

## Farewell Bend

The brewery sits under the mountains in the part of Bend, Oregon where the town turns to high desert. Yoghurt shops and hardware stores dissolve, first into heathery stretches of far-apart houses and then into emptier, rockier land. High Desert RV Services is the last stop before the steppe. Miles of road, gorse, and telephone wire; Junco sparrows in the winter. There is snow in the Cascades to the west, even in the summer, invisibly blue. Snow is still falling in Bend proper, late into the year. It is falling thinly, it touches the gorse in the desert; it is falling thinly, and the brewery is in the process of upscaling.

Elen, thirty-eight and on her third dark beer, watches the door opening on to the whited air-less drift. Teenagers, two boys and two girls. She returns to the beer but they're hard to ignore: not a one had wiped their feet and hulls of snow in the shape of toecaps followed them to their chairs, disappearing slowly. What's the vernacular of dispossession? Snow is a part of it. Tonight, the beer also helps dissolving the image of once-owned things, but snow takes her footprints out of the dirt in her old driveway; in thick banks it buries the skip outside a house that was once hers.

The teenagers are shiny and chattering, fresh from the slopes. They collect around the bar; they roll cigarettes, they might be English. Between Elen and the four teenagers is the gentle relatedness which exists between the only customers in an empty brewhouse, and so she's uncomfortable but not startled when they approach her booth with five beers.

'Drinks for the house,' jokes a short, tanned boy who Elen will come to think of as the main one, and then, bright-eyed, 'Do you mind if we sit with you?'

Elen shakes her head, takes the drink. The teenagers are, in fact, all a few years clear of the same English university. The main one is called Luka. There's Clover, beautiful, whose 'no-spend year after uni was, just, epiphanic', and James, cigarette behind each ear, utterly changed after 'doing India'. ('We did India together', says Luka, and Elen wonders for a moment if India is another Clarins-shiny one of them).

Lyn is slightly cooler to Elen than the rest. She sits a little way apart and sends looks to Luka as if she's not sure what they're doing in the booth. Thin, blonde, perfect. Her eyes are clear without being friendly. Elen finds herself hoping they cannot tell she's thirty-eight.

They're squatters, essentially. They had graduated from using Airbnb to cruise empty homes during their periods of vacancy, always in ski areas and always with the intention to ski ('That's how we did Hintertux'). The parents all thought they were staying at lodges, but it was actually Luka's father who had put them on to the fact that this entire complex had been abandoned. He did something in property, Luka told her vaguely.

'What do you do?' he asks her, finally. Elen pauses and the beer begins a new wash of her insides.

‘I was a wife.’ Elen’s ex-husband had been a vault-teller in a bank. They had lived in Bend for more than fifteen years. Two months after he left, she had been given notice on the house. This morning, she returned from the Post Office to find the locks changed. Her things were in the back of her car, or had been taken for rubble by snow. ‘It’s fine,’ Elen finishes. ‘I’m driving to Michigan tomorrow. I’ll stay there for a while.’ She doesn’t say with her parents, or think too hard about three nights of sleeping in her car. There was no way to reconcile – least of all to these healthful, disinterested faces – the homemaker she had been with what was left; the bar, the car, the beer, the snow.

There’s a small white quiet, after which Luka manages a nonplussed ‘Michigan. Very cool.’

Elen has a pale little mouth which used to be pretty; she’s allergic to fish, and looks it. Deep in the booth with the teenagers, she begins to feel dark and shrewd. They invite her to stay with them, and she accepts.

They take her towards the mountains. Elen’s inclined to think that she’s made a mistake, not because of the long drive into the lonely dark of the Cascades Lakes Byway where bones gleam and snow puddles on the sides of the road, but because they fill her silences with a patter both manic and inaccessible. She is relieved when the car stops.

The resort complex had been abandoned going on five years. Clover tells her there had been an accident, the death of a young man skiing backcountry, after which the resort had shut down. Elen corrects her: the resort had been built for a series of competitions which were now over, the ski club running them had dissolved and the premises fallen into simple, ghostless, disuse.

Lyn unloads some more things from the car into the designated girls’ room; extra blankets, a third sleeping mat for Elen. There is a long dorm-wide mirror, fly-spotted. On the table beneath, Lyn and Clover have laid out their balms. Sun lotion, cold cream. Two silver lipsticks. The teenagers exude belonging, move around the resort like they were born to it.

That these Home Counties children should have wound up in Bend the day before she was due to leave felt quite a thing. They were occupying spaces that she had already committed to memory. Not the mountain so much; she hadn’t skied in a few years – certainly, she had no more real claim than them to a ghost resort which she had never visited. Except that, at the very least, it was a half hour drive from the fifteen years of living in Bend that she had already beerily ceded.

In the daytime, the canteen had been the eeriest part; the spectre of a functioning resort moved most clearly here where the cutlery had been left unpacked and there were tannin stains still on the coffee cups. It was a kinder place in the evening. The boys had cooked – lamb risotto over a camping stove – and the whole hall now smelled of food and use. Instead of cold slope side daylight, one battery lantern shone from under a cotton scarf, another from

behind a bottle of white wine; the light from both diffusing soft and gently coloured. They sit on the floor to eat and the light moves on the walls like the sea. Elen feels calm and separate.

