

LIVING THE BIG SKY LIFE

Urban Tales of my Tortured Tenure in
"The Last Best Place"



DK King



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INTRODUCTION and DISCLAIMER

ABOUT TWO YEARS into my big sky life, a friend expressed great concern for my mental and physical well-being. She was worried I wouldn't survive the stress of living in a place that appeared to be killing me and strongly recommended that I keep a personal journal in the hope that it would serve as a healthy outlet for my compounding failures and compressed emotions. To keep her suggestion on the lighter side, she jokingly added, "Who knows? You might even write a book about it."

The joke was on me because, as evidenced by what you're now reading, she was right - even if it did take more than a decade of time and space for the wounds to scar over enough for me to see the comedy in the situation, let alone write about it.

I'd like to begin by clarifying that the stories contained within this book are strictly my experiences. They come from my perspective as chronicled within my personal journals and as extracted from the elephant-like memory I've been accused of having. Were the incidents and people real? Absolutely - it's my story and I'm sticking to it, but that doesn't mean I haven't changed a few names to protect the innocent and the unaware. Nevertheless, this body of work is strictly my story and nothing described herein is designed to extol or defame, either directly or indirectly, any person or entity I might reference for the sake of telling my side of the story.

As the traumatic effects of Montana's emotional dust began to settle, I began to realize that living the big sky life was for me a brutal lesson in how to recognize and reconcile my shadow side

and its ever-faithful companion, the illusion. Unbeknownst to me, my well-conditioned unconscious mind had been running the show for too long, and what transpired during my big sky life internally challenged its subliminal supremacy. I had a psyche that wanted - nay, demanded - to bust out so it fatefully masterminded a prison break.

Its secret plot involved using my childhood conditioning and other entrenched aspects of my belief system that were apparently incompatible with my highest potential against me. Well, the process was like trying to uproot an old yucca bush - a formidable task that demanded I go deep, painstakingly deep.

To write this has been admittedly cathartic on a personal level, but my motivations in sharing it are perhaps a bit more altruistic - a way to pay it forward, you might say. No matter how special I believe myself to be to me during this part of my journey, I have few illusions about my ordinary place in this world. If my shared experience can illuminate a path that helps even one struggling soul find hope or a way through the darkness, I have accomplished something extraordinary.

The great Carol Burnett once said, "Comedy is tragedy plus time." I'm living testament to the veracity of her simple math. And now that I'm finally laughing, the world can laugh with me too. Like I said, this joke is on me.



"Laugh and the world laughs with you.
Weep and you weep alone."

(Partial quote from *Solitude* by Ella Wheeler Wilcox)



WHAT WAS I THINKING?

BORN IN 1899, my Grandma King was an uncomplicated country woman whose formal education ended sometime during the sixth grade. One of my fondest childhood memories of her revolves around feeling the warm tone in her southern drawl whenever she'd call out to my four sisters and me for a little lovin' with, "Come 'n gimme some shugga."

It's funny how young minds can innocently tie things together that don't necessarily belong together, and even funnier how that intermingling can oftentimes become so integrated that a lifetime of decision-making can be subconsciously influenced by these misconnections. For me - and who knows if Grandma King really had anything to do with it or not - I think equating love with sugar must've been one of those obscure childhood misconnections.

Case in point takes me back to the year of 1991 - to a time when life was busy pelting me with lemons, and I was sure that love was the sugar I needed to turn it all into lemonade.

It seems that subliminal belief was to set the divine stage for me to reconnect with an old California friend from grade school

who'd been living in Whitefish, Montana for about ten years. He was passing through Orange County (yes, that "O.C.") on his way to Baja California for two weeks of surfing as he did most years in the late summer. A reunion of mutual school friends ensued, and the rest became my big sky life history.

Naturally, I visited Whitefish to check the place out before actually marrying Chef or agreeing to move my family and 3-bedroom household up there. The decision to move to Montana was in many ways assumed, however. For a while, there was a pretense of weighing the pros and cons of Chef returning to California to live with us instead, but Chef would visibly hyperventilate whenever the pros appeared to outweigh the cons.

