

*Alison Baker*

## How I Came West, and Why I Stayed

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**I**T WAS A long, strange trip, over frozen plains and rivers and into the mountains; but when the going got really tough, I'd close my eyes, and there they were: Lisa, in camouflage pants, stalking bears; Debbi, in blaze orange, wheezing out female elk calls till huge bull elk stampeded down the hills, ready to perform.

Now I stood outside the Silver Dollar Saloon, the wind whipping around my collar, my hands like two lumps of ice even in my Thinsulate-lined mittens. The sky was cluttered with stars, but I couldn't stand there staring at them all night. I took a deep breath and pushed my way through the swinging doors.

My glasses steamed up, but I could tell everyone was looking at me by the dead silence that dropped over the room. I took off my glasses and wiped them clean on my neckerchief. Then I put them back on. I'd been right; every head in the bar was turned toward me, and the faces were sort of orange, and puffy looking, in the light from the video games.

I cleared my throat. "I'm looking for cheerleaders," I said. They looked at each other and then back at me. "What's that?" said an old geezer at the bar.

"I said, I'm looking for cheerleaders," I said.

"That's what I thought you said," the old guy said. He guffawed; and suddenly the whole room erupted in laughter, people pounding each other on the back, slapping their thighs, rolling in the sawdust on the floor. I smiled, glad the ice was broken.

I walked over to the bar and sat down beside the old guy. He was called *Ol' Pete*. "You can't never find 'em, not in this weather," he said. The snow had stopped, but the night air was bitter cold. The roads up the pass were closed, with drifts over twenty feet high.

"*Haw!*" *Ol' Pete* suddenly guffawed again, and the rest of the heads—hoary, bewhiskered, grizzled—turned back in my direction. "Only a fool!" he said, and the others grinned and nodded, and chanted, "Fool, fool."

"Buy 'em a round," whispered the bartender as she wiped off the bar in front of me.

"A round on me," I said, and an excited hum swept the room. After the third round the hum broke out into singing, and in the middle of "... deer and the antelope play ... " someone sat down beside me.

"Why you want to go up there, anyway?" she said. I turned and looked her in the eye. She was dark, of indeterminate age; and she wore a buffalo-head helmet, complete with gleaming horns. "They wanted you up there, wouldn't they a took you with 'em?"

I nodded. "I can't explain it," I said. "It's just something I have to do."

She nodded, too. "I can understand that," she said. "It's big—bigger than you, maybe. What's your name, stranger?"

"Most folks call me *Whitey*," I said.

"It won't be easy, *Whitey*," my companion said. "I can coach you some, but it'll be hard work."

She said her name was *Buffalo Gal*, and that I could bunk with her. On one wall of her cabin she had a *USCS* map, all

squiggles, with red-headed pins marking the cheerleader sightings. I stared at it but could discern no pattern in the scattered red dots.

"They come and go," *Buffalo Gal* said. "They might as well be *Bigfoots*."

"*Bigfeet*," I said.

"Whatever," said *Buffalo Gal*.

She worked me hard. She never let up, never let me slack off.

"Hit 'em again," she'd say, time after time. "Harder, harder."

But she was generous in her praise, too. "Go, go, go!" she'd shout as I telemarked through the quakes. I worked harder for *Buffalo Gal* than I'd ever worked before; there was something about her that made you want to.

And then one evening, as we skied through a narrow canyon, *Buffalo Gal* stopped so fast that I crashed into her. "Listen," she said.

"Give me an *A*," the voice came, faint as starlight, distant as the sigh of a bear in her snowbound cave. It was followed by a wailed response from a dozen throats, "*A*." It echoed down the hills and canyons, and up under the trees around us.

"It's them," *Buffalo Gal* said.

Saturdays we made the long trek down to the *Silver Dollar*, just to make contact with human beings, and to have a drink.

"Sure, I heard 'em," *Ol' Pete* said when I asked him. "Hear 'em all the time."

"Have you seen them?" I said.

"Hell," *Ol' Pete* said.

When he didn't say any more, I had to ask. "How can I find them, *Pete*?"

"*Haw!*" he guffawed, and nods and slow grins spread across the other faces in the room. "Where you from, *Whitey*?"

"*Veedersburg, Indiana*," I said.

"Well, then, I'll tell you," *Ol' Pete* said. "Them cheerleaders

is like a poem. You don't go lookin' for a poem; it sort of comes to you, iff'n yer in the right place, doin' the right thing." His rheumy eyes got rheumier, dripping a little, as he watched Lu, the bartender, wiping up some spilled milk. "You can't predict. You can be out there for days, huntin', trackin' 'em across the range, countin' the buttercups, and you won't see hide nor hair. And then one day you just washed yer hair, or yer mebbe smokin' some weed you saved up from yer last trip south, and there she'll be, standin' afore you, smilin' down at you, her hand stretched out, whisperin', 'Score, Pete, score.'"

