

## *The Write Place At the Write Time*

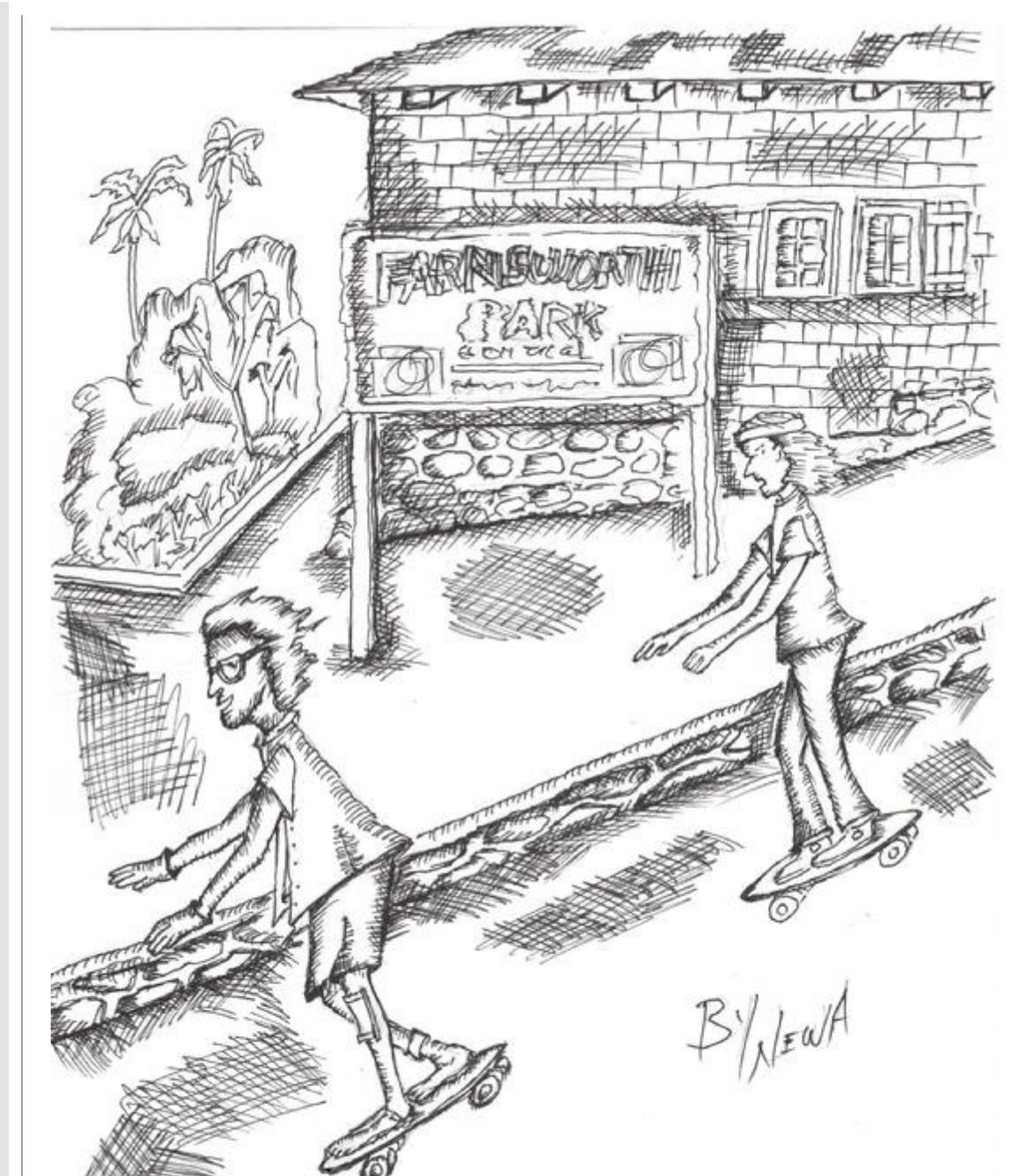
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### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"The Top of Lake Avenue" by NEWA; Copyright 2009

## The Top of Lake Avenue

By Mark Barkawitz

Lake Avenue runs north and south down the middle of Pasadena, dividing the eastern and western halves of our Rose City town. If you stand at Colorado Boulevard and look north, you'll notice that the grade steepens greatly as the street continues up through Altadena and all the way to the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, where it ends suddenly, like a cut-off ribbon.

