



# Adjusting the Ashes

The prize-winning story that asks the question:  
How much consorting is normal for a couple their age?

by Susan Calder

Andy's hand slides under her nightie and strokes her thigh. His body curls around hers, spoon-style. Carol shrugs her husband off. He rolls over and starts snoring. The bedside clock digits shift to 4 a.m. Carol knows she'll never get back to sleep. Perimenopause, her doctor says, is making her restless. If it worsens, he'll prescribe pills. She lifts the comforter and leaves the bed. Andy shudders and returns to deep, even breathing.

Carol tiptoes down the stairs, her nostrils twitching at the fresh paint odour. She enters the den and switches on the desk lamp, illuminating the birthday cards lined up on the window ledge. Carol picks up the one from her younger daughter at UBC.

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT TURNING FIFTY?  
She opens the card.

NOTHING.

Ha. Ha. Carol returns the card to the ledge. From her briefcase, she takes out the Ashe file and settles into the leather chair to review the reports.

Harvey Ashe swallowed a mouse in his beer. Or so he alleges. Carol figures his nuisance claim against the brewery their company insures is worth \$3,000 tops. Instead of settling quickly, her novice staff adjuster dithered. If a lawyer becomes involved, they'll face a demand for lost wages, uninsured medical expenses and pain and suffering totalling a quarter million dollars.

Thank God she took over and arranged today's meeting with the claimants.

As Carol jots down Harvey Ashe's address, her gaze travels to the cards on the window ledge. She reaches for the home-made one sent by her girlfriend, Patti, who, last fall, chucked her coal company job and drove to Yellowknife, NWT. What's she's doing up there isn't clear.

"Stuff," Patti says when Carol asks. "The scenery here is amazing. Sky like you wouldn't believe. Come up and see sometime."

What 'stuff' is Patti up to, Carol wonders. Nice to be single and do whatever the hell you wish.

She stares at the birthday card. On the front, Patti had drawn a girl with long, ash blond hair, sitting cross-legged beside an empty road, her left hand resting on a backpack, the other hand raised, thumb up. Above the sketch she printed: 'CAROL BEFORE...' A depiction of their hitchhiking trip from Calgary to Newfoundland, thirty summers ago. The card's inside page contains only the printed words:

'CAROL AFTER?'. 'CAROL BETWEEN' would be the years of normal, adult life: Marriage to Andy. Mother of two children. Insurance adjuster promoted to branch manager.

Speaking of which, Carol thinks, I better find out where these Ashes live. She rifles through the desk drawer for the Calgary street map. *Kerchoo*. She sneezes. *Kerchoo*. Andy's renovations haven't reached the den yet, but the dust has penetrated. His next project, now that both daughters have moved out, is to turn the cubby-hole rooms upstairs into a master bedroom loft. While that job is in progress, they'll sleep in the basement. *Kerchoo*. Carol grabs a Kleenex. She shouldn't gripe about the dust. Ripping their house apart keeps Andy busy since his company bridged him to early retirement and she'll probably appreciate their updated rooms if he ever gets around to finishing them.

She spreads the map on the desk and works out the best route to the Ashes' neighbourhood, which she hasn't visited in years. Ramsay is a grid of streets, squeezed by factories, CPR lines and the Elbow River. Its residents, she recalls, are largely working class and the Ashes must be viewing this bottled mouse as a winning lottery ticket.

TWO-STOREY COTTAGES with porches and peaked roofs slope up the street toward Scotsman's Hill, where Carol and Andy used to bring the girls to watch the Stampede fireworks. A trio of brightly painted homes, with neat flower boxes, suggest that the neighbourhood, like her West Hillhurst one, is moving upscale. But it's far from there, Carol thinks, as she parallel parks behind a beat-up Civic. A Handi-bus rumbles past the claimants' house, which looks in desperate need of new siding and windows. A plastic sheet covers the upstairs dormer. Carol grabs her briefcase and clacks up the sidewalk and uneven front steps, thinking, if she falls, she'll file a countersuit against the Ashes. After scanning the chipped paint for a doorbell, she knocks and waits on the porch, where the mouse eating incident occurred. On that warm August evening, Harvey Ashe and his son-in-law brought beers out here, planning to relax.

The door jerks open. A short man appears.

"Mr. Ashe?" Carol extends her hand.

His palm is velvety and delicate. Mr. Ashe's shining pate lines up with her nose. He wears a checked shirt tucked into his jeans and a customized belt buckle decorated with a swirling HA.

Carol follows him through an entranceway cluttered with shoes and cowboy boots. The living room sofa, draped with a mauve throw, faces the front window and console TV. An old piano stands against the far wall. Between the piano and window is an armchair, covered with a pumpkin and rust afghan.

