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- *Chardonnay
- de Chaunac
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- Frontenac
- Levi's Reserve
- Marechal Foch
- Northern Red
- *Riesling
- St. Croix
- *Award-Winners

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I didn't know Magnolia trees could live in Nebraska. This one, part of the Arboretum in Brownville, will be blooming soon...late April or May.

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Your

COUNTRY NEIGHBOR

Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Published by Stephen Hassler

Writers this month, Thank You

- Devon Adams
- Frieda Burston
- Vicki Harger
- Merri Johnson
- Karen Ott
- Joe Smith
- Josh Whisler

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VISIT

Dramatic Expressions Photography

on the 'web'

by Your Country Neighbor Photographer,
Stephen Hassler

www.yourcountryneighbor.com/photoblog.htm

L'il Bear doesn't believe in the Groundhog anymore
by Frieda Burston

Second year in a row that he came out of hibernation to see if the Groundhog saw his shadow, and the groundhog did. So he knew that meant six more weeks of winter, and he went back into his cute little cave on the shelf outside my door, and rolled out the zzzzz's again.

And just like last year, global warming caught up with him, and the groundhog's shadow just testified that the earth is warmer than it was. It didn't say a word about the seasons.

So L'il Bear sweated in his cave, and came out damp all over. He found the old geezers wearing shorts, and the sun shining, and the snappy little old ladies from Florida walking out to the bus wearing their sun visors. (What are we doing with little old ladies from Florida? Well, they retired to the good life in Florida from the crowded life in Brooklyn, but their kids went to college and ended up in California— so they did too. After all, who's paying for all this? Not Mom and Dad, they already lived up what they got out of selling the little hardware store they sent the kids to school on.)

Anyhow, L'il Bear doesn't believe in the Groundhog anymore. Or the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy, or Santa Claus, either. He believes in Heat Rash, and Sun Stroke, and Dehydration. But not in Weather Forecasting, either. Or the Tooth Fairy.

There is a clerk at WalMart who may believe in the Tooth Fairy, or in that old Greek guy who went around in broad daylight with a lantern, looking for an Honest Man. It's this way:

I went to WalMart on our Shopping Bus, and bought a watch battery. Found I had to pay for it at the counter, not at the front check stand. Emptied my purse on the counter to get at my credit card. Paid. Shoveled everything on the counter, back into my purse. Went on and shopped. At night, got my purse ready to put away, and found a watch. Not my watch. Ugly but expensive, I'd never have bought it.

Visions of shoplifting arrests flittered through my head. What do they do with old ladies who walk off with merchandise and claim they didn't know they took it? Would Heritage Pointe hand me over immediately? Or would they try to defend me, "Oh, this resident never knows what she's doing— please show mercy this time, and we won't let her go out again!"

In the morning I called WalMart. They took it calmly. Just bring it in and leave it with Customer Service. So it might be weeks before our bus came there? No problem. Come when you can.

Six weeks later I stood in line at WalMart, watch in hand. People ahead of me were



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going through hassles because they didn't have proper papers. Dog house receipts were offered with swim suits. That kind of thing My turn came. I offered the watch to the girl and said, "No papers. I didn't pay for it. I just picked it up off the counter without realizing it. I'm just now bringing it back, my first chance, sorry."

The girl stared at me, and in a squeaky voice said, "You mean you're bringing it back out of HONESTY?" I was bringing it back out of embarrassment, but how could I explain that? So I just nodded. She threw up her hands and yelled "WOW ! WOW !" and I turned and went out as quickly and unobtrusively as I could. Like I said, she probably believes in the Tooth Fairy now.

And my grandson Shai, if he doesn't believe in Something, sure ought to. He lives in my Israeli apartment, and works the dark hour shifts at El Al at the airport. He had a day off. Made a date with a friend who goes to a religious seminary in Sderot, an Israeli town about a mile or so from Gaza. Ever since Sharon sent the Special Police to tear the Jews out of their

homes in Gaza, the Gazan Arabs have been mad at not having local targets. So they've been shooting Big Stuff from Gaza into Israel. At first to Sederot, now farther inside Israel.

