

The single's line is a place where dirtbags rub elbows with millionaires and conversations unfold with ease. Yet during the winter of 2005, these conversations often took an awkward turn for me. After small talk about the snow and life in Summit County, the same question inevitably surfaced: "So, where are you living?" No matter how many times I answered this inquiry, I stumbled in my efforts to explain that I lived in my Jeep Wrangler in the free parking lot at Breckenridge. The reactions were varied, ranging from "Doesn't it get cold?" to "I didn't think there were real ski bums anymore." Kindly, a handful of people suggested I find a girlfriend with a living arrangement better than my own.

This was my life in Breckenridge. In order to construct my winter residence, I had removed the passenger and rear bench seat from my Jeep. There was then just enough room to sleep with my feet against the tailgate and my head beneath the glove box. In the midst of such luxury, the days proceeded with a repetition matched only by that of boot-camp recruits and the chronically drunk. In the morning, the water once contained in my lungs melted from the hardtop of the Jeep, creating a reliable alarm calibrated with the sunrise. If, on rare occasion, the water falling on my face or delicately thumping on my sleeping bags did not wake me, tires crunching through the snow and car doors slamming did.

With a little finesse, I wiggled out of my mess of sleeping bags each morning. This pile of bags formed a makeshift nest constructed around the center console and wheel well of the Jeep. I would peel my condensation-crisp pants and down jacket from the tailgate, where they prevented my sleeping bag from freezing to the exposed sheet metal. Awkwardly, I would then slip on my snowboard gear and open the passenger door to lace my boots.

With frozen water bottles in one hand and a bag of groceries and toiletries in the other, I would walk across the parking lot to the bus station bathroom. While others were relieving themselves before heading up the hill, I brushed my teeth. Although stares were frequent, few people had the necessary blend of curiosity and courage to ask what the hell I was

doing. Now fully awake, I would fill a bowl with water from the bathroom faucet, as it was the perfect temperature for oatmeal. After a bagel, some oatmeal, an overly ripe frozen banana and cold-brewed tea, I returned to the Jeep and grabbed my board. It was time to ride. This was all I needed — and all I had. How I lived, how I slept, how I survived were all subservient to time on the mountain.

I had finally escaped the Midwest after spending a few too many years lapping the icy terrain parks of Iowa and Wisconsin. At the start of January, I hit the road for Summit County. Somewhere in northeastern Colorado, the fifth gear in my Jeep gave out. Nonetheless, I washed ashore in Breckenridge with a handful of dollars. Once in Summit County, I briefly debated getting a job, but knew it would only interfere with riding. I wasn't sure if I would be in Colorado for a few weeks or a few months. I just knew that, when the money ran low, I needed to save a few dollars for gas back to the flatlands.

Once on the mountain and strapped in, I warmed up playing in the glades and often icelicked faces of Peak 8. Each morning was a mystery, as the exposed runs could either shine like freshly Zamboni'd ice or be miraculously buried in new snow from an evening of wind loading. These patches of snow were always a pleasant surprise in the midst of a dry winter. To my dismay, the occasional call home confirmed that Iowa was enjoying more powder days than Colorado. Nonetheless, bouts of

wind frequently sculpted pillow lines from small cornices tucked among the trees.

Even if the conditions left much to be desired, the T-Bar provided entertainment that made the pilgrimage to the upper mountain worthwhile. To the uninitiated, a T-bar lurks like some mythical beast waiting to slaughter the innocent. In the presence of such a thing, determination presents itself in various — albeit misdirected — guises. The T-bar frequently pulled proud spring breakers up the mountain on their bellies. Equally impressive, however, were the efforts of young riders who refused to be left in the dust of their two plank progenitors — even if this meant the T-bar dragged them like forgotten dogs leashed to the bumper of a truck.

Although Breck boasts varied terrain, much of it comes in the form of the rails in the park rather than the trails carved out of the mountain. Nonetheless, Chair 6 provided reliable amusement. Whether it was little hits along trail edges or lines that snaked through trees to drop wind lips, there were plenty of ways to blend terrain with imagination to forge a new line each lap. By afternoon, however, it was time to ride the lower mountain.

Dropping into the Freeway Terrain Park is akin to walking into a circus tent only to realize you are the main attraction. Breck does a good job shielding the inexperienced from their unbridled enthusiasm by making the park as menacing as possible. Although the jumps are meticulously groomed and the rail approaches manicured with the greatest care, the park simply pushes things to another level. The bar is raised just far enough for vacationing Texans to realize that dropping into a sixtyfoot booter is a bad idea. Jeans, cowboy hats and liquid courage do occasionally meet their match. Consequently, the fence that marks the entrance to the Freeway Park gathers lurkers like flypaper. Even with an audience, it did not take long to feel at home in paradise

A certain camaraderie exists anywhere people wait to drop in — even if the occasional snake session snaps riders out of their patient revelry. Waiting to session a rail or standing on top of the drop-in for the superpipe always brought me back a

decade or so to the USASA contests at Tyrol Basin in Wisconsin. Even when the mercury failed to climb above zero, a hundred riders smiled at the top of the pipe in patient anticipation of dropping. This was a time when everything was so new and possible. Still in its infancy, no one knew — or cared to ask — where this thing we loved would take us.

