skiing; he and his Kitzbühel pal Christoph Reindl have twice won the Twenty-Four Hours of Aspen, a murderous competition in which two downhillers go again and again, for a day and a night, down the Aspen racecourse, stopping only for rest on the ride back up. None of us will ever be like him, or ski like him, and the risk of hanging on too long in ski resorts is starting to think that this is the only thing that matters.

“You promise?” he asked again.

“I promise,” I said, and we left it at that.