Not having eaten breakfast in my kitchen, Shai asked his friend to breakfast downtown with him before going to the school. They were eating when they heard the missiles fall, blowing big holes in everything from cars to houses to playgrounds. They finished eating after the rockets finished, and went to the school.

Piles of rubble, shrapnel all over, and a dead student. If Shai had eaten breakfast in my place, he'd have been there. Somebody's watching out for Shai, and he'd better believe it. I doubt that it's Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, but it's sure enough SOMEBODY,

Let's hope that SOMEBODY really HIGH UP is watching Israel— Like L'il Bear, I'm really sweating this one out— regards, frieda

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SPRING CONVENTION

by Devon Adams

In an impromptu meeting
called to order by the fog,
which formed in an interval
void of moving air,
spring was the topic of discussion.
In a less than cordial manner,
the four winds called a truce,
so they could set storm calendar dates.
In the end, the jet stream delegates
had more power, and they decided
to whip up a storm of contention
over the candidates running
for worst catastrophe of the year.
starting early, with a combination
of blizzards and tornados,
the unsuspecting public was set up
to be ripped off in a weather scam
whose participants lost everything.
Those who were present at the meeting
told this reporter that the preceding years
have been known as "warm winters,"
during which taxpayers became infected
with complacency and continuing
expectations of comfort.
The prevailing sentiment among the winds
was one of revenge, and they voted
to retaliate on the general public.
On the drawing board are storms
of epic proportions that should result
in a new respect from humanity
for the strong forces
that are beyond their control.

Editor's note:

You can find poetry previously published by Your Country Neighbor online. Just click on "publications" at:

www.yourcountryneighbor.com

HITCHING A RIDE

by Devon Adams

He waited until spring
to hitch a ride with geese
flying close to heaven.
Their formations carved lines
across the blue of endless distance
as their plaintive voices
sang hymns of celebration
to lives that come and go.
Now he walks through gardens
in the clouds,
and watches ripples in the stream
of life that flows forever
through the river of time.

CHANGE WILL COME

by Devon Adams

The cold gray edge
cut the sky apart.
On one side was blue,
with sun falling warm
on the tired brown hills.
The other side was moving,
like a ruthless army,
advancing low over the trees,
pulling a thick layer of clouds.
The still air was shattered
by the crack of sleet hitting
bare branches and dry grass.
A bulldozer of wind followed
from the far northwest,
plowing into the fragile structure
that spring had built on the prairie.
The winter tyrant kissed with lips
of steel, as his victims shivered
in the onslaught of ice and water.
But calendars don't lie,
and the next page will be warm.

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XX Headquarters

by Joe Smith

In the summer of '49 I was working for my uncle down on the Texas line but still in New Mexico. I was staying in an old ranch house that had been there forever, it seemed, with my uncle's foreman. I was drawing \$75 a month at that time, plus room (which amounted to an army blanket out in the yard) and board. I milked a goat every night. We had no electricity so we had no refrigerator. I would put the milk in a gallon can and put it out in an old cooler, which consisted of a tray stack deal with a linen cloth around it and water in the top tray. The water would seep down the sides. The evaporation was the cooling part. The next morning the goat milk would be solid and we would dump it out and then sprinkle sugar on it and eat it. It wasn't bad. That was our supper. It was over 100 degrees every day. The total roundup took about four days in all, not counting all the work just to get ready for the roundup. This is how the first day of roundup went, one day only.

We had 66 sections to work. (That is 66 x 640 as to acres, 42,240 acres in one pasture and there were three more pastures.) It was divided into three overlapping gathers. The day before, the foreman and I put all the horses in a small one section trap so we could get them early the next morning. By early I'm talking 4 to 5 am. We had several boys come out from town and the Hackberry Ranch foreman came down plus several neighbors would show up.

It was pitch black when we started out after the horses on foot. We had to skylight them with the headlights coming from the other ranch. I don't know how we did it but we did get them in the corral. The women called us in for breakfast of goat steaks and eggs, plus some hot coffee.

