

IAIN MACMILLAN *first tracks*

uplifting CONVERSATION

GROWING UP, I REMEMBER MY PARENTS ALWAYS TELLING ME

not to talk to strangers—except, of course, when riding a chairlift. Funny, but these chairlift conversations are some of my earliest memories of skiing.

In the days of old double chairs and spring-loaded T-bars, the group always seemed to be an odd number and one inevitably had to take his turn solo when the gang of friends or siblings split into pairs. Standing in a crowded schmozzle of a lift line hollerin' "Single!?" when you're seven or 10 years old was hard enough, but the real struggle, I remember, was thinking of something to banter about on the ride up. From the inane to the argumentative, chairlift chit-chat between strangers has to be one of the most refined forms of communication.

There are many categories of accepted chairlift dialogue. Take, for example, the **Basic**. I assume three-quarters of chairlift conversation are in this category. Within seconds of the safety bar crashing down in front of you, your new comrade has launched into either the weather or snow conditions. Equipment also falls into the Basic category: "How do you like those skis?" "Love 'em, [pause] yep, they're great." "Yeah?" "Uh-huh." [pause] "Sure is icy today..."

An **Annoying** ride up can be had for so many reasons. It used to be easily defined simply by the personalities involved, but in today's world of skiers' toys and paraphernalia, it repeatedly occurs when one is forced to listen to half a conversation—your companion talks the whole way up with someone more important on his or her cell phone. The only thing worse is having to listen to the whole crackly conversation on a family radio: "Where are you?" "I'm on the chair." "So am I!" "Which one?" "I don't know, which one are you on?" "Hold on, excuse me, what chair is this?"

Then there's the **Intimidating** conversation, like the one a kid is forced into when really he's just trying to get the ride over with. After talking with others about this subject, I realized how much skiing's coolness affects lift talk. "It's like finding an opening line for someone at a bar," admits one friend who's not that confident in either situation "She's obviously a totally hot skier, I'm sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with her, and I'm riding up in my old K-way pants and rental skis...what are we going to talk about?"

Who says one has to provide chit-chat anyway? I don't talk with fellow riders in elevators, but I feel apologetic when I ride up the chair in total silence. It's happened to all of us. It's cold, you're tired, you're in Quebec and the clock is ticking. Let's face it, if you haven't begun talking with your lift-mate by tower two or three, it's pretty hard to break the ice at that point. Might as well give

up, read the lift-tower advertising, take a keen interest in skier styles beneath you—it'll all be over in a few minutes. Then again, the **Silent Treatment** can be broken, just as the top hut comes into view by those need-to-be-prepared types: "So which way are you going?" "Um, I'm going right." "Same here." "Okay then."

The **Embarrassing** conversation is a guaranteed winner simply because you can't ski away after you've stuck your foot in your mouth. But it's always good fodder for après ski later when you're retelling the day's events. For instance: "I think it's just great that you're skiing while you're pregnant." "I'm not pregnant." [Pause] "Man, this is a tight turtleneck."

The **Sales Pitch** can hit you when you're least expecting it—and



bring a whole new meaning to the comment "I just couldn't get away from this guy." Some people consider chairlifts simply another place to do business. I've been hit on for real estate, ski clubs, insurance and, of course, story ideas that are difficult to turn down—until I've got the "Prepare to Unload" sign in my sights. A friend told me once about her kids exiting the gondola at Whistler with Jehovah's Witness literature in their hands—and confused looks on their faces.

The **Stalked and Trapped** ride up has happened to more than just me. One friend's persistent admirer, who wouldn't take no for an answer, managed to scoot through the lift line and keep back other possible seatmates on a quad just so she could have Mr. Sought-after to herself. Realizing only at the last second who he was going to spend the next 12 private minutes with, he lunged for the emergency stop—but, alas, missed. "Uncomfortable, very uncomfortable" is how he described their conversation later. ☒