The reality for me at the time was that I had a keen desire to get far away from southern California anyway. Not because I didn't like where I lived, but because I wanted to put great distance between me and the inescapable arrogance of a deadbeat ex-husband who'd quit his job because he had no intention of paying child support - child support he spuriously insisted was for my benefit only. Myopic and immature, I know, but he believed I needed to be punished in every possible way for having the nerve to divorce him.

Even though the deadbeat had unilaterally opted out of supporting his two daughters, remaining in California might've been marginally sustainable had he understood and respected the fact that he wasn't entitled to hang out at my house as if it were his own, especially when I wasn't home. Be that as it may, the man I had divorced with zero regrets more than two years

earlier staunchly maintained it was his right to go behind my back and hang out at the house I struggled to pay for in order to spend his *free* time with the children he decidedly felt no obligation to financially support while I was away at work. And this bedeviling behavior was merely the tip of the iceberg.

The tipping point for me was what I saw him doing to our youngest daughter who was, by this time, seven years old. And I'm not talking about the time he took her from Laguna Niguel to Huntington Beach on the 5 Freeway and back again during rush hour without my permission, weaving in and out of traffic with her on the back of his Harley Davidson holding on for dear life. To learn she'd been on that motorcycle was upsetting enough, but when he unapologetically returned her to me with a serious untreated burn on the inside of her leg (now permanently scarred) after it came in contact with the bike's exhaust pipe somewhere on the freeway, I wanted to scream like a banshee.

The more I tried to minimize his malicious maneuvers, the more persistent became his supercilious reminders that I was powerless to protect my little girl when he had rights. Visitation rights, he'd scoff. Any parent who has been in a similar situation knows firsthand that the court system in California recognizes no legal correlation between child support and visitation rights. In other words, court approved visitation rights cannot be denied a parent even if that parent willfully refuses to abide by the same court's order to contribute to the financial welfare of the child via child support. Go figure.

Despite my decent job in Newport Beach, I was struggling with the changes to my financial circumstances brought about by the divorce. So far I hadn't been able to garner the resources necessary to pay an attorney thousands of dollars to fix a problem I could see no end to. Although I'd had an active case open with the Orange County District Attorney's child support division for several years, it was clear the legal system had no interest in pursuing a deadbeat dad who'd gone underground (which means no paycheck, no W-2 income that can be garnished) so that he could intentionally sidestep his legal obligation to participate in the support of his children. That same legal system certainly wasn't going to stop him from putting her on the back of a dangerous motorcycle as long as he put a helmet on her head.

To admit that I was feeling terrorized in my own home would be a staggering understatement, and the anxiety of never knowing when or how the next attack would come was, by this time, exacting a severe emotional toll on me.

Emotionally terrorizing me was one thing - time would pass, my children would grow up, and I would recover. Inflicting emotional terror upon a vulnerable young child behind a hypocritical pretense of love was quite another. Now I know I'm not the first parent to have her children used as a weapon - nor will I be the last, but the damaging tactics he chose to perpetrate his punishments upon me at her expense did ultimately, and sadly, destroy whatever chance he had to have a lasting relationship with this child.

The moment of truth arrived when it became undeniable that he was openly using his daily *free* time at my house on after-school afternoons to smother our young daughter with the illusion of loving attention while manipulatively filling her head with menacing ideas and opinionated deceptions that weren't emotionally healthy or beneficial. Like a vampire, he was consuming her spirit and leaving behind a mini-me caricature of himself. She was acting like him, sounding like him, looking like him. And it was freaking me out.

How was I going to be able to love this child unconditionally when all I could see was a miniature of the intolerable person I had divorced?

In the deepest stratum of my being, I knew that if I were to love my child, I had to give her a chance to freely and safely develop her own authentic identity. Whitefish, Montana offered us that chance.

When my oldest daughter decided not to move to Whitefish with us, I felt as if I'd just made *Sophie's Choice*. I understood why she chose not to come, though. She was going to be a senior in high school, and what normal teenager would voluntarily exchange her happy social life and good friends in the city for the lonely unknown in rural Montana? Leaving her behind admittedly left a gaping vacancy in my world that nothing and no one could fill. It took more than five years for the daily ache in my heart to finally subside, and in those five years I'd been to big sky country and back again.