I had my own horse down there and he was a good one. My uncle comes up to me and asked me if a fellow from town could ride him, as he wasn't too good of a horseman. He told me, "You can ride that little fish-back roan." The foreman from the other ranch near Tatum roped the horses for all the hands. He used a 'hoolihan loop', it is a big loop, swung from the left side and only one swing. This didn't scare the horses as much as the over head roping. He was good at it. Before long we were all saddled and ready to ride. And the rodeo started. Several of the horses broke in two and tried to dislodge their riders, mine included. They finally settled down and we started spread-

ing out to bring all the cattle into the Williams Well corrals area. It was still dark but dawn was close. We were all spread out in a large circle that would cover 5 miles at least. This was big rattlesnake country to boot so you had to watch out for them. There was lot of Mesquite brush every where.

There were about 20 of us, if I remember right. Of course, that fish-back roan had to try me again; he bucked his heart out 3 times that day and never did throw me. That would have been embarrassing to say the least.

About 10 that morning we had over 500 head rounded up and the cowboys would hold them in a bunch while a couple of real good cowhands took out the dry cows and put them in a different group. When we got that done we put all the cows and calves in the big corral. Light Horse Larry, an older cowboy that worked for my uncle, took all the dry cows and headed to another -- smaller -- pasture. (It was only 34 sections. The one we were in was 66 sections.) By noon we had started the branding. Two healers would rope the calves by the hind legs and drag them up to the fire. There, one of us boys would grab the tail and the other, the rope. The minute the calf hit the ground the rope was released and one of us had the back legs and the other the front leg with his knees on the calf's shoulder. These were big calves.

Wasn't long before we had dinner served on a 2x12 between two sawhorses. The ladies from all the neighboring ranches fixed a good lunch.

It was hot and a couple of the town boys were turning green around the gills. My uncle told me to take it easy on them as they were soft. We finally got all the cattle taken care of about dark. There were a couple of men running the branding irons, a couple marking the calves, and a couple of fellows vaccinating. I think we had 3 or 4 sets of flankers. All the calf seeds were kept in a bucket for breakfast the next day with scrambled eggs.

Uncle came around and asked me to go with another young fellow and take all the horses back to the ranch headquarters. All the saddles were loaded into one of the pickups and all the cowboys in the other except for us two guys. So they went right down an old blown out trail that was there from long ago. The horses were ready to go home so it was easy. Everybody else got to ride the pickup home. We didn't mind though, since we knew it was all in a day's work.

Now that was only the first day. This is kind of what my days were like years ago. Joe



"My Life & Times as Harve Bodine"

by Joe Smith

If you like the stories I write, you would love this story. Harve Bodine was in the Confederate Army, riding for the Quantrell Raiders. He didn't like anything that guy was doing so he and another fellow left before the end of the war and went out West. It seems he turned lawman.

The story has a lot of human feeling in it, honest emotions, true love (sorry, no hot sex scenes). The story takes place in an area I am somewhat familiar with. Other parts came from Harve himself. I had no idea where it was going. I just wrote it down like Harve told me to. Whether it actually happened or not is for you to decide. Joe Smith.




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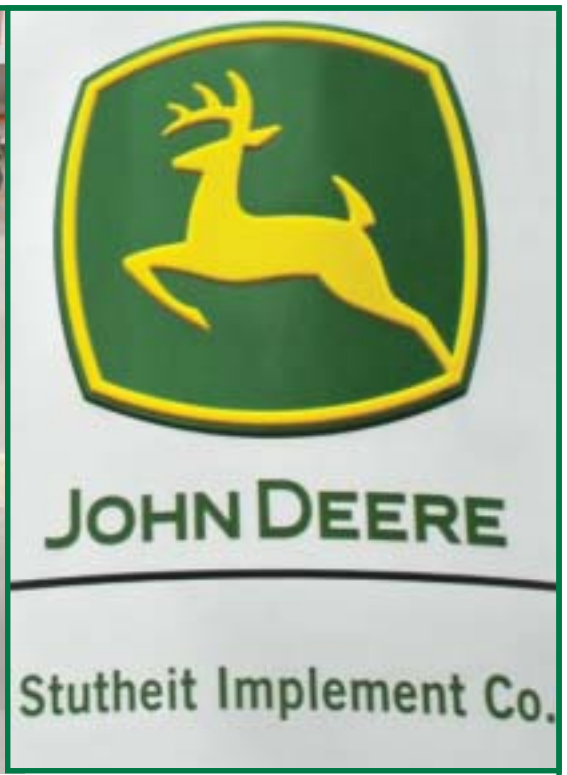
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Photos left to right:

Flowering tree in the Brownville Arboretum.

