

A chairlift chair is suspended in the air, centered in the frame. The background is a dramatic sunset over a snowy mountain landscape. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow near the horizon. In the distance, a ski lift tower and other chairs are visible. The foreground shows a close-up of the snow-covered ground.

JOHN
IRVING

THE LAST
CHAIRLIFT

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SCRIBNER

LONDON NEW YORK SYDNEY TORONTO NEW DELHI

For Dean Cooke

If I must die,
I will encounter darkness as a bride,
And hug it in mine arms.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Measure for Measure*

ACT I

EARLY SIGNS

1.

AN UNMADE MOVIE

My mother named me Adam, like you-know-who. She always said I was her one and only. I've changed some names, but not mine, and not the name of the hotel. The Hotel Jerome is real—it's a great hotel. If you ever go to Aspen, you should stay there, if you can afford it. But if anything happens to you along the lines of what happened to me, you should leave. Don't blame the Jerome.

Yes, there are ghosts. No, I don't mean those ghosts you may have heard were haunting the Jerome: the unregistered guest in Room 310, a drowned ten-year-old boy, shivering with cold and quickly disappearing, leaving only his wet footprints behind; the lovelorn silver miner, whose late-night sobbing has been heard while his apparition roams the halls; the pretty hotel maid who fell through the ice in a nearby pond and (notwithstanding that she died of pneumonia) occasionally appears just to turn down the beds. They aren't the ghosts I usually see. I'm not saying they don't exist, but I've scarcely seen them. Not every ghost is seen by everyone.

My ghosts are vivid to me—they're very real. Some of their names have been changed, but I haven't changed a single essential thing about the ghosts.

I can see ghosts, but not everyone can see them. As for the ghosts themselves, what happened to them? I mean, what made them ghosts? Not everyone who dies becomes a ghost.

This gets complicated, because I know that not all ghosts are dead. In certain cases, you can be a ghost and still be half-alive—only a significant part of you has died. I wonder how many of these half-alive ghosts are aware of what has died in them, and—dead or alive—if there are rules for ghosts.

“My life could be a movie,” you hear people say, but what do they mean? Don't they mean their lives are too incredible to be real—too unbelievably good or bad? “My life could be a movie” means you think movies are both less than realistic and more than you can expect from real life. “My life could be a

movie” means you think your life has been special enough to get made as a movie; it means you think your life has been spectacularly blessed or cursed.

But my life *is* a movie, and not for the usual self-congratulatory or self-pitying reasons. My life is a movie because I’m a screenwriter. I’m first and foremost a novelist, but even when I write a novel, I’m a visualizer—I’m seeing the story unfold as if it were already on film. Like some novelists, I know the titles and plots for novels that I won’t live long enough to begin; like screenwriters everywhere, I’ve imagined more movies than I’ll ever write. Like many screenwriters, I’ve written screenplays that I’ll never see made as films. I see unmade movies for a living; I watch them all the time. My life is just another unmade movie, one I’ve seen before—one I’ll go on seeing, again and again.

They publish your novel, they make your screenplay—these books and movies go away. You take your bad reviews with the good ones, or you win an Oscar; whatever happens, it doesn’t stay. But an unmade movie never leaves you; an unmade movie doesn’t go away.

2.

FIRST LOVE

I first heard about Aspen from my mother; she's the one who made me want to see the Hotel Jerome. I have my mom to thank, or not, for my going to Aspen—and her to thank, or not, for why I put off going there for a long time.

I used to think my mother loved skiing more than she loved me. What we believe as children forms us; what haunts us in our childhood and adolescence can make us do wayward things, but I don't blame my mom for telling me that her first love was skiing. She wasn't lying.

My mom was an expert skier, though she would never have said so herself. The story I grew up with was that my mother had failed in competition; henceforth, in her estimation, her skiing was no better than “fair to middling.” A lifelong ski instructor—she preferred to teach young children and other beginners—my mom wasn't bitter about her failure to compete. As a kid, I never heard a single complaint about her diminutive size—not from her. From my grandmother, and from Aunt Abigail and Aunt Martha—my mother's older sisters—I heard a litany of grievances concerning my mom's size.

“Weight equals speed,” was the condemning way Aunt Abigail put it. Abigail was a hefty woman, especially in her hips—more bovine than svelte in a pair of ski pants.

“Your mom was just a little thing, Adam,” Aunt Martha told me with disdain. “In the downhill event, you have to weigh more than she ever did—she was strictly a slalom skier, a one-event girl.”

