

2003 was the year of firsts. In January, my long-time buddy, Joe, and I went lugeing for the first time. It was a bone-cold day and the race managers told us it was the fastest the course had been all year! Because this is obviously a good thing, Joe and I quickly passed the lower (aka "beginner") luge run and—there not being an intermediate luge run—graduated to the upper run, where we lugged—"race officials" said—40 miles per hour. I screamed five times down the upper run, and under none of those runs did I feel slightly in control of my body or the luge it was supposedly lying on. Joe fared worse, crashing on the first run into the straw bales at the bottom and, on his third run, banging into the wall with such force that his wrist watch shattered and his wrist fractured. Our efforts were rewarded, however, for we went home with certificates: "For successful completion of the Introductory Luge Clinic and Mastering the Luge Courses at the Muskegon Winter Sport Complex." Clearly, "mastering" has reached a new low.



In January and February, I went on a once-in-a-lifetime cruise with my father to the Panama Canal. We started in Galveston, Texas, stopped at Grand Cayman, Cozumel, Jamaica, and Costa Rica, and went through part of the Panama Canal. We fed bananas to capuchin monkeys and squid to stingrays, saw exotic birds and crocodiles and ancient ruins. While at sea, we competed in trivia contests, bean tosses and bingo, the latter of which resulted in a sizeable prize that, once divided amongst my father's friends, left us with enough money to pay for our shore excursions. On land and off, it was a great to spend so much quality time with my father.



After that, though, the year was all downhill.

In April I almost got to ride a train into Chicago and back, except that my co-worker, Bob, and I missed the train and had to drive instead. In May, I went camping on an island and it poured most of the weekend.

In June, Arthur moved in and I entered a new phase in my life as a full-time stepmother to a 16-year-old with orange hair and orange and black clothes. I attended cross-country meets and swim meets, all of which provided ample opportunities to hang out with Mark's Ex. More fun was the night Arthur also awoke us with news of an animal in our backyard, a feat that is interesting only because I was standing at my bedroom window buck-naked and shining my 2.1 million candle power light outside, looking at the same animal Arthur was pointing out from the doorway of my bedroom. I screamed again.

June was extra exciting because we replaced the box around our chimney, a wooden façade that had rotted away due to weather, woodpeckers and squirrels. In fact, as we peeled away the old wood, we found more nuts inside our house than outside, and were actually harassed by some squirrels that had used the box as their home. All was going well in the 95 degree heat, and just as we got everything all sealed up, the nice little girl next door came over and said, "Your box looks really nice, but the squirrels are getting in over there," and she pointed to where the garage and the roof come together by the garage door. As we stood there, mouths agape, a squirrel disappeared into our attic.

In July, I dug a hole to fix a leak in our basement. Said hole was dug outside the front door of my home and was exactly the width of my body. Six feet later, the source of the leak revealed itself in the form of a large tree root pushing up on the water line entering the house. It was while I was bent over in this narrow hole, my head some six feet underground, my hands slopping some hydraulic cement around the hole, my entire body aching from digging, that I had a sudden appreciation for gravediggers. That got me to thinking about graves and dead bodies and being six feet under, and there suddenly emitted from my mouth a small scream and I found myself sucking air and clambering out of my hole. I recruited Arthur to finish the job.

In August, we decided to trim some trees, including one Japanese Messy Tree with a long, thick branch that hung out almost perpendicular to our deck and was so heavy that it had bent the trunk of the tree. The extension ladder extended to its maximum length, I climbed upward and attached two pieces of climbing webbing to the top rung of the ladder, and began sawing. Mark, meanwhile, stood on the deck holding a rope that was tied to the tree branch I was chopping so as to pull the heavy branch away from the tree. After much sawing, the tree limb gave way, and, as Mark pulled the branch away from the tree and deck, I suddenly found myself clinging to the ladder as the tree trunk—now free of a very heavy weight—began to straighten. Therein another scream.

In September, I entered my first 5K race and came in dead last, while my husband (who came in second to dead last), his Ex, his Ex's husband and two of Mark's children all got medals because of the age groups they were in.

In October, I rented a power-washer to clean our deck. While renting the power-washer from the local hardware store, I asked if the machine I was renting had gas and the man said but of course. Fifteen minutes later, having tried every button, switch and power pulling method I could think of, I called the hardware store guy, who later showed up with, yes, gas, and returned later with even more, yes, gas. The hardware store man happened by to re-gas the second time at the moment that I was blasting a three-inch pile of sunflower seeds into a tornado of water and seeds which landed on my head. When I returned the power-washer later that evening, another gentleman at the store said, "I understand you nearly drowned yourself this afternoon."

In November, I had my first morning in many, many years without any ferrets to attend to, the last one having proved like the others before that that ferrets only live 7 years. This is Big Wuzzy, who liked to climb into our kitchen cupboard and come out the drawer for a snack. All told, the demise of 6 ferrets provided just enough fur for a very soft (albeit short) loin cloth for my husband.



In December, I celebrated my birthday by having X-ray type images taken of two of my body parts—two parts which happen to be my husband's favorite body parts, if you know what I mean. To have such photographs taken, one must remove some clothes, put on a gown provided by a nice lady, and, upon her knocking, follow her down a short hallway to the X-ray machine/body smasher. Now, I had never done this before, and was a little self-conscious when I noticed that there was no door to keep the world from watching my two body parts being smashed. I was therefore quite relieved when the nice lady whisked a curtain around me...and then she snickered and told me that I could have left my pants on.

So, as expected, some firsts were better than others. But I'd rather first and fail than not have first-ed in the first place. Happy 2004!