I NEVER WANTED TO SET THE WORLD ON FIRE. NOW THAT I'M FIFTY, MAYBE IT'S A GOOD IDEA!

The wild, wacky adventures of a middle-aged drop-out halfway up a tree in the South Pacific

by BOB BASSO

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Looking Back....

On June 20, 1989, I put my career as a keynote speaker and management consultant on hold and took up temporary residence in a treehouse at the 18-mile marker on the east end of the tiny island of Molokai, in the Hawaiian Islands.

Why?

It was something Dr. Dan said at my annual physical after carefully inventorying several newly arrived ailments, "You're suffering from what we call 'General Malaise.'"

malaise — (ma-lāz'; Fr. ma-lez) n. (Fr.; mal, bad + aise, ease) A vague feeling of physical discomfort or uneasiness, as before an illness.

VAGUE FEELING, hell! The shooting pains in the chest, the perpetual migraine, the refusal to accept the mall as the center of the universe, the urge to throw a grenade in the front seat of every owner of one of those damn atomic blasting car stereos, not to mention total repulsion for acid rain, the melting of the polar ice caps, holes in the ozone, every "How To" book on the market, relationships as an epidemic, gridlock, mail order catalogs and everything on prime time TV were all VERY SPECIFIC! Funny, when you're thirteen they called it "growing pains." Now that you're fifty plus, they call it "general malaise."

"We'll take tests," said the red-cheeked Dick Clark look-alike internist.

So they took tests.

I didn't wait around for the results.

One of the pluses of suddenly being fifty is you completely reject adulthood, lose all respect for outside authority, and start listening to the little heart-voice within. I was all ears. It said, "Go to Molokai. Push the pause button. Do nothing. Listen for further instructions. Little voice, over and out."

I went.

I kept a diary ... of sorts. When the little voice spoke, I wrote. It spoke in the middle of some of the wildest, most pleasantly absurd times of my life. Answers came in the form of adventure, folly, nature, midnight nudity, sex, conversations with Jack London and Henry David Thoreau, and a very instructive relationship with a maverick cat named John Muir. I'm also certain I was the beneficiary of several suspected whispers from the Almighty.

As I look back, I suppose I was taking a seventh-inning stretch, perhaps in search of a mid-course correction, looking for a hole in the clouds to dash through and abandon all this new-age techno-yuppie madness, with its obsessive dependency on non-essentials.

My post-World War II world of hope, pride, family values, and black-and-white movies with happy endings was over. It would never return.

I suspect all "fifty-pluses" have to face up to that jarring new reality. No, it can't be explained away as a "second mid-life crisis" or the simple culture shock of clashing generations. It's much deeper than that. It's a primal struggle to validate that life itself still has meaning. It's a fifty-plus need to answer a simple question that is at the very heart and soul of our future civilization — are we just changing ballparks, or are we actually changing the game?

I'm not sure what I learned in my treehouse will help any other confused mid-lifer answer those questions, but if my experiences — sometimes wacky, sometimes profound, but always instructive — spark an interest to search out your own treehouse, real or imagined, I will feel my time spent on these pages was eminently serviceable. Enjoy!

BOB BASSO

"When I was fifty, I realized heaven had a mind of its own."

Confucius

"In middle age there is mystery. There is mystification." John Cheever, Author

"Fifty is God's way of saying 'stop taking yourself so seriously.' You're not that important. Just remember, when you die, ultimately, the size of your funeral will depend on the weather."

> Janet Basso, Author's Mother

1

I Never Expected Sex at 35,000 Feet, But ... There it Was

TWA 403 from Los Angeles to Honolulu was the first leg of my flight to freedom. Like Candide, Gauguin, Thoreau, and Lord Jim, I was leaving the madness of modern life with the relative certitude I was going to a better place — a tiny, idyllic island in the South Pacific where honesty, non-violence and appreciation for a good Guy Lombardo tune was still possible.

I hated to admit it, but the reality was stark, immediate, and overwhelming. I was fifty years old, and nothing in America looked familiar to me anymore — the music, the movies, families, the starting lineup of the New York Mets, nothing. Not even the in-flight meal — a yellow-green mushy patty with scattered, red blotchy dots that could either be red onion or an unknown killer fungus. My three hundred pound plus female seating companion, with the name "Franny" embroidered across the green and white stripes on her sumo-size left breast, read my confusion and volunteered, "It's vegetarian quiche. This airline is very de rigueur." Her laughter shook both our seats.

I closed my eyes and ran pictures of Molokai Island across my mental screen ... lush valleys with four-hundred-foot waterfalls cascading onto glittering sandy beaches ringing a land that time, graciously, forgot.

My intent was not to make conversation of any sort with any human being until I had reached my final destination. But that ended when I decided to stretch my legs in the galley space between first class and coach.

The Lady in Blue asked me if I would stand guard at the door of the john, because the lock was broken. Her name was Patrella, 23 or 24 maybe, with glistening black ebony hair, a sensual centerfold body in a skin tight navy blue dress that had every pair of male eyes in custom class boiling with lustful possibilities. A small white button sat in the crescent of her bulging cleavage, "Save The Whales." I've never been more aroused by an ecological issue in my life. I was suddenly alive with a young man's passion.

Many not-so-funny voices come calling when you hit fifty. The first arrives just before you are about to blow out the last candle on the surprise birthday cake. It is the loudest and it sticks around the longest. It repeats the same satanic message over and over again. It finally wedges itself in your subconscious right next to that damn forty-foot neon warning sign: "It's a fact that more men die of heart attacks in their fifties than at any other age. Be ready!" The voice, which sounds strangely like David Brinkley, says, "If you haven't made it by now, you'll never make it. Time is running out." It may be the devil's greatest propaganda, because you suddenly find yourself preoccupied with a whole schedule of bizarre rituals, like timing how long it takes you to get an erection; combing your hair from the back to the front; charting your irregularity to see if a deadly pattern is developing; taking your blood pressure every time you go to the drug store; looking for incontrovertible proof of life after death; and becoming an expert on everything to do with your prostate gland. On top of all this, there's a pesky army of cross-examining agitators constantly screaming those ultimate questions at you: "What do you do that's meaningful when the dream dies?" "Did you ever really pursue your joy?" "Should you have listened to your mother and taken a secure civil service job, like the mailman?" All these faceless horsemen galloping through your thoughts seeding chaos and pushing all your unrequited hopes and fading promise into yesterday's shadows. A giant clock is ticking. You're fifty, and the warranty on immortality has suddenly expired. You feel it conclusively in every unexplained ache and shortness of breath.