This energy and kinship still existed in the park at Breck. It came in countless forms — watching Todd Richards in awe as he lapped the pipe, the communal wait for clouds to pass in the midst of a spell of flat light or the shared agitation when a family man would fearlessly lead his flock of snowplowing minions down the middle of the stunt ditch. I still smile when I think of the flock of European girls with matching jackets that stood guard over the pipe. They raised hell all over the mountain, insulting the elderly in one-piece suits or chewing out the "big, sexy man" who accidentally plowed into them in the lift line. They could boardslide a box and break a heart in a single move. I wish I knew where they came from — and where they went.

The park never got old, in part because any park in Summit County tends to be populated by fellow flatland expatriates. Countless times in Breck and Keystone, I've run into friends from back home from the Sundown days, as we affectionately refer to them through a filter of nostalgia. Although most days in Summit were spent riding in solitude, days with old friends brought back fond memories of riding twelve hours at a time in Iowa with only pickles, ketchup and crackers from the condiment bar at Sundown as fuel. These were memories marinated in flat landings, ridiculous lines through mud and snow and backcountry sessions at local golf courses. It was impossible to escape the past as we debated whether or not local legends were floating 270s onto rails or spending time behind bars

after getting caught bumping rails of another kind. Our friends from back home were just as likely to be pulling 9s off of ten-foot tables as they were to be fixing radiators or laying tile. After these sessions, we always parted, wondering, wondering if we had lost too much of this past or if this thing we loved had simply changed with age, just as we all had.

After the last chair and the final lap through the park, I would climb aboard the bus back to my home in the parking lot, as my time in Breck preceded the gondola that now links the town with the base of Peak 8. Once again, a sense of community surfaced — even in the midst of exhaustion and the wet dog smell that pervaded the cramped bus. Smiles and nods of approval conferred that today, like every day, was a good one. Yet, on Sundays, this sense of community faded, as it became evident that some of us would return to another life. Some of us would go back to a world of careers and obligations and cities, places where the day of the week mattered, while some of us would remain in the mountains to ride another nameless day. For those of us who stayed, our pockets may have been empty, but each day we could work on our goggle tan and assert with authenticity that life was wonderful.

Once back in the parking lot, I would shed my snowboard gear and begin dinner. This occasionally involved firing up a backpacking stove to cook pasta, but more often entailed sitting down in the bus station to a can of cold beef stew and a smashed loaf of bread. Once a week, I would fill a backpack with a change of clothes and set off across town to poach a shower wherever one became available. And then it was night — both a blessing and a burden.

Although some evenings were spent riding at Keystone, most were simply dedicated to loitering. I frequently hunkered down in a chair in the bus station to read and relax. Most nights I would also walk all over, simply enjoying the pulse of the main street in a mountain town. These strolls inevitably led to the Crown Tavern. Here I passed hours sitting by a fireplace and sipping iced tea by the gallon. Although all humans are drawn to fire, the glow of a flame becomes especially magnetic when one is aware of the cold that waits outside. Once I began to yawn and my thoughts returned to riding in the morning, I made my way home.

During my journey to the parking lot, I watched snowcats crawl up the mountain as tiny beacons of light. The late-night silence was only interrupted by the crunch of snow underfoot and the drunken musings of the young erupting from bars. I often walked past the Gold Pan Saloon and saw kids my age talking and hollering, reflecting on the day's labors or laps in the park. On one level, our paths were parallel — we gave all to that which we loved. Yet, at times, I felt so distant from them. As simple as life was, boundaries still existed. Or I created them as a result of my abode. Although days on the mountain served as membership dues to an unspoken society, the evenings erased any of these fraternal bonds forged in snow and sun. I remained solitary in the night.

A home in the parking lot afforded more than solitude and convenience. I learned how to fall asleep despite the oscillating orange lights and backup beep of snowplows clearing the lot around me. I learned which colors in toothpaste freeze first. I learned that strangers on chairlifts enjoy giving unsolicited dating advice to a kid who lives in his car. The value of many of these lessons washed away with the spring thaw, but I emerged with something greater: the ability to whittle away the layers of life until little remains but passion and survival.

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Photo: Kyler Deutmeyer. www.kylerdeutmeyer.com

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