

*The Sweetness of Cowboys*

*By Wendy Cohan*

*April.* Many months pass by in the darkness of a long Montana winter. I'm still learning to navigate the frozen streets of my heart and winter in Missoula. Dancing helps, and music, too. But it's time to move on from last fall's soulful Van Morrison to light-hearted bluegrass and new-grass, which seems appropriate as I start my life over.

According to my new cowboy jitterbug partner, who hails from Lincoln, Montana, Ted Kaczynski, aka, the Unibomber, was not the strangest resident in town, but actually somewhere mid-spectrum.

"Why? What was he like?" I ask Cal, wondering by what criteria he determined this.

"Well, Ted could make pretty good eye contact. He came to the library regularly, and he was an excellent math tutor to our junior high kids. Genius-level smart. We just couldn't believe it when the FBI busted him. Thought it was a conspiracy, because Ted seemed like a decent guy. Bit of an introvert, though."

This is the kind of conversation I could never imagine having before moving to Montana, before I pulled up my city roots and changed my life completely.

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I meet Cal one late-winter night at the Union Club, which isn't a dive bar, but might initially give that impression. As I wait for my drink, I glance around the room. Couples everywhere, as far as I can see. As the band launches into Guy Clark's, "Ain't Gonna Sing No Lonesome Tune," one of my favorites, I wander alone onto the dance floor, sway a little to the music, and look hopefully around the room. Sitting at a table near the back are two gentlemen my age. As the song ends, I wander toward their table, drink in hand. I've never done this

before—asked a stranger to dance. But my feet move in their direction, my mouth opens, and the words tumble out. In a heartbeat, this handsome silver fox with a handlebar mustache jumps up. “Right on, Darlin’” he says. “I’ll take you for a spin.”

“Cal” and I set ourselves up on the dance floor as the band starts into an original Russ Nasset tune. Somewhat awkwardly, we arrange our hands, and position our torsos, and begin the in-and-out seesaw of the jitterbug, hips bumping lightly. I glance down at my feet: *right, left, back-step, right, left, back-step*. Cal is a strong leader. He explains that he dances in only one style, “Missouri River Cowboy Jitterbug.” He stays relatively stationary, and uses his ‘throwing arm’ to twirl me out and bring me back in. “I won’t step on your feet,” Cal promises, “as long as you keep ‘em out of my way.”

We jitterbug slow, we jitterbug fast and we start getting good at the basics. We’re well-matched in height, with the top of my head reaching about to his bushy eyebrows. Cal says, “You’re a pretty good dancer,” which I find hard to believe since I’m thirty years out of practice. And at the end of one particularly-energetic number, Cal pulls me in and plants a loud, smacking kiss in the middle of my forehead. Then he throws back his head and laughs. It’s a nice feeling. At one point, he turns me around and pulls me back against his chest, our arms still entwined. We rock back and forth that way for a few bars, before he un-pretzels our arms and sends me spinning out again.

Cal’s arms are lean and lithe and covered with fine blonde hairs. His shoulders are broad, and his hips and waist are narrow. He has a strong frame, but I suspect he hasn’t had anyone feeding him lately. If I took him on, I’d want to take him home and fatten him up, just a little. But this possibility is beyond my current capability in every respect.

As I lean back into a dip, I gaze up at a pair of sparkling blue eyes in the nicely-weathered face of this man I've only just met. He's been many things, but, mainly, he's spent many years as the hard-working foreman of a large cattle ranch on Montana's eastern Front. He hand-rolls his cigarettes as he sips ever so slowly on his whisky and water. His manners are courtly in the way of a cowboy of the last century.

Cal looks like the star of an old western, with silvery hair long enough to touch his collar and the drooping mustache of Sam Elliott. His voice is deep with a hint of gravel, rising in pitch with excitement. As he walks me to my car at the end of the evening he puts his hand on my elbow and leans in close. "Shoot, Darlin,' I like you."

I look sideways at him and ask, not coyly but in a direct way, "What do you like about me?"