Snow Geese above Peru.

Barn from Cover photo.



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Whisler's Hunting

& Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photos provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River has risen with the recent run off from snow thaw. And with the higher water also comes the fishing action. Not a lot to speak of but enough to keep it interesting. Small channels mostly but some are keepers and the sturgeon have also been hitting pretty regular. What are they using for bait? Night crawlers and dough baits. A little safety tip is to watch the banks getting to the waters edge to fish! The mud on top has thawed while the frost is still in the ground underneath – this makes for a slip hazard that won't only throw you but you're going to be messy when you recover from it. And who knows where your pole and tackle will end up. Be careful out there.

Local ponds were producing some pretty good ice fishing early this last month but the warm up since has spoiled most of the ice and all the other runoff has settled between the pond ice and the bank to make things worse. You can't get out on the ice if you wanted to without getting wet. I did get out to ice fish early last month and to my surprise there was 12 inches of ice on the pond I hit. I was using wax worms and minnows and had fair luck with both.

Hunting:

Spring has other hunting opportunities other than turkey. I speak of the Nebraska Light Goose Conservation Action. This season has been established to control Snow and Blue Goose population. The large population of Snow and Blue Geese present a problem when they return to the Arctic nesting grounds destroying nesting habitat for other species of migratory birds. The season allows the hunter to shoot Blues and Snows with no limit of bag or possession and the hunter is allowed to call the birds with a mechanical devise (normal hunting is with month calls). All other migratory bird hunting rules apply (e.g. steel shot, shooting hours, HIP number, Federal Waterfowl Stamp). Nebraska also has a Water Fowl Stamp that must be obtained.

2008 Nebraska Light Goose Conservation Action
February 7th – April 13th

2008 Spring Turkey Seasons have been set with a few new regulation changes for the 2008 Spring Season. NEW for 2008 is that the hunter can obtain three Spring permits of any type (Bow & arrow or Shotgun) this year. Permits can be bought starting January 14th. All permits are available online at www.outdoornebraska.org, by mail through the Lincoln office or over the counter at any Commission Permitting office.


2008 Spring Turkey Season Dates are:
Shotgun: April 12 – May 18th.
Archery: March 25th - May 18th.

Hunting & fishing only had a brief pause this year. The 2008 The Spring Turkey Season is right on top of us and it's time to get your permit. The big groups of turkeys aren't splitting up much yet but soon enough. It shouldn't be long now before they're gobbling going on and coming off the roost. Until then we'll just have to wait. Remember I'm not an expert but I have my share of luck. I wonder if the experts are having any luck today? So until next time "Happy Hunting & Fishing."




This month's pictures are of Russ Pasco from Lincoln with some keeper panfish, and myself with a nice crappie taken through the ice.

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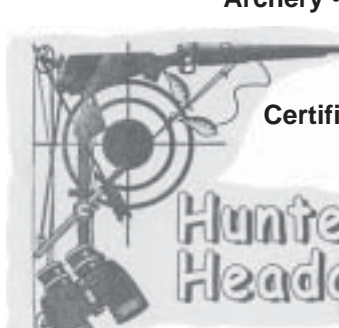
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Diary of an Unemployed Housewife

Merri Johnson

Today was one of those days of minor annoyances, the kind that test your ability to roll with the punches. If you get totally bent out of shape by *this* stuff, be glad you don't have *real* problems.

Knowing that I was going to get dirty cleaning the basement of our new home in preparation for moving in, I decided not to bother with makeup or my hair this morning. You ladies know where this is going. The day you risk leaving the house with no makeup, and sporting a mild case of bedhead, you're bound to run into someone.

As we approached the driveway of our house, I commented that the mailman was delivering in the neighborhood. "Great!" my husband responded, "I'll just flag him down and ask him where we should locate our mailbox." Yeah, great. I'd love to meet our new mailman looking like this.

