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TWO STORIES

RESCUE AT SEA

&

CHARLEY'S EAGLE

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RESCUE AT SEA:

Buster Goes to Sea

by

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CHAPTER ONE:

I gripped the helm of the sloop fiercely, my eyes screwed up to peer through flying foam and shredded wave-tips. Miles of black Pacific Ocean fled away beneath our keel. Big fat luminous stars rained light upon us from a night sky inordinate in majesty.

Mystic II careered down the sides of relentlessly building waves, providing my first taste of the pelagic world's impersonal occult, a toss-away abundance of beauty and dread. Barbarian hordes of oncoming waves seemed to smell the virginity of my sea experience.

Bob, my watch-mate, shouted "We've got a strong cross-current running, keep a steady grip on that wheel." I wondered at his blasè certainty that I could be trusted with our tiny expanse of solid safety in this world of teeming water. Eager to add a bluewater trip to his years of sailing experience, Bob, like me, had never sailed offshore before. However, he was Mystic's First Mate and a competent racer, while I was fresh from a basic sailing course.

Straining to hear each other above the wind, it was hard to believe in the secluded world down below where quiet lamplight illuminated the others playing cards.

Tracy, second mate, was a twenty-five year old American woman whose long legs were legendary. Her acceptance of teasing from male crew members seemed incongruous alongside her cold, swift skills in handling the boat in rough seas.

She awed and puzzled me with that powerful assertiveness; it existed together with an almost pathetic need for male approval. The daughter of an arms dealer, she had suffered a lonely childhood, moving from country to country. Of the entire crew, she alone had survived shipwreck and knew the ocean intimately. Her attitude was sea-hardened, intolerant. Toward me, her behaviour was contemptuous. Contempt for my lack of skill; anger, even fear, at this unwanted extra female presence.

Six-foot, brawny Dave was engaged to a girl on shore, with whom he was making big plans for a round-the-world sail. This was his practice run. Big, strong and kind, Dave was a guy you wanted around when things fell apart. Strangely, Tracy had attached herself to Dave in that way that frailty flies to benevolent strength, though there was little frail about her on the surface.

Our fifth was the skipper, Chad, whose lady I was. Apart from that dubious qualification, I myself had no business on Mystic's water-slicked decks that night. But the flame of adventure had begun to burn in my bones, a different kind of biological clock ticking, and I had packed up my teddy bear, some pretty cotton clothes, a vast supply of skin care products, and climbed aboard for the South Pacific. I tossed in a pair of high heels in case Fiji's restaurants enjoyed a dress code.

With the perspective of hindsight, it seems we were all destined to crew that voyage. Perhaps we all desired a crucible in which to speed a growth process made more urgent by a rapidly changing world.

But let me tell you about Chad, a hawk-eyed retired Army officer. Actually, he had a hawk nose, and melting brown eyes, but the personal ad I had placed stated clearly, "Nurse, 30's, wishes to meet hawk-eyed experienced seaman to liven up a boring and mundane existence." In the confusion of meeting him for morning coffee and trying to appear sophisticated and adventurous, I mistook the nose for the eyes, and accepted him. He also had a lot of money, which may have blurred my vision.

Chad had made it clear that he was looking for a First Mate kind of woman. "Fiji! Imagine sailing into a South Pacific harbour, you and I!" he enthused.

My thirst for adventure suddenly faded a little. "I'm not sure I have what it takes," I said timidly. "Isn't it dangerous out there? What if we get lost?" Physical cowardice was my problem, and I really longed to beat it. Adventure seemed wonderful in a book. But could I see a real adventure through?

"We have radios to home in on beacons down the coast AND the ability to log our distance by dead reckoning. Besides, the SatNav I have on board is the latest in seagoing navigation technology. Absolutely nothing can go wrong. I have planned every detail consummately. Have confidence!"

I had never heard of dead reckoning before, but it sounded dangerous. Still, yielding to my fear was unthinkable. This was probably my last-ever shot at a true, life-changing adventure. After a couple of weeks of hemming and hawing, I finally committed.

