



## Winter Sports

[Home](#) / [Winter Sports](#)

By [EgoPHobia](#) Posted on [14/06/2024](#) Posted in [EgoPHobia #81](#), [english](#)

Tagged [EgoPHobia #81](#), [english](#), [Stephanie V. Sears](#) [No Comments](#)

by [Stephanie V. Sears](#)

One usually looks back on one's formative years with acquired maturity and a critical eye. Alas, in my case, I observe a happy and unabated continuation of the very same foolish impulses and behavior, fraught with a recklessness that I indulgently refer to as *joie de vivre*.

My parents, poor saps, had sent me off to Austria, for a week of fresh air and winter sports with youngsters of my age: that pivotal age of thirteen to fourteen.

My parents' last words had been: *Be good and have fun*; two types of behavior which, in my view, can in no way be reconciled. Still, I replied with a total lack of self-awareness: *Of course, as always*. I do remember my parents exchanging that quick look of stubborn idealism lined with misgiving.

At Paris' Gare de 'Est, towards the end of a winter afternoon, they saw me off with my nineteen other companions, on a train car in the old style: divided into compartments seating six, with a corridor running along one side.

In unfamiliar social settings I was usually of a reserved disposition. Observing how the others were jostling for seats like a herd of herbivores eager for shelter, I decided to stand watch in the corridor, gazing at the passing landscape, rather like Bonaparte contemplating victory at Austerlitz.

Though I knew the trip would be long to Innsbruck I felt invincible in those first hours. Behind me the compartment doors slid back and forth, my ears catching the rough onomatopoeia of teen-age conversation, and the occasional invitation to come in and sit down. The sight of bodies informally sprawled (even piled) across the seats, in a smell of tangerines and *Petit Beurre* cookies, kept me firmly in my standing position. By now, I was staring at complete darkness and at the reflected debacle behind me. No longer having the distraction of the fleeting landscape, I began to feel extremely tired, to the point of faintness, my vision blurring with sleeplessness.

It was then that the boy called out to me with a voice deep for his age, and I finally accepted to enter the compartment. Though he pretended to find a space for me in the mess of overlapping bodies, I spent the rest of the night so close to him that the usual introductions seemed unnecessary. In the course of the night we discovered that we had the same name. Mine was Angele, his, Angelo. The coincidence convinced us that we were made for each other.

I had noticed Angelo at the train station. His family, as I learned afterwards, had moved from Umbria to France before his birth. So he was of Italian extraction. It is extraordinary how Italians perpetuate physical types, quite precisely recognizable in their Renaissance art. Perhaps it is by way of an enduring rurality in their society, in which natives continue to inter-marry between villages and small towns. By the wave and cut of his dark hair, features, posture and graceful stances, Angelo was the incarnation of Verrocchio's bronze of David. Though angelic-looking most of the time, the seraphic look could be disproven by a sudden flash of rascality which vanished just as abruptly, leaving one unsure of having ever seen it. These flashes held the greatest appeal for me.

I must have fallen asleep in those last few hours. When I awoke we had arrived in Innsbruck on a cold, bleak morning suggesting the imminence of a snow storm. Yet the old city's ornate facades, the old-fashioned store signs on their elegant gibbets, the general suavity of the urban scene were heart-warming as we traveled through by bus, our heads swiveling left and right to see landmarks pointed out to us by our organizers.

The bus carried us high to a mountain village where we took our quarters. I shared a room with two other girls according to the general set-up. Boys' and girls' rooms were separated by a hallway and each side had its own gender-specific bathroom containing washbasins, showers,... without which none of us would have left clean and on time for the

slopes and the fresh air that my parents had in mind for me.

I had slid down my grandmother's mildly sloping field as an infant, but this was my first real skiing experience on what appeared to be a seventy-degree incline ending on a precipitous horizon of thin air. I wondered how many fatalities had occurred here to rank it as a 'schwarze piste' or 'black run'. No one seemed to realize that I was a beginner. That afternoon, despite Angelo's encouragements – a wondrous skier, himself – I developed a positive loathing for the four sticks attached to my extremities. The rigid boots on my feet reminded me of the Inquisition's torture instruments.

