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IN SEARCH OF POWDER

A STORY OF AMERICA'S
DISAPPEARING SKIBUM

JEREMY EVANS

FOREWORD BY GLEN PLAKE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Swift by Bob Reitz.

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To my wife, Isabelle, whose love has no capacity.

ski bum (skē-bəm): Any person who dedicates their lives to skiing or snowboarding during the winter. Not usually homeless but can appear as such in the early stages; work is considered a necessary interruption insofar as skiing or snowboarding is not impeded by the act of working; cramped living conditions, menial jobs, infrequent mating, low pay and daily insolvency are some of the sacrifices required until one's situation becomes dialed in, which may include a spouse and home ownership opportunities; powder days, however, make this voluntary substandard of living acceptable, even desirable, to people who are professionally capable of much more and socially are living below the standard of a person with a similar educational background. Synonyms: snow bro; bro-brah.

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Foreword

GLEN PLAKE

On May 4, 1986, the last day of the ski season at Kirkwood Mountain Resort near Lake Tahoe things were going great for me. I had just returned from my first ski film shoot. After skiing since I was two years old and honing my ski skills basically my entire life, I was going to be in a ski film, which is kind of a weird threshold—a graduation—among skiers. But as I was sharing stories of the film shoot that day with two friends, it happened. While skiing at Kirkwood, a small avalanche knocked me over. I stopped after falling through some rocks. I immediately realized that I had broken my femur. Injuries aren't something we want to happen, but we all know they can. We are skiers—not golfers—and let's face it, skiing can be dangerous.

It was when ski patrol members were cutting my pants to perform medical procedures that one of them discovered my lift ticket—or what I had been using for one. I was approaching two hundred days on the mountain that season, scattered at more than a half dozen ski areas. It was the second winter in a row that I didn't have a season pass to any of them, but I

managed to ski whenever I wanted. The techniques to access a ski resort in that way have varied since then—though some still apply—but technology has led to new techniques.

The broken femur kept me off skis for eighteen months, though it healed great. Two years after the injury, in February of 1988, I spent three weeks filming in Chamonix, France, with Greg Stump for his ski film *Blizzard of AAHHH's*. After filming, I was faced with a dilemma. I could either return to California, where I had some unresolved legal issues that happened while I was recovering from my broken leg, or I could trust my skis with my life—both literally and philosophically—like I had done so many times before. The ski pass I had been issued for Greg's film was valid for the rest of the season. I asked myself "What else do I need?"

The decision was made with twenty-three dollars in my pocket. I said au revoir to my friends in California and stayed in Chamonix. I squatted in the judge's tower next to the local ski jump. I picked mountain berries and traded them with a baker, who then provided me my daily bread. I eventually found some odd jobs and did some house-sitting before I returned to the United States almost two years later. Looking back, it was the smarter decision. The time spent in Chamonix helped me become the skier I am today.

Nearly two decades after I made that decision, my wife, Kimberly, and I lived in an rv for almost two months during the 2007 winter. I had been skiing professionally for more than sixteen years, and the previous winter was one of the greatest ever. I climbed and skied from Kullu Pumori, a 22,000-foot peak in the Indian Himalaya, but that was just one of the many highlights of that winter. Kimberly and I traveled through the American Midwest and other areas, calling it our "Down Home Tour." We skied small hills and enjoyed the camaraderie that ski bums enjoy with each other. Some

worked jobs so they could volunteer for ski patrol. Others worked as instructors/coaches, lift mechanics, truck drivers, or were students taking a break from classes. They were as diverse as society itself. It is on these hills where the heart of the ski bum may be the biggest.

I believe the ski bum is alive and well and exists in all corners of our world. Some are stationary, some are migrating, but they all are seeking the same goal—ski! Sure, perfect snow in an idyllic setting is a dream, but the real ski bum is simply trying to make skiing an everyday occurrence in their life. I am not talking about the “seasoners,” the new college graduates ski bumming for a few years before succumbing to the real world. No, I am talking about the ski bum with a life sentence. Our stories are diverse and as colorful as the days and places we ski. Some of us have fortune and fame, some of us are just getting by, but neither is more important than the other. The “I just want to ski” mentality is the common ground.