CHAPTER TWO:

So here I was, under Bob's absent-minded eye, struggling to keep Mystic on course. The cross-current poured under us from starboard, while the wind drove legions of mounting waves toward us from port. In the vortex of these two forces, the bow of our little boat had to stay centred dead on course. I achieved this by swinging the wheel back and forth a thousand million times an hour, right to meet the current, left to meet the weather.

Now, for many people, the thrill of mastering such skills would outweigh their agony of fear. Such a sense of thrill has never been available to me. I'm just scared. Which was why I was doing this, right? To get over all that stuff, to find the Cowardly Lion's heart. I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to scream at Bob, "Take the wheel!"

The huge mainsail was full and thunder-bellied with hollering wind; the 130 genoa drove us on, as our eleven-knot-an-hour vessel surfed wildly down the waves at fourteen.

Bob seemed to be caught up in a racing frenzy, his favourite state of mind at home. Only this wasn't home. In spite of my trust, the pitch of those warning bells climbed. From some faraway, hysterical, distance, my brain noted: My hands are in charge of this helm, attached to a careering boat aimed for San Francisco. This cannot be.

Pay attention, Bob is saying, and yes, I am trying to pay attention, but oh god this is desperately hard, swing the wheel the right way, I mean the left way, over and over, I can't keep this up forever, will it never end..

And then I broached. Fulfilled my own disastrous prophecy, and turned the wheel the wrong way. Just once.

Unforgiving, the sea is called. Once is all you get. One moment there we were, stars raining down, Bob's voice chatting merrily away, the next moment we were on our side and my hair was underwater and I was trying to swing the helm around against an impossible weight. The proud mainsail lay beaten on the surface of the ocean, gathering tons of water in her canvas. Not just water, but two-hundred-miles-from-shore water.

My head came up from the seething waves and I screamed "TRACY". The only one who really knew what the open ocean could do. Maybe that was why her name came shrieking out of my vocal cords. She charged up the listing companionway with the other two close behind her, their poker hands and coffee mugs flung carelessly on the cabin floor.

Within seconds, Bob had released the mainsail, dumping the ocean's death grip from Mystic's throat, bringing us upright once more. Tracy, her long golden hair flying madly in the screeching wind, leaped across the cockpit like a Norse goddess, pulled me out from behind the helm, snapped herself in, and shouted at me "Get down below, NOW!"

As I fled down the companionway ladder, shutting the hatch behind me, I heard Tracy's furious

voice: "Why was she at the wheel in this weather? She has no experience. The mainsail should have been reefed before this."

We had spent days planning medical supplies and were well supplied with seasickness medications. But I had never envisioned a world so full of terror, vomit and uncontrollable motion. To pull out a medicine chest and open it took superhuman energy. Two watches later, too late, someone finally succeeded in laying hands on the Graval, which by then had limited effect on the physiological shock our bodies were grappling with.

Thirst was the second urgent problem. All the fluids were stored in heavy containers. Our stomach muscles, rigid with seasickness, were out of working order; the fluids stayed where we had thoughtlessly stowed them, buried under other supplies.

Down below, my world was reduced to wailing darkness as freight train waves, born of the worst storm to hit the Pacific coast this century, encountered an unexpected cement obstacle, Mystic's hull, at the same angle of impact as the position of my head in the bunk. Above all other memories, one stands out - the sensation of primal, terrorized vulnerability as speeding tons of black water released their core energy directly behind my right ear.

Waves breaking repeatedly over us, Mystic heeled with every huge onslaught onto her side, threatening to turn turtle. Each time we heeled over, I screamed. It became the rhythm we sailed to, the roar of the oncoming wave, the shouts of the crew up top, and my scream as the starboard hull smacked down. I fought to stay on the bunk, hanging parallel to the floor, clutching Buster (that's my teddy) tightly to my chest.

No Intelligence directed this roller coaster, there was no court of appeal, no reason. At no point would a voice declare "Enough!" The sea would calm perhaps long after we were on the bottom. After we had discovered who among us had the personal style to die with dignity.