What to do?

The spirit seems to say, "Seek God in nature." The flesh says, "Make it with a younger woman. Real young."

I've always thought that was a pitifully false refuge for aging men seeking to beat death by bonding with youth. But now I'm fifty, and the voice of conscience isn't so rigid and assured anymore. What was once heresy may now be holistic. Who knows? Hell, it may even be a rite of passage. I didn't invent the idea. It just seemed to naturally evolve along with the receding hairline, the stiff joints, and the curve ball that doesn't break anymore.

I thought if the situation did present itself to me, it would have to be a seventeen-year-old petite nymphet named Candy or Morningstar coming up to me after a college lecture and suggesting she get to know my wonderful mind better by inviting me to have some herbal tea with her in front of a roaring fire at her deaf parents' hunting lodge while they slept soundly three floors above.

I was wrong. It's happening now, 35,000 feet above the Pacific, in front of the tourist class john.

We talk.

Patrella is one part kook, one part shrewd entrepreneur (she owns a thriving futon furniture and design business in Carmel, California), and one part genuine defender of the environment. She is refreshingly direct and totally unencumbered by sentence structure. She never bothers to connect thoughts.

"I'm on a ten-day camping trip to a remote part of Hawaii you probably never heard of, Molokai. Well, it's really not a camping trip, it's a gathering of like minds to center our beings with the flow of the planet. Last year we met at Dacca, Bangladesh. I hope you don't mind chatting with me. I really don't want to go back to my seat. Everybody's looking at my boobs. That's very shallow, don't you think? Did you know Madam Curie was Polish? I read that in the in-flight magazine. I have a good friend who's a volcanologist. He's convinced me that the world as we know it started with a volcanic eruption that produced Molokai forty to forty-five million years ago. I feel like I'm going home."

During one of her infrequent pauses for a breath, I fill her in on my mid-life retreat to the woods.

"Gee, you don't look that old. How old are you?"

"I'm ... 41."

She smiles and feels my right bicep.

"But you're solid. You take care of yourself. I like that in a mature man." She feels my other bicep.

I throw her a little test. Does she have a sense of humor? I've always pictured my youthful fantasy lady and I laughing a lot before, during and after. I figure that's the only way a good Catholic can justify such lascivious adventure.

"I think you'd better stop there, Patrella. If you feel any of my other muscle groups, you're going to send 120 male passengers into cardiac arrest."

She laughs uproariously. The fantasy begins.

A few hours later on the ground, she picks up her khaki camouflaged backpack from the luggage carousel, gives me a one-armed hug and says, "I'll visit you in your treehouse." She flashes me a Betty Grable pin-up poster wink, touches my face gently, and disappears into the crowd.

Was Miss Patrella, the futon lady from Carmel, a phantasm, a construct of fading hope, or is the fickle god Eros finally giving me my shot at immortality?

My loins don't care. They are about to set off the airport sprinkler system. I thought I was turning my back on the world, the flesh, and the devil, but if the dreamy Miss P returns as promised, I just may have to settle for two out of three ... for the time being.

2

My Life in a Tree Begins

I arrive.

Something's wrong ... but right. It's yesterday, a long time ago.

I feel it.

The bumpy, twin-engine, prop-driven Hawaiian Airlines plane was a clever deception, that's it. It was, in fact, a time machine left at the inter-island air terminal at precisely the same time I was to leave for Molokai. I somehow wandered into its well-worn, gray belly obviously guided by a mysterious force that only attracts recent AARP* card holders. It gave all the appearance of flying east by southeast from Oahu for 18 minutes over the temperamental white-capped Kaiwi Channel and then making a silky-smooth landing at the Lilliputian Hoolehua airport — sleepy, rustic, unobtrusive tenant on a shamrock green sliver between two hulking mountains.

All an illusion.

It's definitely yesterday, 1940-something. Where else would the wind gently muffle the sounds of modern commerce. Where else would you see such old wooden baggage carts, a bare-footed handler sound asleep, knotty pine ballpark benches in the open air lobby, rattan furniture, and a clock twenty-one minutes slow. No control tower. No metal detectors or x-ray machines in sight. No regimentation. No signs. No hassle. No hustle. Past the tiny three-table sawdust-on-the-floor bruised mahogany bar. Wait a minute. I'm sure I saw Raymond Chandler, or was it Dashiel Hammet, downing a straight bourbon at that end table. Maybe not. Either way, it's their type of joint.

The brown-skinned wahine at the Tropical rent-a-car counter is a magician. She's warming her baby's bottle, rocking the under-the-desk cradle, balancing two phones on her shoulders,

* American Association of Retired Persons

straightening out some confusion over tonight's canoe race practice for both listeners while flawlessly processing my reservation.

She points to my car in the lot across the way. I'm expecting a '32 Chevy stick-on-the-floor complete with a rumble seat. I get a dented combat-veteran '85 Toyota covered waist-high in volcanic red dirt. Yesterday fades.

The magician smiles apologetically. "Sor-ree. We're short-handed. Our lot boy has a volleyball tournament today. I'll take 15% off your bill."

Up the red hill, eight miles past the family farms, a dozen different storybook wooden-framed steepled churches side by side, past the legendary Coconut Grove of King Kamehameha V with its thousand plus coconut palms planted in 1803 — considered a special resting place of the Gods — and into Molokai's principal town, Kaunakakai. It's yesterday again. Old Tucson, circa 1910. Three blocks of false-front stores that could easily have found their way into a John Ford western epic. Names like Hop Inn, Imamura's Dry Goods, The Friendly Market, and Mid-Nite Inn dominate. Old men, mostly retired Filipino cane field workers, sit on benches and exchange tales, stopping only to pay an admiring silent tribute to a passing young lady. Folks shop and gather in small groups to laugh and hug a lot. An old lady with a giant hibiscus in her hair sells fruit from the back of her '52 Plymouth. No traffic lights, so drivers stop and smilingly wave pedestrians across the street.

Molokai is the old Hawaii of Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Somerset Maugham — unhurried, quiet, at peace with itself — everywhere a common reverence for serenity.