In Search of Powder reveals this mentality, taking a close look into the lives of ski bums and their paths along the way, but it also explores some very real situations, especially the habitat of the ski bum. For many, it’s like animals having to relocate and readjust due to urban sprawl. The ski bum and the communities they live in are facing real problems, as Jeremy writes in this book. The cost of living in mountain towns has increased so much that the mountain town has become the “mountain resort.” Vacation homes have driven up housing costs and have left neighborhoods empty. Employment that once was the domain of the ski bum lifestyle is facing its own challenges.

In Search of Powder is a must-read for people on their ski holidays who might be unaware of the behind-the-scenes situations happening in some of the premier ski resorts in

North America. After all, everything that is nice and shiny during the holidays still has the rest of the year to survive. It's also a must-read for anyone interested in skiing and the mountains, because the book has interesting stories about ski bums and the towns they are struggling to live in. The resort industry has also had an interesting effect on what had always been a very simple pastime . . . sliding on our skis, smiling with our fellow skiers, all in the name of fun, in the harshest environments on earth—cold north winds, several feet of snow, perfect spring days, dreams of traveling to ski in far-off places—these are the things that fill the ski bum's life. All of this is found in *In Search of Powder*. Listen to what Jeremy is saying in his book—it's important information—but listen to me right now.

No matter what ultimately happens to the ski bum in America or elsewhere, the ski bum will adapt and new stories will be told from southern British Columbia through the I-70 corridor in Colorado, from the Smoky Mountains in North Carolina to Chamonix, France, and India's Rohtang Pass. No matter where we are, we have been and always will be skiing.

Ski you on the hill.

Acknowledgments

I first want to thank my parents, Mike and Jan, because without them, I wouldn't be here today, in more ways than just being conceived. I'd also like to thank my wife, Isabelle, who was the first fan of this book and who supported me throughout this grueling process despite me being short tempered during those long stretches of despair. And to my older brother, Matt, who I will always look up to even though he thinks nobody else does.

Thanks to Meg Jones, my Journalism 101 instructor at Marquette, who was instrumental in me becoming a writer. The first day of class she told us "If you are here because you want to make money as a journalist, I suggest you drop this class." Some kids never returned, but her passion for the truth convinced me that the qualities of being a writer far outweigh the miserable paychecks, which she wasn't lying about.

To my friends, specifically Dan Thomas on those Beam and beer nights at Rojo's, thanks for never telling me to shut up about my book even when most of the time it warranted such reaction. To the ski bums and winter sports industry people

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who I met during the research of this book, this couldn't have been done without you. And, lastly, thanks to my editor Rob Taylor at the University of Nebraska Press for believing in my book and taking a chance on me. I am forever grateful, as I am to the rest of your staff, for making this book the best it could possibly be.

Introduction

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.—HOWARD THURMAN
educator and theologian

The idea for this book entered my mind on a rainy November day along Interstate 5 in Portland, Oregon. I was stuck in traffic. I was rarely stuck in traffic in Lake Tahoe, where I lived for three years before moving to the Pacific Northwest. Now instead of counting how many days I went snowboarding, I kept track of my daily commutes. Some afternoons it took me almost two hours to drive the 8.2 miles from my downtown apartment to work. I was on a similar pace on that rainy November day when something occurred to me.

I was inching toward my desk, not looking forward to the day. A case of the Mondays, I guess, only it was Wednesday. A curtain of heavy mist hung from an overcast sky, spraying my car with the precision of a thumbed garden hose. The mist stopped and the moisture covering my car separated. Tiny puddles formed on the hood, jiggling as my car idled. Then it was time to proceed. I released the brakes, the tires rolled one rotation, and I applied the brakes. An endless canvas of red lights appeared before me. Most of my commutes developed like this, but I found solace in being an ankle-pivoting

zombie. It gave me an opportunity to dream, either about being somewhere else or being somebody else.