“She just didn't weigh enough!” my grandmother would periodically exclaim; in these spontaneous outbursts, her arms reached for the sky, fists clenched, as if she held the heavens accountable.

Those Brewster girls, my mother included, were fond of dramatizing their exclamatory remarks, though my grandmother—Mildred Brewster, whose maiden name was Bates—always maintained that drama was more characteristic of a Bates than a Brewster.

I believed her. Evidence of the dramatic developed slowly in my grandfather, Lewis Brewster. I was told he'd been the principal of Phillips Exeter Academy, albeit briefly and with no accomplishments of significance. Throughout my acquaintance with Principal Brewster, as he preferred to be called (even by his grandchildren), he was retired. As a perpetual principal emeritus, gloomy and stern—bordering on catatonic—the former headmaster seemed destined to live forever. Little seemed to affect him. It would take the heavens to kill him.

My grandfather didn't speak; he rarely did anything. I used to think Lewis Brewster had been born a retired head of school. To whatever was said or done, Granddaddy Lew, as he hated to be called, would respond (when he reacted at all) with no more than a nod or a shake of his head. To engage with children, his own included, seemed beneath him. When he was vexed, he chewed his mustache.

Of course, I was not yet born when my mother told her parents she was pregnant. Before I knew the story, I used to wonder what Principal Brewster had to say about that. I was born one week before Christmas—Dec. 18, 1941. As my unwed mother would never tire of telling me, I was ten days late.

3.

A FIRST-NAME BASIS

My mother was the kind of moviegoer who could not resist likening the physical appearance of people she knew to movie stars. When the Austrian skier Toni Sailer won three gold medals at the 1956 Olympics, my mom said, “Toni looks a little like Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*”—a Hitchcock movie we’d watched together. My mom was a Hitchcock fan, but was she on a first-name basis with Toni Sailer?

“Toni almost fell into an open mine shaft in Aspen!” she said in her wide-eyed, exclamatory way. My mother then went on and on about all the ski lifts they were constructing and new trails they were cutting on Aspen Mountain. She said the old mine dumps and the abandoned buildings were being bulldozed, but there were still open pits here and there.

It’s also not clear if my mother knew Stein Eriksen, the Norwegian skier; to this day, I don’t know if they so much as met. The FIS Alpine World Ski Championships were in Aspen in 1950. “Stein was in first place after the first run,” was not quite all my mom had to say about Stein. I’m referring to more than her oft-repeated knowledge of his famous reverse-shoulder technique.

I mean when my mom and I first saw *Shane* together—in 1953, I would have been eleven or twelve—and my mother remarked that Stein Eriksen looked like Van Heflin. “But Stein is handsomer,” she confided to me, taking my hand. “And you’re going to look like Alan Ladd,” she assured me in a whisper, because we were in the movie theater—the Ioka, in downtown Exeter—with the pending violence of *Shane* unfolding before us.

I later pointed out to her that Alan Ladd was blond; whichever movie star I might resemble when I grew up, surely I would remain brown-haired. “I meant you’re going to be handsome, in the same way Alan Ladd is handsome—good-looking and *small*,” my mom replied, squeezing my hand when she emphasized the word *small*.

My aunts and my grandmother complained that my mother didn't weigh enough to be competitive in a ski race, but I believed she cherished her smallness. My being small was an attractive trait to her. Thus, before my teens, I evaluated Alan Ladd—the solitary but romantic gunfighter in *Shane*—and I imagined I might become a hero, or at least look like one.

Did my mom have an encounter (of any kind) with Stein Eriksen in Aspen? Did she even shake his hand? I know she made the trip; she saved the bus tickets, if only the New-York-to-Denver part. I don't doubt that she was there—in Aspen, in 1950—but she finished nowhere near the podium. Two Austrian skiers, Dagmar Rom and Trude Jochum-Beiser, won the women's events. Stein Eriksen, not yet a household name in international skiing, placed third in the men's slalom. The American racers won no medals. It's verifiable that the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships in 1950 were held in Aspen, but that wasn't the first time my mother was in town.

4.

DETERMINED NOT TO LEARN

The U.S. National Downhill and Slalom Championships were held in Aspen in 1941. It was the weekend of March 8 and 9, only a month before my mother's nineteenth birthday. She kept no bus tickets from that trip—if there were buses from New York to Denver back then. She said she got to Denver on her own; she told me she “hitched a ride the rest of the way with a bunch of Vermonters.”