Well, not everywhere.

A souped-up green Volkswagen with balloon tires and yellow racing stripes comes screeching into town, car stereo blasting at sonic boom levels. The unconcerned teenage driver with the heavy metal scowl and jet black wraparound sun glasses seems more symbolic than real. A harbinger of the inevitable seduction of modern life. His ugly volume is rattling the tin roof of Malia's craft store. Old men stop talking. The hugging and laughing stops. The hibiscus lady puts her hands over her ears. Everybody stares and shakes their heads, but nobody does anything about it. Obviously Molokians are no different than any Polynesian people. They're genetically unable to

assert their displeasure with the white man's devils. Well, I didn't come 2,500 miles to a South Pacific hideaway to have my communication with nature shattered by some orange-haired mutant and his concert from hell.

I jump in front of his car. He stops. We stare at each other. It's an old-fashioned, middle-of-the-town showdown. My advantage. Sun's at my back. So who's going to draw first? He does. He gives me "the finger." I match his greasy, antagonistic grin, stridently move closer, and flash a very official-looking badge. Suddenly Clint Eastwood enters by body, pushing soft sarcasm through clenched teeth. "Environmental Protection Agency, South Pacific. Young man, aside from ignoring every basic consideration for your fellow human beings, you are also in violation of every sound ordinance in the state. Now why don't you try something radical — be a decent, caring person and turn down your noise box to a reasonable level."

His middle finger melts and a new, docile creature emerges.

"Yes sir, officer. Sorry."

He gives the gas pedal a butterfly tap, and oh, so slowly and quietly moves ahead.

Thank goodness the stereo boom that destroyed his hearing also blurred his vision or he would have easily read the writing around my official badge — "Ballpark Security — Brooklyn, N.Y. 1938." My grand-uncle Al was a security guard for the old Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field. He left me a legacy of colorful memories watching legends at play and this shiny badge. I've carried it deep in my wallet for thirty-four years without public exposure, until now.

The green Volkswagen comes to a quiet stop at the west end of town opposite the Molokai Fish and Game Store and suddenly explodes in an ear-splitting blend of engines revving, tires squeaking, and stereo convulsing at the max. Conan the Barbarian, Jr., floors the accelerator and disappears in a sooty haze of smoke, middle finger defiantly extended high over the roof of his psychedelic war wagon.

Too bad Uncle Al didn't leave me his gun.

Drop into Friendly Isle Realty to pick up the key and sign the paper work for my treehouse.

Kolola, the soft-spoken agent sitting behind a koa dish of fresh mangoes, smiles.

"There's no key."

"How come?" I reply.

"No lock," says she. "It's open. Send the check when you're ready."

A hundred yards past the 18-mile marker on the southern coast road, there it is — my Walden Pond. Up on a grassy knoll overlooking the feisty Kalohi Channel separating Lanai and Maui is a little yellow-and-brown shack set high in the middle of a forty-foot high mango tree in full bloom.

Down below on the other side of the road is a mile-long stretch of silky white sand beach dotted with petrified mangroves. Their chalky white, serpentine limbs climb out of the sand, combining with the shadows of approaching nightfall to form a ghostlike reminder of twisted metal hulks of war rusting in the surf, proud casualties of a massive amphibious assault long, long ago. My imagination flies. I name it, "Omaha Beach¹."

Inside the Treehouse

My new escape from the modern age is Spartan but functional. A fifteen-by-five-foot screen-enclosed lanai (porch) offers a 180° view of the Pacific found only in midsummer night's dreaming, or on one of those Franklin Mint Limited Edition Collector Plates. Inside is a combination airy bedroom-living-room-kitchen, with all the modern conveniences of post-Depression rural America. There's a first edition Sears & Roebuck front-loading toaster that will also double as an oven; a rusty, bread-box size refrigerator that hasn't been defrosted since the Truman administration; and a temperamental commode that only flushes at its own command ... usually between 1:00 and 3:00 in the morning.

I unpack my only two obligations — The College Edition of Webster's Dictionary and the Douy-Rheims version of the Bible, both graduation gifts from my Dad, the fire chief, who said I could never be truly educated until I've read both, cover to cover. I will.

I also have an ancient thirty-five pound Royal manual typewriter, a prized ringside relic of the 1923 Dempsey-Firpo fight, a three-month supply of paper, my old baseball mitt with the horsehair

¹ Famed landing site of American troops at the 1944 D-Day, Normandy beachhead.

stuffing, a half-dozen music cassettes of "The Best of the Forties," a copy of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, an anthology of Thoreau and Emerson, assorted works of Jack London, and about fifty yellowing copies of "Ladies Home Journal" magazine left by the former occupant. From the fashion look of the underwear ads, I'd say circa 1950.

I'm well equipped to do nothing and grow.

The Learning Starts ...

Changing the Names of Monsters is a Lot Easier on the Heart

Sitting alone in a treehouse writing, reading, thinking, listening, and watching the infinite swirling patterns of the Pacific you become aware of a startling compulsion — you must make friends with all other living things. It's not an intellection. It's an instinct. It's not to be explained. It just is. Nature teaches us all we need to know to survive the flow of the seasons, and this lesson is overwhelmingly immediate. You become an Indian. You get quiet and let the unchanged essences of nature push and pull you to a valid way of living. You know when to rise in the morning. When to work. When to rest. When to let go of all thinking and just float on your back. You respond only to the chemistry of your own body, and it always seems to be right. And without all the excess city baggage, you discover being friendly is a natural thing to be.

Something else happens in the woods. You become a kid, constitutionally, in fact. Emerson said, "In the woods, a man casts off his years as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child ... the woods is perpetual youth ... in the woods we return to reason and faith."

And it is essentially more reasonable out here for the child in you to follow the path of Doctor Doolittle rather than Attila the Hun. You relate to all things. Nothing is inanimate anymore. You find yourself talking to everybody and everything. You talk to the bed, to the fence post, to the wind, to low flying clouds, to the mailbox, and to the animals. I do.

And the animals talk back. All of them, that is, but one, a certain Mister John Muir, the most cantankerous, ornery, cold, independent, selfish cuss I have ever known.

Just writing his name frazzles my nerve endings. I'd better start with the others first.

