

# A Slippery Slope

A romantic ski trip goes downhill in a hurry. By CLARKE C. JONES

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN SHUMACHER

**Good-looking women** make men do stupid things. Trust me. Not long ago, when I was pursuing my doctoral degree in comparative anatomy, I met a green-eyed blond with the face of an angel and the heart of a card shark. Having successfully separated her from her friends at a local tavern, I proposed a quiet dinner date. She upped the ante by proposing a ski weekend at Wintergreen. I should have folded.

Instead, I let my (hormone soaked) mind run free: I imagined myself schussing down powdered slopes like a winter Olympian, then basking by the fire at the lodge, graciously accepting compliments from all who had marveled at my exploits—starting with the green-eyed blond. The thought of two glorious nights together overshadowed a stark fact: I'd never been skiing before.

Still, it was too late to back out. Ski trips, I now know, aren't as simple as they seem when one is in the throes of a new infatuation. First, one needs a skiing outfit. I didn't have one, but my brother did, and he let me borrow his togs. That covered, I went to a sports shop to rent skis. I chose a long pair that fit my 6 foot, 4 inch frame, not realizing that longer skis mean greater speed but less control. Not a wise decision given my zero skill level.

When we pulled up to the lodge, I noticed that the slopes were crowded. This was a *good* thing, I surmised, because it meant that I would attract little attention. Wrong. When I opened my brother's bag of gear, I saw that his ski pants were bright orange. I *would* be seen. Worse, because my brother is much shorter than I, his orange ski pants looked like ski knickers on me. The ski jacket fit better, but was a strange shade of purple, which together with the pants gave me the appearance of a tall, orange-grape Popsicle!

Oh, well: It was on to the slopes and my first descent with my new love interest. We had only gone five feet when I took my first spill. I laughed off the fall, knowing that it was going to happen. What I didn't know was



how to get up off the slope with skis on my feet. My partner patiently lay down beside me, put her feet parallel to the bottom of the slope, implanted her ski poles beside her, then pushed herself upwards and was instantly on her feet. She encouraged me to follow her example. There must be a law of physics that enables a 110-pound woman to pop up like a piece of toast, but prevents a 190-pound man to rise with the same ease. I did manage, with considerable effort, to stand and then ski another four feet before I went down again and repeated the same grueling exercise.

I suggested that she leave me to flounder on my own—and no doubt eager to distance herself from the drunken giraffe sprawled in the snow, she agreed. As she departed, she mentioned that I could slow down by forming a “V” with my skis—a technique known as snowplowing.

You've heard the saying: A little information can be a dangerous thing. Well, my companion failed to mention that when making said “V” one should also force the inside edges of your skis downward to create a drag. Unaware of this, I soon found myself snowplowing downhill at a Nascar-qualifying rate of speed—until the skis crossed each other. That caused a sudden lurch forward, followed

by a nasty headfirst spill into the icy slope. Not knowing what I was doing wrong, I took the same embarrassing tumble several more times.

After too many falls to count, I managed to stay up long enough to finally schuss down the slope so fast that I was almost on top of the skiers standing obliviously in the lift line before I could yell a warning. I can still see the horror in their eyes. I sailed through the scrambling crowd and into the orange safety fence 50 yards beyond the ski lift. After taking an inventory of all body parts and collecting my gear, I felt the adrenaline surge one gets after absentmindedly driving through a red light and reaching the other side of the intersection untouched.

A man cautiously approached me, as one would a deranged person tangled in orange netting far from the actual slope. He suggested that I would do well to crisscross the slope, instead of my straight-on, full-speed-ahead approach. However, he gave no instructions as to how to turn. Trying to mimic what I'd seen other skiers do, I learned I could perform some novel moves. Somehow, while attempting to turn, I made a 180-degree spin and found myself facing up the hill. Gravity has laws which must be obeyed, and so I started sliding downhill—skiing backwards! This routine lasted only a few frightful seconds before I was again splayed on the ground.

Eventually, I made it to the bottom of the slope and staggered over to the ski lift line, desperate to find refuge.

Despite my clumsiness, I managed to make it into the chair and begin the upward ascent. It felt good to sit and watch my fellow skiers having a good time as they glided downhill. Some were even skiing side-by-side with their sweethearts. It all looked romantic and reminded me that my now unattached girlfriend was somewhere on the slopes—no doubt cavorting with Sven the ski instructor and nodding at his après-ski suggestions.

That brought me back to reality, as did the realization that it was time to leave the chair. Actually, the time had past. By the time I gathered my gear and my wits, the chair had swung around and was headed back down the hill. As I approached the queue at the bottom of the hill, I saw a lot of skier fingers pointing in my direction. I ignored their derisive giggling and, still seated in the lift, headed back to the top. This time, I left my seat but did not lean forward when departing the chair, and therefore did not slide ahead. The chair dumped me on the ground, forcing the operator to stop the lift. I crawled 15 yards to a nearby fence and pulled myself to my feet.

I had taken a beating on the slopes, but was determined to attempt one more run. It ended like all the others—with a spectacular crash, except that I heard a loud, sickening “pop” in my right knee. Next came excruciating pain. Two skiers helped me off the hill, and I hobbled off alone to my room. When I dropped my ski pants, I saw that my knee was the size and color of a rotten grapefruit. I took a couple of aspirin and pulled out the scotch I had brought on the trip. My ski pants were around my ankles and I was taking a good swig of liquor when my long-lost skiing partner walked into the room. She took one look at my situation, exclaimed “Oh, my!” and left the room. It was not the reaction I had hoped for when she first saw me in a state of undress.

My main goal for this trip had been romantic socializing, but my condition skuttled that ambition. The next morning my partner fixed breakfast, said farewell and went skiing. Around 5:00 p.m., she returned for dinner. We talked about my injured knee and all the really nice people she'd met during the day. The next day, our routine was the same. Evidently, there was a dental convention at the resort—they seemed to be the only people she met.

We left the following day. I was immobile for about three weeks, which is apparently the right amount of time for a fetching snow bunny to start dating a very nice dentist. Tennis, anyone? ●

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