A few members of the Mount Mansfield Ski Club, maybe? Friends she'd skied with at Stowe, most likely. My mom was already a college dropout; she didn't last a semester. “I tried Bennington,” as she put it; when the snow came, she went skiing instead.

My mother would have gone skiing at Bromley Mountain. It was close to Bennington. A son in the Pabst Brewing Company family had opened the ski area in 1938. When my mom first skied there, there might have been only one trail—on the west side of the mountain—and I have no idea what Bromley had for a tow.

“They put up their first J-bar between the Twister and the East Meadow runs,” I remember my mother telling me. Over the years, when she spouted ski-area statistics to me, I would learn to tune her out.

All the Brewster girls had gone to summer camp at Aloha Camp on Lake Morey in Fairlee, Vermont, allegedly the oldest girls' camp in the state. That summer camp was where my mom made friends with skiers from Stowe. My mother flunked out of Bennington as fast as she could; she didn't stick around Bromley, not for long, not then. With the help of those girl campers from Aloha, she spent her first ski season in Stowe; this went on through the forties and into the fifties, when my mom was helping at the ski area and getting to know Mount Mansfield. My mother would henceforth designate the ski season as her “winter job.” Both before and after I was born, she spent most of her winters in Stowe. I felt like I was a ski orphan.

Until July 1956, when I was fourteen, I lived with my grandmother and the principal emeritus. There was much fussing over me by my busybody aunts. I was an illegitimate child, but I was watched over. With two older cousins, I had no lack of hand-me-down clothes—boys' clothes, mostly.

Technically speaking, Nora wasn't a boy. But my cousin Nora was a tomboy; until she was sent off to the school for girls in Northfield, Massachusetts, Nora wore only boys' clothes. My cousin Henrik was a real boy—a real dickhead, it would turn out. Aunt Abigail and Aunt Martha had married Norwegians from northern New Hampshire; my uncles, Johan and Martin Vinter, were brothers. The Vinter family was in the logging and lumber business. Not Uncle Johan and Uncle Martin—they taught at Exeter, which would make my cousin Henrik a faculty brat when he attended the academy. Given that they were daughters of a former headmaster of Phillips Exeter, Abigail and Martha had come of age while paying attention to the young bachelors on the academy faculty—as my grandmother had observed.

My mom, on the other hand, had come of age while paying attention to skiing—or to skiers. Unsurprisingly, Johan and Martin Vinter were skiers. Why wouldn't they be? Their name means “Winter” in Norwegian, and they'd grown up in North Conway—where the Cranmore Mountain ski resort began operations in 1937. Johan and Martin hadn't waited for the first rope tow to be installed. They were telemark skiers on Cranmore before there were any lifts; they put skins on their telemark skis and skinned up Cranmore Mountain before they skied down.

This was how the Brewster girls—my mom, who was the youngest, included—learned to ski. Abigail and Martha met the young Norwegian teachers on the Exeter faculty, and they took my mom with them on the Boston & Maine—“the ski train,” my cousin Nora called it. They all went on winter weekends from Exeter to North Conway, where they would be met by carloads of Vinters at the train station. (My mother always referred to the North Conway Norwegians as “carloads of winters.”)

Thus did downhill skiing gain a foothold in the town of Exeter—in the seacoast area of New Hampshire, where there are no mountains. Skiing was what the Brewster girls did with their Norwegian relatives on winter weekends. “We went up north,” as my mother put it. By the time I was born, the ski season was already my mom's *winter job*. From the age of four, every year I

would be given brand-new skis and boots and poles. Yet no amount of new equipment—not to mention the private lessons my mother gave me—would do the trick.

At an early age, in my most formative years, I had decided to hate skiing. I would have preferred a mom who stayed at home with me to one who went skiing from the middle of November to the middle of April every year. I wanted my mother to be around, more than I wanted her to teach me to ski. As a child and a teenager, how else could I have made my point? I was determined not to learn to ski.

As the youngest in an extended family of expert skiers, how could I not have learned? It was impossible not to learn a little. I do know how to ski but I managed to learn to ski pretty badly. No one in the Brewster or Vinter family would call me an expert. I'm a purposely intermediate skier.

5.

BUT WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN ASPEN?

My mother must have known the seventeen-year-old girl who won the Women's National Slalom Championship on Aspen Mountain in March 1941. Young as she was, Marilyn Shaw was no newcomer; Stowe's "Snow Baby," as she was called, Marilyn Shaw was the youngest downhill skier who ever made the U.S. Women's Olympic Team. It wasn't Marilyn's fault that the 1940 Olympics were canceled because of the war in Europe. Yet my mom, who surely would have skied at Stowe with Marilyn Shaw, was not on a first-name basis with Marilyn—"the Shaw kid," was how my mother referred to her, when she mentioned Marilyn at all, which was rarely.

