

## **Fly by Night.**

I was once sharing a chalet in Val d'Isère with an amateur pilot. A nice enough bloke, made his money in advertising back when it was just like *Mad Men* and spent it on skiing, obviously, on cars, holiday homes and his beloved light aircraft. He said he flew.

I pitied him.

He did not fly, no more than the man behind the wheel of a super-tanker swam. He sat in a box and pushed buttons and pulled levers and misused the ICAO phonetic alphabet: the fact the box was hanging in the air without visible support was immaterial. I flew. I had flow that morning. I had flown the night before.

Skiing is not a sport of sliding down some mountainside with slats of wood strapped to your feet, in the same way lovemaking is not a simple exchange of fluids. Skiing is flight, pure and simple, and anyone who says otherwise is a liar. No, worse. A murderer: The truth that skiing is flight is so poetic I always anthropomorphise it; the truth that skiing is flight is a person, a beautiful person with soft eyes and long, dark hair, and whoever says skiing is not flight murders her and deserves whatever punishment they get.

He would never get it, that Add man, so I did not trouble him with the knowledge. I did not share my theory that skiing is flight with the snow-boarding lawyers that made up the rest of the party in that chalet either: they were borders, and boarding may be cool, but it's not skiing. Snow-borders have never annoyed me: sure they turn in the wrong place on the piste and so surprise skiers up-hill from them and force you to dodge them, but I like that. It's a fun bit of challenge and besides, I can hear them coming a mile off, and so the horror of most skiers, the border suddenly appearing behind you, has never bothered me.

I pity them, in a way. Boarding may be unbelievably cool, but skiing is sexy and boarding just isn't. That's why Vin Diesel boards and James Bond Skis. Skiing is sexy and whoever says skiing is not sexy murders the truth and deserves whatever punishment they get. Skiing is sexy. Skiing is flight.

It is, admittedly, flying whilst some small, grubby part of you is still connected to the ground (most of the time, barring jumps and whiteouts) but it is, at least, flight of the soul, in a way that messing around with planes and helicopters and even gliders and Parachutes could never be. I have tired these things, and they are at best falling with style. Skiing is flight, flight in the high and cold and lonely places of the world, and I love it.

I was skiing when I met her. Skiing alone for the first time, without my parents or school-friends: the first holiday I had planned and went on of my own initiative, my first real grow-up foreign travel. It was a perfect skiing day, and I flew down the slopes.

I had a couple of games I used to entertain myself when skiing, add a little extra spice to my flights. The first was called *Compliance*: one skier in the group picks out a path, and all the rest have to follow it, their skis never leaving the groves cut in the snow by his. It was most fun when the leader picked a really difficult route. Anyone who left the line of the leader for even a second was *malcompliant* and at the end of the day the most malcompliant player bought the first round of drinks. It was a good game, but one you needed at least three people to play. So I was not playing it.

My other game is *Stalking*. Don't let the creepy name put you off, it's just a harmless little game, a tinny tad voyeuristic perhaps, but still harmless fun. You should try it. It's just like compliance, but instead of one of your group leading, you pick a skier at random, one you don't know, and follow in their tracks exactly in the same way as compliance, without their knowing. It most fun when you pick someone who, unknown to you, is a far better skier than you are, because then it's more challenging and a good surprise, and it's fun to watch them work out they are being followed and try to shake you off, because that makes following their tracks exactly even harder. Many a time I've pulled past someone I've spent that last half-hour following and shot past them, escaping down some nice flat blue run where you can get up a really fantastic speed, and grinned at the thought of them bemused and swearing behind me. But I never follow them too far, never pick people already in their own group or with children, and I never play the game with malice. I keep a good safe distance, and have never (well maybe once) crashed into the person I'm ski-stalking.

So that's how it was, I was stalking people at random, and I just happened to pick her.

She was French-Canadian, or so she said (I have some reasons to doubt it: her French was odd, and archaic, so far as I could tell, but how archaic I shall never know), and she was without a doubt the finest skier I have ever met. I picked her out at random, her with her dark hair and light-blue jumpsuit, and begun to follow her down the red-run that turned off the blue I always started my game on, and she out-skied me by a factor or ten.

She was fantastic, out-and-out fantastic, and I could not fault her anything. It was all I could do to keep up. After around twenty minutes I saw her smiling as I struggled to keep up, and realised she knew I was following her, knew she had always known, and she was permitting it. I caught her eye then, and she smiled at me and turned a perfect three-sixty on the piste.

Well, that was it. The rules of *compliance* and *stalking* were strict, I had to follow the leader exactly. I attempted the same, and not having double-enders like she did, or quite frankly the skill, fell flat on my arse.

I struggled up, expecting to see her skiing or laughing, and I was half right. She stood and watched and laughed, the most beautiful laugh I have ever heard, and then she beckoned me, and I followed. I would have followed her anywhere, and in a way I follow her still.