During our high school years, we were all highly-accomplished skateboarders. There wasn't a sidewalk, parking lot, closed school ground, park, or other concrete surface in this city over which we hadn't rolled our clay wheels. Most in our group were surfers, too, who had been swept-up by the short-board craze. So we carved and rode shorter skateboards that mimicked our surfboard designs. Admittedly, it was all experimental.

Our friend Dick Alfano was a pretty big guy who rode really small skateboards. Mini-guns—pin-nosed and pin-tailed. His feet barely fit on them, so he usually rode barefoot, which explained the road rash on his feet and toes.

One day when we were sitting around, we began to discuss the possibility of riding our skateboards all the way down from the top of Lake Avenue to the first traffic light at Altadena Drive without stopping. Nine-tenths of a mile—straight downhill. It was a daunting endeavor. First of all, there were no sidewalks up there, which meant riding on bumpy asphalt. It was so steep, our top speed would be such that step-offs meant sure tumbles, turning off course at street corners would be nearly impossible, and bail-outs difficult because of a deep gutter that separated us from the front lawns that could soften our landing. The clay wheels we rode in those days could be stopped suddenly by a large pebble or fallen carob bean from a nearby tree. Front wheel stops at high speeds usually resulted in head-first, airborne wipe-outs. Road rash was eminent. Broken wrists or other bones a possibility. The car traffic was usually light except for rush hour. But the Altadena Sheriffs Station was nearby. We were a

nuisance to them. And then there was the final problem of stopping—skateboards don't have brakes—at Altadena Drive if one of us were successful enough to reach there but unlucky enough that the traffic light was red. Put it all together and it pretty much sounded like our kind of fun.

We made attempt after attempt, each time getting a little farther down the hill but usually stepping-off or bailing-out before reaching top speed. And there were some gnarly wipe-outs along the way, too, resulting in torn skin embedded with road dirt, sprained wrists, and banged-up bones. We went home to treat our wounds but resolved to try again.

Dick carved a new skateboard; the smallest, fastest, pointiest board any of us had ever seen. It made little sense because longer boards offered more stability but there was no dissuading Dick.

Junior year at John Muir High School, I bought my first car—a baby blue and white, '57 Ford station wagon—for 250 bucks. I blacked-out the side windows, flipped the shackles that raised its rear end, added five-spoke mag wheels and surfboard racks. It was pretty cool. I drove Dick and my little brother Bruce, who would later become a professional motorcycle racer, to the top of Lake Avenue. Dick took off his desert boots, allowing his bare toes to better grip the mini-gun. But that also meant he couldn't step off without shredding his soles. He put on a pair of cowhide gloves and adjusted his aviator shades. Bruce tied a bandanna around his forehead and almost-shoulder-length hair. It was my job to drive the car (ambulance?) and check their top speed with the speedometer in the dashboard. I figured I had the easier job. They shook hands and then started down Lake Avenue, Dick in front, Bruce a car length behind. I followed in the Ford. The speedometer quickly climbed to twenty. By Farnsworth Park, they were racing at 25 mph—hair straight back, tears streaming across their cheeks. Dick's toes wrapped tightly on the rails to keep the tiny skateboard from wobbling, which would mean his demise. I pulled alongside and screamed encouragement out the open passenger window, but their gazes remained focused down the hill. They were halfway down. 28, 29, thirty mph! I dropped back behind them. As we passed Poppyfield Street, the traffic light three, short blocks below at Altadena Drive was green. But it didn't remain so for long.