Of course, arrangements needed to be made for her care after the big move. And if you think her father stepped up to the responsible task of being a proper father, you can think again. Even if it was only for a year, he was nowhere to be found for that undertaking and left our daughter hanging until his sister eventually chose to step up and take responsibility for what needed to be done. Unbeknownst to any of us at the time, however, this assistance was to come at a high price and carried with it severe long-term penalties.

The repercussions suffered by all - Deadbeat's family included - for that aunt's counterfeit act of familial support had serious unexpected consequences, even if it did take a decade for her illicit actions to come to light. The larcenous exposure and subsequent outcome caused by her fraudulent behavior were so damaging it became necessary for my youngest daughter to legally protect herself during her college years by changing her name. In that unforeseen moment, my mission had unequivocally been accomplished. My young daughter's identity had indeed become her own.



Reading The Signs

17 May 1992 - the week of the wedding had arrived, and a sign of things to come.

The week started out with an urgent court summons smugly delivered over the telephone at 7:00am by the deadbeat himself

who claimed that I didn't have the legal right to take the children he overtly declined to support out of California. After begging for a wedding gift cash advance from family and paying the requisite two thousand dollar retainer to an attorney, I spent the day before my *happy day* in a courtroom where the judge practically tore up the ex-husband's audacious petition on the heels of a scathing lecture about his indefensible non-payment of child support. Deadbeat's shameless parents were even in attendance and got to hear that gavel drop. I quickly learned that day in court that justice prevails for those who pay for it.

Indescribable anxiety of migraine proportions notwithstanding, Chef did not come to court with me that day, even as moral support. I did not ask and he did not offer.

Chef, instead, had spent most of the week alternating between surfing in the name of stress management, and reception dinner preparation. Since Chef was in actuality a bona fide chef and graduate of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), New York, no one, especially me, ever wanted to hear him complain in the follow-up years about the food served at our reception attended by one hundred well-wishers.

All other wedding preparations and arrangements were entirely mine to handle. I did not ask for help and got exactly what I asked for, so the day of the ceremony saw me completely numb from exhaustion before the wedding march could even sound in the late afternoon. If that wasn't enough, my body had gone to the extra trouble of reminding me that very morning - and ten days early no less - that I wasn't getting married because I HAD to.

And then there was the honeymoon. Well, it was more like “what honeymoon?” because the honeymoon period saw us cramming my 3-bedroom household into the biggest U-Haul truck we could find, and taking to the highway on a grueling 1,800-mile, 36-hour road trip to big sky country and my new home.

The first half of the trip was long and dry and relatively uneventful. Everything changed, nevertheless, when we pulled into Pocatello, Idaho to gas up. One of the back dually tires on the U-Haul had gone flat sometime after Salt Lake City - not something that could be easily fixed, especially with a full load sitting on top of it - so we were forced to wait several hours in some empty parking lot on the outskirts of Pocatello for U-Haul to send a repair truck.

After the tire had been repaired and the tow truck had long gone - as if on cue - the U-Haul’s electrical system began to flicker, then completely fail. We didn’t discover the true cause of the failure until we arrived in Whitefish the next day and began to unload my belongings. What we discovered was that the truck had apparently been packed so tight that one of the couch cushions had smothered an illuminated overhead light fixture for close to eighteen hours - long enough to not only burn a smoky six-inch hole into the cushion, but to cause the light fixture to short out, which in turn triggered a comprehensive blow out of the truck’s entire electrical system. Although we were lucky the over-stuffed contents of the truck didn’t explode into flames somewhere on Interstate 15, the already white-knuckled drive really became dangerous when it began to intermittently rain and hail as we entered southern Montana

without the use of our windshield wipers, headlights, power brakes or power steering.

In the true pioneer spirit - or perhaps it was more like the Donner party spirit - we hobbled on. Chef was homesick and had no patience for another delay, even if it were for what I deemed life-preserving repairs. But since he was the one driving the truck, his determination overruled.