We skied together for the rest of the day, no, that's a lie, that murders the beautiful truth, and I deserve whatever punishment I got for that. We danced together, we *flew*. I don't know if you've seen that Pixar film *Wall-e*, but there is a scene in it where the two robots fly through space together, her so graceful, him just managing to keep up but graceful because he's with her, and it is achingly beautiful. I like to think of our flight that day like that. First compliance, then a more, playful, aggressive game of her invention *Mirror-compliance*: Where she went left, I went right and so on and visa-versa, cutting past each other so close to colliding every time we came together again. First I'd cut in front of her, aggressively, and she'd nearly clip the front of her skis on mine, and then I'd let her cut in front of me, flashing like lightning. We made our way down the mountain that way, tracing not the genital zig-zag or a single skier, but a strange, flat double-helix, the DNA of some beautiful and wild double-creature writ proud on its mountain-side habitat for all to see, if only they looked for it.

It was her idea to go off-piste, near sunset, and meekly I followed, panting. Flying is hard work, done properly: you get hot, you pant, you sweat: anyone who has ever been hit by the smell of a boot-room, almost a physical thing in its own right, can tell you that. When I took my helmet off it steamed in the cold March air. I remember that about that night: everything steamed. Our clothes steamed as we, one by one, shed them, ski-boots first (always bloody ski boots, I have always hated mine. They belonged to my father before me, and although we wear the same size shoes, elevens, my feet are far narrower than his and so to get them to fit I needed a dozen in-soles. Still this was not enough, and to get my ankles far enough back to have any control of the ski I have to stand on tip-toes. I give up being a Plantigrade creature every-time I go to the mountains: I become, have always become, something that walks on its toes and has its ankle for its knee like a dog or a fox or a rabbit, flying through the mountain woods at sunset, and I wonder to this day if she knew that then). Our bodies steamed, her hair, attractively slightly ruffled, streamed. It all steamed, and anyone who says it did not murder the truth, and deserves whatever punishment that get.

It all streamed. Our Bodies, the sweat, the semen, the urine.

The blood.

I'd had oral sex before, at collage a couple of times, but when it came to the nitty-gritty business of coitus, the real deal, I was still technically a virgin. She deflowered me then and there on the snow, and I thanked her for it, thanked her as she took both my virginity and, unknown to me, my

humanity. I did not miss them: they were never very much use to me. I suppose, technically speaking, she killed me. But if she did, it was only a little death. She was so beautiful then, in the light of the rising moon, naked on the snow, the heat of her body melting it slightly, her hair shining in the dusk-light. I kissed her face. I licked at her ears, larger than they seemed before. I stared into her dark, soft eyes ( "All the better to see you with, *Mon pettie Homme Analgise*" ). I nuzzled her softly. I let her run her claws down my back, drawing blood (but only a little, she was more playfully than hungry). I let her run her bottle-brush tail, her beautiful bottle-brush tail, around my neck like a fur scarf. I rubbed my brand-new muzzle against hers. I rolled my body against hers, marvelling in her shining, silver pelt. Marvelling in her dominance as Alpha over me, marvelling in her scent.

And then, in the light of that hunters moon, we flew.

Wolves do not run. Well, technically they do, but the petty, lower-ish technicality of that truth is so ugly that it murders a far greater truth. The truth is wolves fly, silver bodies gliding at the slightest touch of hard black pad to soft white snow, and any-one who says otherwise murders the truth, and deserves whatever punishment they get.

We flew together. To add spice to it we played some games. *Compliance* with her flying ahead and me following in her con-trail: we left vapour trails through the woods that night, or breath and paws steaming as we ran, and me running in her trail. In her scent. *Stalking* following the people, the *Pisters* and other locals who worked the mountain by night, following them, flying after them, but never with malice. I never stalked groups, children or those with children, and I always broke off before we collided with who I was were stalking (well, maybe something happened once...) Other games too, we hunted rabbits, catching them and realising them to chase, oh to chase again, before finally boring of such foreplay and devouring the poor things, alive. We marked trees as our own (she over-marked me, but I did not resent her that). We sung to the moon. I experienced the mind-numbing terror that can only be felt by a virgin and lifelong cat-person ( who had never in his life even heard the phrase "Coupling Knot") on discovering that when wolves tie the knot, you don't disengage when you want, you disengage when *she* wants. But mostly we flew. When I tired she brought me meat, I do not know from where, and I ate it, raw and bloody and steaming, and it was the best meal in the world, because she had brought it. And then, refuelled, we would fly again.

It was a perfect night, a magical night. And then like all nights, it ended .

