

The Fine Arts Center helps students find a place to stay. My partner chose ours after the owner told her that his back door measured 429 feet to the Center's entrance. Further, he knew the bedroom's size and the kitchen and bathroom dimensions of the place for rent.

All the houses are multi-storied and close together. Part of the 429 feet, we know now, count 27 narrow steps a bit more sloped than a fireman's ladder raised too fast to judge the correct angle to climb. After unloading her gear, (mine was still stalled in Dallas) the ascent seems easier, but to descend, she has to give a gentle nudge, a slight poke, to jump me off the top landing.

Raised up on the 09 Divide, where 23 defines tall timber and the standard of measure is "hands tall," a 27-step descent looks steeper than a glacial slash on Pike's Peak.

Saturday and Sunday during her classes, I back down one step at a time. Have to be quiet. The landlord houses a Spaniel that barks every time the stairs creak.

This "Charley" mutt fails to differentiate between paying guests and imagined burglars. As travel-weary as my clothes are, looks like a dog's inclination would be to roll on me instead of throw a barking fit.

Town or country dogs depend on senses of smell. Grandpa claimed the time Polecat Edward died way up on the Kiowa branch of the Middle Concho, they had to find "Wildcat Wilson" camped north of Barnhart to catch and contain Polecat's hounds so they could move the body. He said, "Big as the country was, we never had any trouble finding ol' Wildcat after we downwinded him."

After lunch and class, I skip the stair problem to go down on the main drag and buy a costume suitable to pass for a gray-whiskered adult clothed by choice instead of a going-away gift from the state prison system.

The one True-Value store, I discover, sells oldtime Booger Red denim pants for carpenters and plumbers young and tough enough to wear down seams threaded strong as catgut. I buy one green bandana to tie around my neck to hide the shirt collar. Consider a thick blue striped apron to bib over the shirt and cover the travel stains on my pants to the knees.

The cashier misunderstands my request for directions to the Army/Navy Store. She goes on, "Rummage store has lots of nice things - it's closed today. Cheap, too." Kid at the door addresses what the lady misses: "Down two blocks on this side of the street," only missing the

Army/Navy store four blocks and one street width in the other direction.

Twin to the hardware store kid stands to watch the store's door. First impression is that our armed forces wait too long to dump stuff. Second thought is how does the name Army/Navy fit the shelved clay ashtrays and dirty green glasses?

I admit to being uncomfortable. Been six months since I shopped for 18 minutes to buy my partner a chair in Angelo for Christmas and two couches for the ranch house.

For openers, I am going to ask the poorest prospect on the Atlantic Coast where the men's shirts and pants are. Wish you could see the way she reacts. The disgust and disbelief toward a customer audacious enough to ask for service reaches beyond her ability to bring up an insult.

She leads (stalks) through mazes of indifferent dusty pea coats and dreary faded blouses. She motions to 40 or 50 pairs of tan khaki and white linen pants, unhemmed, unpressed and unsized, by a pile of shirts in states of short sleeves tangled in long-sleeve models.

I think: "All right, by gawd, little cowgirl, strike yore chime, drag it, you four-bit piece of humanity."

The white linen ones drape over on a dusty rack. I sort the khaki pants in a cadence from military school -

"Hut, two three, four." Toss the extra large navy blue strays on the floor in motions like abandoning ship - Chant: "Throw your sea bag over the brig, the brink, or the bow."

In command of the men's section of the Army/Navy store, one clean pair of 36 x 32 pants emerge with a workable zipper and serviceable belt loops. Nine ninety-five for a 50-dollar pair of khaki pants.

Wads of non-military colored tee shirts pile over on the next counter. The fad here on the Coast runs to wearing flimsy shirts emblazoned in crudities to abrupt insults. Crafted, I suppose, to support offensive tattoos. On the way back, I dart into a specialty shop and buy a vest-like tee shirt for 25 bucks.

First time I dressed in my new outfit, Charlie didn't bark. I made the ascent and descent with my shoulders reared back.