

BOZEMAN BOUND

Laurence C. Hatch



A TCRPress.com
PDF Ebook

BOZEMAN BOUND

by Laurence C. Hatch

Copyright 1999. Laurence C. Hatch. All Rights Reserved.

Chapter 1 - Braddale

Our story begins in the Long Island community of Braddale Oaks - which of course means the streets are lined entirely with maples and ash. Turn into the gate past the budget attempt to simulate geology and take a hard left. Then another left. Accidentally end up in a cul-de-sac, loop out, and back. Finally the right right. Go down a block and you find still more single story ranchoid homes set back more from the road than they build today. They all got porches but only in the back. There are also real sidewalks full of real kids who are offline for the moment. Bikes of every style whiz on and off the sidewalks as the owners brag about their number of "speeds" or an ability to do some videogame stunt unsuitable for WalMart specials or actually vulnerable riders. Cats chase each other and roam nervously as it seems the canine leash has gotten longer by the year. Squirrels noisily protest the lack of oaks, fight over other treasures, sometimes prompting the wrath of small, nimble tabbies. Mothers exchange pleasantries and formulate sharp, private opinions in passing strollers. Men cluster in selected driveways to examine shiny new accessories, admire or disapprove of various tools, and to offer yet another opinion on a troublesome part - hoping someone will invent the budget Corvette minivan while they're young. The occasional young driver from TR ("Roughrider") High charges by too fast or too loud, stirring varied emotions, expressed and not. Tomorrow is recycling day and half the cavernous green bins are still inside. The week and summer are half over.

The Galena family's residence at 2312 is just like the rest on the street except in the EXACT combination of the same metal and stone colors - and a myriad of abuses two boys eager for allowance inflicted upon the shrubs. But overall it's a neat, responsible sort of place you could live next to. The roof is missing the Jone's mini-satellite dish though the chimney has a well-oxidized HAM radio tower of sorts. A broad silver maple which likes hugging the roof with its brittle limbs separates the driveway from the walkway - which in those days had their own access to the street. A couple of mismatched gray roof tiles recall an ice storm three years back when the maple decided its branches were deciduous too. What remains of mom's dream to alternate the glow of marigolds and the purity of sweet alyssum still exists in circle of upright used brick in the middle of the yard. At least it was better than last year's gaudy pink petunias in the inside-out used tire planter. Mr. Galena had proudly designed both in his underground chamber of motorized genius and mechanical horror.

The lawn was as respectable as you can get without spending big fertilizer bucks and has a little scalped patch near the road where Dell

always rides the Toro too fast and low. "Your entertainment is not the goal here" his dad said just this week. Again. Out of the corner of your eye you see the Foust's new natural wood swingset-slide-tower complex next door - all crawling with recent defectors from the Mann's old metal thing. The driveway has a rippled, tar-like and not too convincing finish from an experiment in a drum dad tried last summer. A damp, rotting newspaper in clear bag sits next to the door as a reminder to scold the papergirl and to withhold the appropriate sum.

'Earl it's his future. You can't scrimp on your future.'

'Yea, Yea. Every time I hear that I get taken for all my overtime. If not more. You remember that siding Elizabeth? It was the future of our family nest...future of this neighborhood. It was a future furkin' mistake. That cheap crap was pink tin foil from some shithole factory in Jersey.'

'Will you watch your mouth! The boys just might have some respect left for you.'

'Of course they respect me. These are my boys.' Earl relaxed, smiled, and used each arm to capture a son.

'If Rev. McKay...or your mother could just hear you sometimes. I do declare!'

'As for McKay I doubt the man has worked a full day in his life...or got up a sweat even once'. The boys had heard this sort of banter between their parents more than once and it was frankly better than any sitcom on tonight. But they sat quietly and never let it show.

'That is a horrible thing to say about a man of God.'

'He's also a man of our tithe and the money of lots of other folks. Thousands and thousands by now. What is it fifteen years? When someone works for you a man is entitled to express his opinion of another.'

'Earl. I know for a fact...from Sheila...the man comes into work not a second after seven and often leaves well after six. And on several nights has obligations like the Minton Home and the membership class...'

'And prayer meeting' Joey chimed in and got a dismissing look from his father.

'Still and all...our Lord was out pounding the road and feeding people and such. McKay sits in his plush velvet chair all day.'

'And our sermons are the deeper for it. Do you expect the man to read study his Bible seated on a bulldozer?' Elizabeth said, sensing a near victory of sorts.

'Dad's still ticked he didn't help the men when they re-built the fellowship hall' Dell said, hoping to add some clarity to the already amusing situation.

'There are churches where the minister has a real job and everything else is done by volunteers. I don't expect you to understand...you aren't privileged to the papers I get to see'. Earl felt he had the better part of the discussion.

'How they ever made you a trustee I'll never know'. She wanted to add 'it used to require more than mechanical inclination' but never speak it. Not before the boys anyway.

'Just take my word that the expenses at the parsonage and the study are not what working folks are accustomed to. I've said far too much already.'

'Now Earl I know Sylvia very well. Their home is no showplace and she's more than economical with the household. Not one of their children wears designer things. They do have some nice furnishings but so many of them are gifts - gifts to the Lord - volunteering as you put it, dear'

'Well...the cable bill alone scoops up a few offering plates.'

'A minister had better see something of the world he preaches to thrice a week' Elizabeth continued, seeming to be in her familiar rhythm of quick reply. Words like 'thrice' always meant she was in her righteous debate zone. It was a place all of them admired and partly dreaded. Joey thought 'score another for EG'.

'Well when we have ourselves a ministry to pro wrestlers and country crooners...and uh famous pastry chefs...until then my opinion stands' Earl retorted with more than a little fumbling. Still the humor was a point in his favor to the sons. It was all as much about humor as logic and that combination always kept it from being a fully negative atmosphere.

As usual it all wound down with no real conclusion except in the heads of each participant. Elizabeth figured the boys at least learned that discussing things was better than being silent - even if their father was a tad harsh at times. Earl just needed to vent sometimes and having three attentive minds at home was more than the pulpit he needed from time to time.

The rest of the summer was uneventful as far as big things in the Galena household are concerned. There was a brief feud with the Carpenters across the street over young Brittany's sidewalk chalk designs on their stretch on cement. This was the third time. But a good summer

downpour removed the traces in a day. Besides Elizabeth and Molly had always had been close at least when it coming to affairs of the kitchen and they managed to smooth over everything.

'I just talked with your father. He said you'd do me a little favor here on this trip of yours' Mrs. Galena said while whipping up a batch of her better-than-Chex mix.

Dell looked at his brother. Since kindergarten his father's preapproved favors had always fallen into three categories: boring, unpopular, or awkward. Some were prepacked to be all three.

'Maybe. Let's hear it.' Joey was always the quick one.

'Madge's sister has a daughter. Real nice girl. Decent Christian woman. She's going to this Methodist college near some place called Rapid City. They're real fine folks but farming hasn't been so kind even to church folks in Ohio. A ticket way out there is kind of precious about now. Of course Madge pulled out that big atlas of hers; she got it for buying 32 rolls of them Scotts papertowels. Anyhow what was I saying oh yes that Methodist girl's school is just up the highway from Montana... so Madge got one of her brilliant meeting of the minds.'

The boys looked at each other again. It was a half grimace this time. Close female company? Nice Christian girl? All alone with a young innocent thing? Madge's niece? She could be ugly? But probably young? Hundreds of miles in the van? Devout Methodist? Could be a repressed nymph? Maybe sent away as punishment? Some kind of higher male mathematics was being computed and neither their faces nor brains could yet reveal a clear total. They didn't really have to say it but wanted to see this chick. Some ancient genetic formula found its fulfillment between them. Any women's worth a chance, a try, a look - especially college girls. Without that formula half our fathers would have died lonely in labs, box cars, or stockrooms.

Dad came up from the cold unfinished basement looking rather pleased with himself. Frustration always shown on his face. His wife and sons could tell it was otherwise this evening at dinner. Elizabeth had learned this was usually a good chance to draw him. Even if she didn't understand everything he seemed to enjoy talking about his projects. He was inclined to think his sons (who labored under just one and not the three shops classes of his youth) might benefit.

'Are you cooking up something down there, Earl?'

'Just a little experimental time. That's what made this country great - folks with time and ingenuity to think about problems and how to solve

them.'

'Problems?' Dell thought. That sounded like trouble. When did things that were decorative (like an endless series of pale pine lamps carved with a burning iron) it was mostly harmless - except perhaps to high states of interior design. But when he took on problems, real or imagined, it was often more than a little odd.

'Seems like a mighty shameful waste to water that lawn and your garden at day long. 'Vaporates half the water before it hits the roots they say. I'm thinking up doing a state-of-the-art irrigation system with some of the things we've already got inhouse.'

State-of-the-art was not usually a phrase applied to Earl Galena's inventions or even his auto repairs. The later he could pull off with some skill - due to years in the National Guard. And his track record with things involving water and most particularly the home's plumbing had been less than stellar. Nothing too diastrous really but enough to call in a plumber once or twice. Elizabeth still remembers having to borrow a kettle of water before dinner from the Fousts - despite so much being available on the floor.

Mrs. Galena had raised her boys to respect women but somewhere along the way fellows arrive at their own level of dealing with women. After all women stick together and protect each other. They had looked more to their father to see which of all the door-opening, chair-pushing, nonsense really and truly got you ahead in life.

'This is the young lady I told you boys about. You know Madge's sister's girl. Her name is Marie.'

The boys extended their semi-feable form of handshake; the stiff kind was reserved for sports heros and deacons at church and the third flaccid one for ugly cousins and store keepers. As was his way Joey avoided her eyes as determinedly as Dell met them. Dell had learned to win ladies (what few in truth there had been) with direct, honest charm. Joey had succeeded (or perhaps failed is more accurate) just as much with girls liking mysterious, silent men who take time to warm up. Marie gave both a little grin and a polite, uncommittable grip.

'Well I'll get some tea now. You kids take a few minutes to get acquainted.'

'Kids these days don't like tea unless its that sweet stuff in the can. Get'em some pop. And I'll take a beer' Earl fired off. He had brought reports home from work. It had been a rough day.

'Pop? Nobody says that anymore ' murmured Dell. He smacked his brother's shoulder and thought he caught a repressed grin from Marie.

Elizabeth almost blanched. Beer and pop instead of tea. Horrors. What

would this fine Methodist girl think of them now? And it might get back to Madge. And you know how she talks.

Marie and Earl went on about a hundred nothings from the weather in Rapid City to how Madge's kids were doing now that they have moved away. As soon as the Methodist's doctrines came up, Elizabeth interjected with pop (and no beer) served in proper tall glasses with perfectly formed ice and those fancy kind of straws a good hostess never lets run out. Had Earl been allowed to engage in the complexities of any demonination his wife was sure he would come off as ignorant, prejudiced, or both. Elizabeth nearly choked on the red strawberryish soda when Earl let out:

'Do the Methodists dunk 'em good like the Baptists do?'

'Not so many of them. There are many kinds of Methodists. Our American Reformed Methodists do immerse. But there are some kinds which sprinkle the children after birth. I am led to believe some Baptists sprinkle as well.'

' 'pose so. Can't go much by names any more. Half the churches with decent sounding names turn out to be cults anyhow.' Earl sipped the pop (without aid of the straw) and looked at his wife again. 'Ain't seen red beer like this before, darling.'

'You know full well its not beer, Earl. To listen to you Marie here will think it's an everyday thing with us.'

'It's darn near everyday with me' Earl winked at his guest who seemed more charmed than offended by the large, stereotype of a dad.