I was pretty sure the people inside the cars surrounding me weren't having similar thoughts, for they were always too intent on weaving in and out of lanes, throwing their hands in the air, and yelling at others who were weaving in and out of lanes, throwing their hands in the air, and yelling at others who were weaving . . . for what reason? So they could get home quicker and sit on the couch sooner? So they could wake up the next morning, practice the same skills by rushing to a job they didn't like, earn a paycheck they did like, and then spend that money during their only two weeks of vacation each year? Is this what life has been reduced to? Is this the new American Dream? No, I decided, it's the mantra of the living dead, a mantra followed by dutiful products of the Great American Capitalistic Machine, and I was one of them.

I wasn't always so jaded. In September of 2003, after three years of working at a newspaper in the Lake Tahoe area, I moved to Portland with noble intentions, sacrificing the opportunity to snowboard each day for a chance to advance my writing career. Things, though, just didn't start off well. A week after arriving, my roommate, Joel, and I went mountain biking near Mount St. Helens. About an hour into the ride, I stopped next to some bushes and waited for him. Before long, I heard a cacophonous panting sound that was Joel walking his bike up the trail. I, too, was breathing quite heavily but felt great otherwise. I had a new job to look forward to as well as a new life that wasn't focused on searching for powder. I wasn't quite sure why not snowboarding would be a good thing, but I also believed, for some reason, that I couldn't snowboard forever.

After a few sips of water, Joel and I got back on our bikes. A

slight downhill greeted us, and we were glad. I took the lead. My fingers were clinched around the brakes, ready to speed check if necessary. But as the bike gained momentum, my head became fuzzy and the fingers on my right hand slowly curled back. My right arm became heavy and impossible to move. It had shut off, from shoulder socket to fingernails. The trees became a splattering of green; there was nothing distinct about them. No bark, no leaves, no trunk. My bike continued to pick up more speed and I suddenly thought I was dead, watching my body from above, watching it wobble out of control. “Get a grip, Jeremy. You’re not dead. Do something.”

I applied the other brake with my left hand and felt the bike gradually come to a stop. My right arm fell off the handlebars and my body tilted to the right. I tried talking but couldn’t. I was confused, standing upright and spinning like a top. My right arm was unbearably heavy and a complete burden. It didn’t feel part of me anymore. I grabbed it with my left hand and nothing happened. I was paralyzed. I grabbed it once more and it clicked back on, like a switch had been flicked. My right arm was weightless again.

“Jeremy, what’s wrong?” Joel asked as he came down the hill.

“Some . . . thing is . . . happening to me. Something is happening to . . . me.”

I could speak now but my tongue curled into my throat, causing me to stutter. I sat down, elbows draped over both knees, head shaking between my legs. “What just happened, Joel? How long was th . . . th . . . th . . . that going on?”

“What are you talking about? What happened?”

“I was frozen, completely frozen. My body wasn’t working on the right side. It was like I was paralyzed. I couldn’t even talk two seconds ago.”

“You know, Jeremy, I thought I felt some weird energy

force pass by us as we started down the hill. It could've been that.”

Chuckling, I reviewed the actual possibilities. Muscle cramp? Dehydration? Pinched nerve? No way. I had a . . . so I did what most people do when they don't want to acknowledge reality—I ignored it. I continued on the twenty-two-mile bike ride, neglecting the tingling in my arm the entire way, drove back to Portland, then called my mom and explained what had happened. A former registered nurse, my mom didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. I also told her I didn't need a doctor for this one. My mom brought up the possibility, but a neurologist confirmed it a few weeks later.

I had suffered a stroke, seven days after turning twenty-six.

