



It's Not Natural

by Liz Betz

[Home](#)

[Winter-Spring 2014](#)

[Fall-Winter 2013-14](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

Lanny is older than his supervisor or anyone else in Campers Warehouse Direct and he often feels that he is on special probation in case he is too old. He makes sure he is steady and conscientious. He keeps a mental tally of his work and compares it with his younger peers. Like an old workhorse in a field of colts; he pulls harness all day while they frisk about. He resents their youth, their energy, but most of all their apparent entitlement to goof off. Such is life. And you have to do what you have to do.

He tried to tell his wife Sharon about his age related trials but the evening he brought it up, her arthritis is raising hell with her. She said the pain is at stock prod level or above. Sometimes she referred to it as a girdle of hurt, other times she talks of being whipped by a red dragon. Seeing her like this serves to alter his perspective. He is healthy, no small thing. In fact, he tells himself, he is in a place where his best qualities serve the company. And from the years of running his own store and hiring staff, he knows how rare an employee he is.

If only he'd hired better staff, he thinks and then he stops right there. He'd been on that particular thought train for years while his retail business steadily went downhill. And still he got to the point where his sister Goldie and his wife Sharon teamed up to intervene. They said sell or go bankrupt and so he sold out and paid down some of the debts and made arrangements to honor some others over time and found a job.

Goldie had sighed as she checked things over and said to forget about the money she'd lent him, he is family. Sharon told him it is for the best; he'd been too close to see the writing on the wall, which sometimes you just had to read. You have to do what you have to do. Such is life.

Life doesn't hold many luxuries for Lanny and Sharon. Sharon's treatments and medications are expensive but Lanny begrudges her nothing, even the various holistic and alternative medical avenues that she gets enthused about and then abandons once they prove to be ineffective. Neither of them discuss these expenses with Goldie. Sharon has some long standing grudge against her sister-in-law. According to her they didn't need to ask for the woman's opinions, they'd hear them anyway. And why Lanny keeps running to Goldie about money issues, like she is some guru, when he should have outgrown that long ago. Really. You and your sister are too close. It's not natural. She'd say. She'd also say you have to stand up for

Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

yourself. Another favorite saying of Sharon's is- and how fair is that? This mournful question serves her as the appropriate comment on everything from the weather to the news of the day.

The work week has come to an end for Lanny. His supervisor drew him aside to tell him that he'd have to speed up; the stock isn't going out fast enough. It is meant as constructive criticism, Lanny tells himself but it stung. And unfortunately he arrives at home to discover Sharon with a new shipment of all natural grains that is to be her new diet along with last weeks organic molasses and the bean sprouts in the plastic gurgling sprout grower. All of which would have to be packed along for a trip tomorrow since Goldie has wrapped them both into one of her plans.

We're going out to the cabin and spending the day. Goldie has said and after Sharon found each of her objections met, -they could take her heat pad, there is a generator, the path to the lake has been groomed, she'd be able to use her walker or her canes if she wanted to, Lanny's weekend chores around the house could be done through the week after work and Goldie's granddaughter Bonita is coming along so they wouldn't just be a bunch of young seniors, as Sharon calls them, twiddling their thumbs. The trip is planned. Nobody mentions that it is Lanny's 60th birthday on the same day. It isn't important that it be celebrated; birthdays lead to reflections and Lanny's reflections are wearisome. Such is life.

The cabin had been their parents and is co-owned by Goldie and Lanny. Every five years or so, Sharon would point out that Lanny never used it and they should sell it and use the money for something – a sun room for Sharon, or a hot tub to soak and relax in, or a remodeled bathroom-maybe with one of those pulsating water tubs. The sale of the cabin would be a windfall even if they did have to give half to Goldie and if she wants it so much she could buy them out. Lanny didn't say anything of the money Goldie had loaned him through the years, and his inability to pay her back. The selling of the cabin would bring all of that to life, and Lanny told himself that he was not frightened of these facts being known, but that he didn't want to point out to Sharon how expensive her condition made things. Her inability to work outside the home, her treatments and although he wanted her to have hope and quality of life, it all cost money and it isn't easy. Goldie's loans, private, are something he has to do to provide for Sharon. And that is harsh but such is life. But because of her ignorance his wife sees his refusals to sell the cabin as another instance of 'little Lanny's' indecisiveness. She usually had opinions of what to do and most of them are blunt and unfeeling. It is high time that he cut the apron strings his sister has him ensnared in. It is high time he stood up for himself.

