

Eight Days with Dave ***True Treehouse Tales of Seattle's Squirrel Man***

Day 1—Friday, April 4, 2008

Someone rings our buzzer. I hesitate because it's late and I'm alone. But my lights are on so I can't play possum. Besides, I know it's Dave, the treehouse guy.

"It's Dave, the treehouse guy. I need to talk to you." Through the intercom, I hear agitation in his voice.

"Be right down." I slip on shoes, go down the stairs, and open the entry door. There is Dave, huffing on a cigarette, wearing cargo pants and a thick wool sweater. Dave is 52, compact, wiry, energetic. He's a man who always has a plan. But tonight he has no plan. Tonight his eyes are frozen wide open, like he's been zapped with a stun gun.

"Thanks for coming down, sweetheart. I didn't know where to turn. They're coming down on me."

"Who, Dave?"

"The City." He means the City of Seattle. I motion him inside our building, which I've never done before. He tosses his cigarette down on the sidewalk and steps in. "They came and pounded stakes with orange flags into the ground all around my treehouse."

Dave's treehouse is not a child's treehouse, nor an architect's dream; more like a dilapidated carousel perched in a tree. Dave's treehouse is made of plywood on an angular random tracery of two-by-fours on beams that bolt into the strongest strategic branches of a maple and two linden trees on a hillside below the I-5 Ship Canal Bridge. Dave's view is a Realtor's rhapsody. Sunset. Olympic Mountain peaks. Lake Union. Kayaks. Rowboats. Tugboats. Party boats. Dave's treehouse feels surprisingly solid underfoot and only sways slightly in significant winds. Dave's treehouse is topped by a big, brown tarp that reaches up to a central tree trunk, like a circus tent. Wind blows through Dave's treehouse because it is open, except for his camp tent, which holds his single bunk and cages for his ferret, Rainbow; his pet rat, Lucky; and his balance-impaired squirrel, Tilt.

"Today they sent two people. They sent someone for the homeless. I'm not homeless. That's what I told them. I have a home. I built a home."

Legally, Dave fits the description of homeless. He has no photo ID, no official mailing address, no running water, no place to wash his clothes, no more protection from the cold than a tent provides, only pickup work or ferret busking at Pike Place Market, no place to cash checks when he gets them, no vehicle to drive, no phone, no aspirin to take when his sciatica acts up. And yet Dave built himself a treehouse bigger than a Belltown studio. His treehouse has a million-dollar view of Lake Union sunsets, a tented bedroom with a single bunk, a metal patio fireplace over which Dave cooks sausage or hot dogs, enough to share. Dave invites the neighbors up—dog owners on walkies, P-Patch gardeners, folks who live in new condos, old houses, houseboats, or on boats smaller than

Dave's treehouse—and tours them around his treehouse like he's Jackie Kennedy showing off the White House.

“And they sent someone from Mental Health. Mental Health! Am I crazy? Am I crazy?”

“No, Dave,” I say. “You're not crazy.” I make my voice calm. “What did the two people say?”

“Let's go outside. I need a smoke.” We step out. Dave lights up and sucks in smoke. “They said the City's going to put up a notice to vacate.” Dave is speedy—his speech, his smokes, his words. “I need help, doll. I need an attorney and the media.”

“Okay, Dave. But first, you need to calm down a little.” Dave's jitters are getting to me. Plus, we're standing closer to each other than we usually stand, and, under the streetlight, his face is startled and startling.

“Can you call your hubby?” he asks. “Robby probably knows an attorney that could help me.”

“He's visiting family in Brazil, so he's hard to reach right now. But I'll think about who to contact.”

“Thanks, kiddo. You folks are all the family I have. You're my family.” Dave's voice wavers. Dave—normally busy with plans for adding a dining room to his treehouse, for hanging a hammock between branches so it swings out over the world, for installing a pulley that hoists his ladder up—is falling apart. “This could happen to anyone,” Dave says. “Being homeless.”

“I believe it.” Our own finances are flagging lately, and the security of home, car, and retirement feels a little wobbly.

“Things can unwind fast,” Dave says. “I used to have a business and two houses and a nice car, a Jaguar.” He shrugs. “It's all gone. Now they want to take my treehouse too.” He sucks on his cigarette. “I've been there almost two years. Two years. That gives me some claim, you know. The grandfather law.” Dave goes on about his claim, and it's a good line of talk, but we both know that that's what it is: a good line of talk.

