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HUNTING GIRAFFE IN MONTANA  
(A Collection of Four Stories)

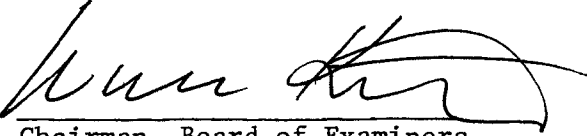
by

Jean L. Arthur

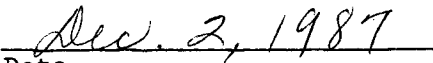
B.A., University of Oregon, 1982

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## Buckley

Buckley sat on a rough boulder and examined the gash in his left calf. A few minutes ago, he had tripped over his crampons. The knife-sharp points had etched tracks in the skin of his calf. He swore at the fanged metal plates strapped to his rented hiking boots and cursed himself for his hangover, then damned his hunchbacked father for dragging the family to one more scene of disaster.

Above him, on a graveled, knife-edged ridge of Mt. Hood, his mother hiked the rim of White River Canyon. The guide and the other woman were up there with his father. They were looking for the spot where the ten teenagers and two teachers dug a snow cave, their own grave. Only the leader and three of the high school students made it down alive. Buckley looked below at the tree line that delineated the white snow from the winter-gnarled green firs. The evergreens clung to the mountain in a desperate effort to hold the sandy loam close around their roots.

"Damn," he said and speared the crampons into the ice. He saw his father a few hundred yards ahead of his mother, just behind the climbing guide and just ahead of Diane Grigg,

the blonde woman they'd met in the bar yesterday. Diane Grigg. The woman Buckley had intended to charm last night now hiked with his deformed father. It had been his father's idea to come down to Oregon for the weekend.

"This is absurd," Buckley said to the rented boots that realigned his toes. Sweat soaked his army fatigues down to the knees. Snowmelt saturated up from the cuffs. Each time the wet right cuff slapped against the left, his slashed calf felt as if someone had poured iodine into the open sore. Buckley smelled his own perspiration, alcoholic and sour.

Last evening, he had listened to his father serenade Diane Grigg with classic calamities. He heard his father brag about the photos in his wallet of the famous 20-story Japanese department store fire, that they had happened to capture on film a couple years ago. He and Buckley were on a business trip in Tokyo. To Buckley's horror, his father pulled the photos out and showed them to Diane.

Buckley shuddered. His rule number one: Never show a potential lover evidence of past affairs. He had been standing in the foreground of the pictures with a Japanese woman, watching people dive out of top floor windows, free falling to their deaths. And the Japanese girl didn't even pan out. As soon as she saw a couple bodies bounce on the sidewalk, she ran away, and in Tokyo, it was futile to try and find her.

That had been some fire, Buckley recalled. He and his



little geisha girl had been waiting outside the convention center for his father, when the alarm sounded. He remembered feeling very tall and magnificent among the Japanese. It was easy to spot his father's light brown hair and gimpy heavy-on-one sided gate as the hunchback dashed down the street, following the flow of foot traffic. From the side, Buckley could see where his father's tailor took in the herringbone fabric to make a size large coat fit a frame that was half large and half small.

By the time Buckley and the Japanese girl had caught up to him, the department store's lower six floors trembled with flames. His father was so excited he could barely hold his camera still.

"Look how they bounce," Thomas Rundall kept saying. "The bigger ones bounce more. Maybe three feet more."

His father clicked away with the camera telling Buckley to mark in his mind the approximate level each body reached on the first bounce. It was about then that his little Japanese princess broke loose from his hand and ran away. Buckley started to go after her, but Thomas handed him the camera.

"Reload Buck. Get that film in her," Thomas shouted over the foreign screams and sirens. Gibberish, Buckley thought. They should all speak English. Life'd be easier. Then again, women all understand one language. Love.

"Jesus," his father said. "This camera lens just doesn't do justice. Remind me to buy a super wide angle lens before we leave, Buck." Thomas never took his eyes away from the structure and probably never blinked, either, Buckley thought.

"Did you see that one?" Thomas was excited. He practically danced in the street. "Buckley, she, that last one that jumped, she pulled her child with her. What a set of lungs these Japanese have. Together they must weigh, what would you guess, Buck? About 220 pounds?"

"Yeah, probably," Buckley answered. He was having trouble with the Fujichrome. "But they leaped from the top floor. Relativity. Matter, time and space."

"Oh, yes of course. They'd have more velocity, combined with their united weight." Thomas said. "Buckley, hurry up with that camera. They'll all be down soon."

Well, Buckley thought, as he readjusted the rucksack that dug into his shoulders. Good thing he only keeps wallet-sized, shots in his billfold. Diane probably didn't notice me in the picture with the girl. At least he hadn't shown her the old Hiroshima photos of the radiation victims.

Buckley had accidentally sent Thomas's wallet through the washing machine last year, washing the silver oxides from the photo paper. Now the photographic solution flaked off like the victims' skin. Thomas no longer carried those pictures in his wallet but when he had, he often complained

about Buckley's failure to check pockets.

Buckley caught a few words from the party above. The guide sat in the snow next to Buckley's mother, while Diane and his father looked over the edge into the massive White River Canyon. Looking up into the mountain, he felt he might tumble over backwards, away from the mass of snow and ice. It was the same vertigo feeling he'd had last night, or rather this morning when the guide woke him up to hike at three a.m.

He'd been dreaming that he was at the beach, at Seaside, where his grandparents lived when he was young. His mother and father sat on a blanket in the dry sand while he played in the surf. Suddenly an enormous wave crept upon him, curled above his head, about to consume him. He ran and screamed a warning to the family. They all just lounged on the beach blanket with rubbery smiles like those painted on ventriloquists' dummies. Buckley felt helpless but would not give up.

Then the guide woke him up in their hotel room at Timberline Lodge, a couple hundred miles from the ocean and over a mile above sea level.

Ridiculous, he told himself and hiked faster, each foot suctioning into the snow. I could have worn toilet plungers instead of crampons. He laughed. Plumber's helpers on my feet. That would be funny.

Laughing made him breathe hard and breathing hard made his heart pump until it pulsated against his chest. He imagined it might push through the flesh and land on the pure white snow. Wouldn't his father like that one, he chuckled again. He envisioned the hunchback examining the heart as it flopped and splattered blood on the snow. The blood would coagulate in crystalline snowflake structures, pretty enough to photograph and frame, then decorate a livingroom. His father would order Buckley to photograph it. After all, he carried the camera.

Wind blew dust off the dry east wall of White River Canyon sending it swirling in mini tornadoes, staining the calcimine snowfield. Three ravens scouted the south facing ridge, soundlessly riding drafts and suddenly, recklessly, diving into the canyon and out of sight.

Buckley wasn't much interested in the birds, but when they reappeared much farther up the canyon, near the crackled crevasses, he realized how much farther he had to climb to reach the gravesite. Just below Steel Cliffs on the Hogsback, those kids died, the guide had said. Things looked closer than they were, Buckley thought, feeling deceived. The guide had also told them not to expect to find anything up there, but his father insisted they make the trek. The guide had explained that the rescue party, of which he had happened to be a member, brought all the bodies down, and they tried to bring down all the climbing equipment too.

His father seemed disappointed, but it was only a weekend trip, only six hours from Seattle, and, he'd told the family, he'd heard the Cascade Dining Room had superb food. Buckley wasn't sure about the food, because he'd missed dinner, but the bartender made good drinks. Too good.

"I discovered her," he said to the ravens. "Yesterday." He'd been in the bar, watching his father's cigarette smoke curl into an impressionist's contorted female torso. Downwind, a woman waved the smoke away with a bilingual sandwich menu. Buckley wondered if she spoke any French, or rather wondered how her Frenching was.

"This place was built during the Great Depression," his father had told Buckley. They waited in the bar for Buckley's mother.

"Just look at the magnificent glasswork in this place. Here's Paul Bunyan, bigger than life. And Babe, the blue ox. Jesus, will you look at the woodwork in here. These tables must weigh over 100 pounds each."

Buckley smiled at the exotic woman who disliked cigarette smoke. He examined her jaw, and how it swept away from her chin, smooth and sleek, with a cowlick of fine blonde hairs that caught the light and sparkled gold. He would kiss that spot, he daydreamed.

"Now this is real art," his father interrupted Buckley's thoughts. "And well used too. The WPA workers were paid

pennies to complete this lodge, you know. Imagine spending a lifetime realizing the fiction of an oversized lumberjack."

Buckley pretended interest in the mosaic and grunted a response. From the time he was very young, he had found that people either ignored his father or went overboard to be polite. It was because of the man's deformed hunched back, of course. It was his own policy to pay only token attention to his father.

Instead, Buckley watched the blonde as she passionately whispered to her friend. She waved her fisted, ringless hands, then held up all ten fingers. "Ten kids up there!" she exclaimed, and sat back in her chair. Buckley decided he'd introduce himself by kissing her fingers. One at a time. He would meet her for a cocktail later, then they'd go for a moonlight stroll around the lodge. He hoped for a quarter moon.

"Your drinks," a bartender set down two glasses. Buckley had not noticed her before. If his mind hadn't already been involved with the blonde, he might have thought the freckled and athletic bartender quite sexy in a tomboyish way.

"Miss," his father said to the bartender. "I wonder if you could answer a few questions?"

Buckley knew his father's tone very well. It was his I-want-information-and-I-want-it-now voice. He watched the bartender glance once over the tiny Blue Ox Bar, checking her

customers. She might know that tone too, Buckley thought. She rested one hand on the back of his chair, probably preparing for the usual tourist quiz. Buckley knew better. His father always asked most unusual questions.

"Miss, a, do you go by Rebecca or Becky?" He asked without letting her answer. "Could you tell me how far from here that those youngsters froze to death?"

Buckley watched the bartender's genuine smile fade to a forced facsimile. He had seen the face before. People just did not want to talk about death, especially the horrid climbing accident two months ago. Buckley had read about the incident. It had been an error in judgment. He cared little about the gruesome details, but his father had to know. Thomas Rundall always had to know.

"Well sir, I'm not exactly sure how far away, probably a mile or so above the lodge," she answered.

His father flung several questions at the bartender. Buckley was sure that the hunchback knew the answers to most of them. It had been in all the papers and on national T.V. Buckley thought she might get mad. I would probably get mad if someone kept pumping ghoulish questions at me, he thought. But why is he asking such basic questions? This isn't his usual bizarre inquiry. Buckley suspected his father was up to something.

He moved his attention back to the blonde. She had

stopped talking and cocked her head as if listening to the barmaid. He studied her profile, guessing she probably stood five foot ten in flats, only an inch taller than himself. He liked tall women, he decided. She didn't return his best smile, although he knew she caught him looking her over. Her green eyes sparkled clear like a mossy rock in the lush of late spring, Buckley thought. Her eyes are flecked with the black-brown blossoms of moss agate, he continued thinking. I'll write some poetry for her. About her. Then he realized she watched the hunchback. She absorbed his father's questions rather than heard them.

"Excuse me," the blonde interrupted the barmaid. "Did you know any of them? The climbers, I mean?" The bartender shook her head.

"Did you?" Thomas Rundall smoothly turned to the beautiful blonde.

"Damn," Buckley said under his breath. He realized his father was on the make again, and after Buckley's girl.

"Oh no," she answered. "I've only heard about those poor children."

Buckley wanted to strangle his father. Maybe this woman would hold the video camera as I do it, he imagined. She's my woman, he said to himself. He pictured a shattered aircraft, a Boeing 727 that his father helped design. Except that it was in a million pieces, spread over a square mile, his father considered it the perfect passenger craft.



