

Front Facing Camera Chronicles:

Aspen

A Jack Simon Traveling Story



When the snow melts the magic fairy dust of ski season blows away with it. Sometimes you end up staring across from your mountain hookup asking “Now what?” A lot of crying had gone on amongst my friends this season about “everybody leaving now that the season was over” and I couldn’t help but think of

James Franco hanging on the noose in “The Ballad of Buster Scruggs” and asking the crying outlaw hanging next to him “First time?”. It’s a meme now on the internet. My best friends have left me every six months for nine years. The mud season exodus comes annually in ski towns. In Stratton you can’t find a store open between the mountain’s close and the summertime. Might as well have tumbleweeds bumbling through the deserted cobblestone streets. The J-1s leave first. Here from Jamaica, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and more, they come over to work on the hill using seasonal visas known as J-1 Visas. They’re on every major mountain, most minor mountains too. Inevitable things happen when hot people are thrown together in close proximity to live on a ski mountain so breaching their posse is the key to seeing a ski town’s greatest peaks. Always the wildest ones, many have taken my heart inside a gondola.

The college kids leave next to “spend some time with their parents before they go back to school.”. Usually they’re just out of money. Blew it all on booger sugar. Mud season kicks in and the tourists empty out. Switch to their Hampton houses so there’s no work for the seasonal employees so then they leave. Most never come back. Some say they’ll come back but most don’t. They return to California or North Carolina or South Carolina or Hawaii or New York or Nebraska. Some say they’ll come back next winter, but most don’t.

Waking up in a bed in a home of a family that stays is comforting. I am the one leaving again after all. I’m waking up at the Lees, the sweetest to ever live. Perpetually welcome to helping, I had met them through the son Colby whom I met when I moved to satisfy a craving for bigger mountains. Having been part of

my interview for my coaching gig he became my first and best friend in Aspen. A few weeks before I had driven all the way forty-five minutes down valley to see a girl I like play a show at a dive mountain's dive bar. She rocked but I got caught up there too late and when I tried to drive home I fell asleep at the wheel. Desperate for respite I pulled into the dirt road leading to their home. I went right where left would have taken me up towards Sopris Mountain on a winding road I totaled my truck on first day here three years ago. I texted Colby that I was sleeping in his driveway and hoped he would come out to retrieve me. Obviously he was very much asleep so I passed out right there scrunched across my front seat. I couldn't go into the backseat I can't remember why. Few hours later I woke up before dawn descended, cracked my neck and drove the rest of my way home. When I told Momma Lee and Colby this story and Colby said they had had a full house Momma Lee hectored him and told me I could have slept on the couch. Just to give you an example.

My car barely made it here again but for different equally dangerous reasons. Stocked full with shit I couldn't even see out my passenger side on the drive over. Not out the window not out the windshield. Blankets and bags and a bin were blocking the way. Might as well have laid a big brick wall to my right. Momma Lee was horrified and insisted she help me repack it the following morning. Of course I had planned on this as she had done the same thing last year, and I gleefully accepted her offer. Needed the reorganization help. Never been good at it. A middle school teacher said, "Organization is the key to success."

I think that's stretching it but I get it and my mom still quotes it so it has got to have some merit.

I came upstairs and Momma Lee greeted me. We talked for a while and then she made breakfast for her daughter Colby's sister, and me. They're a family of good cooks, so the meal was delicious. After finishing and doing the dishes Momma Lee asked me if I was ready and I said I was and we went to my car when I opened my front door shit spilled out and Momma Lee gasped and I laughed. Her hand covered her mouth and I watched her hair turn greyer. "Let's take everything out first." We began chipping away at it, taking my life and sorting everything into piles. One pile I was bringing with me and would need to access on the trip, another was shit I wouldn't need until I was moved in, and then one bin I was leaving back at the Lees. Accessible would be camping gear, a backpack with my laptop and some hastily stuffed-in clothes, a backpack with my PlayStation and games, and a shoebox overflowing with cards from kids I've coached and letters from ex-girlfriends. Enough room was left for my two cupholders to be open which doesn't sound important but very much is when you're going to be driving for weeks and weeks. Unneeded were my domestic kitchen supplies, my TV, my skis, my library, my embarrassing surplus of ski clothes, and my bin of miscellaneous household items I can't seem to rid of. I had cut down on many of those items and was pretty proud of that. I have a problem letting go of things. All stuff has got memories behind them it's hard. Momma Lee was still dismayed, she created a garbage pile and I fought her on too many items

that should have been thrown out long ago anyway. I would end up leaving a whole bin and some blankets with them, fucking Lees rule.

The project took hours. I called for a break when Momma Lee dragged the industrial vacuum out. We went inside and Momma Lee fed Tucker, their misguided service dog. They had raised him for eight months letting him be friends with everybody until they found out you weren't supposed to do that with service dogs. Four years later the poor thing is still confused. You can see the sadness in his eyes. Colby came in from helping his dad and brother install a dishwasher in the apartment above the garage they rented out. Colby was easy to talk to and I knew if I wasn't careful I wouldn't get on the road until the late afternoon. Driving in the dark is like having sex with a condom, you're going to get where you're going but you know you're missing some stuff. We fell into conversation's rhythm like we had never stopped seeing one another every day. "You almost done?" He asked me.

