



# FIRST TRACKS

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*“I don’t know what it is, what it was, or whether it is not less a question of ruins than the indestructible chaos of timeless things...I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too.”*

Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*.

The alarm blared and Kate's hand darted out for a gun that wasn't there. It had been three years since she'd lived on the road, and two years since she stopped sleeping with a handgun in easy reach. But, old habits, you know? Crossing the country, there had been lots of reasons to wake up easily and be ready to fight when you did: gangs of scavengers, fascist militias, or other climate refugees who'd run out of supplies and gotten desperate. She silenced the alarm quickly before it woke up either of the partners she shared the squatted jet with. Normally she'd share the bed with Carter and Bug, but she had to be up early today so she'd opted for a sleeping bag on the cabin floor. When Bug was out, nothing in the world could wake them, but Carter was a light sleeper, and he and Bug looked too beautiful sleeping together for her to risk waking him.

She dressed as quietly as she could and tried to avoid looking at Carter's mirror. Of the three of them, he took the most pleasure in putting together elaborate outfits and spending inordinate amounts of time on elaborate makeup. He had a beautiful face, and he knew exactly how to turn it into a work of art that never failed to set Kate's heart racing. She was more prac-

tical in her dress, and lately had wanted as little to do with her reflection as possible. This far out in the mountains it was hard to get a reliable source of hormones, and her dysphoria had been hitting hard lately. It'd been years since landslides had damaged the road through Glenwood Canyon beyond anything people these days could repair, so she'd have to stretch what she had until the snow melted on the mountain passes and hope she got lucky with one of the caravans coming from Denver. In the meantime, there was no chance anyone around here would misgender her; but still, it sucked.

The jet wasn't as comfortable as a room in the Jerome, but she liked the privacy it gave her. She didn't have to worry as much about loud music and thin walls, and it felt less claustrophobic than a hotel room, less hemmed in, less like a cell in a beehive. Plus, there was something satisfying about taking something that had probably belonged to a billionaire and making it hers. She liked to imagine it had belonged to a real asshole, like a Koch or something. Although someone told her the Kochs vacationed just a little further west, out by Redstone, before someone mined their airstrip (if you're going to work so hard to kill the earth, you should really have better security than

a shallow, slow-moving river on the edge of your property). Either way, she liked to think it'd be someone who'd be really pissed that it was now home to a gay anarchist and her partners. Besides, once she and Carter had gutted most of the seats and furniture there was a lot more space (although they kept the minibar). Their first summer they'd knocked out a couple windows, duct-taped some AC units in place, wired them to the solar-panels they'd bolted on the roof, and then...well it was livable, and they were usually too busy during the heat of the day to sit at home. It was a little cramped for everyone to live there but it was plenty big for game nights. Turns out D&D works just as well after the collapse of civilization, and old school pen-and-pencil gamers couldn't get enough of telling ex-console and PC partisans "I told you so." It was one of Bug's more annoying traits, but after they came to town with a handful of *Pathfinder* and *5E* books, as well as a sackful of dice they'd scavenged, and saved the airportians from an eternity of poker and gin-rummy, Kate couldn't hold it against them. It'd be nice to live somewhere where the whole polycule sleeping together wouldn't mean a night of waking

up to elbows in her face, but Amelie and Jax liked the space that living next door (next jet?) gave them anyways.

Kate zipped up her fleece and walked as quietly as she could to the cabin door. She stepped outside and her breath misted in the morning air. A decade or so ago it'd be below zero this time of day and year, but as it was Kate only shivered slightly under a couple layers. She walked up the half-assed, two-by-four stairs to Jax and Amelie's door and wished for the umpteenth time that Jax'd let her make them less shaky, but every time Kate suggested it, Jax just said, "Hey they work don't they? I'm not going to lose butch points by having someone else do it for me." Kate rolled her eyes just thinking about it. She didn't have to knock on the door. The squeaking steps were loud enough and Amelie opened the front door. "Mornin' sweetheart" she said, handing Kate a steaming mug of tea.

"Morning" Kate said with a peck on Amelie's cheek. "You're the best" she added, taking the tea.

"I know," Amelie replied with a smirk.

“If all it takes is a cup of tea, why am I getting up at the ass-crack of dawn?” Jax finished tightening her boots, while her own mug of tea cooled next to her.

“Because you love me. And because it’s your first winter in Aspen.”