'Why it is that you are traveling so far for school, dear. Aren't' there fine Methodist colleges here in New York?' Earl continued, his wife keeping a sharp ear for trouble from the kitchen.

'Many I am sure. But mother wishes me to go to one sanctioned by the American Reformed branch and they have just the one school. She thinks the distance will keep me from the pleasures...or seductions of a city life. And they have such a lovely campus and grand buildings.'

By this point Elizabeth wished again she had had a least one girl child. One much like this girl. She would tell Madge that. That might blunt any untidy gossip.

The boys soon ignored their guest over a game of Temple Avengers on the Celeron on the other side of the living room. They had managed to ignor their mother's looks and hints to be more attentive to company. The girl was pretty but nothing too out of the ordinary and much more piass than either lad generally preferred. But the words 'pleasure' and 'seduction' when said so purposefully by a young lady have a way of

calling men away from their distractions. It is the video equivalent of a massive fireball or dragon biting his way into your castle. The fellows looked up and around to the young girl who as it happened was giving the straw a workout. To their minds this was some kind of sign. Finally Joey got around to picturing her with far less covering.

Should this all sound like a bad porno script I must confess to my lady readers that such is the way of all men whether they put it down in words or not. Some of you know this already. And to you men I apologize. But perhaps we all need to confess. Yet I cannot imagine most fellows confessing to their wife or girlfriend even the smaller lustful thoughts or images nature or someone put in our heads. I would be damaging and unproductive except for some women who like that sort of thing. Boys want women to give them signs even when they aren't. And of course when you ladys give dedicated signs we so often miss them.

Joey was almost always the schemer and Dell the executor when it came to schemes they did together with girls. Each could not usually pull off the whole thing without the thinking or charm of the other. Joey suggested they offer to show her the ducks in the park and a few other things Dell could not fully recall until prompted. Besides Dad was now on his second beer (both of which he fetched himself) and the poor girl was certain to become bored with his perplexing, philosophizing side. Mom never was too good at shutting him up in front of company. They had to get her out of there.

It worked. They all walked down the street to the corner park and she carefully cultivated an equal interest in both of them. However she did not let down any prim barriers at first.

'Call me Sip.' She grinned to each in turn.

'Sip?' puzzled Dell

'My real name is Sipsalie.'

'I thought it was Marie.' questioned Joey.

'It is. Marie Sipsalie.'

'Don't you like to be called Marie.' thought Dell out loud.

'It's fine. But only my Aunt Madge and my mother call me that. All my friends and my Dad call me Sip.'

'Well I guess we need to be your friends' replied Joey without really thinking out his words.'

'Yes. It's certainly going to be a long trip. I've never been out of New

York except for a trip to Pittsburgh when I was a baby.'

'Bring lots of stuff to read....that's what everyone tells me' Joey continued, hoping to get some advantage over his brother.

'I already have two of my textbooks and I'd like to get into the first couple of chapters before arriving.'

'That sounds smart' Dell said, knowing that compliments never run out of style.

'Dell and I can help quiz you if you want' Joey added quickly to even things up. Or just stay ahead - he was never sure about such things.

'Thanks. We'll have lots of time to talk. That should be fun.'

'Fun indeed' thought both men who by now had warmed up to her curious little smile and tuned into the appeal of the way her hair bounced. If Joey had only known she already favored him way above his brother

Chapter 2 - Finally Headed

The car the boys were taking was a largish red Oldsmobile convertible that had once belonged to Earl's brother up near Albany. It had come to them in a complicated trade that involved Grandpa Galena's old blue Mercedes sedan left to the kids collectively at his death. Philip had always loved the Benz and he traded his aging but somewhat noble Olds to Earl in a sort of buy out of his stake in the inheritance. It was not a cool car for teen boys to be seen it yet it was red enough and convertible enough not to bring any major dishonor. The engine was capable enough and the trunk spacious enough for a long journey. Earl had spent many a long evening making sure it was "road worthy" and replaced anything under a hundred bucks that could cause the least bit of trouble. He insisted the boys take a pack of fuel filters and plugs with them on the road, not being very sure those prairie people had good parts stores or not. 'Can't have you men sittin' around some shop waiting for the UPS man, can we?'

After spending half a day browsing the maps their dad had gotten from the AAA they chucked 'em all. It would be more fun to plan as they went and besides the money hadn't run out yet. Mom insisted they take a Master Card with a four hundred dollar limit but only in case of emergency. She'd also packed up a kit full of non-perishable snacks in the event of a "stranding" - which is #4 on the official Mom List of Horrible Things Which Could But Never Will Happen. Joey was already planning how to use it to get beer and other things without the bill being too explicit.

Sip had been very quiet the first few dozen miles on route 6. She was

thoroughly submerged in a book and not particularly social today. Joey was already planning to try a dozen things she might find fun but had big doubts about pulling most of them off. Dell was sure he would succeed if he decided he should. The road before them had lots of girls on and around it. He always kept his options very open.

'Check her out!' Dell shouted to his brother, pointing to a hitchhiker down the road and rather half forgetting his female passenger.

'Uh yea.' Joey responded taking more visual interest than his words indicated.

The girl was about their age with mid length brown hair and not entirely better for it being unwashed in the revealing sun. She wore ragged very faded jeans, a simple white t-shirt, and a vest that had a faint resemblance to a red and blue tapestry. She has a dark orange knapsack and a cold, indifferent look that stood out yards away. She had the look of both trouble and fun.

Joey had supposed she was to be checked out from a distance and couldn't believe his brother's nerve to suddenly pull over and look back at the girl.

'What are you doing man?' he whispered loudly. Sip looked up and around and then back to her Melville.

'She looks like a college student' Dell replied with some amusement.

'So?' Joey questioned, quietly reaching to feel if his pocket knife was intact.

The girl came running and had grabbed a small rolled sleeping bag neither had seen from the road. Her smile was reassuring. Joey thought she was prettier than it first appeared. She looked harmless anyhow. But that's what the news reports always said.

'Are you going anywhere near Minneapolis?' the girl questioned.

'Yes. Probably in a couple of days' Sip responded, startling the boys for her knowledge of the yet unplanned route.

'Cool!' she said and smiled somewhat inanely again.

'Let me put your stuff in the back' Dell offered, bounding from his door.

Soon they were heading down the road and the girl introduced herself as 'Quila', a self-invented name abbreviated from her favorite Mexican beverage. 'My real name is Christy but so is every other broad' she noted.

'You guys are so nice' Quila effused, giving Joey the best smile he'd ever seen.

Sip was polite and not too much more. 'I'm headed to Rapid City to school and they're going to Bozeman.' Sip told their guest with a degree of comfort and warmth that surprised the men.

'I'm just headed for trouble...figure Minneapolis ought to have it's share of good times besides I can crash with my cuz for a few weeks.'

'Are you still in school?' Joey asked working up his best not-overly-flirting form of smile.

'Not a chance. Been there, done that, got thrown out ' Quila giggled.

'We're going to have as good as time as we can ' Dell interjected, not half knowing what to say or what he meant.

'Cool. Count me in.'

'So what stuff are you guys into?'

Dell he better handle that one and replied 'anything that won't kill us'.

'Me too. And I brought my party kit ' Quila laughed. No one was sure what that meant but unspoken opinions ranged from the pharmaceutical to the anatomical.

'She's headed for Bible school but I'm up for most anything' Dell confessed to his brother's surprise. I guess there was no middle ground now Joey figured. There was now one girl for each and Dell was making his choice.

'Bible school? Cool. I believe the Bible and stuff like that. Not personally but it's like okay. My grandmother used to tell me neat Bible stories.' Quila declared.

'Don't worry I don't preach' Sip said with a little friendliness.

'So you boys up for some weed or am I out of line?' Quila asked, fumbling in her knapsack.

'Sure' Dell snapped in a second flat. Joey was unsure but nodded quietly. Sip made no protest and turned the next page of her book.

'This is a dealer's cut so you might wreck or something' their new friend warned. 'I'm not a pothead or anything...'

Sip quietly thought 'right...you're not anything'.

'I figured we'd stop early today. Let's grab the next cheap hotel.' Dell proposed.

'Cool. I start rolling one for each - ought to get us somewhere. A couple of hits of we're all loggin'

'Alright' Joey said with some enthusiasum, trying not to arouse Sip's attention. He had not the slightest idea what 'loggin' meant but in context it sounded fun.

There weren't many hotels for five miles but finally Joey say a big yellow billboard proclaiming the economic and electronic virtues of the Econotel Motel. It was the Econolodge they supposed but the same overall theme was acceptable. This was hopefully a two star trip - one star if money ran low.

'Never heard of that chain?' Joey puzzled. 'They have HBO'

'And lots of porno channels ' Quila added. 'We have them in Dayton. Nothing fancy but way cheap.'

'Sounds like our kinda place' Dell replied, not knowing to which features he'd agreed.

'I hope it's okay if Quila stays in your room?' Dell asked the obvious question to Sip.

'Sure I'll enjoy the company' she said somewhat cheerfully to the boy's surprise.

The place ran \$21.99 a room plus \$9.00 for the extra person. Everything was clean enough but the cranberry plaid bedspreads were an insult even to the boy's notion of decorating. The furniture was dark laminate with little white nicks on almost every corner. A red and dark yellow Matador battled on the guy's wall while a very blue ocean sweapt upon the girl's.

Before the guys could discuss their new found female friend there was a knock at the door and Quila slowly pushed her way in.

'You guys ready to light some magic?'

'Sure' Dell replied finding it best to do anything this wild creature suggested. Within seconds she had slung her long body over the ugly maroon red easy chair in the corner of the room.

'Suppose I stay here with you guys tonight. I'm into odd numbers ' she smiled with mischief that turned into fervor.

'Umm okay' Dell replied, eying his brother and having a delayed response this time.

'Don't worry I'm easy to please. You don't suppose Sippy dear will be joining us?'

'Not likely' Joey said still eyeing his brother and now with a bit of terror taking hold.

'We'll leave Bible girl to her Moby Dick' Joey said but only he got the joke.

Quila left them and they started talking to each other to cover their nervousness and

'It doesn't get better than this.' Dell confessed with a wide smile.

'You gotta remember Sip knows our PARENTS. We have to play it ' Joey warned.

' Carefully' Dell said. 'But she's not the sort to bring up such things. I can tell.'

'You better be right.' Joey returns

The boys settled in sheepishly in the bed pulling the covers around themselves at either side of their limber friend. She was puffing on another joint and began removing the many layers of her clothing from top to bottom.

'We got free movies guys I just gave the night clerk some head.'

'Oh, yea' Joey said, hardly daring to look.

'How about NIGHT LUST IV boys?' Quila flipped through the adult channel guide. 'No wait WORLD'S LARGEST GANG BANG that's got to be neat.'

'Seen it!' Dell said, shocking his brother.

'You have not' Joey said with waiting.

'Twice I think. My friend Mike....well his dad has half wall full of pornos.'

'And you never told me.'

'I just did, didn't I?'

'Okay boys. Before it starts I want these warmed up' and she pulled off her surprisingly fancy lace bra.

'No problem' Joey choked out. Dell was already in lip lock.

The lights went off and the awkward but wonderfully wild event began.

Chapter 3 - Divergence

The next morning they all trooped over to the Waffle House to get as big and vast a spread of good, greasy

things as could be dreamed up. Quila went for cheese on everything. Dell was having a three meat combo. Joey had given Sip a half-hearted little 'hi' and intended to avoid too many questions - though his eyes and Quila's overnight absence said much.

They all shoved into a small booth and Quila was showing Dell an obvious bit of intimacy with her hand on his leg.