They were both Vermont skiers; they had to have known each other. And there was more than the Mount Mansfield connection. According to my mom, they'd both been coached by Sepp Ruschp—an Austrian ski instructor. My mother adored Sepp Ruschp. "He took his exam at St. Christoph, under Hannes Schneider," she told me.

"What exam?" I asked her.

"The official Austrian state-certified whatchamacallit, sweetie—his ski-instructor exam!" she exclaimed.

How could I forget the Hannes Schneider–Sepp Ruschp connection? The stem christie, the downhill turn that was the signature of the Arlberg technique—the turn that would replace the telemark turn. I can remember my mother saying, wistfully, how the stem christie itself would be replaced; gradually, it was. By the late 1960s, the parallel turn was more popular. I remember my mom telling me that my old-fashioned stem christie made me look like I was barely better than a snowplower. At the time, my turns *were* barely better than snowplow turns.

What would really kill the stem christie were the parabolic skis of the late 1990s—or so my mother always said. "Those new skis made parallel turns

easy,” I remember my mom telling me. “Even for *you*, sweetie,” she added, squeezing my hand.

It was not lost on me that the Austrian Hannes Schneider came to Cranmore Mountain in North Conway, New Hampshire, in 1939. Sepp Ruschp, who had learned from Schneider, came to Mount Mansfield in Stowe, Vermont, in 1936. And one of Schneider’s former students, Toni Matt—the Austrian who schussed the headwall of Tuckerman Ravine (the glacial cirque on the southeast face of Mount Washington, New Hampshire) at an estimated top speed of 85 miles per hour—won both the combined and the downhill events on Aspen Mountain in 1941. Toni Matt had moved to the U.S. from Austria in 1938.

Yet my mom made little mention of Toni Matt that championship weekend in Aspen. Instead, I heard all about the “crude boat-tow ski lift”; my mother said the lift took you only a quarter of the way up. “You had to sidestep the rest of the way,” she said; she wasn’t complaining. Nor did she gripe about the fact that the participants helped to prepare the course. “Everyone pitched in,” was how my mom put it.

I heard so much about Jerome B. Wheeler, I was at first confused; I thought he was one of the skiers in competition. “Poor Jerome,” my mother usually prefaced what she said about him. From what I’d heard her say about Roch Run, the first ski trail at Aspen—a challenging run, named for the Swiss mountaineer and avalanche expert André Roch—I assumed poor Jerome was a skier who’d fallen and been badly injured on Roch Run.

But my mother meant “the Macy’s man,” as she also called Jerome B. Wheeler—she meant the actual president of Macy’s, the New York department store. Jerome B. Wheeler was a New Yorker who came to Aspen in the 1880s. Wheeler invested in the silver mines; he completed the first smelter. There was a railroad construction race, between the Colorado Midland and the Denver & Rio Grande—to see which line could beat the other to Aspen, across the Continental Divide. Wheeler put \$100,000 into the Colorado Midland. And when prosperity came—when Aspen was a boom town—Jerome B. Wheeler paid for an opera house and the Hotel Jerome.

You would have thought my mom knew Jerome B. Wheeler, to hear how she talked about him. She was definitely on a first-name basis with him. “He was a Civil War hero, you know,” she told me. “Jerome rode with Sheridan.

Poor Jerome was a colonel, but they busted him to major because he disobeyed some stupid orders!”

“What orders?” I asked her, wringing my hands.

“I have no idea—*stupid* ones!” my mother declared. “Poor Jerome crossed Confederate lines. He rescued a Union regiment—they were starving! Don’t wring your hands, Adam—they’re small enough already.”

“Poor Jerome,” was all I could say.

There were a few glory years for the Jerome, but the silver boom would go bust; upon the demonetization of silver and the crash of 1893, the mines shut down. Wheeler’s bank was forced to close. In 1901, Jerome B. Wheeler declared bankruptcy; he lost the Jerome for back taxes in 1909. The Wheeler Opera House caught fire in 1912. Poor Jerome died in 1918.

A former traveling salesman who’d been born in Syria became the bartender at the Jerome—this was in the “quiet years” of the grand hotel’s decline. Mansor Elisha, the Syrian American bartender, bought the Jerome for back taxes in 1911.