It's only on second glance that Carol notices the lady in the La-Z-Boy chair by the doorway. Her hair is wispy, white. A shawl encloses her narrow shoulders. This can't be Mrs. Ashe, who, according to the reports, is only sixty, ten years older than Carol.

Mr. Ashe introduces his wife, Bertha. "Call me Harvey," he says to Carol. "Can I get you a coffee? Tea? Juice?"

## "The mouse's top end went down. The backside hung from my mouth. Its tail tickled my chin. I watched the butt disintegrate and yanked the tail."

"A glass of water would be fine." Carol studies the sofa wall, which is painted peach and filled with children's portraits. She edges toward them, commenting to Bertha, "You have a large family."

Bertha's blue eyes water. She blinks.

Carol raises her voice. "Are those all your—?"

"We have three children." Bertha's voice is deep and startlingly clear. "Some of the pictures are of the grand kids."

Carol lays her briefcase on the sofa. "Nice looking bunch."

Trite, but true. Their skin tones range from freckled snow to teak and their hair shades from platinum to carrot to raven. Harvey's face has the ruddiness common to redheads.

Carol sits and slides her fingernail into the throw's spider-web weave. "Did you make this?"

Bertha cranks up the recliner footrest. Carol stares at her scuffed slipper soles. Harvey returns with a tray containing two glasses of water, one orange juice and a plate of oatmeal cookies. He places the tray on the coffee table and settles into the arm chair. Carol shifts to the sofa's higher middle cushion, but still looks up at both claimants. Not a strong bargaining position.

After she and Harvey chat about this year's unusually hot Stampede weather, Carol suggests he begin by recounting his experience. "I don't suppose you like remembering," she adds with a laugh to put them at ease and, hopefully, bring some animation to Bertha's face. The couple gape. Carol fumbles for her water glass.

"It don't bother me to talk of it." Harvey's glance passes from his wife to the porch visible through the window. "It was almost a year ago. Last August, me and Tareq—that's my daughter's husband—spent the day repairing the back patio. By afternoon, it was over 30 degrees, so we got some cold ones from the fridge and went out to the porch. We sat in the shade on the rockers. The beer tasted good and

was going down easy until..."

Carol pulls the water glass from her lips and picks up her pen and steno pad to take notes in case Harvey contradicts his original statement.

"All of a sudden, something solid hit my tongue," he says. "I tried to spit, you know, by reflex. Part of it slithered down my throat."

Carol shudders. "Part?"

Harvey glances at Bertha and sips some water. "The mouse's top end went down. The backside hung from my mouth. Its tail tickled my chin. I watched the butt disintegrate and yanked the tail. That creature was brewed, most likely caught in a vat, but I grew up on a farm and know a mouse's hindquarters when I seen it."

Carol's hand goes weak, but manages to keep scribbling.

"I held the remains up to Tareq." Harvey raises his left hand, his fine fingers mimicking the action. "I dangled it back and forth. Tareq said, 'That'll teach you, Dad, not to drink so much' and, you know, that mouse put me off beer for a solid month, which wasn't such a terrible thing." He pats the cowboy buckle on his slim waist.

"That's why you didn't report the claim immediately?"

Harvey nods. "I figured I'd eaten worse. Us kids used to roast gophers, so what's the difference?"

"I wouldn't care much for gopher."

"Neither does Bertha, but I forgot that and carried the remains of the mouse's hind end into the kitchen, figuring she and my daughter would get a kick out of it. At first they thought it was a piece of string, but after I explained..." Harvey drinks some water. "Bertha backed up to the sink. My daughter said, 'Dad, throw that disgusting thing in the trash—not under the sink—out back in the lane'. Which I did, destroying the evidence, your adjuster who visited us, says. At the time, I didn't think..."

Carol's thoughts wander to the summer that she and Andy rented a cottage at Sylvan Lake. Their daughters were four and two at the time. Patti and her then boyfriend came to visit one weekend. While the men were out somewhere, a bat flew down the chimney into the wood stove. Carol scurried out of the kitchen. Patti thrust a badminton racket into the stove, scooped out the bat and circled the racket toward the shrieking kids and Carol, who forced herself to peek at the sooty, winged rat.

She wiggles her shoulders to brush off the recollection. The steno pad is on the coffee table, where she must have placed it. "Wouldn't a dead mouse be bloated from the brewing process and, when you tipped the beer back to drink, wouldn't it lodge in the bottle neck?"

"You'd think so." Harvey reaches forward and raises the cookie plate to Carol. "Must have been a baby. Starting to decompose." He offers the orange juice to Bertha, who recoils and shakes her head.