Once or twice I weakly reached out in the wet darkness of the cabin looking for a cap or sweater to pull on. If I could get up top, just once, and stay there, I might not be sick anymore. I could function again. Dave's sweater, vomit-soaked, floated toward me as a venomous wave breached our hatches and sloshed toward my bunk, but I had no strength to pull it on.

As each watch ended, a drenched form crawled down the ladder to hover over the charts and work out a dead reckoning, flashlight beam moving ghost-like in that darkness. All navigation equipment was dead, soaked by the saltwater sporadically tumbling down into the cabin. Dead reckoning - a combination of educated guesswork and map measurement - did give us some idea of our course and location, just as Chad had promised, back in the warmth and safety of that long-ago coffee shop.

Blindly feeling their way to a soaking wet bunk, the newly relieved watch huddled, shivering and vomiting, trying to rest. Some removed their survival suits only to struggle back into their waterproof cumbersomeness when a wet mattress threatened hypothermia.

Loathing my own pitiful weakness, I suffered profound humiliation. If only I could get up top to the clean wind, I might be able to perform some duties. I certainly wouldn't be screaming as

much. It was a few yards to the ladder, and the ladder had only eight steps. Surely this should be possible. Being under fire is a very personal thing. No matter how anyone else performs, one's own performance is all that really counts.

CHAPTER THREE:

Little did I know that Chad was going through a crisis of self-contempt beside which my own paled. A massive wave had hit while he was at the helm. Trapped beneath threshing water for two full minutes, hands frozen to the wheel just like mine had been, Chad had "lost his bottle", as they say.

A veteran of campaigns and peace-keeping in three countries, he was a tough guy who had long forgotten such debilitating fear. But when Mystic righted herself after that knockdown, he fell away from the wheel in mortal, speechless terror. It was several days before he could take the wheel again; the other three discreetly covered his watches without complaint.

Then there were the small but necessary hells that made survival even a possibility. Did you ever see a happy group of tourists dressed up in cheery red floater suits go whale-watching? Each of us had agreed to wear one of these suits at all times when up top, complete with an emergency "epirb" light on one shoulder. Epirb lights flash and send out a homing signal when they hit the water. The suits would keep us afloat for a long time if necessary - a last defence against the ocean's fury.

However, seasickness generates diarrhea, and what goes on must come off, especially when visiting the "heads", over and over again.

First, squeeze into the tiny cubicle and pull the door shut. Next, struggle (urgently) out of the bulky layers of whatever it is that makes the gear floatable. Then the boat would rear up like a horse and thump back down, lifting the half-undressed victim at least a foot off the floor. The door would fly open. Try to stay on the seat and be sick in the miniature sink at the same time. This worked, providing one had the strength to press hands tightly

against the cubicle walls, resisting the violent motion of the boat.

Waves and rain constantly entered hatches and portholes, our hasty silicon repairs back in port proving almost completely useless. Every piece of electronic equipment was situated near the bottom of the companionway ladder, making it a certainty that corrosive saltwater drenched it all.

As an astonishing dawn rolled round to reveal clueless acres of sea and sky, we longed to know where the hell we were. Dead reckoning tended to be fairly accurate; but how could we be sure?

But there were many exciting things to keep our minds exercised, apart from the piddly matter of location. Waves broke below decks with regular consistency. Bilge pumps had to be constantly manned, even by the sickest. Those bilge pumps were old and tired.

"The only thing missing" muttered Tracy bitterly as she fell, thinner than ever, onto a wet bunk after a 2:00 A.M. watch, "is fire. We haven't had a fire yet. Still, we can't even boil water for coffee, so how could a fire start?"

Disgusted with herself, she apologized for sounding negative. Positive thinking was Tracy's absolute specialty. I looked at her slight, soaked form, thick golden hair plastered to the back of her neck like a rain-soaked child's. My heart rose in intense compassion for that slender form outlined indelibly in bravery and toughness.

Funny, but a matter of hours later, I thought I smelled smoke. I struggled off the bunk, staggering and falling with Mystic's wild motion. Losing my balance, I fell across Dave, sleeping like a dead man behind a lee cloth in the starboard bunk. "Dave!" I screamed above the storm. "I think I smell smoke!" Never has a sleeping man hit the floor so fast.

