

A Really Good Partner

Contributed by Christopher P. Bruhl

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[Photo] Tyler Cohen

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I had spent most of the previous day with Lindsay, bedside as she slept, holding her hand, telling her all the stories she already knew. Her favorites were tales of blue-sky days we shared on Berthoud Pass and our 18-hour drive across the loneliest highway in America to ski Tallac, on the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe. I reminded her of the time we skied to Fowler-Hilliard off Vail Pass in a 40-mile-per-hour whiteout and laughed at the thought of icicles hanging from our faces when we finally reached that cabin after dark. We reminisced about that powder day above the Jackal Hut, when we skied mid-thigh freshies from the top of Pearl Peak down through the glades.

On the days that I couldn't keep her company, I would call. Most times she wouldn't pick up, so I would leave a message. I'd tell her about my day, how much I missed her and then I'd say goodbye. I knew she would listen to those messages when she was strong enough to lift her head off the pillow.

That late-winter Rocky Mountain February day, I skinned up Butler Gulch. It was clear and calm with seven inches overnight fresh. I needed the skinning and skiing to calm my nerves. The new snow was light and deep, and breaking trail steadied my breathing. For a short time, I didn't have to watch Lindsay melt away like a snow drift in the spring.

The darkness choking our horizon lightened a bit as I climbed beyond tree line. From there, it was a steep 700 foot gain to the peak and I charged up that hill, determined to stay ahead of the wicked winter storm ravaging the rest of my world.

From the small peak, the views were long and the sun was warm. Grays and Torreys peeked out above the sight lines to the east, cresting at over 14,000 feet. A mile to the west was the Divide. The buzz of snow machines on Jones Pass, stretching to the north below me, was a reminder of the terrain that lay beyond the lump in my throat. I pulled out my phone to leave Lindsay a message. I knew she loved this place and I just wanted to tell her I was here and thinking about her.

To my surprise, she answered the phone. She hadn't done that in months. We talked for a few moments. I told her that I missed her presence in this little corner of our world. She softly said, "Goodbye" and hung up.

I stripped and stowed my skins, ate a few peanuts and battened down the hatches of my pack. With my helmet on, I set the music to "play." That day, I needed rhythm and a smile.

I turned my skis down-ridge as the Grateful Dead strummed their steel guitars. Jerry sang, "Fare you well my honey. Fare you well my only true one.... I love you more than words can tell."

That day, his words sucked the thin mountain air right out of my already deflated spirit. As the melody poured over my soul, the tears poured out of my eyes and the skis poured me down the hill. I carved and I cried all the way to the car, where the icy wind of reality slammed me against the yard sale that was our life.

With the storm still raging within, Lindsay passed a few days later.

I scattered her ashes from that peak at the back of Butler so that she would always be there with me. She didn't like it when I went out alone. She also knew how tough it was to find a really good partner.

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