With a block-and-a-half left and both guys racing at nearly 35 mph, it blinked to yellow . . . then red. Bruce veered to the right and launched himself into the air, clearing the deep gutter, and then landing, rolling on the green grass of the last front yard available and into a hedge. I kept after Dick, who was still headed for the red light a block ahead. Cars drove across the intersection as he approached Altadena Drive. I leaned on the horn. Dick put his right hand down on the asphalt and tried to negotiate a wide right turn as he entered the crosswalk, but the clay wheels couldn't hold and the skateboard slid sideways into the intersection. Cars screeched to a halt as Dick laid-out and slid on his belly, and then rolled across the intersection before stopping face-down in the street. I screeched to a stop at the curb and jumped out of the car. But before I could scrape Dick off the asphalt and get him, his skateboard, and his broken aviators into the station wagon, a Sheriff's car likewise screeched to a halt in the middle of the intersection. A big sheriff, wearing his own pair of reflective aviators, stepped out, assessed the situation in the intersection, and approached us.

"Just what do you boys think you're doing?" he asked.

Dick—who was pretty much shredded with road rash everywhere except for his cowhide-covered hands—just groaned. We both knew that in these kinds of situations, it always fell upon me as the oldest with the highest GPA (just barely) and the biggest mouth (again, just barely) among our band of merry knuckleheads to step forward.

"Well, Sheriff," I started and continued talking non-stop like Arlo Guthrie doing "The Motorcycle Song" until he finally stopped me and told us:

"Clear-out this intersection now. And I don't want to see either one of you boys up here again." He stared down at us reflectively. "Got it?"

Dick and I both nodded.

Scratched-up and limping from his tumbling bail-out, Bruce joined us at the station wagon.

I'm pretty sure that was the last time any of us attempted to ride our skateboards all the way down from the top of Lake Avenue.

Serenity, Now

By Beth McKim

My friends and I had found the perfect spot in the Yoga room. The far right-hand corner of the back row seemed like the place to be. Not only was it the warmest section, it was the one where no one noticed what we did wrong or stared at our rear ends. We got there early each day to put down our mats, visit a bit, and relax before class.

We enjoyed ourselves until the day HE showed up for the first time in our protected corner. When we walked in and saw his mat, we were amazed.

Surely he knew he was an intruder since he had been on the opposite side of the room, next to the mirrors, for months. He always entered the room with his wife, who traditionally made a beeline to the front row, clearly happy to exist separately from him in the confines of the room.

After his intrusion more than once, we realized the competition was on. My friend, Katy, and I began a new drill of racing to the room even earlier than before to put down our mats, and then go to breakfast or another workout first. No other victory was sweeter than winning these contests.

We soon learned this tall, thin man with white hair and a perpetual scowl was a retired lawyer. Figures, we thought. Katy, a practicing attorney herself before quitting to rear her children, said that she would have loved

being his adversary in the courtroom.

We named him "Mr. Cranky" and looked forward to our almost daily confrontations. I mostly engaged in stare-downs but Katy actually entered into some fairly loud verbal sparring.

"You need to learn to behave," said Mr. Cranky.

"And you need to go to hell," said Katy.

Originally, we felt sorry for his wife. Later, we decided she was his accomplice because she would report to him we had set up one too many mats for our friends.

And, the endless complaints. The music was too loud or the rows of the room were too close together, the sun shone in too brightly, the mats were too old, or the floor was too hard. Mr. Cranky seemed never to like anything; especially losing the race to the coveted place.

One day we had a substitute teacher, and, at the end of the class, she announced, "I will never be back." Turned out she had had an altercation with Mr. Cranky, who was upset because she turned off the fans and closed the door too soon, making him hot. He had become our Simon LeGree.

Then things changed. Katy moved back to Fort Worth, her hometown, leaving me alone with Mr. Cranky. It became solely my responsibility to secure the area. Many times I lost and spent class in a resentful frame of mind. Other times I won but had to deal with the muttering mouth and glaring gazes of my furious foe. It took intense deep breathing and mind control either way.