The Diving Santini Brothers visit twice a day, usually with the rise and fall of the sun. Romulus and Remus Santini are cocky, yellow-beaked mynah birds who think they're P-38 dive bombers. In the middle of a lazy flight from one tree limb to another, they will suddenly veer off and crash dive into any manner of living thing they feel is invading their domain. I've watched them zoom into

dogs, big and small, cows, roosters, goats, donkeys, and poor old Mister Buelli, the yard man. They never draw blood. They're content to just make statements — "This is my land, beat it!" For the price of some whole-wheat bread crumbs on the porch sill, they will abandon their combative ways, put on their showbiz hats, and do what mynahs do extraordinarily well — mimic the sounds of others. Romy and Remy are the best. Their pigeon trill is superior, but they do a pretty fair blackbird yelp as well. We usually talk at dusk under the lilikoi tree on the side of the house. I ask them why they are always so hyper about everything they do. Romy, who always pauses before answering any question, struts around à la Jimmy Cagney, stops, cocks his head, does his W.C. Fields laugh — you know the one that sounds like a Model T backfiring in a tunnel — and says, "Mynah birds, like all birds, only do what is necessary. And if you've got to do necessary things, you might as well do it with enthusiasm and energy. It makes the day mean something." At least I think that's what he said. Mynah birds talk in a very low whisper.

Donaghy, the vegetarian sneak, is a gray-tailed mongoose¹. He's a fruit thief with no allegiance to history. His forebears were brought to Hawaii in 1883 to make the highly destructive cane field rat their number one entrée. No one is sure just how well they accomplished that chore, but we do know they keep their appetite focused on meat, filling their long, narrow bellies with a steady diet of native geese and other local birds. All of them except Donaghy. He's a New Age mongoose. No red meat. He hides behind the big drooping banana leaf at the side of the treehouse waiting for Mr. Buelli, an affable slow-moving yard man, to gather his half-dozen ripened mangoes and neatly line them up on the running board of his old flatbed trunk. When Mr. B. disappears behind the house to rake leaves and cut down the brush, out saunters Donaghy. He walks very slowly, lest the Diving Santinis spot him and crash dive into his buns, which they have done on several painful occasions. He deceptively zigzags his way to the running board, jumps up, knocks two of the ripest mangoes to the ground, lays on his back, rolls the mango on his stomach, and feasts. I suspect his uncustomary eating position is to keep the circling Santinis in sight in case of an aerial attack. I've seen him put away three fat mangoes at one sitting, darn near the equivalent of his own weight.

For some strange reason, Donaghy, the fruit connoisseur, who's also supposed to be high strung and anti-human, responds to my call and routinely slithers over to eat green peppers, pineapple

¹ Ferret-like mammal resembling a squirrel, noted for their ability to kill poisonous snakes, rodents, etc.

chunks and sesame spaghetti from my hand. He usually does all the talking. I rarely get a word in edgewise. But when I do, I pump him about his non-mongoose ways, like eating fruit and living under a palm frond instead of burrowing an apartment deep into the red clay like the rest of his species. He grinds his beaver-like front teeth, wets his lips, and rambles on about taking risks, pushing traditional and genetic limits in order to discover new things. Once when I was sitting under the lichee tree, alongside the mango tree, reading a little Thoreau, he told me, "A tree can only be a tree and stand so tall and give so much shade. A wave can never be more than a swirling mass of water. But if you're breathing, you've got an edge. You can become more than you are, try a new menu, eat fruit, and sleep in a cool place."

"Yeah," I replied. "But every time you try something new you run the risk of getting bit in the buns."

I don't think mongooses can sigh, but Donaghy came awfully close, then replied, "Hey, most of life's problems have no solutions, just trade-offs. Besides, there's always a price to pay when you run ahead of the herd."

He finished off my dry roasted cashew nuts, rolled over on his back, and took a nap.

I resumed reading Thoreau's brilliant essay in defense of the militant abolitionist John Brown: "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all."

Other friends are Mert and Marge, inseparable retired veterans and frequent visitors from the next farm. They always seem quite content to let me babble on about life, love, and receding hairlines without interruption ... two rusty old fireplugs with stubby feet, liver spots, and expanding potbellies. Mert and Marge are two heavily-scarred, wild, boar-hunting dogs who have beaten the odds on life expectancy for their profession. In the old days they would hunt out the savage three-hundred pound saw-toothed pigs that roam the Kamakou mountains behind us and perform the least appreciated bravery in outdoor sports. It was their job to corner their deadly adversary in the open field and charge him from two different angles — one grabbing the throat, while the other partner had the less desirable task of locking onto the pigs testicles, restraining the enraged beast fore and aft while the hunter moves in and cuts the boar's throat. (From the constant sour

expression on Mert's face, it was obvious which end he was responsible for.) It is the highest form of teamwork in the bloody world of hunting. The hunter trusts his dogs will not let go despite excruciating pain as the crazed boar repeatedly sinks his six-inch, razor-sharp teeth into their flanks and wildly flings them against the ground in a furious fight to the death. The dogs trust the hunter to move swiftly and find the jugular on the first thrust, before they're overpowered by the beast's rage.

The good dogs last a year or two, usually dying in combat. The few great ones get to stick around long enough to retire on a small pension, which includes chasing cars, swimming in the mud flats, and letting the hunter's kids pretend they're long-horn cattle and lasso them in the front yard. Mert and Marge are beyond all that. They're hall-of-famers. They sleep in a store-bought dog house, eat three balanced meals a day, keep their own agenda, and have carte blanche to visit any part of the island. But mostly they just play, rest a lot, and follow me on my long walks along Omaha Beach at dusk. We can sit at the abandoned hermit's shack beyond the mangroves for thirty or forty minutes without a word, just watching another flaming sunset close the chapter on another great day in the tropics. On those rare occasions when they do talk, it's always the same theme, "Don't just be a dog. Become an expert at something, then play a lot."

Now we come to that no-good, self-centered, detached little snob, John Muir.