“It’s so sad!” my mom would exclaim—she meant poor Jerome and the fate of the hotel. “It’s become a shabby boardinghouse, but you can see what a swell hotel it was!” She declared that the Syrian family who took over the Jerome was a family of saints; she said the Elishas always welcomed the townspeople. “André Roch himself stayed five whole weeks at the Jerome,” my mother told me. She believed this proved her point: if the famous André Roch had stayed five whole weeks, the Hotel Jerome must have been swell.

During World War II, when the ski troops of the Tenth Mountain Division came to Aspen on cross-country maneuvers, the skiing soldiers slept on the floors of the Jerome. I learned, long after the fact, that many of Stowe’s male skiers joined the Tenth Mountain Division. Weren’t these men my mother would have seen on the slopes of Mount Mansfield? Maybe some of them were among that *bunch of Vermonters* she’d hitched a ride with, on her way to Aspen from Denver in 1941. She didn’t say.

Toni Matt was a Tenth Mountain Division man. A lieutenant in World War II, he was posted to the Aleutian Islands. Toni Matt wasn’t married in 1941, when he won two championships in Aspen. Matt was only a few years older than my mom—at the time, he would have been twenty-one or twenty-two.

I've seen photographs of Toni Matt; he looks a little like me. Actually, I think I look a lot more like Toni Matt than I do Alan Ladd, but my mother could not be persuaded of this.

"In the first place, Toni Matt has dark hair," I pointed out to my mom, "and his face is rounder than Alan Ladd's—more like mine. Furthermore, Toni Matt's nose isn't as sharp as Alan Ladd's, and his eyebrows aren't as thick—they're more like mine."

"Toni Matt was never *handsome*, not like Alan Ladd—not to me," my mother added, with a dismissive shrug. "Not like you're handsome, sweetie," she told me.

Once, when I argued with my mom about Toni Matt, she just took my hand and squeezed it. Then she said—with each word, her eyes never left mine—"If you were Toni Matt's son, you would love to ski. Toni schussed the headwall of Tuckerman Ravine," she reminded me. She even knew Toni's time for the four-mile race, from the top to the bottom of the ravine. "Six minutes, twenty-nine and two-tenths of a second," my mom whispered to me; her eyes were locked on mine. "If Toni Matt were your father, no one could have kept you off skis. Leave your little hands alone, sweetie."

But my mom must have been on a first-name basis with *someone* that weekend of March 8 and 9. She never varied from saying I was born ten days late—on December 18 of that year. You do the math. That weekend when Marilyn Shaw won the Women's National Slalom Championship in Aspen, someone got my mother pregnant. Poor Jerome didn't knock her up. That March weekend in 1941, Jerome B. Wheeler was already a ghost.

6.

LITTLE RAY

What I remember of my winters, when I was a child and in my early teens, is that my grandmother was my mother. Nana, my name for Mildred Brewster, was my winter mom. And she was my mother's most devoted apologist—for a while, it seemed to me, her only apologist.

“No one asks to be born,” I grew up hearing Mildred Brewster say—to which my audibly breathing aunts, Abigail and Martha, would roll their eyes and breathe more heavily.

“The poor-Rachel routine,” Aunt Abigail labeled it.

“Here comes the whaling ship,” Aunt Martha would whisper in my ear, “just when we were hoping it had sailed beyond the horizon.” But I loved listening to Nana's story about my mother's name. Mildred Brewster had studied English and American literature at Mount Holyoke, a Massachusetts liberal arts college for women; her favorite novel was *Moby-Dick*, the reason my mom was named Rachel.

Nana's copy of the novel was always on the table beside her reading chair. Even as a child, I noticed that *Moby-Dick* was a more constant presence than the Bible; my grandmother consulted the story of the white whale more than she turned to Jesus. “One day, dear, when you're old enough, I'll read this to you,” Nana told me, holding the huge book in both her hands. She didn't wait for me to be old enough. I was ten when she started reading the novel aloud to me; I was twelve, almost thirteen, before she finished. It's a slow novel, but the chapters are short. An ocean voyage goes slowly, except for the sinking.

“Keep your eye on the cannibal, dear—Queequeg is important,” Nana was always saying. “He's not just any harpooner; Queequeg isn't a Christian. He's referred to as an ‘abominable savage’ for a reason—not only to get your attention. Queequeg travels with a shrunken head; he's heavily tattooed. And there's his coffin. Please don't forget about Queequeg's coffin!”