I first spotted Dave's treehouse after a November windstorm blew down the leaves. Then I met Dave: I was walking our Keeshond, Saba, late at night. No cars, so I rewarded her with some off-leash sniffing. She sniffed out a man in a grassy area just off the street. She usually ignores people unless they are carrying food. Yet she went to the man. He greeted her, then gave me a wave. “Hi, ma'am. I'm Dave, the treehouse guy.” He pointed up to his arboreal home. I called Saba. She came. I leashed her. Dave approached gently, as if I were a wild horse that might spook. He bent to rub Saba around her ears and muzzle. The leash is six feet long; Dave was this far from me. Dogs make things possible.

“I've been wondering who built that treehouse. It's quite the place.” “It's just where I live, ma'am.” He stood, looked at me. “I'm a hard worker. If you have any work for me, let me know.”

“Okay,” I said. “If I hear of anything, I'll leave a note there.” I pointed to a prominent rock. “I've got to go.” I tugged on Saba's leash, and we headed in for the night.

So began our friendship with Dave. Elder dog. More walks. More visits. Dave was there at our door when Saba fell on her way down the steps. He was there the night she had a seizure. As if he heard her cry. He brought us a plant after Saba left this world. Our last two years with Saba were also our first two years with Dave.

Now Dave finishes his cigarette and lights another. “The City came seven months ago,” he says. “You remember. They didn’t have a problem then. They were turning a blind eye.”

“So what happened recently?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Someone new at the City, maybe. Someone got a burr up his you know where. All I know is I need help.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll contact Josh from the *PI* (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*), our photographer friend who came out before. You remember Josh, right?” Dave nods. “He can come out again and bring a reporter. I’ll brainstorm on an attorney.” Dave still looks shell-shocked. “Okay,” I say, “go get some rest. Don’t work on your house tonight. Just calm yourself.”

“I’ll try, sweetheart. Can you give me a hug?”

I step into a hug with Dave and feel a shake inside him that is like the shake that comes on an Indian dancer in the tribal longhouse when his spirit song comes on him. That’s when he needs all his helpers to sing his song and support him. It’s the call, the wild cry that brings the helpers around. Dave slips out the door, and I head up to my computer to send out Dave’s call.

Day 2—Monday, April 7, 2008

Morning. From my window I see a car pull up in front of Dave’s treehouse. City of Seattle logo on the door. A police car pulls up beside it. Two workers in lime-green vests and white hard hats get out of the first car and duct-tape a notice on Dave’s bamboo entry gate. They tape another notice on Dave’s tree, right over his *No Trespassing* sign. I go out to read the notice: *Notice and Order to Remove in 48 Hours*.

When Dave wakes up he sees the notice and drops straight into a depression. His voice is shot with gravel, and he coughs from deep in his chest. I get Jim, a rowing neighbor who is also an attorney, to come talk with Dave. Then Josh, the photographer, and Mike, the reporter, arrive. Mike spends the rest of the day with Dave, at the treehouse and at the Eastlake Bar and Grill. Then Mike interviews neighbors, including me. Josh takes photos. Mike goes off to write the story, probably a late night for him. No one else knows yet.

Restless, I replay my last visit to the treehouse, just a week ago: a cold night. Dave buzzes. “It’s Dave, the treehouse guy. That filmmaker I told you about is here. He wants to meet you.” I go downstairs and Dave introduces me to a young, tall, blond guy with a big movie camera. Kevin works at Ravishing Radish Catering down below the treehouse. We shake hands.

“Come see what I’m doing to the treehouse.” Dave leads me across the parking lot and down the path to his ladder. “Ladies first.” I overcome vertigo and climb. Dave climbs. Kevin points his camera at us and films. It should be sunset,

but the sun isn't out. I step from the ladder onto Dave's treehouse. It's bigger than on my last visit and chock full of things Dave has scrounged.