No sooner had we pulled into the driveway of my new home, I was told by Chef that my California license plates were an urgent problem demanding an immediate solution. The engine on my compact urban-mobile hadn't even cooled down from the long two-day trip before Chef ushered me back into my car and off to the DMV in Kalispell to change the car's license plates and my driver's license. He insisted that everyone would give me the 'stink-eye' if I dared to drive around town with any smell of California on me. Frankly, I think he was more worried about getting the stink-eye himself - something about guilty by association. Whatever. I was too tired not to defer to his distress over the matter and proceeded to hide all evidence of my origin within hours of arrival. The rest got handled with a hot shower and a bottle of lemon juice ... for scrubbing the tan off, oh duh.

They say hindsight is always 20/20, and so it was for me - even if it took about ten years to come into focus. I suppose things might've been different had I better read the signs during one of the longest weeks of my life. Live and learn they say, and what I learned that last week in May of 1992 - other than justice prevails for those who pay for it - was that when you move to Montana, you need to hide all evidence of your past and move into a

house that looks just like Ted Kaczynski's Unabomber shack. That way you blend in with the rest of the pack, and save yourself the notoriety of becoming an open target for the ole stink-eye.

2



FIRST IMPRESSIONS THROUGH MY OWN STINK-EYE

THE DECISION TO uproot your home and make the move to a new community - whether it's in a distant city, a different state, or even another country - is a monumental undertaking at best, especially when children are involved. Yet, some parents make that hard decision because of the children, which I could obviously relate to. This wasn't my first rodeo, nor was it my first cross-country move from California to Rocky Mountain territory.

Common sense usually dictates that you investigate the new neighborhood under consideration - do the due diligence, as they say - before making any move permanent. The due diligence should hopefully include more than one visit to the new location under consideration, although from my experience, that's not typically what happens.

With our big sky move, much of my due diligence was dependent upon Chef's interpretive reporting and his ten year Whitefish residency as testament to the town's livability, even though Chef had no children. Six months before moving, I'd made a winter reconnaissance trip during the holiday season - it

was my first visit to the state of Montana. Chef showed me around town and then he showed me off. We stayed together in his little Unabomber bungalow and enjoyed the benefits of what was still a dreamy new romance. Like eating dessert first, I later realized I'd unwittingly had the honeymoon before the wedding, even before the official engagement, because it was during dinner at a fine restaurant in Kalispell on the last night of my visit when he formally proposed.

It was hard not to notice right away that the locals were pretty proud of the fact that Montana had no sales tax and no speed limit. If you did have the rare misfortune of being pulled over for speeding, a five dollar bill was usually enough to casually, yet officially, settle the matter on the spot. And good luck if you got stuck behind a tractor on the highway and you were in a hurry. Historically an agrarian state in nature, teenagers who'd begun driving tractors on the ranch the minute they were big enough to work the controls were given a driver's license at the age of fifteen.

The best schools in the state at the time of my visit were reported to be in the Whitefish School District, and my young daughter did begin fourth grade at Muldown Elementary the following fall. She graduated from Muldown after one year, and then transferred into Whitefish Middle School where she spent the next three years receiving an education. Whitefish Middle School was located in an historical building in the heart of downtown Whitefish, which proved to be quite convenient when I eventually got a job around the corner in a downtown title office.

As Chef drove me around town during my big sky introduction, we listened to the only radio station in the county that didn't sound like country music. It was called B98 and the local celebrity D.J., Beazer Bee - street name: Benny Bee, Jr. - was the son of B98 owner/operator Big Daddy Bee. The station's platform was theoretically rock-n-roll, but it was too pop for our musical tastes. I was an avid Los Angeles KROQ Kevin and Bean fan (still am) and Chef was a bass player in a local hard rock band. The only tolerable option we could find to sustain us musically over the next five years was to create homemade mix cassette tapes for use in the car.

Chef had a friend named Rob who was a real estate broker with his own company when I first met him. He was married to a nice woman and had a lovely family consisting of two adorable towheads. They lived in a small home near the shores of Whitefish Lake. Not long after I'd permanently relocated, Rob told Chef he'd been 'discovered' as having a great radio voice, which promptly got him out of the real estate business and into a radio spot at B98. It seemed an exciting opportunity for Rob and we were happy for him, until his new-found celebrity status seemed to go straight to both of his heads. The next thing we knew, Rob was bragging to Chef in his perfectly pitched always-on radio voice about getting more ass than a toilet seat. He didn't appear to mind at first when his marriage abruptly ended, but it wasn't long before he began pensively moaning to Chef about his shallow existence and the resulting loneliness. At least he had the sound of his own voice to keep himself company.