'Don't worry fellows I've already explained everything to Sip here. I even invited her to join us tonight...but to each her own '

Sip was trying not to blush and had little success. Joey felt bad for her and for once was without any adequate words - especially with her legs forced so close to his. Dad always said you "grow up a little everytime you find yourselves at a loss for words". Don't suppose he meant things like last night but still.

'I'll be okay' Sip said looking Dell full in the face. He blushed to match her.

Joey finally brought up the menu and everyone began to go with the new subject just as Janice arrived with the tiny cylinders of OJ and coffee.

'Sippy said she'd watch a movie with us tonight seeing as how they're free and all.' Quila smirked.

'Oh yea ' Joey was finding himself without words again.

Once again Janice saved further awkwardness by thumping down the four thick glazed plates full of steaming, shining, wonderfully scented portions.

On the way out Quila and Dell made a pitstop and Joey found himself pacing outside the restaurant and under Sip's gaze.

'You guys really surprise me sometimes' she mused, almost asking him for some clarification.

'We don't usually smoke and stuff but this is a fun trip' Joey said, feeling uncomfortable between the two worlds he liked best.

'I suppose. Just don't lose your footing. The world has a way of taking away fun just when you think you have it' she declared with a certainty he'd not seen before.

'You're right. She didn't tell you a lot of stuff I hope.'

'More than I'm used to hearing. I had thought you liked me a little.'

'Oh I do. It's just well sometimes things are too good to pass up.'

'Like I said ' and she pranced away toward to car, leaving him very much ashamed and feeling something exceptional had been lost.'

'What happened to him?'

'He went to Clairmont' Dell admitted without much emotion.

'I have a cousin there. It's a terrific school.' Quila returned.

'Ours went to other great institution there.' Joey said with dry wit.

'Oh!' Quila snapped.

'He sort of flipped out one afternoon at KMart. He was loading upon supplies for a camping trip and said he just kinda liked the way a particular hatchet felt in his hand. Then he justed felt like hurling it down the aisle...into the back of a sales clerk...' Joey was interrupted.

'Yuk!' Sip replied. Quila winched.

'The kid was lucky. Missed his spinal cord by half an inch. He was all right eventually. When the police arrived my cousin was sitting crossed legged in the camping section, wrapped in one of those foil thermal blankets. When the cop asked him to stand up and surrender he offered him some bacon from stove he thought he was cooking on.'

'Now I know where you boys get it from' Quila said with a laugh.

'What does that supposed to mean?' Dell inquired.

'Sip - know what I mean, don't ya girl?'. Sip nodded with a curious grin. Quila went back to studying the back of Joey's head.'

They found a cheap old-fashioned hotel just off the highway called Bermann's Retreat. It seems the upkeep had retreated along with it's popularity. B ut at \$19 even per room it was too good to pass up.

'Sorry guys I tried but we gotta pay for the movies. Besides I don't swing with fat white chicks anyhow.' Quila continued. 'You guys up for a couple of hot rounds tonight. After we show Sip here some cool flicks.'

'I suppose ' Joey replied, thinking not quickly enough to avoid Sip's quick look. 'Um I'm kind of tired. Besides Sip was going to show me some stuff at the driving range.'

'No problem. Me and Dell can get some business done while you two love birds pretend to whatever '

Sip headed across the street without waiting for Joey and apparently not so pleased at any of her companions. He caught up to her just before the traffic cleared. 'Sorry I had to make up something to get away from her.'

'I've never hit a golf ball in my life except Putt Putt.'

'They won't be noticing. They've already closed the door.'

'I'll stay with you if you want .' Joey offered.

'I don't think so.' Sip scolded.

'No, No! I meant for a little while until I can get back in.'

'Alright but you're paying for this little lie of yours. And where did the 'love bird' thing come from?'

'Not me I swear'

'I'd rather you wouldn't.'

The golf went well but Sip remained a bit cold and he didn't get to hold her arms in anything like the closeness he'd imagined. Still she was a lovely and very nice girl. Still he'd not see her again probably after next week. But maybe as a friend. Who was he kidding? It was another of his wasted crushes that ended up going nowhere. At least this one was not ALL in his head. He did need some practice with nice girls - his mother's idea of nice that is.

They got back after dark and crossing the highway was a real treacherous ordeal that took a full five minutes to manage. Sip went into her room and closed it rather quickly he thought. He listened at his room door and the wild ones were still going at it. He was stupid to miss this - last night was absolutely the best - still he felt an instinct.

Joey knocked gingerly on Sip's door and she seemed surprised to see him. 'I'm kinda without a room' he said sheepishly. She opened the door and let him in without much comment, returning to a documentary on the Discovery channel.

'You can stay another hour until I turn in. After that you're on your own.'

Joey dumped himself onto the second bed which she somehow didn't seem to care for. 'She's not using it you might as well for an hour that is.'

'Okay' he said looking her way. 'I really am sorry. I'm not going to mess around anymore. You're kinda like my conscious out here.'

'A conscious is usually best when it's your own and you carry it with you.'

'True. But this is our first big trip away from the folks. I'm entitled to one mis-step.'

'I think I counted four and multiples of each' she looked directly at him and half smiled to his surprise.

'Do you do anything at all...I mean for fun.'

'Yes. The golf wasn't so bad and you avoided all the obvious jokes.'

'Well I thought better of it.'

'See I know you better than you think.'

'This is fun. Just talking. '

'I not very tired. There's a Taco Bell on this side of the road down that way' she motioned to the west-facing wall.

'You're buying '

'Not if I get there first ' and she bounded for the door with athletic ease she'd not shown before. 'I'm going like this girl' he said to himself.

By the time they got back and he listened at the door it was clear the real love birds were not going to stop.

'Let me get my stuff. I guess I'll have to make due in the car tonight.'

'Serves you right....perhaps.'

'I suppose. My brother is going to buy me a room if he tries this again. Damn well count on it!'

'Is he as new to big, open world as you are....and myself too?'

'Yes. He does a good job of pretending though. It's his macho nature. He hasn't kissed more than five girls in his whole life.'

'He won't have to if this continues.'

'Should we like have a meeting about it or something - after all two-thirds of the budget is from you and I.'

'We can't very well ask Quila for very much. A meal occasionally seems all she is good for.'

'And the...' he almost said pot.

'Pot? That's not exactly an asset for anyone. Herself included.'

'I guess I'd better head out' Joey said with genuine dread but it came out well.

'Wait....maybe you could stay. It would not be very Christ-like of me just to let you freeze to prove a point. You will be sleeping in full clothes you understand?'

'No problem. YOU can do whatever you want? Didn't mean it that way...'

'I will buy us a movie - NC-17 or better.'

'Better goes in which direction?'

'To PG and G'

'I was afraid you'd think that.'

'Have you seen Cullen Falls? I hear it's wonderful.'

He gives her a puzzled look that says much.

'Chick flick I guess?' Sip says, breaking a smile for the first time in many minutes.

'I'll pay for Killing Falls and you buy one for me.'

'CULLEN falls!'

'It sounded better the other way.'

'It would. Okay...you look like a Fantasia man'

'Spare me.'

'How 'about "Hornet"?''

'Really? It's a Guy Movie you know.'

'It's supposed to be a little like Top Gun - something for everyone.'

'Done. Wait a minute now. That's one and half girl films out of two.'

'Sounds like a deal to me.'

'Except....Hornet they say here is an R.'

'Oh. Well that evens us up a bit.'

'You know I just realized something wierd. You're name is Sip - sortof - and she is named for a drink.'

'And your brother is named for a small valley'

'Let's not go there...'

'No let's not'

The movies went very well and surprising both of them were entertained to a reasonable level. They seemed more comfortable with the other now and their conversation continued long after the movies into the the dark of the room.

'I guess Dellie and I weren't the only naughty boys and girls last night eh?' Quila squirmed and questioned.

'Think what you want' Sip said with her first sign of annoyance at her untamed friend.

'I didn't say you fucked him or anything. Isn 't simple cohabitation like a bad sin.'

'Well we're not LIKE Catholic or anything'. Sip was very annoyed now. The brothers were giving each other some looks.

'Okay. I was just being happy for you whatever you did or did not do'. She reached for Dell rather carnally from the back seat.

They moved only fifty miles up the road the next day and found another Econotel. Things were much the same. It was same identical architecture in fact - if one may dignify it with a word of that length. Even the front desk clerks looked like the same unfulfilled, sleepy people running on Bunn. This facility seemed to be in a little better condition though Sip was sure the smell of urine the carpets was stronger here. The two sexes

paired up as originally intended and all were tired and without a mind to do anything crazy.

The next morning's arrival was not warmly greeted by any of the four in our party. There had been a raucous fight outside in the hallway of the hotel. One of two boyfriends of their nextdoor neighbor had been slashed by the other and by the time the Police took a report the night was half wasted.

'No man every knifed anyone for me' Quila remarked out of the blue and getting nothing by a faint moan from the frontseat and a strained eyes from Sip.

The day's driving was very productive though they noticed the price of gas going up as the miles advanced. All four took turns at the wheel. Remarkably Quila was quite the controlled, cautious driver. 'I learned to drive taking my grandma to get her medicine' she said. She drove like grandma was still with her. Dell took over for his second shift and noted the sagging heads behind and next to his own.

'Let's stop for some beer. Eh, girls?' Dell cut the silence of the numbing gray road. Joey glanced at his brother as long as he dared and wished to scold him for being so direct.

'Pour it down my neck boys!' Quila responded instantly and let out a howl Sipsalie had always associated with drunk rednecks. 'Gimme a dollar - I want some of that good German stuff...'. She held her hand out to Sip who meekly complied with some amusement.

'I don't think they have any Hefe-weizens around here' Joey remarked with no notice or response. Sip had already imagined he might well know something about everything. If there was a gentleman's kind of beer or a passion devoted to it like her grandfather did with his wine cellar she would expect him to be in command.

Dell pulled 'the beast' (as Quila had recently dubbed it) into the 'Gas-and-Save'. Joe's active mind thought that lime and white sign might do well for a combination service station and house and worship. Quila ran in and was first in line with assorted bags of orange-dyed things substituting for potato chips in the year's fashionable shapes; one was of African animals due to some minute fraction of one percent going to a unknown wildlife society. The other bag was a more golden generic imitation of the old Frito's theme but containing some curious blend of rice, corn, flour, and potatoes. A high dose of salt and spices made it go more easily over the tongue and some machine-added carmel spots

made it appear to be roasted or toasted or baked in an old Mexican oven. Joe had opened the car's hood and was doing his impression of a science nerd. Since grade six he had mentally equated the congested contents of any engine bay with a traveling scientific laboratory. It was all a matter of science and math after all. This thing reacted with this fluid or two under these precise, well-defined temperatures and pressures. It was all a matter of knowledge he felt; engineering being a cover word for what he felt was just simple chemistry and physics.

Sip was quietly inspecting the shelves for anything interesting and quickly slipped a 5 inch doll in her hand and headed for the checkout with a bottle of aspirin. Her period was at best a week off and was of her mother's belief that aspirin and a dark skirt was all any decent women required to get over it. The doll was something like one she had years ago and in the way of all good toys was not to be found anymore. It was a bit of comfort in this new life of chaos and fast-moving mileposts.

'How do you tell when you're drunk?' Dell harmlessly interjected once everyone except his brother (asked to drive) had poured a few cans or bottles into them. Joey was always amazed how Dell picked simple questions to ask girls. They always responded well but when he tried it seldom had any results of note. He had recently concluded his simple questions were perhaps too direct or intimidating. His brother's were so crude...so poorly phrased...so...effective.

'I get numb...blessedly numb' Quila confessed before raising a Beck's high over head.

'Some people say I'm numb all the time...but I can tell...'

'How 'bout you Sip. I'll bet you've never got ripped real good?' Dell was giving her a quick teasing look and a flow of words his brother knew too well.

