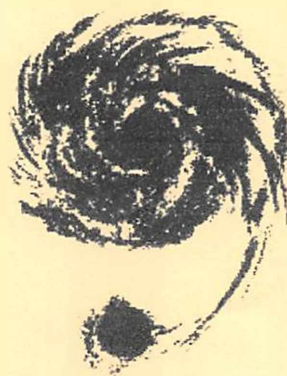


A Bright Particular Star



*Words and deeds of
Lucy Huntzinger*

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Never Just This Year's Fashion

Kim Huett

As it states on the cover this volume is devoted to the words and deeds of Lucy Huntzinger. For Lucy isn't just a fine writer with a good eye for how the world works. She is also somebody with vision, principles, and much determination who isn't afraid to follow through on a good idea.

If one day the story of fandom in the Eighties is committed to print I expect Lucy's name to appear more than once. It was after all in 1981 that fandom found her at the ripe old age of twenty-three. She was living in her home town of Seattle when Janice Murray discovered her reading a science fiction novel at work, recognised a kindred spirit, and invited her to a party at the Jumping Jesus Bar & Grill. Destiny decreed she would find fandom irresistible and set up permanent camp.

It didn't take long before she started to have an influence. To quote Lucy:

'A lot of my motivational skills were based on The Naïve Question Asked At just The Right Moment. For instance, I once asked why no one talked about science fiction much if we were suppose to be science fiction fans. It seemed like all modern fandom ever did was talk about itself whereas the fanzines from the Forties and Fifties that I loved were actively involved in responding to the literary genre we were fans of. In response, Babble-17 was created, a reading and discussion group which began meeting once a month and became a point of contact for new and potential fans.'

Later, when she had moved to San Francisco to start a whole new life, she went one better. Amongst other things she became involved with the Emperor Norton Science Fiction Hour on public access tv. This involved more than just a willingness to wear homemade monster masks, perform sf-based skits, and review recent science fiction and fanzines on camera. It also involved much time in bars and restaurants with producer Elisheva Barsabe and director Allyn Cadogan working on material for future episodes, drinking margaritas, and gossiping. One evening after much griping about the perils of convention organisation Lucy demonstrated once more the power of the Naïve Question by asking who would do something so crazy as run a con? It turned out that Elisheva and Allyn would and thus Corflu, the convention for fanzine fans, came into being. Eighteen years later and it's still going strong which is a pretty impressive response to one innocent question.

If she hasn't caused anything else of this magnitude to be created since then that's simply an accident of fate. I would suggest those who see her most often to be careful if she ever looks in a questioning mood. You might get swept up into the sort of project which makes fannish history before you can dive for cover.

While all this was going on Lucy was also making her mark in other ways. She published snappy fanzines with the likes of Avedon Carol (**Rude Bitch**), Bryan Barrett (**Abattoir, Cartouche**) and wrote articles for many others. Whenever she could she travelled, visiting various parts of the US and her special love, England. In 1987 she was elected the DUFF candidate and travelled to Australia to represent North American fandom. Her last paper fanzine was published in 1996. She then made the switch to publishing online You can still find her there adding to the thousand plus entries of her journal **Aries Moon**.

Luckily for the size of this collection not everything she wrote was brilliant enough to be included. Through all her work however runs a thread of honesty, of sincerity that ensures that none of her pieces deserves to be ignored. Lucy never made the mistake of thinking writing for fanzines meant it never mattered what she wrote about. So while not every topic covered in these pages may be to your taste if you appreciate somebody who is willing to be true to herself then they will all have something to say to you. Fanzines being the ephemeral creations that they are much of this earlier material is no longer easy to find. This didn't seem right to me which is the why of this collection. I'm glad I did it.

The Ben Yalow Mystique

Abattoir #2 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger & Bryan Barrett (1987)

I have been totally confounded. I can't believe it but several good friends have verified it. So I have no choice but to present to you the amazing case of a man who dresses like a Martian and is an irresistible fannish hunk.

Ben Yalow is a Ladies' Man.

It's not easy to find this out. He's got a lot invested in keeping things quiet. It's just that people notice he has all these girlfriends all over the place, and they want to know how he does it. It's one of the more intriguing riddles in the social matrix of fandom. Consequently, everyone has an opinion on it.

"I'm researching the Ben Yalow Mystique," I said to a few people at Sercon, "what do you think about his mysterious surplus of girlfriends?"

"It's kind of weird, isn't it," said an anonymous admirer. "He's not particularly attractive or anything obvious. He's just a nice guy."

"Oh my god, I could tell you stories you wouldn't believe," said Genny Dazzo, ex-girlfriend, and she did. I listened for two hours in awe.

"I hear he's hung like a rhino," said a confident Greg Ketter. Before I could say anything Craig Miller chimed in, "No, a hippo." I told them I didn't want to hear about it but they insisted on describing how rhinos and hippos *Do It*. I was appalled.

Pam Davis and Dawn Plaskon both supplied ancient gossip on the subject. Apparently there is a wealth of fable concerning Ben's legendary exploits with females. Certainly he is known as a heartbreaking cad on the East Coast. This was confirmed via phone by Teresa Nielsen Hayden who added, "No one ever believes me when I tell them."

He's apparently so secretive about whom he's dating that he will ask to be dropped off a block from where he's actually going so that no one will see who gave him a ride. He prefers to arrive at parties alone. Debbie Notkin said that he once called her up and spent an hour and a half moaning about his break up with one of his lovers but he wouldn't tell Debbie who it was. She assured me this was classic Ben behaviour.

I went into the Terrace Bar to get further information. In Vino Veritas and all that. Discreet inquiries provided various theories, all boiling down to "He's a sex machine," (male opinion) and "He's a poor, sweet man who needs help and I can fix him," (female opinion).

In fact, the most frequent male response was "Why him and not me?" I couldn't figure that out either so I decided that Ben probably had an enormous amount of persistence and a dollop more self-confidence than your average male fan. Like I always say, confidence is an aphrodisiac. So, of course, is power, and in fannish terms Ben has a stockpile of it.

"That's exactly what it is," said Allyn Cadogan, "power is sexy. Wear a power suit and things begin to go your way. Every Wall Street type knows that." I visualised hundreds of fans starting to wear Bronx High outfits, the boon to the bow tie industry, the return of Brillcream. It was a scary thought.

I began to burn out on the Ben Yalow mystique. Everyone wanted to tell me their own personal Ben story at exhausting length. I learned far more than I wanted to about fans' perceptions of Mr. Bow Tie. It was really impressive, though.

Ben Yalow is a Love God. I swear.

Pulling the Wings Off the Chicken Brothers

Lip #3 -- Ed. Hazel Ashworth (1988)

They were sitting together at a table, clasping pints and cigarettes. Everyone called them *The Chicken Brothers*. It stemmed from an incident at a convention and Linda Pickersgill had bestowed the nickname. She'd found them huddled around a bucket of three-day-old Kentucky Fried Chicken, their eyes bloodshot, their clothes in disarray, and their mouths ringed with grease and chicken residue. I watched them from across the Fan Room. I'd heard they were glib, morose, and terminally hip; these guys looked like computer programmers. No Gothic hairdos, no bizarre clothing, no witty bon mots were in evidence as I moved closer for a better look.

They had acquired a reputation for boorish behaviour. For some reason this group had cold-shouldered nearly all of British fandom somewhere along the line. Naturally, they were intensely discussed. Many people viewed them as an unnecessarily gloomy bunch of spoilsports although everyone liked them as individuals. I had been much amused with their descriptions in fanzines. I stood just out of earshot and stole short peeks at them when I thought they wouldn't notice.

Alun Harries stared back, wreathed in smoke and a bad attitude. He curled his lip with a practised sneer. No one paid attention. He practised some more. The fellow dressed all in black had to be Nigel E. Richardson. Nigel was pale and lethargic, just as I'd imagined. I checked out his shoes, very cool.

Robert Stubbs was smiling amiably at everyone. He absolutely radiated bonhomie. Most unusual for a Brit and highly suspicious. I'd keep my eye on him.

I recognised silver-haired Steve Higgins without any trouble. Steve wasn't saying much but he was listening intently to everyone else. Sitting next to him was Glen Warminger, a distressingly normal-looking guy, who actually seemed a bit morose. Very good, I thought, I like a man with a touch of existential angst. I decided to introduce myself.

I'd been warned that they were close-mouthed and clannish, especially around women. On their own they were undoubtedly decent sorts. Clustered together they looked intimidating indeed. I didn't wonder at certain fans' unwillingness to approach them. This lot looked as though they were circling the wagons around the campfire to keep out the unfriendly natives. Mustering my best brazen Yankee attitude I sashayed up to the group and grabbed myself an empty chair.

I discovered they weren't really unfriendly to strangers, just uninclined to work at socialising. Sometimes we talked about music. Alun would say, "Let's go see the Meat Puppets next month," and Nigel would grunt his approval. Then Nigel might say, "What did you think of that Big Black tape you bought last week?" and Alun would grunt his approval. I practised grunting approvingly but never quite achieved the insouciant effect which they had mastered.

Steve, who was so voluble in fanzines about the need for and standards of criticism in fannish writing, had nothing to say whenever fanzines were discussed. Possibly he'd already said it all somewhere else, but since I hadn't been there I was disappointed in his silence on the topic.

Once, Robert volunteered an opinion. I can't remember what it was.

I tried to buy Glen a drink in the Residents' bar late one night but he wouldn't go unless another *Chicken Brother* went with him. Eventually we located Nigel who came along to do all the talking. I worked on my grunts, Glen worked on his pint, and Nigel entertained us with stories about East Garforth.

Once they got use to me it was open season for sarcasm. I tried to explain to Alun how programming always bored me at conventions. "I have a brain the size of a planet," I intoned like Marvin the Paranoid Android.

"A plant," Nigel blurted out, "you have a brain the size of a plant?" Alun nearly spat up his drink while I tried to thump Nigel who was using him as a shield.

After three days of sitting around with them I started to feel embarrassed. I was enjoying their company but it seemed that I had to make all the effort. My pleasure in the conversational camaraderie was spoiled knowing that they hadn't ever sought me out and therefore might be merely tolerating my presence. There was also a certain sense of invading all-male turf which made me uncomfortable. My Yankee ingenuity was wearing thin from combating their natural tendency to cronyism and sloth.

By Saturday night I was fed up with their sluggishness. I went to Lilian Edward's and Simon Ounsley's wonderfully crowded room party in the Metropole with Pam Wells and Simba Blood. The three of us cornered the area next to the refrigerator and got down to business. We drank and gossiped and called out rude comments to the other partygoers. We were having a great time when I suddenly remembered my frustration with *Los Hermanos Pollos*.

"I am really pissed off," I griped to Simba. "Those stupid guys are too cool for their own good. They're a great bunch as long as they don't have to actually do anything. No wonder they don't win any popularity contests." I polished off my pint and poured another from the cans of bitter scattered on top of the fridge. "Alun and Nigel are the only ones who get excited from time to time. The rest of them are practically comatose. They oughta call them *The Slug Brothers*."

"No kidding! Glen only speaks when he's spoken to and Steve is too reticent to get to know. Robert just grins a lot," Simba replied, holding out her glass.