One day I decided I was tired of expending all of the negative energy and tried an experiment. I threw down three mats only, one for my buddy Sue, one for me, and one for Mr. Cranky. His was the exact spot that he cherished, the one in the corner.

When he entered class, I pointed to his mat. His seemingly permanent pissed- off look quickly turned to one of bewilderment. That day, he managed to nod his head and mutter a very faint "Thanks."

Since then, I have placed a mat for Mr. Cranky before each and every class. He has begun to smile occasionally and make comments to me. Most of the comments are still about how bad the temperature in the Yoga room is or that it is too crowded, but once he managed "Have a nice weekend." Now he often smiles, his face transforming from surly to almost cheerful. One day I even noticed he has sparkly blue eyes.

Once he mentioned that he likes being in the back corner since he cannot do most of the poses and therefore feels better being there. While he still has not put down a mat for me if he arrives first, that may happen.

In all this saga of territorial consternation, the good result is that I can now get into a calm state of mind right away. Although I occasionally miss the days of competing with my old nemesis, I have found I am much fonder of peace than war.

*P.S. Dear Readers, you may be interested to know that the author informs us that Mr. Cranky, more affectionately named these days, now puts out a mat for her also ;)*

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“Pieces of April”

By Denise Bouchard

As early spring nears and the stores begin to burst with bright colors, I think back to my early childhood. Easter dinner would be prepared by my grandmother who would wait for us all to come in, in our finery. I remember the smell of the new leather shoes by my bed, an Easter basket on the bureau and a new starched dress hanging on the closet door, a hat on the vanity. Yes, in the 60s hats were still worn to church; in fact, it was a must as were white gloves. Such was the world before Woodstock, before holidays were just another day. We would dress, and the French take couture to another level.

All former evidence of such attire was completely decimated of course by a teenager in white go-go boots who had long, golden hair and hot pants; she looked aghast at the pictures of formal clothing and thought, 'How lame was I back then?', obviously oblivious to the outfit I had on at that moment.

Yet in those earlier days, my sister and I were made to go with my mother to a store called Royal Youth which was royally scary. I think the couch rotated if memory serves me. One year I ended up with a large white, wide-brimmed hat filled with flowers, a pink coat and white gloves. I think I went round the couch one too many times. My younger sister was all in yellow with a white bonnet and held aloft a stick bunny. We weren't smiling in the picture that my father proudly took of us.

My brothers were sent to Eddie Freed's for Eddie and Saul to fit them, much to my brothers' dismay and complaints of "Never again!" These were our yearly rituals.

It's a funny thing though, what I wouldn't give to walk back into my grandmother's elegant home so full of aunts and uncles and cousins that we would have separate seating times, like an elegant restaurant. My grandmother would call out the names of the different families. Banquets and buffets lined with silver and cut crystal, white hydrangeas and candles would reflect in the large mirror above.

My cousin would hold court being older and tell us about the Beatles concert she'd just attended. She would jabber on in her powder blue mini-suit, telling us about how Paul McCartney looked right at her.

The male cousins along with my brothers were in the sun room telling off-color jokes with endings that I would just catch as I walked in, like "Would I?! Would I?! Hare-lip! Hare-lip!"

My aunts talked of whose husband snored the loudest and during this my mother was handed the latest gadget to hold in the midst of the laughter and told to ask a yes or no question. It was called a magic 8 ball and the room grew quiet as she and my father looked across the room at one another.

She closed her eyes and everyone knew that there was a special wish that she was inquiring whether or not would come true. The answer foretold of the wish being granted; this was to be in the form of a bigger pharmacy for my father near the city hospital. This was unbeknownst to us at the time but we all knew that something was going to happen. I well remember the gravity of that moment.

Easter has always brought exciting new beginnings and in those worry-free childhood years we celebrated them all-together with the different generations.

