



Love After Divorce: Sharing a Mutual Passion for the Slopes

A suddenly single skier finds romance when he opts to zoom down snowy mountains

by Crai S. Bower, **AARP Members Only Access**, January 10, 2022

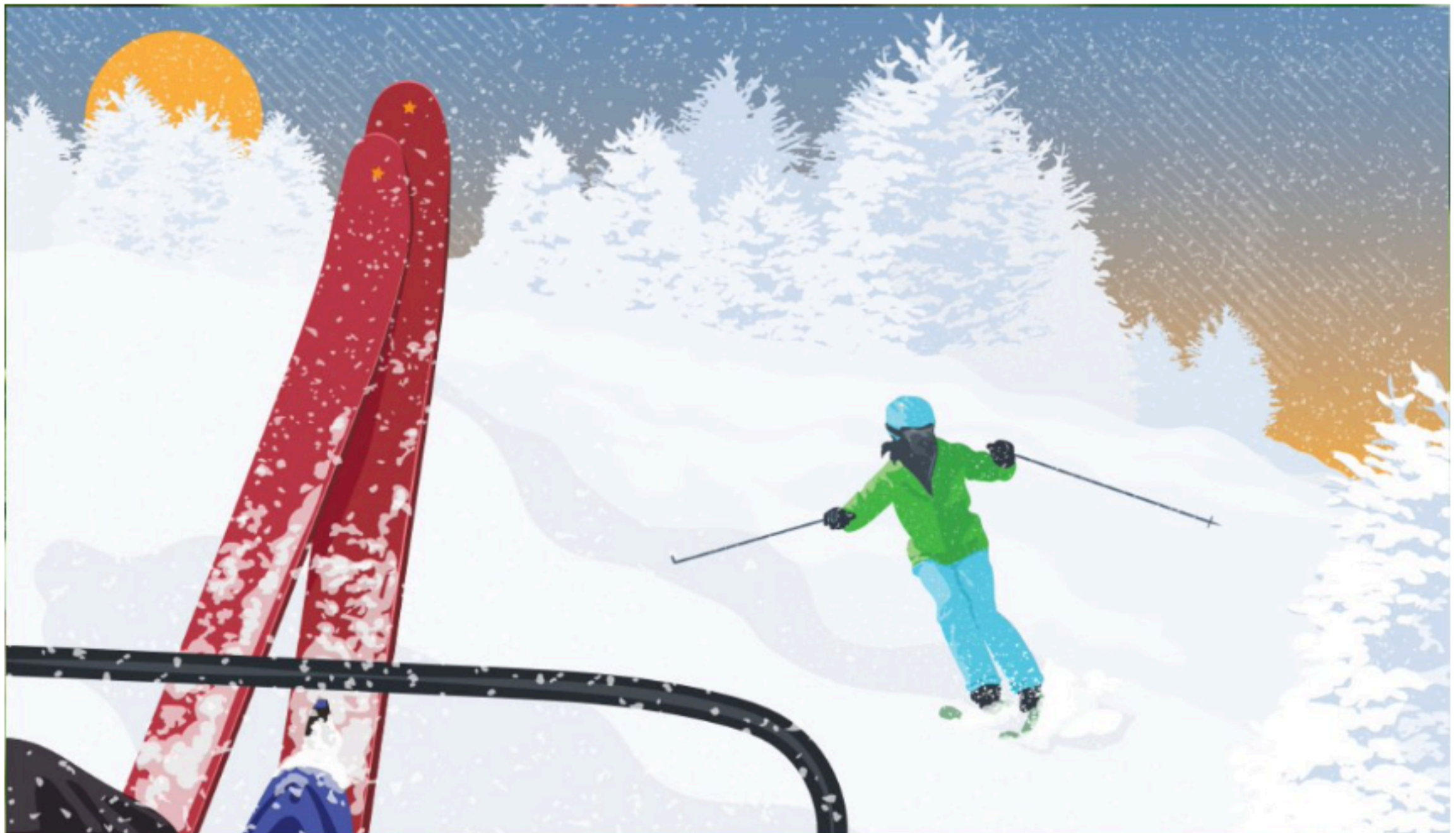


ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS LYONS

Dating again after ending a 20-year marriage feels reminiscent of stepping onto campus for your first day of college: You can present the new you to the world, but the old you will likely seep back in as the days go by. Determined as you are to go vegetarian or embrace punk music, comfort foods like poutine soon come calling and you eventually tire of three-minute non-melodic rants.

For me, meeting someone new during COVID was as elusive as that white Thunderbird in *American Graffiti*, potential partners traveling parallel roads in separate worlds. I know many single people shifted to Zoom dates, but the one-on-one camera format felt way too close up. What if I saw my “date” checking the time? Or what if she saw the reflection in my glasses of the Bruins–Canadiens game I was simultaneously screening?

Online apps intimidated, too, a series of boxes to check like the growing list of ailments I’m now asked about before doctor appointments. Would my checking the box “love for the outdoors” occlude the reality that I can be lazy, leading to silent “what a fraud!” accusations from my “I live to hike” companion after shorter-than-expected jaunts with me? Would the “I love opera” descriptor cancel half of the eligible candidates? Would “huge Grateful Dead enthusiast” cancel pretty much everyone?



Instead of seeking out romance, I focused on spending more time with my kids and, I'm not kidding, playing tons of online bridge with my mother. Little did I know that when the world creaked ajar just enough to allow a return to my winter passion, alpine skiing, a white Thunderbird moment would manifest itself in the form of a chartreuse ski jacket and a powder-blue helmet. That final scene in the George Lucas classic, when Curt sees the white Thunderbird driving parallel to his plane's flight path, became analogous to my chairlift ascents as I looked down to see a skier traversing beautifully below me. For three consecutive Fridays, after driving the two hours from my Seattle home to Washington State's Crystal Mountain Resort, I'd spied the chartreuse-jacketed woman carving down the Green Valley, Upper Ferk's and Upper Northway runs.