Smoke was curling up lazily from the electrical wiring. Dave shouted Chad and Bob below decks, frantically trying to isolate the faulty wiring, grappling with the big red fire extinguisher.

The fire was swiftly doused and then immediately forgotten as Tracy shouted through the hatch for assistance with a tangled storm jib.

As Mystic ploughed through latitude after latitude of ocean expanse, our greatest friend was that wonderful diesel engine, shouting its awesome battle roar. Mystic heeled over, rolled back up, again and again. Cascades of water poured from her bilges; but that darling engine just kept on going: chuggachuggachugga...

It had to happen. God had to be getting tired.

A padlock, carelessly hanging loose directly above the unprotected engine, had been swinging back and forth all afternoon. Finally yielding to gravity and the unrelenting see-saw motion, it slid off the hook unnoticed. Without warning, the engine screamed, a red-hot scream. The chuggachugga stopped abruptly.

How silent, in that cauldron of storm, it all abruptly was.

Chad again tumbled frantically down the companionway, this time followed by Dave. Urgently, cautiously, the skipper inserted a pair of pliers. Withdrew the padlock, glowing red and sheared by a third, from the engine's great heart.

God couldn't have been as tired as we thought. The engine grumbled to life again. We all remembered to breathe.

By then, lassitude from endless vomiting and diarrhea had reduced Bob to crawling on hands and knees. It was clear that he would rather die, be washed overboard, anything, than admit his strength was gone. The others banished him below decks to a bunk where from time to time his face, vividly green, would rise to gaze numbly from behind a lee cloth.

Mourning, not so much his misery, as his inability to keep going. I knew that feeling.

At last, on the evening of the second day, I made it up top. To the taste of fresh air. I brought bad luck with me.

Mystic's helm was composed of two round pieces of wood framing three layers of spokes, all

leading down to the centre. Ten minutes after I had joyously snapped myself safely onto the cockpit lifeline, the wheel fell apart.

Have you ever been presented with an perfectly cooked artichoke, a whole one? You move the first row of leaves away with your fork, and in a beautiful cascade the spiky green layers fall slowly away, exposing the small, tender heart. A magical food.

This was so much like that. In slow motion we watched Dave's face, his mouth falling open, as the circle of wood came off in his hands. Then our eyes fastened on the metal spokes slowly tumbling out of their slots and spraying across the deck.

Dave sat there, foolishly holding the unattached wheel in his huge hand. The unfailing strength in those hands had directed Mystic's hydraulic steering system through weather that was sinking other boats around us. Those hands had nothing to direct anymore.

Chad rose from the bench beside me, his face a mask of despair. All he said was, "What next?"

There was no time for pouting. Before the next body of water fell across the cockpit, Dave grabbed the smallest spokes, re-inserted them and carried on steering, his huge fingers nimbly manipulating the slender strips of bright metal. As one fell out, he pushed it back in and carried on. The full impact of this latest disaster is hard to explain. When added to Mystic's growing damage list, it could be said that crises were growing in spurts of geometric progression, which I had always heard was the case with tragedies at sea. Above and below decks was a grim sense that we were, indeed, in the middle stages of such an event - a tragedy in the making.

Damaged beyond our level of repair were navigation lights (the fire had doused those), propane beeper, satellite navigation system, depth sounder, two radios, epirbs (we assumed the suits would still float), and, now, the wheel itself. In addition, the preventer, which controls the mainsail, and both hatches, were all badly damaged, although still functioning.

However, the lifelines, encircling the entire boat, were indestructible; Chad had seen to that. And the liferaft was in good working order. Well, as far as we could tell. The more uninitiated among us wanted to launch it, just to be sure. Tracy explained carefully just how uncomfortable a lifeboat could be. She knew, first hand.

We decided to stick with Mystic.

CHAPTER FOUR:

For the final ten hours of what felt like our private storm, Dave and Tracy spelled each other off helming, using the unstable small spokes to control the boat. I am willing to swear to that with my hand on anything from the Bible to the Celestine Prophecy. Your pick.