He takes two cookies for himself and rests them against his chin. "The day after I ate it, I figured Bertha was joking when she jumped away from me and said, 'Don't touch me with that thing inside you.' I laughed, but Bertha knows a mouse's head is meat and would be absorbed into my sys-

tem, instead of passing clear through me, like a penny would, for instance." Harvey munches a cookie while his wife cranks down the La-Z-Boy footrest. "Bertha started sleeping in my daughter's bedroom and a few months later couldn't drag herself to work. Our doctor sent her to a psychologist, who's tried everything, pills, different therapies. It's all in your reports."

Bertha's shrink concluded that her husband's mouse swallowing triggered a latent trauma related to a childhood experience too buried for therapy to reach. The resulting depression forced her to quit her factory job five years short of retirement. In addition to lost income, there would be reduced pension benefits.

Carol nibbles the home-made cookie and turns to Bertha. "I understand that you're also unable to do housework?"

Bertha rises. Her shawl slips down her fleece top.

"I don't mind handling those chores." Harvey mumbles while chewing. "Washing dishes and clothes and such gives me something to do. I lost my job this past winter."

"You were laid off?" Carol watches Bertha shuffle from the room.

"It wasn't mouse related," Harvey says. "Just a normal downsizing."

Such honesty would impress a judge or jury if the case went to court. Most claimants would try to link the rodent swallowing to the layoff. With both spouses unemployed, a lawyer would add substantial figures for lost medical and dental benefits.

"For me, the main problem is..." Harvey glances at the empty hallway. "...losing Bertha." He runs his index finger up his water glass. "I don't care particularly about her cooking and paycheque. I expect Bertha misses her music and crochet, but, for me, it's..." His finger rests on the glass rim. "Her looking over and smiling while she mashes potatoes for dinner. Us going for walks to Scotsman's Hill to see the sunset. Sleeping together, her crowding my side of the bed." Harvey's finger circles the glass. "About the bed..."

Loss of consortium, the lawyer would add to Harvey's claim. Carol notes this on the steno pad, wondering how much consorting is normal for a couple their age. A couple not much older than she and Andy, who haven't consorted for several weeks and Carol can't remember the last time she did it with genuine interest.

"By bed," Harvey says, "I don't mean so much the excitement, although that was always good." His expression softens as he stares at the vacant recliner chair. "I mainly liked being with her. You know?"

I DON'T, at least I haven't known in years, Carol thinks, as she drives past downtown office towers and across the Bow River to West Hillhurst. To hell with stopping at work to process claims that will only re-emerge in new form tomorrow and the day after that until she retires or, like Andy and Harvey Ashe, is declared redundant. She bumps down the lane to the barn-like structure Andy plans to replace with a double garage, parks inside and steps along the paving stones that bisect their resodded back yard. A year

from now there'll be a terraced deck, but today she takes a giant step up to the kitchen.

"Andy?" she calls.

Silence indicates he's out, probably shopping for supplies for the upstairs renovations. Carol removes her high heels. On stocking-clad feet, she pads from cool ceramic tile to living room hardwood to worn Berber carpet. She plunks her briefcase on the den desk. *Kerchoo*. Carol squints at the window. Will they ever be rid of sawdust hanging in sunbeams? As she closes the venetian blind, the bottom slat bumps a birthday card, which falls onto Patti's card, which knocks down the next and the next.

The hell with them, Carol thinks and opens the Ashe file. Let's see where this goes.

She calculates figures for lost wages, lost pension and lost dental and medical benefits and adds amounts for pain and suffering and loss of consortium. Carol stares at the total in the calculator window. Her company's Toronto vice-presidents would freak if she faxed them this figure. No way can she recommend it. She taps her pen on the calculator. Although she could insist that this is the minimum the Ashes will accept without consulting a lawyer. With her twenty-eight years in the business, the vps would believe her.

## "Don't touch me with that thing inside you," Bertha said. She knew a mouse's head is meat and would be absorbed into my system.

At the bottom of the sheet, Carol prints the figure.

Noises rumble from the street. Carol stands, pulls down a venetian slat and watches her husband's minivan draw to a stop at the curb. Andy gets out, goes to raise the tailgate and yanks plywood from the cargo section. He staggers as he adjusts the awkward load.

Carol picks up the birthday card. 'CAROL BEFORE' hitches a ride on an open highway. The breeze billows her hair.

She opens the card.

CAROL AFTER?

She could tell Andy, "I need a vacation. We're not going anywhere this summer. I've never been to Yellowknife and Patti says the scenery's amazing."

Andy will say that he'll miss her, but he'll appreciate the time alone to work like crazy creating the loft upstairs. Carol will return to a revamped master bedroom.

Or not.

**Susan Calder's** stories have appeared in the *Montreal Gazette*, *Avenue*, *Green's Magazine* and on CBC radio's *Alberta Anthology*. An excerpt from her novel in progress *To Catch a Fox* appeared in *Transition magazine*. A former insurance claims examiner, Calder is the winner of the *AlbertaViews* 2003 Short Story Competition.