I topped up her drink and gave the rest to Pam who was giggling at our assessment of the situation. "Don't laugh white girl, you live here and you haven't figured out how to get them to act like real humans," I told her. Hazel Ashworth wandered over to our corner as I continued my litany of their social failings.

"You know these guys, right, Hazel?" I pleaded. "What does it take to make them less passive about having fun? I feel like I'm forcing them to socialise. What is it with British males anyhow? They just drift around like inert gas!" She shook her head and grinned at my exasperation. Pam dodged a spray of bitter as I gesticulated wildly in her direction. Hazel gave the problem some thought.

"Catch them off-guard," she offered. "Use Guerilla Girl Tactics or something. Rush them when they aren't expecting it." I paused mid-wave. Simba, Pam and I looked at one another, inspiration taking hold.

"Wow, what a great idea. We'll wait until they're all standing together in the fan room, alone in the crowd," Simba said.

"Yes, but then what? I know, we'll sneak up behind them and each take one," Pam decided. "But what will we do to them to make them react?"

"We'll smooch 'em," I answered, "kiss 'em up real good and then run away in three different directions so they can't catch us easily. It's perfect! They'll be trapped. If they respond in any way they will have been terribly uncool in front of each other."

"But if they don't do anything, everyone will have seen them get Girl Cooties! They'll never live it down," Simba shouted.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" we squealed in our highest voices. The rest of the party joined in our noisy good humour. More beer was poured and more people crowded in. The joint was really jumping and it matched our mood exactly.

Fifteen minutes later Security shooed us all out.

The next day, hungover and weary from four days of conventioning, I found my co-conspirators in the fan room waiting for the bar to open. They reminded me of our great plan but I didn't have the energy to go through with it.

"No way," I groaned, "I give up on those guys. My brain hurts. Leave me out." I forked over 50p for a cup of sludge to see if caffeine would cure me. Pam and Simba tried to jolly me into action but I was having none of it. I drank my coffee and waited for the ringing in my ears to stop.

"I can't believe you're giving up," Hazel mourned, "you were doing so well."

"Hah," I muttered at my coffee, "easier to liven up New York fandom."

Just then the Brothers entered the room.

I saw them heading in our direction and covered my eyes with my hands, my enthusiasm as dehydrated as my body. I hoped they'd be morose somewhere else. Gradually I realised they were greeting everyone in the room. I watched them working their way through the crowd, bursting with energy and joie de vivre. I felt ill. They all had pleased looks on their faces as they mingled like mad. Nigel bounded over and informed us that *The Chicken Brothers* had transmogrified themselves and would henceforth be known as *The Fun People (TM)*. He bounced up and down as he made this announcement.

I knocked over my coffee cup as I struggled to get out of his way. "What's wrong with you guys? Did Martians invade your brains or what?" I asked while backing away from their unseemly gyrations.

"We're tired of being weenies!" Glen announced brightly. "We're going to have fun from now on! Mingle, mingle, mingle. Chat, chat, chat. Whee!"

"That's right," declared Alun, "we might even let you kiss us."

I glared at Hazel but she swore she hadn't snitched.

Later, after the bar opened and my head cleared a bit, I tried to pin them down on the reasons for such a radical change of attitude. Glen explained that they'd merely decided to set British Fandom on its ear and this was the obvious way to do it. Nigel said he'd have preferred getting a tattoo, but he was squeamish about wearing it to work and no one else wanted to get one. While I puzzled over their new image, Steve sat down at our table and started bemoaning the sorry state of modern music.

They're still terminally hip. Some things never change.

Pandora's Box

Abattoir #5 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger & Bryan Barrett (1988)

Being thirtysomething is just a little weird, sometimes. You know the problem? Either you get in a snit over some well-meaning person underestimating your age by five years (hey, who you calling immature?), or you're having the vapours at some horrific new evidence of advanced age (are those wrinkles/age spots/grey hairs/cellulite/sagging muscles I see?). It's a peculiar sort of age to be. I would like to do what Jane Austen did and assume the mobcap of the spinster, but there's no equivalent gesture in late twentieth century society to indicate a graduation from youth to active middle years as an unmarried person. Since my general behaviour is rather more giddy than sober I'm still prone to acting like a teenager in adult situations (which is probably why people underestimate my age so frequently). But make no mistake, I am an adult.

Want to know how I can tell? Lately, I've developed an interest in skin care products and perfumes. I've begun lingering around the astonishing array of cosmetics counters in the department stores, trying to grasp the intricacies of the many cleansers, emollients, astringents, replenishers, firmers, buffers, and renewers available to the unwary consumer. I'm convinced every woman ought to take courses in chemistry, physics, and French before buying so much as a powder brush. I feel bewildered and not a little suspicious, like I'm being taken for the sucker I am. But I've become susceptible to the idea that my age is showing. The claims made for the revitalising powers of various products are enticing and seductive; I'm not old, of course, but perhaps a tiny bottle of Niosome Systeme Anti-Age wouldn't hurt, especially if it will make me look like Isabella Rosellini.

But it's not just a matter of finding a product that works with your skin type. No, you must decide how you feel about yourself. This is self-esteem therapy, not merely colouring inside the lines. Do you see yourself as Sporty? Feminine? A hot babe? Perhaps European royalty? How about the scientific approach? Or just plain erotic? With little exception, and a lot of combinations, these are the six images cosmetics firms present to sell their wares. It's a lot to cope with when all you want is something for your chapped lips.

It's not unlike being a teen and trying to figure out the mysteries of makeup. When my parents finally decided I could wear makeup to school I was thrilled. I immediately went out and bought blood-red blusher, violet eyeshadow, and some blue mascara. For the next year I wore colour combinations formerly seen only on tropical fish. I learned, though. I never passed a makeup counter in a store without trying on some gloss or powder to see what colours were best for me. I would furtively whisk my fingers across the open eyeshadow containers and move down the counter to a mirror where I'd test the effect of Sahara Desert Rose with Midnight Blue. Eventually I mastered the subtleties of Day Makeup, Office Makeup, Evening Makeup, and Photograph/Stage Makeup, each requiring a technique and touch all its own.

So I have every hope of someday grasping the complexities of skin care, dizzying though it now appears. But it's not just fighting gravity that's got me over in the white lab-coat section of Macy's. I've decided to learn about perfume.

If buying makeup and skin care products is like doing Jungian therapy, with all the dream imagery and archetype assessment, buying perfume is like doing hard-core Freudian analysis. They don't pussyfoot around in the perfume business.

Perfume names tell you what you want out of life. They used to have ethereal, feminine names like Joy and White Shoulders and Chantilly. There were also the Famous Designers names, linked to the French couture houses, called Halston and Chanel and Yves. In the late seventies there was a sudden surge of what I can only think of as anthropomorphic perfumes, named Charlie and LouLou and Anais. But now there's a truly disturbing trend. It is not enough to want to smell like a girl, nor to associate yourself with a designer, nor even to personify a style by wearing a certain fragrance. These days, perfumes are given names that

describe a strong emotion or uncontrollable urges: Obsession, Passion, Poison. Gone are the arts of enhancement, evocation, and seduction. It seems the eighties woman has gone haywire, maddened with unrequited or overstimulated appetites. She wants a man, and she'll do anything to get him.

Observing this trend has given me a few ideas of my own for perfume names. To extrapolate from Passion, should we not offer a fragrance called Victim? Or what about Abductee? I can see the ad copy now - 'Her perfume left him weak with desire. He was powerless to resist her advances. He was...her Victim.' 'Captured by love, bound by desire, swept away by her own urges - Abductee.' No? Well, why bother with subtlety? By all means, let us purchase Rut- '...because the heat of a woman is a force of nature.' Or perhaps you fancy a spritz of Rottweiler - 'Never lets go...' But heck, why fool around with the sex angle when we all know what this whole shindig is about? I guarantee some bright Mad Ave type is going to realise what every woman wants to wear is 'Money - feel it, taste it, breathe it, live it - The ultimate fragrance for our time!' I'm telling you, perfume these days is not for the faint-hearted.

Anyway, all the fancy face creams and French perfume won't change the ongoing process of aging, not really. Besides, I'm rather enjoying the experience. After all, I may have had moister skin and fewer grey hairs ten years ago but I was a much bigger jerk. So I'll put my imaginary mobcap on and start using the phrases that denote massy years and hard-earned wisdom, amusing myself at youthful follies and annoying the kids. I shall positively delight in saying, "Ah, when I was your age..."

The Legend of Saint Yo Mama

Nutz #7 -- Ed. Pam Wells (1988)

A long time ago, about 1983 in fact, I shared a house in the Mission District of San Francisco with three or six other people. Our neighbourhood was primarily Latino: Mexican, Central and South American culture. We bought groceries down at the stalls off Mission Street instead of shopping at Safeway. Our sundries came from the Pharmacia, our fast food from the taquerias, and our candles from the Occult Candle Shop around the corner, which also sold Jesus paraphernalia.

Our household was fascinated by the trappings of Catholicism. We collected pictures of visitations, annunciations, and sacred bleeding hearts. We created a special Jesus clock by gluing a drawing of the Son onto the back and arms of an old clock we'd found in a dumpster. Twice a day, at 3:45 and 9:15, He was crucified all over again. One wall of the living room had a shelf full of our favourite plaster statues; many bought at the Occult Candle Shop. I particularly liked the blue and violet Virgin Mary with the chipped hands. Sandy had found a little statue of a black boy whose function was to hold the reins of horses, a Jockey such as one used to find on folks' front lawns earlier in the century. We thought it was gruesome in the extreme but it looked pretty funny in among all the Marys and Jesuses. We were both fond of mixing cultural artefacts.

Sandy and I were the only women sharing the house. We were punks in those days with shaved heads, tattoos, leather jackets, and black clothing. We didn't wear dresses or skirts as we hated 'feminine' attire. We smoked a lot of pot and hung around the warehouses late at night with our friends, listening to bands practice or participating in various pieces of performance art. We didn't fit in the neighbourhood at all and the local vatos let us know. They pelted us with stones, screamed "Putas...lesbian putas!" at us, and sprayed graffiti on the sidewalk in front of our house.

The guys in the household didn't have it much easier. They were gringos, they had funny haircuts, and they refused to beat the living daylights out of anyone who doubted their manhood. The homeboys hanging around on the corners of 24th and Folsom loved to follow them around and taunt them. It made running to the store for beer a real hassle for all of us but we were there because we couldn't afford to live anywhere else.

One night I came home in tears after a particularly irritating encounter with Los Morons. I was broke, there wasn't any beer in the fridge, someone had smoked the last of the dope, and my tape deck was out of batteries. I lay on the linoleum floor in the living room and bawled my eyes out. Sandy wandered in from the kitchen and sat next to me on the floor.

"I can't stand this horrible place any more," I sobbed, "I just can't take the flak or the dirt or the poverty one more minute." I was ready to catch the next Greyhound going anywhere.

Sandy patted me on the shoulder and looked distressed. I realised after a while that it wasn't just my crying that was bothering her. I sat up. "You'd better tell me now. I might as well have all the bad news at once."

She looked away from me and took a deep breath. I followed the direction of her look and saw the shelf of statues. It seemed normal -- or did it? Where was the Virgin of the chipped hands? And where was the black boy? I turned to Sandy and she sighed with great emotion.