Buckley remembered the day ten years ago as if it were yesterday. Charcoaled bodies lay everywhere. They'd been golfing when his father got the call. The little stewardess. It had been only her second flight. Buckley helped her inside. She wasn't hurt, only shocked that she and five others were the only survivors of 230. Then the hunchback stepped in to "interview" her, and that was the last Buckley saw of her. A victim, Buckley thought. That's what I am.

Buckley watched the bartender slip back behind the bar, while the blonde and his father talked. He felt his own face burn red. Thomas has gone too far.

The woman introduced herself as Diane Grigg, a nurse from L.A., and her friend, well, Buckley couldn't remember her friend's name. He was furious. He had to sit there while his father charmed his girl.

"I heard that when you get frostbite, the skin turns black and rot away," Thomas said.

"Yes, I've seen that, being a nurse and all," Diane said. "I guess one of the survivors had severe frostbite. They had to amputate parts of both legs."

What luck, Buckley thought. She's attracted to that humpback. She should see it with his shirt off. His spine has more curves than the Indy 500. Buckley had to chuckle at his own analogy. When he was young, Buckley played with toy cars on his father's back while his father lay on the floor,

watching T.V. He had a pretend racetrack for his Hotwheels. His father's few freckles marked the corners. He supposed the little tires felt good on his father's skin.

Buckley heard his mother's voice outside the bar door. He was very glad to see her.

"Here comes Mother," he announced.

"Oh yes, my wife," Thomas Rundall said. "Mandra, I want you to meet Diane Grigg."

Diane and her friend soon left to join the Forest Service's nature hike. Buckley was determined he would find her that night, before the hunchback got a second chance.

"Well, I've finally met an employee who was here when those children froze to death," the hunchback said to his wife. "Most of the kids are college students who weren't here in the spring. I'll have to come back in and talk to her later, buy a pretty girl a drink," he said and nudged his wife. "Mandra, you haven't yet told me what you found out in the other bar."

Unfortunately, Buckley now thought, wiping perspiration from his neck and forehead, Mother found out that they could follow in the tracks of the ill-fated climbers. Buckley stopped to rest again. The crampons strapped to the hiking boots had long since stopped aiding his climb, but he did not take them off. The snowfield softened in the August morning sun to a porridge mush. He decided to hike up another two hundred yards where his parents, Diane Grigg, and the

climbing guide--Buckley couldn't remember his name--waited for him.

A tuft of wind puffed Buckley's cotton shirt away from his sweaty chest. He wished he didn't have the rucksack grinding against his back. He swore at his father and his hunchback, a fine excuse for carrying nothing at all. His father even got his wife to carry his video equipment up here. Buckley remembered his uncle telling him about Thomas using the same excuse, as a child, to get out of chores or something he wished to avoid.

Buckley had just watched the space shuttle blow up for the fiftieth or sixtieth time, when Uncle Tory, his father's older brother turned off the video recorder, declaring it wasn't healthy for Buckley to watch. He told Buckley that he would turn out like his father. Buckley didn't see anything wrong with studying implosion or explosion. They argued a bit, then Uncle Tory told Buckley that his father only became fascinated with misfortune after his fourteenth birthday when he became a live human specimen for bone doctors to poke and test. His uncle told him that his father's humpback, called kyphosis, or curvature of the spine, began in infancy and continued degenerating all his life. Several of the vertebrae wasted away, finally collapsing to allow the hump to form. Doctors studied the abnormal spine, even keeping him out of school for nearly a year of tests. Uncle Tory

said that his father never forgave the doctors for making him miss school. His father had loved academics. One day he decided he'd had enough and marched out of the hospital, never stepping foot inside one again. He even made his wife bear her child at home with a midwife's and his own help.

His uncle's lecture bothered Buckley. How could reruns be bad for him? They were just family home movies. Besides, he surmised, the space shuttle explosion was on national t.v., and everybody saw it. What really puzzled Buckley was his uncle's story about the hospital. Nobody wants to be a pin cushion. He's a pain junkie. He likes feeling how people endure pain by watching them. Somehow that makes him happy.

Buckley hiked across the steep slope, disgusted that he should pull up the rear. Buckley considered himself in fine physical shape. During lunch breaks at the Boeing aircraft plant, he worked out in the weight room or jogged around the gym. How can that hunchback possibly get up this mountain? He sits at his engineer's desk all day and smokes cigarettes.

The group looked farther away than they had before. He wondered if he'd been hiking backwards, downhill. Or maybe like Fred Flintstone, he thought. Fred tries to run but his feet always spin out in the same spot, digging a hole deeper and deeper. He looked down at his feet, buried in a few inches of slush. Better move, he told himself.

He pushed up the sleeves of his jacket. The light

breeze instantly cooled his damp arms. He felt sick again, not the sickness of a hangover, but the sickness he sometimes felt when far away from home. He hated the desperate funky feeling. His hands felt swollen. He wondered if he really was ill. Maybe just weary of this hike.

He found he wasn't at all interested in this disaster. Buckley decided that the Mexican earthquake last September had been much more rousing. At least the Mexican maiden piqued his interest. She'd been much more stimulating than any other woman he'd encountered on these family trips. And his father hadn't touched her. Of course the hunchback found his own gal, but Buckley was proud of himself anyway. He thought of her smooth skin and her shiny black hair, braided then knotted behind her head.

Buckley first saw Rosa as the family watched rescuers paw through residue of an earthquake-toppled apartment building. Buckley held the video camera while his father dictated camera directions. He was getting footage of Red Cross volunteers pulling a 12-day dead body from under the the collapsed building. She had been laying on a bedframe. The smell nearly overwhelmed Buckley, but his father insisted he get close-ups. The bedsprings had run through the woman's body so that much of her flesh tore away when they pulled her out. He remembered thinking how it reminded him of his college era cooking job, and pulling filo dough sheets apart

from the raw roll.

Suddenly, a young woman lept into the camera frame. Thomas kept shouting to get closer, to be sure he was in focus and that he should get everything. Absolutely everything. Rescuers yelled in Spanish. The young woman flung herself onto the rotted corpse, hysterical. Buckley watched her facial contortions through his zoom lens. He'd never seen such muscle contractions as in her lips and cheeks. She cried like she might laugh until she could have been a mad dog, biting and snapping. Then, as quick as she'd begun, she stopped crying. The Red Crossers carried away the body, leaving her alone. Buckley asked if he could buy her some coffee.

She wanted to get married after their first night, and move to Seattle with him. He told her he would return in a few weeks and they'd be married. That was eleven months and four disasters ago. He would have forgotten her except that after the family returned from vacation, Buckley erased the section on the video of her. He told his father that his finger must have slipped off the trigger. His father was still mad that he didn't get all of the Red Cross details. When some of the neighbors had come over for a cocktail party last week, his father had put together a 45 minute tape of his favorite first-rate disaster excerpts for his friends. Thomas narrated, filling in what Buckley erased. The hunchback included every ghastly detail.

Buckley was tired of hiking in the snow, tired of the sweat drooling down his spine, and tired of ghost hunts. He paused again, this time pulling the backpack off to dig for the water bottle. He wondered if the climbing guide had any aspirin in a first aid kit. Buzzy. That was the guide's ridiculous name, Buckley remembered. Why would anyone want to be called Buzzy, he thought. But then, Buzzy was appropriate for a guy as hyper as that.

At 3:30 a.m., Buzzy pushed them into rental backpacks, and out the doors of Timberline Lodge, greedy for the \$350 Thomas Rundall paid him. Buzzy was tall and tan, and looked like a barroom quarter horse champion, Buckley decided. Buzzy was one of those guys who practiced before a mirror, the fine art of holding a quarter between his buttocks cheeks. It wasn't easy to do with jeans on, but those were the rules. Good flex. Buckley laughed out loud. That's what it took, and Buzzy probably took his good flex to bars all over the state where people line up to race with a quarter between their cheeks. They'd run around a barroom race course to the finish line, and deposit the quarter accurately into a mug of beer that's on the floor, then the winner was the first to chug the beer. Buzzy probably made quite a living at quarter horse racing. That and hauling people on mountainside graveyard tours.

Buckley turned around and faced the valley that sprawled

below. He remembered the ocean wave about to consume him. He felt the wave, still curled and frothy above his head. A hundred miles south, he saw Mt. Jefferson, another volcano in the Cascade range. In between, dense forests separated the hazy civilization on the west side from high open plains of central Oregon. He suddenly desired to turn back and catch a ride east. Maybe to Bend. Or the flatland beyond.

Almost dizzy, euphoric, Buckley resolved he'd had enough of this family vacation. And all the other ones too. And enough of his father. Pulling the pack on, he would march up to where the others waited. He would tell Thomas Rundall that he and his disasters could go to hell.

He remembered Hurricane Sherri, three years ago in the Florida Keys. It had decimated some of the islands. The family had planned a vacation to California to see the remnants of an earthquake. At the last minute, his father changed their flight plans. They were lucky to catch the catastrophe just two days after it happened. Buckley was enraged. He agreed on the California trip because an old girlfriend lived near the fault line. When his father switched, Buckley was furious. He'd been late getting off work, so he met them at the airport. When he found out about the new destination, he planned to make a scene on the plane, march off and leave his father in a lurch, without his best camera man. Once on the plane, he found his assigned seat was next to a beautiful young college coed who wore tight



jeans and had a Christy Brinkley smile. She had never been to Key West before either.

Buckley was close enough to hear his mother's voice. She complimented Diane Grigg for her sewing job on the beautiful ski parka that Diane now sat on, insulated against the snow. She doesn't even care, Buckley thought. Mother doesn't mind that her husband adulterates every trip they go on. She ignores her husband's philandering, even stays in hotel rooms, reading her books, while he picks up women. My women. And at home, she lets him invite all kinds of women to the house. How could Mother not see his obvious debauchery, like last summer when he had that barbeque and slide show. He'd just gotten home from a business trip to the South Pacific. He was all excited about some slides he bought of some cannibalistic tribe. They no longer eat people, but some enterprising photographer had set up shots of the natives in a fake, but realistic feast. While he was in the tropics, someone had served Thomas some brain soup, claiming that it was human brain. At the barbeque, Thomas made brain soup from cow's brain and other fresh flesh. Buckley had been disgusted, but the neighborhood women were truly impressed at his father's agility in the kitchen.

Buckley saw Diane pass a water bottle to his mother. Diane had to step over his father's outstretched legs. He held his hands out like he wanted Diane to slip and fall into

his lap. She kept her footing but on the way back to sit on her jacket, the hunchback held her hand while she stepped across him and the sloping ice. Traitor, Buckley thought.

The gash in his calf began to throb. He realized he must have hit it again. It was only twenty yards to the picnic but he stopped to examine the mess on his leg.

"Buckley," his father said. "What have you done to yourself?"

He didn't answer. He rolled up the pant cuff and hiked the last steps to the showdown, preparing his speech. First he would accuse Thomas Rundall of infidelity. No, first, he would announce he was turning around. He would throw his pack, with the Nikon into Thomas Rundall's lap. Hard. Then tell them all how absurd this whole trip was. And how sick he was to enjoy death scenes, or watch maimed people suffer.

There's a word for his kind of people, Buckley thought. Necrophilia. That's what he is, a necrophiliac. He loves dead bodies. People are excited by death, but he's especially fond of maimed anatomies. It's because of his hump. That fucking hump that women like to fondle. He gets so stimulated by death, and then he takes advantage of people, using his hump to get right to the action and investigate each decaying corpse. And the women. The women are attracted to the hump. Maybe it brings them luck. Some people used to believe that.

Buckley unbuckled the hip belt of the pack and ripped

the rucksack off his back.

"Oh my God," Diane Grigg said. "Buckley. You've injured your leg. It's bleeding badly."

Buckley looked at the torn flesh, and for the first time saw what a mess it really was. He was amazed at the array of colors on the inside of the bloodied skin.

"The crampons," he said.

"My God, Buckley," his father echoed. "Why didn't you tell us about this? "

Buckley started to answer "because you would want to take a picture of it," but Diane interrupted him.