Luka is talking about how their lifestyle is geared to this moment, to facilitating a little meal like this. 'Take your average mountain supermarket. A supermarket serving, like, a destination mountain, lodges, resorts. You're not going to get a delicious leg of lamb. You're going to get, like, own-brand crisps and novelty shot glasses. Pot Noodle. I'm saying plastic, glittery shot glasses. Backcountry skiing in a real place – I mean, we could even go to a real butcher's, if we wanted.' She thinks he might break into grace.

'It's wellness skiing,' says James, quite seriously.

'It's anti-seasonnaire,' Luka continues. 'It's about actual alpine life – not, like, skiing interspersed with Jägermeister and Europop. I mean, you've been in Bend however many years. We don't have to tell you.'

Elen smiled and thought as the lamb fell warm apart in her stomach that she had lived for a while now without any of this charm – moisturizers in their little pots, risotto, soft light: the adorable hallmarks of a thoughtless life.

In the morning they kit her out. Half of it is put together from Clover's spares; the jacket is James's and there are skis piled high in a room with a broken lock that feels like a tomb. Lyn shows her stoically to a part of the reception where dozens of ski boots have sat in boxes collecting dust.

'Do you think someone is coming back for these?'

'Not for a while.'

'Have you always skied?'

Lyn exhales. The snow – blue, invisible; the gorse, cold in the desert. 'Yeah. Since I was very young. My dad and James's dad actually used to take us skiing together. Like, all of my friends do SoulCycle now, I just think this is much better. It's kind of like getting back to the land.' She is wearing a pale blue angora-mix underneath her Moncler. The moon is still up. Outside, the mountain looms and obliterates.

The nearest chairlift is miles from their route, so the whole day is composed of climbs for hours for descents over in minutes. They make the climbs in twos and threes; they talk, James smokes. The sky is Pacific.

The first descent is over too soon. Initially, Elen concentrates on not falling, overworking her eyes scanning the slopes for their hidden jags and divots. Something slides, and then she is going for the first time in years. She moves so fast through the air and so smooth over the land and she doesn't want to make a metaphor of anything but she is on the edge of a real thought, all cold and whistling and whitely gliding, and it is that she is a transcendent impulse housed in a body. After, she feels it all through, under her tongue and between her legs, and she isn't thinking of Michigan the whole way.

Elen makes the next ascent with James and Clover. 'I used to smoke up before skiing,' says James, describing a joint with his hands. 'But these guys are purists.' Clover looks at him. 'And they're right!'

'You're so lucky to have grown up around a mountain like this,' says Clover. 'To really know it.' (Elen gets the sense she's being paid some kind of homage, and does not explain that she grew up in Michigan.) 'I guess you're sorry to be leaving.'

She is looking up at Elen, blithe, lovely, naturally over-collagenous. Even though the painted nightstand that she'd kept her paracetamols in for ten years is in a skip, or possibly now a landfill, Elen does not shake her. Instead, she says 'It used to be a volcano. Might still be.'

There were other things she could and should have told Clover. She'd done a form of growing up there. It was hers. There were things she knew. Mirror Pond in autumn. The names of little children in her part of town. She didn't expect that little children occurred to people like Lyn and Clover. Once, the city had only been a point on a river that the pioneers called the Farewell Bend, the last point before you couldn't look back. Once, she had wanted to live in a mountain town because she liked mountains. Perennials and alpine plants growing star-shaped. The air, colder, thinner, run through with birds; mountain roses in the backyard where she could take her coffee. And through the windows of the green-lined café where she would have breakfast and watch no one come and no one go, the crags going chalky in the sun. She had wanted to live in a desert town – beers, she imagined, at a gas station with the sun overhead and then nothing else for miles – because she liked deserts.

On the left, Lyn twists down the slope like a blonde sheet of ice. Easy grace. When they switch routes, she doubles down on the quick turns, sends snow-spray back up the mountain in staggered powder. Volcano, still; sleeping stratified enormity, atavistic and underneath her. They are the better skiers, Elen thinks, but old things in her legs are waking up.

The cold is the obvious flaw in the dream of it all. The teenagers are in sleeping bags. Elen is awake in the late night or early morning, and the chill runs up her shins. There must be holes all over the resort, she thinks; cracks in windows, whistling walls. Something like a deep breath from the room across the hall: Elen wonders where Clover heard the story about the dead boy, and then decides that it's James, smoking in a half-sleep.

She stretches her aching legs under the blanket. Her husband is in Portland now, is in Olympia, is in Victoria, Canada. He is washing the dishes in another woman's sink or putting Splenda in a foreign coffee cup. He is asleep. His glasses flash on a million desks. They are in Portland, or they are back in the red cabinet of the house in South Bend, or they are in the skip under snow. The cold cream is lying easy on Lyn's neck.

Elen finds herself alone at the top of the slope, almost without realizing. She looks down at the mountain disappearing in front of her. The descent, she knows, will be over in minutes. She will climb it again. On the ascent, the ice underneath the snow makes it blue and creaky. She will climb it again.

Two, three junco sparrows take off across the sky from somewhere east. The darkness is warm, the shrewdness dissipating; Elen lifts one ski, then the other, sets them softly down again on a mountain that she knows and will learn. The snow keeps the mark of them.