I still decorate like the Cadbury bunny on crack but the hats, thank goodness, are a thing of the past. I do, however, miss the sounds of the men smoking cigars, glasses clinking, cousins' mischief.

My daughter and I will still buy new dresses but the weather will seem cooler to me than it did in the sunny 1960s, the season rainier. My husband will wear a new tie. I'll look at my family and think that they're so beautiful because they are just that. They were *my* granted wish.

We'll all eat too much at the restaurant brunch and we'll have a great time but I'll miss my mother's comments- "Look at that one!" It will be much quieter. I

look to my daughter and I know she will be the next to bring the sounds, the noisy chaos of family again. Someone, bring me a magic 8 ball so I can divine the timing of the arrival of the right man, the babies and we'll keep on the grand tradition of dressing those babies in ways that would make England's royal youth blush. So here's to the final scene in the *Something's Gotta Give* with Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson where they enter the restaurant with the daughter, son-in-law and grandchild held aloft because... it is time for the next seating.

### UNDER A SPELL

By Ann Reisfeld Boutte

My husband, André, and I were about a year into our courtship when we saw a notice that a renowned comedy hypnotist was coming to our city for a series of performances. The hypnotist was known for calling members of the audience to the stage, hypnotizing them, and asking them to follow his directives.

André and I thought it would be a great adventure to go to a performance and volunteer to be part of the act. My brother and his then girlfriend agreed, and the four of us excitedly made a reservation at Magic Island.

The night of the show, we arrived at the theater in anticipation. At the appointed hour, the hypnotist appeared and called for volunteers. Despite a round of drinks, my brother, his girlfriend, and I had a change of heart. The situation suddenly seemed fraught with opportunities for embarrassment, more a platform for humiliation than enlightenment. Only André raised his hand and soldiered on along with about a dozen others.

The hypnotist, let's call him Swami, dangled a shiny object in front of each

volunteer, and one by one they fell “asleep.” Then Swami told the panel to perform a series of stunts, crow like a rooster, yell fire whenever the word smoke was mentioned, and so forth.

In the next portion of the show, Swami selected couples from the group and had them act out specific scenarios. When it was André’s turn, Swami paired him with a young woman, let’s call her Sue. He told André and Sue that they were married. He said André had told Sue he was going to the neighborhood Pak-A-Sak to get some cigarettes. But by the time he returned home, many hours had elapsed. Swami then left André and Sue sitting on chairs mid-stage and let the drama unfold.

“Where have you been?” Sue demanded.

“I went to get a pack of cigarettes.” André replied.

“But you’ve been gone for hours,” she protested. “Where were you?”

“I went to the Pak-A-Sak to get cigarettes,” he said.

“I’ve never heard of Pak-a-Sak,” she hissed.