I met many of Chef's other friends during my first visit as well. They were an eclectic lot overall. Chef wasn't a big socializer, a

loner some would say, so when his friends got wind of a serious girlfriend, they were anxious to know how it happened and of course, who she was.

There was Jealous Jack, confirmed bachelor and surfer buddy. Jack lived a few blocks away from Chef and he was the only Whitefish resident who attended our wedding in the O.C. Because Jack enjoyed competing with Chef in every possible way, and also prided himself on his skills in the kitchen, he was enlisted to help Chef with our reception dinner preparation. He also helped him out with those daily surf sets in the name of stress management.

Then there were Sparky and Lisa, married with two daughters. They had a nicely refurbished craftsman cottage on the northern edge of downtown. Sparky worked at a timber logging company and evidently lived to spark it up, which meant 'sparking up a joint' to all who knew him, hence the nickname, Sparky. It was several years before I came to know what his first name really was. He gave the appearance of being laid back and uncomplicated, even simple at times, but like I was to learn about many of the people living in Whitefish, he was not always as he appeared.

Sparky's wife, Lisa, was the social one. She enjoyed entertaining and we attended several delightful gatherings at their home, including the holiday party she threw when I came to Whitefish for the first time. This is where I met many of Chef's local friends in one fell swoop. Lisa worked for the largest beverage distributor in the Flathead Valley. She specialized in wines and

was extremely helpful to me when Chef and I began our catering business several years later.

And then there were fellow CIA chefs, Mac and Morgan, married with two daughters. It was Mac and Morgan who wrote the letters of recommendation to the Culinary Institute of America that helped Chef secure admittance years earlier. My first memory of Mac at Lisa's holiday party was that this guy is insanely wild and fun, fun, funny. He partied with us like that party would be his last, and I couldn't shake my foreboding impression of *live hard, die hard* when Chef and I left that night. Imagine my shock, but not surprise, when Chef called me a few months later to say that Mac had been killed in a head-on collision (not his fault) early one morning on his way to work in Kalispell. He was on the "pray for me, I drive 93" highway between Whitefish and Kalispell.

As nice as most of the townsfolk were to me throughout my tenure, I struggled to resonate or connect with any one of them. I felt as if I had nothing in common with the people living around me, and the evidence was noticeably tangible when it came down to basic social pleasantries or any conversation with a local that went beyond talking about the weather. My inability to make even one good local friend proved in due time to be a more difficult aspect for Chef than it did for me. But there was no changing the fact that I simply could not connect with the vibration of Whitefish, and it wasn't for lack of trying. The local residents gave the illusion of being connected to where they lived and to those around them, but I could only feel like I was on the outside looking in. And none of it proved to be enough.

Something big was missing, and the cavernous hole in my core being left me with nothing more than an emptiness I could not identify, let alone manage to fill. Yet, for the longest time, I was made to feel as if something was wrong with me, as if I were defective, as if I had the problem. And like so many others before me, I directed the anger at my accumulating list of inadequacies inward. I found myself more than once praying with tears in my eyes, "Please God, let me be simple and stupid so I can be satisfied with this life."

The answer to my prayer was to come in a most unusual way.



The Lay Of The Land

To fully understand a culture - whether it be foreign or domestic, big city or small town - is to understand its history and its geography. With that in mind, I'll strive to describe the local low down and the lay of the land as I knew it twenty years ago.

Whitefish is a resort town named after its own lake, or maybe it's the other way around. I could never be sure. It's advantageously nestled near the base of the Big Mountain ski resort and the mountain does a fine job of crowning the northern summit of the panoramic Flathead Valley. The town's far-reaching appeal is often attributed to the indescribable natural beauty surrounding it - Glacier National Park is only twenty-five miles to the west, Flathead Lake (the largest fresh water lake west of the Mississippi River) is barely twenty-five miles to the south, and

Canada's British Columbia/Alberta border is sixty miles to the north.

