



POSSE

By Caroline Arlen

A slant of late afternoon sunlight glanced off the Animas River. The autumnal current was shallow and swift. My cheeks bristled in the crisp air as I raised my new fishing rod and drew it back. I steadied my feet on the rocky bank and cast the line. My plastic minnow lure from Woolworths sailed through the air. One of the reasons I had chosen Durango over other southwestern towns, was because it had a Woolworths downtown, as well as a Coast-to-Coast Hardware store, not just touristy t-shirt shops and window displays of Native American jewelry.

The fishing line tightened, and I pulled back, yanking up an algae-bedraggled twig. I reeled it in, pulled off the slimy detritus and re-cast the lure, this time toward a darkened eddy pool downstream from the bridge's center pylon. A truck, pulling a horse trailer, crossed over in the direction of Missionary Ridge. A mud-caked Subaru, stacked with kayaks, drove the other way toward City Market, where some people would be shopping for their supper.

I liked this version of myself: fishing for my food. Old school. There was really no other reason—other than projecting this new idea of me—for me to be down at the riverbank, with my tin bucket for my prospective dinner, while just a hundred feet up the road, City Market was having a sale on Van de Kamp fish sticks. But I didn't move to Colorado to wander fluorescent grocery aisles in search of fish sticks. No, this was a better western look for me, replete with Wrangler jeans and an orange hunting jacket—because it was hunting season. Though probably not at the 32nd Street bridge.

The line tightened again. I reeled in a small, speckled fish and lifted it from the cold water of the Animas—Rio de Las Animas, the river of souls. The trout's gills panted. I stuck my fingers under its jaw and snapped its head back.

I took my "kill" home, driving up the dirt road into our neighborhood of warped, weathered duplexes. I had moved into my house late that summer, then had almost immediately been called away on a freelance magazine assignment.

My neighbors sat at the top of the porch steps. I had spoken with Fran and Lilly only a few times. Fran, the taller and more imposing of the two women, peered in the bucket. "Did you catch that in the Animas?"

"I did!"

Fran looked up at me. Her thick gray hair was pulled back in a ponytail. "We generally don't eat the fish. We do

catch and release around here."

My jaw tightened. "Well, that's nice, but what if you're hungry?"

"Oh, it's not for ethical reasons," Lilly said. She had a porcelain complexion with patches of rosacea on her cheeks. "We don't eat the fish because of contamination from the mines up in Silverton."

I looked down at my little fish, half expecting to see three eyeballs.

Once inside, I rummaged through my unpacked moving boxes for something I could use to dig a hole. Fran and Lilly had left by the time I brought my bucket down the porch steps. It took several attempts to get my new Wranglers to bend at the knees before I was able to kneel on the ground. I dug my clipboard into the arid dirt, breathing in the wafting dust tinged with sagebrush.

Lilly came out on the deck. She dunked a teabag up and down in her steaming mug. "We have a shovel you could borrow," she said.

"Thanks, but I think I've got it." The hole was already three inches deep.

By now, I had concluded that Fran and Lilly were "together." I suppose when I moved from the east coast to the land of rodeos and white-water rafting, I didn't

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expect my first neighbors to be a couple of mild-mannered lesbians, but I had not thought long enough on the subject for it to register a feeling.

I laid the fish down in the hole and straightened its head.

Lilly blew on her tea. "Why are you burying the fish?"

"Well, I'm not going to eat the poor polluted thing."

"Yes, but why are you burying it? It's a fish."

I shrugged. "I feel bad." I pushed what I had dug over the silvery fish and patted it down.

"I thought you said you were from New York."

When the doorbell rang the next morning, it was Harvey, the plumber. He said, "Gotta crawl under your house, ma'am. Landlord wants me to replace the freeze valve before winter."

Harvey looked in the mudroom. It was cluttered with mud boots, cross-country skis, and old wooden snowshoes from my college years in Vermont. Harvey gathered up the stuff and dumped it out on the living room floor. "Previous tenants always leave behind a bunch of crap," he said.

"That's my crap," I mumbled.

