

## VANESSA MARSH

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# Avoiding Hemingway in Ketchum, Idaho

## Finding My Voice in the Shadow of a Legend

I met Ernest Hemingway in the ninth grade. Not the Nobel Prize–winning writer, but by way of his book, *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was required reading in Ms. Lyon’s literature class but I spent math class sneaking glances at the book open on my lap below the desk. While Mr. Manfred worked through a geometry equation, I met Santiago, the Cuban fisherman who had gone eighty-four days without a catch. I learned the boy Manolin’s parents forbade him to fish with Santiago, who planned to sail alone from Cuba into the Straits of Florida. There in the Gulf Stream, he believed his luck would change in the deep water where the schools of bonita and albacore lived.

It was nine that night when my brother complained about the light and I retreated to our only bathroom. I was still reading in the empty tub at midnight when my mother knocked at the door. “Do you know what time it is?” she whispered.

“No. I’m almost finished with this book.” I thumbed the remaining pages.

“You have school tomorrow,” she reminded me.

“Ten pages more.”

I returned to Santiago and his cramping left hand.

“Andrew,” she whispered and returned to bed.

I was hooked from the beginning of the story when Santiago first catches the marlin.

*“Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes,’ and shipped his oars without bumping the boat. He reached for the line and held it softly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He felt no strain nor weight and he held the line lightly. Then it came again. This time it was a tentative pull, not solid nor heavy, and he knew exactly what it was. One hundred fathoms down a marlin was eating the sardines that covered the point and the shank of the hook where the hand-forged hook projected from the head of the small tuna.”*

Thirteen years old and embraced by the tub’s cold porcelain, I could not know how hard Hemingway must have worked to write sentences that drove gooseflesh onto my arms and back. Sitting in the bow of Santiago’s skiff, I listened to the old man beseech the fish, “Just smell them. Aren’t they lovely? Eat them good now and then there is the tuna. Hard and cold and lovely. Don’t be shy, fish. Eat them.”

During the following two hours I felt Santiago’s pain when the Marlin ran and the line cut into his right hand.

I watched the blood drift away when he rinsed it in the Gulf Stream. And then when the fish died and, gripped by his own approaching death, Santiago lashed it to his boat and turned toward Cuba, I felt the strike of the first shark and the despair when the old man's good fishing knife broke off in the mako's head. I suffered through the passage when he finally reached home and the marlin's skeleton remained as a testament to Santiago's courage, failure, and guilt. Hemingway wrote when Manolin found the old man, "The boy saw that the old man was breathing and then he saw the old man's hands and started to cry." At that moment the power of Hemingway flooded into the cold tub and I too started to cry.

I finished the book at 2:00 a.m. Haunted by images of the old fisherman and the giant marlin, I didn't sleep that night and for days afterward would stare into the distance. Years later I can still summon images of the marlin's first bite that served as a warning of the fight to come. And I still see the skeleton lashed to the skiff and Santiago dragging the mast up the street. Hemingway knew exactly what he intended when he wrote the scene. I may have been thirteen, but the hard image of Jesus dragging a cross along the Via Dolorosa in old Jerusalem haunted me as I lay in the bathtub.

\* \* \*

I was living on Front Street in Lahaina on Maui when I submitted my first short story. Hammered out on a Royal typewriter; there was no way to correct typos, no way to cut and paste—no e-mail or text. It was all careful hunt and peck, snail mail, self-addressed stamped envelopes, and months waiting for a response. My first story was about an old woman waiting for an afternoon train in Martinez, California. Born before the Great Quake, she had lived well and loved many and now waited for long-dead friends she was sure were on the train. I slipped the manuscript into a manila envelope, addressed it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, and dropped it in front of the Hawaiian postman.

Touched by the salt air, the Royal gradually rusted to a stop while I waited for a reply that never came. 3-IN-ONE oil eventually freed the keys but it spotted my manuscripts and between the stained pages and a year of rejections, it took a day to pack my fins, mask, shorts, and scuba regulator and catch a flight back to San Francisco.

I didn't track Ernest Hemingway to Ketchum, Idaho. Instead I planned to ski a hundred and twenty days between November and April. Crossing Trail Creek Bridge on Highway 93 in Idaho on a late afternoon in October of 1974, I looked west to the cottonwoods that flared brilliant yellow above the Wood River, then to Bald Mountain that brooded over the small town, and finally to the yellow and red aspens that crowded into the blue, sage-covered south slopes. That evening I followed Main Street past the Casino Club, Slavey's, Lane Mercantile, and Duffy Wimer's Pioneer Saloon that remained unchanged since the writer had lived his final years in the Hemingway House above the confluence of Warm Springs Creek and the Big Wood River.