"I didn't mean to break them," she said slowly. "I was jumping around because Vanna White had turned the wrong letter on Wheel of Fortune and the contestant guessed the sentence too early. I sort of bounced into the shelf backwards and before I could stop them they crashed onto the floor. I'm really, really sorry."

We were both quiet, contemplating the loss of our favourites. I was too upset to do more than go to bed. I decided to look at the pieces in the morning to see if they could possibly be

glued together. We gathered the parts and put them in a paper bag. Sandy left it on the shelf.

The next day I awoke to the sound of rain and someone singing in the kitchen. I stumbled out into the daylight and found Sandy making coffee. She brought me some in my Boynton mug, the one that says 'Ever Have One Of Those Lifetimes? and smiled cheerfully at my gloomy grunt of thanks.

"What are you so happy about, Shiva?" I glared at her.

"Don't be a grouch. You'll never guess what's happened," Sandy replied with a peculiar little smile.

"I'm not in the mood for this. Tell me or leave me alone. Pass the milk." I've never been fond of mornings. She sat down at the table and slid the carton towards me.

"I went to have a look at the broken statues when I got up. I got the bag down from the shelf and put all the pieces together to see what was missing. The Virgin's head is gone." As expected, this pierced the fog in my brain and I stopped toying with the spoon in the sugar bowl.

"What!"

"No kidding," Sandy agreed. "I couldn't find it anywhere. So I tried assembling all the main pieces for each statue and there wasn't enough of the Jockey black boy left to make it whole again. The only untouched part was his head."

We stared at each other.

"You didn't," I said, starting to grin.

"For sure," she answered, and handed me the bag.

I drew out the reconstituted statue and placed it on the kitchen table. It looked pretty strange; the slender draped figure with benevolently folded caucasian hands topped by the incongruously maniacal grin of the black Jockey's head. We both began laughing and I pulled it closer to inspect the masterful glue job.

"That is absolutely amazing, Sandy. But it's clearly no longer either the Virgin or the Jockey. Who is she now?" I passed the figure over and Sandy pondered it for a few minutes.

Suddenly she shouted. "Saint Yo Mama! The patron saint of the cross-culturally confused! She's perfect for us. Whenever el stupidos on the corner yell at us for not wearing dresses, we'll pray to Saint Yo Mama for help. She'll inspire us and remind us to yell back because we all know those goons won't hit a girl. We'll use their cultural assumptions against them."

"Saint Yo Mama. Yeah. When the neighbours below play corridos y rancheras all-night we can pray to her for the gift of tongues so that we'll appreciate the Spanish language equivalent of Wham! And then we'll play Throbbing Gristle all the next day when they're dealing with hangovers. Excellent!"

We smiled at the statue on the table. Sandy picked her up lovingly and took the little Saint into the living room.

"She looks real nice up there with the others, don'tcha think?" Sandy asked with pride in her voice. I agreed wholeheartedly.

"I have a feeling our lives are about to change. For the better. No more Ms Nice Gringa. From now on we're going to carve out our own niche in this neighbourhood. Take back the corners. The Mission belongs to us too. Ole!"

Saint Yo Mama grinned maniacally from the shelf. We went outside to kick some ass.

My Life With Shoes

Eyeballs in the Sky #5 -- Ed. Tony Berry (1988)

It started very young with me. My relatives still think it's funny to tell the story about me at age three toddling up to strangers and exclaiming, "Look at my new shoes!" months after I had gotten them. The strangers would see the scuffmarks and ratty strings and regard my parents with wistful pity. "She'll soon grow out of that phase," they'd say, "appreciate it now while she's tiny." My parents would nod and drag me away.

The strangers were right. Soon 'new' shoes were only new for two months and I'd be begging my mother for more. I loved the shiny black patent leather of my Sunday School shoes and cried when they got roughed up. I kept all my old shoes neatly lined up in the closet, the very oldest in the very back and the newest in the front. Each fall the kids got new school shoes and it became a battleground between my mother and I. I would desperately try to talk her out of buying the ugly, sturdy saddle shoes she insisted on, sure that I couldn't live without a flimsy, ethereally lovely pair of low pumps or orchid coloured ballet slippers. She never went for it and I wore the clunky, brown and tan horrors until I was old enough to buy my own school shoes.

I wanted to dress like a cool person during junior high, hoping to fit in with a group. There were exactly three groups, the Cheerleaders (very expensive, no chance), the Scholars (hopeless geeks, utterly revolting), and the Horse Girls (hung around the stables every possible moment). I fell into the Horse Girl crowd easily as I loved horses, hated school, and craved a pair of riding boots. Boots were the best thing about dressing as a Horse Girl. I didn't have the petite, athletic body of a Cheerleader, nor the undernourished, absent look of a Scholar, but by golly I could stomp around in big cowboy boots, tight jeans, and a black tee shirt with no self-consciousness at all.

Even then I realised it was possible to look cool with nothing more than a great pair of shoes. I longed to wear the current fashions but was always too worried about being too chubby to feel really comfortable in the more outrageous outfits. I found that my feet were the perfect focus for my need to be trendy. I wouldn't wear flares or hotpants but I owned several pairs of platform heels. No matter how much I weighed I could hit the streets with the baddest feet on Mercer Island. I became a shoe junkie at age thirteen.

These days I'm not ashamed of my addiction; after all, it's socially acceptable and doesn't lead to the harder stuff. It can be expensive but, like any junkie, one learns to be devious and justify the expense. I started collecting shoes by going to sales. I wouldn't buy anything unless I had a specific need for a certain type or colour of shoe. "Gosh," I'd think while mulling over a sweet pair of royal blue ankle boots, "I haven't got a thing to wear with these so I'd better not buy them even though they are on sale." I'd walk away with a sense of moral superiority. Two months later of course I'd get an outfit which absolutely required a pair of royal blue ankle boots, but by that time it would be too late. I would mourn the loss of the boots every time I wore the outfit.

Clearly then, it was okay to buy a pair of shoes if one really liked them because one was sure eventually to acquire an outfit with which the desired pair could be worn. From this it was frighteningly easy to realise the maxim every shoe junkie discovers, build your wardrobe around your shoes. My mother taught me that shoes were an accessory. I soon discovered they were a foundation.

From then on buying shoes was a thrilling safari. I plunged energetically into the jungle of sales, speciality shops, and mail-order catalogues. No longer did I justify purchasing some thigh-high leopard skin boots by pretending I needed them; it was enough that I wanted and could afford them. I'd find the occasion to wear them, and buy an entire outfit to wear with them if nothing in my closet happened to match. Thus I acquired an extraordinary collection of gold glitter-covered flats, four-inch shiny black stiletto heels, uncounted quantities of black leather boots, see-through plastic sandals, tennis shoes in every colour of the rainbow, velvet

and satin high heels destined to disintegrate in the first rain, butter-soft wonders from Brazil, cheaply made oddities from Taiwan and China, lacy creations from London, and best of all, a long-coveted pair of silvery-blue evening pumps from the thirties given to me by my grandmother.

Of course, in the lust to own these marvels I have sometimes misjudged the size of my feet or my ability to bear pain. Once in a while I have deliberately bought shoes that I knew were too small or too large because I was desperate to wear them. Unfortunately, while the spirit is willing, the flesh is always weak, and no amount of cramming, stretching, or pretending will make size six become size seven and a half. Nor will any amount of stuffing socks in the toes reduce a size nine boot to something less than awkward for than seven and a half. So I keep careful track of the shoe sizes of my girlfriends and their birthdays.

Which leads me to the ultimate thrill of a shoe junkie; Shoe Bonding. For while seeking out the perfect little black pump is fulfilling and locating the perfect skirt to match your latest cha-cha heels is a triumph, there is nothing quite as satisfying as having someone with whom you can share the moment. Shoe junkies meet in unlikely places; not, as you might imagine, fighting over the sales racks. They meet in restaurants, in bars, in the office, and on the street. A shoe junkie will spot someone wearing great shoes, rush over despite traffic, crowds, or the fact that it's a complete stranger, and blurt out; "I LOVE your SHOES!" Most people accept the compliment and continue on their way but another shoe junkie will respond enthusiastically, return the compliment, exchange information on where shoe bargains can be found, and a new friendship is launched. My best friends are shoe junkies to one degree or another. Whether it's the joy of owning one exquisite pair of wingtips, or the security of having twelve pairs of pointy-toed creepers to choose from, my friends understand the pleasure of shoes.

A brilliant woman named Mimi Pond wrote a book called **Shoes Never Lie** and it's the shoe junkies gospel. She delved deeply into the habits and obsessions of those who desire shoes. She let us know that it's okay to want shoes, that it's not shameful to prefer them over clothes, fame, or even sex. She described the behaviour so aptly that all over the world shoe junkies find themselves giggling helplessly at her illustrations of 'The Smell Of Unworn Leather', 'Why Shoes Are Better Than Men', and 'The Shoes of Death: Why Every Woman Must Own A Pair At Least Once In Her Life'. The Shoes of Death are of course, four-inch black stiletto heels. Mimi has freed us from any lingering guilt.

Obviously my shoe habit is curtailed by my income and the necessity of paying rent, but I never stop craving them, and live in utter envy of The Great Shoe Junkies like Imelda Marcos and Cher who had entire rooms built for their collections. I can only hope that someday I'll find those royal blue ankle boots again. In the meantime I'll settle for new shoes.

Women & Saints

Sisters -- Ed. Pam Wells (1991)

I like the idea of saints. Think of it: cool supernatural attributes, widespread influence, a steady source of income from all your relics, and no taxes to pay. Of course, you're dead and unable to benefit from the money but you get to heal people and everyone talks nice about you plus you see God a lot in your position as go-between. I think it's a comforting, not to say useful, development now that we have just one all-purpose deity, here in the Christian division of Western Civilisation. But it wasn't always an option.

Hundreds of years ago everyone believed in multiple gods, all having their own spheres of influence and particular attributes. To cope with the bewildering assortment, the tribal shamans worked out which deity required which sacrifice: after that, it was just a sort of maintenance plan where you offered up whatever a god liked best in the way of food and drink as often as seemed necessary. It was very simple: the gods got fed, they answered your prayers. No bullocks, no deal.

Eventually, Christianity got the upper hand in Europe and became very snippy about there being only one god. After a lot of arguments, some of them fatal, most people agreed that this was the case, at least publicly. But there was one hitch. No one really believed that a single deity could pay attention to everyone's needs all at once. The priests got mad about church attendees sneaking off to sacrifice a goat or two after services. So the church wised up and provided saints.

A saint was a holy interceptor, passing on all the genuine prayers to God who clearly didn't have time to fool around with fake prayers from people just trying to look good. This pleased the people because they not only got their own personal metaphysical being to intervene for them; they could actually attempt to become one themselves. Saints, you see, were plucked out of the ranks. Holiness was attainable by anyone if they tried hard enough.

At first, martyrdom was the main chance. This went over in a big way in the first few centuries after Christianity caught on. Eventually, it wasn't quite enough to be willing to die; you had to do holy things while alive like take care of lepers and live in cold stone huts without bathing and give all your money to the poor. Hardly anyone wanted to do this, of course, so after a while there weren't enough saints to go around. People got to wanting specific saints for specific purposes, too. You obviously couldn't get much of a result asking the saint in charge of accounting to put in a good word for an easy childbirth. The list kept growing to keep up with market demand and some of the new saints had pretty iffy claims to the position.

