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REBIRTH ON THE NORTHERN ISLAND

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SKIER:
Yoichi Watanabe

I've seen moondrops. They fell the first night. They're falling now as I pack. It was different the first night. Green light glowing on the hill. A pint of Japanese whiskey that tasted like rum. Fluorescent lights pouring through a sluice in the trees. Four-foot snow drifts. Half-inch flakes. Twenty people on the mountain. We didn't know what was going on, but it was piling up around us.

It's hard not to see them when I close my eyes. We're on a bus now. Soon the airport, then the runway, Tokyo. We fly over the peaks, the Sea of Japan. There's a fleet of fishing boats headed for Sapporo City. They navigate the shoals in a narrow V; white breakers roll from their bows. They're making good time. There's another storm rolling in tonight.

Shunsuke curls the fingers of his right hand when he speaks. When he describes skiing in Hokkaido, he makes fists like he's holding ski poles. He seems uncomfortable. He nods and stares at the blank TV.

We're sitting in his apartment near the Niseko train station. The neighborhood is run-down, not like the resort five miles up the road. Shunsuke and our translator, Ian, recline on a tiny couch. I'm on a wheeled office chair. The apartment is the size of six toll booths. There are two pairs of skis by the front door, a skateboard in the hall, a kettle on the kerosene heater, two TVs, five VCRs, and six remote controls. When I ask Ian what the shiny cube-like device on the coffee table is, he answers, "That's his phone."

We've been in Niseko eight days now. We've been skiing with Shunsuke for four. He speaks in paragraphs. It seems he's been waiting to explain some things for a long time. His Japanese is sudden and jumpy as he describes what it's like to be a ski bum in Japan. *Hatsuyuki. Suberi.* Not easy. Young men are expected to con-

"THERE'S SOMETHING SURREAL ABOUT THE TOWN OF NISEKO. THE SNOW FALLING. THE 6,000-FOOT VOLCANO ACROSS THE VALLEY."

tribute to society, follow the straight and narrow. Self-serving lifestyles are something of a disgrace.

Shunsuke lived the other life once. Tokyo, computers, money, an apartment, a wife. It's hard to believe, looking around his apartment. It's like he's speaking of another person when he talks about the past. In a way, he is.

It's the snow that defines Japan's northernmost island. It floats in at night when you're sleeping. It falls all day. It whitewashes the town, the mountains, lift towers. The locals say it comes from Siberia. Freezing air crosses the Siberian plains, then hits the moist Sea of Japan. Another Russian front. The phenomenon has made Niseko Ski Resort one of the snowiest in the world at 551 inches a year. Averaging a feathery four percent water content, it seems like more.

In the 13 days we ski here, eight feet falls.

We watch it come down from the apartment Ian found for us. It blankets the trees, cars, cliffs, road. There's snow spewing from the neighbor's blower, blocking our van, stacked three feet high on the windshield. It's trailing the shuttle bus, covering the patrol shack, quieting the skiers.

The snow is in my mouth the first night we ski Niseko. The funniest things happen in Japan. Massive fluorescent lights illuminate the mountain like a scoreboard. Speakers blast American hip-hop. I don't recognize the tunes. Most of the skiers are teenagers. Niseko is fast becoming the most popular resort in Japan. The lifts run from nine to nine.

We find a wooded bowl off the top of the quad. The lights make the slope green. Visibility is decent. There are runs like this all along Mount Annapuri. The mountain hosts three interconnected resorts—Annapuri, Higashiyama, and Hirafu—for an average of 3,100 vertical feet of skiing over 2,200 acres. Then there's the 15 square miles of backcountry beyond the boundaries.

Three tracks lead to the 600-foot face below. There's a draw at the bottom. If the face slid, it could be a terrain trap. But the maritime snowpack here seems solid. We decide to ski it and my skis lift as I pick up speed. I can hear the snow hiss and see a faint cloud of green following Dave down the hill. The scene is like a recurring ski dream I have every August. In it, I fly off a jump and keep going up and up.