“So why isn’t Amelie going?” There was no way Jax was going to be up this early and not gripe about it the whole way out the door.

“Because, babe,” Amelie replied, “I wasn’t even a skier back when there were real seasons. Plus, you were the one going on and on about how much you missed ‘real’ winters the entire time we were in Arizona.”

“Okay, but why are we going all the way into town to ski when we already live at the base of a mountain?”

“Don’t be a baby, it’s only a couple miles. Buttermilk is like, fine, but Highlands is *Highlands*.” This was actually a matter of some debate. Lots of people had ideas for what to call the mountain. Some of the more committed radicals suggested renaming mountains for their revolutionary heroes instead of keeping names that they saw as irredeemably tied to the ski resort’s commercialization of nature and the legacy of colonization and capitalist exploitation of nature. Last Kate heard, they had renamed Snowmass, Buttermilk,



Highlands, and Ajax, to Goldman Peak, Bookchin Mtn., Mt. Öcalan, and Mt. Angela Davis respectively. The commune on Owl Farm called them Hunter Thompson Mtn., Duke Hill, Mt. Gonzo, and Freak Peak, but after their third breakfast whiskey they could never keep straight which was which. The community of ski bums and former liftys in the old Snowmass Village had much cruder names that Bug loved and Amelie thought were stupid and immature. There wasn't any kind of authority or landowner to give them official names anymore, so mostly people just called them whatever they wanted. The old names had a way of sticking around though. They were the names Kate had known them by as a little kid, and she was pretty sure they'd always be Snowmass, Buttermilk, Highlands, and Ajax to her. The one thing everyone agreed on was not to call them the Four Mountains. It didn't matter what camp you were in, fuck the ski company for turning mountains into private property. "Besides, that's where the biggest party will be." This was enough of a motivator to sway Jax in Kate's favor.

Kate and Jax walked into a departure terminal where a small group was already forming. “Morning Kate. Hey Jax, she rope you into hiking the Bowl this year?” Juniper grinned through her beard.

“Morning, June. Yeah, somehow she talked me into it.” Juniper laughed.

“Yeah, she does it to all of you. She even got Bug to go last year.”

“Bug got up this early? On purpose?” Jax gave Kate a surprised look.

“Well it took a year of asking, and we almost missed breakfast.”

“Carter?”

“Who do you think took me the first time?”

“So why isn’t he here?”

“Because he’s lazy,” Kate laughed. “It was fun for him to show off as the rugged mountain man when we started dating, but honestly he’d rather sleep in with Bug.”

“Relatable” Jax said, thinking about how much warmer it was under the covers with Amelie.

“So, breakfast?” Juniper asked.

The three of them ambled over to the counter where a pot of oatmeal had been set out. Shelves that used to be filled with cheap knick-knacks, refrigerator magnets, and shot glasses printed with the state flag now held plates, bowls, and assortments of sauces and seasonings either made locally or traded from the caravans. Conversations were subdued while warm oatmeal woke everyone from their pre-dawn stupor and the air hummed with collective excitement.

“Are you coming too?” Jax asked.

“No. Snowmass.” Juniper looked wistful. “There aren’t enough days in the season for me to waste them anywhere else.

“Waste?” Kate said indignantly.

“It’s the best mountain, and the biggest, and you know it.”

“Size isn’t everything. You should know that.”

“Ha ha ha,” Juniper said sarcastically, but with a wry smile. Jax got the sense that this was an old argument that they kept up for the sport of it. Gradually everyone got up to wash their dishes and shuffled off to the stables. Kate

and Jax made small talk with their neighbors while they finished tightening down saddles and tying on skis.

Horses still felt like a luxury to Jax. On the road, she and Amelie had mostly hiked where they could or bartered rides where they couldn't. Most of the space around here had been ranch land though, and even before the collapse people had kept horses. Most of them had been expensive pets for the children of the rich or ways to flaunt wealth. Now they were a necessity for moving people and sharing resources. At least they didn't mind the shorter winters. Lots more time and space for them to graze.

