

## Ben and Gary

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The wind tugged at Ben's coat as he accelerated towards the kicker, his legs chattering over the ruts in the approach, his eyes fizzing over the ground to check for a speed bump or death cookie that would throw him off balance. He curved from his heel edge to his toe edge...rising through the transition...he was going too fast, he wasn't ready...he spun off the lip and into the air...90 degrees...180...270...

Ben saw the mountain roll slowly away from him. He knew he was going to land on his heel edge and whiplash into the piste, he knew – that just like all the other times - he was going to be hurt.

The impact came, and Ben collapsed like a bag of used body parts being thrown from the back of a hospital, his bone marrow rattling inside his skeleton as it slammed into the snow.

When he finally slid to a halt and he lay, motionless, staring upwards, one side of his face burning from the impact, wondering whether his brain was still connected to his spine and limbs, a playful shadow slid across his face. The girl that Ben had been trying to impress by hurling himself off a 30 foot jump, knelt down over him, lifted up her sunglasses to reveal sumptuous chocolate eyes, and smiled.

Before Ben's body allowed him to speak, the girl had risen and skied away, floating over the piste like steam unfurling from an espresso. He shut his eyes, light still piercing his eyelids and leaving dancing bright dots on his retinas.

“Why am I such a loser?”

Ben was working in a chalet in Courchevel, a ski resort in the French Alps. He'd prized himself away from his past life, like a metallic spatula scraping a greasy egg out of an old frying pan, and flipped himself into the mountains.

Ben had grown up in a house, on a road, with a car parked outside. He'd gone to school, gone to college, done his exams, done OK. His dad worked in an office, was crushed by the weight of paying the mortgage, wore grey trousers. His mum cleaned the house, watched TV, liked Barry Manilow, ironed socks. His younger sister had slept with every single hard kid in his year, for which he hated her, fuelling as it did an infinite supply of material for a long list of tormentors. His older brother had a house, a front garden, a car, a daily commute, a wife who knew lots about soap stars, a poodle. None of them talked to one another, they just shared the same dinner table every other Sunday. And it was every other Sunday, staring past the roast beef and potatoes at his sister filing her nails, his mother anxiously rubbing salt onto a red-wine stain, and his father and brother talking about motorway lane-extensions, that Ben felt

particularly alone. He was convinced he had been swapped at birth: being average height, having blonde hair and a straight nose meant that he looked nothing like his tall, dark-haired and hook-nosed Dad, nor his short, curly haired mousey mother. He'd tried so many times to rid himself of his familial odour – but no-one he knew would let him. For as long as he stayed where he was, he would be Clare's older brother, Steve's younger brother, Nigel and Sue's son and the fact that he tried to skateboard and listened to hip-hop would continue to be ridiculous...so here he was in the mountains, trying to run away, trying to nurture a little glamour in his life, trying to snowboard and become someone more interesting than his destiny would seemingly allow.

"Bloody hell Ben...what do think you're doing?" Gary unclipped from his snowboard, and stumbled across the piste to where Ben was lying.

"Why the hell are you trying bloody 360's off the biggest kicker in the resort? Are you mad?" Gary loosened Ben's bindings and pulled him up off his back so he was sitting up. "Just because that bird was watching. Ever since she's started following you around, you think you're bleedin' Shaun Palmer<sup>1</sup> or something. Even Axel takes it easy over that one."

"I know, I know...I'm a dick." Ben shook his head, for a moment wondering what the hell he was doing in the mountains, what the hell he was doing by trying to contort his personality and his body in this way. He felt the sarcasm of those he'd left in England beginning to sink through his goggle-marked skin, scattering doubts across his face...and then he looked up.