"Well," he says, "You've got good muscle tone. That long muscle that runs up along your spine? I held onto that all night."

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Every evening after work, Wylie and I run together through the fields of yellow grass and sweet clover at Kelly Island. Just before the sun heads over the horizon, I sit on a downed cottonwood log, bleached silvery smooth by years of Montana weather.

Wylie props himself against my knees, gazing out at the riparian forest, ears up and alert for sounds of wildlife beyond human hearing. I rub little circles on the top of his head and reach around to bury my fingers in the thick hair on his chest. Wylie leans in closer, ninety-five pounds of canine comfort. The silence is interrupted only by the calls of woodpeckers.

I let thoughts come to me, and I let them leave. Like the birds flitting above my head. Like butterflies. There is no hurry.

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My new friend Cal and I dance together every week or two. His solid presence is warm and comforting, and he becomes a kind of crusty, no-bullshit mentor who always speaks the truth.

“I don’t think men are attracted to me.”

*“Look in the mirror, Sweetheart.”*

“I have a lot going on right now.”

*“Call me when the lightning storm is over.”*

One thing I never allow myself to do is to lay my head against his chest when we dance to the slower tunes. *What if I wanted to leave it there?* Cal smells deliciously like a combination of quality pipe tobacco, leather, and wood shavings, so sometimes is harder than you might think. Cal is just completely foreign terrain from every man I’ve ever dated, and I don’t have a compass.

One night, following a horrendous, botched, root canal, I call Cal in a Percocet-induced fog: “I have to take my toilet out because the guys are coming in the morning to install my new floors. What do I do?” I ask, secretly hoping he’ll charge right over and take care of the problem so I can go back to dreamland.

Instead, he patiently talks me through shutting off the water valve, holding the handle down until the tank was emptied, disconnecting the toilet from the tank, and the bowl from the wall. He breaks the steps down perfectly and calmly, as if he’s removed and installed a hundred toilets with his eyes shut.

I carry the whole thing in pieces out to my front porch, scrape the remnants of gooey beeswax from the floor and then from my hands, and drag myself upstairs for a long, hot shower. As I drift off to sleep with an ice-pack against my jaw, my phone chirps out a text from Cal: *“Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.”* I smile as I drift off to sleep, grateful to have my own leathery, silver-haired, tobacco-chewing Yoda who tells me, often, “Sweetheart, you have everything you need.”

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With or without Cal, I keep dancing as often as possible. But, still in search of my other new tribal members, I also join a hiking group and a backpacking meetup. I summit a few peaks and survive a blustery, weekend backpacking trip, which prompts me to start filling in the blanks in my arsenal of outdoor gear.

Last August, when I left the bright-blue home I lived in for twenty years, the comfortable nest where we raised our two sons, I brought with me only half of the cook-kit, all four of our inflatable pads, and the water purifier. Clearly, I was not thinking clearly.

I wake early, throw on my khaki shorts and a T-shirt and head down the highway with a ripe nectarine in my mouth, determined to get to the members-only REI garage sale early enough to beat the crowd. After we wait for half an hour in the hot sun, the store clerk came out to go over the rules: “no pushing, shoving, or hoarding—play nice, kids,” the green-smocked clerk called over her shoulder, before unlocking the door.

Following the stream of fit, tan people in the door, I head over to the storage bins filled with perfectly good, recently-returned merchandise tagged with little cardboard notes. “Scuffed,” for example, reads the tag on the expensive leather hiking boots, which have seen some serious wear. (REI has a very-generous return policy.) I score a Sierra Designs sleeping bag, 100% goose-down, and a half-price two-person tent. Their mossy-green hues match perfectly.

“*Honey, I’m home....*,” I call out to the dog, who has been patiently waiting for my return. It’s consistently rewarding to have someone in my life who is always this happy to see me. I drag out my backpacking gear, which has been spilling out of the coat-coat closet, ever since the louvered door fell off in its struggle with the vacuum cleaner. My new tent goes up easily. I inflate my old Thermarest and toss it inside, followed by my new sleeping bag, and a paperback I’ve just started reading. K 103.3 FM – “The Trail” keeps me entertained while I assemble a snug, little camp in my living room.