My husband rolled down the window and called the mailman over and introduced himself. Being a gentleman, he also introduced me. Just this once I would have been happy to be ignored, as I tried to shrink into the seat and look the other way. No luck. I had to face him to say hello. Of course, we couldn't just have a quick exchange on the topic of mailbox placement. We had to discuss the current sorry state of affairs in the postal service's handling of mail forwarding, which has been a sore spot with us for the entire six months we've been in rental pending the completion of our house. The mailman agreed wholeheartedly with my husband's lament, which made my husband feel better. But all I could think about was how ghastly I looked. "He probably didn't even notice," my husband reassured me. I'm not sure if that should make me feel better or not.

Anyway, we moved on to the cleaning and almost immediately got into a tiff about the advisability of walking on the just-painted concrete floor in the basement storage room. My husband insisted it would be fine to walk on it after 24 hours. I wasn't convinced. Sure, it might feel dry to the touch, but would it really be cured and ready for heavy traffic? The paint can gave no advice on the subject. Wouldn't you think that would be standard information on a can of *floor* paint, for heaven's sake? We went back and forth on the matter, with each point and counter-point delivered more em-

phatically. Just when I was about to go into frustration overload, my husband saw the wisdom of my argument. He's so smart sometimes! We finished the cleaning harmoniously and left for lunch.

A message on our telephone answering machine awaited us back at our rental house. Our landlord would like to show the house to a prospective buyer on Monday afternoon. Oh, great! Tomorrow is fully booked with Easter activities and more moving prep, and we'll both be at work all day Monday, so that means the house has to be gotten ship-shape today. Tidying up for a prospective buyer is not like getting ready for company. Company won't snoop in cabinets and closets, or if they do, you might consider not inviting them back. You can shove your clutter in a cupboard or closet and no one's the wiser. But a prospective buyer is entitled to check out the storage space; you can bet they'll discover not only how much closet space there is, but also what occupies those closets. Two hours of moving stuff from the back porch out to the garage, sweeping and dusting, ironing the mountain of laundry in the guest bedroom, and sorting and stashing piles of house building documents and other miscellaneous papers ensued. Pretty fast work, if I say so myself.

At last. Time to relax. I tune in to NPR's "All Things Considered" radio show. The guest is a pastor of an Episcopal church from somewhere in the Northeast, talking about what she's giving up for Lent. Get this: carbon. She and her friends are giving up carbon, as in "reducing their carbon footprint," for Lent. Specifically, she's hanging her laundry on a clothesline in the basement instead of using her clothes dryer. Do we need more proof that environmentalism *is* a religion? I'm probably going to offend someone reading this who sincerely believes that giving up carbon is the kind of sacrifice God wants from us during Lent. I just can't buy into that.

But I'm not going to get all annoyed by it. "A Prairie Home Companion" is coming up next. And even though I suspect Garrison Keillor would applaud the Episcopal pastor and her Lenten ideas, I can forgive him for that as long as he keeps entertaining me with the news from Lake Wobegon.

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The Face of Drought

A Farm Report from Western Nebraska

by Karen Ott

Everyone gets one at least once in their life, that middle of the night phone call which pulls you from sleep like a fisherman hauls an overloaded net from the bottom of the ocean. It's usually something bad, occasionally something good, and if you're a farmer or rancher more than likely has something to do with calves on the highway.... cows on the railroad tracks.....or a couple of errant 4-H pigs rooting in neighbor's front lawn. Tuesday night it was something good.

"Mom.....we have a baby girl." Coming in at six pounds five oz. baby Allison has a head of black hair (which I'm convinced will be replaced by a fluff of blond before long) and the pouty lips of Paris Hilton. Our strapping six foot son, the one who walked at eight months, sucked his thumb until he was six, and connected our computer to the internet when he was just thirteen (only white text on black background in those days) has fathered a second daughter. He and his wife April couldn't be happier.

How different their life will be than ours was: no snips and snails and puppy dog tails; no trucks, or trains or tractors cluttering the kitchen floor; no faded jeans caked with manure or irrigation mud. Just dolls and pink dresses, frilly lace socks and shiny black patent leather shoes.....all things sugary and spicy and everything nicey. There will be dance classes and cheerleading camps, piano lessons and prom dresses, boyfriends and broken hearts; a lifetime filled with all things female. What an adventure!