The sky was a perfect, crisp, piercing blue. It was met by a jagged horizon of snow-capped mountains, which chomped ambitiously at the sky like teeth in a hungry mouth. Deep green trees grew up from the valley, hugging the mountain like a bristly beard, white stripes running through the growth as man's ski slopes cut their way down to each of the villages which sat carefully on the mountain side. At the altitude at which Ben, Gary and Axel were sitting, the trees began to thin of their own accord, only the hardiest able to sprout through the snow and the alpine cold, and those that did wore a dusty white coat through the winter. The falling sun was painting the mountain with its brightness, the snow doused in a pink glow, ribboned with long blue-grey shadows, thrown behind each standing object by the light. Ben smiled, breathed deeply, soaking the fibres of his lungs with the beauty surrounding him, feeding his sinuses with cooling shards of mountain air, and postponed his doubts for another day.

Gary patted Ben on the shoulder. "Come on...get up, we need to get back and serve afternoon tea."

Gary and Ben worked together in a chalet. Gary was a bundle of Wiltshire village born-and-bred energy: stout, robust, huge head of blonde scraggly hair, thick leathery hands, huge happy face with even huger, happier blue eyes. Loved ale, obscure progressive rock, concept albums. He lived with

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<sup>1</sup> Shaun Palmer is a legendary hell-raising world championship-winning snowboarder, amongst other things

his mum, desperately wanted a girlfriend, couldn't find one in his village (they either wanted to mother him and/or were related) so decided to work in a ski chalet after watching a documentary about it on Channel 4, because he liked the idea of finding some 'posh totty'. He was the chalet's chef, and made a wholesome three course dinner every night for 25 guests. Ben did all the other crappy jobs, like cleaning and washing up. Between them they managed to keep their guests happy, save for the odd middle-class aspirant who thought that by moaning about every aspect of their holiday in front of everyone, they were establishing their importance in the world - far as they were from the reality of their desk-bound lives back home, where they no doubt spent all week getting told what to do by someone 15 years their junior.

Ben stood up, his legs still wobbling from the crash. He re-adjusted his goggles and straightened himself out, brushing the snow from the back of his neck.

Gary walked back over to his board and strapped in. He and Ben slid, gingerly, down to where Axel was standing, a huge French smile beaming across his face.

"Well...you certainly know how to fall mon pote, the way you let your head take the impact was, how you say, from the text-book." He high-fived Ben, who responded with a lackluster 'woo-hoo', before chuckling at himself.

Axel was a Courchevel local, and the standout snowboarder on the hill. There was very little he didn't know about the mountains or snowboarding, and what he didn't know he had discarded by choice. He looked like a roasted nut, brown and leathery from his time under the alpine sun. He lived just down the road from the boys' chalet, and having smelled the delights of Gary's cooking wafting down the street so many times, had one day knocked on the kitchen door for a chat / culinary scavenging mission. After several free helpings of duck a l'orange, tartiflette, and lots of persuasion, he had agreed (in return for regular portions of Lasagne and the odd bottle of cheap wine) to teach the boys all the finer aspects of snowboarding. Ben's slam was proof that they weren't quite there, yet.

"He's a right idiot isn't he..." Gary pushed Ben and laughed, smattering him with a couple of failed dead-arm attempts. Axel shrugged his shoulders, looked French.

"So then Axel...are you coming out for a beer tonight? It's our day off tomorrow...same for all the other chalet workers...so there'll be a few shenanigans no doubt...are you up for it?" Gary ushered Axel and Ben downhill, conscious that the hour of afternoon tea was fast approaching and that after eight weeks in the mountains he still hadn't managed to get a cake to rise at altitude for the guests.

"No...for me, Kaliko, it has too much drinking and too many English." Axel's smile pierced his weathered tan skin, as his English friends mouthed

'piss off'. "And Veronique is cooking my favourite dish tonight, so I think I'll stay in with her and a bottle of good French wine."

"Alright, alright, don't rub it in...we're lonely pathetic singletons, you're not" Ben cleared the snow out of his goggles, placed them back over his eyes and began to slide away from Axel. "Are you riding down then?"

"No, I'm going to do encore deux loops...hey, wait a minute..." Axel grabbed Ben's arm, an uncharacteristically austere look inhabiting his face "...this girl who is following you, this Precocia who you so want to impress...just be careful with her, oui." Axel re-enforced his grip. "I'm serious, if she is like the rest of her family she'll be...très malin...err, how you say...very bad."