"Buckley, sit down here, next to me," she said. "Let me look at that. I'm a nurse. Here, Buzz. Give me that first aid kit."

Buckley did as he was told, and sat on Diane's jacket. He could smell her perfume, perhaps left over from last night. It might be Pierre Cardin, he thought. Or maybe, yes that was it. Halston. The same perfume the Alaskan woman wore. What was her name? She was the one who'd shown them the aftermath of a tidal wave that wiped out the small island community in the Aleutian Chain. It hadn't been much of a show. Only a few pieces of wood lay around the rocky beach. They hadn't even bothered to land the small plane.

"Just relax, Buckley," Diane was saying. He lay back on her jacket. Just before he closed his eyes, he saw Thomas

Rundall scrutinizing his leg. The hump blocked the sun. It's beautiful, Buckley thought. The hump is really magnificent. He felt Diane's cool hands wrapping gauze around his calf. He knew she spoke soothing things to him, but he didn't really hear her. Everyone stood around him, looking down, concerned and sympathetic. He saw his mother, her frown and total trust in Diane. The guide was on his knees, handing Diane a pocket knife to cut the tape, but looked at Buckley as if he were a temperamental child who might explode into tears at any moment. He saw Thomas leaning over him, not examining the gashed leg, but looking in his eyes.

He relaxed, and let his eyelids shut. He could still see their forms as red silhouettes on the inside of his eyelids. Thomas isn't the ghoul, he thought. He knows that I'm on parade, in the spotlight, the center. He's happy. Maybe it's the only time in my life, but everyone wants to know about me. He smiled and let her examine his calf, content to let the wave of fame engulf him there on the crest of the Cascade Range.

## GOOD GUYS

Kelly scanned the beach for Reno, trying to spot his white painter's hat with the rolled down neck flap that made him look like a sheik. She sat, on her sailboard, straddling the custom designed craft, legs in knee-deep water, sail down, floating in the green Columbia River lagoon.

"Half hour to race time," a megaphoned disc-jockey voice announced above the beach crowd. "And we have here today another beautiful and windy August afternoon at the Gorge. In the finals today, you'll see," the announcer dropped the mike in the sand. A sudden scattering of pebbles chattered against the microphone. The noise shocked the crowd and Kelly to attention. Her nerves were as tight as drum heads.

"Sorry 'bout that folks. As I was saying, welcome to the finals of the 1987 Hood River Amateur/Open Boardsailing Championships. We've had a fine week of hot competition, and now we're down to the fastest, most talented sailors on the water today. These men and women survived the West's toughest winds and are preparing for the last triangle race of this world class event."

"World class?" someone pushed at Kelly's board, dipping its nose out of the water and tipping Kelly off balance.

"Oh, hi, Reno," she said, glad to see him. He wasn't dressed to sail, she noticed. "See you've got a new pair of shorts." She shaded her eyes from his violent green and silver and white knee-length baggies.

"Yeah," he turned sideways, showing off the design like a model. "Whatcha think? Hot or what?"

The shorts had holsters and guns printed on them. A printed belt went around his hips, with printed bullets in its printed loops. Ornate pistols dangled in the holsters, billowing in the breeze. He always had some crazy new thing to show her.

"Careful, they're loaded," he said.

"Did you get those in town?"

He shook his head no. Reno leaned close. "Psst. I made the deal of the century," he whispered, checking over his shoulder for eavesdroppers.

Kelly looked at him sideways, tilting her sunglasses onto her forehead. She knew by the sparkle in his wily blue eyes that he was up to something.

"What kind of a deal?"

"I traded something for 'em," he said.

"Okay, what did you trade for them?"

"A date with you!" He danced in the warm lagoon water, splashing her.

"Bull shit," Kelly slid her glasses back into place and frowned. Reno never knew when to quit. Oh well, she thought, it's too bad he's out of the race today. He's fun to sail with. Always a good joke at the start line.

Yesterday, Kelly watched him wipeout in a collision with another boarder in the deep chop of the main channel. It was the other guy's fault, barging into Reno, but the impact sent Reno tearing through his sail, snapping the mast in two places. The collision left a gaping hole in the board's delicate fiberglass hull. As Kelly turned a corner on the race course, she looked back and saw the wreck. She was ready to swing back, forget the race, and pull an unconscious Reno from the water. Just when she started to jibe back to Reno, she saw his hulky arms swimming to his board to wait for the rescue boat. He waved her on. Reno was a good guy, she thought.

"Just trying to get you to relax a little, Kel." He sat down on her board, on the same end she balanced on.

"Careful, Reno," she stood, still straddling the board. It was sinking.

"'Fraid of getting wet?" he splashed her thigh.

"Guess I'm a little nervous about the race." She swung a leg to the other side and stood on the sandy bottom.

Reno could race if he wanted to. Several people offered him their rigs, but he had declined. Too many crazies on the

water, he said.

"A guy from Mistral sailboards talked to me last night at the bar," she said. "If I do well today, they'll pick me up on the Pro Team." Kelly pictured her name where she hoped it would be on the finish chart in a couple hours. It was at the top of the amateurs, behind a handful of the pros.

Reno whistled in exaggerated awe. Kelly thought she detected a little jealousy in the whistle, maybe not jealousy exactly, but something odd for Reno. He was always so happy and funny. He looked almost sad for a moment. But the look was gone now, and he smiled so wide the sun screen on his nose cracked.

"So the pressure's on, Babe." He tugged on her braided hair.

"Yeah. Full sponsorship's where it's at." She smiled, picturing herself in the Bahamas or Fiji. Someplace where there was always enough sun and wind. Her job would be to sail every day.

"Full-time fun," Reno said. "Everyone begging for your autograph, men pawing at you." He slid his hand along her bikini'd hip. "And you'll just toss them aside after each adventure." He blazed his best Pearl-Drops smile at her.

A gun sounded. Kelly quickly set her watch-alarm for ten minutes, counting how many seconds behind the warning gun her watch should be. Reno had stepped onto shore.

"Fastest gun in the west," he blew the tips of both



index fingers.

"Huh?" Kelly looked at him. "Oh yeah, right. The shorts. Hey Reno, have you seen that instructor guy? You know, Monte DeBruler?"

"You still got it in for him, Kel?"

"He made the finals too," she frowned. It was funny that Reno thought she liked the guy. DeBruler was just a snobby Californian, who thought women could never race with the men. He'd been some kind of California triangle champion a few years ago, and now captured a lot of slalom titles as well. Well this race would prove him wrong. She had raced against him all summer. He hated to lose a race, especially a triangle, and especially to a woman. She glories in beating him today. She beat him once in July.

"I'll tie his thrusters to dock!" Reno said.

Kelly laughed as she pictured DeBruler sailing away from the dock, picking up speed, then getting slammed because the thrusters, the back fins on his board's belly were roped to the dock.

"Sometimes you're pretty funny, Reno," she said. He gave her a quick, almost imperceptible kiss on the cheek.

"Best of luck, Kel. You can shred with the best."

"Thanks," she said, and nosed her board into the wind, towards the start/finish line.

Clear the mind, Kelly told herself. Gotta think

triangle. She looked out at the familiar Hood River race course, home court for the last three years. Starting into the wind, her gaze followed the route down-river to the first orange buoy. A fast jibe right. She pictured herself stepping on her board's tail, maneuvering the sail forward, sheeting in with the back hand, turning the craft under her heel. Then, with the wind blowing at her back, the board perpendicular to the wind, she would speed across to the Washington shore. It was Kelly's favorite part of the river, where the wind was at its strongest. Another jibe right, she thought, then the final downwind run, the fastest and most exciting part of the race.

The five minute gun was muffled in the moist heat.

"Racers, take your mark," the announcer said, more for the benefit of the crowd than for the racers. All the cannons bothered Kelly at first. Normally, race committees relied on colored flags to indicate interim warnings. You get guns in the big leagues, she thought.

Kelly and twenty-five other board mounted sailors bumped and rocked for good positions just behind the start/finish line. Upwind of other racers meant clean unhampered air before it was hassled by the glistening sails.

"Hey, hey, Kelly," someone just downwind from her said. She had to strain her neck around her upright mast to see who it was. This is dangerous, she thought. Racers luffed just short

of the start, holding back their boards until that moment, seconds before the start gun popped, when they would leap into the wind and go. It took finesse and good timing to hit it right, and not pass the start flag early. The ones who missed had to restart, while the rest of the racing fleet plunged windward.

"Good luck to you." Monte DeBruler waved at her. She watched his coconut-brown skin ripple over muscle like a lazy stream over slick rocks. His tamed chestnut hair was only slightly ruffled by the wind. He probably uses hair spray, she thought.

"Luck to you too." She pulled the sail back into position and knew she must beat DeBruler. He's slipped into a better regatta start position, she thought, but I'll catch him on the beam reach.

Her watch alarm rang fifteen seconds until the flag.

A hundred sails were set to task. The bolder Pros dashed for the start line first. Kelly was close behind. Careful not to hit anyone, for fear of disqualification, Kelly maneuvered through the masts, sails and booms, polyethylene, mylar, and neoprene. Boards crowded together so close that she couldn't see the water or any of the marks.

One of the Pro Teamers, a woman who Kelly met last night at the bar, launched into the stronger breeze just ahead and upwind of Kelly. The Teamer was really Guccied-out, Kelly

thought. Most of her gear wasn't even on the market yet. Kelly watched the woman handle her board. I've seen her in the magazine ads, Kelly thought. She lost sight of her behind a half-dozen sails.

Once on open water, past the wind shadow of the lagoon, Kelly relaxed a little, and focused on the upwind tack. She wondered if she chose the right sail size, and tried to read the number on the Pro Teamer's sail when she came into sight again.

Concentrate on what you're doing, she told herself.

With each zigzagging tack toward the first buoy, Kelly passed another sailor. She studied the darker water ahead. It meant stronger wind, not the best time to increase sail. Kelly gave it more sail.

A gust took out the sailor ahead of Kelly. She watched the man cartwheel across the swirling water. It was Rick Gray, the owner of Gorge Jammer's Surf Shop. Kelly bought several sails from him. He always gave her a good deal. He's a good guy, she thought.

Another tack, another tackled sailor. She checked the first mark, an orange buoy in the middle of the main channel. One more tack.

Kelly fell in behind the Teamer, riding her line, copying her course. God, she thought, I can be there. Winter in the tropics, all the sails I ever dreamed of. She pictured an island with sand so white it glistened rainbows.

She smelled salt air, orchids, and coconuts. Then she remembered the puzzling expression Reno made when she told him about going Pro. He's probably just jealous his student did one up on him, she thought. Or he doesn't want to lose his best sailing buddy.

An unexpected gust caught Kelly off guard, snatching the sail and pulling her forward, off balance. Her feet clutched at the the board under the foot straps, but the power of the wind tugged her into a stretched-out spider, dragging the board's tail up and out of the water. She watched the nose of the board dip dangerously below a wave, shaking against her. Under the churning green water, the white board's surface looked the color of thick tropical weeds.

"Come on baby," Kelly said too loud. She didn't want anyone to hear that she was in trouble. She pushed down on the tail of the board with her feet, trying to tug the bow out of the river.

"Don't do it, come on." Too loud again. She let out the back of the sail, releasing the breeze, slowing down, stabilizing. "Good girl," she said, and turned into the weather.

The Pro Teamer moved ahead, maximizing on the gusts. Kelly knew she'd have to pull hard to catch up, but there were a few sailors in between to pass first. She sheeted in again and leaned into the wind, her shoulders just a foot

above the swells. Bouncing across the whitecaps, she sent sheets of spray raining onto the river.