The rest of us were simply unable to contribute to our own survival. We could not lift a hand to do more than pump an occasional bilge. Only those who have experienced the disabling power of seasickness can understand.

Tracy and Dave saved our lives. They were true heroes, and earned our lifelong gratitude. But, as if that were not enough, they were given an extra layer of icing on the cake. They did it with a broken wheel. An embarrassment of blessings. Stick that in your ear, Stallone.

As we approached California waters on the third morning, (I had to check my diary to believe it; yes, only the third morning) the storm showed signs of abating. I looked up to see Bob wavering unsteadily beside my bunk.

"On all the earth, there's only one coast more dangerous than this one, and it's Cape Horn.

You had no experience - you shouldn't feel so badly. I've had more experience than you, but I can't fight this sickness either."

He asked for my collusion in radioing the Coast Guard. "Maybe they can get us off in a helicopter," he said listlessly. "But there's a problem. Dave and Tracy are thrilled about the improvements in their seamanship and they don't want help. They're determined to get us into San Francisco alone. We need help or we're all going to die out here."

Hauling myself off the bunk, I yelled, "Improvements in their seamanship? Show me how to work that damn radio and I'll do it myself."

"No, just back me up if the others try to stop me. I want to live to see my wife again."

Breathless, I watched Bob's slight form settle onto the bench by the one functioning radio. That moment is still with me, standing in the dim light of that soaked cabin, feeling afraid that one of the others might open the hatch and see us.

Then the radio crackled and, so easily, a strong male voice took its presence among us. Calm, reassuring, knowledgable, the voice gave routine instructions. Human sympathy was like a lifeline, and we grabbed it in utter thankfulness.

"A spotter plane is on its way," Bob said, after signing off. "Now to tell the others what we've done."

Protest was surprisingly minimal. Even Tracy's lovely face, white as moonlight behind the helm,

showed a glimmer of relief.

"But we could have made it," she said fiercely. "We could have done it ourselves."

Such a small boat, to hold five completely separate universes. I knew that her stories of the trip would forever be quite different from mine. Hers would be full of positive thinking, and mine would be full of humiliation and fury. And both stories would be true.

Within hours, a helicopter hovered above Mystic's mast, heralding the arrival of a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. With as much compassion as the sea allowed, we were guided to safe harbour at Drake's Inlet.

"Does the Coast Guard charge for its services?" I wondered. We would have to work forever to pay back the cost of a spotter plane, a helicopter, and a Coast Guard crew and ship.

At Drake's Inlet, tied to a buoy, we were nourished, listened to, and doused with sympathy. Whatever opinions they may have expressed to our skipper we never knew.

There was no charge. The sight of a Coast Guard donation jar will forever have the power to remind me that I am lucky to be alive; even more, that there is benevolence beyond measure in this world.

After a quiet night of profound sleep, we set sail for the Golden Gate as dawn broke, cool and calm, over the inlet. We had done it. Our magnum of champagne, snug in its nest under the forward bunk, waited to discharge the task it was born to.

At approximately 4:00 p.m. the traditional "pop" echoed on deck and a burst of effervescent spray shot into the California sky as our mainsail moved majestically past the girders of the Golden Gate Bridge.

We immediately ran aground in front of the afternoon cocktails crowd standing outside the Corinthian Yacht Club. Our damaged preventer decided this was the moment to finally fall apart. The mainsail began to swing round. Bob threw himself upon the preventer and jury-rigged some lines to stave off disaster.

Embarrassment had only fleeting power over us now. We drank champagne on the sandbar till the rising tide floated us off. And we worried that lobster might be off the menu by the time we got to the San Francisco Yacht Club.

To be connected with the solid, bustling world of people was like being born again. We had another chance at life; the same old problems awaited us all – finding work, handling relationships, getting through the mundane stuff of life.

But our characters had undergone lasting alterations.

Over the next two months we stayed in a series of yacht clubs, which definitely made things better, and I did not abandon ship until Mystic berthed in San Diego, many nautical miles away.