"Wow!" I said. "That happened to you?"

"Nope," he said.

Buffalo Gal and I skied home, heading back out of town and up the canyon through the moonlight. I looked around for shooting stars, and my nose twitched at the smells that skidded across the moonscape toward us: a last whiff of tobacco from the Silver Dollar; the sweet, flowery smell of someone's anti-static sheet from a dryer vent; the mucus-freezing smell of cold air rushing off the mountains. It was just the sort of time I might have seen them, if I'd only known.

In the mountains, in Montana, in winter, time loses its substance; it becomes meaningless. Night ran into day like the Ovaltine that Buffy stirred into our milk in the morning. I knew time was passing by the way the moon grew and shrank; I knew a week had gone by when we headed for the Silver Dollar on Saturday night. But that's all I could tell you.

"That's how it is here," was all Buffalo Gal would say.

One day, up in Avery Pass, we came upon a single, dainty footprint, clear as day, left by a size-seven ripple-bottom gym shoe. I flung myself into the snow beside it. "How could she leave just one?" I cried, and when I put my face next to it, I sniffed just the faintest of odors—rubber? antifungal medication?

"You tell me," Buffalo Gal said. With her ice axe she chopped the footprint out of the frozen snow and laid it gently in her helmet. I pulled it along the ground behind me, the horns serving as runners across the snow. We flew down the mountain, down to the lower pass and back to the cabin, and the speed of our passage created a wind that freeze-dried the footprint, sucked the moisture right out of it. It was frozen so solid it would never melt.

We hung the footprint above the front door, hoping it would bring us luck.

I was beginning to understand how important the presence of the cheerleaders was to the local people. They were part of the mountain mythology, feral fauna as significant as the mountain lion, the grizzly, the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. And they were not a recent phenomenon; nor were they exotic visitors. The history of cheerleaders in Montana went back for many, many years: as far back as local memory reached.

Ol' Pete had given me a hint of what they meant. What the manatee is to the naturalist in the mangrove swamp, what the race car is to the Hoosier, what the tornado is to the Kansan—that is what the cheerleader is to the Montanan. Cheerleaders are Possibility, they are Chance, they are Fate; they are beauty, and grace, and poetry.

Many had learned the hard way that Ol' Pete was right: you couldn't find a cheerleader. You had to wait, and be ready. Many an expedition, hunters in their red flannel, stocking up their mules or their llamas or their ATVs with two or three weeks' worth of food, had set out determined—come what may!—to find the cheerleaders. They carried guns, too. "Hell," they'd say, if you asked why. Would they shoot a cheerleader? Would they hang a freckled, pink-cheeked face above the fireplace, among the furry heads of grizzlies and mule deer and moose, and the iridescent bodies of stuffed dead pheasants?

The truth was—the truth was that nobody really knew how he or she might react, if he or she actually found them.

And in all the years the cheerleaders had been in those parts, no one *had* found one. There'd been tracks, and signs: bits of pompom here and there, and of course my frozen footprint, and once an old, well-used megaphone, standing on the wide end under a spruce tree.

But many a hunter had returned cold, frostbitten, disappointed. And many a hunter had hung up her gun, and taken up, say, jogging, or tai chi—something that would get her outside, in the woods, on a hilltop—and in solitude, maybe whispering, she'd chant, "S-U-C-C-E-S-S." Just in case, someday, the cheerleaders came to her.

"Okay, B. G.," I said one evening, as we stretched like lazy cats before the glowing wood stove, each with her own bowl of popcorn—Buffy liked garlic powder on hers, but I stuck with melted butter. "What gives?"

"Ah," said Buffalo Gal. She smiled, and gazed dreamily at the stove. "Impetuous Youth."

"Youth?" I said. "Buffy, I'm forty-two years old. I'm not exactly Youth."

She shook her head and gave me a look I couldn't interpret.

"Whitey, cool your jets. Do you know how long I've been up here?"

"No," I said.

Buffalo Gal leaned over her popcorn bowl and put her face close to mine. "Neither do I," she said.

"But Buffy," I said, "how do I find the cheerleaders?"

"How the hell do I know?" Buffy said. "I've been up here lo, these many moons, and I haven't found them yet."