The day of Allison's birth was exceptionally warm, but 24 hours later winter returned like a black-sheep brother-in-law. Today the air was bitter, the roads slick and icy. Early afternoon saw blue sky peek through the clouds but it was more gesture than anything else, the sun was the color of weak tea and offered little warmth.

Like most everyone else I'm sick and tired of winter, of wearing heavy coats and two pairs of socks. I know it's supposed to be cold, I was prepared for cold, but good grief...even a freezer door gets opened every once in a while; we've been shivering since November. Winter has put my spirit on ice and just plain worn the rest of me out.

Inclement weather normally keeps people at home, but the tire shop was exceptionally busy today, and tomorrow's schedule looks even more demanding. It seems the worse the economy gets the more we're needed: when people can't afford to buy new keeping the old in tip-top shape becomes incredibly important. Until daughter-in-law April returns from maternity

leave I'll be living my life, more or less, at my tire-shop desk. I've shoveled more paper than snow this winter and some evenings my voice is hoarse from saying, "Hello. What can we do for you today?" But I count my blessings and continue to repeat my little prayer every morning on my way into town, "Thank you God, for this work, for some people have none."

Dale spent Wednesday afternoon at a class required to renew his chemical applicator's license; he was in good company....half the county's farmers were there with him. The group gets older every year, the heads grayer, the faces more weathered. In twenty-five years the number of attendees will be quarter of what is today, and in fifty....who knows?

Who'll feed the hungry when we're gone? Will everyone be better off when Colorado's cities have stolen the farm fields dry and short-sighted environmentalists have litigated Wyoming's water and grazing lands from the hands of agriculture? Is it the destiny of the high plains to be divided and subdivided into 'ranchettes' so America's Neuvo rich can build palatial country homes, pull on cowboy boots, and pretend to be something they're not?

A few years of good commodity prices won't stop what's happening, the game's been set, the die cast. Someday the world's going to miss us...mark my words.

The panhandle experienced a bit of excitement last week when a mountain lion was shot and killed in a housing development near the Scottsbluff golf course. For years there have been various sightings of the big cats, some confirmed, some pooh-poohed by authorities as being the result of overactive imaginations....or one too many cans of beer. This time there was no

doubt.

The first to see it was an 18 month old toddler, who, according to her parents, stood looking at it through their sliding glass door "as if it were a big kitty." Only after attempts to tranquilize the unlucky creature proved unsuccessful was the cat was killed. It was a beautiful animal.....and I mourn its passing.

And in closing: We won't be spending (in the normal sense of the word) our tax 'rebate.' The money will be going towards principle reduction on one of our bank notes.

In the old days society would have been asked to bite the bullet and sacrifice its way to a healthy economy...today we're told our patriot duty is to go shopping.

Who would have thought?

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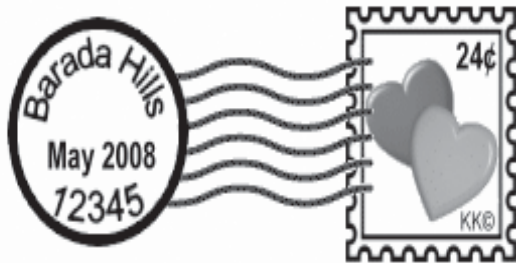
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"Mission of Madness... Miracle of Love"

by Vicki Harger

It was quite a proposal, I must say...

Darkness was closing in on the River Bluff. There we were in front of a crackling fireplace as a sudden snowstorm roared in from the West. The atmosphere inside the lodge was cozy and rustic... Enormous beams... tall ceilings... huge windows overlooking the Missouri River.

Steven came and knelt before me, his face tender in the firelight. "Vic..." he said, taking my hand. "I love you so much."

His eyes were bright with something...I think it was tears. "You're so beautiful and funny and clever and unique. There's no one else quite like you in the world."

He squeezed my hand and smiled at me. "How do you do it, Vic? Somehow, you soothe and thrill me all at the same time. I can't think of living without you!"

His words left me speechless. Overwhelmed. Oh my...! How could a man feel that way about a simple gal from the Barada Hills?

I wasn't used to this side of Steven at all. I was accustomed to his wacky sense of humor. His infectious laughter...the made-up words and crazy nicknames that he gives me. I really didn't know this somber suitor who sounded so tender.