Why do I call him that when he's a lot shorter than his famous namesake, considerably less hirsute under the chin, and has positively never set foot in the Sierras or even heard about Yosemite? Because I am an inheritor of a long family tradition of giving all life's monsters noble or silly names that immediately seem to reduce the evil they can work on you. I think it's the sound of calamity that does the most damage. Don't you think more people would survive CANCER if we renamed it "Fa-la-la-la," or hold together a lot better during a HEART ATTACK if the doc said, "No problem, you're just having a little 'Oopee Whoop.'?" Renaming monsters changes perception of pain. Ask any "Sanitary Engineer" who used to be a "Garbage Man." It doesn't make the garbage disappear. It just changes how you feel about it. Maybe in the long run all we can do is change how we react to garbage. I think words that make you smile can't hurt you. Okay, there are some monsters that deserve evil-sounding names like poverty, pollution, PMS, and junk mail. But that's about it. John Muir is a dirty brown, leopard-striped cat who lives under my treehouse.

For starters, I've been a dog man all my life, so any attempt at a relationship with this critter is no easy matter. John is the embodiment of all the black myths you've ever heard about his kind. You look into those steely green eyes and you know this self-assured furry little stoic is a mystic, a soul reader. He knows immediately who you really are, what you are. And that damn expressionless little face with the frozen smugness ... I hate it.

He knows the answers, and I don't. And he knows I know he knows, and that drives me nuts.

So why don't I just ignore him altogether? Because when you live in the woods, you not only need to be friendly with the animals, you also need their approval. You need to be accepted as an equal. You need to feel your slack city ways haven't disqualified you from being a part of the basic, more meaningful dominion of nature. And there's no democracy out here. You need a unanimous vote of the tribe to be voted in. I lack one vote.

He sits exactly fifteen feet away from me (I've measured the distance) on the porch sill and watches me type every day. He'll sit for hours, just staring at my two-finger key banging with no apparent editorial comment. And no matter how many times I attempt to move closer, he adjusts the distance, and we end up fifteen feet apart. I've tried everything to lessen the distance between us — rubbed my face with honey and played dead on the front lawn, whispered kind thoughts, smiled, hummed, sang, whistled, cajoled, bargained, and begged. Nothing. I tried treating him like an equal ... chatting off-handedly about Hegelian utilitarianism, the junk bond market, and Henry Adams' observation that the succession of presidents from Washington to Grant was in itself enough to disprove Darwin's theory of evolution. No response. I've offered to be a good neighbor and give him a lift into town, taking a jog with me to the twenty-mile marker, or doing some light aerobics on the porch. Nothing. Just the same fifteen feet of indifference.

Today I invoke some classical Adam Smith supply and demand. I put a little supply of 2% low fat milk in a saucer, and leave it in plain sight of his nesting place. I sit down by the offering in anticipation of our first close personal contact. Ah, there he is, peeking out from behind the trunk of the plumeria tree, but no movement. I will not budge. We sit and stare at each other for thirty-five minutes. I time it. Nothing. I budge and move back a little. Nothing. Dammit! I move back a little further, about fifteen feet. Slowly, his primordial demand for calcium overcomes his acquired fear of Brooklyn-Italians living in treehouses, and he cautiously moves to the peace offering, devours it handily, licks his chops, and arrogantly scampers back up the tree.

Ah, but it's only a matter of time, John, before we erase this five-yard gap of mistrust, for I have just learned a new truth. Even in the forest primeval, everybody has their price. Cats are people, too.

4

Do Country Stores Have Souls?

I'm getting restless depending solely on my third-degree flat feet for transportation. Relative isolation has it's joys, but when you live on a tropical island, you are immediately overwhelmed by an ancient curiosity — you've got to explore, move out and about through tide pools, clay pits, gullies, water caves, and gothic rock formations. You've got to touch every part of your island, because this is where nature is most instructive. This is where land, sea, and sky converge to conclusively prove there is order, beauty and balance in the universe and, if you only get off your duff and touch some of it, you will find magic. There are no hieroglyphics in nature, just simple answers. I want some.

But I need more mobility. How?

I do like the early Hawaiians ... I wait for a moonlit night, go down to the beach, and ask the great 'aumakua (god) for relief. True to the custom of the ancients, I leave an offering to stimulate the mana (spirit) of the deities. I sit for an hour watching the high tide carry my half-pack of sesame spaghetti, wrapped tightly in banana leaves, out to the shipping lanes beyond the reef. If my newly-found respect for Polynesian culture and spirituality has any substance, an answer will come.

It does ... sort of.

The next day, on my pre-dawn walk up the coast, I follow Mert and Marge as they rummage through an abandoned fisherman's hut slowly sinking into the mud flats at the twenty-mile marker. Forty-pound retired boar hunters are too little to upset the delicate balance of the angel-hair-thin rotting floor boards, but one two-hundred pound, graying biped thrashing around the salt-encrusted jetsam and flotsam of this seaside antiquity has the effect of King Kong entering a house of cards. First, a creaking noise like an old wooden ship of the line running aground, then a giant rumble, followed by the whole left side of the shanty collapsing sending the rusted slivers of the tin roof sliding into the thick keawe bushes hugging the shoreline. Abandon ship! Mert and Marge leap through a hole in the crumbling floor and ride the current downstream to safety.

I grab the last standing two-by-four support beam and manage to survive the quake with nothing more than a harmless shower of sand, rotting lilikoi (passion fruit), and a batch of waterlogged Life Magazines, circa 1952. I salvage one with a smiling President Ike Eisenhower waving at his inaugural parade audience. This is not a fitting resting place for the designer of the Normandy invasion.

Amid the rubble, my prayers are answered.

I am now free to explore the Molokai beyond my limited horizon. The spirit has wings; the body has a bicycle.

Well, technically a bicycle, practically more like a work in progress from Fred Flintstone's garage — a seatless, rusted frame sitting on little more than faith and two mismatched patched tires. The handlebars are frozen in the extreme up position like the ones on those super-dude Harley Davidson motorcycles. Brakes never entered the mind of the designer, and two twisted rods are all that's left of the pedals, but, to a footsore treehouse dweller, this is a late model Astin Martin. Mert comes back and pees on the back tire. In my new sense of spiritual renewal, I take it as a sign of nature's blessing.

Lots of sanding, patching, and oiling, and the darn thing still looks pretty awful, but it does produce locomotion and a new world of possibilities.

One of those possibilities is the fact that I may forget my chariot of fire is seatless and absentmindedly sit down, giving myself a surprise protological probe of epic proportions from the rusted, pointy support rod. I'll worry about it tomorrow.