Surrounded by high mountains and watered by pebbly trout streams, Sun Valley Ski Resort was built during the summer of 1937 by Averill Harriman, then president of the Union Pacific Railroad, who hoped to sell berths on the passenger trains that turned north from Shoshone across the desert lava flows until the Pioneer Mountains rose above Picabo's snow-covered hills. In an attempt to place the ski resort on the map, Steve Hannigan, Sun Valley's general manager, invited Hollywood's major stars for all-expense-paid vacations to relax and recharge in the lodge. The payback was photos of Hemingway writing the final chapters of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in room 206, the "Glamour House." Taken by Lloyd Arnold, the black-and-white photos show Hemingway in full flower—black hair, strong arms, fringed leather vest, scarred by the African plane crashes, focused on an Underwood typewriter in front of what would become Sun Valley's Dollar Mountain ski area.

That first night I rented a twenty-dollar room at the Bald Mountain Hot Springs. Eighty years old and fed by an ancient, wooden pipe, the hot spring pool and sulfurous rooms—though decades past their prime—spoke to the early twentieth century when Ketchum had survived on sheep herding and silver mining. It took three days to find a ground floor Krystal Villa condo within walking distance of Bald Mountain's River Run lifts and a job working for Sun Valley Company at the Ram Bar. For the coming six months, my life focused on Bald Mountain. Rising three thousand feet above Ketchum, the ski mountain resembled a forested Sphinx. Blanketed by blue-smoke snows and defined by Lookout, Easter, and Mayday Bowls,

Bald Mountain whispered to me in deep, private glades off International, College, and Fire Trails.

During the winter of 1974, Hemingway's impact on literature and writers had yet to be fully realized. The tourists had yet to leave Cuban cigars, empty shell cases, or glasses of red wine on his grave in the Ketchum Cemetery. The Nature Conservancy had yet to purchase the Hemingway House that overlooked the swimming hole upstream from the Warm Springs Bridge. Later the Conservancy would rent it for private dinners, but then it sat empty and haunted beneath a leaking roof.

I didn't give much thought to Ernest Hemingway during my first winter in the Wood River Valley. That would come later when I traded the Krystal Villa condo for Swank's Motor Lodge. Before Swank's, it had been McDonald's and Etchin's Cabins but it was Swank's when I moved into the end log cabin that offered a private bedroom, a six by eight guest room, and a tiny living room half filled with a massive fireplace made of Cherry Creek stones. A large window looked across Highway 93 to the east, facing the cliffs that vaulted from the Big Wood River to Lower College. My eyes were stronger then and as I wrote, I would watch skiers swing from edge to edge on College and, on the bright clear days, Blue Grouse and Upper Holiday.

I built my desk from wood pallets I had salvaged from the Ohio Gulch landfill. Stained one-by-fours provided a top, twisted two-by-fours framed the rails, and scarred four-by-fours served as legs. Lags bolted the desk together, and it listed to the left and shook when I hit the carriage return at night after work when I saved time to write. I had lived at Swank's for six months when Kenny Baker, whom I worked with, advised me that because Sun Valley was closed during the summer of 1946, Hemingway had stayed in the end unit of McDonald's Cabins. He must have valued the short walk to the Casino Club that remained unchanged on Main Street. A photo in Lloyd Arnold's *High on the Wild with Hemingway* shows Hemingway and his son Patrick measuring a decent four-point mule deer in front of my cabin.

I've never felt a need to apologize for hunting deer or elk and will confess to a love of the dark, early morning climbs to the high ridges above Warm Springs where heavy-beamed bucks appeared next to the tree line at first

light. The writer was a hunter and, in the fall of 1940, followed Taylor "Bear Tracks" Williams into the Pahsimeroi Valley. Bear Tracks was equally famous for his mint juleps as his reputation as a hunting guide. Though he was convinced that mint grew best on the grave of a Confederate soldier, locals claimed he cultivated the pungent leaf anywhere he could find a damp piece of ground. It was in the Pahsimeroi Valley, across Trail Creek in the shadow of Mount Borah, Idaho's highest peak, where Ernest and his son Gregory shot an antelope—the photo of which survives them both.