The mist continued to fall during my commute. Red brake lights exploded everywhere, like sad eyes in the back of robots' heads. It had been two months since my stroke and I wanted something more out of life. As the weeks passed, and as cardiologists and neurologists expressed how fortunate I was to escape permanent damage, my stroke crystallized for me that this game of life can end. It caused a moment of clarity, where a truth was acknowledged, and convinced me that career advancement is meaningless if your passions are sacrificed along the way. I knew how to make things right. As winter approached, I yearned for powder days in Lake Tahoe and began devising a plan for moving back.

But on that November day, stuck in traffic, the mist fell in large sheets as the soothing sounds of George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun" bounced around the inside of my Nissan Maxima. I bought my car within a month of graduating from college. It has a CD player and a moon roof. I mentioned earlier that these commutes gave me an opportunity to dream, so I

sunk into my leather seats to get comfy. But before my dream started, reality barged in, asking, “Why do you think you are any different from these other people sitting in traffic? What makes you better than them? Who are you to judge other people’s lives?” I usually advised reality to shut up when it antagonized me like this. Other times, such as now, it offered clarity and hope. Reality’s stay, however, was only temporary, and my mind drifted. The dream began.

I wish I had the balls to be a ski bum again. Life would be so simple. Work as little as possible and snowboard as much as possible. Party all night, pass out next to some girl in a hot tub, wake up the next morning and do it all over again. I could live in the Colorado Rockies this time, maybe Aspen. Yeah, mock the celebrities while I’m drowning in hip-deep powder. I wouldn’t have to stare at red lights anymore. Freedom.

Unfortunately, since my leg was broken in college and my soccer career ended, I’ve never loved any singular activity enough to convince myself it’s smart to squeeze into a condo with eight guys on a long-term basis. I’ve never loved anything enough to convince myself a diet of peanut butter sandwiches was satisfactory. I don’t know why I’m unable to convince myself of such things, but what I do know is that I’m not learning much sitting at a desk and waiting for my two days off each week so I can go snowboarding at Mount Hood.

The mist had changed to drizzle, typical Pacific Northwest. The incessant tapping on my car’s hood created a soft chorus that interrupted my dream. Reality also intruded. I ended up in this situation, stuck in traffic on Interstate 5, because I had left my sportswriter job at the *Nevada Appeal*, the newspaper in Carson City, where I worked for three years. It was my first job out of college, and I started a month after graduating in June of 2000. The paper was less than a half-hour drive from my house on the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe. I worked

swing shift, from 3:00 p.m. to midnight—the ideal schedule for a snowboarder—and wrote about high school sports and rodeos and five-year-old gymnasts. Before work I went hiking, snowboarding, mountain biking, swimming, and rock climbing. On my days off, I went hiking, snowboarding, mountain biking, swimming, and rock climbing. This was the life I had always envisioned for myself, and that vision was reinforced during my senior year at Marquette University.

On a warm autumn night in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my roommates and I had just gotten home from an evening of drinking. It wasn't long after we had flopped onto the couch that one of them leaned over and pressed the red flashing button on the answering machine. There was a message from my older brother, Matt.

“Jeremy, bro, it’s snowing in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It’s only October and it’s dumping outside. Can you believe it? Jeremy, it’s snowing right now as I speak in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Later, bro.”

Until my brother and I hiked the John Muir Trail in California’s Sierra Nevada in 2009, it was the first time I had heard him sound happy in more than five years. Matt is probably the brightest of all the men in the family. Thin and athletic with dirty blond hair, he has natural good looks and a clever network of brain cells that supplied him with solid grades in school—when he went. Matt also has a debilitating alcohol and drug addiction. It started at age sixteen and hasn’t subsided. And to this day, that message he left when he was twenty-five has remained the last instance of true happiness I’ve heard in his voice, the last time I felt I had a brother, the same brother I woke up at 4:00 a.m. on Christmas morning in 1984 to look at what Santa Claus had brought us. If Jackson Hole could generate happiness for my brother, even a splinter in a lumberyard

of sadness, I figured something had to be magical about ski towns and the people who inhabit them. Once college was over, I couldn't wait to live in such a place.