Tomorrow is another sun-drenched gem in the tropics. A big juicy papaya from the tree on the side, two mangoes from the tree of life, and a banana from the patch out back. Voilà! Instant breakfast.

A half a tin of 2% for John Muir, a quick swim down at Omaha Beach, and I'm ready for my morning reading. Who will it be today ... Twain, Maugham, Thoreau, or Wil and Ariel Durant's *History of Western Thought* ... No, none of them. What's wrong with me? Fifty-year-old men need motion, not reflection. There's no more wisdom or insight in words when you get to this age, only in experience, doing, feeling, reaching, working your joints. Mahatma Ghandi was right when he

concluded at age fifty that all the philosophy from all the world's great thinkers doesn't add up to the knowledge one derives from a simple, single act of unbounded joy. However evil the world may seem, there is always the possibility of a single act of joy by doing. And within that act you have all the basic knowledge you need for healthy survival. Ghandi was right. More doing than thinking. Have you ever seen a thin philosopher? Never. They're too busy vegetating in their Lazy Boy Recliners analyzing instead of "doing." Not for me, no sir. Don't think. Do. To bike! Ride, ride you son of nature. You're 2,374 miles from the nearest gridlocked freeway. Revel in that freedom.

Off I go, pedaling in a standing position, down America's most beautifully perfumed highway, Molokai coastal road 470. Why the number I don't know, because it's the only coastal road on the island. And what a road, trellised in sweet-smelling frangipani, vanda orchids, eucalyptus, and a dozen more exotic odors wafting down from the creased south face of the Kamakou mountain range. Past neatly painted mailboxes with colorful floral art and island names that sing the ethnic rhythms of the Pacific — Mapeul, Keliikipi, Babayan, Sakurada, Laufalemana, Wong, and Pagaduan.

It's amazing how a few inches of elevated smooth-wheeled propulsion can dramatically transform your perspective on the world. You're passing by the same scenes you've passed on foot a hundred times, but the reality is somehow different. Maybe it's becoming part of a grander motion ... the awareness that you, everything is in constant motion and that motion, has a natural synchronicity to it. You just can't find it walking, jogging, or squatting behind an internal combustion engine. You need to move at the speed of the wind, the kind of moderated speed you can only get bicycling.

I'm sure the synchronicity would be even sweeter if only I could sit down. Ah, well, every unbounded joy has its trade-offs.

The easy flowing pattern of genteel, dilapidated local plantation houses with their tin roofs, open lanais, and colorfully improvised add-ons are occasionally and abruptly broken by the foreign intrusion of modern construction — pre-fabricated pricey boxes with the mandatory wraparound porches, tinted windows, and cathedral ceilings. The parade of mainland malcontents is on.

It's happening all over the Pacific from Molokai to Cook Island to the Marquesas and New Zealand. A whole new class of displaced persons are on the move, fleeing the collapse of post-World War II materialism in search of a rebirth of spirit and meaning. The romance of island living is a powerful magnet that seems to live in the consciousness of everyone pushed to the brink by a technotopian madness that has redefined the yardsticks for success and contentment to be the gathering of stuff. They're here in Molokai, on this road. The used car king from Southern California, who left it all to buy the local eight-page weekly newspaper; the mini-mall developer growing white ginger in his tiny hothouse; the chemical researcher from Croton, Connecticut, now running a dusty old general store; the sports shoe manufacturer doing nothing in a pole house by the sea, and now ... me.

All refugees of the soul, fleeing disillusionment and the horrible ugliness of comfortable neglect. We don't know why the traditional order of things changed so drastically, but, deep down, there is a confraternity of guilt that we all allowed ourselves to be seduced into submission by becoming overdependent on so many convenient, but nonessential, things. And now we must reject them or become one of them.

So we run ... past the city limits into the greenbelts, but soon the sins of the city follow us there, too. We run further still across borders and oceans in the pleasant delusion we have finally outdistanced the certain harvest of endings. The end of more and more of the same as before. The end of plenty. The end of a grand era of secure dreaming.

Uh oh, I'm thinking. Sorry, Mahatma.

Owww! I did it. I sat down. What's wrong with me? Must be the onset of Alzheimer's. Got to walk it off. Boy, that smarts.

Suddenly, I'm in front of yesterday — the most old fashioned of all Molokai's old fashioned structures ... the venerable Ah Ping Store.

It's 1901 again.

Molokai is going through another of its certain cyclical economic tragedies. This time the sugar crop has failed. A previous population of 8,700 shrinks to 1,300. Everyone is leaving to find work on Oahu and the Big Island. Joseph Ah Ping, a quiet, mild-mannered Chinese immigrant cane field

worker from Lahaina, Maui, looks across the windswept Kaiwi Channel to the devastated neighbor island and sees nothing but hope and the possibility of realizing his dream — to be a shopkeeper. He comes. He buys four acres on the side of the road in the lush East end. He builds four simple, sturdy, plantation-style buildings, all with shiny red tin roofs, bright green exteriors, and well-scrubbed linseed-oiled floors. The tiny shack out back is for mixing poi, the staple of the Hawaiian diet. The next smallest shack will be used for storage and placed out front near the largest building, the general store. He builds a "long house" a few feet from the store for the family sure to come.

They do. Three sons, Ah Ing, Ah Hung, and Ling Wah, and two daughters who always answered to their western names, Lillian and Katherine. They all pitch in. Mama Ah Ping spends most of her time outdoors, meticulously picking weeds, removing bushelfuls of fallen leaves and ripened mangoes that miraculously seem in constant production.

Mama always pauses in front of her pride and joy, the bougainvillea-rimmed gate, to carefully trim the long, spidery vines that weave their way around the white picket fence. In the middle of a sale, if Mama sees a single leaf fall on the front lawn, she will politely excuse herself to go pick it up. Things must be clean and neat for the customers.

"It's the way we do things, children," Papa says in a voice that rarely rises above a whisper. "Our customers are neighbors. Be kind. Always be kind."