Sainthood wasn't a sure thing, either. It wasn't like being a lifetime supporting member of public television or something; it could be revoked. St Christopher hung in there for several hundred years and built up quite a fan club but in the end he was kicked out. Zillions of worthless St Chris medals are littering up the attics and land fills of Catholic countries today. But despite the arbitrary machinations of the church, even in the late twentieth century most people are fond of the saints. The thought of a friend on the Other Side is appealing.

This formed the basis for a series of discussions I had with Pam Wells, Hazel Ashworth and Linda Krawecka. We'd get to talking about women and men. As you can imagine, there was a lot to talk about. The topic that kept recurring was the compulsive need women have to take responsibility for everything, and whether it was bred into us or innate in our gender. We deplored the tendency while recognising how often we, our own enlightened selves, gave in to it. Female guilt we called it. You know what I mean. It's apologising for his mistakes, sometimes to him. It's the pernicious desire to take the blame even when it has nothing to do with you. It's the relentless sense of 'I ought to be able to fix this,' ranging from housework to relationships. It's refusing to acknowledge that if something goes wrong it is not necessarily a reflection on your worth as a person. It's sacrificing your needs and preferences even when it's not required. It's being a martyr.

Surely, we postulated, there must be someone who represented the highest form of this sickness in their earthly life and was now working off their sins by acting as a comforter to those still suffering from it. If we could identify this person we would have a saint of our own to pray to when we felt we were about to succumb to a bout of useless guilt.

Then Owen Whiteoak suggested the perfect candidates. We immediately concurred. Who spent their lives catering to a father's autocratic oddities and a brother's errant talent? Who stayed home, year after year, writing late at night after housework and social obligations had eaten up the daylight hours? Who made a virtue out of sacrificing health and normal human needs in the name of duty? Who, despite illness and jobs and potential ostracism, wrote books so powerful that 150 years has not dimmed their fascination?

The Bronte sisters, of course. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne: the perfect specimens of filial respect, Christian duty, Victorian womanliness, and martyrs in the name of male superiority who still managed to find the time, energy, and emotional resources to produce major works of literature. We had found our saints of women's guilt.

We became the Order of the Sisters of the Saint Bronte Sisters. It's nice to have a saint of one's own. It really works. If Linda succumbs to agonies of remorse over the dishes stacked in the sink because she preferred to finish her apa contribution, Hazel can remind her to pray to St Charlotte for forgiveness. After all, she probably let the dishes go occasionally in order to work on **Jane Eyre**. Last year, Pam and I traded guilt days on our holiday in the Midlands; I'd take the blame on Monday and Wednesday, she'd feel guilty on Tuesday and Thursday. That way we each got two days of glorious freedom and two days of wallowing in pointless angst. It was surprising how good it felt to abdicate responsibility. I felt several pounds lighter on my guilt-free days. One can binge on guilt quite easily.

It isn't a very exclusive order. Our Sisters are everywhere. Gender is the only requirement for admission into the order. Lots of our female friends were obvious candidates. Teresa Nielsen Hayden became a novice as soon as she heard about us, having suffered from a particularly debilitating form of female guilt most of her life due to her Mormon upbringing. Yvonne Rousseau became an instant Sister (Australian Auxiliary) because of her wonderful story **Mr Lockwood's Narrative**, a wry fantasy involving the male narrator of **Wuthering Heights**. Somewhere out there I imagine a male reading this and indignantly protesting his sensitivity to oppression and the hundreds of times he has felt guilty about something. Men have their own special brand of guilt, for which they no doubt could use heavenly intervention, but they do not suffer from the peculiarly female disease of needing to make things right. If they did, we might not feel such a craving for responsibility.

It may sound amusingly lighthearted, and it certainly is a jokey name, but in fact the Sisterhood is a surprisingly good tool for getting us to stop and think instead of automatically assuming we can, or should, fix a situation. True, sometimes we plunge into the guilt anyway. I know my household wouldn't run nearly as smoothly without the Shirt Fairy, the Vacuuming Fairy, the Laundry Fairy, and other manifestations of female guilt. Real Women, I think to myself, keep their house tidy even when they aren't making the mess. But then there are the times I open my mouth to smooth over some minor problem and just close it up again. Who said the world has to be comfortable for everyone? Will my friends forsake me if my husband says something less than gracious to our hosts for instance? Of course not. It won't reflect on my worth (though it may say something about my taste in men). I think there is a real need for a Saint of this type despite our modern secular sensibilities. Women need as much help as ever overcoming the accrual of centuries of second-class citizenship. An attitude adjustment is in order.

I wonder what kind of sacrifice the Brontes require?

Love's Heaving Bosoms

Cartouche #2 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger & Bryan Barrett (1991)

I love romance novels. Really, I do. You can't talk me out of this habit either. Shame doesn't work, or intellectual one-upmanship. They're a constant source of reliable entertainment, though not always in the way the author intended.

It's embarrassingly easy to locate the romance section of a bookstore. All those pink and purple covers simply scream 'Trash! Total trash! Get some now!' from across the room. I gravitate towards them immediately. Regencies are my favourites but I occasionally read the other kind, the big fat ones with three words in the title and a large-breasted woman in the arms of a steroidal hunk of manflesh. You have to skim the text to find the good ones. You sure can't tell from the covers.

On most covers, the hero is showing a manly profile while trying to kiss the heroine as she clutches him dramatically in what looks like yoga positions but might as easily be convulsions and are really just artistic ways to expose the heroine's breast and thighs. I'm awfully tired of the heroine hogging the cover. I'd rather see a sexy guy but the publishers aren't listening to me, they're trying to impress their male salespeople and distributors. Which is kind of stupid, if you think about it, because men don't buy these books at the grocery store or the airport, women do. Why aren't they trying to entice me, the buying public? Another mystery of life, I suppose. I buy the books in spite of the covers.

A very important part of a romance novel is the sex scenes. Authors just kill themselves trying to think of new ways to get my blood racing. The funniest descriptions usually involve body parts. Sometimes I don't know which body part we're talking about; the author gets so poetic. I recently read Virginia Henley's **The Pirate and the Pagan** in which the hero had thighs, arms, and other manly attractions 'like marble.' When aroused, his nipples became 'diamond hard.' Ouch! His eyes were 'stained black with passion' every few pages, when they weren't 'emitting green fire.' This guy sounds like a hazardous waste product, not a love god.

It seems most romance novels are walking the fine line between porn and mass-market entertainment. It's fun when you find someone who can manage the job with finesse. I particularly like Laura Kinsale. I'm also fond of some of the excesses of Bertrice Small, who is known as Lust's Leading Lady because of her extremely graphic sex scenes which go on for pages. It's all very tasteful, I assure you, though she is prone to touting each intimate encounter as bigger and better than anytime ever before in the known universe, upping the sex god count and lowering the credibility factor. On top of this, Bertrice is enamoured of harems which means that each heroine in each book is captured and sold into white slavery and ends up the Number One Mistress to someone named Ali or Mohamed, no matter what gyrations the author has to go through to get her there. This is kind of tedious unless you go in for the slave-to-love theme. Actually, I much prefer romances with unconsummated lust; it pumps up the dramatic tension. Which is why I like Regencies: lots of dialogue, not many body parts. Also Regencies tend to stay in one country. The other books rush their heroines around the world so much I get jet lag.

Possibly my favourite part of a romance novel is the advertising in the back for other romance novels. If a man doesn't deliver a searing kiss, employ a warm, broad chest by crushing a heroine to it, flash a devilish gleam from name-your-colour eyes, or vow to do something heroic to win the girl/plantation/ancestral manor back, then I figure it can't be a very good sort of book. While thumbing through the back of Henley's latest, I became enchanted by the description of **Arizona Vixen** 'Sterling Hawkins was a tormented man caught between two worlds. As a halfbreed, he was a successful businessman with a seething Indian's soul...' Wow! How'd you like to run into that guy in stockholders' meeting?

Naturally, I figure I could write one of these books if I had any sort of discipline. Frankly, I don't so I doubt you'll ever see my name gracing the racks but I think about it quite a lot. I particularly worry about which nom-de-plume to use and what to name the characters. The

men in these books always have ridiculous names like Dylan Dartmoor, Slade Hunter, or Hawk Diamond. The women's names are even more: Satin, Ambrosia, Radiance, or Paris. I believe I shall simply name my characters Noun Noun or perhaps Verb Noun. This will save immense amounts of time pouring over the Name Your Baby books, amusing as that activity can be.

It's easy to write a romance. No, really. Here's one; Melody Harmony, a tough blonde D.A. with a soft spot for cowboys, spends her summer at the Lone Crow Dude Ranch where she meets Dirk Darko, a tall, rangy cowhand with a secret that could tear his world apart. Melody and Dirk have a fight within ten seconds of meeting each other. Little does she know that he lies awake at night, playing his harmonica to keep the memories of another blonde, who did him wrong, from disturbing his peace. His harmonica playing disturbs the other cowhands' peace and they toss him out of the cabin where he finds Melody taking an impromptu midnight bath in the icy mountain stream. He saves her from a sudden flash flood and she realises that he is her soul mate. She knows this because Dirk Darko is a major heavyweight in the smouldering looks and kissing department. Then they have a fight again because she wants to know what is this secret that could tear his world apart and he won't tell her. So she goes off to take an impromptu ride so he can follow her on his untameable stallion Devil and save her from some other unlikely natural disaster and he realises that she is, in fact, his soul mate, only now she's really mad at him because she's a tough D.A. and shouldn't need to be saved by a cowboy every five pages even if he does kiss up a storm.

And so on. Not hard at all. I could probably turn in that outline and get a big advance on my six-part series Montana Melody but I'm way too lazy to actually finish anything. However, this article is copyrighted so don't get any bright ideas.

Then there's the matter of the perfect pen name. Regency authors choose fake British names with y's instead of i's in them, like Phoebe Wychwood and Emyly Sonnet-Fortnyghtly, because no one would buy a Regency by someone named Tom Smert or Edna Fernhalter. Western authors get to pick out rugged, homespun names like Hattie and Mattie; mainstream types go in for vaguely uptown monikers like Francesca and Veronica and Olga. Well, Olga Bicos didn't actually change her name to anything and see? It sounds out of place. So picking the right name is very important, practically as important as sex scenes. You want to keep it in mind if you ever decide to write a romance. I'm warning you though. They'll put some female with bazooms the size of a small refrigerator on the cover.

I'll probably buy your book anyway. I just love Love.

Real Nails

Southern Gothic #1 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger (1993)

Tina Marie Meisenheimer and I are sitting around talking nails.

"Fibreglass?" she says, grabbing my left hand and bringing it close to her eyes to scrutinise the perfection of the fill.

"Acrylic. I can't deal with having the same material my skis are made of on my hands. Besides, the chemicals they use to bind it really stink," I reply, not at all discomposed by having Tina Marie breathe all over my hand while she twists and turns it to get the best light. She nods seriously and holds her own hand out, palm down and fingers spread wide, to show me her newly acquired nails.

"Fabulous," I say admiringly. "Is that Magenta Sunrise or Blood Rose?"