Most important of all (to me) I learned to competently steer our vessel through peach-tinted

California dawns, dolphins dancing in our bow wave. Glorious. The Lioness had found at least a little courage. I had what I'd come for, after all. And my seasickness had finally quit, outside Ventura, as everyone's apparently does.

After I left, Chad found another lady mate, one with extensive blue water experience, and sailed on to the Isles of Dreams – the Tuomotos, our original destination. The Gods love those who seek adventure. I thank them I didn't have to pay for the rescue squad.

It was snowing in San Diego as my plane lifted into welcoming skies, taking me to my northern home, a little braver and wiser. These days, when I face the seemingly insurmountable odds we all have to deal with, I remember Tracy, hair plastered to the back of her delicate neck, soaked through and exhausted, determined to stay positive. And winning, for all of us.

I can't believe I have finally written this story.

And I realize again how much I love those four people.

I found a tiny medal in an old jewel box the other day. It fits Buster's furry little chest nicely.

The End

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A GENTLE STORY:

CHARLEY'S EAGLE

by

VANAYSSA LOVE

CHARLEY'S EAGLE

The yellow helicopter shrank to a bright speck against Needle Mountain's sun-splattered ancient forest.

"Well, there go my tax dollars again."

Charley watched from the doorway of Desire Inlet's Marine Store, perched at the end of the town pier.

"Some T.V. producer in Europe makes a movie about rain forest eagles dying in Canada and the government dips straight into our wallets for a flying squad of expensive experts."

"Falling eagle population!" he continued to berate a sympathetic customer. "They should do something useful and find out why the duck count is down." Duck hunting, his favourite fall pastime, was a big disappointment this year.

"The deficit will bring this sentimental spending on wildlife to an end, believe me. If it's not eagles, it's sea lions, or even shelters for hippies."

"See you in the pub tonight, Charley?"

Below the open window, Vic Larson called up from the deck of his little pleasure boat. Like other local builders, Vic had prospered from world-wide publicity about Canada's rainforests.

"No thanks, Vic, I'm beat today. It's been a busy year. I must be getting old."

It was six o'clock before the last chatty customer finally waved goodnight. Glad it was only a short drive home, Charley stood squinting in the cold evening rain for a moment before starting the van.

His bones felt colder every fall.

As he stamped into his cottage, droplets of rain flew

from his shoes. Jip and Tip, the twin kittens, sleepily strolled in from some warm niche. Time for the can opener. Obliging, he paused for an exchange of affection and filled their dish with the local Co-op's best.

What he needed, his buddies often advised him, was a nice woman to spend his evenings with. Well, Charley wasn't getting into that kind of hot water. He'd seen enough marriages go up in smoke, the man left to pay out forever as punishment for having sought happiness. A man's world? That was a joke! Taxes, sick eagles, Native land claims, and, to end it all, hockey and baseball strikes!

Thank God for whiskey and tobacco. He gratefully paused to light up his pipe.

The doctor wanted him to stop smoking. That last checkup. Blood pressure through the ceiling. Well, no wonder!

Ah, the mail. In his windbreaker pocket. Pulling out the rain-damp bundle, he groaned to see the familiar Receiver General stamp on a long brown envelope.

Wearily, he lay it aside and walked over to light the stove. Then, having mustered as much domestic comfort as possible, he opened the dread letter. He knew his last GST Tax return had been late.

It was notice of a fine, his second this year. Fourteen hundred dollars.

A huge sigh erupted from his chest. Head in hands, he tried to think straight. This recurring tax nightmare! His blood pressure...

There just wasn't time for all the paperwork. Such a lot of money! And for what? For sea lion and eagle studies and inflated salaries of so called environmental protectors...

Greed. He no longer understood the world. How much sacrifice would it take to satisfy the hungry government mouth, the demands of all the do-gooders and hippies...

Untouched, his pipe smouldered to lifelessness in the ashtray.

Maybe, a part time person to do the paper work. At this rate it would be an economy. Nice to have someone around on the quiet days too, a bit of company, when winter stillness settled on the little town.