Dropping my shorts to the floor, I tear off my sweaty T-shirt and pull over my head my one splurge—a gorgeous, cotton knit dress in little rivulets of blue and green, like a mountain stream. Then, I crawl into the tent and snuggle into my sleeping bag, sinking into three-quarter inches of warm, Gore-Tex-covered air. Patting the tent floor, I call the mutt to join me, since he is standing there wagging his tail in hope. Once Wylie is settled, I turn onto my side to nap and dream. No one is here to tell me it was odd behavior for a fifty-six-year-old woman on a hot July day.

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Stuck is an unproductive place to be, even if you're relatively content. So, it's time to devise a stone with which to kill a bevy of birds: ease my loneliness, indulge my need to care for others, tap into a new flow of information from the Universe, and make some money. After a couple of trips to the home goods stores, I open the two remaining bedrooms in my small house to Air BnB guests. "Aspen Grove Cottage" quickly becomes the new place to stay in Missoula.

In a few short months, I welcome dozens of Forest Service employees, peach-faced college students, world travelers, digital nomads, videographers, Buddhists, and even one lonely, newly-divorced and attractive male just my age. My brightly decorated home is now filled with interesting conversation and classic breakfast smells: Mexican coffee, alder-smoked bacon, freshly cut oranges. Strawberries. This simple action has brought me what I was craving: *Movement. People. Connection.*

Wylie looks at me as if to say, "Duh, Mom. Why didn't you think of this sooner?" Air BnB has brought him benefits, too: *Strangers to sniff and endless belly-rubs!* And at least a dozen five-star reviews for "world's sweetest dog." One visitor called him "a gigantic ball of happy."

Things are definitely better, but I'm still feeling like I'm sitting on the banks of the river of life. I can see it, but I haven't yet gotten my feet wet. One late-July morning, I'm hiking in Pattee Canyon with one of my favorite guests. Susan is a happily unattached female in her

forties, here for a week to check out Missoula as a potential place to live. She understands being stuck, just as she understands the need to find one's place in the world.

“I think you need to surrender,” says Susan, a practicing Buddhist. “Just start saying “yes” to every opportunity that comes your way—and see what happens.”

Then she tells me that a very unhappy and stuck person named Michael Singer began his own “Surrender Experiment,” and it totally transformed his life, naturally leading to a best-selling book. As he said “yes” to the many, strange opportunities that fell across his path, curious and delightful things began to happen. Well, wouldn't some delightful be delightful, right about now?

Only a few days later, I stop into the Union Club for something to do. Mike, the friendly doorman, asks me if I'd come for the open mic comedy, which takes place the first Thursday of every month. “Gonna do a set, are ya? It looks like a pretty good crowd tonight.”

“Uh, I hadn't thought about it. I don't have anything prepared. I've never done anything like this. Never even been on stage...”

Mike shrugged a lanky shoulder, smoothed his long mustache. “Give it a try. It's a pretty easy audience. Might as well go for it.”

Because I want to be brave instead of stuck, I walk over and introduce myself to the hosts. Then, I nervously find a seat and await my turn. Fifteen minutes later, in a shaking voice, I begin, “*I drove all the way to Great Falls to meet someone from Match.com, in February. I wouldn't recommend it...*” and for some reason, people begin to laugh.

I just talk...about my life as a mother, and as a newly-divorced, newly-transplanted woman of a certain age. It is all true—every word—even the part where the guy couldn't pick me up for our date because he had half an elk carcass in the backseat. My dating life must be relatable, because half-a-dozen women high-five me as I leave the stage and the bartender hands me a free drink called a “Dark and Stormy,” which, at that point, I really need. My body is vibrating with new energy.