The town of Whitefish has the expanding turn-of-the-century vision of the Great Northern Railroad to thank for its existence. When the railroad was laid through the region in 1901, the railroad company decided to build a town to serve as one of its hubs. Because the area was heavily wooded, and still is, it needed to be cleared of the huge trees that were standing in the way of progress. The resulting stumps that remained behind created a serious impediment to the local flow of traffic. As difficult as it was, the stumps were eventually removed, but not before the town acquired the nickname, 'Stumptown'.

Considered to be a vacationer's paradise by many, I secretly came to call the place 'Boy's Town' instead because it was where all of the boys came to play, and well, live the dream of being one with nature, even if that meant hunting nature down. It had it all, and anyone who heard the call of nature and yearned to live the big sky life after seeing *A River Runs Through It* or *Legends Of The Fall* knows what I'm talking about.

I believe there are certain distinct similarities that one would find in the standard American small town. And through my observational stink-eye, I found Whitefish to be no exception, no matter how hard it tried to reach beyond its small town status when I lived there.

I had a girlfriend from the O.C. who'd spent her summer vacations growing up in Livingston, Montana. She understood these small town similarities very well. At her request, one of the

first things I did after moving to Montana was to drive around town with several disposable cameras and take pictures of all of the distinctive small town landmarks I could find throughout Whitefish. Things like the Safeway, the Dairy Queen, the cemetery, the main drag, the Ben Franklin five-n-dime craft store, the greasy spoon, and the local watering holes. The highlight for her was when I created a Stumptown story-telling photo album, replete with arrows, captions and plenty of stink-eye commentary.

The Whitefish I got to know in 1992 had a year-round full-time population of about 3,500 - half of the full-timers resided within a mile of the town's main drag, aptly named Central Avenue. The rest of the population resided in homes that were sprinkled throughout the surrounding 30,000 or so acres - scattered somewhere between the sheep, the free-ranging cattle, the hay and alfalfa fields, and the woods. It wasn't unusual for the resort's population to swell above 4,500 during the summer season, especially after those two Brad Pitt movies made Montana look so idyllic that anyone dreaming to be like Brad was seduced into selling out in order to pursue a life of fly-fishing in nature's big sky backyard.

As for the lay of the land, the best place to start is Highway 93, also known to locals as the "pray for me, I drive 93" highway. U.S. Highway 93 is a north-south thoroughfare that runs the length of the country - from the Canadian border sixty miles north of Whitefish, Montana, on down to Wickenburg, Arizona, where it dead ends.

During my residency, it was considered to be the most direct north-south route between Whitefish and Kalispell, but there were several other north-south options into town as well. Highway 2, which we used to call LaSalle Road, was second to Highway 93 as an east-of-town option. It's also where the airport, Glacier Park International Airport, is located. Farm-To-Market Road was an older west-of-town option that wasn't generally very efficient. And then there was Whitefish Stage Road, which ran parallel between Highways 93 and 2, but ended at Highway 40. Highway 40 was an east-west thoroughfare running between Columbia Falls to the east and southern Whitefish to the west, where it ended at Highway 93.

When driving north into town on Highway 93 - just north of Highway 40 - first came the Par 3 Golf Course-Driving Range and Jack's Diamondback Restaurant and Casino to the east, and then came the Mountain Mall.

The Mountain Mall was a commercial retail albatross that never seemed to achieve an occupancy rate above 30%. In my opinion, the mall's only saving grace was the fact that it housed a 6-plex movie theater. Most of the time, it was hardly worth putting your life into the hands of another to drive sixteen miles south on the 93 just to see a movie at a theater in Kalispell, particularly in the winter.

Adjacent to the Mountain Mall was the Food Depot, the biggest supermarket in town at the time. As I mentioned, there was a Safeway too, and it was across the street on the west side of the 93. For whatever reason, this Safeway, no matter how hard it

tried, couldn't manage to attain the popular prestige enjoyed by the Food Depot.