During their soggy years of marriage, the first flush of love over and the evidence of loyalty and time passing not yet seen, these notions of

Sharon's caused Lanny a great deal of distress but eventually he realized that it is all a game; a little tug of war with him in the middle. Both his sister and his wife said they just wanted the best for him while they tugged in opposite directions. And if it made them happy, and certainly Lanny thought they are in their own agitated sort of way, what should he do differently? He has no idea other than this. Go along to the cabin at Goldie's invitation, he really wanted to, even though he'd have to smooth things over for Sharon, before, after and during the trip. At least he could enjoy Bonita's company, but not too much or Sharon will think he regrets their childlessness.

Later in the day at the cabin, supper is almost ready. Bonita passes the plates to him as she gets the wine bottle and glasses. Goldie has platters of food, and chafing dishes and Lanny's appetite is certainly peaked. Even if his birthday is forgotten, he is going to get a great feed, his stomach rumbles a little, not unlike a cat's purr. Sharon is at rest on the couch with her back to the table. Lanny licks his lips in a comic manner for Bonita's viewing. Goldie catches the joke and smiles too.

"We're going to indulge a little tonight. It's not natural to deny yourself every little treat." Goldie flips open the lid on a container of appetizers that would shine in the fanciest of hotels. Lanny's eyes widen in appreciation and Bonita nods her interest.

There is a creak of the couch as Sharon reaches for her canes. She lurches forward, stifles a cry; her hip joints have very little cartilage left, the pain of movement is written in the grimace on her face. As she almost has the canes, one is knocked to the floor. At the sound, Lanny comes to help, his concern mild, his manner cheerful. He gives the cane to Sharon and gives her a hand so that she is on her feet.

"Let's see what the big fuss is all about." Sharon approaches the table. She gazes at the food warily. She asks what is under the domes and Bonita lifts the lids to reveal the poached salmon mousse, then the vegetable terrine dressed with a sauce. Her nose pinches in on itself and she asks, "Is any of this prepared without cream or saturated fats?" She raises her eyes innocently to her sister-in-law's face.

"This is Lanny's birthday present from me. I've used beautiful delicious ingredients so that the food will taste good. It's not every day that my little brother turns 60."

Lanny blushes with pleasure. His birthday hasn't been forgotten after all. And not only has Goldie made this meal, she has another present. Ignoring the scowl on Sharon's face, she hands the gaily wrapped box to Lanny. He quickly sets it by his plate as he pulls out Sharon's chair and helps her sit down, then places a warning hand on her shoulder. It doesn't stop Sharon though.

"I'm usually in too much pain to do all this gourmet...fuss. Besides which, I have to eat clean. Organic. Nutrient packed. The food that comes into our house is for health and to ease my arthritis, isn't that right Lanny." Then she glances at the present and her husband. "I've

got you something at home, although I can't shop for hours and we are on a budget, I didn't forget your birthday." Her expression remains saccharine, her mouth painted as a mild smile and her eyes a mock-up of pleasantness.

"Do open your present, from your dear sister." She gestures for Lanny to go ahead.

"I wish you hadn't done all this." Lanny mumbles; then bends his head to the gift. There is a moment of silence which Bonita breaks by grabbing the wine bottle and pouring wine, anything to distract attention from Goldie's efforts to remain cordial to Sharon. An old battle seldom won.

