

NEEDS FROM THE FOREST

by Dennis Hiatt

Frail, pale and blonde, little Holly Hope Hildegard sat in the back seat of her grandmother's car watching the trees fly by. Holly Hope was exceptionally bored. Grandmother was driving the Jaguar sedan rather fast for the sharp curves of the mountain highway and telling her sister, Holly Hope's great-aunt Phoebe, some very intimate and flamboyant details of her most current adulterous affair. Holly Hope had heard most of the soiled underwear earlier that afternoon when grandmother had their hair molded. She was hoping that great-aunt Phoebe, who wore men's suits which were never to Holly Hope's taste, would not start motor-mouthing about her Latest Girlfriend. Latest

Girlfriend was an early financial backer of Texas

Instruments who knew all the Los Angeles Lakers on a first name basis. Holly Hope had met Latest Girlfriend once and was pleased to see that the woman wore stylish dresses, even if the end results looked like Liz Claiborne had tried to clothe a cigarette machine.

The forest of pines and firs and vine-things whizzed by the window with a translucent Holly Hope superimposed on the dusty-dark and lovely forest like a dangerous secret. Holly Hope felt beasts must lurk in those woods. Some beasts with breasts but most without. Long snakes as well.

"Mmmhmm." Phoebe said as if she too was exceptionally bored. "Let's stop for a bite, Nan."

"Where pray tell?" Nan arched her eye brows into a tiny frown on her smooth, tan forehead.

"Someplace..." Phoebe crossed her slim, tan arms and looked out the window, "rustic."

Hungry Little Holly Hope knew better than to side with

Great-Aunt Phoebe. Very hungry little Holly Hope said.

"Grandmother, I must urinate."

Grandmother clicked her tongue. "Now, now Holly, you were doing so well remembering to call me Nan. Do you need a Valium?"

Holly Hope crossed her legs and her arms and looked out the window like great-aunt Phoebe. "I'm only eight...Nan."

Nan clicked her tongue again but softer. "You know you're ten, dear."

"I'm too anorexic to be ten. I look eight and I must urinate now....Nan." The forest flew by the window too quickly to see even the longest snakes.

Nan sighed. "When the cat and the mouse agree, the grocer is ruined."

Great-Aunt Phoebe laughed and uncrossed her arms. "Oh Nan, really! if you must boink proles, try to not be assimilated."

Holly Hope's grandmother laughed and exchanged a quick, smug glance with her sister.

"I think I'm about to urinate NOW," said Holly Hope, wondering if she could manage to wet her seat.

She found she could not and sighed.

Perhaps, Holly Hope thought rather wistfully, there would be a roadside zoo at the restaurant. At that zoo could conceivably live a bear. Holly Hope was not so much a child that she could bring herself to hope for a great, vile bear, but even a sickly bear, once released, might bite those who stood near.

The Jaguar rounded a curve, over-quick as always when grandmother drove, and there nestled in the tall, thin pines was a cafe...of sorts. Grandmother braked hard and fishtailed into the gravel that passed for a parking lot. Holly Hope felt she could, conceivably, dampen the seat.

There was no sign of, or reason to hope for, a roadside zoo at the tar-paper shack cafe named SLIM JIM'S BUCKET.

Little, frail, pale, blonde Holly Hope Hildegard tried her hardest to dampen the seat and found she could not.

Nan said. "Rustic?"

Phoebe replied. "Mmmhmm...quaint."

Holly Hope saw, at the far end of the parking lot, an old, old, old red pickup truck that's bed was filled with sleeping wolves. No, she thought, the things were hairy-vile but too smallish to be true wolves. The beasts were more like drab dogs and, she sighed, more like dead than sleeping.

Still she cheered a bit; perhaps there was an abundance of such creatures nearby. Perhaps they bit. The rush of rich forest air smells made a biting seem almost probable.

Grandmother sailed onto the cafe's sad, rickety porch as if she were stepping onto a yacht. Great-Aunt Phoebe followed close behind, adjusting her tie and then thrusting her hands in her jacket pockets as casually as Hamlet nodding to his stepfather. Holly Hope drudged behind them both in her white

summer dress, making the most of being an orphan.