Next to the Safeway was the bowling alley, slash pool hall, slash 24-hour greasy spoon called the Pin 'N Cue. It had been eloquently nicknamed the 'Spin 'N Puke' by locals because it was the only place to eat after last call when all of the taverns and watering holes shut down at 2:00am. There's nothing like a plate of greasy food to line a turbulent stomach when your head is spinning from a rowdy night of heavy drinking at The Bulldog. The early morning parking lot of the 'Spin 'N Puke' was a constant reminder of the stomachs that refused to be subdued.

Traditionally, the 24-hour restaurant in many small American towns is Denny's, but Whitefish didn't get its first Denny's until 1994, and my young daughter got all caught up in the grand opening frenzy with the rest of the villagers who were lined up around the building at dawn to get Eggs Over My Hammy - as if she'd never been to a Denny's before. It was almost comical because Denny's had historically never been a restaurant we'd gone to by choice and here she was, begging me to take her to the Denny's grand opening as if we didn't have better options ... options that included our own CIA Chef at home who could prepare her anything she could've possibly wanted to eat without involving a pool of lard.

Further up the 93, on the very edge of 'almost downtown', was the Dairy Queen - not only a small town requisite, but a local favorite. Okay, for those who remember, sing along with me: "Let's all go to D-Q Dairy Queen! The food's more fun at D-Q

Dairy Queen. We'll have a D-Q sandwich. Maybe two or three. The food's just great. And what va-ri-e-ty!" And no, my daughter never worked at the Dairy Queen, nor did she ever wear frosted lipstick (an obscure *Baby Boom* reference ... sorry, I couldn't resist).

After the Dairy Queen, the 93 assumed the now-you're-downtown name of Spokane Avenue. While the official Highway 93 would hang a sharp left, due west, at Second Street in the heart of downtown Whitefish, it would once again veer north beyond the outskirts of western Whitefish as it continued its northern journey toward the Canadian border. On its way out of town, Second Street offered a scenic tour past the local cemetery, the Grouse Mountain Lodge with its professional golf course, and Lion Mountain, which also provided partial access to the western shoreline of Whitefish Lake.

It was the happenings on Third Street that influenced my stumped town life the most. Whitefish Title Services, the escrow title office I managed, was located on Third Street between Spokane and Central Avenues. The famous Buffalo Café was next door, and the infamous Mountain Bank was across the street and across the alley from the Frank Lloyd Wright office building where my first title office had been located.

Central Avenue proudly boasted a few local landmarks such as the Ben Franklin store, the Bulldog Saloon (in honor of the Whitefish High School mascot, the Bulldog), The Remington Saloon and dance hall, the favorite and always fashionable Great Northern Bar and Grill, and the Black Star Micro-Brewery.

Central Avenue ran the length of six short blocks, yet was considered the community's downtown hub. Many of the saloons, bars and restaurants were there; the art galleries and kitschy tourist shops were also there. The street hit a northern dead-end at the Stumptown Museum and Whitefish Depot, where Amtrak and the Burlington Northern ran regular rail routes.

When I lived in my home on the range, the only thing that stood between my back porch and the railroad tracks east of town were hundreds of acres of hay fields littered with more grazing cows than I could ever count. It somehow seemed sacrilegious for me not to stop whatever I was doing to simply savor the austere beauty in those train processions whenever they would silently glide across my distant mountain landscape behind the billowing smokestack of a lead engine en route to the depot. And when the landscape was draped in fresh glistening snow, the scene was nothing short of surreal.

It was the Baker Avenue Bridge that offered the only access available to the other side of the tracks and the resorts: Whitefish Lake and Big Mountain. Once over the bridge, Baker Avenue turned into Wisconsin Avenue, and it promptly offered up a fork in the road. To the left was Lakeshore Drive, which followed the lake's eastern shoreline until it ended abruptly at the edge of a vast forested wilderness managed by the Forest Service. To the right went Big Mountain Road, which predictably switch-backed half way up the mountain on its way to the resort and ski hamlet of Big Mountain.

What few outsiders knew was that Whitefish had an evening curfew and every night, precisely at 10:00pm, the curfew alarm would sound at deafening decibels from the fire station and it would reverberate through the night skies for miles. When my big sky days began drawing to a close, that screeching alarm served as nothing more than an inescapably rude, and quite symbolic, wake up call for me.