The board felt like a shockless car on the dirt road her family lived on just south of town. She remembered her old Galaxy 500 she and her brothers shared while they went to Hood River High. They hated the wind then. It swept through their father's apple orchards, nearly shaking them off the picking ladders. Too bad we didn't have sailboarding back then, she thought.

Kelly held herself rigid, refusing to yield to the wind. She rounded the mark perfectly, the jibe executed the way Reno taught her. It was fast, clean and tight against the buoy. Her long blonde braid whipped the orange mark, making a sound like a single slap on a bongo drum.

Straight ahead loomed the cliffs of the Washington shore. A few spectators stood the rocky bank. Most were the national magazine photographers who didn't rent a press boat early enough to be on the water. Kelly reminded herself to look good at the next mark.

She overtook two more racers at the buoy by cutting inside, while the others overshot with slow mechanical jibes. She shouted a greeting to one of them, another local, then leapt past for the long ride across the opposing currents.

Just ahead, she recognized the sailing style of DeBruler. He always looked too big for his rigs, she thought, wondering how much sail he was using today. Where

he relied on brute strength, she depended on a ballerina's finesse. He could be beaten, she thought. I beat him in a city-league race. He made excuses when she beat him.

Kelly saw someone shoot off their board, in front and upwind of DeBruler. Forced to bear off, DeBruler sailed out of the course to avoid running over the downed sailor with his thrusters.

Ha, she thought. I can pass him. Her knees bent and straightened with the waves, the only shock absorbers she had. He'll probably use that little obstacle as an excuse when I beat him, she thought. Just like last month at the city league race when someone fell in front of him and he crashed. It was quite the yard sale, Kelly laughed out loud. She pictured DeBruler in the river and his gear spread out all over. He blamed his gear. That'll teach him to tie better knots.

Wind velocity intensified as Kelly neared the Washington shore. A nuclear day, she thought. Westward, high cliffs of Columbia River basalt lined the river. They funneled cool coastal air through the Gorge, before sending it east to the desert. Sometimes when she was sailing alone, or with Reno, she swore she could smell the salt air from the coast, a hundred plus miles away. On those days she imagined she sailed the tropics.

Sheets of water torn from the white caps slapped across

her back. Kelly's board leapt crest to crest, humming from stress. The taut sail obeyed her commands and she planed ahead, closing in on DeBruler.

He had been in the bar last night too. While the Mistral Team Manager explained duties of the Teamers, DeBruler had been trying to get her attention in the mirror behind the bar.

World travel, international racing circuits, advertising endorsements. The guy made quite an offer. Kelly liked the benefits. The sailing alone was enough to try for the Team. European Cups pay twice or more than what's here, she knew. And the whole time, DeBruler distracting her in the mirror. The Team Manager told her everything she wanted to know. All expenses paid, some holidays off, and plenty of free time to just sail and explore. No more waitressing for me, she thought.

Kelly liked the Team Manager. She liked his tanned and freckled nose and bleached moustache. He bought her a couple beers, greenies, and they danced a Beach Boys set that the local band butchered. He was a good guy, she thought.

DeBruler recovered from his drift. Kelly sailed into what would be his blind spot if he were driving, taking advantage of the water wake that smoothed her path. They neared the next mark where Kelly planned to power jibe ahead of him.

Kelly sped alongside DeBruler, not able to pass because



of the draft off his sail. Another thirty yards, she thought. I'll jibe around the mark, cut inside of DeBruler, and be free of him.

As they neared the mark, Kelly tried to slide inside, between DeBruler and the buoy. He cut her off.

That bastard, she thought, and tried again. If his jibe is anything but perfect, I can pull ahead here. Kelly knew it was her only chance to pass. Once on the downwind ride, she would not be able to catch him. He had too much sail.

She rode a couple inches behind and next to his board, giving him sea room but overlapping his wind on the same tack. She knew he wouldn't dare bump her, risking disqualification. A committee boat sat nearby.

Kelly couldn't see his face, but she knew the smirk DeBruler probably wore. It was the same smug smile he used in the bar last night. He really thinks he's got me beat, she thought. Wonder what excuse he'll think up when I pass him here. Probably blame his equipment or some other lame excuse.

A few feet before the turn, Kelly again tried to slip between DeBruler and the buoy. There's not enough room. DeBruler had the right of way, and used it. She felt sick. It was either hit him with her sail, or hold back. Kelly saw him step back on his board, initiating the turn. There was no way she could pass him.

Hood River's not so bad, she tried to convince herself. Monday, it'll be just Reno and I and a few other locals, hanging out on the whitecaps, like always. After all, she thought, we've got the best wind right here at home. Who needs the tropics.

She saw DeBruler grinning at her as he started to swing his sail around. The tight skin on his cheeks barely wrinkled when he smiled. His rusty tan, accented by high red cheekbones looked beyond a model's perfect make-up face. He had a chance to make the Pro Team too.

A duck jibe, she thought. Why didn't I think of that before? It was a more difficult maneuver, one she usually didn't practice because it was more flashy than practical, but if she could pull it off, she could still slip between the obstacles without hitting either.

They reached the mark, the nose of Kelly's board just a couple feet behind the nose of his. She stepped back on her board, putting all of her weight on the downwind rail of the board. At the same time, she pushed the sail forward and leaned into the turn. The board nosed up and turned right. Instead of swinging the sail around like a regular jibe, she ducked under it and grabbed the boom on the other side. Perfect. She was in the lead.

Not far to go, she thought. She saw the Pro Teamer ahead of her but not by much. The Teamer passed someone on her own team. Her arms began to tire. A couple more

minutes, she told herself.

Kelly sheeted in tighter, almost laying on the river. The top layer of water contradicted the flow of the Columbia, climbing upstream with the wind. She let her sail fill like a spinnaker. Her board no longer fretted against the surface.

The river water reminded her of DeBruler's wily green eyes. She looked back and saw him ten yards behind. He looked like Adonis with his hair tousled. DeBruler winked at her and waved her on, his shouts lost in the wind. Her stomach felt like something inside tickled it. She giggled out loud not caring if anyone heard.

The first Pros reached the finish, but Kelly didn't hear the announcer or the cheering crowd. The disc-jockey announced her name as the first local and non-pro nearing the finish. Spectators honked their horns and the traffic was stopped on the bridge crossing the Columbia. Reno stood away from the crowd, silent.

Kelly did not hear or see any crowd. She didn't feel the cool water of her homeland. She rode the crystalline seas of the tropics with DeBruler, a good guy.

## BABY FAT

"Oh my God," Suzanne burst out. The two girls, Emmy and her best friend, Suzanne, dashed into the nearest shop, a B.Dalton's Bookstore, and buried their chins in magazines. They giggled as they peeked out from behind the shelter of book stacks.

"They're gonna have really ugly kids," said Emmy. "You know what happened, don't you? This ugly girl gets pregnant from that geeky guy so now they're married."

"And having gugly kids." Suzanne laughed at her own joke. "Get it, Em? Ugly plus geeky equals gugly."

"Yea, I get it," Emmy said, now a little sad. Maybe it was just enough for the ugly girl to have someone who liked her.

"People that weird looking shouldn't be allowed to have any children," Suzanne said, still giggling. She noticed the magazine page she'd stuck her nose into. "Awesome. Look at these jeans. Aren't they just yummy?"

Emmy examined the French model in Elle Magazine. The camera angle, from street level looking up long thin blue

jeaned sticks, revealed the model's upcurved breasts under her untucked white men's shirt.

"She's sure tall," Emmy said. The model was crowned in violet blue sky and shod in only one sandal. Along the horizon, a tanned, black haired man sat on a white stone wall, holding her other sandal. He was shirtless. Emmy decided he looked like Jade Norby, her brother's best friend.

"I wonder where they sell jeans like those," Suzanne said more to herself than to Emmy. "Oh, look at the cute little pocket on the side of the knee."

Emmy decided that if she ever married Jade, that was where they would go on a honeymoon. They would dress like that and walk around barefoot. She looked closer at the print to see where the photo was taken, but it didn't say. Jade would find it for her, she was sure, if she could just lose some weight.

"What magazine do you have, Emmy?"

She folded the cover back. Of course, she thought. Out of the hundreds of magazines here, I have to pick up Weight Watchers.

"Are you going to diet counseling?" Suzanne said loudly. "What a good idea. You'll have to share their secrets with me. I just have to lose five pounds. Which one is it? Weight Watchers?"

"No." She shoved the magazine back on the rack, under

some motorcycle covers with half-naked blondes straddling big engined cycles, and leather-jacketed men leering at them.

"Let's go." She saw the cover of Sports Illustrated, a photo of a young man jumping hurdles. Emmy thought of Jade. She smiled, remembering dinner earlier this evening. Her brother Roxy always brought Jade over. He left the house so quickly, she recalled. Something her father had said.

"Like a beer, Jade?"

"Sure." He answered between mouthfuls of his third bar-b-que burger.

"Emmy, run in and get a couple cold ones," Mr. Moody said. That was when she ripped her shorts, she remembered, but she didn't want to dwell on that just now. She'd gone into the refrigerator, and seeing her mother's fresh chocolate pie on the top shelf, had dipped a finger in for a scoop. Over the hum of the appliance, she could barely hear them. Something about drunks and drinking.

"You're still tipping the tin cans even if your old man's a drunk, huh? You know it's a fact that children of alcoholics almost always become addicts themselves."

Her mother and brother hushed Mr. Moody. Jade's father had been an alcoholic for ten years. Now divorced and in forced retirement, he depended on Jade to take him shopping or wherever he had to go because his own licence had long since been revoked.

Before Emmy was able to swallow her third scoop of

chocolate pie, she heard the sliding door open and shut. Afraid of getting caught, she stayed bent over in the refrigerator, digging for beer. Looking between her queen-16 size legs, she recognized the red and gray running shoes of Jade, his long hairy legs and the bottom of his nylon track shorts.

"I guess I don't want a beer, Em. I gotta go."

She wished her thighs weren't so fat so she could have seen more of Jade. Then he was gone, and her fingers had chocolate all over them, and the pie was scarred.

"C'mon," said Suzanne.

The girls dipped back into the flow of the mall crowd. They walked past Fabric World and The Knitter's Nest before either said anything. Emmy glanced at Suzanne's slim figure. She always wore tight jeans and the newest of fashion brands. No extra luggage anywhere, Emmy thought. She looked down at her own mechanically moving legs, bulky, loose. She hated the way her jeans puckered at the crotch. Her mother always told her not to worry, that she would lose her babyfat soon. Her mother had shown Emmy a photo of herself when she was Emmy's age. Even fatter than Emmy, they both agreed. And look at Mother now. A slim Aphrodite, Emmy thought. She liked using the new words she learned for her literature test.

They lingered briefly in front of a young men's store,

glancing in, hesitating. Emmy felt the texture in the jackets on a sale rack outside the store's door. She smelled men's aftershave, a cool musk, and thought of Jade's long, tight thighs. A handsome clerk caught her eye and smiled. He knows what I'm thinking, she thought, terrified. She stepped away quickly and caught up to Suzanne. They neared the end of the mall where they would make the turn, and cruise with traffic back on the other side. The pedestrian flow, Emmy thought, looks like trained horses at a show. Everyone prancing about for show or glory. Emmy wondered what the show rules were. How is a winner picked, she asked herself. Suzanne's a pretty little Arabian. I guess I'm a Clydesdale.

Emmy spotted two good looking youths, taller than most of the crowd because of their cowboy hats. They strolled through the highway of people, against traffic. She saw one catch his eye on Suzanne, and jab the other in the ribs, pointing with his chin. Emmy watched them ogle Suzanne. Without seeing her eyes, she knew Suzanne was aware of their attention. Emmy saw Suzanne's petite breasts rise, almost felt the pull in her own stomach, and knew Suzanne wagged her tail as the cowboys strode by.

"Hi missy," one said. The other cowboy whispered under his breath, "Wanna go for a ride?"