'He's going to seduce her in front of everyone' Joey said to himself with a beginning of anger.

'I never permit myself more than one. I get very sick otherwise.' Sip replied regaining her seminary girl image. Dell was not convinced and gave her his moderately wicked smile. Joey approved her answer and Quila was trying to twist off a cap not intended for that form of address.

'DAMN!!!' she screamed looking curiously at her nearly damaged index finger. Sip noticed that the wild girl had nails a good deal more plain and short like guys. Dell handed her his Swiss army knife again. Joe watched in the rearview mirror content that his model of knife had ten more useful attachments and much more impressive girth than his brother's crude model. And it was in the authentic dark NATO green too.

'This is so boring' Dell broke out and thumped the thick wooden steering

wheel.

'Let's talk about what we talked about last night' interjected the liling Quila. Joey wanted to say 'no' and 'no way' and quite strongly but he did not want to appear to have some secret thing with The Girl. Sip would hate that. Women pick up on those things he thought.

'Yea. Why not? You start' he said with nonchalant slickness that made him grin to his internal ego.

'So did you do it last night? And were you thinking of me?' She held back nothing. Joey derived his own meaning and nearly choked on the now warm brew he'd been nursing. Sip showed no alarm or sign of any comprehension. Dell stared hard the far horizon and tried to form an answer without driving off the road. He wanted to slow down but after so many miles any change of speed or smoothness or alignment was as good as a facial contortion.

'No. What about you?' he sounded deadpan as if the subject did not interest him.

'You aren't getting off that easy boy! Pardon the pun.' Quila grinned with grinch-like evil and let out a little high-pitched hoot which men and other girls can interpret for no good. Joey surprised himself. He hadn't slept the night before very well and that effect of the beer on him was like a much stronger beverage.

He was now silly and reckless. 'Dell said he fantanizes about Madonna in army boots sticking a gold cross up his butt.' None of the other three knew what undiscovered side of the quiet, calm and thoughtful Joey that came from. But Quila was happy things were getting hot and ripe.

'Let's go for TT, babies' she said with contentment.

'I'm sure I'll regret it but what's TT?' Dell asked, trying to spot Ms. Sipsalie's face in his undersized chrome-edged mirror.

'TT. Total Truth. Shall we go for TT-4. Four people telling all?' What Quila lacked in sophistication of appearance she made up for with a skillful quality of tone and inflection. She seduced by voice more than anything else.

'Sounds like Truth or Dare?' Sip finally spoke up.

'Not 'zactly. Sip. There isn't any dare and anyone can ask anything and everyone must tell. '

'Suppose one lies?' Sip replied

'Nothing 'cept you get asked rougher and more personal questions.' Words is weapons, right?'

'Sometimes. Sometimes not.' said Joe regretting now his earlier outburst.

'How 'bout it boys? Sip? I'll answer anything. Somebody go first?'

Joey dashed into fatigue-numbed curiosity which once again he would regret by intense self-evaluation: 'Did you touch it last night Quila?'

'Yes. And I gave it three extra deep dips for you, nosy boy. Now's my turn?'

'Sippy girl. Your turn, sister. Did you ever do it with a hairbrush?'

'Most certainly not. I'm not sure I want to do this.'

'TT-3 coming down! Sippie Sweet's goin to bale on us boys.'

'No. I just don't see the point in being so brutal. Total truth sounds more like total rubbish'

'We're all friends. We trust our lives to this old beat up car and HIS driving. Any of us could be an axe murderer. God knows half of us have the personality for it. What's a bit of bodily function between friends, eh?' Quila said with amazing clarity and persuasiveness. To Sip and Joey she was making a small case for being Lucifer's own dear sister in the flesh.

'No is your answer. Do I get to ask something soon?' Sip fired out with a glance back to Melville.

'Sure enough, Sips. Fire away.'

'Quila, do you ever fear for your eternal soul?' Sip asked with suitable solemnity.

'No. Cause I always do good to others. I figure if I suck enough dicks and show love to enough of God's horny creatures it all adds up. Adds up for good. Sharing the love...'

Joey almost snorted his Pilsner into his upper cranium and Dell almost drove off into the smooth tranquil meadow.

'I might have expected less than absolute honesty from you' Sip returned, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

'Na. That's how I feel. Besides it's very bad karma to make fun of another person's religion.'

'Religion? I think not. Unless it is worshiping yourself and your own carnality.'

'Enough. This is Total Truth not the total preaching hour' Quila said

thumping Sip playfully on the thigh.

Arriving at the third Econotel they were pleased to find one nearly desolate and full \$5.00 cheaper a person. Dell and Quila immediately took up their hobby with not so much as a parting word. Sip found a soft patch of green in the back where to continue her reading. There was a lounge at the end of the corridor adjacent to the unoccupied pool. Joe took up a station quietly behind the faded white vertical blinds and spied upon his perplexing friend. He spent nearly an hour just watching her consume the book, her long blue dress spread around her on the lawn with just the bottom of her white knees visible and soliciting him fully. Her hair seemed particularly lustrous in the waning sunlight and with a tint of red he'd not seen before. He parted with the vision and quickly ransacked the tiny giftshop for a disposable camera costing a third as much as the room. Through the blinds he snapped three shots and returned to find Dell and Quila proweling around for food.

Joey was determined to drive again and almost begged his brother to assume the wheel just before lunch the next day.

Quila let out of zingers as Sip awoke: 'Would any of you boys do it will I watched - and if I did it too?'

'Do what?'

'Each other - no just kidding. Tug the wonder worm or whatever you call it'

'Not this subject again' Sip said turning her head to the outside scenary and appearing distressed.

'Lighten up, sweetie. We're all adults'

'That is a matter of definition' Sip retorted but decided to ignor them for the rest.

'Well boys.'

'Let's discuss that later' Joey said, receiving his brother's visual approval. This kind of brotherly shorthand was sometimes convenient with girls around.

They decided to stop off at one of the few signs that beckoned from the road. It was supposed to be a piece of habitable art and had won some kind of awards they'd never heard of. And it was free so the ticket was just right.

Driving down the dirt road (surely a sign of a second rate trap) they came on a tall modern house formed from five dark blue enameled silos - each of a different height. A band just below the roof of each was made of small windows and encircled them completely. No door was visible from the road. A nicely done wooden sign detailed the history and

construction of "Agriconia" as the "first of many future developments" was called. Apparently a real family lived there for there was a red Escort wagon parked outside. Quila of course had leaped the wooden fence. Dell ran to retrieve her as two other tourists came down the road.

Later that evening at The Tartan hotel they were forced to share a double room among them - it was the only one left and the price was good - included a breakfast voucher for two even. Dell and Joey had their customary post-road drink before dinner (whatever that was going to be) and walked out back down a little path in sparse woods .

'I really dig her, Joey' Dell broke their silence. 'I worship the ground she pisses on.'

'What?'

'I thought it sounded good.'

'Point taken.'

'She might be the one.'

'There isn't usually a "one" at our ages'

'Ma and dad. Grandpa Grover. They all met in their twenties.'

'You gotta separate out the sex part. It clouds a man's judgement.'

'You're sure very wise today.'

'I've learned alot on this trip. 'Bout girls mainly.'

'So how's your little thing...whatever...'

'It's one of those complicated friendships. I held her hand one evening for about an hour. You guys didn't she.'

'Cool. That's all?'

'We're taking Sip here. Hand holding is like twelveth base!'

'It's the damn pennant'. They chuckled a minute.

'I see we have potential. I'm sure one of those poems is for me....sooner or later.'

'That would be neat. Never had a poem written for me. Not sure Quila is capable.'

'She could do it. The chick is bright enough. It might have the F-word ever other line but she'd do it.'

'Yea. So you guys hold hands when no body is looking.'

'Just once actually....to be honest. She wouldn't have any of it the next day.'

'Maybe you need to buy her something. Like a girl type gift.'

'I don't have any money. '

'Nothing stupid like food but something of souvenir of the emotional experience.'

'Wow. That's good, Dell. You and I might be adults one of these days.'

'Some little trinket is okay if it's unique and given with...whatever.'

'Sincerity. Probably any sort of kind emotion would due.'

'There you go.'

'This place has a little gift shop. I just might do that.'

Chapter 4 - Something of Pal

The next day they decided to drive only in the morning when their energy was full and the sun's wasn't. All the miles of the past week had gotten to each of them and they just needed some time to stabilize, chill, or rest as they might variously phrase it. They'd gotten one large hotel room, a 3-bed family "suite", though the kitchen lacked utensils and plates. That of course was not to Sip's liking but the economics of the kitchen prevailed.

Dell arrived back from the grocery and gas mart down at the intersection with a surprising variety of things. He dumped out the two thin-as-air plastic bags to reveal the making of any Mexican bargain treat one might desire - minus lettuce. There were two pulltop cans of halfway persuasive cheesoid spread, two more of refried beans, a rather incendiary pepper sauce, taco shells, refrigerated tortillas (artificially singed with carmel coloring), a pricey container of a local dairy's take on watery sour cream, and some fragments of Tostitos nacho chips. There were of course four bottles of a streetman's wine - two in bold orange and two in a green that rather closely resembled antifreeze. Each member of the party had their own idea on how to begin the fun.

'Wooh...now that's a drink to firm the nipples.' Quila said with her characteristically shocking frankness.

'Why is everything about nipples with you?' Sip snapped, causing the brothers to look at each other and grimace.

'Have a swig, sweetie...it might be the only excitement yours get this year' the wild one retorted. No one was worried because the two dissimilar girls never went more than a few sentences each before settling down as if nothing happened. Joey called it 'venting'.

'Come on girls...we have an nice assortment of delicacies to offer over here...don't we Joe?' Dell said with unjustified pride.

The girls came over to inspect the boys attempt to pack far too much of everything colorful between the tortilla and get them to stay intact. They both laughed almost in unison and proceeded with smiles to correct the disaster. 'They'd get fired at Taco Bell after two minutes' Sip remarked. The boys headed for the door.

'We didn't hurt your little male egos did we boys' Quila remarked after trying a cup, mixing the two colored beverages into something like muddy water but evidently tasty enough in her state.

'No...we're going to get more sour cream.' Joey shouted through the half-closed door, wondering if he should leave the girls alone.

'Get me some of more of this good green stuff' Quila said with a fake swoon. 'and something ribbed and lubed for tonight'. The guys shook their heads and said nothing to the other.

Ten minutes later the guys returned, opening the door slowly to see how their companions had faired. Surprising they heard soft giggles.

'Come here fellas' Quila said with a seductive look 'Feast yourself on our creations'. Both girls had formed the ingredients into all manner of anatomical objects and something of a refried orgy scene splashed with sour cream.

'Sip's been into the juice' Joey whispered to his brother who was admiring the works in amazement.

'I noticed.' his brother replied.

The group was stuffed, tired, and beginning to come out of their bargain haze with all the pleasantness such beverages convey. They'd napped off and on that afternoon and Sip seemed glued to an old movie but clearly not getting all of it.

'What's ya doin' Sip' Joey said with foggy tone.

'Watchin' How Green is My Valley. It's so sad and sweet' she replied and her settled down next to her, putting his arm around her shoulder.

'I think he'd rather she How Pink is Your Valley' Quila remarked with Dell's arm now fully around her. Those two alone laughed.

'So Quila what's your favorite band?' Dell gave her his look. 'There's dozens really.' She gave the look back but with the female twist men think is so much more polished than their own look. 'Didja ever here the Sweet Ludes? They're like so smooth...loud and quiet mix.'

'Don't think so.'

'So who do you like?'

'Half the bands I like I forget as soon as I sober up. I usually need someone to remind me who I liked.'