I see the draw below. I split two birches and follow a sluice toward it. Then down, down. The turns keep coming and I think I must have missed it. Then there it is—*whoomp*—I'm across and climbing up the other side.

There's a cat track above the draw. Dave's standing on it. His body is white and green. There's a light tower behind him. I'm honestly wondering if this is real. The whiskey was strong. I could've nodded off on the couch. But it's cold and I feel melted snow dripping down my neck. Dave moves slowly. It's spooky. It's like we're underwater. You can't hear the hip-hop down here. There are no skiers. Just the muffled sound of snow on snow.

Ian visits every night after skiing. He collars a Sapporo from the fridge and watches us play backgammon. He's from Scotland. It seems Niseko is a haven for snowbirds like him. He's lived here since he quit his job three years ago teaching English in Hiroshima. He met his Japanese wife in the Hirafu Chalet 200 feet up the road.

One of Ian's first jobs in the valley was to construct the apartment we're staying in. His boss is local, he says, one of the old ones. His name is Kaya. The entire


Shunsuke

"SHUNSUKE, NABE, AND NASHI HEAD STRAIGHT FOR A STAND OF BIRCH. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FOLLOW THEM. ALL WE CAN DO IS LOOK FOR THE TRENCHES THEY LEAVE."

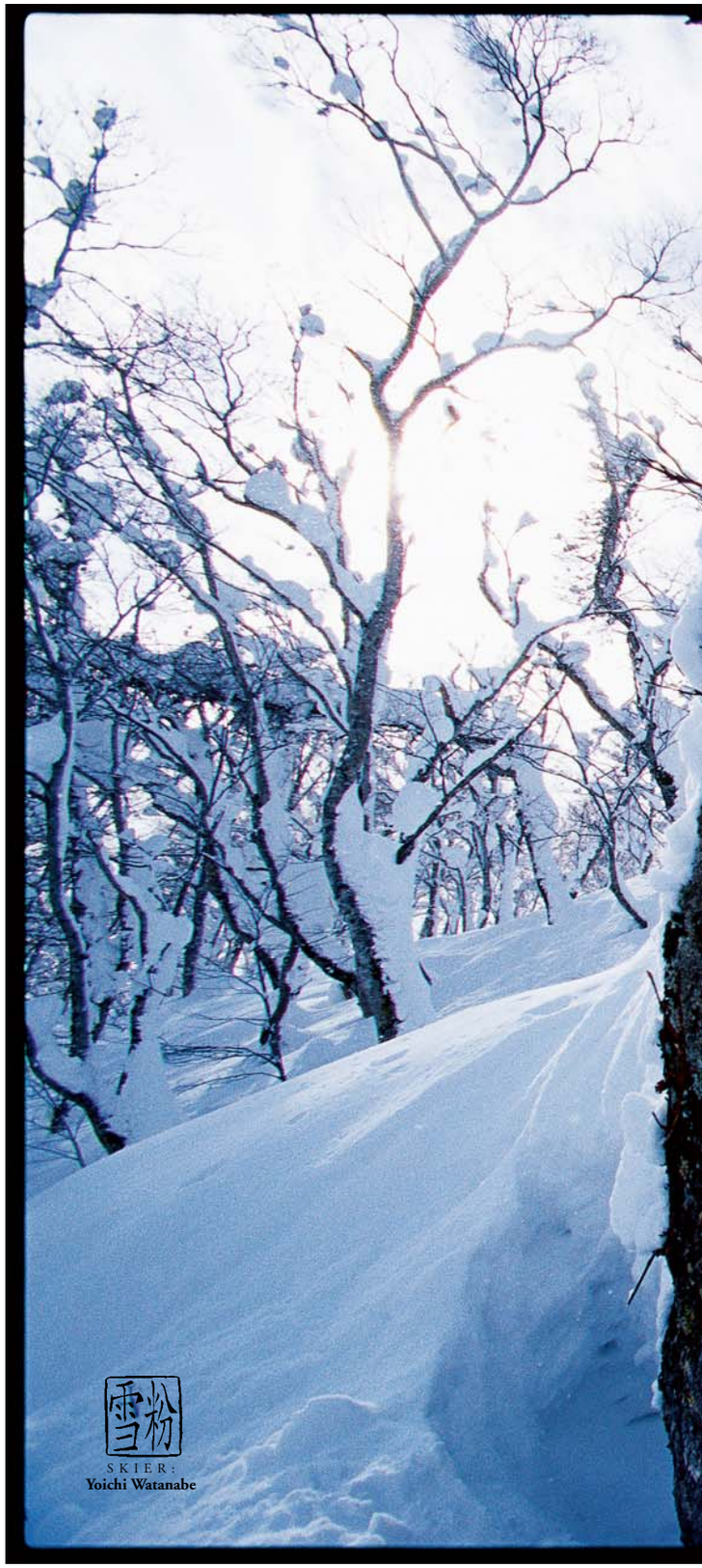
building—including the benches, tables, and counters—is hand-hewn. There are pegs over the heaters for ski boots and clothes. There are some funny angles in the roof. Kaya wears a customary *happi* jacket when he works, Ian says. It's a tradition among Japanese woodworkers. Tradition is everything here, he adds.