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On a Friday night in late summer, I walk into Draughtworks to meet my friend Cal. There he is, wearing a close-fitting blue denim work shirt that looks as if he was born in it, and bearing the clean scent of fresh sawdust. He likes the band, which pleases me, as he's here at my invitation. Carolyn Keys is gifted with a sweet, rich voice meant for bluegrass, and she also plays standup-bass, banjo, and guitar. Lucky us. We sit at a table near the door, ready for a quick escape if it gets too crowded, but so far, we have the entire back corner of the bar to ourselves. Soon we're up dancing in a place where no one usually dances, and just like always, it feels so very natural. I lean up close.

“You know, it's kind of strange, but it feels like we've been dancing together forever.” Cal just nods and smiles with his spark-filled green eyes and seizes the opportunity to spin me out again. After a very-pleasant two hours, the band begins wrapping up. We sit, sipping on warm root beer, no ice, no straw—a reasonable facsimile for a hefty pint of Draughtworks' Last Rites Mexican Chocolate Porter. (Cal and I both hate the taste of beer.) It's finally quiet enough to talk, and just when we get into it, a very-buzzed young lady came up to us on her way to the bar.

“You two were bringing the thunder,” she roars. “Now, are you gonna take her home and make sweet, sweet love to her?”

Cal and I haven't crossed that bridge, yet, and who knows if we ever will? Covering my blush of embarrassment, I turn to Cal, “did you pay her to say that? He jokingly pulls a wad of bills out his wallet, but by then the drunk girl has left us and is on her way to top up her tank.

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It turns out to be a busy summer, dancing and flirting with Cal, dipping my toes into standup comedy, hosting Air BnB guests, and fitting in as many mountain hikes as I can. I climb Cha paa qnn and St. Mary's peaks, hike to Crescent and Heart Lakes in the Missions, my favorite mountains, kayak the Bitterroot and the Blackfoot rivers, hike every inch of Pattee Canyon, and



most of the Bitterroot, too. The Universe, and Cal, both seem to be telling me, “you’ll be just fine.” It’s the natural state of human beings to be modestly happy, and I am.

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*September.* Russ Nasset and his band are back in great form, and since we’re early, we have the dance floor to ourselves. I’m leaving early in the morning for a backpacking trip, so Cal wants to take advantage of every minute of dance time, and he barely lets me sit down. I’m loving my new cowgirl boots, slick but not too slick, and incredibly comfortable. (The lady at the boot store said she can always tell when she’s made a sale when the customer pulls on a pair of boots and says, “ahh...”)

Cal makes all the other men in the bar look like sticks in the mud, I think, as I watch the envious eyes of women track us around the dance floor. I’m feeling lucky, and happy, to be here with him. When the last slow song of the night begins to play, I move into his arms. I lay my head lightly on his shoulder, just for a moment. I just want to know what it feels like. I know perfectly well that this is crossing a boundary, breaking a rule. But Cal doesn’t say anything, just gently pulls me closer. I breathe in his unmistakable scent.

Cal walks me to my car. We kiss once and hug tightly. The wind is whipping down Hellgate Canyon, literally freezing my cheeks. I wrap my arms around his chest, beneath his jacket where it is toasty warm. Because we’re so close in height, his lips just naturally find my neck for a few, delicious moments. We pull apart a bit reluctantly. We haven’t really talked about any of this yet. We’ve been too busy dancing, where the music is always too loud for an intimate conversation. I know how much love I have to give someone, and I’m really afraid to risk my heart again. I know that Cal and I already work as friends and dancing partners. For now, maybe that’s enough.

My phone beeps as I pulled up in front of my house. “*Thanks, Sweetheart.*”

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While on my backpacking trip with a new Meetup group, I think about Cal entirely too often, all alone in my tent, shivering in the long, cold night. And I have a serious bone to pick with those Sierra Designs people. What were they thinking rating this bag to twenty-three degrees?

As I drive home from the Rattlesnake, I hear this strong, clear voice in my head, possibly my mother’s: “just because something *can* happen, doesn’t mean it *should*.”