When Buffalo Gal said that to me—when I realized that, by golly, she never had said she could help me find them—I had to ask. "Why are you up here, Buffalo Gal?" I said. She smiled. "Whitey," she said, "I used to be a jock. I did

every sport you can imagine—field hockey, tennis, jai alai. Seems like every time I turned around, there they were, supporting me all the way. 'Go, Buffy! Yea, rah, Buffy!'" She shook her head. "Guess I just didn't want to go on through life without 'em. Even if it's not me they're cheering for any more. I just want to hear them, once in a while in the night. Just want to know they're there."

I nodded, and stood up. "I'm off," I said.

"See you around," she said.

That's the way it is in Montana. When the time comes to go, you go, and there are no hard feelings.

I don't know how far I skied that night, or how long. I was thinking as I went, and that's a dangerous thing to do. Thinking distracts you. You can get lost, thinking of something other than where you're going. You can ski right up the mountain and over the top, and you get going so fast that it's already too late when you realize there's nothing under your feet and you have taken off into pure, crystal-clear Montana air. Every now and then in Montana you see it—a skier, flying across the moon like a deformed Canada goose.

I don't know how far I skied, but when the trail ended, I was right where I knew I'd be: at the door of the Silver Dollar Saloon. I went inside, and when I'd wiped off my glasses, there was Buffy, nodding at me, and Ol' Pete lifted a finger from his glass in greeting.

I had sat down at a little table and ordered a glass of milk when someone spoke. "What are you up to up there, anyway?" she said, across the crowded room.

I knew who it was: Renée, a lean, grim-faced ranch hand, not much older than I was. She'd ridden the rodeo circuit for a while and then come back to Montana to work Ephraim P. Williston's sheep ranch. Somewhere along the line she'd lost her left hand—caught in a lasso and squeezed right off when she was roping a steer—and most Saturday evenings she sat

in the Silver Dollar with a chamois rag, rubbing and polishing her elk-antler hook till it gleamed. She was a tough customer, Renée; even the feral dogs stayed away from her flocks.

The room was so still you could hear the chamois rubbing against her hook. She stared at me, her eyes in the shadow of the red crusher she never took off. Her hand, polishing, never stopped moving.

I swallowed the last of my milk. I put down the little glass, and then I looked up and across the room straight at where I figured her eyes were.

"Nothing," I said.

She took off her hat then, and I found myself looking into the hardest eyes I'd ever seen. They were as cold as ice, and dry ice at that; it was hard to believe they'd ever cried, or looked at anything but bleak and windswept sagebrush desert.

I'd said the wrong thing.

"Sister," she said, "you just said the wrong thing. You come up here, from God knows where—"

"She's from Veedersburg, Indiana," O! Pete interrupted. "She never made no secret of that."

I threw him a grateful look, but Renée shook her head.

"From God knows where," she repeated. "You sit in here and drink with us; you follow Buffalo Gal around the woods like a goddamn puppy dog, sucking up everything she knows; you pry, and eavesdrop, and then you go out and harass our cheerleaders; and when I ask you, in a friendly, innocent manner, what you're doing, you say *Nothing?*"

The silence was so thick you could have cut it with a bowie knife. I didn't know what to say. She was right about part of it: I did come in and drink with them, I did ask questions, I did follow Buffy around. But that part about harassing the cheerleaders was way off the mark.

How could I explain that I was doing this for *all* of us?

"All my life," I began, and I prayed my voice wouldn't shake, "there was nothing I wanted more than to be a cheerleader. All

through my childhood my parents held up cheerleaders as role models for me. 'My dream,' my dad used to say, 'is that someday you'll be just like them.' We went to every game. And when I watched the professional games on TV—oh, I burned with the desire to be out there with them, leaping and bending and rolling on national television, and flinging my arms out to embrace the whole world!"

I paused for breath. I looked around the room, and I knew I'd struck a chord. No one was saying a word: all eyes were either on me or were dreamy, looking back to their own youthful aspirations, remembering the cheerleaders from all those little towns they'd left—Moab, Ipswich, Findlay, Kennebunk—and I suspected they'd come for much the same reason I had. I took a deep breath. "I guess it's an old, old story," I went on. "For years I practiced, twirling my baton, getting in shape with tap lessons. I did so many splits that my legs would hardly stay closed. I memorized the chants, the yells, you name it."

They were nodding; they'd been there, too.

"I never made the squad," I said quietly. "Not even the B squad. I just wasn't good enough."

A sigh rippled across the room; some of those dusty eyes were a little damp.

"You know," I said, "there was nothing in the world I wanted more than to be a cheerleader. I would have sold my soul." I laughed softly, sadly. "I guess it's still for sale."