"We'll have a toast." Bonita says brightly but Sharon shakes her refusal to have wine. Juice is offered but that too is refused. Lanny has the wrapping paper off and he is opening the lid. He folds back the tissue paper to reveal a pair of shoes, fine leather loafers in a burnished brown color. He looks no further, he can see an envelope which will contain the receipt, in case he needs to exchange them. In the past, he has done just that, taking home a cheaper pair and giving Sharon something with the money left over. He will probably do that this time too.

"I want you to put them on, Lanny. They are supposed to be very comfortable. You're on your feet all day, you need good shoes." Goldie takes the box from Lanny and places the shoes in front of his feet. He hesitates but then obeys and puts them on. His feet immediately feel at ease, and he smiles at his sister.

"They feel good. Really good," Sharon frowns as she maneuvers herself closer. She looks down at Lanny's shoes.

"I wish that I could just put on something new and feel good. It must be nice." Lanny cringes at Sharon's open hostility, but before Goldie feels compelled to respond, he speaks.

"I wish you could too, it is awfully hard to be in as much pain as you are. I'm sorry that you have to suffer." He puts a comforting arm around Sharon, all the while giving Goldie a pleading look. Don't start. He tries to tell his sister with his expression. That's how Sharon is, and it's the pain that's talking and ... just don't start. From the corner of his eye, he sees Bonita cast him a look of sympathy, but it's Sharon who deserves sympathy not him.

Goldie, to give her credit, speaks gently too. "We know you are in constant pain. And if we could, we would take our turns with your pain. But Lanny deserves some comfort and happiness too. And for all that he does for you, couldn't you be happy when he's happy?"

Goldie's tone is genuinely sympathetic, Lanny thinks and her question

is perfectly reasonable but he feels Sharon tense and he doesn't have to look at her to know that she's ripping mad. It doesn't seem that the women will ever see eye to eye and it doesn't seem to Lanny that they even try.

He wants to signal his sister to stop, for her to remember Sharon's condition. He wants to prevent his wife from snappish replies, to smooth her feelings, to make things pleasant. But it is something that he's never been able to do despite the many ways he's tried. The room seems too hot. Then he can't draw in enough air and he has to get away. Abruptly he rises from his chair and walks to the door. There he stops to say that he is going for a walk and he leaves the three astonished women behind. He's out of the cabin, he's down the driveway and he cuts into the bush on a faint trail, clipping along as if he were about to break into a run in just a moment, his breath raspy. Soon he is far enough away that he can no longer hear his name being called from the cabin.

It is then that Lanny looks down at his shoes, they won't look new after this stupid notion of a walk, the dew is making them wet. He should have worn something old that he didn't care about. He can imagine his wife Sharon with one of those head shakes that said he is an imbecile and what can you expect. But if his sister even smiled at his forgetfulness or brought up a story from his childhood about him being hard on clothes, it would be another piece of evidence in the ongoing battle between the women. Each of them claim that he needs their guidance. Well he didn't. And like a child that finally twists away from the nose wiping, Lanny deliberately turns off the pathway into a patch of tangled grass and brush and scuffles his feet, to cover his shoes with dirt and leaves and wet.

He would throw something, if he could. He wants to break something.

After another scuffle or two he sees the yellow leaves, their compost status, their rot covers his shoes. The sight pleases him. A man in the woods, he thinks. But what type of man, some city fool worried about his prissy-assed shoes, and what his waiting women will have to say about his ruining them. The ground beneath him is very spongy and he realizes that it is a mud puddle. Mud. He needs mud, and defiantly he hops to the middle of the spongy circle. There. He gives a whoop into the verdant woods. He is a man in the woods.

The bushes beside him explode. A tangle of ghost gray legs and body and long ears and antlers is only visible for a split second. The deer had hid until the last possible moment and then in fright had made its move. Lanny's heart is pounding in his throat even as his mind sorted the images – it was a mule deer, it was antlered and huge bodied. Is it possible that it looked at him? He has the impression of a baleful glance from the deer. A look just like the ones he got all day long, from the moment he looked himself in the mirror to the greeting he got from his supervisor to Sharon's description of her day when he got home. It

pierces his soul.