Dave lives on margins. He built his treehouse on a margin of a contractor's leftover lumber: beams, two-by-fours, sheets of plywood, shims. Dave eats on the margin: sealed packages of hot dogs or once-frozen burritos he finds in Safeway's Dumpster. The margin of Safeway's business plan is Dave's grocery plan. Dave furnishes his home on the margins. He knows the academic schedule, knows when students abandon things: a chair, a shelf, a desk, maybe a pot or a pan. Dave lives on the margins of Lake Union and the University of Washington, and these are rich margins for him. At night Dave burns scrap wood, sits on his cushy camp chair with cup holders in the armrests, and eats pull-dated sausage cooked on his cast-iron flat pan. All on the margin.

I admire his work. "You moved the fireplace to the middle." I point to his metal patio fireplace. But it's not lit and the wind is chilly. I pull my gloves out of my pockets and slip them on.

"There was hail a while ago," Dave says.

Dave notices Kevin moving behind Dave's camp tent bedroom to get a different camera angle on us and the treehouse and the failing light in the western sky. Dave leans toward me. "We're making the movie together," he whispers. "It's mine and his. If it makes money, we're splitting it."

"Good," I say. "You're the one that built this amazing place."

"I built it because I didn't have anywhere else to live."

"But how did you come to this spot, Dave?" I ask because Kevin is filming and because I have wanted to ask.

"Marriage ended. My ex-wife cleaned me out. Took everything," he says. "I had to get out of there. So I drove to Seattle from the East Coast. I got a studio in Belltown that cost four seventy-five a month and smelled like urine. I lost it after a while. Then I lived in my Jeep Cherokee. But I lost that too." He doesn't offer more detail, but loss is definitely the theme. "I camped out down below." He points below the treehouse. "It's dirty and full of brambles. Rats crawled on me. So I found a piece of plywood and nailed it up in this tree. That night I slept on the plywood. Then I started building the treehouse."

I've only been up in the treehouse an hour, and my hands are freezing with gloves on. Dave proudly shows me the calluses on his hands from all his exuberant construction. "I'm fifty-two," he says. "I built this so I'd have a place for the time I have left, maybe fifteen years."

Kevin lights a propane lamp, his gift to Dave. "You want to see the animals?" Dave asks me. He goes inside his tent and comes out holding a rat in his cupped palms. It's white with brown patches, a pet-store rat. "This is Lucky. He was starving when I found him. He's totally tame." I take off my glove and run a forefinger down the rat's spine. Soft fur. "Watch, I'll put him in the chair and he'll just stay there while we talk." Dave places Lucky on the cushion of his camp chair.

Then Dave turns to a cage sitting on a table near us. He opens the wire gate and lifts up a blanket. "Here's Tilt," he points to a squirrel. "With his balance

problem, he wouldn't survive out here. He'd fall right off." I look in. Tilt is sleeping and disinclined to come out.

"Rainbow's in there." Dave points into the camp tent. "You can go in." Dave lifts the tent flap and I duck under. Dave holds the propane lamp so I can see. His single bed is on the right, and the ferret and rat cages are on the left, along with stacks of stuff it's too dark to see. The ferret's silky, white coat glows in the propane light.

We step back out of the tent. "That's where I feed all the squirrels." Dave points to an open peanut butter jar wedged between tree branches. "You wouldn't believe how many squirrels come up here. It's like a traffic jam."

"Thanks for the tour, Dave. I'd better head back," I say. The truth is, I am freezing. I catch sight of a package of those hand warmers that heat up when you open them. "You use those?"

"I use one each night and move it around," Dave says.

"I have some of those. I'll drop them off for you."

"God bless you," Dave says.

My hands grip the ladder rails. I can't see the ground. My foot finds the first rung. Then the next. And next. Until I am down. I head in, dash up the stairs, grab some hand warmers, race back down, hurry over to put them in the mailbox nailed to Dave's tree, then duck back into my own place, where heat comes from a furnace.

Now it's a week later, and this is what Dave has: two days. I go to bed knowing that Dave's story will come out in the morning, just 24 hours after his 48-hour notice. But I am not sure what it can do for Dave.