I find Cal very attractive, fun, smart and kind. He’s a winning combination of charisma and grace. He’s impressed me in all sorts of ways: he thanks the band for playing each night we’ve danced, he stops to greet one of his employees in a crowded bar, he welcomes a friend of mine who stopped by our table to say hello, and he’s the best dance partner a girl could ask for. Maybe even in the whole history of cowboy swing.

Cal is the sweetness in between. But, truthfully, I am still in love with someone else, even though he is thousands of miles away even though I have not laid eyes on in months and might not ever again. But, there just seems to be no way that I can stop loving him, and, at least for now, maybe there is no reason why I should. No hurry at all.

I’ve never been very good at allowing life to unfold for me, but this is precisely what I need to do now. As Willie Nelson says, “The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” *Patience, Grasshopper*. My heart needs time to heal—so I give myself this gift.

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I didn’t come to Montana alone, the first time, but with my husband and children. Together we purchased five acres near Glacier National Park, complete with an old, tin-roofed

cabin. When I say cabin, I don't mean second home made of rustic materials but possessing all modern conveniences. Here, the bathroom is a single-seater with a half-moon carved in the side, and no sink. In the separation, I ended up with the cabin, my trusty Subaru wagon, and Wylie. I'll take it.

Another winter has gone by, and it looks like my cabin and I have both survived, still upright. Although melting drifts had piled up against the North side, the West-facing path to the door was mostly clear. I pick my way across the densely-packed snow, pock-marked by fallen pine cones, larch needles, and a few random branches that have fallen over the winter. Not that the winter was over—I've lived in Montana long enough to know that—but a Chinook has swept in and brought the temperature up into the fifties. Winter birds flit about in the cedars, emitting little peeps and chirps, but the predominant sound I hear is water dripping from tree limbs. I unlock the door and step inside.

The cabin is frigid—so much colder than outside, that it's always kind of hard to believe. I make a quick cup of tea, sweeten it with honey, then head outside to sit on the sagging front stoop. Sipping my tea, I turn my face up to bask in the sun's light and warmth. Wylie runs around in circles, ecstatically taking in an entire winter's worth of smells. I think we're both pretty happy to be here again.

Despite a valiant effort by our real estate agent, no one stepped up yet to buy our little patch of woods in the North Fork, not even to create a “glamping” resort or a yoga retreat, which are both great ideas. But we live in uncertain times. It's scary to stick your neck out on a business venture when you don't know how quickly the planet is warming and whether this forest will survive or will soon be devoured by opportunistic insects or a catastrophic fire.

For such a small space, this cabin holds a painfully-large chunk of my past. But, despite the vague feeling of melancholy, I don't regret a minute of the time I spent here with my husband—only that our life together ended without anyone really fighting for it. As my new mentor in truth-seeking, Pema Chödrön, says: *"Things come together, and they fall apart,"* sometimes without making much of a sound. Thirty years *should* have made a hell of a sound. Instead, our marriage received a quiet burial, with a closed casket and no discernable ceremony.

I filed for divorce appropriately enough, on November, 2nd, the "Day of the Dead." This also happens to be a widely-celebrated Missoula holiday, but I wasn't in a mood to celebrate. After signing the papers, I walked two blocks in the bright fall sunshine, from my attorney's office to *Sweet Peaks*. I bought my wounded soul a double scoop of pink-lemonade-huckleberry sorbet, which is just as good as it sounds. Then, on my way home, I picked up flowers, salted-almond dark chocolate, and a good bottle of Malbec at Orange Street Market. I then cozied into my couch and watched the entire season of "Fixer-Upper" on Netflix without moving. I wish, sincerely, that Chip and JoAnna Gaines were my close personal friends. I'd offer to babysit their well-behaved kids and tend their little flock of pygmy goats. I've always been good at making myself useful—just not indispensable: The fact that my husband did not want or need me is now inescapable, a simple, mathematical equation. I have it in writing, signed by a judge, and locked in my safe-deposit box.