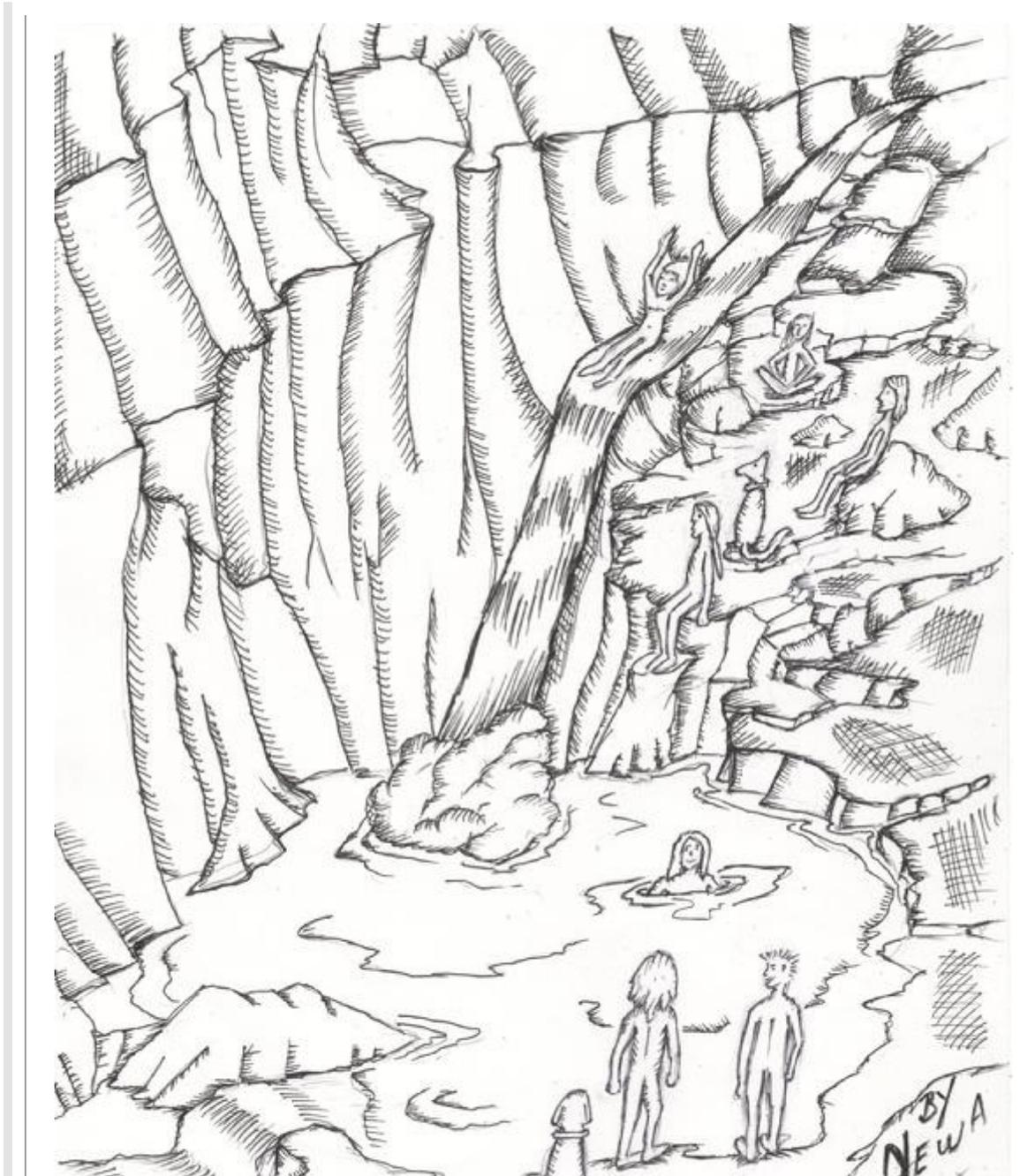
“Well, I don’t know why not. There are Pak-A-Saks all over this state,” he shot back.

During the ten minute exchange that followed, the more André held his ground, the angrier Sue became. André became irritated, but nothing Sue said made him change his story. He had said he was going to the store, and

that is exactly what he had done. He couldn't conceive of telling a falsehood. He couldn't invent a fabrication. Sue's temper continued to escalate until Swami stepped in and broke the spell.

It was great entertainment. The audience was laughing uproariously. I was laughing, too. In fact, thirty five years later, the memory still brings a smile.

But that night, I was also among the mesmerized. André's performance had confirmed what I had suspected. I had found an honest man.



"Seventh Falls" by NEWA; Copyright 2009

## Seventh Falls

By Mark Barkawitz

There's no easy or safe way to get to Seventh Falls. So if I tell you about this place, you have to promise not to try and climb up there. I don't want anyone getting killed.

