



MORPHEME

THE CAST

Keeping up with the characters

BY DEVON O'NEIL

Devon O'Neil is a writer and skier in Breckenridge, Colorado. They called him "Devo" in high school. He's still working on a better nickname.

TEN YEARS AGO, they used to let you race for first T-bar. The closure ropes were strung across the entry to the lift maze, so that's where you stood, in an informal and disorganized mass of people and parkas, everyone kind of knowing who got there first but no one very interested in abiding by that order.

For many of us, it was always a highlight of any powder day. And for the most part it was friendly, one of the few times when all the local jonesers convened in the same place to chase the fresh snow. Soon enough—once the steep terrain was open—we would scatter about the 3,000-acre resort like lynx in a forest, trying to avoid the lot as we sniffed out the next untrammed stash.

The gathering engendered a sense of community among ski bums old and young, rowdy and tame. It didn't matter if you skied alone; you felt a sort of kinship with the others, if only because you knew getting up early to powder-hound meant as much to them as it did to you. *These are my people*, you thought, as you elbowed them out of the way and stepped on the tails of their skis to earn first T.

At some point, though, the powers-that-be decided to start the line at the actual loading zone, eliminating the carnage. I worried the energy would die with the race, but it didn't. The same group still gathers each snowy, frostbitten morning, a collection of faces that varies by the day but rarely the week.

When I think about why I adore my home resort, beyond the peaks and the powder and the soothing breeze that tickles my nose at 12,500 feet, I think of the people I see in the T-bar maze. You don't have to know their names as long as you recognize their jackets. Nor do you have to like them. Maybe someone snagged the single you were eyeing in line yesterday. Maybe they act like a tourist. Regardless, they are there, day after day, and that's what counts.

A love for skiing is a wonderful trait to have in common with a stranger. I remember talking to Chrome Dome (so named due to his shiny silver helmet) on an 11-inch day, as he and Rick the Pup (a longtime local ski tech) stood in pole position for first T. Chrome Dome was upset because he'd taken the day off work, and it was already 9:30 a.m. and he had yet to get a full run in. He made it sound like maybe he should've just gone to work, as he lamented the delay in his thick Eastern European accent. But I knew he didn't mean it—not

because we're friends, but because I see him on the hill every day, which, to me, means he lives for soft turns a lot more than he lives to work. Beyond that, even after skiing the same runs and standing in the same lines for more than a decade, I know nothing about him.

Chrome Dome and Pup are always near the front of the line, contending with the likes of Riggins and Kopicky for first tracks. Time was, Squally, Toast, and the Silver Fox would have been there, too, but Squally and the Fox left town and Toast stopped buying a season pass because the chaos got to him. They aren't the only ones who have mellowed. The seasoned guard—CJ, T-Bar Tommy, Grotey, et al.—still ski most days, as do slightly younger bucks Cooch, Shaunie, and Tall Trey, but now they often concede the mornings to an ever-growing crew of 20-somethings and instead emerge later, when the throngs have dispersed and local stash knowledge pays a deeper return.

Sometimes I find myself on their schedule and happen upon a quintet at the picnic table below the bowl, sipping a flask on a Tuesday afternoon, swapping stories in the sun.

The local stalwarts are reassuring. Their presence and familiarity make us feel comfortable, like we're home. Which is how skiing at your local resort—big or small, corporate or independent—should be.