Emmy blushed, although she didn't know why.

"Hey look, Emmy," Suzanne said a little too loud as she



weaved into the crowded Bake by Night Doughnut shop. People stood up drinking coffee and eating doughnuts. Emmy's mouth watered for a cream-filled doughnut, but Suzanne pointed out four girls who sat at the counter dressed in matching blue and gold sweaters and miniskirts. Each sucked on a straw stuck in a milkshake. They shared a plate of doughnuts. Their little skirts hung over the back of the stools like lampshades, Emmy thought, with bronze legs curled around the base. Like the lamp at the rummage sale, she thought. When no one was looking, she had examined an art-deco lamp for only \$2 at the church fund raiser last week. Naked bodies climbed over each other to get to what Emmy guessed was the light switch. I wonder what the cheerleaders are trying to get, she asked herself. Probably not just doughnuts.

"It's the Hellgate High cheerleaders. My school," said Emmy. "I wonder why they're dressed up today."

"There's a competition or something out at Big Sky High for all the dumb cheerleaders in the state." Big Sky was Suzanne's school. They'd gone to the same grade school until Suzanne's mother divorced her father and could no longer afford to live in the Rattlesnake, a high income district of Missoula. Emmy's family had always lived in the Rattlesnake and were in their third new home Emmy's father had built. She could never remember just where Suzanne's father lived anymore because he moved back to the East to one of the

cities beginning with "New."

"Come on Emmy, I have an idea." Suzanne ducked back against the mall wall, opened her straw bag and dug out a big safety pin from among mascaras, eyeliners, lipsticks, and a mirror she always carried, even when she didn't carry a purse.

"What are you going to do?" Emmy asked. Suzanne sneaked a glance into her mirror.

"Just watch." She pulled Emmy by the wrist into the doughnut shop. With excuse mes and thank yous, they squeezed through the crowd until they were right behind the middle girl. Emmy realized it was Margaret, Jade's old girlfriend. She doesn't know me from a doughnut, Emmy thought. She watched the pretty brunette sip and talk, using her braceleted wrists and delicate hands in the conversation. Maybe I should go to one of those weight loss clinics, Emmy thought. But they're so expensive. I'd have to ask Mom for money. And she'd probably tell Dad. The smell of cinnamon made her mouth water.

Behind the counter a heavy man in a black sweat-stained t-shirt and greasy white apron pulled a new batch of steaming doughnuts from the deepfryer. He looks like the Michelin Man, Emmy thought. That's mean. He also looks nice. Probably has nice kids too. Probably fat kids who wish he wouldn't bring home doughnuts. Just the dough. She chuckled to herself.

Then Emmy saw out of the corner of her eye that Suzanne was pinning the back of Margaret's skirt up onto her matching blue and gold sweater. The underside of the skirt was the opposite of the top, gold with blue. Margaret's blue kick panties had a run in the material, up from the right hip and under the skirt's waist. The left elastic leg of the panties had lost its vitality and crept up high on the cheerleader's buttock, revealing an ugly red birthmark.

Suzanne pinched Emmy hard on the arm and pushed her through the crowd until they stood at the counter.

"Come on, let's get some doughnuts."

Emmy looked back at the cheerleaders. They didn't notice a thing. So many people crowded the small shop that no one else detected the pin-up either. Emmy looked at Suzanne, who beamed at her work.

"She's gonna be mad when she finds out," Emmy said.

"Hurry up and order, Emmy, it's your turn."

Emmy looked into the glass showcase with sprinkled doughnuts, maple bars and bear claws. She could almost taste the cinnamon in the apple fritters.

"Hurry, Emmy. There's 10 people waiting for you. Stop drooling on the counter and tell the lady what you want."

I'll get just one fritter, she thought. That's probably only 50 calories. Or maybe two small buttermilk doughnuts.

"What'll ya have, Sweetie," an old woman with a smoker's

voice said.

"A maple bar and a Boston cream." What I always have, she said to herself. She liked the names as much as the taste. It made her feel worldly to eat something named Boston. She'd seen a booklet on Harvard once, and decided that's where she'd go for college.

They got their food then made their way out of the shop and sat on the benches to wait for the cheerleaders. Emmy chewed quietly on the cream, listening to Suzanne go on about the cute boys she served ice cream to today. Emmy half listened. Suzanne's a pusher of food, Emmy thought. She imagined Suzanne standing on a scale, topping at a hundred pounds and holding chocolate cake in one hand and burgers oozing with ketchup in the other. She wore the Dairy Queen apron with a calorific scale printed on the front. What was it Jade said about food, she asked herself. Food is a necessary fuel, not a luxury for casual recreation. Why had Jade left dinner before he had dessert, and left in such a hurry?

Jade Norby and Roxy, Emmy's older brother, were inseparable. They ran on the U. of M. track team, and both worked for her father in the summers repairing, painting and doing the yard work on his rentals. Jade usually drove Roxy home after track practice, and like tonight, stayed for dinner. They screeched into the driveway, where Emmy waited for them.

"Hello Jade. Hi Roxy," Emmy had said.

"Emmy, what are you doing? You know you're supposed to dry the car off or else it'll spot."

"You can help me. Here's a towel." She threw a towel at him. Emmy had on her new lycra tights, black, shiny, and revealing. They were the same brand as the university trackers had for running. Emmy decided she would start jogging, just a mile at first. She had pulled the lycra stirrups up from inside her tennis shoes so they dangled behind her ankles like she'd seen the boys wear them.

"I have stuff to do. Dry it yourself." Roxy threw the towel back at his sister. "What the hell are you wearing, Emmy. You look ridiculous. You shouldn't be outside in that get-up."

Emmy felt her face redden. Her brother sounded just like her father. He often embarrassed her in front of company. She frowned.

"I'm gonna tell mom you're running without your shirt again, Roxy. I saw you today run past my school. You're gonna get skin cancer, just like mom says."

"You're a brat. Come on, Jade. Let's see if dinner's ready."

"Be inside in a minute," Jade said. "I'll help Emmy dry the car." He picked up a towel and began rubbing down the car.

Emmy felt her heart shrink in her chest. Then it expanded and she had trouble breathing. She watched him work for a moment before joining him. She liked the grey hooded U.M. sweatshirt he always wore. The neck was ripped and the painted lettering cracked. His light brown hair hinted of a recent shower. "You know Emmy, he's just tough on you to be cool or something. Inside he really likes you."

Emmy couldn't believe her brother liked her, but she liked Jade talking to her. He made a better brother than Roxy, she thought.

"Emmy, there's a book I've been reading. I'll loan it to you if you'd like. It's called The Athlete's Kitchen. It's about nutrition and fuel we need to live." She listened in earnest, yet on the verge of tears. "It has some good diet programs, if you're interested." They finished the rest of the car without another word.

Emmy was mad enough to punch her brother, but she knew he'd win any fight. She still smarted when she remembered how embarrassed she'd been at dinner on their back porch at the picnic table. Roxy refused to sit next to Jade, some homophobic thing he was going through, so Jade sat next to Emmy. The shorts she wore to dinner kept creeping up higher on her thigh, but she didn't have a chance to tug them back down until near the end of the meal when Jade's attention was finally distracted away from his plate to Mrs. Moody, who politely asked about his father. Now she suddenly felt ill.

The closet smell of the mall constricted her breathing. Emmy decided to do something about her weight. She threw away the last bite of the Boston cream.

"Oh here they come," Suzanne squealed.

The four matched girls bounced out of the doughnut shop, Margaret in the lead. Emmy and Suzanne couldn't hear what was said, other than Margaret's screech, but they saw the other girls laughing. They got the skirt unpinned. Margaret faced the others, accusingly. Emmy saw that Margaret's pink cheeks dripped tears. After a few words, the angry girl left her friends and ran down the corridor out of sight.

Suzanne was laughing hard and quiet. Sneaky girl, Emmy thought. It's not funny at all. What if she loses her friends over Suzanne's evil trick? She was about to go after the poor girl.

"Wasn't that the funniest thing you ever saw? I mean did you see her face? She blamed the other ones." She laughed harder. Emmy didn't say anything, but marched down the mall, not waiting for Suzanne. Still laughing, Suzanne caught up and said, "Let's go try on some clothes."

They passed a sausage market with petrified beef sausage in lacquer-coated baskets on the store front display. The meat bulges out of its skin the way my legs nearly burst from my pants, Emmy thought.

"Oh gross." Suzanne wrinkled up her petite freckled

nose, the way Emmy tried to copy before a mirror. She didn't feel confident to try the pugnacious glare until she'd gotten more practice.

"Oh gross," Emmy echoed, forgetting her anger. Then she turned back. There's always free munchies at the Hickory Farms, she knew. She took two pieces of summer sausage, and was ready to bite into both when Suzanne snatched one of the pieces from her hand. Quickly, she stuffed the other piece into her mouth and let saliva fill her jaws.

"There's Tammy and Sammy holding hands," Suzanne said.

"They're always mashing in public. Mashers. That's what everybody calls them at school."

"That's old," said Suzanne. "We call 'em scroggers this year." She walked a step in front of Emmy. "He's kinda cute." Suzanne was smiling at the slender boy who walked on his toes and swung his arms high with every step. "Let's go talk to Tammy."

"No way," Emmy said. She knew that she'd told Suzanne about her crush on Sammy last fall. Maybe Suzanne didn't remember, but she must, Emmy thought. I talked about him for months. She certainly would never talk to Tammy again after the P.E. class last December.

It happened at weigh-in. Everyone knew a week in advance that they'd be weighed, so Emmy decided to lose some weight before then. The morning of the weigh-in, she tried jogging to school instead of riding with her father on his



way to work. Skinny Tammy had yelled at her from skinny Sammy's car on their way to school. Tammy made faces at her out the car window. Emmy remembered the tongue and crossed-eyes. Then in P.E. class Tammy stood in line behind Emmy. Just before Emmy stepped on the scale, which she knew would top out near 200, Tammy said, "Got your lightest clothes, Emilia the jogging blobilia."

"Lets go in here and try on some clothes." She started into Bertha's Big and Beautiful.

"Let's go into the Three, Five and Nine store. They've got the most adorable little jeans in there." Suzanne grabbed Emmy's hand and dragged her into the boutique.

Before Emmy could protest, they were in the shop, Suzanne already pulling on a jeans jacket and Emmy consciously pawing over sweaters that could only fit half her body. She remembered when she was a little girl, she wished to be bigger and wear big girl's clothes. Now she wished she could stuff her 5'8" into a size nine. She frowned as she looked at the tag on a sweater. If I get smaller, maybe I'll get younger too. No that's crazy.

A salesgirl stepped up to Emmy, looking her up and down, as Emmy saw out of the corner of her eye.

"Can I help you?"

Emmy saw the frown then the pursed lips, over-drawn with color-schemed dual shaded pink lipstick, the long thin neck

and almost gaunt figure in an oversized fuchsia print blouse, multiple shades of pink. Everything matched, from her fingernails to her untied shoelaces in hightop Reeboks. Emmy was fascinated. She doesn't look real, she thought. Even the girl's belt, a sparkled plastic woven band, complemented her bracelets and earrings.

"No, I'm with my friend. She's in the dressing room." Emmy turned away from the salesgirl.

"Just try anything on you like," said the crisp salesgirl. She went in the direction of the dressing rooms and left Emmy standing in the middle of the size three designer jeans. Emmy turned to watch the salesgirl for a moment, noting the thin hip line under the very tight pink printed jeans. Where was it, she wondered, that she'd heard that girls had to lay on the floor and wiggle into tight jeans. I wonder how she goes to the bathroom, Emmy thought.

Suzanne peeked out from behind the dressing room curtain. "Emmy, could you do me a favor? Bring a five in these white jeans. I picked out a seven but it's just too big." Suzanne tossed the larger size on a chair for Emmy to replace.