"Vicki..." Steven leaned forward, and murmured in my ear. "I love you...Will you marry me?"

I slowly let out my breath, unaware that I'd been holding it. "Oh all right, Stevie..." I whispered. "If you really want me to!" My words were a surprise, even to myself.

Our friendship was a paradox. Really. In some ways, Steven and I were strangers—yet in other ways we were best friends. Internet Dating had introduced me to this man...this California native. We'd known each other for over a year, now—but not until a few days ago had we actually met face to face....

We sat looking at one another as the firelight flickered across the rafters. Two soulmate/strangers staring into each other's eyes—thinking about all the tomorrows in our future.

Shadows danced across the ceiling and down the walls. The fire crackled. "Vic—I've got to get on the plane early tomorrow morning," Steven said. "But how can I leave you now? I knew once I met you, I'd fall madly in love—but I had no idea it would be like this...."

We held hands and discussed the matter while the blizzard hammered against the windows. It didn't take us long to realize that we needed something tangible to seal our togetherness...

"We need to get you some kind of ring..." Steven said, patting my hand. He got to his feet. "Let's run to the store tonight and get a little something for your finger... Ok, Vic?"

I stared at him. "Run to the store, right now?...In this storm... Stevie! Town is ten miles away! Are you sure?"

Yes he was sure. "I'm leaving tomorrow morning...It's now or never, Vic."

Oh dear.

The only place open tonight was a discount store! I giggled and jumped to my feet....But what the Hey! Beggars can't be choosers. A discount store would have to do!

Laughing, we hugged each other like happy children. Our sentimental, romantic sopppiness had vanished. We were set for adventure. Grabbing our coats, we headed for the door.

The Pamida store would be closing at eight o'clock sharp. We had less than 25 minutes to get to town. Such a trek was nuts—pure insanity, of course...But soon we found ourselves in my little Saturn, heading into the blizzard with me behind the wheel...

...No way was I letting Mr. California drive. Not in this weather!

The blinding fury blasted us from the west, pummeling us with shards of frozen snow. No one else was on the road, tonight. Nobody sane, anyways... Just us...love-crazed fools. I hunched behind the wheel and drove as fast as I dared, glancing at the clock on the dashboard. 7:43. We had seventeen minutes.

Swish-swash. Swish-swash. The windshield wipers fought to keep up with the snow, but it wasn't easy. The sky was dumping.

Flashing lights up ahead. The back-end of a snow plow loomed in the roadway. I didn't hesitate. Pulling into the opposite lane, we roared past, leaving him behind in snowy plumes.

Eat my dust, Mr. SnowPlow! Onward we flew with our Mission of Madness.

Without a snowplow to clear the way ahead of us, the road conditions grew worse. We began to fishtail a bit. Slipping and sliding. California Man sat beside me, motionless. I wasn't sure he was even breathing.

Swish-swash...Clunk! Swish-swash...Clunk! Ice was building up on the wipers.

I could see a white glow in the distance. The lights of Auburn...We were almost there. Up ahead were stop signs and traffic lights and slow-moving cars. Oh me! We didn't want that! I had to think fast. Should we take the side-road that skirts town?

But of course!

Abruptly, I made a sharp turn, nearly tipping Steven over. Righting himself, he peered out the windshield at the winding, narrow road stretching before us... It was steep and unplowed.

I stepped on the accelerator harder.

"Uh...did you see that sign?"

Steven murmured. "It says there's a tight curve up ahead."

"Oh Stevie," I said, "I know this road. Trust me! I know this road—" My words ended in a muffled shriek. I hit the brakes, but we overshot the corner, anyway. Fortunately there was a driveway there, or we would've ended up in the ditch. We blundered to a halt, and I threw the car into reverse.

"Sorry about that, Stevie."

I shifted gears and spun back onto the highway. My suitor didn't say a word.

Up a hill...down a hill...around a corner....and there it was. Pamida. Big as life. The lights were still on. It was 7:50.

I stopped the car and we jumped out, sprinting through the swirling snow toward the door. Inside the store, we came to a halt by the cashier's counter, panting.

"Ma'am," I said. "Where's the jewelry department? We need a ring!"

