



my mom was raised in Montana's Bitterroot Valley, long before such things became chic. She had a million stories and gloried in telling them.

My brother and I, East Coast city kids, sat spellbound. Sometimes in the summer, we'd all get on a train and take the long journey West, where we'd watch my mother saddle up her horse and gallop off into the hills. I loved it out there, but I'm not sure she ever really knew that. We were so different, Mom and I. And the differences came into sharpest focus out West.

My mom's been dead for a decade. I hadn't been West for at least twice that long. It was time to go back.

Predictably, Missoula, Mont., where I landed, had become spiffy. So, too, had many of the little towns on the hour or so drive from there to the Bitterroot Valley. But no matter. The Rockies were all around. When I was little, they looked fiercer. They were magnificent, but I didn't want to pay the price to grow up in them. My mom did, though. The children of poor Irish immigrants, all the kids were feisty, but she was the feistiest. It was my mother who hid the strap that her father had used to discipline the kids. It was Mom who pulled together the first Christmas her family ever had. She made some beaded necklaces and auctioned them off at a local movie theater and came away with enough to buy a tiny tree and a gift for everybody but herself. By the time she

mother and child reunion

A daughter finds the mother she never knew deep in the Montana wilds. By Elizabeth Hanly

was 12 she was out of the house, working in other people's homes, on other people's farms. All of her earnings went back to her family. It was her duty, she thought — nothing more or less.

Over her lifetime, my mother allowed herself just one great indulgence. After nursing school, her reputation as an extraordinary private duty nurse started to spread, and she bought an old race horse named Tony. Together they'd ride like banshees in the mountains and even swim across the swollen white waters in the spring, Mom all wrapped around Tony.

During our summers in Montana, I never wanted to get on any horse, especially Tony. Or son of Tony. Much to my mother's horror, every time I saw Tony I cried. It wasn't just him. I was terrified of snakes. I was even afraid of cows.

My mother had wondered if she and I were even related. Besides being feisty, she had always wanted everything to be simple. I, on the other hand, was happier weaving stories about troll nations hidden in the mountains, or about the miners I was sure had thrown little bits of gold to women dancing inside the bars.

My mother had wished I would toughen up a bit and come down from the clouds. For years, she had campaigned for my being well-adjusted, signing me up for every after-school sport the local Y offered. There were tennis lessons and tumbling lessons and softball teams. But no matter what the sport, it all seemed to move too fast for an introverted kid who hated competition. All I really wanted to do was to dress up in old curtains and dance out the stories I was always making up for myself. After several seasons of such misfirings, my mom finally resigned

moving, I chanted to myself to just keep breathing. After a while, the landscape took over and I relaxed as we rode through a pine forest that was a million shades of green, past tree roots and broken trees and tree skeletons, all shifting in light and shadow. We were closed in for a time, then suddenly everything opened out — cascading vistas and always more mountains, pine and sky. Sometimes there were sheer drops on one side of the trail. My mom had once galloped through all this. For the first time in my life, it occurred to me that maybe her

take off in that plane than I'd been to get on Rowdy. This was the way to see the mountains, I thought. From up there, they looked like elephant toes or the great curve of some inner thigh. At times, the plane was so close to the pines we might've been nuzzling them.

We landed in a virgin forest that made the mountains from the other day look downright suburban. The pines were 10 stories tall and waved like palms in the breeze. The forest,

these mountains filled me with whimsy — not the toughness my mother kept asking of me. All this was so far from my ordered world in New York. I knew I needed it, but I hadn't realized how much.

I did get on a horse once more.

By then I'd start-

ed to wonder about all the wimp stuff. I had been softer than my mom, sure. But maybe it had been more than just an absence of strength. After all, could a wimp have felt so comfortable hiking about in those mountains as I had with my cousin?

On my next visit out West, I found a horse called Copper at Triple Creek Lodge, an extraordinary inn in the Bitterroot. And off we went. This time, I didn't need to remind myself about breathing; the wimp was nowhere in sight as we raced through the mountains. And finally, I understood my mother's need for the mountains. Much of it certainly was about breakneck speed and breaking free.

For me, the mountains are all about being contained and held close. Such opposite versions seem to meet each other somewhere — as I felt my mother and I had, up in her mountains. ■

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rides hadn't been such a good idea.

Rowdy was cautious. I was grateful and pretended to myself that I had a relationship with my mount. I rubbed behind his ears, as I had seen my mom do, but Rowdy just sneezed.

In a little while I couldn't reach his ears anymore anyway. A little while longer, I could no longer feel my legs. By the time the ride was over, I could barely get off the horse. And when I did, I was "stovepiped," as they say out West. Legs wide apart, butt high in the air. I was, it seemed, still a wimp. When a cousin invited me to join a group of women friends on a six-hour ride the following day, I declined.

Another cousin who didn't ride any better than I did had a different idea. There was a place called Mouse Creek he wanted to show me. It was more than a week's hike, several days by horse and only a few minutes by plane. Although there were no roads in, there was a tiny landing strip that had been built years ago for firefighters.

For some reason, I was less afraid to

herself to the fact that I wasn't interested in becoming an adventurous tomboy. She, of course, was the one who would have loved all the bats and balls. But good moms in the 1950s were committed to other tasks. It was only in Montana that she had allowed herself such freedom. On Tony's back. Mom would be pleased to know that finally, enough of my fanciful stories told, I was ready to go for a ride.

Return to the Wilds

These days, there are dozens of B&Bs nestled in the pastures where Tony and my mom once roamed, most of them with stables. At the suggestion of an aunt, I visited one that she heard was kind to strangers, and where they offered short as well as all-day rides.

My guide at the inn said that two hours was enough for a start. So up I went on a beast called Rowdy, a name that didn't bode well. When he started