She walked slowly back to the chair. She picked up the tiny slacks and held them out in front of her. I'll never fit into something like this, she thought. She tugged at the stretch material designed for tight wear. She heard a giggle from the direction of the cash register, and noticed another

salesgirl with the first, looking at her. They both turned suddenly away, one to folding tiny t-shirts, the other to writing something in a catalogue.

"They don't have your size," Emmy said. "Let's go."

"They must have it," Suzanne said from behind the curtain. She poked her head out again. "Did you ask the girl? I think her name's Belinda."

"I want to get a diet pop. It smells funny in here."

"Okay, Emmy, I can't buy anything today anyway." She dipped back into the dressing room. "I might want to put something on layaway though." Suzanne almost always bought on layaway, a habit Emmy despised because half the time Suzanne returned the clothes after she wore them once or twice anyway. It's dishonest, Emmy thought. Suzanne has some racket going on. A profitable one. Once she even bought something on sale then returned it to a different store and somehow got full price for it. I wonder if she could be arrested.

"I don't know why you're so weird today," Suzanne said, pulling her purse onto her shoulder and brushing her hair. Emmy felt the eyes of the salesgirl on them. She hurried past the window displays of size 5 mannequins on their knees playing in turquoise sand with a pink child's bucket and shovel. That was a children's store, she thought. No baby fat though.

They walked down the mall corridor, past the gaming parlor where the junior high kids hung out and smoked. Emmy watched two boys, 12 years old, she guessed, as they pressed Copenhagen under their peach fuzzed lips. As they passed, she caught a whiff of the tobacco. It smelled like her father.

Emmy glanced into the window of Zales Jewelry Store. She saw Suzanne eyeing her own reflection in the glass rather than seeing any of the jewelry. She's window shopping for herself, she thought. Next to Suzanne, farthest from the windows, Emmy realized that her friend's figure easily fit inside her own with ample space in front and back for Emmy's leftovers. She looked past her image into the window display, then back at her friend. A light from above the girls caught and highlighted Suzanne's golden hair, backlighting her silhouette, but not Emmy's. For an instant, Emmy thought Suzanne's form originated from, then stepped out of her own. Emmy stopped to get a better look, but the effect was gone. Suzanne still admired her own image.

"Suzanne, look at that cool diamond bracelet."

"Oh, isn't it perfect?" Suzanne purred. "I just love the diamond rings. When I get married, I'm gonna have the biggest one they make."

"Which one do you like?"

"Oh," she looked around quickly. "That one. The one with the matching men's ring."

"This one's much bigger over here," she said with a snap. "I thought you wanted the biggest one, Suzanne." They walked on a few steps.

"What's bugging you today, Emmy," Suzanne said, pausing in front of Greek Gyros snack bar. Emmy stepped back and away from her friend. Several people walked between them. Emmy noticed for the first time that Suzanne had a crooked nose, and her nostrils were two different sizes.

"You're just window shopping for yourself."

"What did you say, Em? I couldn't hear you."

"You always take me into that shop, and you know I can't even think about trying on any of those clothes," Emmy blurted, nearly in tears. At once she regretted saying anything. She considered running away from Suzanne, down the mall and outside to the fresh air. It was a long way to the open doors. She looked around for another escape. A girl from her high school, a sophomore, walked toward them. She was poorly dressed but a cheery girl who sat next to Emmy in English class.

"Emmy, I didn't know you hated that store so much. We don't have to go there anymore." Suzanne stepped over to her. She put her arm on Emmy's shoulder. It was the first time Suzanne ever touched her that way. Emmy sensed the kindness in her gesture. Then she remembered the ice cream. It won't work, she told herself. Emmy walked away, no longer

concerned with Suzanne.

She always gives me an ice cream cone everytime I see her at work, Emmy realized. Even if I don't want one, she makes me take one.

"No, I won't go there anymore." Emmy took a deep breath, pulled in her stomach muscles and walked over to the girl from her English class, leaving Suzanne standing alone in the crowd.

"Hello Char, how are you?"

"Emmy," the girl answered, surprised.

Emmy noticed Char's old but very clean slacks and pressed cotton camp shirt. She thought that Char would be beautiful, svelte even, in some new tight jeans and one of those big blousy shirts, the kind Emmy always tried on, but never bought because they accentuated her bigness.

"Are you ready for our spelling test tomorrow?"

"Well, sort of," Char said. "How 'bout you?"

"Emmy," Suzanne called. "Let's go. I have to be home in a half hour."

"Ever ready," She answered. She wondered why Char didn't have nicer things to wear on her nice little body. Emmy remembered that Char cleaned rooms at her parents' motel.

"Emmy, I'm leaving now, so you can just get your own ride home."

"Fine." She watched Suzanne flip back her hair and

march off. "Say Char, do you live near the Rattlesnake?"

"No we live near here." She nodded toward her companion. "We can walk you home though, if you miss your ride."

"I can call my mother, I guess." She looked after Suzanne who was now just a blonde in the crowd. "It's too far to walk."

Emmy was about to ask Char and her friend, who she guessed might be Char's little sister because they dressed similarly, if they might want a ride from her mother. Before she said anything, she saw Jade walk out of High Country Sports.

"Well, see you tomorrow," she said.

"Oh! Good luck on the test, Emmy. Bye."

Emmy walked as fast as she could to catch up with Jade. He was alone, carrying a plastic bag with a box that Emmy thought might be some new running shoes.

"Jade," she half shouted. Emmy stopped in mid-stride. I've just treated Char like Suzanne treats me, she nearly gasped out loud. The realization nearly made her turn back to Char.

Jade turned around, and she saw that his left eye was puffy and red, and he looked like he might have had a bloody nose. Emmy glanced over shoulder for Char, but the throng of the crowd enveloped the spot where the girls had stood. She

turned back to Jade.

"What are you doing out here?" Emmy said. She was pleased to see him without her brother.

"Had to get some new shoes," he said and turned back the direction he'd been walking.

"What kind did you get, Jade?" She had to push hard to keep up with his long strides. "What color are they?"

"They're just for hard turf. Certain shoes are better for cinder tracks, other shoes for long distance dirt running. These have an air cushion but not much because you don't want to lose much contact with the running surface."

Emmy sensed that he wasn't listening to his own words, just talking, but that he didn't really want her around. She considered this for a moment, then decided to try and keep a conversation going, hoping he might warm up to her. "Are you going back home right now?"

"Yeah."

"I need a lift."

Emmy wondered if he might be mad at her for some reason. She tried to think about dinner, and sitting next to him on her parents' deck. Her face felt hot when she remembered getting up for the beer. She'd caught the edge of her shorts on the picnic table, tearing the seam up three inches. The fat of her thigh had poured out. He despised her. He hated her for being fat, like her brother did. And her father. What had been said at dinner? She looked up at his blue



eyes, usually sparkly and amiable. They looked red. She noticed again the swellings of a fresh black eye.

"Are you all right, Jade?" She asked as soft as she could. "I mean, you don't look like you feel OK."

Jade kept walking, and for a minute, Emmy thought he was ignoring her, or maybe even trying to lose her. Finally he spoke, turning to face her, grabbing her right hand. His hand felt cold and rough around her puffy, soft one.

"Emmy, my father. We fought. He was drunk again. Then he took my good track shoes, the ones my coach bought for me with his own money, and threw lighter fluid on them and then a match. Right in the kitchen. And my little sister had to stand there and watch the whole thing. My little eight-year-old sister."

Emmy felt his hand gripping hers, feeling his terror, his humiliation, his anger. She'd never known anyone who'd physically fought with their parents. She remembered one time when Roxy said he wanted to beat up their father because the car was taken away from him for something he'd done, but it was only angry words. He would never do that. She looked at Jade. He trembled, holding on to her. She didn't know what to do.

"Jade," she said trying to keep herself from stepping back and away. "Are you all right? Is your sister OK?"

"We're not hurt." He still looked in her eyes, looking

for something that Emmy didn't think was there.

"I'm sorry, Jade."

He turned away for a moment, still holding her hand.

"You're so lucky Emmy. You don't know how happy your family is. How, how." His voice faded.

Emmy knew that Jade's father was not a good man. She'd heard her parents saying so. But Jade didn't even live with his father. All the kids lived with their mother. And why did he say I'm so happy, she thought. That's not true. I cry every night. I can't go to sleep for hours. At least he's in good shape and handsome. She looked at Jade who now stared off down the mall, his eyes unfocused. She wanted to remind him of the ride. Hadn't he heard her? She tried to look into his eyes again. He let go of her hand.

"I can't take it anymore. He just won't quit. I don't want to hurt him." Jade started walking toward Hennessy's. "Why do you go back and see him?" If something's so bad, she thought, then change it. Get out.

"Because." He paused. He looked different to Emmy now. The two cowboys she'd seen earlier walked into the Western Outfitters, behind Jade. She heard children squealing over toys at Fun World. Maybe I should get out of my body, she thought. No, that's weird. If I can't get out, I will change it. "I want him to stop drinking," he continued with effort. "He always tells us he's stopped. And I always want to believe him. That fucker. He had to hit me in front of

my little sister."

They walked for a bit before Emmy could think of something else to say. I will change, she thought. She wanted to remind him of a ride home. Hadn't he heard her? Maybe he wanted to be alone. I'll phone Mom. She considered telling him everything would be all right, like her mother would say when she caught Emmy crying in the night. Before she could say anything, Jade stopped and turned to face her again.

"Emmy, never stop loving them. And never stop loving yourself." He kissed her forehead, then slipped off down the hall and out the doors.

She decided to phone her mother. And ask for money to join a clinic. She walked into the bright department store world of Hennessey's, browsing through the perfumes and hair notions on her way to the phone. She let her hand run through silk scarves and brushed corduroy jackets. I like Hennessey's, she thought. There's nothing to eat in here. She knew she'd see Char in school tomorrow.

## Hunting Giraffe in Montana

Mary Helen Eldridge sat in the women's restroom of San Francisco's Hyatt Regency. Delicately she pulled back the sleeve of her silver tipped mink coat, and before she uncapped the extra-fat El Marko felt pen, she thought, the perfume of these pens exudes so many evocative memories. I think they are my favorite utensil. Except watercolors. But those pigments are not permanent. She began writing on the pink metal stall wall. She knew her husband, Rowland, was busy discussing economics with other nationally reknowned DOW predictors in the Hyatt's main ballroom. She knew he would not miss her. In neat block letters she deemed appropriate for the material, Mary Helen printed: "Free enterprise--You always have a choice: You can pay your electric bill or sit in the dark."

She capped the pen, and pulled a little black book out of her purse. She found the page marked "California," and under a list of several other places she'd been, she wrote the Hyatt's address and the location of this bathroom. She

copied what she'd written on the wall, then looked at the wall on her right. Hating to see a totally blank slate, she dug a pencil out of her handmade kangaroo-skin purse. Perhaps a school teacher's precise handwriting would do, she thought. She wrote, taking care to perfect each cursive letter: "Jesus was a \$aver." She double slashed the "s" on saver with the black El Marko, then wrote: "But did he invest?"

The Hyatt Regency's ballroom brimmed with black ties and formal gowns. Mary Helen, or M.H., as her friends called her, relished fancy evenings, but found economic discussions decidedly dull. She had a zest for travel so she went to the four or more conferences a year with Rowland. He was out to save the savers.

M.H. caught Rowland's eye through the smoke from across the vast open-ceilinged room. His white hair, half a head above everyone, was easy to spot. He looks handsome tonight, she thought. Montana's summer sun wore well on him.

"It's time to go," M.H. mouthed. He nodded his head and gestured for five more minutes. Rowland stood in a small group with Ralph Nader, who, M.H. thought, appeared more sickly this year than ever. They were all getting older. I don't even stay out after midnight anymore. I don't like to look any older than my 41 years.