Soon the Ah Ping Store becomes much more than a halfway stop for locals traveling the narrow, oftentimes treacherous country road, where one miscalculation would put you in the ocean on one side or the big rocky ditch on the other. It becomes a gathering place, a haven, a warm campfire at the end of a day of backbreaking work in the fields. A place to "talk story" (Hawaiian expression to gossip, exchange news, tell tall tales), laugh, sing, buy some Nehi soda pop, a week-old mainland newspaper, or just look up at a geometric miracle — a magnificent hanging garden of tin, wood, iron, steel, and porcelain shapes clustered in a confoundingly tight but orderly congestion. The ceiling had disappeared, as dripping from every open space on the beams and trusses were the essentials of island survival, scythes, hoes, rakes, washing boards, fishing rods, toilet seats, rocking chairs, and a seemingly infinite array of tin boxes and containers of every size and shape, each with its own very distinctive label.

Homer Kamalu, the four-hundred pound stevedore who routinely astonished his fellow workers every day by lifting hundred-and-thirty pound crates by hand at the Pukoo pier, came every night at seven just to look at the colorful labels in the hanging gallery and read them out loud. "North Dakota Screaming Eagle Pine Tar, Wopahachee North Country Fertilizer, Haywood's Rectal Ointment — The Salve That Saved the West. Each label got one big pitch'a and a whole history of da' place. We did'dent have no movie house, so next best 'ting to seeing a motion pitch'a, huh?"

And, standing in steel-banded barrels next to the floor-to-ceiling stacks of Spam, Portuguese sausages, and pork and beans was the store's most demanded, the reason every keiki (child) on the island relished a trip to Ah Pings — crack seed candy imported from Shanghai, China.

"You have no money? No worry. Mister Ah Ping will jest put yur name in da' book, if he can remember. You pay next mont, first 'ting." Next month rarely came, but Papa Ah Ping didn't mind. He understood all his neighbor/customers were well below the poverty line and worked just as hard as he did to provide for their families. For years, very little money changed hands. You need five gallons of kerosene, okay, bring Mr. Ah Ping two fresh squid or sharpen his knives, or bring whatever you can. Barter was the economy, and the Ah Ping Store was where it took place.

When Henry Ford sold some of his new Model A's to the rich pineapple planters on Molokai, the old shopkeeper quickly responded with a single gas pump in front of the tiny shack on the side of the store. If you need gas after hours, just knock on Mr. Ah Ping's house a few feet away. "He geeve you da' key, tell you to pump what you need, and pay him first 'ting next mont. Den he go back to sleep."

When the liquor bars opened on the island in the late thirties and the partying lasted to three, four in the morning, guilt-ridden revelers filled to the gills with okolehao¹, would whisper below his bedroom window, "Mistah Ah Ping, I forgot to buy some food fo' breakfast. Ma' wife gonna keel me. Can you help?" Out he'd come in his nightshirt, holding his big yellow lantern to open the store and square their consciences. Again, never a harsh word. Never a judgment. And so it went for sixty-five years. Through three wars, a Depression, and one agricultural failure after another — cattle, coffee, copra, corn, goats, honey (Molokai was once the world's largest producer of honey),

¹ A gin made from rice or pineapple juice

oranges, potatoes, sugar, taro, and wheat. There was always the Ah Ping General Store and the sure hope you could barter 'dis fo' dat and survive.

In 1965, at the age of 90, Joseph Ah Ping, suffering from a variety of ailments that prevented him from standing tall behind the old hand-cranked cash register and serving his customers, sold the store. But things were just not the same without the original proprietors around. The store closed for good soon thereafter.

The doors haven't been open for twenty-four years, but the four original buildings are still standing proudly, weathered, bent and rotted through in spots, but erect nevertheless with the tattered, threadbare elegance of the oldest veteran marching in the Fourth of July parade. He knows his time is over, but he will not go meekly. He knows his history deserves one last salute.

The ancient Hawaiians believed all things in the universe — stars, ocean, trees, fish and rocks — have souls, a life force within that allows them to interact with the flow of nature. Surely, the old Ah Ping Store has a soul. You can feel it every time an occasional tourist slows down when he passes in response to some mystical reverence that sends a message that something really important happened here a long time ago. A soul forged in the dusty red dirt of Molokai at the turn of the century when Filipino, Japanese, Chinese and Portuguese immigrants risked everything to come to a far off tiny island to work in the fields and start dreaming of better days. They worked side by side, learned one another's languages, ate one another's foods, and sang one another's songs, and lifted one another whenever they fell. It was democracy's finest hour, but will never be found in a history book. But it did happen.

Back to the present.

I'm sitting on the seaside shoulder of the road opposite the store, nursing my wound and admiring the most stunningly apparent feature in all this gentle fading charm — the one thing that seems to strengthen the earth beneath the buildings and buoy up their will to keep on fighting the inevitable victory of time and salt air erosion — the grounds are immaculate. Lawn cut uniformly, hibiscus hedges trimmed in exact symmetry, not even the usually ubiquitous dandelion or chickweed in sight, and *not one leaf* on the ground. Considering the 80 by 100 lot is ringed with ancient mango trees, the undisputed king of leaf shedders, this phenomenon takes on mystical proportions.

At 10:00 a.m., exactly, the mystery takes on a very simple, human explanation. The door to the "long house" opens and Miss Katherine Ah Ping, age 89, stands to her full four feet ten inches height and straightens her faded straw sun bonnet, and secures it on her head with a long blue cloth. She wears a long-sleeved, red-checkered work shirt, the kind you see in old photos of California gold rush miners, wrinkled but clean denim overalls, rubber boots, and a sturdy pair of dirt-stained brown-and-white garden gloves. Her movements are an orchestrated ballet in slow motion. First the leaves. Pick them up, take them in the back, and burn them in a large, rusty pot. Down on her hands and knees to pick a few maverick weeds invisible to the eye at my distance, and then a large scissors to trim the grass border around all the buildings. A few minutes rest on the crumbling concrete steps in front of the store. She pats the top stair, perhaps retrieving a single moment from her childhood memory, and then back to work. To the antique, hand-cranked Chevron gas pump in front of the storage shed. Peel the rust slivers away from the hose handle and carefully put them in her large plastic garbage bag. She cleans the glass window on the face of the pump. The frozen numbers read: 49 cents a gallon. Past the sign: Please turn off motor and no smoking please, to the large "Drink Coca Cola" sign over the store entrance immediately next to the larger Pepsi Cola sign announcing: Ah Ping Store. She adjusts her garden hose to a light spray and points it toward the signs, gently washing off the accumulated red dust. A leaf falls, and she begins her pas de deux all over again.