Day 3—Tuesday, April 8, 2008

The story hits the streets and the Internet highway in the wee hours. Because Dave pounded together a plywood platform on beams spanning three trees, because he is living out everyone's *Swiss Family Robinson* treehouse fantasy, because he has a million-dollar view of Lake Union sunsets, because he talks up foremen on nearby projects who give him excess lumber, because Dave builds without drawings or permits, because his construction follows the thickness and height of tree branches, because Dave is gregarious and invites the neighbors up his aluminum ladder, because he lights a fire most nights in his round, metal patio fireplace with its stack rising up through the tarp ceiling, because he cooks barbecued ribs on the fire, because Dave adopts abandoned animals, because he feeds the resident squirrels, because he nails his home into more permanence each night, because he tells a good story about how he became homeless, because he understands the word *plight*, maybe because the Dalai Lama arrives here just as the City posts its notice on Dave's treehouse, or because Seattle is both compassionate and costly, because Dave looks you in the eye and calls you *sir* or *ma'am*, because he says *God bless you*, because he lived in his treehouse for nearly two years before getting the boot, because his treehouse now perches on numbered days, or just because Dave is Dave, his story hits a nerve.

People show up. TV people. Homeless people. Treehouse people. Animal rescue people. Activists. Neighbors. The curious. From my window I see car after car pull into the parking lot that leads to the treehouse. Vans bearing the names KING, KIRO, KOMO, and Fox 13 arrive with big cameras on tripods to tell Dave's story. Dave Csaky becomes known to the world—if briefly—as *squirrel man*. The City of Seattle crew shows back up and posts a new notice: Dave has ten days instead of two.

Brandon, a young man who lives in our building, knows Dave and decides to do a search for an RV for him. He finds one on craigslist for \$750. Brandon calls the seller and talks him down to \$500 for Dave—the *squirrel man special*. The seller can come tonight after six. Brandon prints the photo and gives it to me, so I can go discuss it with Dave. We figure we'll all chip in and get it for him. It's already almost three and the seller needs to know.

I pull the carabiner handle in the blue rope that rings a bell in Dave's tent. Dave comes out, gives me a wave, and climbs down the ladder. We huddle over the photo of the RV. Then Dave looks at me. "I don't have the money to buy an RV."

"Well, we're going to all chip in and get it for you." Dave stands stock-still. He looks up at his treehouse. "Dave, the City just gave you ten days. But they will get you off of their property. The attorney told you that, right?" Dave nods. "The RV is an opportunity." Dave meets my eyes, and his are luminous and liminal and wild as moons. His arms rise as if he is about to lift off. He gives me a huge hug, and I know the RV is a go.

So I tell Brandon. I call the guy who manages the parking lot because the RV will need to park somewhere; I ask for a week. Then I head off to Washington Mutual to get \$500. Even though I am not sure how many others might help buy Dave the RV, even if it might just be Robby and me, even if it might be a harebrained thing to do, I am elated. I drive back with five crisp 100-dollar bills in an envelope. I find Brandon and give him the envelope.

Word has spread about the RV. It looks like a street festival in the parking lot near Dave's treehouse. It's time for me to go to my music class. I drive past Dave's growing audience, people looking for a fairy-tale ending or the next best thing. I know it's not all as perfect as a fairy tale, but I drive north with a smile that won't wipe off my face.

While I'm gone, Brandon handles everything. Tim and Amy bring their RV, and Brandon introduces them to Dave. Dave tours them around the treehouse. They see what Dave has built, see the crowd in the parking lot, see the TV cameras, and they decide to sell the RV for a penny. So Dave buys it himself.

When I get back from class, my headlights find Dave's new RV tucked into its temporarily designated parking place. I don't know if Dave is inside it or up in the treehouse. Then I see the ladder hoisted up and know he is in the trees, his castle bridge drawn, white knight stabled nearby. I watch it all on Channel 13 at 10 p.m.

Day 4—Friday, April 11, 2008

Dave invites the neighbors over in the evening to say good-bye to the treehouse. Dave is exhausted from the media onslaught. Bloodshot eyes. Face stubble. He hasn't had a break since Tuesday morning. Because my name and e-mail address went in the paper and because Dave has no phone, I become his secretary. People call me because they want to meet Dave, take Dave's photo, film Dave, bring a group of schoolchildren to visit Dave, ask Dave questions, praise Dave, or give Dave a hug.