The hike to Seventh Falls starts the same way as the hike up Eaton Canyon to First Falls, but when you get to the last switch-back before First Falls, instead of following the canyon west, you climb up the face of the northern mountain. There's sort of a single-track trail to follow up. It's very steep and the surrounding rock is shale, which crumbles under your feet; one slip and you don't stop rolling until you hit the canyon floor below. Looking down is not advised but hard to avoid. About three-quarters of the way up the face of the mountain, there's a small mine shaft, which runs all the way through the mountain to the other side. Back in my teens, the rusted-iron door that guarded its entrance wasn't locked. When you looked inside, there was only blackness except for a tiny dot of light at the far end. (My old friend Kurt Gnewuch reminded me that I had closed that door on him once when he was still inside. He didn't find it as funny as I did.) It helps to have a flashlight. But with or without one, we always walked bent-over—the shaft is no more than five-feet high and four-feet wide—with a hand or a stick held upright in front of our faces to fend off invisible spider webs or low spots in the rock ceiling. It was pretty freaky, especially in a state known for earthquakes, which someone always brought up as we were just about to enter or already inside the mountain's intestine. If you keep at a steady gait, it takes maybe five minutes—which feels a lot longer when you're inside—to get through to the other side. And that's without any trouble—like a bonked head or a fall in the dark. Climbing out of that black hole on the other side of the mountain into the daylight—squinting and blinking—is like being re-born. The canyon walls there that form the creek

bed are extremely steep. As you follow the creek upwards, you pass a series of small waterfalls with small pools below—each a nature-made prize in itself. But best of all is Seventh Falls, which has a smooth rock chute leading to its twenty-foot waterfall into the swimming pool-sized pond below. And because it's possible to climb the rocks alongside to the top of Seventh Falls, you can ride down the chute over the falls over-and-over-again, like a fee-less amusement park ride.

I haven't been to Seventh Falls in years. Not since 1970, when a bunch of us got the bright idea to hike up there together. There must've been a dozen of us with a half-dozen dogs and one girl's dad, a buttoned-down lawyer who was on vacation from Boston. He had no idea what he was in for that day. It took us about two-and-a-half hours—helping each other and the dogs over the scarier parts of the mountain assault—to get to our destination, where we all proceeded to take off our clothes and skinny-dip down the chute, off the falls, and into the pool below. Even the middle-aged lawyer dropped his drawers and joined us. Afterward, as we stood on the shore together—dripping ourselves dry, watching the others continue their play—he confided to me: “My colleagues in Boston are never going to believe this.”

“Believe what?” I asked.

“That I went skinny-dipping off a waterfall in California with a bunch of teenage hippies,” he explained.

“Oh. Yeah,” I replied. “Trippy, huh?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Definitely trippy.”

And please don't attempt the alternate route over the top of Razorback Ridge. The single-track atop that mountain is razor-narrow, earning its moniker. I've read numerous times in the local newspaper about hikers who have fallen off Razorback and down the steep mountainside to the

canyon floor—some surviving; some not. I've only been up there twice myself: once following my crazy little brother and a second time to rescue a teenage girl off the ridge. Believe me when I say this—never again. So please don't make me climb back up there again to save your sorry butt, too!

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### Freshman Tryout

By Carol J. Rhodes

Once-a-week lessons for over a year, plus practice for two hours every day, rain or shine, were about to pay off. Very early one hot, humid Saturday morning in mid-May, seventeen hopefuls assembled in the steamy high school gymnasium where the cheerleader auditions for the coming school year were about to begin.

Being the tallest and thinnest among the candidates, I admit having pangs of envy when I compared myself to the other girls there. All of them were in shorts and blouses tied at the midriff which showed off their cute, curvy figures. I was wearing a uniform I borrowed from a girl down the street who had been a cheerleader at another school.

"Maybe it will bring you good luck," Wanda Jean had said the day before as she folded over and pinned large pleats in the short skirt to make it fit my small waist. Sadly, the skirt hung limp and uneven against my body, instead of flaring out like it may have done on someone with fuller hips. The letter sweater was also too large, but we concluded it would take more than safety pin alterations to make it right. I was determined to wear it anyway. The wide tops of the short white leather boots I had saved my allowance for months to buy also accentuated my long broomstick legs.