I climbed Borah, fished and camped in Copper Basin, and hiked high into the east faces of the Pioneer Mountains but can't say it occurred to me that Hemingway had hunted these wide, sage-filled valleys. But then, I would expect to find him surrounded by the rose and yellow shale slides, the old-growth Douglas firs, and the rolling sage hills filled with herds of elk, mule deer, and antelope and flocks of prairie chickens.

It was Taylor Williams who introduced Hemingway to the farmers who raised corn, potatoes, and Herefords in the lava-rock-studded fields that surround Shoshone and Gooding. By the midseventies, those same worn-out farmers would still nod if you knocked on the front door to ask for permission. "Sure, you can hunt the birds. Just lock the gates and don't shoot the cows." On the way out of the driveway, the tough little cow dogs—blue heelers and Australian shepherds—would bust silently out of the barrow pits to attack the mud flaps. We were careful not to run them over as much for dogs' sake as for their owners', as they held the keys to the productive ditch banks and harvested cornfields.

Surrounded by photos of Hemingway, Gary Cooper, and Taylor Williams in the Pioneer Saloon, Sun Valley Lodge, Challenger Inn, and the Ram Bar, it was impossible to escape the writer's legend. Tillie Arnold, who was married to Lloyd, Sun Valley's photographer, lived to be ninety-three. Tillie remembered Hemingway as brilliant company—charismatic, hysterically funny, devastatingly handsome, a man's man who never spilled his drink or slurred his stories. During an interview shortly before she died, Tillie said, "He was utterly passionate about his work and after a night in the Ram with Gary Cooper, he would rise at 5:00 a.m. and write until noon."

Fading locals who knew him recalled he would claim the last stool against the wall, next to the large window where he faced the front door that opened to the Opera House. Sometimes, when I was bartending late and the snow feathered against the front window and the candles flickered and late night ebbed into early morning, I would suddenly glimpse the writer, one arm on the bar, the other around Tillie Arnold or Rocky Cooper, or Cooper himself.

Comparing myself to Hemingway suggests an arrogance that ensures failure but, though separated by five decades, we pursued the same sports, in the same places, during the same months.

Though I moved to Ketchum thirteen years after Hemingway had died, I imagined not much had changed since he'd startled mallards and teal off small, sheltered backwater eddies in the Gannett Triangle. Photos of Hemingway, Gary Cooper, and Taylor Williams show them standing on a wooden bridge above Silver Creek. I know the old bridge, have crossed it on moonlit nights when mouse flies worked along the deep, undercut banks. Duffy Witmer, who owns the Pioneer Saloon, told me Hemingway hunted a point that juts out from the Picabo Hills and forces Silver Creek into an abrupt arc around the sage- and shale-covered ridge. Instead of banking to follow the creek, the ducks and geese will cross the ridge where hunters hiding in the sage surprise the birds when they lift to clear the low blinds. Hemingway was an excellent wing shot and he must have watched a dozen greenheads fold into the sage where Taylor William's black Labrador would retrieve them uphill to hand.

During the seventies, when I was struggling to develop my own style in short pieces about life in the Wood River Valley, I refused to read Hemingway. I instinctively knew that his powerful descriptions and dialogue would infect mine. For the same reason, I avoided contact with his heirs. Jack, Hemingway's oldest son, was a gifted fly fisherman and a friendly, famous face around town. He lived in Ketchum with his wife, Puck, and daughters, Muffet, Margaux, and Muriel. Margaux and Muriel were discovered and departed for modeling and movie careers in New York and Hollywood. Joan, called Muffet, stayed and one midwinter day posed for the cover of a cookbook she had coauthored with Russ Armstrong, the owner of Chez Russell. Russ was a close friend, needed a background model

for the shoot, and invited me to join Hemingway's young granddaughter at a burdened table perched on a rock outcropping that looked across to Bald Mountain. Muffet was tall, pretty, pleasant, and businesslike and, when the shoot wrapped, offered a perfunctory handshake then made her way downhill through the deep snow.

Blame *The Old Man and the Sea*, or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or *Death in the Afternoon*, but as hard as I tried, I could never fully distance myself from Hemingway's legend. He was a skier who, to my knowledge, never skied Bald Mountain. By the time he returned to Ketchum in the late fifties, he was always one year older than the twentieth century, and the decades of a life ferociously lived had taken a toll. He must have looked up at Bald Mountain and remembered the winter he had spent in Schruns, Austria. A passage from *A Moveable Feast* describes days he spent in the mountains: "There was a great glacier run, smooth and straight, forever straight if our legs could hold it, our ankles locked, we running so low, leaning into the speed, dropping forever and forever in the silent hiss of the crisp powder. It was better than any flying or anything else." Looking up at Bald Mountain, he must have ached for one run but the pain in his knees and back and shoulders probably made him realize that his days of climbing for turns on skis had passed.