But there is a downside to publicity: In the afternoon Dave goes to the Methodist Church in the University District for a shower, shave, and clean clothes. While he's gone, I glance out my window and see two guys in Dave's treehouse. A hand reaches up and shakes the tarp. I wonder if Dave is back and already taking things apart. But something doesn't feel right. I go out the door and north to the treehouse. I stand at the base of the ladder and shout, "Dave." One of the two guys comes around. "Is Dave up there?" The guy shakes his head. "Then you need to come down," I say. The guy shoots me a make-my-day look. I hold his gaze until he gives a minimal nod. Then I head back home and watch from my window as they pick up the rest of a six-pack, climb down the ladder, and race down the steep hill toward the lake.

When Dave returns I go over. The treehouse is a mess: garbage, cigarette butts, food bits, ashes from the fireplace, and Dave's clothes all over the floor. Dave paces the treehouse. "They trashed the place." He points and paces. "They're lucky I didn't catch them. They'd be on their way to the hospital by now. I would have beat the crap out of those thugs. What did they look like?" I tell him. He can't stand still. Neighbors and homeless friends arrive for a farewell party he no longer wants to hold.

"Do you have a broom?" I ask. Dave looks around and finds his broom. I take it and start sweeping. I make a pile in the center of each piece of plywood and pick out Dave's treasures. It's tempting to sweep the piles out of the tree, but I get the dustpan and collect it for the big, black trash bag.

A homeless character named Rudy arrives with some food from the Methodist Church Friday-night dinner. Three Styrofoam containers. Chicken. Corn. Potatoes. But Dave can't eat. Rudy gives me a play money million-dollar bill. "So you can buy the treehouse from Dave. It's for the million-dollar view." But I don't have the heart. So I watch the sun set into a pink line above the ridge of the Olympics. Pink fades to silver, then gray. Dave lights the propane lamp with his cigarette lighter at the top of the glass. A few boats move on the lake with their running lights on, green for starboard and red for port.

Day 5—Saturday, April 12, 2008

The day dawns like summer. On Thursday Kevin took Dave down to be on KISW talk radio. On air, Dave put the call out for a work party to dismantle the treehouse; construction guys called in to volunteer. Now they arrive in pickup trucks. They clamber up the ladder to Dave's treehouse. They admire his work, his building methods, his materials. They talk to Dave, take photos of themselves with Dave in the treehouse. They eye the beams, crossbeams, plywood. They know what it took to build; they know what it will take to tear down.

They form a bucket brigade to hand Dave's things down the ladder: Animal cages first, then deck chair, canvas sag chair, metal table, bed, shelves, unplumbed sink, patio fireplace, foot locker for food, a four-drawer metal file cabinet, everything. Then the big-top tent comes down; lathe board pried loose, tarps pulled up. The circus is breaking camp. Soon it looks like a big dance floor in the trees, and Dave's worldlies fill two parking spaces in the lot. Dave is hyper, moving around his pile of possessions. His job is sorting. But people keep coming up to talk with him. He is one big distraction that he can't escape. Kevin films it all.

The Lake Union Café is getting ready for an afternoon wedding. A flock of bridesmaids flutters through the parking lot in fuchsia dresses and satin bows. They glance up at Dave's treehouse and the construction guys, and then they swish on toward nuptials. Tuxedoed groomsmen cluster to watch. Wedding guests stop to chat, and some are reluctant to head inside.

I go to the café side door and ask Dan, the manager, if he can spare any wedding food. "Sorry," he says. "The family is taking the leftovers. That's how it usually goes. But I can bring over some pitchers of soda." He does: pitchers of Coke and Sprite, along with plastic glasses. The guys drink the soda down to nothing and go back to work.

The lead construction guy plugs in a circular saw that buzzes through plywood. Other guys lever crowbars under boards. Loud creaks. The afternoon deepens. A big piece of the platform swings free and drops to the steep slope below the trees. After a while another piece follows. Then another.

Brandon talks the Eastlake Bar and Grill into donating burgers, and I talk Romio's into a free pizza, then I donate a couple more. We arrive, laden with food. The construction guys come down again and devour food. "I built a treehouse half this size when I was a kid," one guys tells me. "I think we all built treehouses. There is something about them, you know?" I nod. "Shame it has to come down. It's well-built. Solid."

Dave is walking around wearing a thick, blue sweater, even though it's now more than 70 degrees. He glances up at the skeletal remains of his treehouse. "I didn't think it would happen this fast."