"Hell," O! Pete whispered, "so's mine!"

"Whitey," Renée said, standing up and crossing the room to where I stood, "I misjudged you. I'm sorry." She did a forward lunge and stuck out her hand.

I took it. "Renée, Renée, Renée," I said. "You were right about so many things."

She punched me on the arm with her hook. "Howsabout a turn at the cards?" she said.

"Yeah! Yeah!" The crowd roared its approval, and O! Pete

actually did a herkie. I grinned with pleasure; this was another Montana tradition. In many a saloon heated discussions came to an end when the cards were pulled out and would-be pugilists resolved their differences with a hand or two of this traditional game of the Old West. It had saved the glassware and bar mirrors of a good many drinking and gaming establishments.

Eight of us sat down around a table, and Ol' Pete dealt the cards. Carol Ann, another shepherd from out at Williston's, held Renée's cards for her—she had trouble managing them with her hook.

It wasn't a long game—these games never are—and one after another the players matched their last card and dropped out. Finally, as fate would have it, Renée and I were face to face. And, friendly as we now were, I was sweating.

I held two cards. Carol Ann was holding one card for Renée, and it was her draw. If she drew the matching card, she'd be out. But if she drew the other, I still had a chance.

Renée kept her eyes on my face and reached. Her hand hesitated above my cards; the tension—friendly tension—in the room was palpable. And then, as Renée's hand descended, she stopped. She lifted her head. "Listen," she said.

I'd heard it, too. A rhythmic clapping, the soft patter of sneaker-shod feet. And then, voices.

"H-O-W-D-Y! Hey-hey! We say Hi!" And through the swinging doors she burst, the first cheerleader the Silver Dollar had ever seen. She popped those doors back and bounced into the room, her hands rolling in front of her, her blond curls cascading over her shoulders. She bounded across the room, right over to our table, and dropped to one knee; one arm flung out to her side and the other straight over her head. "DeeDee!" she cried.

Another cheerleader leaped through the door and sprang over to kneel beside the first. Flinging her arms exactly the same way, she cried, "Kirsti!"

And they kept on coming, the doors swinging and banging against the wall, their little rubber-soled feet tap-tapping through the peanut shells that littered the Silver Dollar's floor. "Debi! Suzi! Lori! Heather! Patti! Mindy! Lisa! Darlene!" They climbed on top of each other till their human pyramid reached the ceiling. They jumped up and landed in splits on the bar.

And in the dim light from the bar we saw that they had changed. Gone were their pleated skirts, the snowy white tennies, the matching panties. Their sweaters were black from the smoke of a thousand campfires and stiff with the arterial blood of dying elk. The dimpled knees were hidden in layers of wool, of heavy-duty twill, of camouflage-pattern neoprene. Their sneakers were gray, worn; their little socks showed through holes in the toes.

And their faces. No longer pink and shiny, their skin was rough from winter winds, wrinkled from the brutal western sun. The blond hair was stringy and sort of greasy, after so long without indoor plumbing.

But their teeth! One after another, they smiled; again and again the gloom of the Silver Dollar was broken as their teeth flashed little reflections of the neon beer signs in the windows. Years of fluoridated water, decay-preventive dentifrices, and orthodonture had done their magic. Whiter than new snow, more uniform than kernels of hybrid corn, brighter than Venus, Jupiter, and Mars in alignment, their teeth alone would have revealed them as the cheerleaders they were.

They stood, and knelt, and sat splayed before us in splendid formation, and then they windmilled their arms and all at once leaped into the air, spreading their limbs toward the four corners of the world, and screamed "Yea! Rah! Team!" Something warm surged through my body; I looked at Renée, and she was smiling right into my eyes. She reached out and took the card that matched hers.

I was the Old Maid.

The crowd went wild, and the cheerleaders bounced and hugged each other, tears rolling down their leathery cheeks, and they all clustered around Renée and wanted to pat her, and touch her, and have her sign their sneakers. It was Renée's moment of glory.

And I might have felt really bad, if something hadn't happened that warmed my heart all the way to the mitral valve. As everybody pushed over to the bar, the cheerleaders spontaneously stopped, and they all came back and stood around me in a circle, and each one put her left hand on the right shoulder of the next cheerleader. And then they bent their knees, and they stuck out their right hands, and in unison they bobbed up and down, as if they were shaking *my* right hand, and they chanted, "YOU'RE OKAY. YOU'RE ALL RIGHT. YOU PUT UP A DARN GOOD FIGHT! Yeal Rah! Whitey!"