Harvey was short and stocky, but kind of flattened, as if he came from a clan genetically adapted to crawl spaces. "Okay," he said. Then he snapped his red suspenders and disappeared through the trap door. After clanking around for a while, he climbed out. "I tell ya, with so many outsiders swarming into Durango, developers are just throwing up these garbage pails for buildings."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Why? You didn't build it."

"I mean, for moving here." I had noticed that newcomers didn't seem very welcome, which is why I was trying to blend in.

As Harvey wrote up the receipt he said, "You just get divorced?"

I nodded. "What makes you say that?"

"Those eight-foot-tall skis look like they've been pulled out of storage from a bygone era." He handed me the receipt. "Hey, there's a bar downtown called The Chicken Bone. They have a live band every Friday for Happy Hour. Everyone goes. You should go."

I stared at the clump of rotted dirt stuck to his top lip and wondered if he might be asking me out on a date, but Harvey just turned and walked out.

I started to close the door behind him, but it bumped into a silver-toed boot. I let the door swing back open.

Attached to the boot was a man with curly, black hair and graying sideburns. He grinned. "Hi! My name is Robert, but I go by Dr. Ritz. I'm a chiropractor."

The doctor wore a cropped, scoop-necked t-shirt. Gold chains lay across his hairy chest. He crossed his arms. "I watched you move in a couple of months ago. But I figured I'd wait for a better time to introduce myself."

"Is this a better time for you?"

"Yeah, I live over there." He pointed to the duplex across the dirt road from mine. "I own my own chiropractic business." Dr. Ritz reached up to place a hairy-knuckled hand on the doorframe above my head. "My psychic predicted that you'd be coming." He emitted a sputtering laugh then wiped his mustache. "You're a Gemini, aren't you?"

"No, a journalist." I started to close the door.

He furrowed his brow then shrugged. "Well, I'm also kind of new here. I was wondering if you might want to go to The Bone sometime."

"I'm sorry, I have to unpack," I said and shut the door, successfully this time.

Most afternoons I went down to where the Animas River passed through Durango, then banked around Santa Rita Park's two soccer fields. At the heart of the park was Smelter, a Class IV rapid, as well as a water treatment plant.

I sat on the bank above the rapid and sketched kayakers surfing the conflagrating current. The sewage stench was no longer noticeable now that the hot summer months had passed. The kayakers would nose into the whitewater waves and get spit out and spun around like bull riders. The boaters would scatter to either side of the rapid to make way for commercial rafts, which occasionally flipped in the massive center hole, scattering shrieking tourists into the tumult.

Amid all the commotion and chatter between the kayakers and their friends on the banks, I felt like I was being social, that I had pals and was part of something. As the sun began to set, so did the mirage of my social life. I then drove to Romero's for chile rellenos. By insinuating myself into its bustling atmosphere, and deploying and scribbling notes in my writing pad, I could again feel like I was with people and yet also very busy—so very, very busy doing something important.

These nibbles of a social life carried me for a while, but as the days shrank, so did my mood and self-confidence. I began to long for actual human contact and conversation—someone to take even a vague interest in me. I concluded it was time to brave Happy Hour at The

Bone.

That Friday, I wove my long, blonde hair into a French braid. I pulled on a pair of Lucky jeans and put on some rouge. After parking my black Suzuki Sidekick on a side street, I strode down Main Street toward The Chicken Bone Saloon. Electric guitar riffs reverberated out onto the sidewalk.

When I neared the picture glass window, showcasing The Bone's rock 'n roll band, I sped up, walked past the open door, and continued around the block. On the next pass, I slowed just enough to glance into the doorway packed with shoulder-slapping locals. Beyond them, inside, were steps and a narrow balcony lined with people on either side, gauntlet style. Again, I sped up and slingshot around the block.

On the third pass, I lowered my head and dove through the pod of people in the entrance and sidestepped through the gauntlet. The bar counter was three people deep with mostly men with sloshing pitchers of beer. I breached the male wall to gain access to one of the bartenders. I raised my gaze from the floor to order a tequila shot and a Rolling Rock. The dance floor was packed, the music infectious. It wasn't long before I was swing dancing to the Rolling Stones with Sam, the City Planner. I had done it... something, though I wasn't sure what.