'That's...that's rep. Make's sense.'

'Oh! Oh...oh..oh. I'm hot for the Stapled Corndogs. I heard them in Madison. They have like this song called Dumpster Girl. It's so loud in the beginning and then it gets kinda mellow like a ballad. '

'Stupid Horndogs? Never heard of them. But that's a decent name.

'No silly! Stapled Corndogs.'

'That makes no sense.'

'Yea. Well you like hear or see that name and you have to find out. It's like that business thing...marketing or whatever.'

'Yea. Like bait.'

'Right. But you're happy to be hooked. It's like a good addiction.'

'Good Addiction? Wo...that sounds like a fine name. Good Addiction. Any fool could market that name.'

'Now you got a job. Make us all proud.' Joey chimed up from his paperback bliss. Dell wanted his brother to go intercourse himself but the presence of two ladies made it wait for later. He always resorted to something clever after the vulgarities drained from the front of his thoughts:

'Maybe I'll hire you as our chief consultant. Any music you hate is bound to be popular and make money. Unfortunately he forgot his brother was better at lines and he rarely failed to make girls laugh:

'So Joey what is Sips' favorite band?' Quila said, knowing the subject of her question was really listening.

'Can't say I know'

'Probably Mother Theresa's Angelic Fuckin' Choir' Quila effused with Dell's beaming approval.

'I'm not Catholic....' she half said "stupid" but took it back and went back to her long secret poem which Joey was sure was for him.

'Same card in my book.' Quila returned with another sip of Dell's foam cup.

'So how are the Heaven's Gate people, Quila or are you the only moron left?' Sip confronted.

'Wooh!' Joey interjected.

'They're cool. If I went out big I'd do it something like that' Quila said directing her eyes at Sip.

'They cut off their nuts, dear. I don't think you'd get along there.' Dell added.

'You're so right. If I ever join a cult remind me to check for testicles' Q. continued.

'All of you are such hormonal misfits.' Sip remarked with a little more smugness that Quila could handle.

Back on the asphalt they had to work out a driving schedule as not one of them was eager enough. Today they were headed east and the sun was getting bruttle. Quila had bought them all \$2 sunglasses with dark lenses and neon green frames. Even Sip wore hers to be socialable.

'Whatya' writing there sis?' Quila said with a cozy snuggle up against Sip with whom was the sharing an old plaid blanket.

'Just some poems. I have Creative Writing my first semester. It's wise to get a head start.'

'Isn't that cheating? It must be...'

'No. It's just thinking ahead. It's too hard to get A's with pre-preparation.'

'I won't know...I've only had one.' Quila lamented with a frown.

'Bet you can't that about too many things' Dell said, knocking his brother with his elbow and spurring a small laugh.

'What?'

'You said....I've only had one...and I said...you can't say that about too many things.'

'Oh shush!' Quila said as if somehow temporarily tired of that sort of humor.

'Why don't you read it to us...I sense this vehicle could use some culture...right Dell' Quila said with an intentional cough.

'It's not nearly finished'

'Oh it's finished enough for us friends....' and she grabbed it, spiral binding and all. Quila started to read with a surprising amount of respect and grace:

Joyfulness dances among dark facts

Inevitability lurks nearby but hides

The day is set

and I above all am ready.

Time is my friend

Was once my foe

Every goodness flows my way

and I above all am blessed.

'That was good...unless it's 'sposed to rhyme.' Quila said, handing the notebook back to it's author with respect.

'No. Rhyme is too confining' Sip replied. 'Impedes the soul..'

'But takes more skill' Joe chimed in. 'I prefer the extra discipline required'. Dell looked at him somewhat harshly and he continued 'but it was very good, Sip'

'Thank you. But since two-thirds of it is still in my head you all must be mind readers.'

'Hey....stop, stop, stop' Quila shouted. Dell dutifully applied the brakes and turned in where her arm pointed. 'It's a Trader Barn.'

'What the heck is that?' Joe asked. He was secretly hurt the poem had no reference to himself.

'It's like the coolest store on earth. Come on...' and without a second the wild girl had climbed out and headed for the door.

'I hate these things' Dell noted as he closed the door with no less than ten strings of bells on it.

Opening before them was a sort of modern, retail barn all done inside in light pine varnished to a thickness and gloss that almost harmed its beauty. To the back was a huge loft that had gifts and knick knacks of a thousand descriptions. To the left was a smaller loft where Quila had already assended full of simple locals crafts. The main floor was devoted mostly to foods from the best local jam to more brands of fruitcake than the style ever deserved.

The four exited with their own bag full of necessities and a better mood that they'd entered with. Dell found a sort of "real fruit ring" to be irresistable for he was fond of dried pineapple. Joe bought his mother a thimble for her collection and a small 3-D puzzle of a Model T for his dad. Sip found herself a delicately woven scarf in red, black, and gold which suited her taste for ornate fabrics quite perfectly. They were a block down the highway before Quila opened her large bag and began to show her treasures.

'Whad you get Quil....' Dell asked.

'Edible panties'

'Here we go again.' Sip rolled her eyes.

'What flavor?' Joe asked.

'Cherry of course.'

'And I got myself a little buzzy thing' holding up a small white object the size of a forefinger. 'Forgot to get batteries for it.'

'Okay...' Joe replied. 'I didn't see that kind of stuff in there.'

'It in the back through the green door. You have to know these things. They don't have signs.' Quila clarified.

'Damn...' noted Joe.

'I got a little present for our Sipsalie' and with a wry grin held up the largest pink gel dildo ever molded on the planet. The boys exploded with deep belly laughs and took almost a minute to quiet down. Joey figured hand holding was now very much out of the question. For days at least.

'Put that thing down....somebody might see it. There are children around.' Sip said, slapping Quila's harm down.

'And it even squirts' and with that she squeezed the bulbous base and nothing happened. 'Guess you have to add the water down here.'

'And you're supposed to add a girl up here...' Joey said examining the other end.

'Just got of the phone with mom...' Dell mentioned casually.

'Yea. What's new?'

'Nothing too important. 'Member that irrigation system Dad was trying to rig up?'

'Of course. Has he tried it?'

'Oh yes!'

'A flood?'

'Not exactly. He set up this timer and a long stretch of hose on little supports around the backyard.'

'Sounds terribly ugly.'

'So he made this sprinkler thing that rotates with blades with separate

heads on each part. And a timer in the house runs it at night to save evaporation.'

'Right?'

'I guess it worked okay for a couple of nights but one night it just broke or something. Must have got clogged up and the whole big blade thing built up pressure. It just took off like a helicopter and landed on Millie's vegetable patch'

'(laughing hysterically). That is so good. Did she come over and kill him?'

'I don't know. Mom said it mashed most of her canning tomatoes. Can you believe it?'

'You know I saw him drawing this thing with four long arms and a sprinklers on each end. It was so horrible. I can't believe he actually built it. It was like ten feet across'

'It must of have been huge.'

The drinks tasted better after that good laugh. Both of them missed their parents deeply but hadn't yet found the words to express it.

Brandy's Hotel sounded more like the name of a good brothel to Joe but it turned out to be one of the best places they'd found yet. The TV actually had three movie channels, everything was clean and smelled faintly of bubble gum which seemed to be blasted from a small white box near the ceiling in the bathroom. There was even a small rug in the bathroom to warm the toes and a hairdryer that was strong enough to dry out your eyesockets with one missed angle.

Dell and Quila agreed to get their own room. Joe and Sip did the same but he was under very strict rules that included the other's departure when it came to remove or add any clothing. Without warning two loud bumps followed by two more came from their companion's room and Sip declared 'they're at it already'. Joe said it was the brother's signal ever since they got their own rooms years ago. It was drinking time. Sip said she'd join them later.

'So what's the special of the day, girl' Joe said quite cheerfully to Quila who was unpacking an assortment of bar accessories.

'We have half a bottle of that rough scotch and enough vodka to drown a horse. Is Sip coming?'

'Later. Start me out with a coke and vodka...then I'll have enough courage to break into that bottle'

'Okay. Um....I was going to ask you...are you maybe up for a three-way tonight. It's like been awhile. I know you and Sip have something goin' on.'

'It's more of a good friendship. Not romantic really. Maybe for her it is. I'm up for some fun' Joe said somewhat somberly and taking a practical view of his situation.

'Cool. Dell said it was fine with him. Besides we have some things to try out...'

'Oh yea.'

'I have a couple others I didn't show anyone.'

'Really...?'

'Oh yes. There's even this neat card game where you try all sorts of stuff. And you have to get ripped to enough that!'

'I agree. Let me bring Sip a drink. She likes....'

'Screwdrivers. We have Tang.'

'That'll work. She's going to shower and call her mom. She needs to loosen up.'

'And your the man to do it'

'I hope so.'

'You're a nice couple. If you don't write her this semester you're making a big mistake. Every week at least.' Dell said with some seriousness.

'I know. I will. She's a real peach.'

'A special peach. I know about these things. It's like romantic ESP or something. I'm not into her lifestyle and religion thing but she's a great person.'

'Why don't you tell her that. She thinks you hate her.'

'No she doesn't. We've had a couple of deep talks when you guys weren't around. And the hand thing. I'm going to write her too. And I got her a little ceramic lighthouse like we were talkin' about.'

'Oh good! A phallic symbol. I'm sure that went well.'

'Actually it did. She said she loved this one in Maine and would use it as a model for a poem sometime. It brought back her childhood or something.'

'Good deal man.' Dell said, being supportive.

'God! Does vodka go bad. This is horrible.' Joey reacted with a grimace.

'I put some lemon juice in it' Quila explained.

'I hate this. I'm sorry...I can't finish it.'

'The machine's out of Coke. Here's a sprite and vodka with a splash of rum.'

'Those are good.'

Dell walked out the bathroom in his floorlength towel but only after checking to see if Sip was in the room. Sip went over to him grabbed his behind and they shared a deep french kiss. 'Here...your brother's already two drinks up on ya'

'Did she ask you something?'

'Yea. It's on.'

'Good. This one's a non-stop kind of girl' Dell remarked and she greeted him with a second drink and another sloppy kiss.

'You tell Sip yet?'

'No. She'll figure it out if I stay over here.'

'Man, don't do that. She'll be pissed.'

'Either way.'

'I think you wasted that lighthouse, pal. Don't be surprised to find it in chunks some morning.' Dell confessed.

'I suppose but I'll make it up to her tomorrow. We'll sit in the back together or something. Or I'll buy her breakfast. I don't know.'

'Some love life. Sorry bro...'

'It's a like life. But a good one. One of these days something big will happen.'

'That kind of girl is worth the patience.'

'And what about THIS kind of girl?' Quila said with mock jealousy.

'You have no patience my little wildflower.' Dell said opening his towel and swaying.

'Gees man...wait 'til the lights are off' Joe continued.

'We're uh....going to be in here for awhile' Dell said to his brother, grabbing Quila by the arm and pulling her into the humid, dark

bathroom.

'Have fun...' Joe said. A minute later Sip tapped on the door with her drink in hand.

'Have a chair'

'That was a long ride today...even with the stops.'

'Made your call?'

'No. Yes and No. They weren't home so I left 'em a long message. What's in this thing?'

'Vodka, Tang, and that ratty old lemon juice she uses in everything.'

'It's too tart.'

'I'll toss it. Take my drink here...I'm ready for the scotch.'

'Don't get too loaded again. You know who had to clean up last time?'

'Really. Was it bad?'

'Very.'

'I'm sorry sweetie. I didn't know. I'll be careful.'

'Where's Quila?'

'They're both in there. And don't ask...'

'I don't need to. With them it's always a one item agenda.'

'Well put.'