The trees are part of the story, too. They surround the house, line the edge of the road, frame the trails. They're mostly silver birch. Hoary bark coils around the trunks. Notches split the trees in two, then two again. Gnarled branches hold the snow.

The best skiing is in the trees. It's old growth on the mountain, so they're spaced far apart. When we meet our guides the next day—Shunsuke, Nabe, and Nashi—they head straight for a stand of birch. It's impossible to follow them. We can't see them through the clouds of snow. All we can do is look for the trenches they leave.

The components of Shunsuke's life are strewn about his apartment. Video-editing software. Digital cameras. Stacks of manuals. Three years ago, he and Nabe produced the most popular ski movie in Japan: *Rowe II.* It followed on the heels of another blockbuster, *Rowe I.* They are cinematic films, shot mostly in Japan, but also in locales like New Zealand and Alaska. There's no question where the filmmakers hail from. Almost every shot is of unfathomably deep powder.

The name Rowe comes from the ancient Ainu civilization that settled Hokkaido. They're the island's equivalent of Native Americans—conquered and cast out from Japanese society. The Japanese look down on most things foreign. They are a proud people. The old generation covets tradition, convention, language, religion, culture. Hardly anyone speaks fluent English. Visiting the hospital is a sign of weakness. There is no divorce.



SKIER:
Yoichi Watanabe

"THE LOCALS SKI WITH THEIR HANDS UP. IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE TRYING TO CLIMB OUT OF THE SNOW."

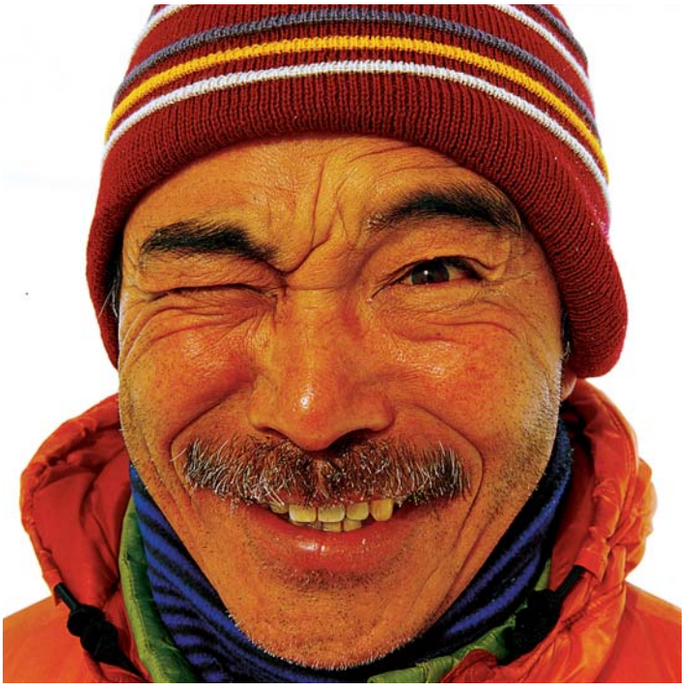
Shunsuke knows what it's like to buck tradition. And to be an outsider. When he was growing up, he hiked and skied the mountains near his house while his friends raced at the ski hill. When his friends received new gear on holidays, Shunsuke got old Caber boots and hot-pink Blizzards.

