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I left home in November of last year to move to Colorado by myself, unsure of what to expect. It was my first time living anywhere other than my childhood home, not to mention my first time living on my own—no adults to tell me what to do or to catch me if I ran into problems. I had known I wanted to take a gap year for a while—an opportunity for a year of adventure before entering the “real world”—and when Covid eliminated the possibility of leaving the country, I decided I wanted to work at a ski resort. As I drove from California to Colorado—over the Sierras and across the deserts of Nevada, then through the otherworldly rock formations of Utah and, finally, up into the towering Rocky Mountains—I began to realize how different life as a lift operator was going to be from my high school experience.

When I walked into my apartment that first day, two of my roommates had already moved in. They were sitting on the couch with wine glasses in hand and I remember thinking, *I'm way too young to be living here*. My fears were reinforced when I found out they were both out of college—older than my older brother, who always felt like he was in a different stage of life than I was. I spent those first few days before work started sitting in my room, unsure of what to do with myself. I wondered if I had made a mistake, as I saw my friends from home who had chosen to start college right away continuing their educational journeys in a situation not entirely unfamiliar to them, surrounded by structure and new friends.

After a long and lonely first five days, my first day of work as a lifty arrived. I chatted with other new hires outside the locker room as we waited for official instruction, feeling optimistic despite how little I seemed to have in common with the people I talked to.

Eventually, one of our supervisors emerged from the office and sorted us into groups, then instructed us to disperse across the mountain.

On the gondola ride up to my assigned lift from the base of the mountain with my group, I began talking with Abby, another girl from California. I immediately felt a sense of connection—finding even a small piece of home in a place that felt so far from it was a great relief. Over the course of the day, I found out that I had more than just a home state in common with Abby. I was inspired by her electric energy and eagerness to explore what our surroundings had to offer. Throughout the week, Abby and I grew closer and jointly took on the challenge of acclimating to our new environment. Though facing my new environment alone had felt almost cripplingly intimidating, joining forces with Abby made me feel ready to take Snowmass by storm. The waves of anxiety I had felt during my first few days sitting alone in my room dissipated and turned into a swell of excitement about the season; finding a friend that I connected with so strongly assured me that I was in the right place (and quelled my fear that seven months of quarantine had stripped me of the ability to meet people). As we made new friends and our circle grew, Colorado began to feel a little more like home.

Over the course of the next four winter months, I found so many things to love about my new environment—the ability to spend every day outside surrounded by breathtaking scenery, skiing on my days off, and most of all, I loved my community. I realized that despite our wildly varying backgrounds, it was more than a coincidence that we had all ended up in Colorado—we were bound by a shared desire to explore and seek out novel experiences, as well as an ability to accept and adapt to any circumstances. I found myself part of a patchwork family that celebrated our differences and accepted everyone as they were.

As the snow turned to slush and winter drew to a close, I tried to avoid thinking about the imminence of parting ways with my new friends. I decided to return for the summer season—another three months with my Colorado family. Summer flew by, filled with camping trips and days spent floating down the Roaring Fork River.

The weekend before I departed for my new chapter at college, my friends and I took one last camping trip on Independence Pass, driving up the road that began in Aspen and climbed into the clouds. That night, as I laid on a rock 10,000 feet up and gazed at the wide open sky surrounded by people I loved, I felt at ease. The anxiety I had held at the end of winter about leaving Colorado and losing touch with friends had given way to a security in knowing the connection I had to these people was stronger than physical separation. In that moment of serenity, a blazing meteor streaked across the sky, and a collective gasp was emitted. Though the alpine air was frigid, I felt warmed by the energy of my friends settled around the campsite like a blanket engulfing me.