The two slim, beautifully manufactured women and the frail, white child sat at a plain wood table near the counter. The waitperson/cook had long, greasy hair, with a tie-dyed head band. His face was so white next to grandmother's and great-aunts that it looked startled--like a child caught naked. His stomach was vast and poorly covered by a wretched tee-shirt. He looked over his granny glasses at the women as he passed

around menus. Holly Hope took her menu to the bathroom. The bathroom was a chamber of horrors. It delighted her. She sat freezing her bum on the hard stained toilet and thought wondrously of the man at the counter. He made the soiled waitperson/cook look like a man of compulsive hygiene and smashing beauty. The man hunched over a cup of coffee at the counter had a red filthy face that looked like one of the statues the poor French placed on their cathedrals to make them fear evil. The man at the counter was a man of the forest. The man at the counter could make the French or the

wealthy fear becoming evil.

On her way back to the table, Holly Hope caught the man's yellow eye and smiled nice.

As the waitperson/cook stood ready to take their order great-aunt Phoebe said, "There's a prole for you, Nan dear." "An animal lover no doubt?" Grandmother replied, smiling ever-so-softly.

"A coyote date perhaps?" Great-aunt Phoebe tittered and the man at the counter looked deeper into his coffee while Nan and Phoebe laughed as soft, slivery and bristled as drunken angels tinkling.

Holly Hope hung her head and stared at her white shoes with a smile as blank as a dolphin's. She remembered when great-aunt Phoebe had explained that joke last year. If you woke up with someone that was sleeping on your arm and they were so ugly that you'd sooner chew you arm off and escape, (like a coyote in a leg trap) than wake them, you'd been on a

coyote date. After meeting Latest Girlfriend, Holly Hope had given up believing her great-aunt would someday sport a prosthetic device.

When the laughter tapered off, Holly Hope looked up and smiled her I-don't-understand-what's-funny smile at the

waitperson/cook. The waitperson/cook frowned but what, she thought, could he say? He needed their money.

"Oh what GOOD today, Innkeeper?" Grandmother said, tossing the menu on the table.

"The Rocky Mountain Oysters are radical Ma'am."

"How quaint. I'll try them." Nan smiled showing all of her bright teeth.

"Make that two," Great-Aunt Phoebe chimed in.

"I want a dog," Said Holly Hope.

"Bring the child soup and crackers and a glass of milk."

Grandmother dug in her purse for the Valium.

Holly Hope enjoyed the thick soup but became sad when

the man at the counter left. Grandmother paid, great-aunt Phoebe (who'd love the oysters and chewed them with gusto) left a stunning tip, and Holly Hope ran outside. The man from the counter was standing in the back of the old, red truck. He was smiling. Holly Hope smiled back.

"Comemeer little girl." Said the man.

Holly Hope trotted as brisk as a fawn to him as Nan and Phoebe stepped out of SLIM JIM'S BUCKET congratulating themselves on their culinary luck.

"Holly Hope Hildegard!" Grandmother screeched.

Holly Hope, ignoring her grandmother, smiled up at the man.

"Want a puppy, little girl?" The man scratched himself in a nasty place as he spoke.

"OH yes! Please!" Holly Hope made her eyes as big and bright as she could.

The man tossed a dead coyote from the back of the truck and grinned at Nan and Phoebe.

"Come, Grandmother. Please help me with my dog." Holly Hope grabbed the coyote's tail and managed to drag it a few feet. It left a trail of cold-black and bright red blood in the gravel.

Great-aunt Phoebe jerked Holly Hope back to the Jaguar without touching the hand that had held the pleasing coyote. Halfway down the mountain grandmother finally spoke. "Why did you do that Holly?" Grandmother's unhappy voice sounded almost as real as a friend's to Holly Hope.

"I...I needed something from the forest." Holly Hope said, not fooled by the realness of the moment.

"Well...we'll get you a pine cone," her grandmother said in a way that made Holly Hope think that she'd be seeing Doctor Vandyke soon.

"Mmmhmm....from a gift shop." Said Great-aunt Phoebe staring out the window at the dark and lovely forest.