She took a seat on a voluptuous maroon couch next to a woman who wore more strands of pearls than Princess Di. They woman had looped two strands around her black stockinged ankles. Gaudy. The black gloves with diamond rings were fine, but more pearls, why, she looked like a lifesize foot massage roller of the kind Rowland kept under his desk. The woman turned to her and smiled.

"Well, Mrs. Eldridge, darling, how are you? I haven't seen you in eons. Must be at least a decade. How have you been?"

M.H. recognized the whiskey-strained voice of Sophie MacKinzie, an international economist she'd met in Duluth when Rowland started lecturing in '72.

"Sophie, you don't look a day over thirty. Are you still in Minnesota?"

"Of course, yes. As a matter of fact, I'm here to invite certain of our best speakers, the quintessence of economists, to our convention this fall. It's on Economics of Ocean Agriculture." She swished the ice around in the tumbler with her little pearl-ringed finger, wetting a glove.

Sophie explained the program in detail. M.H. hummed agreement and nodded once in a while but she concentrated on not listening. Duluth, she thought. Spray painted walls and marble floors. She pictured one particular restroom wall at the University there, one she cared for more than most, and nurtured in her memory. She hadn't seen it in years. She'd

worn a miniskirt to a luncheon for the economists' wives. Not too short, but skimpy enough to see the better part of her thighs. Hervy Hettock. That letch, she thought. His wife was an economist, and he attended the luncheon and followed M.H. around, pinching her every chance he got. She fled into the restroom and stayed for two hours, delicately painting farm animals copulating on the walls of the stall. Then she painted a giraffe and its hoof prints walking up and over the wall into another stall, and labeled the graffitti, "Giraffe-feeties." Didn't Rowland tell her that Hervy Hettock died last year? Serves him right, she thought.

"Are you ready to go, darling?" It was Rowland. He kissed her cheek. M.H. was sure Sophie had already cornered Rowland into attending the deep-sea farming conference. It's probably about some cult economic commune ten leagues under. Well, she thought, maybe my painted animals are still there.

"Let's get a nightcap," Rowland whispered in her ear. "And take it to our room." His breath made her skin tingle. He still made her feel wanted after all these years, but feeling wanted wasn't always what she wanted. Something had always been missing.

M.H. followed her husband into a piano bar. Sophie never broke stride in her soliloquy, and rolled her pearled wrist in their direction. A star-struck man perched himself on the couch.

"Rowland, are we going to the undersea lectures this year?" Maybe I could color in my giraffe with oils, M.H. thought. Didn't I use indelible felt pens? She tried to remember. I'll have to look it up in my book.

"No, it's right in the middle of finals week, and I just can't afford to leave my students at that time."

That's strange, she thought. Seems to me he wasn't teaching fall quarter, just working with his grad students on a textbook or something. Then, with no more thought about Duluth, M.H. decided she was ready to fly home to Missoula and check on her wall gardens that she had fostered before they left two weeks ago. She hated to think anyone else might be tampering with her material.

She missed the bakery and the little cafe bathrooms where she'd accumulated some of her best writings. She wondered if anyone noticed that Missoula's famed but unknown writer was absent. She looked forward to sitting in the middle booth where she easily eavesdropped on the cafe patrons and employees who talked about her latest epigram. The next adage I'll write, she thought, will read: "The fabric of American society is 100 percent pure virgin polyester." A K-Mart green with acrylics should do nicely.

Rowland led her across the bar. She wondered if he missed Missoula too. It would be good to get home, although she regretted they weren't driving the route to Montana. She thought about the public rest area in Idaho, near Boise,



which always cultured interesting puns and whatnots. They'd been on a trip to Tahoe. She'd been doodling abstract flower chacteratures in compromising positions to pass the time. Rowland said her art looked like a child's scratchings, and that he didn't know why a failed artist just didn't try some other craft like knitting. She got him to stop at the rest area. She wrote, "Idaho isn't the end of the world, but you can see it from there." The state painted it over. Someone had started a story about a cowboy riding his ass, and various hands added their version of the scene, until they had Ronald Reagan riding shotgun with Kaddaffi, the ass.

There once rode a cowboy,  
Who lived in the sun.  
He had a tiny ass,  
That kicked like a Raider,  
And bit him on the bum.

Each line or two, M.H. assumed, had a different author. She preferred reading Yeats but loved the bourgeois challenge this poem provided her. She added:

On his tiny ass  
He did ride,  
Across the great and wide divide.

Last summer while they vacationed to Eastern Oregon's Malheur Bird Refuge with Rowland's bird-loving mother, M.H. barely convinced Rowland they had to make a third stop in an hour. To finagle Rowland into stopping, M.H. had him believe she'd drunk a 40 ounce Coke. She bought the Coke but dumped most of it out before they left the first Boise stop. She discovered the cowboy had gone considerably farther than the great divide.

Far and near did they go,  
Up and past the Alamo.  
To the east, the ass did trot.  
The cowboy, he sat up there,  
Smoking a joint,  
Ready to pop.  
He told those camel jocks  
To screw themselves.  
And while they're at it,  
Screw Reagan too.  
Now that ass, he had a name,  
And playing roulette was his game.  
He bucked and kicked,  
And stole the fire  
From Khaddaffi's cigarette lighter.  
So Reagan stepped in to lend a hand,  
And sat on Khaddaffi's little band.  
They rode off in the sunset,

The cowboy and Khaddaffi,  
The ass and the man.

"A brandy, M.H.?"

"Sounds distracting." Where will it be this time, she wondered. Whenever Rowland bought her sipping brandy, he had another trip in the works. She used to wish he'd surprise her with a trip to Africa. Once she'd patted a real giraffe in a petting zoo. The young animal licked her with his purple tongue. The tongue was rough but kind on her palm. His brown eyes, she'd imagined, told her of happiness and peace of mind.

"What do you think about Louisville?" Rowland asked.

"Louisville? Do you have a meeting there? I don't think I've been there since Secretariat won the Derby."

"They offered me the dean's job. Starting next month. It would double my salary and they'd move us down there, help us find a house, a home, everything."

M.H. was dumbstruck. They didn't need the money. Rowland didn't need to work at all, with her family money and his investments. But a move to the South? She'd hated the pay toilets and the restroom attendants at the derby. She'd nearly been caught by an old black woman who came in to wipe the seat for a dollar. Before the big race, M.H. excused herself from their finish-line booth. The restroom smelled

of lilacs, but needed remodeling. She'd slipped past the attendant who cleaned another stall, and began etching, "Winning is important to losers." Before she'd had a chance to finish, the old woman bashed her in the head with the door. She dropped her charcoal pencil which rolled under the stall wall and out of sight.

"I'm sorry ma'am. I jus' didn't see yous."

M.H. hurried out of the restroom, less one charcoal and plus one headache.

The brandy snifter slipped out of her grip and shattered at her feet.

"You don't need to give me any answer now," Rowland continued as if he hadn't seen the mishap. "I realize we'd be giving up our home, and not see our friends so often, but there's always the phone, and we could visit."

A cocktail waitress brought a mop. M.H. stooped to pick up the shards and noticed some small print under the barstool. Someone had penciled, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

"We don't have to sell the house in Missoula," Rowland continued as if she stood facing him instead of kneeling on the floor under a barstool.

How could someone write upside down so precisely? M.H. asked herself. Eternal vigilance. It has the resonance of a Biblical rune. Perhaps Job, she thought. Or maybe a freedom slogan from South Africa. She stood to face Rowland. He

held another brandy for her.

"It's an economic think-tank of sorts. D.C. relies on some of their reports to direct the country."

M.H. knew the tone in her husband's voice. It was the same high, excited tone he'd used when he asked her to marry him, back at Boston University, where he was an assistant economics professor, and she, a flirtatious art student, enamoured with the sixties and political whims on bathroom walls. His tone did not have the same heart-tingling effect on her it once did.

M.H. listened to Rowland snore. She'd tried everything in their 22 years together to stop the noise. She nearly suffocated him once with a sock. Tonight it didn't bother her because she thought of nothing besides her walls in Montana. She thought, I just can't leave Missoula. I've been working so hard on the walls I've got.

Her memory drifted to the little restroom, almost an outhouse, actually, behind the Broadway Market. M.H. loved the game she had with the proprietor, Mr. Calozono. She'd decorate the wall with an array of sayings, like, "A man born to be hanged need not worry about drowning," then someone else might spraypaint "Contra Aid Kills" and another hand would finish it with "Communist Thugs." Little bull-legged Mr. Calozono would paint it over, and M.H. would start the

cycle once more. She nearly cried again, brooding over relinquishing her repute in Missoula. What would her readers do without her? Whose work would they copy onto other walls? A dagger of jealousy pricked her heart. What if someone else tried to replace her?

"An asshole is an asshole no matter what it looks like," she once wrote in the men's room near Rowland's office while she waited for him to finish his night class lecture. M.H. couldn't remember who she'd been thinking of when she wrote that, but it became a popular adage that others copied. Now she imagined herself writing in foot-high flaired letters: "Dear Missoula: I thank you from the heart of my bottom."

No, I couldn't move from my home, to anywhere. It is out of the question. She felt adrenalin pump through her system. She needed to run to her writings and let her brushes caress the walls. She looked at her husband. How could he take me away from my only pleasure?

"Rowland, I can't move."

"Oh, sorry dear," he woke up. "Was I laying on your arm?"

M.H. knew the flight into Denver always tormented Rowland. He hated flying. M.H. was glad when he went hunting for aspirin. She could investigate some walls. The sign had "woman's restroom" clearly marked in five languages, with a little French maid applique painted on the board.

The room, crowded with travelers and smouldering in perfume, needed some lights replaced. Only half the stalls had enough light for her to work. She stood behind five women in line, a lottery for stalls, she thought. Might not get a bright one this time. M.H. decided to forego the waiting line. She poised herself in front of the mirror.

More grey hair, she sighed. Time to either dye it or cut it, she thought as she pulled the dead hair from her comb and threw it away. She applied lipstick and a bit of rouge to her high cheekbones, then the green eyeliner to ring her lids, accentuating her vivid green eyes.

"Linda?" a woman next to M.H. asked. "Aren't you Linda Evans? Crystal on 'Dynasty?' Please, can I have your autograph?"

"I'm sorry. You have the wrong person."

"Oh." The woman had already pulled a piece of paper from her purse. "My mistake. Are you sure you're not her? I mean, you look just like her."

"Sorry," M.H. said, and turned back to her eyeliner. I'm not a movie star, she said to herself. Just an unknown artist who works better on walls than canvas. The woman left the paper on the counter. M.H. picked it up to throw away, then put it back down. With her green eyeliner she wrote with sticky letters, "There's no sun at the end of the tunnel. Linda Evans."

Satisfied, she turned to join the now shorter line. Finally, it was her turn. A great draw, she decided at once. The walls were filled with incantations and notices. She loved it. The usual "Susie loves Damion," and "men are whores," checkered the wall. M.H. barely glanced over the basic scatological cacophony which she despised as vulgar and plebeian, focusing on a small, shakey hand's message written in, M.H. guessed, Spanish.

"Wonderful!" she said out loud.

"Musta been the Salisbury steak," someone with a New York nasal accent said from the next stall.

M.H. paid no attention. She got out a paper scrap from her pocket, and copied down every letter, double checking and re-checking the spelling. She'd have to ask her cleaning woman what it said. M.H. looked at her copy of the note, and decided she might not have it exactly right. The original hand was so untutored. She pulled a paper out of her notebook, and held it up to the wall to trace the thin line. She was so excited she forgot to scrawl her own message, and fled the room, anxious to get on the plane and home.