Tension mounted as the hot sun filtered in through the windows high above

us. Seated on bleachers, we waited for our turn to show what we could do. The girl next to me tapped her feet on the empty row in front of us, and repeatedly adjusted the rubber band holding her ponytail in place.

"Are you nervous?" I finally managed to ask. "Nah, piece of cake," was her flippant reply. Well, I certainly was nervous, even though I had worked hard on my routine and knew I had it down pat.

Performing with the first group, comprised of five girls, I was clearly the best. My cartwheels were perfect, my voice strong. I was even able to run, jump up high and land effortlessly in a split, while groans came from some of the competitors who attempted the same maneuver. The last group of girls to compete had been cheerleaders the previous year. As I watched them, I was confident my showing had been just as polished as theirs, if not more so.

I had dreamed of this moment for more than a year. I could just see myself and the other cheerleaders leading our football team onto the field, the crowd wild in anticipation of another victory.

In a backdrop of stadium lights, I saw us perform intricate routines while leading the pep squad in all our favorite school cheers. Now my fantasies were about to come true.

With perspiration matting my hair in ringlets around my face, I finally gave in and pushed the sleeves of my sweater up above my elbows. Waiting for the results, everyone was surprisingly quiet. It was nearly noon before the head gym teacher, Mrs. Barnett, returned from her office, clipboard in hand, along with her two assistants who were there to assist in the selection.

"Girls, thank you all for coming this morning," Mrs. Barnett began. "Now, if I may have your attention, I will read the names of the lucky ones we have selected for the upcoming school year."

At an agonizingly slow pace, she began to read the names from her list. I started to count on my fingers after I realized the names were not in alphabetical order. Seven down, three to go. Then two, then only one. As their names were called, the girls stood up and made their way down to the court.

Tears welling in my eyes, I counted the girls again, hoping one more name, mine, would be called. But there were already ten girls hugging one another and shrieking with excitement as they danced and pranced around the gym. Something told me I should stay and congratulate them, but at the moment I felt sick. All I wanted to do was to leave.

When I returned home, my mother met me at the door. "Well, how did it go?"

"We're not going to find out anything until next week, " I fibbed, but no doubt she must have seen the disappointed look on my face.

I headed to my room where I stayed until suppertime.

"Today was the big day, right?" my dad asked after he said the blessing.

"Yeah."

"Well, tell us all about it, for goodness sakes," he coaxed.

"I'm not feeling very good,...it was so hot today...I have a headache and don't feel like talking right now," I managed to mumble. "Can I be excused, please?"

I dreaded having to tell my parents the truth, absolutely sure they had never suffered such a painful letdown. I missed seeing the knowing looks which must have passed between them.

After school the following Monday, I stopped by the gym teacher's office

where she was busy trying to close a too-full drawer of her filing cabinet.

"Mrs. Barnett, could I speak with you a moment, please?"

"Yes, but make it quick. I'm late for a meeting."

"I just wanted to ask you why I wasn't picked," I said in a shaky voice. Without looking at me, she responded, "Well, I have to admit you were one of the better contestants, but I, I mean we, decided you're just too tall and skinny. You wouldn't have fit in, size-wise, with the others."

Later I reluctantly told my mother about the tryouts and my conversation with the gym teacher. Gathering me in her arms, she stroked my hair.

"You know, honey, all through your life, you're going to have disappointments. Learning how to deal with them is just part of growing up. Now after you change clothes, why don't you go on out in the yard and practice your cartwheels. A lot can change between now and next year's competition. In fact, I've heard Mrs. Barnett may be retiring."

For the first time, I let myself cry.

I've never forgotten this disappointment nor my mother's words. She was right.

I experienced many other disappointments throughout the remainder of my school years, later in my career, and then in my love life. But things did change; mainly my attitude about them changed.

When viewing the disappointments I once thought would surely bring about the end of the world, I realize they were really not such big deals after all. I am keenly aware that this is what is known as *Maturity*.

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