As they rode out of the airport parking lot, Kate looked across the valley up to Starwood. It was mostly obscured by the scars of the last few wildfire seasons. Here and there mansions in various stages of damage and decay poked through. *It's a long way from L.A. to Denver...* floated through her head. Some of the mansions were still intact enough to be used as squats by folks who preferred to think of themselves as roughing it, or who liked the punk-house squalor. Most were the blackened tatters and charcoal ruins of capitalist history. *It's a long time to hang in the sky...* came the lyrics. *And a longer time to scav-*

*enge, hitchhike, and trek*, she thought. Jax and Amelie didn't talk much about their time on the road. They didn't have to. A lot of places were pretty shit right now, but the road was one of the worst. At least in towns and squats there's a sense of *here* that people can unite around. *Here* creates and *us*, and too often a *them*. But on the road, between *heres*, there's pretty much only *them*. It's where people feel the least secure, the most desperate. Still, enough people feel the need to travel. Maybe they prefer, even now, not being tied down anywhere. Or, like the caravans, they've found a niche for themselves moving goods between settlements. When things got bad, Jax had the bad luck to be in a part of California that slid pretty quickly into eco-fascism. She figured there was more *away* to go if she went east. She met Amelie somewhere along the way, and as they got closer to the Rockies they heard rumors that things might not be too bad in the Roaring Fork Valley, and they decided to see for themselves.

Some folks quietly split off to head up a back road to Snowmass. Juniper looked back and waved at Kate and Jax before heading off to her own communion with the mountains. Soon they reached the round-about where they

forked uphill. Borders are bullshit, and no borders were used as pretense for as much violence as state borders, but Kate remembered how this round-about, The Circle, was another kind of border. The 1% would gleefully brag that they never went past The Circle, into the realm of the merely upper class. They even made sure that kids from too far outside The Circle legally couldn't go to the same public school as their kids. Now it was just a part of the road with rusted cars gathering weeds along its circumference.

Kate wasn't sure at first why she kept moving. The first few places she found herself were mostly folks desperate to hang on to what they had. Everyone was sure that the world had ended, and all that was left was to draw out their own deaths as long as they could. Kate thought that it was a lot of pessimistic bullshit. She didn't have much love for how things were before, and she wanted somewhere where she could build something new, not just hang on to what was left. She'd stayed in one town for a while. Got serious with someone, then got tired again. She'd tried to convince them to come with her. They'd tried to convince her to stay. She'd thought they were a fool to think there was nothing better than to stay where they were. They'd thought she

was a fool to imagine that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. So she had left alone. And some places were better, and some places weren't. And she kept hoping to find somewhere better. Eventually, she decided if she was going to end up hanging on to a precarious existence, she might as well do it somewhere she liked. So she'd gone back to the valley she grew up in and found it better than she'd left it.

Snow crunched under their horses hooves as they trotted into the plaza at the base of the mountain. The first few tents were being set up for the winter festival with streamers and strings of cloths tied between them like Tibetan prayer flags. Holidays didn't mean quite the same thing that that used to. When Kate was growing up, a holiday was one of the few days that she didn't have to go to work, or it was the center of a break from school. Now, there was no mandate to work or go to school, so now you could just take a break whenever you needed one. Sure, if you made a habit of not working folks might take issue with it and call you out, or feel less inclined to share resources and labor (it's called *mutual-aid* for a reason), but if you had a bad week, or you were mourning, and didn't show up for a while there were no bosses to

fire you and no landlords to evict you. It wasn't perfect. In theory there were plenty of ways that people could work the system and freeload off everyone else's hard work. In theory, it was a slap-dash set of solutions jerry-rigged together as problems cropped up and it was full of holes and oversights. In practice though, they got by. Kate was pretty sure that people were basically decent when they weren't desperate or starving, and so far the folks in the various confederated squats, communes, co-ops, villages, and townships up and down The Valley hadn't disappointed her.

Holidays now weren't the exclusive time that everyone got to take off work, they were the time everyone chose to take off work simultaneously, or refocus their work around the festivals. It made it more fun somehow. Kate didn't worry about getting enough rest to be able to go back to work after. She just focused on having fun with her community, skiing, and taking in what little winter there still was these days. That wasn't the only difference in this holiday. People used to celebrate the solstice because it was the turning point between nights getting longer and colder, and days getting longer and warmer. It was the time when people had hope that they'd make it through to the



end of the long, dark season. They still had something like that for the summer solstice, but now they celebrated winter for itself.