Wanting to live up to Angelo's expectations, however, I slid down with skis as closely parallel as possible and, therefore, at uncontrollable speed. Flailing the air with the arm sticks, and seeing no other way to stop as the ominous end of the slope approached, I collapsed on my side and gave up altogether as I had seen pet cats do when I dressed them in doll clothes. I suppose it is by contrast with that experience that I later developed an enthusiasm for snow-boarding.

When we returned to our Gasthof, my ordeal was not over, as I had hoped. In the warmth of the inn, blood rushing back to my frozen fingers and toes, left me rolling on the floor in agony for a good twenty minutes. Perhaps others had the same experience but I was too preoccupied with my own suffering to notice or care.

After two days of this routine on extreme slopes, with the ensuing collateral damages, some chemical catalysis occurred in my brain, opening Pandora's box, and, in a combination of vengefulness and self-affirmation, it released the fiend in me.

We shared the hotel's downstairs restaurant and bar with locals, mostly men, some barely older than us, others more advanced in age, but all sharing an inordinate taste for beer, and consuming it in buckets. Around six pm the restaurant was already crowded, noisy, joyous and increasingly so as evening progressed. My select group of new friends included the admirable Angelo, of course; another was the ash-blond Bertilde, with dreamy saucer blue eyes and waist-length braided hair; gentle to the point of passivity, though, as I quickly discovered, quite receptive to my ideas of fun, whatever they might be. Her family name, reticulate with antiquity, included three particles. One might spend a good part of an afternoon spelling it out to someone. One of her ancestors had been, I believe, a Cru a fact that might account for the extraordinary inconsistencies of her personality. Finally, there

was Roland, floppy-haired, milky-skinned, black inquisitive eyes, mirrors to an exhausting mind obsessed with accuracy. He was abnormally tall for his age, seemingly boneless, and like a rock python, could bend, bundle or stretched himself into any space. That he was able to stay atop his skis and not fold over like a reed in the wind seemed incredible to me.

In tune with local customs at the Gasthof, the four of us drank liters of beer available in unlimited quantities, and as we soon found out, free of charge according to the liberal arrangements of our stay. None of the organizers of our group could, apparently, be bothered with monitoring our drinking habits once this blessing was discovered.

In the course of making useful contacts with the natives, I had agreed to exchange my gold bracelet gifted to me by an aunt, and probably a family heirloom, with a burly individual, for some ten cartons of Marlboro cigarettes containing twenty packs each.

The four of us enjoyed drinking and smoking heavily and simultaneously, in a near constant haze of alcohol and tobacco smoke.

The acquisition of cigarettes had inspired me with a great idea for an evening's entertainment. I presented my project to my friends as we cozily sat in our pinewood booth. I proposed a contest to determine who, among us, was the most physically enduring. We would burn ourselves anywhere on the inside of our hands and forearms with a cigarette, for as long as we could bear it. I felt certain that, after spending six to seven hours standing in a train corridor and freezing on the slopes, I was to be a sure laureate.

Taking to the game enthusiastically, all four of us came out of it covered in blisters, as though we had been interrogated in Afghanistan's Pul-e-Charkhi prison. To this day I bear the mark on the inside of my left annular finger of one particularly harsh self-infliction. But I didn't win the contest. Thanks to her placid nervous system, or perhaps, by way of her crusader antecedents, Berthilde beat us all.

The following evening, we were back in our booth, bare-footed as usual after a day in the Inquisition boots, tankard in hand, drinking and fumigating ourselves with cigarette smoke in almost perfect synchronicity, but slightly subdued by the pain of our burns from the night before.

It was a clear night outside and a great many locals had arrived to mingle. One large

individual, already quite undone by his intake of beer, placed one hand on my nape and patted my head with the other, while, to overcome the general brouhaha, he howled his appreciation into my ear. Angelo, who had become quite attached to me, told him to cease at once, in terms which I will not repeat, dictated, no doubt, by his rascally half and intake of alcohol.