It is that way in the Ito family. End over means. Shunsuke tells us about his grandfather. When a storm rolls through, he hikes the hill behind his house with a pair of bamboo skis. He doesn't know how to turn, Shunsuke says, so the old man bombs straight back to the house. He likes to look at the lines in the snow while eating his breakfast.

There's something surreal about the town of Niseko. The falling snow. The 6,000-foot volcano across the valley. Log taverns, sushi bars. Silver trees. Clapboard farmhouses with western log barns. Tiny saloons with men standing around a fire. Baskets of sake cups. Door handles made of driftwood. Crimson tuna fillets. Sushi chefs turning their hands in the air, using wooden knives so as not to spoil the fish.

We saw two oceans from the top of a mountain yesterday. The Sea of Japan on one side. The Pacific on the other. They looked about the same. Big, deep, blue. Sparkling waves. I read that they tested Zero fighter planes up here. They were disappearing over Siberia during WWII and no one knew why. They flew them over Hokkaido because the weather was similar to northern Russia. They discovered an engine part was freezing after a dozen planes went down. Silver Zeros falling from the sky. Last year a man dragged out a wing and hung it in his bar.

Shunsuke rejoined the mainstream after college, he says. He moved to Tokyo, worked as a computer programmer, leased an apartment. He made new friends,



enjoyed his independence. When winter came to the city he realized that for the first time he was living among people who didn't relate snow to skiing. It was also the first winter he didn't log a single day on the hill.

But he was earning money, and his parents were proud. He stuck it out that year. He survived another. He grew roots. He got married. The years passed. Then something gave. His job wasn't fulfilling. The concrete byways of Tokyo weren't home. He missed the mountains, the snow, the trees. After six years in the city, he needed a change.

Ian's old boss, Kaya, knows about the trees. The houses he builds are made of them. There are piles of sawdust and three motorcycles in his yard. We sit in his office in seats he shaped with a chainsaw. His wife serves green tea on a solid pine table. She helped him peel logs the first winter they spent in Niseko. They built a small studio first, then lived in it while they built the main house. They spent half of each day clearing the snow off the logs.

A dozen fishing rods hang in the rafters. Thirty-one reels sit behind glass in a cupboard by the window. Along the windowsill are two dozen hammers, each head made for a different strength nail. The tips are capped with the same steel they use to forge samurai swords.

Kaya knows about tradition. He wears the jacket. He learned his trade by carving Ainu dolls, then studying Japanese log temples. He built 20 houses in the valley using traditional Japanese tools. He does it for a living, but also to keep Niseko a Japanese town instead of a generic ski town.

But even Kaya has a story. He was in trouble in Kobe, he says. He sweeps a long, black strand of hair from his eyes, smiles. Something with the law. He never went to jail, he says, but it was close. It was a bad time. When he came to Niseko, he didn't know how to build. He didn't know about living in the mountains or skiing or fishing or living in the snow. He says 30 years ago, there was nothing here. Just the mountains, the river, the woods, and a few skiers. It took courage to move here, he says. To leave a life behind and start again.

The masses have clued in to Niseko's healing snows. A television crew came into the bar last night. Ian didn't want to talk to them. They were Japan's version of ESPN, he said. They heard Niseko was chic and were looking for a scoop. They looked like they'd never left the city in their lives. The reporters sat at a long table and pretended to sip beer. Then they drank from a shot-ski. They had the bartender pour tea into the glasses instead of whiskey. They left not knowing what this place was about. They left assuming we were thinking about them. We weren't. They were thinking of us and we were living.