The guys finish the last of the pizza and climb back up the ladder to the last of the platform they are sawing and leveraging apart. The wedding is over and guests troop back by, stopping again to witness this coming apart. By seven o'clock the guys are done. Dave's face is as empty as the trees.

Day 6—Sunday, April 13, 2008

Dave only has a week in the parking lot. He needs a place to live in his RV. People who saw the news story e-mail me with suggestions. Someone who heard the radio show calls Kevin with a suggestion. Dave, Kevin, and I confer; we agree that two places sound viable. Both are unofficial animal-rescue shelters.

So we journey north to check them out. I drive. Dave is in front with me, Kevin in back, shooting footage for his documentary. We drive north of Everett, then west. Pete (not his real name) meets us in a church parking lot and has us

follow him to his secret animal shelter. “No one knows I’m here. It’s a safe haven.” In fact, it’s a narrow suburban lot with a single-wide mobile home. Houses on either side and across the street. We park behind Pete, get out, and greet each other. First names only. Pete is in his forties. Mustached. Denim-clad. Glum. He sees Kevin’s camera. “You can’t film here.”

We follow Pete around the single-wide to a top secret wooden pen at the back of the lot. Inside are stacks of cages. I notice a pigeon with a broken wing, a rooster that’s been through a bad fight, and a multilevel fun house for ferrets. “They’d kill these animals if they knew they were here,” Pete says. Only the ferrets light Dave up. He opens the cage door, and the nosiest ferret slinks onto his arm and up his shoulder and around his neck, and then Dave holds the ferret so they are face-to-face and Dave makes ferret noises and the ferret makes them back, mesmerized by Dave.

Then Pete allows us inside the single-wide. The living room holds two rows of animal cages: the furry row hosts guinea pigs, hamsters, and a rabbit with eight babies; the reptile row hosts two pythons in separate terrariums, a bearded dragon, a foot-long snapping turtle and assorted lizards. “These are all throwaway pets,” Pete tells us. “People just leave them in parks. I rescue them.” Pete points down the single-wide hall toward a bedroom. “Birds are down there. They’d drive me nuts if they were in here.” I see two recliners facing a TV on one side of the entry and a kitchen on the other side. Everything else is animals.

Dave gives me the let’s-get-out-of-here look. “Thanks, man,” he says to Pete. “We have another place to go look at today.” They shake hands. Then we climb back into my car and head east, cross the Interstate, and on toward the Cascade Mountains.

“That was weird,” Dave says. “No land. It’s surrounded by houses, and he thinks it’s top secret. Was that what you expected? That’s not what I expected.” Kevin and I agree. “I mean, if I had to live there awhile, maybe I could. But it’s not what I expected.” One down, I think. All our eggs are in the next basket. I don’t want to hope too much, but I do anyway. We head north on Highway 9, drive along Lake McMurray. “Hey, there’s two guys fishing there. I could fish here. This is great.”

We talk about how to cook fresh-caught trout as we drive through low wetland, full of last year’s cattails, burst and brown. Then we are at Big Lake. “There it is.” Dave points at the Big Lake Bar and Grill. It’s where we’re meeting Jill. I pull in. We get out of the car, stand in front of the café, and look at the big lake. A guy is smoking outside. “Can I buy a cigarette off you?” Dave asks him; the guy hands him one. I glance at the newsstand. Tulips are the lead story in the *Skagit Valley Herald*. Not a treehouse eviction. We are all three nervous and hopeful about Jill.

White Cadillac. Blond woman. Black jeans. Black jacket. Black boots. Pink lip-gloss. I approach first, since I have talked with her. She gives me a hug. She gives Dave a hug. Then we go into the café and huddle in a half-circle booth. The guys both order monster burgers, I go for broasted chicken, and Jill asks for a Hefeweizen.

“What’s that?” Dave asks.

“A wheat beer,” Jill says. Dave nods. His face relaxes; his potential landlady drinks a beer on Sunday afternoon. Dave and Jill discover they are the same age: 52. We eat and we exchange stories. Jill worked for the phone company for years, splicing cable. Now she drives a truck part-time for a construction company. She lives on a mountain and off the grid. She adopts animals that others give up. Seven potbellied pigs. Six goats. Three elderly wolves. We save a container of food for Dave and a container of scraps for Jill’s pigs.