## T-J and Barnaby

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“Pass me the lotion would you T-J, this chairlift faces straight into the sun.”

“What? How can you want more of the bloody stuff, you just covered yourself in it five minutes ago...I can still see the grease on your nose. For Christ’s sake Barnaby, you are not going to burn with *your* skin.”

“T-J, just hand it over you stupid fuck.” The ‘f’ of Barnaby’s fuck-epetive snaked out from between his stiffened upper lip like poisonous gas from a cracked lead pipe. He had to force it out past years of proper upbringing and his gleaming white teeth.

T-J reluctantly reached into the breast pocket of his ski jacket for the sun cream, and grimaced.

“Oh, Jesus...you’re a complete prick aren’t you. You didn’t put the top back on properly and it’s jizzed all over my coat. It’s like you just dropped your trousers and loaded your creamy fantasies into my pocket.” T-J handed over the bottle at arms length, which was covered in its white contents.

Barnaby rubbed the outside of the bottle with his un-gloved hand and then smeared the cream into his nose and forehead. He offered the bottle back to Barnaby.

“You can keep it, I don’t want that back in my coat. This jacket cost me four hundred pounds, and I’m not having it covered with your mess.”

“Whatever. You won’t look particularly cool when you have flaking blisters all over your face.”

“Shut up you prick.”

T-J (or Terence James as he was known to his parents) and Barnaby had known each other for a long, long time. They had developed the kind of mutual dislike and intolerance that can only come from years spent living, eating, pinching and towel flicking together in boarding school. However, like a spitting married couple held together with gentrified family-duty sticky tape and glue, they couldn’t leave one another, because somewhere in the belly of their minds they knew that they would struggle to find anyone else who would put up with them.

They were both twenty. Their sterling-saturated schooling had endowed them with many soft skills - how to deliver the perfect dead leg, discreet cigarettng, cut-glass bullshit delivery - but top grades had eluded them, in part due to a genuine and highly developed talent for work avoidance and in part due to the fact that in their case, the academic part of the brain just wasn’t particularly well developed. Both boys were too tall for their bodies. Having giraffed to over six feet they were left without the bulk required to carry a large rock or drag a log up a hill, but were nevertheless lithe and benefited from a spindly musculature.

T-J's big blonde hair was carefully styled such that he appeared carelessly unkempt, but not to the extent that his old housemaster would have requested that it be cut. His skin had an ivory transparency, which coated a firm set of features. A smile full of teeth had disarmed many a school mummy and induced a sexuality-discovering-froth amongst some of the younger attendees of the girls' boarding school in the same town. He always walked as though he had somewhere to go, and carried a bulging wallet, even if most of the bulk was attributable to scraps of paper on which telephone numbers were scribbled by young girls, rather than actual cash.

Barnaby wet-look gelled his hair, which was frequently manipulated with long fingers to keep it in place. A narrow strip of eyebrows played a supporting role to his dark brown-nearly-black eyes. He was blessed with dark good looks, which had enabled him to indulge many of his temptations with a host of girls young enough *not* to know better.

Their parents explained to inquisitive golf friends that the boys were on a gap year, but it wasn't really a 'gap' in the true sense of the word...i.e. something empty between two objects of substance...as their past (school) had just been a mischievously hollow series of fake-outs and sneaky playtime, and their imminent future didn't involve going to university or starting a job. It was also over two years since they were actually at school.

The reality was that T-J and Barnaby had been sliding through a series of girl-snaring, quick buck-making streaky situations since their time at The Chiffing School for Boys in Surrey. They had relied on their indulging parents for a steady income during this time, but had back-pocketed a decent amount of cash as a result of their own boyish scamming. Convincing Alzheimer-ravaged mint-sucking octogenarian deck chair dwellers on Bournemouth beach that there was a new sea-view taxation system in place had generated five hundred pounds over the course of one summer. Selling tickets to non-existent club nights in a string of cities across South America consistently made them enough cash to pay for a lavish weekly visit to a local casino, which in turn occasionally made them enough money to pay for a high-class blow job. The scam which had generated the most cash involved freeze drying chunks of marmite and selling it to other wet-eared public schoolboys as cannabis resin. This was utterly risk free as they knew that none of these milky types would ever admit to being duped, let alone come after them. On at least ten occasions they had seen kids "tripping out" on the vegetable based savoury spread. And now, they were on holiday in the mountains.