No part of me is happy about this outcome, but I accept it. Ending things is just something that we needed to do, a choice that we had to make. Of course, I didn't come to this realization right away, but, eventually, I came to believe the words of the Indian yogi and mystic, Sadghuru: *"A spouse is not a destination, but a fellow traveler."* I find myself wishing that every

twenty-something woman with stars in her eyes could know this and believe this, before all those huge, unrealistic promises are made, before decades go by, before hearts are broken.

My husband and I traveled together for a long time—too long, in all probability. And, although there are many possible travel companions in life, it's perfectly OK to fly solo for a while. Maybe it's even good for us, as this past year has been good for me. Here, in the most grounding, peaceful place I know, it's easy to believe that I already have everything I need to have a happy life. But this past year hasn't been easy. Not by a long shot.

In fact, happy is a feeling I've not been closely acquainted with recently. What happened was, in late September, before the first snowfall, I stopped dancing. While Cal had tried to be supportive in his gruff, Montana-cowboy, Yoda sort of way—I was short-tempered and humorless, joylessly dragging myself through the final, busy tasks of divorce and financial disentanglement, and heartbreak.

I wanted nothing to do with Cal, or with any other man, or, to be honest, with anyone or anything, for two solid months. In fact, I ignored a whole slew of random texts from Cal, like: *"Thinking of you makes me smile out loud,"* and *"Just breathe, Sweetheart."* My cynical smashed-up heart wondered if Cal really cares about me, or if he's just another manipulative, narcissistic man out to break me, for good, this time. Trust no longer comes easily to me.

I stayed in "hunker down and get 'er done" mode, on my own, without ever reaching out for the support that I knew was there from my friends, from my kids, and from my whole family. I don't really know why I chose to isolate myself—but I went to ground, as if it were the only way to accomplish my mission. But, I think it might have had something to do with shame. I have felt shame, bone-deep, for failing in my marriage—an emotion that is the opposite of helpful.

The dark, drudgery of divorce finally ended, on December 7th, D-Day—a date that’s just a little too easy to remember. I stayed in bed and cried for about twenty-four hours straight. After all, thirty years is worth a little respect, and the grief that comes with it.

When I came up for air—the first person I thought of was Cal. It was simple—I missed him. I mean, I really missed him, everything about him.

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On Christmas Eve, I bake a pile of Finnish ribbon cookies, pecan snowballs, and jam-filled thumbprints. After a quick phone call, I show up at Cal’s house, where he is on hospice duty, sticking close to his ailing black-and-white tuxedo kitty. We talk for hours, as he tenderly cares for her, as feathery flakes drift down outside the kitchen window. We eat some more snowball cookies, drink cups and cups of tea. I hold his cat’s weightless body on my lap. *Pleased to meet you and goodbye*, we say to each other.

After a long while, Cal gently pulls my wool-covered feet up into his lap, rubs warmth into them with his big hands, which feels sensational and more. Something real and undeniable begins to grow and take form between us. It shimmers there like an unopened Christmas gift. As we watch the day turn to dusk, I reach for Cal’s hand. I feel his warmth and openness, his gentleness and his strength. I feel possibility, and forgiveness, even. This is a man I already know well, so when the moment feels right, I reach for all of him.

Cal has the combination strength and tenderness I’ve been craving all my life, and which, for so long, has always eluded me. I had very nearly given up hope. *And me, a perennial optimist*. I’ve been searching for a man who is comfortable enough to just show up in his own skin, and I finally found him. Cal is authentically who he is—completely without artifice. And he’s heart-meltingly romantic, too. Most cowboys are, he tells me, and he should know.

I love it when Cal places the palms of his hands on my cheeks and leans in close, which is how I know it's going to be a really good kiss. Then, he takes possession of my lips, very, very slowly. His kiss is gentle at first, and then it builds, like all the best kisses, growing into a conversation. I do my part, too, because I have a great deal to say, and I've held so much back.

It's a first kiss that carries both of us forward—even though I'm still a bit of a mess, even though Cal, too, had thought he was closed off to loving again. But, none of this really matters. It's just the weather, and it's going to blow over soon enough.

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