Most mornings I passed Kat, Dr. Ritz's duplex neighbor, on our way to and from the mailboxes at the bottom of our dirt road. She was small and sturdy, with a determined walk and the stern focus of a baseball pitcher. I had first noticed Kat when she closed her hand in her car door and let loose a litany of very specific and shocking curse words. I was surprised to later learn she was a kindergarten teacher.

We rarely spoke, but the morning after my Chicken Bone pilgrimage she greeted me with crossed arms at the mailboxes. "Saw you at Happy Hour. Those guys were all over you like fresh meat."

"What?"

"Seriously!" Kat had freckles and a ponytail geyser of red hair erupting from the top of her head. "There are so many more men than women in Durango, it can be a little overwhelming. Especially when winter nears, and the bucks start rutting for a warm body to bed down with."

I cleared my throat. "Funny. I thought we were dancing."

Kat laughed. "You were."

When the phone rang a few days later, I thought it would be my landlord calling for my past-due December rent, but it was Justin.

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm the guy who was standing by the rail at The Bone... black t-shirt? Cowboy hat?"

Although we hadn't met, I did remember him. He was tall, with a tanned complexion and pale blue eyes. He said that Sam, the city planner, had told him who I was. Had I given Sam my last name? Well, it didn't matter.

We went to Trimble Hot Springs. Justin looked kind of funny wet. Large, tanned arms hanging off a pale torso. White legs. He talked about his horses and packing into the Weminuche Wilderness. His stubble glistened. The darkness around him steamed. I dipped my head back into the hot water.

Dr. Ritz rang my doorbell the next morning. He wore a t-shirt cut just above his hairy navel. "I saw that cowboy drop you off," he said. "You're better than that. Did I tell you I own my own business?" He winked and put his hands on his hips.

I closed the door.

I was on the porch with Fran and Lilly when Justin came to pick me up on his Harley. "I didn't know you have a motorcycle," I said.

Oh, yes, he was all man.

We rumbled off down a county road to a dingy bar called The Billy Goat. While I inspected the pool cues, Justin fetched us a couple of tequila shots. I racked the pool balls.

Justin broke then walked around the table. He leaned forward then sank a striped ball. "You know, you should be careful who you hang out with."

I banked the two ball, but it missed the pocket. "What do you mean?"

"Those ladies next door to you. You might not have known it, but they're gay." He struck the cue ball so hard it hopped off the table and rolled across the wood floor. He went to fetch it and then placed it back down on the green felt. "Just thought I'd warn you. This is the West. Traditional values and all." He patted my cheek. "I'll get us another round."

When we left the bar, a snow flurry danced through the crisp, night air. It was my first winter, in eleven years, outside a city full of sooty snow. My heart met the lightness of it. As we sped off on his Harley, I buried my face into the back of his leather jacket and felt protected. When Justin pulled into my driveway, I invited him in for Hot Pockets.

In the early morning, as I lay with my head in the depression beneath Justin's shoulder, someone knocked on my front door. I got up and went to the window. Dr. Ritz stood in the thickly falling snow, looking up at my bedroom. He pounded on the door.

"Shit," Justin said and put on his pants. "It's probably my wife."

Dr. Ritz pounded on the door again.

"Your wife?"

Dr. Ritz kicked in the door.

Justin pulled on his shirt and grabbed his boots.

I went to the top of the stairs. "Get out!" I screamed at Dr. Ritz. I then turned to Justin. "You too!"

By the time my headache dissipated enough for me to go outside, Fran and Lilly had cleared the snow from our deck. I walked tentatively across the slick boards.

Fran leaned on her shovel. "Just so you know, you'll be wanting to clear the snow off your side of the porch. We're happy to help, but just so you know."

"Yeah, just so you know," Lilly added. Her blue eyeliner ran down her pink cheeks. Lilly stuck her shovel into the bank, barely impacting it, and tossed off a little snow.