Traffic began to move along, not as many red lights, but the drizzle continued. My tires rolled five feet before I had to apply the brakes. In the distance stood the pale green towers of the Interstate Bridge, which spans the Columbia River and separates Portland from Vancouver, Washington. I despise that river. It always informed me my exit was nearing and my dream was ending. The cruelty about freeways is they give us an avenue to escape but keep us linked to the very thing we are escaping. The carpool lane wasn't clogged, but people don't like that option. Cars have become sacred, sanctuaries, individualism in a four-door sedan, pods advertised for zero down and 4.9 percent APR for sixty months. This type of swindling is disguised as necessary, but it is an elixir for consumerism, an anchor that shackles and an anchor that continues to reach new depths. Life's necessities are now financed. Reality evaporated and my dream resumed.

I have the balls to be a ski bum again. I quit my job and started an individual pilgrimage. It is sparked by dreams of something new and exciting, by dreams of embracing my passion, ideals that have gotten lost somewhere between the innocence of childhood and the drab expectations of adult life. Snowboarding is now my first priority, everything else is secondary. My parents and friends, forever pragmatists, question the longevity of my lifestyle. But I tell them the rationale that produced my lifestyle—the concept of knowing what makes one happy and being undeterred in actualizing it—is undeniably sustainable. I tell them I know the secret of life. It is my walking stick. Yeah, I'm in Aspen, in the hot tub.

Wait, where is the girl? I can't recognize the person holding the stick anymore, a stranger in my own body.

Reality had struck with a swift jab and ended my dream, returning me to my November commute. The drizzle stopped and the Interstate Bridge was no longer distant but overhead. My exit was nearing, located on the other side of the river. This meant my desk at the *Columbian*, the daily newspaper in Vancouver, was awaiting my arrival. Also awaiting my arrival was a boss who wore a tie to work most days and made it seem that age and tenure, not talent and ambition, would dictate company esteem. These were not positive factors for me, someone who sent his resume for a job opening at the *Columbian*, then drove more than six hundred miles from Lake Tahoe to Vancouver in the hope he might interview for it. Not only did I get the interview, I got the job. But this was one totem pole I didn't want to climb anymore. I didn't have the proper shoes, and I wasn't interested in hanging around long enough to acquire them.

The *Nevada Appeal* was the type of newspaper where, after a big snowstorm in January, co-workers would tell me how lucky I was to have been snowboarding in thigh-deep powder earlier that day. The *Columbian* was the type of paper where co-workers wondered why I snowboarded at all. The *Columbian*, though, is a much bigger paper than the *Nevada Appeal*. It was the right move for an aspiring reporter, a so-called step up. It follows the industry's theory of always advancing one's career and of never becoming too stagnant. But what if every decision made with that theory only adds another coat on top of the most beautiful thing each of us has—the notion of self? Isn't that the one thing that separates us from everyone else, and assuming we follow our own path and not somebody else's, the one thing that keeps us different? What if, after decades of investing in that theory, our coat

becomes a hardened shell and the beauty at its core can't be resurrected? Sadly, I was becoming a turtle in Portland, one commute at a time.

In short, I had had enough. I stopped dreaming and started meshing reality with dreams. I can thank the stroke, my belated twenty-sixth birthday present, for that revelation. That's why during my fateful November commute on Interstate 5, where I watched people's lives erode inside their metal boxes, something occurred to me. I needed to move back to Tahoe. Within eight months of that November commute, I was working as a sportswriter at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* in California, a step down the circulation ladder and one my colleagues in the industry didn't approve of. But working swing shift and snowboarding seemed a more righteous path than climbing someone else's totem pole.