She smirks, preening a little. "Caribbean Calypso. Isn't it nice, though? James picked it out. I was going to have a French buff but he talked me into this." We both stare at the deep ruby sheen glowing on her fingernails and sigh in mutual agreement that James definitely knows his colours.

You might think this is female bonding, standard girl stuff on the order of clothes shopping or discussing boyfriends. You would be wrong. This, my friends, is nothing short of Female Empowerment. For every girl who was a tomboy or an irredeemable nail biter, having false fingernails is a major piece of personal mojo. Suddenly we're walking tall, exuding confidence, feeling sorry for anyone who isn't us. Our hands, for the first time in our lives, look utterly feminine. They appear longer, slimmer, more elegant. Rings look better on our fingers. But best of all, we get to buy lots of little bottles of nail polish.

After all, the real reason women like makeup is because it comes in so many delightful little pots and tubes with French names. No woman will deny this if confronted by the truth though they might act slightly guilty and try to justify it by claiming they can actually tell the difference in their skin when they use L'eau du Watteau Superhydrative Biologie Creme de Nuit instead of good old soap and water. What it really boils down to is a deep emotional need to possess exquisite glass containers and tiny crystalline bottles of mysterious liquids and powders which are to somehow transform us into the breathtaking perfection of female beauty. (I guess it's the old Sorcerer's Apprentice mentality. Either that or some people still think there's a way to transmute base metals into gold.) But the business of false nails is distinctively different even if there is a crossover in the irresistibility of the beautifully packaged containers. For what every girl discovers when she gets her first set of false nails is that an amazing transformation has taken place on her own grubby, stubby hands. She becomes Woman, the epitome of sleek and sophisticated femininity. When she reaches for a pen now the act is imbued with glamour. Whose elegant hand is that holding that pen? What might not that hand write with such well-manicured nails? Clearly, the owner of such highly polished and cuticle-free nails is someone who has time for luxuries and is willing to pay for them. Gone is the visual reinforcement of childishness. In its place are hands that can compete with any privileged, soignee Ladies Who Lunch. When it comes to separating the girls from the women, nails count.

I'm not suggesting that false nails can cure cancer or make you a better person. I'm certainly not suggesting that one must have false nails in order to be truly feminine. All I'm saying is, watch what happens when a woman gets her nails done. Suddenly she's holding her fingers in attractive positions, unconsciously or consciously showing them off. She hands you something with a little flourish. She cocks her wrist slightly and learns to rest her nails against a complementary colour such as her blouse or her lipstick. She's flirting with her hands. Interpreting the message is akin to understanding the language of flowers (now an esoteric exercise but once a high art) or the answers signalled by the position of a lady's fan in the 18th century. A certain type of woman wears a certain range of nail colours. I am absolutely not kidding. And Madame Lucy is going to Reveal All.

Let's face it, a sweet young thing wouldn't be caught dead wearing nasty red nail polish. She'll go for the pastels or best of all the 'natural' nail, so contrived as to appear to be her own with just the right amount of pink and an extension of white on the end. A light mauve, a pearly pink, or at most a deep rose proclaims the wearer to be girlish, young (or young-at-heart) and very, very nice.

The more adventurous sort will try a rainbow of glistening reds and pinks. This is the magpie woman, unable to resist a glossy shade of anything. She will always do her nails in silver glitter for Halloween. And she loves to match the colour of her outfits, spending hours every week taking colour off and putting new colour on. She also dyes her hair but that's another issue and article entirely.

The woman in wine or jewel tones is self-confident and rather sophisticated. She probably owns a Very Good watch and several Very Good pieces of clothing that seem quite plain to the untutored eye. Sherry, burgundy, champagne, ivory, amber, anything discreet but rich will grace her hands. She is never a blonde.

The rebellious types go for bold and unusual shades: corals, crimson, black, blue, anything that says to an observer "I'm not hiding myself. Love me, love my bad taste." Rebels wear an orange red, so different from a high gloss, blue-tinged Chanel red. College students and heavy metal girls fall into this category. Most women go through this phase before settling into their own niche. Even so, sometimes only a really trashy red will do, especially if you're wearing all black.

Finding someone who will do your nails the way you like them is fraught with tension and high drama. Women trade names of manicurists like family recipes or military secrets, withholding information if they fear their favourite will become too busy or too self-important. Which is pretty silly because any really decent manicurist is already busy and self-important. Scheduling nail appointments can be hellish. And believe me, false nails are a major investment of time and money.

There's the initial session which takes about two hours and costs about \$60, longer and more if extensions have to be added (and they almost always do or you'd be wearing your own nails, wouldn't you?). Then there's the fill, ideally done every two weeks at a cost of \$25 to \$35. A fill takes a mere half-hour on the average. Occasionally I miss an appointment for one reason or another. Should this occur the dreaded gap appears, where my own nail can clearly be seen peeping between the cuticle and the edge of the false nail. No amount of nail polish can hide the gap and it is a familiar sight to false nail wearers. It's really the only way anyone can tell if a woman is wearing her own nails or not. If you can afford it and your manicurist is good, the gap never appears. If you let it go on for too long you run the risk of snapping off the false nail because it isn't properly anchored at the base. This hurts far worse than breaking your own because the false ones are actually bonded to your nails with industrial-strength quick seal glue. This is not an operation for the squeamish. But it's worth the bother to the nail-wearer.

Do men detect this state of grace? Fat chance. It's a subtle thing. It might be the equivalent of owning real pearls, another symbol of privilege. It's definitely a class thing. For a woman who has to do her own housework cannot maintain her nails in pristine condition. Which is why the technology of false nails is such a boon to modern women. No one has to know they work for a living. No one can tell just by looking at them that they have to do their own dishes.

It's something that women do purely for themselves. Other women admire a beautiful manicure. Men won't notice unless they themselves get manicures (or give them, I suppose). Men sense only in a dim, far-off sort of way that a woman is dressed for success with nails to match. They indicate faint approval or distaste according to their nature and then they go back to grunting over the Packers. But most women recognise the time and artistry that go into another woman's exquisitely done nails and they are quick to compliment and compare notes.

Getting our nails done. It's not as intense as shoe shopping nor as competitive as finding the perfect hairstylist but it's a common thread that binds the gender together in a mutual admiration society. And as we stride through our modern, hectic, fast paced life it's a chance to sit back, relax, and allow a bit of luxurious pampering to carry us beyond the demands of the outside world.

Time to go. I have an appointment with James. I'm going to ask him to try that truly fetching shade of Caribbean Calypso on me. It will match my new outfit.

Pam Wells: More Than Chocolate

Southern Gothic #2 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger (1994)

London, 1984

The night I first meet her she giggles and squeals over my gift of a pink plastic cowgirl jacket. She especially likes the smiling cactus and bucking burros on it. She puts it on and instantly becomes Pamelita, one of the vicious and beautiful Las Hermanas Chingadas; the famous Fuck You Sisters. Las Chingadas (Pamelita, Luz and Leeeeenda) write and perform a song at the first Mexicon in Newcastle. The audience is stunned by the presentation which includes many yips and high stepping kicks. Pamelita is a hit. I admire her unreserved enthusiasm, her inability to carry a tune, and her flirtatious cha-cha-cha. We become very good friends.

She promises to make me one of her special cakes when I say I am getting awfully tired of British cooking. She brings it along to a party. Fans line up to get at it. "Quite the little home maker, aren't we?" I say, watching people wolf down three or four pieces as fast as they can get them in their mouths. "Well, I'm rather good at cakes," she replies modestly. Later, when the entire party is lying around on the floor giggling at the ceiling I ask her what her secret is. She just smiles and helps me and Linda Krawecka draw up a Langdon Chart of British fandom's sexual relationships. Our chart makes the rounds of fandom for weeks afterwards, most people professing shock at the idea but manoeuvring to get a copy. Pam knows all the inside dirt. People tell her the most remarkably intimate things. She calls it her Agony Aunt persona. It's one of her specialties, like cakes.

Brighton, 1987

"This is killing me, it really is," she confesses approximately two seconds after I arrive at the Worldcon. "I can't stand all these twits everywhere. Christ, the sheer numbers of them! How can Americans take this?" I tell her we like our twits in bulk. She groans and retreats to the Fan Lounge, hidden several corridors and construction sites away from the main programming area. I see her briefly throughout the convention, assisting publication of the newsletter here, conducting Martin Smith away from an amorous discussion with a speaker stand there, always popping up when needed and ready to dance like a maniac when someone puts Talking Heads on the sound system. It looks like a lot of work being a guardian angel. She still has a hell of a cha-cha-cha. I tell her all about my latest romance. She nods sympathetically and offers me a piece of cake.

London, 1988

Upon arrival at her flat I present several packets of hair dye with a flourish. "Passion Pink?" she says with a gasp. "Oh, marvellous. Let's do it right now!" Later, with passionately pink hair and rather ghoulishly pink fingers we drink the last of her Bronte Liqueur, a combination of French brandy and honey marketed in Haworth as a tourist treat. Pam adores it. Just right on a damp March evening for evoking the consumption-inducing chills of the Yorkshire moors. We both come down with dreadful colds and produce noses to match out hair. Pam asks me to send her more packets for future hair experiments. She can't wait to shock her co-workers.

"We're all going to Tony Berry's housewarming party in Nottingham next weekend. You come, too," Pam urges. "You simply won't believe the wallpaper." I arrange to attend the party and am, as promised, struck dumb in disbelief. Each wall has a murderously clashing colour scheme and design. She drags me into the kitchen. "Look," she says in glee, "brick wallpaper covering up real bricks! Isn't this worth travelling several thousand miles to see?" I can only agree. Pam loves the bizarre aspects of her native culture. She is easily the best-travelled Briton I know in terms of seeing her own country. She's lived in London all her life yet in contrast to most big-city dwellers she regularly visits other parts of the country. She avoids the xenophobia of island dwellers and enjoys other cultures on their own terms; still, she's very conscious of her British attitudes and values. I suspect that if she had enough

money and time she would emulate the great Victorian lady adventurers and trot off to see the world with sketchbook and British panache at her side.

Hampshire, 1989

Pam is delighted to visit Jane Austen's house at last. "This is fantastic," she enthuses as we patter up and down stairs and peer into Jane's room. We are happy to imagine ourselves dressed in muslin, meeting the Prince Regent, immersing ourselves in Jane's day and admiring the Austen ephemera on display. Pam selects the newest Austen biography to take away as a souvenir and conducts me across the street for tea where we pore over our treasures and discuss our favourite Austen novels. This is just one stop on our erratic tour of Regency England, including Bath, Cheltenham, Iron Bridge and all three Wallops. It is in Nether Wallop that I discover Pam hates feet. "You're not going to take your shoes off and wade, are you?" she asks with a shudder. It's blisteringly hot and we've found a pretty little stream running along the road. I tell her yes, I certainly am, and she refuses to watch. She loathes the sight of bare feet, it transpires. "But you love shoes, how can you hate feet?" I insist, not at all inclined to deny myself a cooling footbath. "Shoes," Pam replies with awful dignity, "are one thing, and Feet are another." I can hear the capital letters.