Fate or coincidence?

Skiing is at once an incredibly social and solitary pastime. Unlike most shared outdoor recreation, a weekend bike ride or golf excursion say, there's no time for casual chatter when descending a snow-covered pitch, save some location hoots when tree skiing or, if you're lucky, ripping through fresh deep powder. These location calls hardly make for intimate conversation, just quick callouts to say, "I'm over here."

Conversations among skiers and snowboarders are reserved for the chairlift. If you're traveling solo the talk rarely strays from patter about weather and snow conditions. Even then, one's ability to communicate is directly tied to the former, any enthusiasm to speak intricately tethered to the latter. In other words, if the weather's lousy you're too mummy-bundled to utter a word, and there's nothing much to say unless you've good snow to crow about.

COVID further silenced the ride. Resorts limited chairlift groups to families. Those of us who skied alone sat no more than two to a chair and were instructed to sit on the far ends of it from each other. We essentially shared an unspoken pact not to breathe, let alone speak. But this silence worked just fine for me; I remained focused on scanning the slopes for glimpses of chartreuse and powder blue.

As it turned out, I got my best glimpse while waiting to board a chairlift. Imagine my surprise when, while at the head of my "singles" line (yes, that's what it's called), I spotted the mystery skier at the head of the opposite singles queue for the same lift. We would be riding together, on opposite ends of the same chair. The romantic in me thought it fate, but it was probably more coincidence, considering that Crystal is spread out over 2,600 acres, with 11 lifts giving skiers and snowboarders access to 85 named runs and bowls.

Single or married?

Alas, what to say, if anything at all? First, it was COVID; see the unspoken rule about not speaking. Second, ski hills are awash with ski widows and widowers, those individuals who are so singularly passionate about the sport they leave their disinterested spouses at home and ski alone. For 10 years, "ski widower" was also my moniker.

A single-parent social worker, my mother could never afford to take us skiing. It wasn't until my late 20s, when a friend invited me to join his family on a Tahoe trip, that I discovered this epitome of family travel, the ski holiday. What could be better than a day spent slope-side, followed by a convivial evening of fresh-faced folks chilling out over board games, pasta and pints? Years later, as a husband and father, I repeatedly tried to replicate the same "ski-trip bliss" with my own family, always unsuccessfully and with much disappointment. It takes two snow sport lovers to make the magic happen.



COURTESY: CRAI S. BOWER

Mystery skier in the chartreuse jacket.



I have friends who absolutely love skiing but who, due to pressure from non-ski enthusiast spouses, gave it up for their marriages, only to have their relationships melt like a ski hill cursed with rain anyway — sending them right to back the slopes, newly single. I also know others who maintain ski widowhood, having struck agreements with their ski-adverse spouses that, come winter, fresh snow takes precedence over conjugal commitments. Given I'd seen my impending chairlift-mate skiing solo for almost a month, I figured she resided in one of the two camps. Which one remained a mystery: Ski gloves cover up wedding rings.

Breaking the ice

As I boarded the chair, I surprised myself by vowing to remain silent, to respect the COVID protocol and not say something undeniably awkward like, "I've seen you now for three Fridays in a row. You're a beautiful skier." I did steal a few glances, noticing she was about my age and that we shared a taste for Rossignol skis and Smith goggles. I was debating whether to break my vow of silence when, halfway up the seven-minute ride, my seatmate simply asked, "Isn't it great to be skiing again?" I could have replied, "Have you ever seen *American Graffiti*?" but instead responded, "It's absolutely fantastic!" with too much enthusiasm, I'm sure.

The silence broken, she went on to tell me she lived in Seattle and skied solo most Fridays (I refrained from saying I already knew this). Most importantly, she said she'd love to take a run together. We slalomed down Green Valley to the taut Ferk's, up the REX chair, followed by a trip down Blazing Elk. One run became several until I finally gathered the courage to proffer "Snorting Elk?," in reference to one of North America's best ski-in après pubs at the mountain's base. She replied, "absolutely fantastic idea!"

As we settled around a firepit table and into our respective pints of Woodpile IPA and a shared Thai chicken pizza, I finally found out what I most wanted to know: She was indeed a member of the first camp, divorced nearly a year and back on the slopes. She confided she'd assuaged her feelings of domestic failure by envisioning her return to Crystal, vowing to ski every Friday from December to April. As if to emphasize the power of her narrative, snow started to fall before the backdrop of a Douglas fir glade, flakes so fat they looked manufactured, like the snow in the opening scene of the second act of *La Bohème*.

That serendipitous chairlift and après conversation led to several shared Friday sojourns to Crystal, as well as a few dinner dates and Ravenna Park strolls back in Seattle. And the approaching winter looks very different from the previous one. After alfresco winter dinners shivering beside inefficient propane heaters, we can now dine inside at our favorite Seattle haunts. We've also scheduled ski getaways to Lake Tahoe, Mount Bachelor and Red Mountain in Rossland, British Columbia. Fridays at Crystal remain a given.

Suddenly single in my late 50s, I never thought one shared passion would engender another. Question is: How will this new skier in my life feel about 12 hours of Grateful Dead on the road to Tahoe come February? As Jerry said to Bobby and the band on many an occasion, stay tuned.

Seattle-based freelance writer and photographer Crai S. Bower, who looks for tracks of snow wherever he goes, has penned scores of articles about the skiing lifestyle for numerous publications, including AAA Journey, Afar, Alaska Airlines Magazine and American Way.