We caravan north and then east into the foothills of the Cascades, Dave with Jill, Kevin with me. We leave the paved road and turn onto a dirt road, go through a gate, up a mountain, and through another gate that Jill punches a code into, black-jacketed arm out the Caddy window. We drive up to a clearing and park. Two horses come galloping toward our cars. They race around us like excited dogs doing a welcome dance. Jill gets out and calms the horses. We get out. Kevin is itching to get the camera going. “Can I film?”

“Of course,” Jill says. Kevin hoists the camera to his shoulder. “This is where the RV can go.” Jill points to an area near a water standpipe with a hose attached. Dave goes over to the brown horse and pats its neck. Jill goes over too; both of them do their animal handling rituals. Then a potbellied pig shows up, like a younger sibling looking for the party he knows is happening without him.

“Come on up to the house.” She points to the top of this mountain where her house perches, like an ark—prow pointing west, toward salt water and islands.

We stand in Jill’s front yard. A wolf slinks by, ten feet from us. “The wolves are a little skittish around new people,” Jill says. Then I see two more wolves. “They live with me.” Jill points at her house. “Inside. In fact, they are a little ticked because I locked them out to keep the house clean while I went down to meet you.” Two potbellied pigs come to the gate. Jill tosses my leftover salad and fries to them. A black-and-white hog named Oreo shows up in time to help.

“Come on in.” We follow Jill inside. “That’s the wolf sofa.” She points at a futon frame with a dark folding mattress on it. “Used to be for guests, but now that the wolves are getting older, they need a sofa.” We admire the wood floor, wood beams. “It’s made of old telephone poles,” Jill says. “When I worked for the phone company, I got old poles and milled them. Free wood.” I nod. Like Dave.

Jill may be off the grid, but she is not without power. She has two wood-burning stoves, a shiny, new generator, a big propane tank, and solar panels. Back outside we visit the goats. Beatnik, whose goatee makes him one cool Daddy-o, gives my fingers a nubby-tongued goat nuzzle. I look at Dave and see him making contact with each goat.

Jill offers beer. The guys accept. The three elder wolves circle a little closer. “Their dad was a full wolf,” Jill says. “He was gorgeous. When he died it was like losing a husband.” I nod. I believe her. “Their mom was wolf/hybrid. Probably German Shepherd.” I study the wolves. I can see the dog in them; but they are still wolf, even if they sleep on a futon sofa.

Time for the summit. Here on the mountain. Jill and Dave face each other. She lights a cigarette for herself. She offers one to him. He nods. Lights up. They

smoke. They talk. Nod. Talk more. Final nod. They lean in to a hug, cigarettes held away with the grace of dancers in a pas de deux arabesque.

We drive back down the mountain with the gate codes written on a torn-off piece of a paper bag. “Are you relieved?” Dave asks me. “I’m relieved. She is great. She’s not a nut like that guy at the first place. I have to tell you, I was losing heart then. I put all my prayers into this one.”

“I am hugely relieved, Dave.” I drive back down the dirt road to the valley road and on back to Highway 9. It’s one of those return trips where everything looks different on the way back, deeply technicolored. We pass the Bar and Grill. “Hey, this is my neighborhood place.” We edge across to Interstate 5 and join the Sunday flow back to the city. It starts to rain. Dave leans the seat back and falls fast asleep. I glance in the mirror and see Kevin is sleeping too. I drive south out of Skagit County, through Snohomish County, and back to the city. We pull up to Dave’s RV in the parking lot and say good night. Relief.

I go home and lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling and think about shelter and rescue and adoption and the ways that humans treat each other and the way that humans who rescue animals treat other humans who rescue animals. I doze off and dream of wolves circling.

Day 7—Thursday, April 17, 2008

We drive down to KOMO television at eight-thirty in the morning, and Dave is in no way ready for prime time, or even daytime, TV. Dave is barely awake, has not had coffee because the Starbucks cup Kevin bought tipped and spilled on the way to Dave’s RV. Dave’s eyes are shot full of red, and he looks as if he hasn’t slept in days, which, likely, he hasn’t. He’s been nervous about how he’ll make a go of it up north, with no Dumpsters nearby. He coughs, snorts, coughs again, then croaks out words about the media that I hope he won’t repeat when we are on air. I am worried about how this will go down. Yet, after the producer provides a cup of coffee and squirts of Visine, Dave revives. On air, the attentive host summarizes Dave’s story, then turns to ask Dave: *How did you come to build this elaborate treehouse? How did your neighbors help? Tell us about your eviction.* Dave talks and his voice is crusty and authentic. The camera moves in close to catch the tears in his eyes and the craggy lines of his face that proclaim prodigal story. The camera loves him. The live audience loves him. Walt’s Auto gives him three batteries for his RV. Dave is king for a day. Dave touches his heart. And it’s a wrap.