Chicago, 1991

"This is much, much worse than 1987," Pam blurts out when I ask her how she likes her first American convention. "Worldcons are crap," she elaborates. But this one is quite small, only 3000 or so. Pam is unmoved by these arguments. She knows what she likes and this isn't it. She explains to fans throughout the weekend what makes British conventions so much more fun than these behemoth get-togethers Americans throw. Suddenly, she sounds tired. "The problem is," she confides while a dozen people are strung along the hallway in classic hall-party formation, "I've realised even Britain doesn't do many good conventions any more. 1984 was the last really good year for cons. I've felt let down by nearly everything I've been to lately. There just isn't the commitment to doing a genuinely superb con any more. It's very depressing." I ask her how she feels about being Guest of Honour at Illumination. "Well," she says, perking up, "that actually stands a chance of being the best thing to come along in ages. They've got a good attitude. I'm very proud they asked me. Coming to see me give my speech?" she adds, paraphrasing Christopher Robin.

I might, I said. But it didn't work out. So I wrote this for her instead.

Say It Ain't So, Joe

Southern Gothic #2 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger (1994)

"You've got it all wrong. Men don't care about fingernails, Lucy."

It's 10:30 p.m. and I'm about two hours into my weekly phone call to Joe Wesson.

"You're kidding. Then why do all the women in porn movies have long dragon-claw fingernails? Those films are made for men, not women."

"Men aren't looking at their fingernails!"

"Sure, but the women all have 'em. So they must serve some erotic purpose," I reply stubbornly.

"Listen. Men like a lot of things but they won't talk about it, not even to other men," Joe says. "So there's no way you could know."

Joe knows. Joe knows a lot about a lot, which always impresses the hell out of me because I can't remember information if I don't use it on a regular basis. I decided a long time ago I only have room for so much at one time so I just keep the things that interest me in my head and the rest I either forget or ignore. I never win at Trivial Pursuit. But Joe has flypaper-mind. His specialty is International Economics. He has a doctorate to prove it. He seems to keep up with everything. He thinks things over. I believe him when he says men don't talk about what turns them on. But if I ask him he'll tell me the answer.

"Name one," I challenge him.

"Shoes," he shoots back. "A guy might say to his friend, 'great legs' about a girl they're both looking at. You'd probably think he meant he thought she had great legs if you overheard him. But what he means is her legs look great in those shoes. High heels. Extended and taut. Sexy. It's the shoes."

I laugh. "Well, okay. I'll buy that. I know what the sight of shapely legs in high heels does to some men. I seem to remember you falling on your knees to worship my four-inch black stiletto heels one night at the Worldcon in New Orleans. Art Widner was terribly unsettled by the scene. He kept earnestly asking me why women would wear such uncomfortable shoes. I was kind of embarrassed that he didn't know."

An undignified snort echoes down the line. "I'll bet. Here's another. Chiffon. The sight of chiffon really turns men on. Same with silk. "

"Satin?" I venture.

"Definitely satin. But not latex or spandex. Unless maybe the guy's a fetishist. But mostly women wear spandex because they think men like it. Which is a complete waste of time. Men would rather see women undressed if given a preference between any fabric and nudity."

"I knew it!" I cry triumphantly. "I've always thought Victoria's Secret stores were catering to women's fantasies about men's fantasies. Men always want women to get out of their clothes pronto, not loll about the bedroom in fluffy peignoirs and so on."

"Not stockings. Men do like hosiery on women," Joe corrects me gently.

I accept the distinction. Joe knows. I talk to him about everything.

We spend hours on the phone. It's as if nothing is real until it's been discussed, analysed, turned over and over like a stone in a polishing machine, fining down the rough exterior and exposing the clear essence of the experience. There's always so much to talk about.

My parents, being religious and naively conservative, didn't teach me anything useful about living in a profane and illogical world. I could have used some practical guidance but I didn't get it. I grew up yearning for simple, obvious answers, coveting black and white in the midst of the grey shifting fog. It's still my fallback position when some event or emotion takes me offguard but at least now I have a few coping mechanisms that help me work through problems. When all else fails, I pick up the phone and call a friend to get some feedback.

"Okay, tell me this. Why is it if you ask a man whether or not you should cut your hair they always say don't cut it but a woman will take into consideration your face shape, your lifestyle, your whole personality and give you an answer based on that?"

Joe is not fazed. "Because men like the idea of long hair. It's part of their primitive instincts. It has nothing to do with the woman who's asking. It has to do with what makes a man club a woman over the head and drag her back to his cave. Hair, breasts, hips equals female. Hair is just hair to a man."

"Aha! Whereas hair is an accessory, a statement, an important part of defining self to a woman." I point out. "That's why the first thing a woman does when she gets a divorce or dumps her boyfriend is cut her hair. Hair matters."

"Good God," Joe says, revolted.

Our conversations drift from topic to topic, veering between the ridiculous and the earnest, but always coming back to human behaviour. It's a fascinating subject and for me, at any rate, a necessary one. I'm still making up for lost time.

We're not much alike, me and Joe. He's passive and idiosyncratic disposed to follow his own notions without being much bothered about anyone else. I'm far more interactive, caring more for others' opinions demanding that life explain itself. My life is dramatic, filled with emotion, turbulence and extravagant gestures. But we share one similarity. Once I decide I like someone then I expect to always like them. I have a steadfast loyalty that I find difficult to give up even when I should. Joe says if he likes someone at first then he finds he always likes that person, even if he doesn't see them for years at a time. They just pick up the conversation where they left off.

I think he's lucky. I think people change a lot and when enough time has passed you hardly ever have anything left in common. I brood about this, resenting the fickleness of others. I still like them, I'm still the same, why have they changed? People are so slippery.

"Have you heard Mitch Thornhill moved to Vermont?" Joe offers.

"No way!"

"Yeah. He's living in a log cabin in the woods. No electricity. No running water. No indoor plumbing, if you know what I mean."

"Double no way!"

"With a hippie Grateful Dead woman. I went to visit 'em. Stayed one day. It was all I could take. Love, huh?"

"Yeah. I guess." We are silent for a moment, picturing our friend living in a log cabin in Vermont with a back-to-nature Deadhead. Probably eating squirrel and rabbit and so on. What makes a city boy go back to nature? We can't imagine, being city folk ourselves and fond of all that civilisation has to offer like dim sum and good coffee and Cds. We are bonded by that sense of awe at someone giving up all that we think of as essential, at the strange urges other people succumb to.

"How's the job hunt going?" I ask tentatively, hoping for good news.

Joe sighs. "I've sent out over a hundred resumes this year. Got a call from a couple of places. No interviews, though. Might go to a conference next week. See if I can network a bit. I guess this means getting a new suit."

"Oh, come on," I say, trying to cheer him up. "You'll be in the forefront of fashion if you keep wearing that awful old thing you wore to Stever's wedding in the 70's. Wide lapels are coming back, you know."

Joe makes several rude sounds designed to convey his disgust. "Well, I'm not wearing bellbottoms again, that's for damn sure."

"Or leisure suits."

"Or fat ties with hideous patterns."

"How about moonboots?" We're starting to laugh, exhuming our style skeletons. Joe finally admits he only recently gave away all his clothes from high school. They hadn't fit in a long time but he kept them because they weren't worn out.

"Holy cow, of course they weren't worn out. They were made from the most icky, unnatural, undestroyable substance known to man..."

"A fabric which will live on, long after the earth is ruled by cockroaches..."

"Polyester!" we chorus in mutual glee. I flip over on the bed and switch the receiver to the other ear, trying to find another comfortable position, feeling happy and normal. It's so good to talk to someone who likes to talk.

Joe, you see, understands the need for conversation. And frankly, few men do. They don't seem to comprehend the lifeline conversation represents for women, dismissing it as inconsequential or pointless. How many times have men asked themselves, "What do women really want?" It's so obvious. Women want to talk. Since the world began women have allowed themselves to be bopped over the head and dragged back to the cave in hopes that later, after the procreative urge- is dealt with, men will feel expansive and talkative. We need to know, to hear, to share. We need to laugh with someone over how weird everyone else is. Otherwise, we might go nuts.

It's been three hours now. Important personal concerns have been dealt with, much gossip dispensed, several conclusions reached, a few truisms reaffirmed. It's provided a much needed reality check. We've learned a little bit more about what makes people tick, what separates the genders. I've had a chance to bounce some ideas off someone other than John. I've been given several new ideas to contemplate, ideas I would never have come up with myself. I've come up with a fanzine article.

"I'm going to write about this, Joe. You don't mind?"

"Naw. I can't wait to be immortalised in your fanzine."

"Gee, thanks. You might feel differently when you see it. I never can remember exactly how the words go. I paraphrase. It all gets filtered and reworked. But I think you'll recognise everything as essentially true to the original."

And to be honest, I don't know that you can ask much more of anyone. That's part of the art of conversation. Joe knows.

Shadowboxing the Blues

Southern Gothic #3 -- Ed. Lucy Huntzinger (1994)

In August I went back to Seattle. I grew up there. I haven't visited much since I left. Twelve years ago I couldn't wait to get out the hell out. You know the story: small town girl yearns for something more than a series of dead-end jobs and lights out for the big city. Me, I headed for San Francisco and pitied anyone still deluded enough to stay in boring old Seattle.

It is consequently no small source of amusement to me that in my absence Seattle has become a Mecca for the terminally hip. Destiny's a funny thing.

Anyway, now that I live in the centre of the country I find myself looking back on my West Coast days with some affection. At least I knew how to talk to people there without sounding like some weird over-educated dork. In Seattle it's normal to sound like a weird over-educated dork (Hi, my name is Fleur and I have a liberal arts degree, will that be for here or to go?). Maybe it was a surfeit of iced tea or an aversion to 97% humidity; at any rate, I had a sudden yen to pop in on the cool Pacific Northwest for a long weekend. I didn't think of it as going home, though. Too much has changed; too many years have intervened.

My family was pleased that I was coming, particularly since it would be John's first visit. My father wanted my sister and me to sift through boxes of family photographs, anything left would be thrown out. Mary Lou, my wonderful stepmother, immediately began planning a party for the three of us who have August birthdays. My sister Sarah said we could stay with her in her new house in Redmond, just down the road from Microsoft where she works. It all sounded pleasant and relaxing, the perfect vacation.

Then some bright soul suggested we have a formal photograph taken since the whole family would be together. Even though this is a rare enough occurrence, as we're all constantly travelling or moving house, I was immediately on my guard.

I probed cautiously for information. Did this mean my brother would be coming up from Portland? Yes, it did. Was he still heavily involved in his ludicrous religion, The Church Universal and Triumphant? Yes, he was. Did he still think St. Germain reincarnated every century and inconveniently dead Ascended Masters communicated through living channelers? No one had asked recently but presumably he did since he was still going to church several times a week. I was troubled by the news.

When we were children my brother and I were extremely close. We lived in a wonderful secret world of our own peopled by elves and talking animals. We played and bickered and united against all outsiders including our parents with whom we had a combative relationship. I felt no one else understood me.

To compound matters, we were being raised as Christian Scientists and were deeply confused about whether or not the world would still be there the next day. An early diet of metaphysics did us no favours when we got to school and had to interact with other children. My report cards are unanimous in describing me as intense, oversensitive and unable to get along with my peers. My brother had the same problem though he had a sunnier personality at first.