"Where now then?" Barnaby turned to T-J, peering through goggles that had misted up with all the boy-heat and fuss created by his sun cream application.

They were on the Suisses lift, approaching the top of Courchevel. As they reached the peak they could see that the slopes down to the Meribel valley were clear – a piercing blue sky providing a striking contrast with the rolling

expanse of crystalline snow. On the Courchevel valley side, a darkened nappe of cloud had burgled its way round the mountain below them, and was shrouding the route down to Le Praz.

“I know...” piped Barnaby before T-J had a chance to respond “...let’s head down there” he pointed into the cloud, towards Le Praz, and his face gained the kind of absent focus usually reserved for when he was trying to execute a beer-numbered wank after a ladyless drunken night. “I heard a guy talking in the lift queue about a bar...called ‘Le Max’ or something...anyway, it’s down there and it serves absinthe, and I feel like getting off my face. It has women there too.”

T-J moved his skis and lifted the bar on the chairlift as they approached the point at which they needed to jump off, and for the first time that day, turned with interest towards Barnaby.

“What kind of women?”

“The kind you like best”

“What, naked?” Both the boys slid smoothly off the lift and headed towards Le Praz

“No. Rich.”

## Ben and Gary

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“Are you done yet?” Gary shouted.

Ben was still downstairs, hoovering the dining room and un-picking pieces of baguette that had been stuffed into the cracks in the ageing and battle-scarred dining room table. He turned off the hoover and a clean silence cut through the chalet, compromised only by the faint sound of Gary’s ‘Chimes of Rumpelstiltskin’ CD that was playing in their room on the top floor.

“Yeah...all done...I’ll be ready in two minutes.”

The chalet in which Ben and Gary worked was modest. Not like a man who had achieved some great feat but preferred not to talk about it, but like a small man who’d never achieved anything, so had to be. It stood prosaically in the smaller village of 1550, where the real Courchevel locals lived...away from the diamonds, furs and crazy property prices of the main village of 1850 that was just three hundred metres nearer the sun.

It was made in a traditional alpine style. White walls, a wooden balcony running the length of the first floor, small windows and a snow-laden slate roof, it had originally housed a large catholic family, the mother and father of which ran the village bakery. As the ski area developed and property prices rose, they traded in their family home and took their extra money down to another, slightly larger village bakery in the valley. An English tour operator had bought the chalet and squeezed in as many bedrooms as possible, which had been filled with eager skiers and snowboarders every year since.

The front door led into a dining room, in which twenty-five guests were fed and watered morning and night. From the left hand corner of the room, a corridor ran past Gary’s spotless kitchen and towards the stairs, which led guests up onto the first floor, where all their rooms were situated. Beds, washbasins, acrylic curtains and fuzzy carpets were tightly packed behind the scruffy doors with brass numbers.

Ben and Gary’s room occupied the whole of the second floor, but it was far less grand than it sounded when described that way. They lived in the eaves. Thus, neither of them could ever quite stand up straight, a fact which they frequently forgot during drunken night-time visits to the toilet, and consequently had heads covered with bruises in various stages of development.

Having un-picked the final piece of red-wine soaked baguette from the table, Ben hurried himself past Gary’s kitchen, along the corridor, up the squeaking stairs, past the guests’ rooms and up the stairs once more into his and Gary’s space. It was nearly ten o’ clock...a later finish than normal to the day, as a few too many of the guests had tried to make their dessert last for over an

hour, in order to take advantage of the tour operator's brochure offer of 'free wine with the evening meal'.