"Of course," I said. "I know that. I just got a late start this morning."

"We heard," Fran said.

I drove to town to buy a snow shovel. I got two, because I didn't know which one was better.

That afternoon, only a dusting of snow fell through the clouded sunshine. But by noon it started to come down thick again and unrelenting. After about a foot accumulated, I met Fran and Lilly on the porch to begin what would become a shoveling ritual. Every now and then the accumulation on the roof cascaded onto the porch, compounding our situation.

Across the road, Kat shoveled hers and Dr. Ritz's porch. As each deluge from the roofs fell onto the porches, the snow packed against our windows, against the porch rails, and weighed heavy on the two-by-fours holding up our decks.

Despite all our shoveling, the roof kept letting go avalanches of snow. The porch snowpack rose to our waists and then above. We couldn't stay ahead of it. Lilly dropped her shovel. "I'm going to make some calls."

"I'm going to have to take a break too," I told Fran. "I've got a date."

"A date? In this?"

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“Hey, you’ve got somebody to hibernate with. I don’t.”

“Make sure he can shovel.”

Dan showed up wearing shorts over waffled long underwear. He used his jean jacket sleeve to scrape away the coating of ice on his Jeep's windshield. He laughed. "Defroster's broken."

We went to a pub. When he ordered his burger, he added, "And totally cook the shit out of it, dude." He leaned his head back. He was blonde with a chiseled, handsome face despite a crooked nose that looked like it had been broken at least once. He blinked slowly. "So, you're a writer." He seemed to be studying me, curious and interested. Then he said, "You should totally write about me." I wanted to go home. But he wanted to talk about his rich, mean parents in Vail. And how hard it was being a ski racer because chicks want a man with a real job.

By the time we left the pub, the snow had so blanketed Main Street, it was difficult to discern what was road and what was sidewalk. Dan's windshield wiper didn't work, so we tied my scarf to the blade. I asked him to let me out at the bottom of the road. I didn't want to spend the rest of the night pushing him out of a drift.

As I walked up the hill, a truck backed out from Kat's duplex. She stood in the doorway. The headlights passed over her red, tousled hair. When Kat saw me trudging up the road, she waved. "Wait!" she yelled, then went inside. She reemerged in a puffy, orange ski suit.

We went to her carport and dragged out an old Finnish sled her grandfather had made. It was basically a straight-backed chair on two long rungs, designed for one person to sit and another to push the sled, then stand and coast on the rails. Because Kat was so small, I did the pushing and coasting. The moon was full. We sailed down Main Street.

And the snow kept falling.
While we called for snowplows that wouldn't come.
While we slept.

In the morning, while Fran, Lilly and I shoveled, Dr. Ritz shuffled and skidded across the snow-packed road in his silver-tipped cowboy boots. He tried to walk up the steps to our porch but spun out and wound up facing the wrong direction. He turned back to face us. "How are you? You okay?"

"We're fine," Fran said. Lilly laughed.

"I wasn't talking to you." He wiped his nose and frosted mustache with his mitten. "I'm heading down to Phoenix. You should come with me."

"Me? Why?" I asked.

"Now's not the time to be headstrong. I can take care of you."

Fran snorted.

Dr. Ritz sneered. "Oh, don't you roll your eyes at me, Fran. Some of us still believe in old-fashioned chivalry!"

I looked across at Kat shoveling their porch. "What about your house?"

He sniffed. "It's a rental. So what if I lose my damage deposit?"

"If your side of the porch goes, so will Kat's," I said.

"I told Kat she should come with me too. I can take care of you both." The cold was turning his nose a purplish shade of pale.

I scooped up a shovel of snow and flipped it on top of him. Dr. Ritz slogged off and soon after, drove away.

That afternoon, Dan's jeep turned up our drive, but his bald tires spun in the snow. He honked the horn then got out. "Chair 8 is open at Purg! Let's go catch some powder!"

I stood up from my hunched shoveling stance and stretched backward. "I can't!" I yelled. "My porch is collapsing!"