Chapter 5 - Road Life Gets Old

Sip sat alone on the thick, longcut lawn behind the small hotel while the others watched a brown woodgrain box she insisted was not real entertainment. She faced the non-descript woodland that had been allowed to remain twenty years ago when the highway to the north and the hotel were cut from an old farmland. Sitting crosslegged with a used, hardbound copy of *The Moonstone* in hand, she took a moment to contemplate her own young course in life. It was too peaceful and quiet an evening to do otherwise. How white were her feet against the very green blades of grass. How small she was against the old oaks that stood within the forest, contemplating their own remaining privacy and calm. "I wish I could join you" she whispered.

Back in the hotel room Quila was experimenting as usual with drinks

they'd been concocting from a large plastic jug of vodka bought at a discount liquor warehouse a day back east. It was strange Joey thought that she seemed to think some unique combination of ordinary vending machine sodas could possibly yield any ideal formula. Yet she always tried. But after the first three cups none of them really cared.

'Wait. I'm watching that.' Quila shouted as Dell hit the remote away from the MTV channel.

'We've been watching that shit for hours' he countered.

'Well if I don't keep up with trends I'll start getting old' she confessed after jumping on the blue-quilted bed and putting her arms around Dell and his remote.

'They should be watching you. They'd learn something' Joey offered and his brother nodded in agreement.

The next morning they all arose almost at the same time from their three beds. Sip was already done in the bathroom before the others could even get away from the cartoons and over to the tiny coffee pot that had hissed out of proportion to its size.

'I thought we were going to get started by seven!' Sip said half seriously to Dell.

'That was before Quila's last 'vodka medley'. I've never had anything so strong and sweet in my life.'

With that the drink mixer appeared from under the covers at his left arm and sought to address whatever was said with her name in the same sentence.

'What?' she asked, unknowingly with one breast less than covered. Joey noticed.

'I'll be in the coffee shop if anyone wants to join me' Sip said.

'I'll be with you in a minute' Joey said but with a look and tone suggesting it would be a good half hour or more.

'You know the turnoff to Minneapolis is probably coming up tomorrow' Joey told his brother as they shared slight enthusiasm in a dismal effort by the Knicks on TV.

'I know. She has avoided the issue. But I'm going to ask her to stay on with us. Maybe on the way back she we can drop her off.'

'That makes sense. Sounds like you're not sure about the way back either?'

'Would you be? She's really the best girlfriend I sort of ever had. Quil's

'great to me'

'I would agree. Mindy Kyle was sort of sweet, though.'

'No more chances there.'

'Heard that.'

'We don't have that much in common but that's kinda good. We both learn alot about the other's way of thinking and living.'

'She's a real education alright. And I mean that in a good way...'

'I know you do.'

'But I wouldn't think too long 'bout letting mom meet her.'

'I've thought about that too. Remember that day at the indian village.'

'She played a perfect lady with that tribal elder. Respectful. Curious and smart. Even her vocabulary seemed to change. The girl was raised much more like you and I.'

'She's pretty bright if she wants to be.'

'I wouldn't make it a very long visit though.'

'I'm going to have to bite the bullet sometime. I could see the two of us living together while I go Tech. If my fall grades hold I might shoot for Hofstra.'

'Dad can't afford that and you're not getting any scholarship worth more than beer money.'

'I know. But if she were to work and I have part time job we might manage a little apartment.'

'Mom is expecting you to live at home.'

'Like I said we'll have to have a discussion.'

'A damn loud one I think!'

'Freedom. An apartment. A great girl. Some things are worth the trouble. You don't think they'd like cut me off?'

'No. But shaking up is not going to put you in their good graces.'

'Dad would understand a little. He'd slip me some help occasionally. I'm sure they'd be good for a little tuition money?'

'Probably but you're really pushing it'

'Then I'll say I'm living alone and she'll just hide when they come visit.'

'You don't hide a whole apartment full of woman things. The clothes alone...'

'Whatever it takes, Joe. I'm not giving up on this girl.'

'I wouldn't but it might cost you some things.'

'I'm ready.'

Quila always had surprises planned for them along the road. Many of them came from those glossy, color brochures people pick up at rest stops and tourist havens. She always grabbed them all and read them in front of the TV. Today she had planned something "way better than a hotel" and everyone (especially Sip) wasn't sure that sounded very wise.

'Guys we're going camping' she beamed, combing her still wet hair with her fingers and keeping her other hand on Dell's knee.

'Have fun you three...' Sip said with more sarcasm than usual.

'It's going to be...and very cheap. They rent tents and like a grill thing.'

There's a big building with showers and...'

'spidars and bears' Joey finished.

'No guys. Let's be adventurous. This place even allows adult consumption...'

'Are we talking beverages here?' Dell asked.

'Yea. It's called Kelway Lake and Campground. There's a huge lake too. Dell...just look for the sign for 44-A coming up in a bit. I think it's before the 101 split.'

'I think I saw a sign for that place back aways' Joey tossed out. 'Come on, Sip. It'll be fun. You might even get an idea for a new poem...in God's green wilderness and all.'

'I suppose' Sip said, giving Melville most of her attention.

'Haven't they gotten that damn whale yet?' Quila said with more of a smile in her voice than on her face.

'Not with all you jabbering.'

They actually found the campground with terrific ease (the fourteen signs not hurting the effort) and the total rental for two tents and gear came about \$10 under their usual hotel budget. Aside from some dry spruce needles stuck in her backside Sip was mostly content and quiet throughout. Quila of course helped the boys finish the last of the big plastic jug of Romanov vodka. She and Dell did it in the woods. Twice. The first time a couple of kids nearly walked onto them so they took it deep in the hills the next time through. Joey did it with himself. Sip did Melville.

Joey had the urge to drive in the morning and Dell hadn't had enough sleep to be steady anyhow. That meant Sip road shotgun while Dell and Quila cuddled in the backseat. He desperately wanted some head and knew Quila would do it but somehow modesty partly prevailed.

They stopped at Rufus' Sub Shack for what various members of our party described as the best and worst experience in that cuisine had in their lives. 'You just don't use that orange Kraft stuff on real subs...not for \$6.00!' said Sip with almost a tear at precious expenditure. Dell and Quila shared a footlong. She added with a wicked laugh 'I do everynight anyhow'. Joey gave his roast beef-bacon-double pickle combo mixed reviews. He'd invented it himself so it certainly wasn't Rufus' fault it came out a little conflicted and overpowering.

That was actually breakfast too. For dinner they decided it was time economize again (their collective concious has a sort of a silent alarm) and found what appeared to be a major chain grocery store. It had lots of cars at it anyway. Quila filled the cart with three jugs of cheap table wine (big surprise). The other three put together a collection of halfway edible canned pastas and stews which could be consumed cold on the run. For dinner they bought two cooked chickens from the deli which could be heated or not depending on how the future hotel looked. Joey had always been fond of those cups of dried chili and soup you can

actually make with very hot tap water in a pinch. He figured freeze dried clam chowder might just be the world's best invention if the picture was half truthful.

Scott's Motor Inn was absolutely crawling with young families on their way to and from the big safari-amusement park up one exit. Where else in the Midwest could you spot lions at rest from the top of an old time wooden roller coaster? Our four kids were just too tired to bother again - they'd been to a smaller part a week ago and had enough cotton candy reserves in their tissue to last a month or so.

Scott's had 3-bedders as Dell called them but Sip was absolutely not buying the single room option again. 'Some things shouldn't be heard either' she said somewhat cryptically to Joey as she put down cash for her own room. If Quila wanted to share she knew who to pay. He'd assured her a few nights before that if he stayed with the lovebirds in one room it didn't mean he would be participating in any carnal way. She was prepared to let him share her room as a general rule so it just worked out that way.

The next morning they had a mostly wonderful breakfast (in all four opinions) at the coffee shop attached to the north corner of the motel buildings. They weren't the largest portions on the planet ('must be robin sized eggs' Joey thought) but everything was hot and flavorful - justly called home cooking for once. Even the toast was still warm when it arrived.

They put on a full 214 miles with Dell doing the duties half of the day and Sip for the remainder. She sometimes got her best poem ideas when behind the wheel. It wasn't hard to daydream a bit on such straight and quiet roads once they'd past Sioux Falls. The hum of the big engine almost made it easier to think up there. Joey and Quila had struck up a fascination with a card game she brought at the coffee shop. The cards were various objects and uniformed people. Players put down a card (or even two) and whatever card image had the most "value" won. Sometimes it was a matter of argument whether a Ferrari or neurosurgeon (based on annual salary) was the real ace. Space shuttles, yo-yos, Tiffany necklaces, an old lawn mower, and an ibis from King Tut were in the deck. You had a sure thing with Fort Knox and the aircraft carrier. Quila always seemed to get the wrapped hamburger and man digging the ditch. There was another rule that the dealer got a free card from each player every fifth play or something like that. It kept them amused and Dell went along to be sociable.

'What is this?' Sip exclaimed in the temporary silence of the enclosed car. Joey's dufflebag had opened and dumped part of its upper contents onto the backseat - a half-empty bag of watermelon candy, a can opener, three brochures, and some photos.

'What are doing in my stuff?' he fired back with somewhat undue hostility.

'Everything just fell out when it tipped'. Now Quila was alert and turned around to spot the items.

'And you couldn't have caught it?'

'I'm glad I didn't now'

'Wooh! Is that who I think it is?' Quila asked with a little twinkle.

'Stay out of my stuff' and with that Joey scooped it all up and secured it - including all three photos of Sip on lawn in her long dress - which he had developed at a One Hour Photo shop when no one was looking.

Sip decided it was now better not to say a word and motioned with her hand for Quila to turn around.

Sip had her big black leather Bible out and was reading it as she usually did for morning devotions in the room. It was just inviting trouble from Quila.

'People still read this old thing?' the wild girl said provocatively as she enjoyed a good scrap in the morn.

'Yes. And you'd be finer if you did too.'

'Nothing that old is going to help me.'

'Only great things require no improvement.'

'Everything can be improved. It's the American way or something.'

'That applies only to people - this is God!' and with an emphasis Sip hoped with cut off the pointless conversation.

'You sure don't have much of the love they talk about in there somewhere.'

'I'm sure you're the expert....'

'No. But I do know your attitude sucks - even for a Christian.'

'Girls!' Joe interrupted.

'Oh I love her!' and Quila squeezed her very uncomfortable companion in the back seat.

'Aren't I the lucky one?'

'You know I'd lick it for you, sweetie, if you really begged.'

'Quila!' Dell now was becoming stern.

'Don't worry it's about the flesh for her. It's all she'll ever have' Sip said.

Joey was beginning to wonder if Quila was not a little correct.

'I'm a complete person. That's more than little Miss Holy Hole here can say?'

'This is not constructive' Joe said with a look very stern to Quila.

'Remember the "special" burritos we made, guys. It was half her idea. She's just repressing.'

'It's a phenomena known as self control. Perhaps you could try it some time?' Sip retorted again. Joey knew this was going to be good before it got bad again.

'That's just it, Sippy. Sometimes life requires you to give up a little control. Life's better that way.'

'Then we disagree, don't we?'

Dell was searching the strip ahead of them for an interesting shop or store - anything to break the conversation in half.

Chapter 6 - Springs

'Guess what you guys?' Quila effused. 'The clerk guy gave us some free tickets for the hot springs. It's like an hour west - we could do that tomorrow.'

'I don't know - we're only half a day ahead now. Otherwise Sip will miss registration day.' Joe mentioned.

'You can always do that late. Besides we'll drive all night tomorrow to make up for a couple of hours.'

'I'm up for it' Joey said with some eagerness, not half knowing what hot springs were all about and whether it involved nudity.