By anyone's standards we had a difficult childhood. Even now that we're all adults and more or less on speaking terms none of us really understands why it was so hellish. I think our emotional natures disturbed our phlegmatic parents and their attempts to control us were disproportionately severe. At the time we assumed we were being punished for being ourselves. In the war between adults and children our weapons were mostly passive. We learned to hide, to lie, to forget. Forgetfulness was a skill we sought eagerly. We became experts at it, so much so that to this day Mark and I have a five-year gap in our memories.

Still, everything was okay as long as we had each other. Then it changed.

About the time Mark turned fourteen he started hanging out with his male friends more often. He wouldn't take me along. He didn't want to play much any more. We started to have arguments. I was upset by the distance I sensed in him. I thought I was being shut out just because I was a girl and I resented it deeply. On rare occasions he would ask me to sing the songs we used to love and we would talk about Tolkien and science fiction with some of the old enthusiasm. But mostly he was becoming taciturn and unhappy. I felt deserted by him and betrayed by puberty. I had troubles of my own. We drifted apart.

Our interest in drugs momentarily reunited us in college. Having battled the 'real world' for so long we turned to marijuana with gusto. It was a relief to find something that muffled the vicious self-criticism that haunted us both. It was nearly as momentous as our discovery that aspirin really did cure a headache and we no longer had to suffer needlessly from minor ills (though we had to hide the aspirin bottle from our parents). Only a few friends were as dedicated to getting high as we were so once again we shared a secret interest. We smoked a lot of pot, listened to the Grateful Dead constantly, and tried to reconnect. It almost worked. Still, he was restless, constantly seeking spiritual truth. I wanted the world to be what it was and no more; Mark wanted enlightenment.

He was always experimenting with lifestyles. First it was tarot cards and psychics, a flirtation with the occult. He became a vegetarian and tried to convert everyone to the joys of wheat grass juice and fasting. He ate so many carrots his skin took on a yellow tinge. He found a book on Breatharians and was greatly taken by the concept of being so spiritual that one could live on air alone. I scoffed and the distance between us inexorably widened again.

I discovered science fiction fandom. Mark discovered Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Our paths diverged further. I eschewed all religion. He became a dedicated follower of a woman who preached a combination of Buddhism, Christian Fundamentalism, and New Age woo woo. I said he was a lost person who needed someone else to think for him. He said I was blind to the unseen forces at work in our world. His religion didn't seem to make him very happy. I had many sad and terrifying dreams about his burning eyes.

We moved to California together and shared a household off and on for three years. I grew to despise his religious morbidity. He tried desperately to convert me, worried that I'd be left behind when the Apocalypse came and took all the true believers to heaven. No logical argument moved him, no reasonable discussion got very far. Finally one night I lay weeping on my bed and admitted defeat. The twin soul I once knew was gone and in his place was a self-righteous fanatic stranger. I told my parents that I would not have further contact with him. He moved to Montana and my life went on. I grieved as though he had died. After a while I didn't dream about him any more.

Thus I was wary when Mary Lou said Mark was coming up to Seattle for the family portrait. My dad had indicated Mark was slightly less fanatic than he used to be. Apparently his guru's prediction that the world was going to end in October 1989 left him disillusioned when it didn't happen. He was working in Portland renovating historical homes which seemed responsible enough. Sarah was thoroughly disgusted by his avowed non-materialism and evangelical tendencies but she had a strong sense of family and kept trying to 'understand' him. She thought I should too but I disagreed. He didn't want to be understood, I argued. He had his agendas and his value system in place. Why bother?

Mark showed up for the birthday party. We hugged awkwardly and stood looking at each other. I finished telling Mary Lou why I had just come inside. The wind whipped up the long tails of the streamers attached to the flagpole, I said, and kept whacking me in the face. I laughed and so did Mary Lou.

"Hmm," Mark said, nodding his head wisely. "Now what do you suppose that was trying to tell you?" I looked at him steadily and replied that sometimes the wind was just the wind. He obviously disagreed but kept silent.

When dinner was served we all scrambled for seating. John and I sat at a card table and were digging into our steaks when Mark pulled up a seat. We got to talking about the

weather, a generally safe topic of conversation in my family. I was glad the weather was so beautiful, I said, especially since last summer was so terribly wet. Mark looked up from his vegetables and rice.

"Well, I was reading about that," he said calmly. "You know, the Russians have a weather machine and they control our weather. They shoot ray beams into the sky and cause it to rain. They were concentrating on the Northwest last year."

John was about ready to laugh at the obvious joke but caught the serious look on my face. "Mark," I said slowly, "the Russian economy is in collapse. They can barely feed themselves. They don't control our weather and they don't have the money to waste on speculative science." Mark pressed on.

"I suppose you read that in a newspaper," he said pityingly. I allowed as how I did, in fact, obtain some information from newspapers. He shook his head. "The Communists control our media," he confided, eyes dark and intense, radiating his zealotry. I felt a rill of fear lift the hair on the back of my neck and head. "You can't believe anything you read. It's all Communist lies," he added with great earnestness. I looked down at my plate and felt sick to my stomach.

He continued to tell me all about his church papers and communications with the Ascended Masters. John finished his steak and took his plate into the kitchen. I listened to the stranger with my brother's face and tried not to cry. The evening was a success for everyone else; birthday presents and funny cards were exchanged, news and gossip traded, plans for the rest of the weekend discussed. The following day we sat for our family portrait and then John and I went into Seattle to visit friends and shop. We didn't see my family again except for Sarah.

Back in Nashville I told my therapist about it. I had discussed my brother's oddness a few times but we hadn't gone into it much. She asked a few questions: when did he start to change, how long had he been paranoid about the Russians, and so on. She was silent for a minute and then gently said she thought he was not just a little odd or offbeat. He was most likely schizophrenic.

It hit me hard, the way the truth usually does when I've been trying to ignore it. I'd had a couple of friends who were diagnosed as schizophrenic; the clues had been there all along. It explained why no amount of love or understanding could help Mark find an elusive peace, why he needed to create an enemy to account for the sense of paranoia. It's difficult to accept but at least it makes sense. The hard part is knowing he'll never seek conventional treatment. He doesn't believe in it. He just knows he's miserable and he thinks it's a lack in him, a spiritual void that can only be lived with if he concentrates on a life hereafter where all questions will be answered and all heartaches soothed at last.

So there will be no 'cure' for Mark. Without medication he will live in his perpetual twilight world of enemies and suspicion and a harrowing sense that everything is wrong and he the wrongest of all. Long ago I lost my beloved brother to a chemical imbalance, a series of missteps and dead ends and bewildered cries for help that never came because no one knew how to answer.

I miss him with all my heart: my old playmate and companion, my pride and joy, my laughing baby brother. I only wish I could forget this, too. But I can't.

And without him I can't truly go home.

Asante Kenya

Yhos #54 -- Ed. Art Widner (1995)

I strained my eyes trying to see through the thick, heavily scored airplane window, searching for a pre-dawn glimpse of something that would tell me I was about to land in Kenya. I was tired and keyed up, nervous about my first trip to Africa. Years of watching wildlife documentaries and supporting wildlife conservation had created an urgent desire to see it all first hand, especially elephants. I wanted to see elephants striding free, crisscrossing the savanna in a timeless rhythm beat by the rains and droughts of each year. I was afraid to wait any longer. Time was running out for the great herds of East Africa. Every year they dwindled and diminished, hemmed in by ever-growing human habitation.

John and I planned a 10-day safari following the classic route, taking in Nairobi, Amboseli, Mt. Kenya, the Aberdares, Lake Nakuru, and the Maasai Mara. We chose a safari company which offered an opportunity to participate in a reforestation project. We stayed in everything from hotels to mountain lodges to tents (though admittedly the tented camp was as luxurious as a hotel). During the planning stages friends kept saying enviously, "This will be the trip of a lifetime!" I always replied firmly, "Oh no! This is just the first trip."

We got inoculated against four or five uncomfortable diseases and I got bonus inoculations for polio and tetanus since I'd never had any of my childhood shots due to a religious exemption. The doctor at the Infectious Diseases clinic acted like I'd been raised by wolves. I don't think he'd ever met a Christian Scientist before. Anyway, the shots didn't hurt and I didn't contract anything worse than an evil gastrointestinal disorder that struck everyone on the safari. We were careful about drinking and brushing our teeth with bottled water but we had to bathe in local water so the bout of Tourista was probably inevitable.

My eyestrain was in vain; it was still velvety black even after our luggage came bumping around the baggage carousel. My suitcase had imploded somewhere between Nashville and Nairobi. I didn't care. I was elated to have arrived at all. I looked at the multicoloured visa and entry stamp in my passport and rechecked my camera while we waited for the rest of the group to arrive.

Before we left on our trip John and I got kidded a lot about the fact that we were taking a Super-8 movie camera instead of a camcorder. Our friends thought we were goofy to take such ancient technology when we could have bought a really nice video camera and made our own high-tech wildlife documentary. Yeah, right. Sure, those itty-bitsy camcorders that recorded sound and light simultaneously have immense potential. You know what everyone who used one got? Hours of unseen people saying, "Dang, I'm out of film," or "Ooh, look at that one," and lots of animals with their backs to the camera. Whereas we, happily devoid of sound recording capabilities, got shot after superb shot of animals looking right at us. Why? Super-8 cameras make a distinct whirring sound. Score one for ancient technology.

After waiting for a late British Air flight we were finally collected in one place and piled into the six safari minivans for the trip into Nairobi. The sky, pale with daybreak, was dusted with high feathery clouds. As we pulled out onto the main road I was electrified to spot a small herd of impala grazing near the perimeter fence. Beyond was softly undulating savanna dotted with yellow fever acacias and brilliant jewel-toned bougainvillea. The sight of those spiral antlers in the long golden grass under a dawn sky thrilled me to the core. Welcome home, I thought. Here is where it all began. I smiled and abandoned myself to the luxury of living from moment to moment in the honey-coloured day.

The moments were awfully long between arrival and check-in. The departing tour group was running late and our rooms weren't ready. I tucked myself into one of the intricately carved ebony chairs in the lobby and looked at the huge, exotic flowers in the atrium garden. Birds chattered and swooped through the small trees, shielded by the luxurious foliage. It was hard to tell where nature left off and artifice began. Just as I decided the flamboyant fronds and flowers in tall vases near every door must be made of silk, a hotel employee arrived with

fresh-cut antherium, bird-of-paradise, and palm leaves to replace anything that looked marginally wilted.

At last we were taken to our room. Left to our own devices until the noon orientation meeting we tried to sleep but couldn't quite manage it. Two days of flights and endless waiting around airports had depleted our resources including my happy ability to sleep anywhere, anytime. I lay on my bed and listened to the morning traffic of Nairobi. A mysterious object purporting to be a mosquito-chip burner hummed and gave off a scent of mothballs. I gave up and went to find the tour director to see about getting my suitcase repaired. Everyone I passed in the hallways smiled and said, "Jambo" in a pleasant voice. "Jambo, jambo," I replied, a little shy about my grasp of Swahili but willing to say hello to everyone I met.