He jutted his head back. "Dude! That's serious!" He put his hands on his hips. "Well, I'll catch ya later!"

Across the gully, Kat laughed. "Where are all our suitors now?"

And the snow kept falling.
And falling.

Lilly came down with a cold. Fran and I struggled to keep up with the snow sliding off the roof onto our precariously propped-up porch. I watched as Kat set up a ladder on the side of her house. When she began to climb it, I yelled, "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's breaking in my roof!" Once on top, she started using a broom to push the snowpack past the rain gutters that were hindering its progression.

I took one of my shovels and slogged over to Kat's house. I climbed the ladder and tossed my shovel up ahead of me onto the slanted snowpack.

After a while, we took a break and reclined back on the roof, surrounded by darkness and stars. A blanket of night, touching warmth. I took in a deep breath, then sat up. As I stood, I slipped, fell backward, and slid on my butt toward the gutter. I tried to dig in my heels, but I went over the edge, taking a cascade of snow with me. I landed on the porch snow with an embedding crunch.

"Oh, my God! Are you okay?" Kat yelled down.

I waved. "Peachy."

She laughed. "Well, catch ya later! No, wait!" She got to her knees. "This calls for rum!"

The next evening, while I read *The Hot Zone*, a thick mass of snow cascaded off the roof, burying the living room windows on the side of the house. The creaking porch began to whine. I opened my door. Fran was already approaching. She said, "I think we're in trouble."

We shoveled through the night, the wind chilling my sweat-dampened brow. Still, our building kept groaning like a wounded animal. Our efforts began to seem absurd. I sat down in the snow.

"Don't give up yet," Fran said, panting. She went into her house. A few minutes later, she returned with two steaming mugs.

"Tea? That's your solution?" I asked.

"It'll keep you going." She slurped. "While we wait."

"For what?"

Fran smiled at me, then winked.

I squinted my eyes. "You know I'm not gay, right?"

She laughed. "Oh my God! Please tell me you didn't just say that."

"I'm sorry. I haven't been really good at reading people lately."

A truck, heading up our road, skidded out on the wet snow. It then backed up for another try. "They're here," Fran said.

“Who?”

The silver Ford-150 revved its engine and barreled up the drive, spinning up to our duplex.

“Our knights in shining armor,” Fran said.

The Ford parked in the middle of the road. Four women piled out of the cab, each with a snow shovel. They lifted the tarp on the truck bed to reveal a beautiful, red Honda snowblower.

Lilly ran out in her robe and slippers and fell to her knees in the sea of white. “Jennie! Steph!” she cried out. A pink tissue was stuck to the tip of her nose. “You came! Ann? Kathy?” You’re our heroes!”

The driver, clad in Carhartt work pants and a cap pulled down over her forest of auburn hair, thrust a fist in the air. “Lesbian posse to the rescue!”

Eventually, though it was still snowing, the porch stopped creaking. We moved our efforts to Kat’s porch. Kat, in her orange ski suit, brought out a thermos of rum cider and a stack of plastic cups. She plugged in a boom box and started shaking her hips and shoveling to her mixed tape.

Some of us followed Kat’s lead, dancing in a sort of stupor of fatigue, relief, and rum. When Jimmy Buffet started singing “Margaritaville,” all of us chimed in on the chorus while we shoveled. Fran grinned at me. “And they say chivalry is dead!” she shouted over the roar of the Honda blower, spewing its funnel of snow, flakes breaking off and falling like white confetti.

By the time I made it back to my house, I was so overheated, I stripped down to my Woolworths long underwear. I went to the kitchen and took a TV dinner out of the freezer. As I listened to the microwave whir, I saw my reflection in the window. I noticed that in addition to white long underwear, I was still wearing a wool hat with earflaps. I laughed and thought, *What a catch.*

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BIO: Caroline Arlen lived in Durango, Colorado, for 20 years, writing short stories and adventure travel articles. She authored Colorado Mining Stories; Hazards, Heroics & Humor, as well as The Judas Horse & Other Stories.

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