It ended in a remarkably civilised way. No waking up naked in the wolf-exhibit at the zoo. No blood-strewn wreckage. No angry mob. No puking-up human fingers into the chalet toilet-bowl the morning-after. I woke before dawn, and she was gone. I could tell that she was not coming back, and I did not begrudge her for it too much, although I was a little sad. Lots of people go on holiday hoping to get laid, and understood that this was all she had ever had in mind. I did not want to go home covered in the blood and adhering scraps of flesh and fur that decorated my mane, so I rolled

myself clean in a snowdrift .I picked the snow where she had lain, post-coitus, because it still had a little of her scent, and I followed our scent back to where we had shed our clothes and our humanity. Her clothes were already gone, her skis and poles too, and mine were neatly packed on a borrowed dog-sled, with empty harnesses. She had clearly done this before. I got back to my chalet without issue, ski-resorts are pretty quiet just before dawn, left my gear then the boot-room, and got in through a window. It wasn't the window to my room, but I was quiet, the doors to rooms did not lock, any of them, and the door-handles were long enough to operate by paw: my paws still surprise me with how big they are. I did not wake anyone. I woke up human-shaped in my own bed, around nine, and lay there for some time, reluctant to shower. Despite waking whole and human and clean in my bed, I never doubted it, or thought it a dream: her scent was too strong on me. I miss that perfume some days, but I soon perk up.

Thinking of my next flying holiday has always perked me up.

I never saw her again, although I thought I once caught her scent blowing in from across the piste, in Austria this time, all mixed up with the scent of machismo and après-ski, nervous sweet and sun-cream that characterises young Englishmen skiing alone, and I smiled at it. I've never changed back in England, which I also never thought odd. You can't ski in England. You can't fly. My flight was always a thing of the mountains and a thing of the mountains only, so it never struck me as wrong that my only adventures as a lycanthrope have been on the skiing holidays I take every year, and during my pleasant mid-twenties stretch as a *seasonare*. France, Switzerland, Austria, America and Canada, I change there, but not in England. Anywhere with snow it happens. I've not tried Scotland, but only because you can't guarantee snow, and so the skiing could turn out rubbish.

I think myself quite a tame wolf. But then again I'm quite a tame drunk, and that really what it's like. A little difficulty remembering the next morning. A willingness to sing to the moon, badly. A desire to eat things you'd never touch sober. A belief that public urination is suddenly acceptable. An unfortunate tendency to try and romance stunning local beauties only to realise latter they are utter dogs. Nothing you don't see every Friday night in any British town-centre. Nothing all the other British tourists aren't doing when the après-ski bars close for the night. Unlike drinking, however, I know that when I change I am beautiful. I never felt beautiful before that night the girl changed me: I knew I had a certain boyish charm, but that never gave me any confidence. I've seen photos of myself changed (sometimes in crypto-zoology magazines: They never get my good side, and everyone always says "That's just a husky or something" when I bring them out at parties, and that always annoys me somehow), and met others like me, and I'm always struck by the beauty. Like drinking, however, it's good to line your stomach first. Good hearty skiing food. Germknödel. Tartiflette. Fondue (the kind with the meat, for preference). If you change hungry, you tend to find hair in your stool the next morning. I picked some out with tweezers the first time it happened and sent it to a lab, terrified. Rabbit, marmot, cat (the collar-bells should have been a clue) nothing worse, but still, better to be safe. I've always kept up with the news after a change, and there's never any unsolved murders, animal attacks, or missing persons, for which I am always grateful.

No, tell a Lie. That first time, with The Girl, some French skiers went missing, but that was different. They were on the run from the law: They killed two men in a mountain-side restaurant and then skied off in the direction of the Swiss border before the police arrived. They didn't go missing: they were never caught. Sometimes skiing legally is flight. Officially they Swiss have no record of them ever arriving there, and their Facebook profiles went dead that day, so maybe they covered their tracks well. Maybe they never arrived. Mountains are harsh, even ones so civilised and apparently tame as the alps: even the tames lapdog can bite like a wolf, even the nicest ski-resort is still a desolate mountainside where the weather can turn just like that. They had been drinking heavily, those French boys, and they were not equipped for going off-piste. Their lift-passes were found the next year in the debris from a rock-fall, but they could have ditched them, fearing he radio-frequency passes could track them somehow. And if their gnawed bones are found one day, what off it? The mountains are full of scavengers, and I will lose no sleep over it. If the games I played with my first (but not now my only) werewolf love got out of hand that night, and if the meat she brought me was recognisable, I do not remember it clearly, and I'm not going to bet myself up over "maybe". Down that path madness lies.

Besides, they were killers. They saw a twenty-something man rubbing sun cream on an older-man's back and speaking to him lovingly in German, decided that that pair were homosexuals, and decided to start a fight and kick them both to death with their ski-boots there and then on the restaurants wooden decking, and then they fled. The truth was the pair were father-and-son, on a skiing trip to celebrate the son's graduation from university, and the fathers sore back stopped him creaming it himself. Speaking no French they could not tell anyone this when the fists begun to fly and the boots begun to fall. I doubt French would have helped them anyway. Bigotry and drink are their own language, and if I were there again that day and my love brought me a hundredweight of that strange meat, I would eat of it. Those missing French boys murdered the truth: and so they deserved whatever punishment they got.