The tour director and I drove into central Nairobi to the Swissair office with my imploded suitcase. While Ibrahim was upstairs persuasively explaining the absolute necessity of repairing my suitcase within 48 hours to the polite but complacent Swissair personnel, I stood on the sidewalk of Mama Ngina Street and watched the people go by. Veiled women from the predominantly Muslim coastal tribes mingled with men wearing European-style suits and white shirts uncreased by the equatorial heat. Women on their way to the market carried enormous baskets of fruit, vegetables, cloth and other goods on their heads, weaving expertly in and out of traffic. The ordinary buses and cars shared the road with overloaded matatus, that staple of African transportation consisting of minivans, buses, and trucks lavishly painted with heroic or political mottoes and converted to haul as many people as could cram their way in or on the vehicle. Men shook each other's hands when they met and when they parted. The colours were vivid, parrot-bright kinte cloth competing with shimmering silks and sober blue or grey wool. Above all shone the African faces, the beautiful endless variations in warm brown and black. I fell in love with Nairobi at once.

We were taken on a short tour our first afternoon but sleep deprivation cast a shadow on the experience. I didn't think much of Karen Blixen's house in the suburb of Karen, having never read or seen 'Out of Africa' (a situation I have since remedied), although the fellow who brought over a horned chameleon to me in hopes of earning a shilling or two for a photograph was quite interesting. The Nairobi Museum may have been the pride of the city but I was more interested in living humans and animals than old bones. And the railway museum, which provided a number of fascinating statistics about the technical development of East Africa, was viewed through a growing resentment at having been jollied into the short tour. I stumped dutifully through every attraction and thought wistfully of finding a taxi back to the hotel.

The second morning, Ibrahim divided us into our cadres in preparation for the drive to Amboseli National Park. We were assigned to Leonard and van number five; we would be with the same van and driver throughout the safari. We soon realised we would be with the same six passengers as well and we cautiously tested one other for compatibility. Kay and Cathy were from Florida, both vegetarians who were very quiet and pleasant companions. The Peffers were a cheerful, outgoing couple who had apparently gone through life doing everything they thought sounded like fun. She was from Sweden, he was from Pennsylvania and they responded to virtually every piece of information offered by Leonard with a hearty 'A-ha!' Naturally we began calling them the A-ha Family and everyone found their enjoyment and zest for life irresistible and contagious. We also, inevitably, picked up the habit of saying A-ha! to everything.

Our group was amazingly compatible. All of us had the same basic agenda: photographing wildlife and learning about Kenya's culture and history. We didn't have conflicting interests or personalities. There were certainly other agendas. The pair of older women from Georgia seemed to treat each game drive as a chance to catch up on gossip or discuss the latest movie. We met a couple who were ill throughout the safari and couldn't refrain from reciting their symptoms. There was the cheery, outgoing gal from Oklahoma (named Ethel but immediately dubbed Bubbles), who headed for the bar and stayed there from the time we arrived until the wee hours but was as chipper as ever the next day. There was the snooty, fruity Swissair employee who personally handled, you understand, all the most important

clients and was on the trip because he simply *had* to use up his free trip bestowed on him by Swissair and he'd *done* Asia to *death*. There were the Junior League sisters from Atlanta who bribed a bellhop at each hotel to provide them with the huge bottles of locally-brewed beer because they liked to do their drinkin' on the road. We were glad none of them were in our van but overall we liked just about everyone.

The drive from Nairobi to the Tanzanian border was five hours, only three of them on paved roads. We zipped along the A104, Leonard deftly dodging potholes, keeping the other vans in sight. A break at a sanctioned rest stop gave us our first opportunity to barter for goods. We were not hassled but the fellows running the shops were eager for our business and it was impossible not to at least look through the rows and rows of carved animals, bead necklaces, painted shields and malachite. I was somewhat uncomfortable about bargaining but I wanted to get something for my parents. Though I did my best to be a canny bargainer I feel certain I gained no face with the chap who sold me the ebony figurines of a Maasai warrior and his wife for the princely sum of 1000 Kenyan shillings (about \$15.00), two Bic pens and a pair of Lady Footlocker socks.

Bumping along past village after village we noticed an odd combination of enterprises. Inevitably the butcher also ran a hotel. It seemed a bit macabre but in the dry open territory of Maasai land it probably made a great deal of sense. We always knew where the butchery was by the trees crowned with great Marabou storks and flocks of vultures. I looked my fill from inside the van but we were warned not to take photographs of the Maasai and in one place the villagers shook their fists at us and threw stones when Kay thoughtlessly held her camera up to take a picture of a corral. We learned our lesson and kept our cameras in our laps unless no one was in sight.

At the border we wriggled through the thriving town of Namanga and hurtled down a dirt road studded with rocks and lined with grazing donkeys. Here and there we saw women working in their small plots or filling jugs with fresh water from a well and loading them onto a donkey. The men hung out in circles near doorways or under trees, devoting themselves to great matters of the mind while their wives and daughters worked hard at the business of life. Soon enough we left all signs of habitation behind and jolted along at a great pace through an increasingly dry and stony landscape ringed with sharp-peaked hills. Leonard explained his speed by pointing out that if we went slowly we would feel every boulder and bump separately but if we went a bit fast it would seem more even. He was right, of course. I was ready to get to our destination anyway. Jet lag had not been slept out of my system yet and I felt bone weary all that day.

Once we crossed into Amboseli National Park we began looking for animals in earnest. Everyone was seeing them, giraffes and gerenuks and birds galore. Everyone except me, that is. I couldn't seem to spot anything. When I did think I saw something it inevitably turned out to be a termite mound or an old acacia. "Wonderful," I grumbled, "some safari this will be if all I see are termite mounds and tree stumps."

Fortunately, not even the tireddest traveller could have missed the beautiful sight of a young giraffe not two dozen feet from the road staring at our mud-spattered white vans. Everyone stopped and cameras clicked like mad. I began to spot giraffes here and there after that, as if the first one had somehow trained my eye. Ostriches were pretty easy to see in the grey-green foliage with their flamboyantly pink legs. Mostly I sat and let the sense of being far, far from home wash over me.

In Kenya, every drive is a game drive unless you're in downtown Nairobi but game drives within a park or reserve were really special. Everyone who goes on safari wants to see the Big Five, so called because they are the beasts who can kill men: lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo, and leopard or cheetah. We happened to have a couple of keen birders with us and within a day or two everyone on the safari became enthused about bird watching. Everyone had a favourite animal they wanted to see so our driver was on the lookout for those animals in particular. In fact, we were thrilled by everything we saw from the tiny weaver birds and their strange twig nests built at the tips of tree branches to the surly Cape buffalo with their massive horns. I wondered at the patience of the drivers who had to stop over and over

again while green tourists aimed their cameras at anything that moved. I finally asked Leonard if he ever got tired of doing the same old thing with every new group. He smiled hugely and said, "But the animals always change. It is never the same, never."

There were a few animals we never grew tired of. Elephants, giraffe and warthogs were a continual delight. Having only seen giraffes standing around enclosures at zoos, I was surprised at how fragile and graceful they are in the wild. If you think giraffes look weird individually you ought to see a whole herd of them. We saw twenty-two one night at a waterhole. They looked like visiting Martians with their antennae-like horns, attenuated bodies and thin, delicate faces. Any little noise would cause the whole group to dart awkwardly away.

The company who ran the safari was owned by Kenyans and the particular tour we were on included planting trees in Amboseli as part of a reforestation plan created by the manager of the Serena Lodge. All who stay at the Amboseli Serena are invited to plant an acacia seedling. We went with a group of about 100 tourists and did our bit for conservation by scratching our hands on the wicked thorns as we plopped the seedlings into pre-dug holes and then covered the roots with dirt and straw. John captured this activity on film. A troupe of Maasai danced and sang for us while we worked. I hope someday I can go back and see our seedlings turned into saplings. I was glad to give something to such a beautiful country, to be part of the solution instead of the problem. I'm probably overly optimistic, but at least we tried.

We soon settled into the routine. Each morning after we had arranged ourselves in the van, stowing away multiple camera bags, safari hats, and water bottles, Leonard headed out on the day's game drive. Each vehicle kicked up a vicious cloud of dust and gravel so as soon as possible the vans separated from each other. In the National Parks we were required to stay on the roads. They weren't paved roads, just deeply rutted paths cut by hundreds of minivans roaming the park each year looking for game. Clearly they would be hellishly impassable after a good rain. All of them provided hours of neck-wrenching jostling and teeth-jarring jolts. But we were determined to enjoy ourselves and no amount of discomfort could spoil the beauty of the scenery.

When we asked why the roads were so bad, Leonard told us the state of the roads in the national parks is a deliberate measure by the head of Wildlife Conservation, Dr. Richard Leakey, to minimise damage to the parks by limiting access. It's slowly working, but the damage is still evident. Ten years ago Amboseli was lush with a variety of foliage and boasted several lakes. Today it is an area of short grasses and acacias with a few swamps; it possesses a stark beauty in its present state but it is a clear example of the effect humans have on the land. With so many tourists visiting and an increasing need for grazing land by the Maasai, the wildlife has lost a lot of territory. When too many elephants, for example, depend on the same area for food, they quickly deplete their resources and turn to stripping trees of bark and knocking over other trees to get at the leaves. Erosion soon sets in. They also learn to scavenge from the garbage pits of the lodges, great for photo ops but bad for the elephants. The Kenyans have worked hard to preserve their natural resources and make conservation a national priority. The penalty for poaching is death on the spot. They're serious.

We visited in May, after the Long Rains of spring, which is not considered prime game viewing season but the variety of animals to be seen grazing a few dozen feet from busy roadways was amazing. We saw so many ostriches, zebra, Thompson's gazelle and wildebeest that we grew casual about them and wouldn't bother taking photos unless it was a particularly scenic shot. In fact, I discovered after I came back and had my photos developed that I'd managed to take only one picture of a zebra the entire time. Such a ubiquitous and photogenic animal deserved more space in my photo-album. I devoted the bulk of my film to elephants but I tried to capture some of the essence of Africa by including shots of villages and people taken at high speed out the window of our van as we travelled southern Kenya.

Finally we arrived at our lodge. It was difficult to spot it from a distance as it blended in with its surrounding remarkably well. The vans drove through a gate tended by a group of gangly young Maasai leaning on their spears and watching us watch them. When we emerged from our van the lushness of the heavily planted property overwhelmed everyone. Cool glasses of fruit juice awaited us as our tour leader checked us in and handed out room keys. The lobby and sitting areas were open to the breezes, being walled only on two sides. John and I moved along a stone pathway to our room at the very edge of the compound. We had wide views of the open plain as we walked. "Jambo," we greeted anyone we passed. "Jambo, jambo," they replied courteously. The soft syllables of Swahili delighted me and I was learning to say a few words besides hello. That night at supper I added 'asante sana', thank you very much, and 'karibu', welcome. The meal was a buffet but I don't remember much except offering a 500 shilling note to pay for my 100 shilling bottle of water and waiting 45 minutes while the waiter tried to find change. They don't mention this in the guidebooks but Kenya is absurdly short of small currency. Getting change was always a lengthy if honest process.

We retired to bed early, thoroughly worn out from the day's drive. Lying in bed listening to strange sounds was not relaxing. I strained to hear what I thought might be the roar of a lion but decided it was probably something more prosaic like a vehicle being driven inside the compound. Insects buzzed and clacked against the screened windows while I tried to read a little. At midnight the lights cut out and shortly afterwards I was asleep, dreaming I was in Africa.