"I think so, we're about to clean, and then we just have to put everything back in. Should be... what Momma Lee? Hour and a half?" She gave me a doubtful look. "Ninety minutes?" Like rephrasing fucking changed anything.

"We'll see." She had bigger plans for me. Colby made lunch for us. I felt like a very well-attended to guest. Time melted by like a Dali painting. Mercifully Colby got called by his dad to help with something in the back and we all walked outside to get back to our respective work. Momma Lee put in her earplugs and turned on the vacuum and that got the attention of her husband who passed through and chuckled at all my stuff splayed out on his driveway. He continued on his way to

his boys waiting for him in the back. His daughter caught him first, saying goodbye as she goes on a trip to Utah to buy a car. She hugged her dad and her brothers and me and her mom and then left with her boyfriend driving her car. Momma Lee put her earplugs back in and handed me the vacuum. I knew how much she hated the sound and how it gave her a terrible headache so I took care of jamming it into every dirtied crevice. My car was filthy. An electric blue Jeep Trailhawk Compass, it's a Smurfmobile and I should take better care of it but it's not possible to keep a clean car during ski season. Coaching means I got skis, poles, boot bag, garbage from my last trip to work a competition, a wax bench, empty Red Bull cans, a skateboard, and lost water bottles. Exhausting keeping up with all that. So I don't. It got embarrassing towards the end of the season though. Might have lost a love due to it. Can't have that. I knew it'd be a wreck again by the time the trip finished in Oregon but at least now it won't be double dirty. I finished and put the vacuum away and we began repacking the Smurfmobile. Slowly. It burned into the afternoon with the sun now beating at our backs. I shed my shirt stuffing it through my jeans belt loop and scratched the new Stratton Mountain tattoo on my right ribcage. Damned if I wasn't going to show it off. Couldn't take too long a moment tho and hustled along to load the heavy bins and bags before Momma Lee tried to do it herself. She found room to stuff shit into spots I had never even thought to look. Slipped my skis and camera tripod on the floor between two bins and blew my mind. Only ended up taking that ninety minutes more or less to finish the pack. "Come inside and fill up your

water bottles.” She ordered and obediently I took my empties from my car and followed her inside. “Do you want any food for the road?”

“No I’m all right.” That was the truth, I was excited to stop at the Wendys a few miles down the highway. Good way to kickstart the road trip. Momma Lee hated when I stunk her house up with fries and hated any food that came with an expiration date so I kept that fact to myself. Helplessly I watched her pack me a to-go sack in a canvas tote with fruit, bars, and leftovers. No stopping her. Straightening the bag out she pushed it over to me before we both leaned over the marble kitchen table. Actually only I did, she was too short so she rested her elbows on it. I felt her attention intensify on me. Cursed with a scattered brain after knocking it a couple too many times it was rare she was able to corral her thoughts and push them in a singular direction. She gets in a mood and her questions and comments come in a fury and get increasingly personal but she’s optimistic and sincere in her curiosity. She wants to know everything about you but people usually aren’t willing. I of course would talk shit to a rabid wolverine so we get along swimmingly. “You know you’re always welcome here.” She began. “Even though you broke up with (REDACTED)” She was very upset I left my girlfriend. She really liked her. “You’re always welcome here. Doesn’t matter what time for what reason. We always have room for you. You’re a part of this family.”

“I know Momma Lee.” I croaked out. She had given me this speech before, I had cried those times too.

“When you come back to the valley you promise to stop here first?”

"I promise."

"Okay. Are you excited for your trip?"

"I am."

"Good. You should be. It's going to be fun. Where are you going first?"

"Denver. See my best friend before taking off. He used to be a criminal you would like him. I got him to coach Mt. Hood with me last summer, been trying to get him to coach park team in Aspen for years."

"We need good coaches here."

"Yeah."

"We need to work on your clothes next time."

"Yeah I know it's bad. I'm going to do a total redo when I move back. I need new bags and bins and shit. I'll trim through my clothes too."

"It needs to happen. It's time."

"I know."

"Do your best to clean as you go along. Do you have bear spray?"

"No."

"Get bear spray."

"Okay." Having mace sounded fun.

"You're gonna have fun. Time's inevitability is pretty terrifying have all types of fun whenever you can. Maybe you'll fall in love again. Bring her back with you."

"Dough Boy was worried about that. That I'd call and say 'Sorry Dough I met a girl up here I'm not coming back.' I ran into Amy at the grocery store and she told me he was talking about setting me up with somebody but made me promise I

wouldn't bring that up with him." Dough Boy was the program director at my ski club, Colby's former boss too, and his former coach. Friend of the family.

"He knows his coaches. Knows what makes you tick." And she laughed her great big cackle and it filled the whole house. We chatted for another twenty minutes and then I said "I really should be going" and she walked me outside to where the boys were working so I could say goodbye. We all shared big hugs and then Colby was the one to escort me to the Smurfmobile. I was really gonna miss him. He was a homebody who I rarely saw this past winter but we knew that was going to happen when we stopped working together. I put my waters in my cupholders, started the Smurfmobile, and plugged in my phone. Never stopped at Wendy's, ate the food Momma Lee gave me.