"Bye, darling," Rowland kissed her on the cheek. "Let's discuss some things this afternoon. I've left Louisville brochures on the diningroom table. "

Fall quarter started in a week. Rowland had cleaned his office and boxed his academic material. M.H.



sighed as she closed the door. He's happier than I've seen him in years, she thought. He almost skips down the walk. He's set on Louisville. She wondered if they still had segregated restrooms. Oh sure, she thought. There weren't supposed to be separate facilities, but there were ways to bend the rules. Discrimination ruined artistic freedom, she thought.

She went up to her dressing room for Calvin Klein jeans and a polo shirt. They'd been back for two days, and she'd nearly exhausted herself. Saving the best for last, M.H. filled her purse with feltpens, ready for the Mammyth Bakery.

She snatched her purse and a light jacket and was just about to step out the door when Theresa-Maria, her housekeeper, walked up the driveway. M.H. liked the elderly "grandmother of fifteen," as Theresa-Maria often introduced herself, because she only cleaned where M.H. told her, and left the rest of the house alone. M.H. held the door for the tiny woman, who smelled of Mexican spices. A silver chain dangled a crucifix between the woman's breasts. Her stained but clean cotton print dress and white cardigan had long ago lost their own shape and imitated hers.

"Your trip, Mrs. Eldridge. Was it wonderful?"

"Yes, Theresa-Maria. I've brought back a little something for you. It's in the kitchen." M.H. knew Theresa would love the little ceramic doll. She would share it with

her grandchildren, nearly half of whom probably lived with her in her small, north-side house. "I've found some Spanish I'd like you to interpret for me, Theresa-Maria. I'll be back in an hour."

"Yes, Mrs. Eldridge. May your walk be pleasant."

M.H. hurried her mile walk down to the Old Town Cafe, where she'd have a coffee and croissant, then check for any new material on the ladies' room wall. Betty Flores, her coffee partner, would meet her in a half hour.

September was M.H.'s favorite month in Missoula. A few leaves might turn golden on the poplars. The city was quiet before the onslaught of students returning to the University.

Louisville, M.H. thought. Kentucky. Tornados. Horses. Rolling hills. She pulled her black book from her purse. Under "Kentucky," she read, "Worst grafiti in the U.S. Most is violent material about rape and racial hatred. No potential." I must stay in Missoula, she said, and closed her book.

She glanced up at the foothills. Golden grasses beckoned fire, and there, atop the northern ridge, boldly stood the peace sign painted on the microwave reflector. She loved that peace sign. She'd hiked up to it on different occasions, past the "No trespassing" signs, through the horse pastures and barbed wire fences. Every time the Montana Power Company painted over the peace symbol on the 30 by 80-

foot sign, she would pick a night, usually when Rowland had a night class, or played poker with his friends, then haul two gallons of paint up to the hilltop. She loved the exhilarating sensation a sneak up by moonlight left in her palpitating heart. The toughest part was throwing her rope up to a swing-down ladder. She usually made several attempts before the rope caught between the rungs and she could snake it back down to herself. Once doubled, she tugged the old ladder down and climbed up.

Shivers pricked the back of her neck when she thought about the last time she'd been up to the peace sign. It had been a warm August night. She'd taken her shirt and bra off while she painted. She liked the feel of the smooth, damp paint against her skin. Barely off the ladder and dressed, she hears someone's pant legs brushing against the tall grasses on the trail.

The rancher who leased the grassland for his horses almost caught her. Covered in paint splatters and no doubt looking suspicious, she looked the rancher right in the eye and said, "I was just out for a walk. "Tracking giraffe."

She sat across from Betty Flores, a retired museum curator from Billings. Betty had decided to return to the University for a PhD, when her husband became ill then died

two years ago. She never enrolled in school.

"Will you just look at this," Betty thrust the open Missoulian at M.H. "They've done an article on 'The Zorro of Bathroom Walls.' Even a picture of the restroom here."

M.H. scanned the newspaper. They call me the Shakespeare of Missoula. She read outloud, "'The identity of Missoula's most prominent and prolific versifier remains unknown. His secret reputation is known city-wide, and some say, nation-wide.' Can you believe that?" Her face reddened. She felt exposed.

"And further down," Betty poked at the paper, "it says that they secured a handwriting specialist to analyze the lettering. It's certainly exciting, don't you think?"

M.H. read on. The analyst drew an account of the writer's personality. "Tall, dark eyes, moody, and unable to communicate with those whom it's most important to enlighten. He's educated, sly, and often writes in distress."

"Yes, it's interesting," M.H. answered.

"Who do you think it is, M.H.?"

"Who, me?"

"Yes, what's your guess on the identity of of our mystery writer?"

"Oh, probably some lonely housewife."

"A woman. I wouldn't have considered a woman. Well, they should have a contest or something and try to identify the writer. The winner could receive a life-time supply of

toilet paper and felt pens." Betty laughed. "Hey. You're always going in bathrooms. Was that you last Christmas who wrote in the Lovegrove's bathroom that Santa Claus's reindeer were really giraffe in disguise? Maybe it's you, Mary Helen Eldridge."

M.H. didn't look at Betty. She wanted to reveal nothing. She was miffed that Betty misquoted her. She'd written that Santa was accepting gift donations of neck gaitors for Montana's giraffe.

She read more of the newspaper article. The journalist called her the "nouvelle artiste," and said that people were interested in buying her sketches. They wanted to hire her to come to their homes and sign toilets.

M.H. felt trapped. Somewhere, she thought, I've lost control.

"Excuse me." M.H. left for the bathroom.

Usually very cool, the room had been originally painted lime green, then papered, painted pink, and now a dusty orange. In the corners where the old coverings peeled off, someone had scribbled a new bold inscription: "The saddest line in T.V... 'Aye captain. I cannot get her up.' Scotty."

She pouted. No one wrote anything worth reading. No real political agendas. No inspirational tenets. Not even any witty feminist stuff. And now they want to turn my cultivated walls into a game show. I'm drying up. With

that, she started to cry. She sat on the closed stool lid and remembered her days at B.U., and how on every bathroom wall, even in sorority houses, clever hands had left something worth her scrutiny.

With her forehead and shoulder against the left wall, and chin in hand, she let tears drip into her lap and on her straw handbag. She pulled some tissue off the roll and blew her nose. I just don't know what's happened, she cried. She pulled out a thin pressure-point pen from her purse, one she'd accidentally taken from a bank teller. Usually M.H. loathed ballpoints, but today she found it appropriate. Below the paper roll, writing sideways, she scratched: What does it matter? We do things every day, only to die in the end, back to the same place we started from."

She wanted to write more, but someone knocked softly on the door.

"Hello. Is someone in there? Hello."

Reluctantly, M.H. stood up and flushed the toilet.

"Yes, just a minute." She splashed her face with water and dried her red eyes on a rough paper towel. Then she sat down and continued to write: "A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep." For the first time in her writing career, M.H. initialed her work, then went back over the sloppy writing with the fine point, nearly engraving her monogram in the wall. She left for home, explaining to Betty she had a

headache. She did not visit other refuges.

"Aieeee! What you say, Mrs. Eldridge! Aieeee!" Theresa-Maria shrieked. The elderly cleaning woman shook her mop at M.H. and rattled on in Spanish. "El papa usa calzoncillos de puntos verdes. How could you write such things?"

M.H. watched her housekeeper run into the pantry and snatch coat, purse, and broom.

"I don't want your little glass doll. No thank you. Blasphamy! There's your interpretation." Theresa-Maria threw the little hand-painted ceramic doll past M.H. It hit a cupboard below the sink and shattered on the tile floor. M.H. barely saw the top of her head on the far side of the hedge before she disappeared around the corner towards the bus stop.

"What is going on here, Mary Helen?"

Rowland.

"You're home early today." She tried to calm her shaking hands.

Rowland picked up the scrap paper with the Spanish message. A smile slowly overtook his frown. He started chuckling.

"El papa usa calzoncillos de puntos verdes? You gave this to Theresa-Maria?" He laughed. "No wonder she's mad. Your Spanish is worse than my cooking."

She didn't like Rowland laughing at her. Time wounds all heels, she mentally wrote on her mind's wall. "I asked her to interpret something I found on, on a, I found somewhere. I just wondered what it meant."

"You should stick to Kafka, M.H." He shook his head and laughed heartily. "This says 'The pope wears green polka-dot undershorts!'"

"Oh my God!"

"No, just a pope." Rowland had a full rolling laugh boiling up. "You gave this to Theresa-Maria? She's probably on her way to the Grotto right now. You should be glad she's a good Catholic and not a voodoo priestess. She'd be stabbing your effigy with hemlock needles."

"She quit, you know. It's not so funny, Rowland."

"She'll be back." He laughed harder. "Remember when you tried to tell her about the Spanish dinner we had at the Museum fund-raiser? You looked up all the correct words. Took you the entire morning to figure how to tell Theresa-Maria that we ate baked, stuffed dog!"

M.H. felt betrayed by the Denver wall. She'd been set up somehow. "The pope in polka dots," she repeated. She sat on a kitchen chair and rested her chin in her hand. I thought it was something brilliant, she pouted to herself.

"You know, I really love you, Mary Helen. Did you get a minute to look over the Kentucky material?"

M.H. had forgotten about Louisville, and her morning at



the cafe. She remembered the first time her mother told her they would move from their New Hampshire home. She'd been using color crayons to draw figurines onto the caulking between the logs of the old garage. At the time, M.H. recalled, I think I cried not because I'd lose my kindergarten friends, but because I'd miss my garage. The new house felt cold and sterile, until she discovered the waxy tiles of the bathroom floor. The housekeeper simply mopped over her artwork, never telling her mother. But she'd hated the maid.

"I particularly liked the benefits Louisville offers. Did you see the contract, M.H.?"

She held her hand toward Rowland as if she blocked his words. She wanted to clear her head. Terror shook down from her mind to her hands. Somehow she told Rowland that she wanted to take a shower first.

M.H. turned the shower on high and let the steam fill the bathroom. She sat on the closed stool lid and wondered if this was the end. The steamed mirror beckoned her. She wrote sloppy letters with her index finger. "Why dinosaurs are extinct." She tried to draw some pictographs of dinosaurs drawing on walls, and little people with spears stabbing them in the neck. Her finger just didn't work right.

She stood on the toilet and pushed the attic door open.

Dust puffed around her, then settled on her clothes. She stepped on the shelves and pulled herself up into the darkness. Careful to step on the two by four framing, she slipped back to the farthest corner, which was above the bedroom. She began writing with a number two pencil. Her hand shook so she could barely read her own writing.

"To Betty, I leave everything on the walls at the Mammyth Bakery, Old Town Cafe, the port-a-potty at Greenough Park, and on the wall in her guest bedroom's bathroom. To Mr. Calozono, I leave all my spray paints and every layer of writing in his outhouse, plus the paintings on the wall at the Crystal Theater's women's room, and the walls at Fort Missoula. To Rowland, I leave."

She stopped. Someone had turned the shower off.

"M.H.? Are you in the attic?"

"What do you want?"

"What are you doing up here?" Rowland popped his head through the trap door.

"I'm thinking."

"Well while you're thinking, try and explain this black book to me? What's this? A list of rendezvous with lovers? 'March 10, 1982. New York. The Met.' Is that what you do while I'm in business meetings? Meet your lovers? It says 'The ooze. Art in any form is still art.' What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

The ooze. That was in the tiny bathroom behind the

curator's office. Some kind of insulation had seeped through the chink and hardened into a yellowing bubble. She'd written more, but Rowland must not have read on to the next page. "Yet art in the heart is true life."

"What? Come down here and explain yourself." He disappeared into the bathroom.

She finished her writing. "To Rowland I leave nothing." She put the pencil back into her pocket and picked up the magnum that she'd put there a few months ago. She settled herself, her back against the wall where she'd just written, then checked the gun, unlocked the safety. She held the barrel in her mouth, and before she pulled the trigger, she thought, blood will color the writing nicely.