There wasn't a dry eye in the room. "A round on me!" I shouted. And they cheered me again.

In the days that followed, I knew something had changed. I had achieved a goal, a major one, and now—temporarily, anyway—I had nothing to strive for. I was happy, but I felt a little empty, too.

On about Wednesday, I was sitting listlessly in the sun, contemplating the bleak future that stretched ahead of me, when I heard someone coming. I looked around and saw that it was Buffalo Gal, and behind her was Renée.

Buffy got right to the point. "We been huddling," she said. "We want you to stick around."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure I can do this any more." "Not this," Renée said. "There's an opening on the Williams ranch for another shepherd. Carol Ann's getting hitched."

"I don't know anything about sheep," I said.

"You don't have to," Renée said. "They mill around, and you stand there. Or you sing to 'em, sometimes." "Surely there's others more qualified," I said.

Renée gazed off at the horizon, and rubbed her hook with her mitten. "The thing is, Whitey," she said, "most of us, we never seen a cheerleader since we been here. It's what we came out here for, and we tried to do everything right, and we waited. But they never came until you got here. It's got us hoping again."

"Hoping?" I said.

Hard-bitten, rugged, dry-eyed as she was, she blushed. "We've started practicing again. It's all we really want, still. And we've realized that, even if we'll never be varsity cheerleaders, we can still do the work, learn the new routines. And who knows? Someday they may need a substitute."

I looked at her. There was something in her face I hadn't seen there before, but I recognized it. It was spirit: team spirit. It's something that's hard to find in the West, in Montana, in the wide-open spaces, where women spend most of their time alone. I thought, maybe that's it. It's not the adulation, the cheering, the popularity that we want; it's team spirit. "I guess I could learn," I said.

So I stayed. I'm still just an assistant shepherd—sort of on the B team—but I'll tell you something: sheep are the best pep club in the world to practice on. You can be out there in front of them walking on your hands, doing triple back flips, and they don't even look at you. They keep on munching the grass, ripping it out of the ground and chewing it up.

But it's in the nature of sheepherding, and of cheerleading, to stick with it, to keep on trying. You realize how hard the cheerleaders have worked to get where they are. That makes you work harder.

Sometimes, at a summer evening—oh, yes, summer finally came—I'll be out there on the range, practicing in front of my sheep. "Give me a P!" I'll shout, and the only response is from a border collie, who obliges on a nearby fencepost. And then the warm-summer wind picks up, just as the sun sets, and the sky is all red and purple and pink, and I hear, from

miles away, "Two bits!" And maybe a distant figure cartwheels across a hilltop, silhouetted against the place where the sun just disappeared.

And then, from the east where the sky is already dark, I hear "Four bits!" And I know it's Buffalo Cal, calling down from her lonely vigil up on the mountain. And from up at the ranch house, where Renée is loading up supplies to bring out to us the next morning, comes "Six bits!" And I jump up and shout "A dollar!"

And the next voice is so far away the words aren't quite clear—it's up in high pastureland, where the sheep are chewing grass in the dark, and the little lambs are jumping around, or nursing on their moms, and the dogs are lying in the dust after a hard day, sleeping with one eye open, always on the lookout for coyotes. But we all know it's Ol' Pete, yelling, "If you got spirit, stand up and holler!"

And wherever we are, we leap into the sky, and holler for all we're worth. Down in town they probably think it's thunder, but it's us, practicing, ready for when the snow flies in the fall and the cheerleaders come down from the high mountain passes. We'll be ready to go with them, hunting for the Big Game.

## Clearwater and Latissimus

SCHOOL HAD been in session for a couple of weeks when Miss Nancy told us the Siamese twins would be in our class. She said we should be kind. "We want them to feel at home, don't we?" she said. I was in love with Miss Nancy, who was large and flat and had brownny gold hair curled up around her face. "We want them to live happy, normal lives." How anyone could expect this is beyond me now, but every six-year-old nodded solemnly, gazing at Miss Nancy's curls as she nodded too.

The next morning the first thing we saw was the double wheelchair, a frightening object in itself, parked at the end of the second row of desks. A colored boy with a huge forehead sat in it, propped up with pillows, and another one, with a normal-sized head, sat so close they seemed to be hugging each other. This one was grinning, and he had the whitest teeth I had ever seen.

Their names were Clearwater and Latissimus Dorsey, and they were joined at the chest. The doctors said that one heart kept the blood circulating through both bodies, and that it was mostly inside Clearwater. Which was a shame, because Clearwater was the dim one: sweet, always smiling, but he'd never said a word until he was four years old, and that's all