The winter after I moved back was the 2004–5 season, which happened to be one of the wettest winters in Lake Tahoe's history. It snowed more than ten feet during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, and some areas received almost eight hundred inches (sixty-six feet) that winter. Three years after leaving the Pacific Northwest, I have snowboarded, on average, eighty-five days each winter and purchased a home with my wife, an elementary school teacher.

While things seem to have worked out for me, something seemed different about the place. I know now that changes were happening long before I moved here after college, but I started to view ski bum culture from under a different microscope. After all, I moved back to Lake Tahoe because my stroke clarified what was important in life, and as a result, I wanted to associate with others who had a similar outlook. As luck would have it, I found something more interesting to write about than high school sports.

Several people I had previously known in Lake Tahoe had left. Ski towns have always been transient places, but this particular exodus was being caused by something other than the usual ebb and flow of seasonal work patterns. Dead-end jobs had suddenly become too much to justify the quest for powder. About forty years ago, during the advent of the ski bum, one dead-end job paid enough money to eat and live somewhere for a winter, perhaps in a van or someone's garage. It was an agreeable situation for ski bums because ski towns were cheap then, situated on the fringe of society. Ski bums had little trouble escaping the establishment and carving out a life for themselves in these idyllic places. But rising real estate costs, misguided values, an immigrant workforce, and ski resorts operated by publicly traded corporations or other profit-above-all-else people have changed the dynamic of ski towns and the ski bum lifestyle. It's more difficult now. It's different. Ski towns have become extensions of America, where money and real estate and commutes dominate the way of life.

The ski bum's mantra is to ski or snowboard as much as possible, and it's a subculture hinged to a singular belief—fuck the system. On the surface, ski bums seem to be a subset of individuals, male and female, young and old, who are following their own path—however meandering and unconventional it may seem to mainstream America—and who seem to be having a jolly good time doing it. But there is more to their lives than hot tubs. They need to ski as much as possible, yes, but in order to do that they need to earn enough money to eat and live. Their basic necessities, though, are no longer being met. I wanted to find out why.

So once I quit my job at the *Columbian* and returned to Tahoe, I began the oh-so-arduous task of visiting other ski towns across the American West. I wanted to see if other places were

dealing with the same changes as the south shore of Lake Tahoe. During my travels, however, I discovered something more intriguing than the harmonious kaleidoscope, the paradox of intense debauchery, love, drug use, and beauty that swirls in these towns. What I discovered is that the ski bum is a dying breed, a spirit being systematically destroyed. To some extent, every town I visited is dealing with the same issues, but certain factors are more pronounced in one town than another, a reality that allowed me to focus each chapter on a specific reason why ski bum culture is disappearing in that town. So, collectively, the chapters describe why ski bums are becoming ghosts in their own backyards and what kind of spirit will be lost when they do vanish.

Not long after I had my stroke and began devising my plan to return to a ski town, I informed my boss who wore a tie to work most days that I didn't want to write for the *Columbian* anymore. I wanted to move back to Lake Tahoe, snowboard, and ultimately figure out what makes ski bums tick and what makes them willing to sacrifice the traditional financial pleasures of American life for daily insolvency. My personal story is no different than other ski bums who ignored the next logical step in adult life to go search for powder. In the end, who lives the more charmed life? Is it the guy who makes \$300,000 each year at a job he doesn't like and can buy any material item imaginable but spends all his time dreaming of living somewhere else? Or is it the guy who ekes out a living each year working a menial job and can buy little more than basic luxuries but lives exactly where he wants? It's a classic debate, and you can't have it both ways. But during my final commute in Portland, as I brake-pedaled over the Interstate Bridge onto the exit ramp, just minutes from my desk, I noticed the people inside the cars surrounding me

INTRODUCTION

were still weaving in and out of lanes, throwing their hands in the air, and yelling at others who were weaving in and out of lanes, throwing their hands in the air, and yelling at others who were weaving . . .

Which got me to thinking. Who's stagnant now?