They're coming more and more, Ian says. Real estate is spiking. Japan is in a recession, but it won't last forever. People will come in droves, he says. He thinks five years, maybe. He says he'll find another place then. Get away from it, start again.
The Japanese move quietly around the tourists. They serve food, drinks, take money. They talk with customers they recognize. The men are courteous. The women are striking. Occasionally owners share a cup of sake with a guest. In the streets, they walk with their heads down. On the hill they ski with their hands up. You can see their gloves gliding through the powder from the gondola. It looks like they're trying to climb out of the snow.

It was to Niigata, near Nagano, that Shunsuke escaped that last winter in the city. He went to learn to ski bumps. He got a job as a caddy at a golf course in the summer. He joined a bump team at Hakaba, then Fukushima. In 1999 he left the

SKIER:
Shunsuke Ito

"THERE'S A CERTAIN MAGIC ON THE NORTHERN ISLAND. A MAGNETIC PULL THAT LIFTS YOU UP AND OUT OF YOUR LIFE."

team to ski on his own. It wasn't long before he found himself in the same woods he learned to ski as a boy.

He marvels at the course his life has taken. An abandoned career. A stand against tradition. Even a divorce. In any other country, this wouldn't be abnormal. But you don't do things like this in Japan, Ian says. You just don't.

Before we leave, Shunsuke hunts for a Japanese magazine. He flips to a spread of him and his friends Tachimoto and Yamaki in India. They're sitting on bulbous Royal Enfield motorcycles with skis strapped to their backs. The pictures are of a trip he took last spring. The trio motorcycled 300 miles through the Himalayas looking for turns.

He shows us to the door and I ask if it was hard to drive the bikes with 75 pounds of gear on their backs. He smiles, leans on the doorframe, curls his fingers.

"Yes," he says. "Very hard."

I stopped today mid run. It'd been snowing for two days. We were poised on the edge of Waterfall, an 800-vertical-foot drop through the trees. The sun came out from behind a cloud. Silver birch cast shadows on the snow. There was a ridgeline to the right. It dropped steadily toward the river and then straight down. The water made a black streak through the snow. Snowflakes hovered in the air. They were so light they hardly fell. Ian pushed off toward the stream. In a minute, I followed, staying just right of his tracks.

Before we leave, Kaya lays out his tools on the table. They are crafted from steel and wood. They are well-used.

The *nomi*, he explains, is a Japanese chisel that shapes the mortise and tenon joints. An ads-like *chouna* notches logs. Each instrument is individually named by the machinist who made it. There is only one in the world like it. The maker's name is engraved on the handle. Kaya places his *kana*—a hand planer you pull instead of push—on the coffee table. It is solid and square with a thick, razor-sharp blade jutting from the bottom. Etched in the steel is the mark of the man who created it, Chiyozuru. The tool's name, Kaya said, is Moondrop.

We didn't know what was happening that first night. We didn't even know if it was real. The slot through the trees. The draw, the cat track. The green light radiating from the ridge.

But we couldn't stop skiing. We lapped the face. We picked new lines. We discovered the farther you skied the ridge, the longer the run to the draw. We skied straight and fast back to the lift, then sat on the quad and floated up through the dark.

There's a certain magic on the northern island, Kaya and Shunsuke will tell you. A magnetic pull that lifts you up and out of your life. It's a world so different, it can't

exist within the reality you know—so it creates a new one. One you dream about on fall nights; one where it snows every day. Where carpenters build houses with samurai steel, and trees grow silver bark.

It's a place where old men sit at a breakfast table and contemplate two shaded lines running down a hillside. Green tea steaming in a mug. A napkin balled on a bamboo mat. Footsteps in the kitchen. Boot tracks parallel to the line. Bamboo skis leaning against the doorframe. A rare break in the clouds. The sun lifting so slowly over the mountains, you hardly notice it lighting the slope.

DETAILS, DETAILS
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