There weren't a lot of days in a year where they still got a nice heavy snow, and it usually didn't fall on the solstice, so they celebrated the winter whenever it did come. They treated the snow like a guest of honor and celebrated all through the day. Yesterday had been filled with howling winds and a fierce blizzard. Today would be blue bird skies and festivals at the base of all four ski areas. They tied their horses up near a maroon-dyed tent where they lingered long enough to drink steaming cups of hot chocolate from ceramic mugs (festivals these days didn't leave behind the same mess of styrofoam and plastics that parties like X-Games had). Then they took their skis from the horses, strapped synthetic skins onto the bottoms, traded riding boots for AT boots, and started up hill.

They reached the top of the ski lift as the first rays of sunlight grazed the tops of Maroon Bells. Sunrise was coming soon and they still had a good forty minutes to the top of the bowl. It would have been quicker and easier if the lifts were still running, but they couldn't justify that expenditure of power on

a luxury, even during a festival. The draw from the town's solar farm didn't have that kind of excess, and even if they had the fuel none of them would have felt justified running the diesel generators for the convenience. Besides, Kate had come to appreciate putting in the work of skinning up the mountain. Putting in that much work and sweat made it feel more like a ritual for her, it helped make the morning feel spiritual, almost religious. When some para-alpine skiers had figured out how to train horses to tow them up hill and trot down after them, that had put the final nail in the coffin of any talks to power up the lifts, and now the chairs swung empty on rusting cables.

They all stopped for a breather on the plateau where people used to double check bindings, strap into snowboards, or stop by the warming hut before skiing back down. Some people treated blisters, rubbed sore calves, or adjusted the number of layers they wore. Everyone drank from bottles or backpack reservoirs. Most were too winded to talk much. "Do you think we'll make it up before sunrise?" Jax asked.

"No, not this time," Kate said, resigned but still excited. "Sorry hun. It'll probably catch us about halfway up."

“It’ll still be a hell of a view.” Kate nodded her agreement. From here there was no more use for skins, so they peeled them off their skis and packed them away. They had a short downhill to ski and enjoy letting gravity do the work for the moment, before it was time to dismount, strap skis to packs, and take the final leg of their trip on foot. Like Kate had guessed they were on a peak about halfway to the summit, trying to catch their breath, when the sun finished cresting the horizon. “Goddamn beautiful,” Jax breathed.

Kate wished she had something poetic to say, a bit of verse stored away that she could pull out. All she mustered was a breathless, “Yeah.” Someone started humming “Rocky Mountain High.” It was appropriate, if cheesy. There was a corona of reds and oranges around the sun as it came over the eastern peaks. It was gorgeous, but they all knew it meant wildfires on the front range. Only a sky full of ash could refract the sunrise so beautifully. Kate felt a twang of guilt. It didn’t seem quite right to get so much beauty out of something that was burning habitats and homes on the other side of the Rockies. Kate set the guilt aside. There was nothing she could do about those fires, and mourning the world-before could only get you so far. That’s part of what these ski days

were about, wringing every bit of beauty and joy from the world-as-it-is that they can, then, when the celebrations are done, getting back to work trying to make it a bit better. So she scooted closer to Jax and pulled her into a kiss while the ash-tinted air bathed them in fiery hues.

From then it was a steady march up to the summit. When they reached it, no one said anything. They set down packs, stretched sore muscles, and turned in slow circles to take in the panorama. Under the unbroken blue dome of the firmament, they understood why mountain tops were depicted as the homes of gods. All around them snow-capped peaks glittered under the morning sun. White blankets covered mine tailings and burn scars, and in the morning's quiet the world felt new-born. Maroon Bells and Pyramid peak glittered to the south-west like crystal leviathans, as did other uncounted, unnamed peaks besides. Jax was the first to break the silence. "Thank you," she whispered, "for sharing this with me." Kate just smiled, and kissed her again.

Every sport has its share of goofy slang. The skiers Kate knew growing up had a perfect word for days like this: *church*. They mounted skis, and fastened packs in silence. They lined up along the ridge, then one by one they dropped

into the bowl, cutting the untouched powder field with their skis and the morning air with their whoops, hollers, and shouts of pure animal joy.



# More from Strangers

We release audio versions of each of these featured zines, as well as interviews and other behind the scenes content, through our podcast Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, so we hope you'll check it out! Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness is a collectively run anarchist publisher. We put out books, zines, and podcasts, which you can find at [tangledwilderness.org](http://tangledwilderness.org). At the moment, this includes: **Live Like the World is Dying**, your podcast for what feels like the end times; **Anarcho-Geek Power Hour**, for people who love movies and hate cops; and **Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness**. Thanks for reading!













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