I don't know how it must've looked...Two overgrown teenagers dashing in at closing time with Emergency written all over their faces. The cashier's eyebrows rose, but she took it all in stride. Had probably seen worse in her day. She waved at a nearby counter. "There it is," she said.

I looked at the counter and my heart sank. It was worse than I'd feared. This store had no jewelry department, at all. Just one dinky glassed-in case near the checkout counter.

But what had I expected...? Zales Fine Jewelry?

Steven and I stood staring down into the glass case. It wasn't till this moment that the utter foolishness of our mission overwhelmed me. We'd risked life and limb in a blinding snowstorm for what...? This silly bit of jewelry? \$19.99....said the sign on a tray of rings. They looked like they came from a bubble gum machine. Or a Cracker Jack box.

A kind sales clerk took pity on us. "Can I help you?"

Help us, indeed. We certainly needed it. Psychiatric help, probably. I tried to sound sane and reasonable. "Right," I said. "We just need a little something—" I trailed off.

A-little-something-for-my-finger?

It had sounded so romantic in front of a crackling fire. Now it sounded absurd.

I stared down into the glass case. Suddenly, I felt a mild stirring of hope. "What is that?" I said. "Is that Black Hills Gold?" There were only a couple of rings there. But they looked promising. I've always loved Black Hills Gold.

Steven leaned over and peered into the case. "Those are pretty, Vic..."

The clerk brought out the rings. Looking at the price tags, I sagged to

a new low. The cost was horrendous!...even at discount store prices. Steven hadn't come prepared for this, I was sure. Hundreds of dollars...? I couldn't let him do that—even if he wanted to.

Idly, I picked up one of the rings and slipped it on my finger. It fit. Not too big. Not too small...like it was made for me. I looked at the delicate design... I loved those swirly vines and little golden leaves—a distinct Black Hills trademark. The ring was lovely. Just right for a country girl from the Barada Hills.

I sighed. "It costs too much—" I said, then stopped. That wasn't true. Not only did this ring have the lowest price tag...there was something else I'd overlooked. My gaze fastened on a nearby sign... 60% off all fine jewelry.

Oh my. Surely miracles like this don't just happen. Not in a Pamida store. Not in the middle of a freakish spring snowstorm. Not to Crazy Vic.

I looked up at my man. He smiled. "We'll take it," Steven said.

The clerk rang it up. I couldn't believe it. I'd never in my life seen Black Hills Gold sell that cheaply. How had it happened?

The clock struck eight. We walked out the door into a fantasy world...a velvety white landscape. I felt dreamy. I was Cinderella, heading for my coach....and Stevie was my Prince.

Back in the car, Steven took the ring out of its little box. He put the Black Hills Gold on the hand of the Barada Hills girl...wrapping her finger up in swirly golden tendrils and vines.

It was a romantic moment, indeed...Sitting there in the snowy parking lot with the lights of the store sparkling on my new ring. Then Steven reached for me. He kissed me tenderly and everything faded into white bliss.

But I no longer saw blizzards and blinding snow.

In my mind's eye, I could see long white beaches stretching forever. Sand and sun and surf. Palm trees swaying in the breeze. And there...Walking down the beach was the California Man with his bare-footed Barada Hills Bride...The two disappeared into the sunset—both of them all tangled up in the swirly, curly tendrils of their love.

It was a lovely image...a vision of tomorrow—and it had emerged from a freakish Nebraska snowstorm. I sighed with contentment.

From a mission of madness...had come a miracle of Love.

I knew it would last forever.

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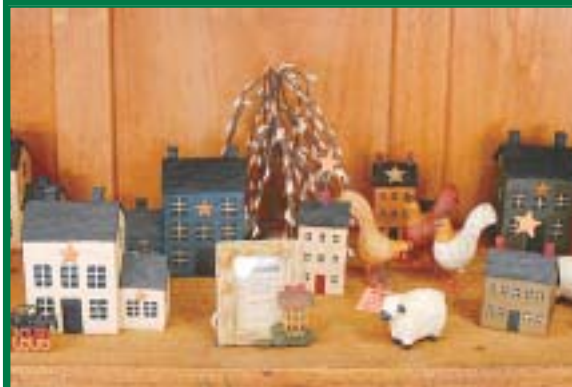
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