Half an hour later they were in the mountains, a topographic feature that didn't seem to exist from their recent view off the highway.

'Are you sure this is right?' Dell inquired of whomever held the mimeographed map.

'Absolutely. We passed the big bear sculpture back there.' Joey advised.

'I know that. But since then....this is a very narrow road.'

'Look I see a parking lot with cars up there....' Sip noted.

'Hold on kids - that's a steep climb up to that lot' Dell continued and with that he accelerated them into a closely wooded lot that must have already held 50 cars already and could easily accommodate 50 more.

'This place is big' Sip remarked, removing the last few pills from her infrequently worn, one piece magenta bathing suit covered with a long matching robe.

'I told you guys. It's like a family thing people do around here.'

The guys paid the reluctantly paid the \$12 apiece it cost for an full day pass and use of a towel. The girls used the free coupons which were always given out to only some of every party. There were several pools where people of all ages sat while their children splashed as amid the rising steam and odd scent of minerals that faintly reminded Joey of a fertilizer plant backhome. Over the years Lodgemont Hot Springs and Spa had expanded up and down the closely wooded hill to include a picnic ground, softball diamond (where fouls were seldom recovered), gift shop, and assorted spa and sauna buildings. Even the disabled has a roll-in pool. To hold more people wood-slatted pools of various sizes

were placed in all directions from main rock springs with water pumped into them a carefully controlled rates.

The four kids managed to find a ten foot wide wood-slat container up into the north face of the hill. They could look down on everyone and have a measure of privacy thanks to a unpruned bough of softest hemlock.

'Isn't this cool' Quila said. 'I shoulda brought a joint with me. Wake up Sippy...help me get the trunks off these boys. '

Sip ignored her and the boys seemed engrossed in watching a couple necking in a similarly shaded pool to the right.

'Okay if no one is going to listen to me I'm just going to play with Betty'

'Who's Betty?' Dell asked with partial attention.

'You should know. You kissed her for a hour last night. And she was very grateful...'

'Will you stop it? It's always about your blessed little body, isn't it?' Sip snapped.

The boys gave each other a now familiar glance.

'You have one too sister and if it got some attention it might improve your disposition.'

'Just 'cause your a sick little bitch doesn't mean other people aren't normal.'

'God gave it and I use it, baby' Quila was more than venting now and the boys pushed her back from a threatening position.

Suddenly Sip grabbed her towel and headed for the woods. By the time Joey was after her she'd gotten to as full a run as her disposable slippers allowed. Dell and Quila soon followed though in a more adventurous, laughing mood by now.

Sip collapsed well off the trail and was panting on a log when Joey arrived.

'I'll never made varsity basketball...I'm in such terrible shape now.' Sip lamented as Joey pulled a twiglet out of his right slipper and put his arm half way around her. By now she trusted him again and was used to such symbolic affection.

'Check this out guys...there's like a cool village down here' Dell shouted from the south, holding Quila as they headed down the sloping forest. After five minutes Sip and Joe followed and caught up with them. The girls exchanged weak "sorrlys" and things seemed back to normal.

What had looked like a village was actually some cabins that tourists were occupying and from a few messy yards and old junk cars some year-rounders as well.

Sip spotted a glistening silver lake just down the road and as it was mostly deserted they decided to sit awhile and rest for the walk back to Lodgemont.

'Howdy all' came a deep voice from behind them.

'Hi...can you tell us what this lake is called?' Quila asked the rugged man who seemed to be a native.

'Could if it had one...' he said with a calming but incomplete smile. 'Guess that means you can name it, missy.'

'How 'about Silver Lake' Quila offered as he came closer to them

'Already got one of those next county over. It would confuse folks too much. I'm Elden Spurwell. You kids have a cabin 'round here?'

'No we were at the springs and kinda wandered off' Joey offered, sizing up the old stranger who seemed comfortable in red plaid jacket on a warmish day.

'You all know them ain't real springs no more?' the man said, picking up a small assortment of rocks as they chatted.

'Really...they felt great...for some of us anyway' Quila continued.

'If you go up the old log road they got this building hideaway. Do all the boiling of the water and even add bags full of mineral salts and such. Sorry to tell you - it's fake as can be.'

'I thought it had too much of a chemical scent' Dell said , picking up on his brother's earlier point he'd not accepted then.

'There's still real springs up in the hills but folks keep the good ones private like. Got me a good set of pools - one's a big dry this year but the other...You seem like nice kids. If ya got the time I'll show you a real mineral bath to beat even them famous ones in Arkansas.'

'That would be cool.' Quila said matching the man's earnest, grandfatherly smile.

'We're a bit pressed on time but we appreciate the offer, thank you, sir' Sip replied, trying to see if her manners were still functional.

'We got time guys. Could you recommend a good but kinda cheap restaurant first. We've not had much since breakfast.' Dell spoke.

'Not much decent grub in this half 'the county - except for that real fancy

gourmet place on Banner Peak but they get \$5 just for a baked tater.'

'We're into something old-fashioned but delicious' Sip interjected.

'Then there's just one place for that. I'll have my sister rustle us something if you'll all be my guests this afternoon'. With that he tossed his collection of small stones across the lake with the skill of skipping master.

'We'd be delighted, sir. We've got to get our stuff back at the springs so we'll need some directions.' Sip wanted to move things along.

'You musta seen that hideous old wooden bear, eh?'

'Yea.' Dell and Quila said in unison.

'Just go left this time, then the next left a mile further down. You'll see a big oak with a table and benches nailed 'round it - like a sittin' place. Take the right road of the three. Then a couple miles and it's own place. You'll see a couple of dry springs on the way in.'

'Thank's Mr. Spurwell...' Joey said

'Call me Elden....and my sister is Ellen. Both us 'widered so we take care of the other in old age.'

They got back to the springs quicker than expected and the promise of home cooking (any cooking really) moved them on. Quila insisted they all get out and pose around the bench ringing the ancient oak for a picture. Sip privately though such a noble, old tree deserved more than to have crude lumber nailed to it like a collar. Down the Spurwell's drive they discovered a private world that seemed to be the creation of two very active people. There were little gardens of both flowers and vegetables carved out of the woods in bits of sunlight.

'Holy shit' Quila exclaimed. 'Stop the car!'

Startled, Dell applied the brakes and backed up a hundred feet per his darling's specifications. It was a pen full with two ostriches enjoying the partial shade and seeming to tolerate the other as well as the two girls did - there was the occasional rough peck and then minutes of nothing. Further down the road they found a young deer in a chicken wire enclosure. Quila insisted on a her picture being taken to fill out the roll.

The Spurwell's house was nothing much to speak of and was clean as much as it was old. The side porch formed of rough, rounded stone was a thing of classic mountain architecture and obviously took weeks to build. The main house was entirely of red-painted wood even down to the sills. An assortment of chickens ran around in a small enclosure on the side opposite the porch. A very old, silvering dog offered an sluggish bark and wagged his tail like they were old friends.

'You must be the kids Elden told me about. Come in and have a wash. He's up at the springs tidying up a bit. I'm working on dinner...but here's a brownie each to tide you over.'

The kids were floored at the hospitality having been used mainly to hotel clerks, harried waiters, pizza delivery boys, and foreign store attendants this last two weeks. The house was dark and dingy but in gloom Sip could make out some nice wallpaper and an assortment of antiques it takes a lifetime to gather.

'Just head up that path to the right. You might see Johnny the pig. He's all blubber and noise and won't hurt a flea...'

Sip screamed and came charging down the path, rejoining her slower partners with what seemed like the world's largest pot-belly pig in chase. He was pink boldly mottled in black and together with his drool and weight seemed like a very unearthly spectacle of horror. Joey held her as they froze - something that always worked with bears and dogs - mostly. Johnny turned away, sniffed the air, and almost as if apologizing walked very slowly and repentedly toward them. To their shock Dell went up to him, said something about 'good fellow', and patted the porker on his head, avoiding the sloppy mouth. He grunted loudly as if threatened but Dell persisted and realized that a rub about the chin was the more friendly move. Soon they joined him in touching the big creature and went on their way.

'Thought you might be lost. Got a rather good flow going tonight...you're all in luck.' Elden continued.

'You sure have a big pig there. Glad your sister warned us.' Joe said with cheerfulness.

'We call him our guard pig. Wouldn't hurt no one...and no one would hurt him...'cept Lily over there.'

As soon as he'd said 'over there' Sip spotted a small shed with a cage built in place of a door and the eye of death itself looking deep into her soul with fangs of pure white.

'Oh God.' she pointed.

'I ain't going to say Lily won't hurt you but 'cause I'm here she'll be fine.' Elden remarked, motioning the kids down into the little sitting places he'd carved into the rock.

Dell looked nervously over his shoulder as he stepped down into the spot, covering himself with water. 'That's some wolf.'

'Got he and Johnny the same day. Good ten years now. Old man Gregor had a stroke and we all had to keep his animals. Died suddenly the next

Saturday and nobody's been back for 'em since. Figure they're mine by now...'

'This water is so much better. And it doesn't smell as bad' Sip offered. 'Everything is so lovely down here. It's so natural and with those ferns and everything.'

'Ellen used to garden right much. It's not a twit of what it was once. Used to have all them little yellow flowers...forgot what ya call 'em...bloomed for months. Pardon me if I don't join ya. Pulled something last week in this old back. You kids just enjoy a little while. I'll holler when dinner's on the table...'

'Thanks, Mr....Elden' Dell said respectfully as the old man slowly walked off.

Johnny followed Spurwell to the shed to get his evening bowl of slop from his Great Dane-sized bowl. 'How's my babies tonight....they're ya go girl' and he tossed a big of fresh meat over the bars into Lily's domain and eager jaws. 'That's the last of the Springfield lot I'm afraid, girl...good cut that was...but we have somes dandies on the hoof.'

The kids had barely been in the real springs half an hour when the word came through the maples. They ran, giving wide birth to the area where they remembered the shed must be. Johnny walked them halfway down to the house and parted company with a brisk rub of the ears from Quila. Dinner was a spread of the greatest delight. Joey had never had such buttery fresh corn in all his life and the glaze on the ham was in the finest tradition of grandmothers. Quila was hungry enough to eat anything and had been eying the liquor cabinet until Elden offered her a far too small glass of sherry. Dell and Sip had developed a strange attraction once they'd seen the other in bathing clothes and he at least was convinced it was more than a physical thing.

They all talked and laughed for a full two hours after dinner. Sip was more than interested in Ellen's needlepoint and it progressed so far that the college girl learned a new stitch. Elden entertained the rest with stories of his lumbering days, assorted crazy tourist stories, and stories about large bears he'd hunted - one of whom looked down upon them all with an almost comical, sneering expression. It was amateur taxidermy for certain but more than appropriate for the setting.

It was late and dark and Ellen offered the girls a stay in the third bedroom while the boys could make due on the two couches. There was a TV and open bar in the living room so they'd not mind. 'If you'd be able to help Elden with feeding the beasts in the morning...we'll call it even.' They agreed, completely forgetting about Lily.

The next morning was bright and clear with the warmth of the sun beginning quite early. All of them noticed the freshness of the air.

They'd half expected a large breakfast spread (and Sip intended to assist in every way) but it never happened. It was just basic cereal and toast with Elden telling another crazy hunting story. Ellen was apparently up to cooking just one a day they inferred from his comments about many, various medical conditions.

'Johnny'll be waitin'...sure as the sun rises' Elden said as the five of them hauled buckets to back of his old green pickup. They fed the entire zoo which also included a rare breed of ornate hen, some half wild pheasants, three aging unambitious geese, and two ragged milk goats. 'Not good but for a glass or two a day' Elden said of them. Back at the house they sat for a few minutes to rest on the large stone porch which the kids praised.