Miss Katherine has been performing this ritual for 24 years, ever since retiring from 40 years of elementary school teaching on the island. She never married, and continued living in the house where she was born because, as she later told me, "I promised Mama and Papa I would keep the place clean. It was very important to them our store should not become a shame to the community."

I pedaled the Astin Martin down to the Ah Ping Store at the 13-mile marker every Tuesday and Saturday, timed to arrive at just about the same time Miss Katherine finished her daily outside chores.

We'd talk at the bougainvillea gate about the mango harvest, the wind, the necessity to take frequent breaks when working in the afternoon sun, the health benefits of napping — you know, the important stuff. Frequently, when a leaf would fall, she would politely excuse herself and go pick it up. Then one Tuesday, Miss Katherine wasn't there. Grady the handyman/beekeeper from

Kentucky, with the slow Southern drawl and a mouthful of Red Devil chewing tobacco, was there with a small army of cutting, trimming, blowing and mulching machines.

"Miss Katherine broke her hip. Had to go back to Honolulu. Too old for this work. 'Spect she'll never see Molokai again." Mr. Grady pauses after every second sentence to spit downwind. "Made me promise to keep the place neat and clean. Funny, this old store hasn't been open in twenty years, but she still had to keep it up. Don't know why. Heard tell the grandkids are just waiting to sell the place for a million-and-a-half dollars." He rubs his big, callused palms across the top of his worn blue denim railroad overalls. "One of those rich people from the mainland running away from the big city will buy it and put up one of those ol' ugly houses." He spits. "They'll never know about the history of this place ... or care. Well, I suppose people are always looking for a piece of paradise, you know what I mean?"

I know.

We stand in silence for a very long time. A few leaves fall off to the right. I go and pick them up. Mr. Grady smiles.

If She Can Sing Every Song of the 40's, it Must Be Love ... So Much for Solitude

Back at the fairy tale Hoolehua airport. Alone, except for that same sleepy baggage handler and a Goliath-size counter agent delicately picking out chords on his ukulele.

I'm waiting for love. Hannah Marie from Haiku, Maui, arrives in twenty minutes.

I had fully intended to spend my tropical hermitage experience alone, but I distinctively heard one of those little deep down voices say, "Share this contentment with Hannah." I'm relatively certain it came from the heart and not the loins, but I haven't really mastered the art of pinpointing the exact location of "little voices."

Upper-middle-age bachelorhood hath loosed a terrible beast within me, guerrilla love — hit and run sex. I resent it, and yet knowingly entertain it. I'm not sure I'm just another weak-willed casualty of our flighty permissive times, or perhaps just sailing through some fifty-plus passage that ominously allows me to see that well-known light at the end of that proverbial tunnel. A frightening light that fraudulently invites all aging men to conquer as many females as possible as proof positive of their immortality.

I think I'm trying to end that charade by genuinely getting closer to the very extraordinary lady about to arrive on the single-engine five-seater Air Molokai flight #107.

Jack London introduced Hannah to me. She was sitting at her desk between a Japanese woodblock print of a rainstorm in Nagoya and a giant ceramic fish. She worked in the art gallery of a hotel at which I was lecturing. I visit galleries about as often as I rotate the tires on my car. Why tonight? Another one of those little voices, I think.

It wasn't love at first sight. No, it was something else — mutual curiosity, I think.

We danced around a bit with small talk, even though the animal inside instantly knew we would become lovers. Funny how we manipulate every other rule of society to serve our selfish ends, but steadfastly honor the take-it-one-step-at-a-time mating code of the tribe.

We skipped a few steps when I noticed her reading from my literary hero and spiritual super-ego, Jack London.

"What piece you reading?" I asked.

She cautiously raised her aquamarine eyes over the tops of her fawn-colored bifocals and answered, "'White Silence,' a short story of being snowed in on the Yukon trail. Ever read it?"

Much to the surprise of the tweedy lookee-loos around us, I leaped between the Remington bronze, End of the Trail, and the pre-Columbian busts, and recited what many literati recognize as the most beautifully descriptive paragraph ever written:

"The afternoon wore on, and with the awe, born of the White Silence, the voiceless travelers bent to their work. Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity — the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery — but the tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass, the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And the fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him — the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence...."

We say the final line together as if on cue.

"...it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God."

Hannah, the classic, self-contained Libra, was flushed with embarrassment. It wouldn't be the last time my impromptu outbursts would redden her cheeks. Two Japanese tourists ask for my

autograph. One of the tweedies intones, "You sure know your Bible, young man." Hannah melts down behind her counter.

We met later that night at the encased display of the shark's jaw in the lobby. We agreed to have a mini-picnic on the rocky cliffs encircling the hotel grounds. I brought grapes, apples, orange slices, lo-cal cheese, and spring water. Something told me she was a "health food only" child of the earth. She was, and a whole lot more. Retired child psychologist, former barn-storming pilot, world traveler, hiker, defender of the planet, expert on North American wildflowers, and the possessor of the most colorful eclectic art collection on the island of Maui. None of which bonded us until I discovered what, to me, was her most seductive talent — she loved songs of the 40's!

For two days we sang every one of them. When I found she was the only other person in North America, besides me, who knew all the words to Bing Crosby's classic, "I Only Want a Buddy Not A Sweetheart," love bloomed.

It was consummated three months later on a return trip. We jitterbugged to my "Best of the 40's" for two hours on her antique Oriental rug ringed by priceless East Indian mosaics, 18th Century Hawaiian poi pounders, Balinese fertility masks, and a smiling array of Hopalong Cassidy artifacts. We then lay down on her Iranian scatter rug beneath her four-foot golden Buddha and grabbed a measure of immortality. We became, most likely, the first couple to make love to the accompaniment of the crashing, burping, belching musical madness of Spike Jones' "You Always Hurt The One You Love." We just didn't have the hormonal control to wait for "As Time Goes By."

Maui Hannah arrives. A blond, forty-something Katherine Hepburn. Strong, athletic, non-conforming, independent free spirit, with a copy of Mother Earth News tucked under one well-muscled arm and a Sierra Club knapsack slung over the other.

Her cheeks start to redden as she gets closer and reads the sign I'm holding up over my head: "Congratulations Henry/Hannah. Your Sex Change Looks Great!"