Charley stood to gaze out the small window. Against the rising moon a cedar snag stood, proud in its great age. Its uppermost branches were usually graced by the splendour of some majestic bird. Ravens, blue herons, eagles.

Lately a young eagle had claimed it for his private use. Early morning skirmishes were frequent as he defied all others to take the high branches. The unusual vantage point must have a reputation among the hunting birds, Charley figured.

And this stripling eagle had just come along and claimed it for himself.

Abruptly, he stiffened, eyes narrowing. The young predator, outlined in deep shadow against the lunar landscape, gripped the topmost branch, and, to Charley's consternation, had fixed gleaming eyes directly upon him. The great bird seemed to hold his focus, drawing his mind away into the cold freedom of the forested night.

It slowly came to him that the eagle was alone.

Every morning the black, seven-foot wing span would circle the snag as shrill calls echoed high above the town. But there was never an answering call.

Like Charley, he fought his battles alone.

It almost seemed those moon-lusted eyes were communicating some cosmic sympathy far beyond language. Then, without warning, as cloud obscured the moon from sight, immense wings unfolded. The tree was empty, the stage dark.

The spell snapped like a broken twig.

His empty stomach bringing back reality, he noticed the kittens had finished their supper and were entangled in a warm bundle on the couch, asleep. Going to the fridge to prepare his own meal, he thought about that young eagle. They had a few things in common. Funny, that.

No one should be alone. His thoughts turned to Marjorie Johnson, the pleasant widow who helped out at the post office now and then. It seemed she was looking for a little regular work, and she lived within walking distance of the store. He wondered if she ever got lonely. People didn't like to admit to being lonely.

Chopping raw onions for his steak, he firmly pulled his thoughts to supper. What you need, my man, is a good night's

sleep, he told himself, feeling embarrassed for some reason.

After a night spent on dreamslopes creatured by flashing wings and shadowed eyes, the mundane routine of his store was reassuring next morning.

Leafing through a stack of tax invoices, he heard the racketing noise of the yellow copter. He snorted. The return of the eagle study team. Throwing on his windbreaker, he locked up and strolled over toward the still-spinning blades.

"Hi there, Charley," grinned the pilot, Jake. "I was just coming over to pick up some stores. These environmental flights keep me so busy, I've hardly got time to keep up.

"Have you met Al, from the Ministry? Al, this is Charley, the highway robber on whom we all depend for survival. Charley and I are duck hunting partners. Hasn't been a great season, has it, buddy?"

"That it hasn't, Jake," he agreed. "How are you, Al? Good to meet you. How did you guys make out? I heard you were trying to figure out what's going on with the eagle population."

Al didn't smile back. "I hate to have to tell you guys this. The fact is we have a big problem with lead shot out here. Tourists mainly, I guess, but a lot of hunters are leaving dead ducks all over the place. Eagles eat the carcasses. Result, lead poisoning. They die out there and never get to reproduce. You'll see a lot of eagles without mates in the months ahead."

Heaving his packsack onto his shoulder, he headed after his crew, leaving the two men to look after him in startled silence.

That night, Charley looked in vain for the eagle. The branches were empty.

After trying to get to sleep for an hour, he brought the twins in to sleep on his fluffy comforter. Some company might help. He lay for a long time, listening to warning winds whistle down from early-wintered hills.

Saturday morning, and the sun rose behind the snag like a firm, pale peach.

An early sound wakened the cats, who in turn licked his face and ear awake. He got up to put on the coffee. It sounded like the eagle was in full battle dress this morning.

Half asleep, he wandered over to the window to see what the noise was about.

A new song spilled over the forested valley.

In seven-foot wing sweeps, the white-headed bird circled the snag, his song of welcome rending the air. Perched upon the lower branch was another young eagle.

"Look Jip," Charley murmured to the ball of fluff lying in the crook of his left arm. "It's a she. You can tell. She's giving him the top branch." He watched the courtship all morning, aware of a lump in his throat.

Then he sat down, lit his pipe, and dialed Marjorie Johnson's number.

It was a long winter. Too long for anyone to be alone.