'Would like to say I did it all myself' Elden huffed. 'Bought this place lock, stock, and barrel from a New York couple who kept it for summer use. I done their caretaking 'rest of the year so they gave me a good price on it. Don't reckon it's worth much now but someday some rich young couple might offer me a mite or two.'

'It's got very rustic, curvilinear lines' Joey said, realizing his planned architectural treatise would be mostly wasted on the crowd.

'Got one last bugger to feed. Let me get a few pieces of meat outta the cooler back here and we'll be off.' Elden continued, raising his frame out of the old wooden porch chairs. The kids gave each other odd looks. Sip whispered 'that wolf' and Quila held her hand to her mouth.

'No use in ya'll going unless you want to see her. She's a right ornery in the mornings though.'

'I'll go.' Dell shouted out.

'Can we take a quick dip in the springs?' Joey asked.

'Sure. Don't need but one of ya to help with Lily. My back's a might tight so far.'

They all headed for the springs with their bathing suites with Sip reminding them two full days were about to be lost.

'Here. Just toss this up and over the bars.' Elden told Dell. 'It ain't fancy meat but when a local farmer has a cow go down she eats pretty well for awhile.'

'Must be expensive, otherwise' Dell said, perfecting his expert move on the second toss. 'She's really big. I think I heard her howl last night.'

'She does most nights. Usually just a fire signal from somewhere in the county. Lily old girl can lock in that pitch and get the notes just right.'

'She's a real beauty. Does she ever get out.'

'Not in recent years. There's too many children running around with the tourists these days. They're mostly fine with adults if I'm around. But children - they see almost as prey - little animals the vet tells me.'

'That makes sense. Heard that on some show too'

'She's back to pork next week. A sow went down at one of the neighbors so she'll be getting the old swine stuff for abit. Johnny won't speak to her then...that's what Ellen says anyhow.'

Dell laughed and found his brother sweet-talking Sip in the hot water.

'Where's Quila?'

'She had to pee and went off that way. You better find her...we're going get way behind.'

'I will.' and Dell charged into the brush.

Half a hour later he'd not found her and met up with Joe and Sip. 'Can't find her'

'What? She just went twenty feet to whatever...'

'She's not around. Where's Elden. We need to get going.'

'Yes and soon. I'll bet she found some stupid lake or something to play in.'

'Probably havin' a Betty moment' Joey said softly so only his brother might hear. Sip made a point to lock eyes anyway.

Dell went back into the woods and the other two went down to the house to find Elden. Ellen said he hadn't been back down yet. After an hour the three of them were combing the woods in earnest, staying two arm lengths from the other, and now starting to be concerned.

'I'm going to kill her' Sip said, brushing away a sharp weed from her bare legs.

Two hours later they gave up and headed for the house where their hosts were waiting for them with lunch.

'Let's have a quick bite' Elden suggested. 'I'll help ya search for her. There's a couple of trails she might have taken...mostly old hunter's paths but I know 'em all. They only go three-quarter mile in. Won't take long...'

'Are there bears this time of year?' Sip inquired.

'Not on this mountain. I saw some tracks once last year but they wander

in to find food when it gets dry. She'll be fine...don't you worry.'

Their next search lasted an hour and Sip returned to the house to ask Ellen to call around to the neighbors. One of the paths led to the Jenkins and Elden thought she might have gotten lost near there. By dark the girl hadn't been heard from or seen and Elden made a call to Sheriff Brock who sent out a deputy and his nephew.

Using any lights they could muster the party of six combed the woods again but to no avail. When the others were out the Sheriff quietly probed the deep end of the springs with a long pole, thinking she could have drowned.

The kids stayed two more days and they'd not even found any tracks. When the Sheriff heard she'd been picked up hitchhiking he tried to convince them it was her way of just not saying goodbye. He even asked if they were missing any money or valuables. Other than that her situation seemed in good hands and with great reluctance the three of them said farewells to the Spurwells, and drove on and back to the highway. Joey felt the situation was ominous but said nothing to his brother except with his eyes.

Chapter 7 - The News

The kids were laughing up a storm as Dell continued with his impression of several movie actors in compromising and silly situations. They'd all fell under the spell of more humor than usual - a likely response to the disappearance of their friend.

Suddenly in the dark a panel of the brightest blue and red lights filled the car and a siren pierced their calm. A highway patrol vehicle pulled them over. Dell had no idea of what his speed had been and figured the worst.

They waited what seemed like minutes for the officer and nothing happened. Then a screech and an amplified voice saying 'I want all of you to get out of the car...with your arms up'. As the command finished another fully lit car came over in front of them. Joey sobered up at once. They all complied.

'You're not under arrest but we have some questions you'll need to answer.'

'Is this about our friend Miss Burton?' Dell said confidently, trying to display out of false guilt he was very much more sober than his brother and an overall good citizen.

'Yes. That is was one of her names. The real one is Priscilla Walker.'

'Priscilla? Her a priscilla...' Joey remarked as they all rode in the second car to a station somewhere in the fog.

'We've got a small shift tonight so I might as well get as much of your story as possible now. I'm going put on this tape here. Consider yourselves under oath....' the officer advised, which to Dell seemed like a lapse in protocol of some kind.

On the long ride they detailed all their associations with her and Dell felt rather embarrassed as providing the most complete description of her appearance - right down to the location of several tattoos.

'Well...you kids sound honest enough. Mind you if I find out otherwise we don't take decently to the offense. The detective said you were all from good families and your parents check out.'

'Our parents?' Sip said with amazement. Joey was still recalling the word "detective".

'They've been contacted. You all might as well know now...your friend was found murdered.'

Sip screams, Dell shakes his head violently and stares, and Joey whispers "god" and buries his face in his hands. Sip reaches for Joey and the two embrace completely, warmly.

Dell looks up and asks 'what happened? Oh God this is awful. She was our best friend. Oh shit no'

'Very best friend' Sip shrieked, shocking her male companions.

'She must have wandered too far and some old mountain man did her up. Carved her up pretty good. Raped her too he admitted. It wasn't a pretty scene. There's more but you don't need to hear it just yet....' the officer said, showing strong emotion in his voice. **'If you have to know...it's the worst thing in this county in several years.'**

By now Sip was sobbing and the boys were more than stunned. Joey was mumbling all sorts of things and Dell just stared into the foggy night. Occasionally he pounded the armrest until something else took his mind away.

'You're not under arrest but the only place we have to put you up is in the jail. I'll get you double blankets and pillows. Best we can do. The hotel is full up with hunters so we're out of luck there.'

'We understand. You've been very kind.' Joey offered still keeping Sip in his grip.

'What about the car?' Dell wondered.

'Will have it towed to the station. If everything checks out you can be off in the morning.'

'Isn't there to be a funeral or something' Sip asked from under her raw, red eyes.

'I imagine it'll be back in Connecticut where she's from. I understand her father is some kind of industrialist or something. Got a number somewhere. Guess you can have that.'

The next morning a detective from the State Bureau of Investigations got their stories again and with clever questions found out how little they really knew about their guest, friend, and lover.

'Now I don't want you to be alarmed.' the highway patrolman said to Dell. 'You're the oldest. I'll leave it to you how or if you tell the others.'

'Thank you'

'You are very fortunate. Spurwell, the old man you stayed with is the one who confessed...'

'What! Can't be. They're the nicest two people in the world...' Dell said in disbelief.

'It might have been all of you if he'd had his way. And that woman he calls his sister is little more than a old lumber camp prostitute he's known for all these years. Made some kind of crazy life together out of a common love of animals, I suppose. Her record is a mile long - back into the fifties too.'

'This is all too much...unreal.'

'I'll stop if you want...anytime...say the word.'

'No. Go on...it's better to know.'

'I'm very sorry to say this but he had his way with your friend. We imagine he killed her while you all were out searching. It wasn't the first time though. They have three sets of partial bones in that freezer he kept out back. One looks like it matches a girl a tourist family lost last summer - a pretty little blonde lass. Innocent as anything.'

'I can't believe this...we almost...'

'Best not think about it. You did the best you could. Getting the Sheriff up there when you did probably saved the rest of you.'

'But he called the Sheriff!'

'Sometimes they do. Sometimes they even want to get caught. Other times it's the thrill they want - having the law so close. It's a very strange'

place in those sick minds. And we found more bones in the wolf's pen...that's the worst part. '

'You don't mean...'

'Fraid so...I don't think your Sealla got that far, thank God. The State guys are having quite a time. It's a five man job if anything.'

'I hope not. This is one nightmare after another.'

'Your parents want you to come home. All three of you.'

'Sip's not ready for school now.'

'It's best to put some time between yourself and the events. I'm no psychologist but I've seen folks move on way too fast.'

'That's sound advice. What's happened to him.'

'He's booked on five counts...maybe four. It could be dozens if he's done this for years. The old lady is probably going to do a little time as she knew some things. She's got a couple of bad checks they might throw in the case too. You kids need to thank your God or someone. It was your lucky week.'

'They could have poisoned us several times...done something in our sleep.'

'Crime isn't the most logical thing...heard that from my old Captain once.'

'Is someone looking after the animals? I hate to have them suffer.'

'Got the county SPCA up there. The wolf will be put down for sure. It's too horrible a thing to let such a product live. The thought isn't one for good dreams, is it? The rest'll have good homes. There's a hundred farms in this county still.'

'That's good I guess.'

The next morning the three packed themselves into the car and silently drove away. Dell had told his brother the whole story the night before. Both agreed that Sip knew too much already.

'Sorry you have to put off your school this semester' Dell said to Sip who was sobbing in the back seat. Joey wiped a few of his own tears and didn't care if his brother saw them or not.

'It's for the best. I wasn't ready anyway. This whole trip taught me that. You guys taught me so much. I'm a much finer person now' she said with fortified spirits.

'You've always been a fine person, Sip.' Dell said with sincerity.

'You're the best. It's been a thrill to know you. You're a fine, truly fine girl. Girls don't get better than you, sweetie.' Joey continued in her comfort, appending a term of endearment he'd dared use only in these last, difficult hours.

'We were like sisters. Special sisters. We didn't get along sometimes but we had a lot in common in the final analysis. Very different people often have deeper things in common. It takes time to reveal.' Sip lamented and hugged Joey who had joined her in back seat.

'Quila was such a cool girl. She was so unique. Special is an overused word but it...like...fits her.' Joey continued, staring out the window.

'She was an original. Everything she said and did was different. She had this way of looking at life that was...' Dell spoke slowly if a eulogy had been forming in his mind for hours now.

'Refreshing...' Joey finished.

'Exactly. The four of us are a great set. The greatest set of friends on earth.'

'We have to stick together, guys. I'm never going to be apart from you guys. Promise me we can drive and put flowers on her grave.' Sip said, seeming unaware that Joey had been talking.

'We will...very soon' Dell assured. They continued praise for their lost friend and their collective friendship in general. Dell whispered something like 'that old bastard' but failed to continue his point in deference to their mutual girlfriend.

'We almost did it once. God, now I wish I had.' Sip sobbed. Dell glanced in the rear view mirror, meeting Joe's eyes. 'She said she'd like show me these things...toys and stuff...it would be our cool secret from you guys. And I told her no. But I sort of wanted to anyway. I should have...'

'It's okay, babe' Joey said with an arm even firmer.

'Tonight' Sip said rather loudly. 'Let's toast her memory. All of us...as if she was with us. She'd want us to do it. And get wasted. No holds barred.'

That night they shared a bond of the deepest kind amid hugs, kisses, new found passions, endless embraces, and sweet words of comfort. In their pleasure and closeness they found some peace with each other, their memories, and themselves.