In the midseventies, John Rember was young, dark haired, and already building a reputation as a writer of fierce work and future promise. He recalled meeting Hemingway when he was a child and he and a friend were building a snow fort in Ketchum. Hemingway had wandered up and stood staring at them. This was the 1950s and Hemingway's mind had already been damaged by alcohol abuse and electroshock therapy.

Hemingway said, "Hello, boys. What are you doing?" "Building a snow fort," Rember replied.

The old man paused, then asked again. "What are you doing?"

"Building a snow fort," Rember repeated.

Hemingway stood for a moment, then nodded, turned, and hobbled away down the street.

Shock treatments at the Mayo Clinic had burned the library from where the writer had summoned his scenes, characters, and dialogue. The greatest terror he faced, far worse than when the plane engines had quit in Africa, or

the shell had exploded in Italy, lacing his leg with shrapnel, or hearing Manolete was gored by the Miura bull Islero, was to search his ruined memory for something he believed was true and coming up empty.

I was working on the Community Library on Spruce Avenue in Ketchum—nailing alder two-by-six decking onto glulaminate rafters—when Ken Baker volunteered he was a bellman at the lodge the morning Hemingway shot himself. Accidental, intentional would be debated for half a century afterward. Kenny and one other bellman were asked if they would clean the room. No need to repeat the details, only that, fourteen years later, Kenny was still deeply affected by that morning. I don't know if it was the reason why he would stand on the ridge of the library and stare west toward Bald Mountain . . . or if framing a library was exhausting work and he simply needed to take a break.

I never met Hemingway but I recognize the depression that finally killed him. I do not like to relive the black despair that would settle within me when I'd check the post office box in Sun Valley at exactly noon. I hoped for a letter bearing the return address from the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *National Geographic*, or any one of three dozen long since bankrupt magazines. Too often, months of waiting for a reply went unrewarded, or, on the rare occasion when a letter would appear, I would stare at the return address, equally afraid of bad or good news.

In the spring of that year, I was ready to quit writing and apply to law school. In the course of a collect call to California, my mother, who had let me finish *The Old Man and the Sea*, listened to my plan then replied, "Andrew, anyone can be a lawyer. Only a rare few can write."

Four years passed, rejections filled three-ring binders that I saved to remind myself of those tough times when my reputation and fortune rivaled that of Michener, Uris, or Steinbeck. Then in 1978, I sold a description titled "Fall Slack in Ketchum" for fifty dollars to *Powder Magazine*. The following year, *Powder* flew me to Switzerland's Inferno, the race to hell from the Schilthorn's summit to the Lauterbrunnen Valley floor, sixty-five-hundred vertical feet. The year after that I flew to New Zealand, Europe, and Canada. In the years following, I added Japan, Romania, Russia, Norway, Argentina, and a dozen others to my résumé.

Hemingway believed that "Every man's life ends the same way. It's only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguish one man from another." Analysts who didn't hunt, fish, or survive shrapnel wounds, plane crashes, affairs, and divorces criticize his machismo but in the past forty years, I've come to envy the writer.

Every writer searches for a line that will survive him. Hemingway found his in Gene Van Guilder's death. Van Guilder, who was head of publicity for Sun Valley and a close friend of the writer, accidentally shot himself while hunting ducks from a canoe on Silver Creek.

People who had been at the funeral recalled that Hemingway had looked at the ground and spoken so softly everyone had strained to hear his eulogy. "He loved the warm sun of summer and the high mountain meadows, the trails through the timber and the sudden clear blue of the lakes. He loved the hills in the winter when the snow comes. Best of all he loved the fall . . . the fall with the tawny and grey, the leaves yellow on the cottonwoods, leaves floating on the trout streams and above the hills the high blue windless skies. He loved to shoot, he loved to ride and he loved to fish." Hemingway's four sentences captured life in the Wood River Valley far better than anything I have written in forty years.

**Andrew Slough** has two books in print, *High Value Target* and *The Traveling Skier: 20 Five-Star Skiing Vacations*, and two novels he is presently working on. In the course of Slough's travels, he has contributed stories and photos to *Ski Magazine*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Esquire*, *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, *Men's Health*, *Outdoor Life* and others. Slough currently resides in Ketchum, Idaho, and Northern California with Linda, the love of his life, who he met searching for the treasure of Tayopa.