Day 8—Sunday, April 20, 2008

It’s Dave’s day to leave. Robby is back in town at long last, and he wakes Dave up around ten-thirty. We take him out for coffee at the French bakery for a sendoff. “You want a pastry, Dave?” I ask.

“Just coffee,” he says. “I’m a cheap date.”

The three of us sit at a table, and Dave tells Robby about the first animal-rescue place we went to, then talks about Jill’s place. We drink our coffee. Then we walk Dave to his RV. We hug him, tell him we love him even. We say good-

bye and head downtown for an afternoon symphony at Benaroya Hall. Mozart and Schubert.

It's four-thirty when we drive back home. "Do you think he'll be gone?" Robby asks.

"He needs to be," I say. "I think he knows that."

"Fifty cents says he's still there."

"Fifty cents says he's gone."

I pocket two new Oklahoma quarters. No RV. No Dave. We take a walk past all that empty space, and I wish Dave well with each step.

Back at home I see an e-mail from Jill: *Dave's RV caught on fire on the way up here. I'm going to help him. Will call you later.* Much later, maybe ten o'clock, Jill calls. They are at her place. "The RV is all wet inside because the firefighters hosed out the fire in there," she says. "He wants to talk to you."

"Hi kiddo," Dave says. "You hear about my fire?"

"Yeah. How did that happen?"

"Exhaust got routed back inside somehow and fried some wires."

"Are you okay? The animals?"

"Everybody's okay. The RV is a mess, though. I was a mess too. Jill and I stopped off at the Bar and Grill. I tried to order a big martini to calm myself down. They only had small ones, so I ordered two." That explains why he's not hyper. We talk a little more. "Jill's letting me sleep on the sofa—not the wolf sofa."

"Well, at least you're safe. Get some sleep."

"I will," he says. "Thanks again. For everything. I mean that."

Afterwards

In the ten days after Dave drove north in his RV, our building was hit three times by a graffiti tagger: same guy, same tag, different colors. Three times we call the police; three times we scrub with Graffiti Off; three times we paint over the tags. In the two years Dave was nearby, we had no graffiti hits. Dave was our quirky night watchman who kept track of what was going down and confronted troublemakers.

I remember my mom telling me that her childhood house had a hobo mark on it. The mark signaled that my grandmother was a soft touch, that she would give bread and a bowl of soup to a passerby down on his luck. Lots of folks were down on their luck in Oklahoma in the Depression. Including my grandfolks.

Mike the reporter asked to include my e-mail address at the end of the newspaper article, the part about how to help Dave. I hesitated, wondered if I would become an easy mark. "You'll get a couple of flames," he said. "I can pretty much guarantee that. But you'll mainly get people who want to help." So I agreed.

I only got one flame, someone who believes every homeless person is a criminal. I deleted that message. Then I got a message from a woman on the East Coast whose aunt was once married to Dave. She wrote that Dave drank and was not a good husband or father. She questioned whether Dave deserves help, no matter how kindly intended. She closed by saying she hadn't seen Dave in a few years, and she supposed people could change.

I save the offers of help. I sort them, answer them, print them. I collect the small checks and cash donations. I forward it all to Dave. In the end, I am only marked in ways I accept.

What does it mean that Dave's story has a relatively good ending and so many do not? Do we help Dave because he is our neighbor, because he is engaging, perhaps redeemable? Do we help Dave because the City is giving him a bum rap? Or do we help Dave as insurance against becoming homeless ourselves or to learn how to receive help when our turn comes? Or do we help him just because he is Dave?

I miss Dave. We will go visit him soon in his new home. We will take in his new million-dollar view and just maybe catch a glimpse of a fleeting shimmer of grace.

"Eight Days with Dave" first appeared in *Chautauqua* (2009)

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