Ben stoop-walked across the room and stood, slightly crouched in front of the mirror that was propped against the wall by the window. The window normally presented them with a view into the valley, but all Ben could see were thick falling flakes, picked out by the bromide glow of the streetlamp. He ruffled his hair into place and shoved himself into his going-out gear. A skate t-shirt, a pair of scruffy jeans and his old bmx trainers, patterned red and white like a chess board. Clothes that he'd bought – albeit subconsciously - to distance himself from his prosaic origins, clothes that might provide an identity where none had ever really existed. Clothes that made him feel like the person that only now, two months into the season, he could (almost, if he wished for it hard enough) claim to be.

Ben pulled at his t-shirt. It was getting a bit tight around the shoulders, because he'd been forcing himself to do press-ups every day since he arrived in the Alps. He pulled at his jeans, they didn't quite look right. He pulled them down so that you could see his boxer shorts over the top, then pulled them back up again. He took his studded leather belt, started to feed it through the belt loops, stopped, realising he didn't really have the attitude to pull it off. He ruffled his hair again, it didn't look right...

Deep breath, almost a sigh. "Oh sod it..." he muttered under his breath. He turned to Gary, who was lying on his unmade bed. "Right...are we off then?"

Gary threw down his 'What hi-fi' magazine, jumped off his bed, grabbed his fading black denim coat to cover his fading black Pink Floyd t-shirt...remembered to duck...and bounded down the stairs with Ben.

Ben and Gary had quickly become mates. Compressed into a tiny living space and faced with the challenge of giving 25 people the best ski holiday of their lives each week, they quickly learned to rely on one another, and help one another out when it was needed. Ben couldn't stand the fact that Gary ate crisps in bed – ruffling the packet when he was trying to get some sleep, Gary couldn't understand what Ben saw in hip-hop ("sounds like someone's dropped a drum kit down the stairs", "why would you scratch a record *on purpose*?") and he also thought Ben worried too much about what everyone thought about him. But as an only child Gary had found a brother in Ben, and as someone desperate to shed his old, ill-fitting skin, Ben had finally found in Gary someone who just accepted him the way he was – so they worked well as a team.

They both tapped the ledge just above the stairs, as though they were running out at Anfield, the growing but little dirty patch of fingerprints evidence of their presence in the chalet since the beginning of the winter.

At this hour, the chalet felt empty, as most of the guests had disappeared to the various bars of Courchevel to enjoy the local beer's analgesic qualities and exaggerate the day's feats. Six inches of air became six feet, a nanosecond of hang-time became minutes, encouraging comments from the instructor that their parallel turns were 'quite good' became a sure sign of Olympic potential and that they could have 'made it' if they'd just been born in France.

Gary felt a pang of chalet-duty guilt as he reached the first floor. The corridor was long, dimly lit and more closely resembled a youth hostel than a chalet.

"I wonder where the guests in room twelve were at dinner time...I'm a bit worried they might not have come back, they could be stranded on the mountain or something...shall I knock on the door?"

"I'd leave it...you know how it is...they're probably just boozed up somewhere and..."

Ben was interrupted by a thrusting squeal of squeaking mattress springs, that fizzed out of room twelve like a renegade firework. Gary cast Ben a what-the-hell look. Ben shrugged his shoulders, puzzled. Gary held his finger up to his lips, more to hush *himself* quiet than Ben...and crept along the coarse red carpet, past the fading black and white photos in gold leaf frames on the walls...towards the source of the fun.

"Red leader...I'm going in..." he whispered to himself.

"Oi...leave it out Gary, you can't creep up on the guests like that..."

Another rally of bed-squeaks. Gary resolved to creep closer. He smiled with a face-full of mischief, and inched himself forwards, making sure to avoid the squeaking floorboard just outside room nine. He bent over and peeped his eye into the keyhole to room twelve. He pulled away in an instant, a curdling shock painted over his face, eyes convinced that what he'd just seen couldn't be happening.

"Christ almighty...you don't get that kind of thing in Wiltshire." He rubbed his chin, rolling his blue eyes in disbelief.

"Ben, there is something well dodgy going on in our chalet."