This is the woods where his father would bring home a deer each fall, while his mother preserved from the garden. They in turn, talked of how their parents lived off the land. Man and nature's bounty. How far away from this spot he has wandered. How out of tune with nature he lives. He is so inept that he is ashamed of himself.

He finds a fallen tree that he can sit on, tests it for stability, and eases down. He takes off one shoe and scrapes some of the mud off in the grass. The gray mud is left in streaks. The shoes are a thoughtful and wonderful gift that he has ruined. What possessed him?

Breathing deeply now he looks into the grasses, their gentle wave soothing then he gazes at the bark of the tree he's on and considers the bark's humble design. A glimpse of something white attracts his attention. Is that? It is a mushroom, familiar and yet strange. At one time he knew what to look for, there were the right colors for the gills to be and the top and whether a ragged skirt was around the stem and he remembered how he once gathered mushrooms for the family table. With a position almost reverent, he gets down on his knee and reaches through the grass to the mushroom. And he picks it and holds it to his nostrils. He breathes it in, the subtle flavor of earth and rain and life.

It isn't too late. He looks at the mushroom again and he is sorely tempted to bite into the flesh. It might be fatal, but then he would know. Know what? He passes over the implication of this thought.

No one has to eat the mushrooms, he could gather a few and bring them back to show the women in the cabin. But at the thought of them, he hesitates. He wants to remain where he is, feeling the wet of his socks, smelling the dankness of vegetation, watching the sun spot its way through the canopy of leaves, breathing air that is free of humanity. For a minute he is sorry for his presence in this world. He knows he is an intruder; that he is a rudeness in the forest. As the women are a rudeness is his life. No. He won't think of it that way. They just bicker so much, Lanny frowns. That's all it is. This trivia, this petty little concerns that loom upwards like ships out of the water before they slip beneath the waves. His wife and his sister, are both undone by their stubbornness, trying to be more important than they really were. The parliament in the sugar bowl, the strategies of war that are placed on the table like cutlery, the winner takes the plates. The food is another army they use.

Then maybe the gathering of nature's offerings could show them something. For a moment Lanny imagines himself fully prepared to be in the outdoors. He pictures a hiking stick, and his feet in good laced strapped hiking boots, and within his backpack there are cunning saws that fold and containers that expand and within his brain is the knowledge to gather the edibles, and the confidence to feed and provide for them. And just for good measure, Sharon, whose arthritis is no longer the reason for her existence, stands beside him smiling.

Goldie finally satisfied and at ease with her life. Bonita, strong and confident and ready to face the world. With wonder and love shining from their eyes. Each of them eating. Pure natural food that these woods have given them. Like Adam and Eve, before the fall.

The day dream collapses under the weight of his reality. Such is life, he thinks although it has a hollow sound in his head. Does it have to be this way? He puts the question aside much as he had the day dream. He gathers three mushrooms and he walks back to the cabin where he eats his birthday meal in silence. He and Sharon go home early.

But he doesn't forget that day. Often in the days and weeks to come, it haunts him. He puts out the merchandise, luring customers to buy into this sanitized modern version of the outdoors, and he remembers how none of this is necessary for the first people who lived off the land. Then he remembers the moment at the end of his walk, where he didn't eat the mushroom but came back from the woods to his life. Or tried to. When he is really down, he tries to direct his sympathy to his wife, she is the one who really suffers. You have to do what you have to do, he tells himself, but even though he's said the words for years, it's not natural anymore.

Liz Betz is a newly minted writer from Alberta Canada who is making her writing dreams come true. She is especially glad to be published in SNReview for the second time. More of her stories can be read by linking from lizbetz.blogspot.ca.

Copyright 2014, © Liz Betz. This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.