In proprietorial outrage, he stood up, readying to slug him. *My champion*, I thought, delighted for a second. The next, however, the other boy ruthlessly slammed his ceramic *Steinzeugkrug* on top of Angelo's head, splitting it open. Blood spouted as from a Roman fountain, drenching Angelo's Renaissance hair and face. The brute walked away as Angelo staggered on his bare feet and reached for the back of the bench to steady himself. We assailed him with paper napkins to stop the impressive gush. Deciding that he 'd had enough, Angelo tottered out of the restaurant with my support. The ball of reddening napkins pressed to his wound, one arm over my shoulder, my arm around his waist, he made his way to the boy's bathroom upstairs.

Who knows what other drama had taken place just before our arrival there.... At the door, Angelo had gallantly let go of me, not wanting me to enter the men's bathroom. With foreboding, I supervised his advance towards one of the washbasins under the dim ceiling light. Soon I heard the sound of crunched glass, then a moan. In the latter could be heard incredulity as well as physical pain. Blood seeped between Angelo's toes. Someone had left broken glass on the tiled floor which we had not seen because of the poor light. I gasped and told Angelo not to move. I rushed downstairs to find help. I must have communicated the urgency of the situation to one of our chaperones because he followed me unhesitatingly to the bathroom where, with shoes on his feet, he was able to lift Angelo out of a pool of blood and carry him downstairs. I followed after them, brushing aside both Berthilde and Roland's questions. Soon was heard the hysterical siren of an ambulance as it pulled up to the Gasthof. Angelo was strapped into a gurney and whisked away in a frenzy of flashing lights.

That must have been how I found myself standing outside under a starry sky, calling me ever so temptingly to escape. While Berthilde and Roland called me from the threshold, as if I were a recalcitrant pet.

I cannot quite explain what happened to me then. Was it a sudden seizure? The c of madness brought on by the residual effect of alcohol? Was I feeling invincible under that

crystal clear night?

At any rate, my eye caught sight of a motorcycle leaning against the wall of the Gasthof. As if prodded on by the devil himself, I approached it and seeing that it was of a manageable size, got on it and tried igniting the motor by way of the right handle and a button the red color of which seemed strategic. To my delight, the motor came to life with a willing growl. I rolled the right handle towards me and off I went down the winding mountain road with a precipice on one side, the bottom of which, thankfully, I could not see in the dark. I was reminded that I did not know how to turn on the motorcycle light. I was able to rely for a while on street lights and all went surprisingly well at first. I even leaned forward as I had seen done in action movies. I almost forgot about Angelo. But, having passed the lighted area, the road became darker, steeper, icier. I realized that I did not know what I was doing nor where I was going. My nerves shattered, I skidded and by good fortune or remaining sense, I crashed into a shallow ditch mountain side. My bare feet met the ice. Looking forward to a moment of reflection I propped myself against the mountain, the motorcycle lying on its side in front of me like a slain animal. Alas, no peace was to be had. A small crowd ran down the hill towards me, led by Roland's tall figure, followed by Berthilde. Being unscathed, I knew that I was in trouble.

Angelo returned that evening, his head and feet thickly bandaged, unable to do anything else for the rest of his stay in Tyrol but hop on crutches or sit, looking out at the views. I proposed to forego skiing to stay and entertain him in some way, but to my chagrin he seemed reluctant to the idea.

Upon our return to the Gare de l'Est, Angelo, looking like a major casualty of the Great War, was led off the train ahead of us all. The alarm on his parents' faces made me cringe. My own parents, who, at first, rejoiced to see me in full health, by comparison with this apparition, were taken aside by the tired-looking chaperone who had carried Angelo downstairs. I overheard him asking my parents to not register me into their program ever again. I was touched to the quick.

Saddest of all, however, was my parting with Angelo. We did so with a meek and inconclusive wave of the hand, like divorcees still in love with each other, and not sure how things had reached such a point of no return.