

## He's a Rope

by Sari Boren

### U.S. Department of Homeland Security House Style Guidelines



Imagery is an integral and vital part of Department of Homeland Security communications. Visual imagery—specifically photography—conveys the spirit and energy of our homeland and helps bring its essence to life.

When preparing or selecting imagery, keep in mind these characteristics, which represent the essence of who we are.

Trustworthy  
Accessible  
Resourceful  
Determined

Reassuring  
Proactive  
Innovative  
Committed

Authoritative  
Protective  
Aggressive

Where can I find a man, just like the man who could be the Department of Homeland Security?

Accessible and Reassuring. Trustworthy and Committed. American through and through. Even as the sound of his name, DHS (go ahead, say it aloud, *Dee Aych Ehs*), holds a whisper of multicultural spice, a contemporary dip into the melting pot.

If DHS were a man, if DHS were *my* man, I'd call him Dahas because the insertion of a few vowels would loosen him up and the letter "a" is the most optimistic letter, the flag-bearer, so to speak, of our entire alphabet.

Dahas. Jesus. I'm getting ahead of myself. I hardly know DHS and already I'm making up pet names, so I can . . . what? Surprise him with a meal reminiscent of the homeland?

Grilled American Cheese.

Do you do this? Do you meet someone at a party and right away—in the time it takes to walk from the living room to the kitchen to pour yourself a glass of wine, half hiding—half hoping to be noticed, in that brief squeeze against strangers' bodies, ignoring the damp hands and the ciphered conversations—do you spin out an idealized version of a person?

I intuit his needs. Glancing over my shoulder to check if DHS is nearby, I discreetly rearrange the wine bottles into a row showing the levels of wine consumed in descending order, a visual chart of boozy popularity. And hope DHS sees what I've done.

Of course he does.

DHS likes his data graphically represented. So I take my data the same way. And my steak.

*You shouldn't change your behavior because a government agency somewhere is doing the wrong thing.* — Edward Snowden, 2015, in exile in Russia.

In grade school I wanted to be the heroine of my own story. I fantasized rescuing my unrequited crush from a burning school bus; sadly, the bus remained intact. I cycled past his driveway day after day as he shot hoops, hoping to come upon him

pinned under the garage door so I could free him. Such were my suburban childhood dreams.

Then the boys grew bigger. I grew older. Rescue became something to desire, not perform.

How does DHS woo me? First, with promises. Then with pies. Hot apple smothered by melted American cheese.

We drink. I lean toward the hard stuff, but order white wine. What would I signal with a whisky, neat, or a vodka on the rocks? That I'm tough, cool, yet still choosing to smoothly loosen myself into a puddle for his appraisal?

I will puddle; I will melt if I don't watch myself. I am always watching myself.

He does not watch himself. He does not need to.

DHS plans; he pays; he collects receipts. What I owe is not specified, but my payment in return is awaited.

Junior year of high school and my boyfriend and I had split up again; we'd both be at a friend's party that night. My dress was short but sweet, a white flared skirt with red polka dots, and ribbed white cotton on top. I bought strappy white sandals. That was my comfort zone of sexy: snug white cotton, pops of red. Imagine Minnie Mouse dressed to make Mickey sick with regret.

At the party a beefy college boy latched onto me. Or was it the other way 'round? His top two teeth stuck out frontways like he'd been punched from inside his mouth. But who'd fight this guy—a boulder crashing through rooms, from couch to kitchen to toilet to boy huddle, and back to the couch? I marked my ex creeping around the

party's perimeter, sat myself in the college boy's lap. What had happened to his teeth? He slobbered a kiss down my neck.

I trailed his unsteady steps (the boy always leads). Rode shotgun on his drunken beer run, all the while fearing we would crash.

When you are getting to know someone everything he tells you, each characteristic you observe, is disproportionate to your understanding of him.

You've known him for an hour, therefore his twelve-minute anecdote is 20 percent of your knowledge of him. Maybe 15 percent, factoring in what you've gleaned from his pleated khakis.

If he trips twice within the first five minutes, you judge him clumsy. If he catches his fall by grabbing your arm, your shoulder, pulling you down, his stumbles loom large. But for all you know, he's kitten-light on his feet.

For all you know.

It's like that allegory about the blind men trying to identify an elephant. Each man takes a guess as to what's under his hands as he fumbles, bewildered by its massive leg or muscular trunk: *It's a tree stump! It's a rope!* Reverse engineering each grope back to the beast.

Why did I let him kiss me again? Maybe he couldn't help but slobber. Those teeth. He was pulling me across the second-floor landing by my arm. I don't remember how we got up there. My spiky heels dragged through the deep pile carpeting as I leaned back, levered my slight body away from him and his boulder

strength, all the while smiling, wheedling, saying sweetly how oh no I don't want to go into the bedroom, I don't.

I don't want to be rude, be a bitch, a traitor, a tease. I had, after all, acquiesced to this dance, sat on his lap. Let him kiss me.

Here's my admission. I am terrible at this: dating, meeting, flirting. A puzzling deficit; I am friendly and social. But I can't do the dance.

I know he's supposed to lead, but why should I follow someone I've just met? I'm supposed to mirror his steps? Weird.

I get it. I understand roles are clarifying, like manners; they keep us from literally tripping up. If we both step forward at once, someone will get hurt. But why do I have to step back, not just in the dance, but in deference to this power imbalance?

*Let her go.*

My ex-boyfriend stood at the bottom of the stairs. That's what I remember most: The ex looking up at us. Taking the stairs two at a time. That, and the friction of carpet underfoot.

*Let her go.*

My ex: Determined. Protective.

But so was I.

If I'm honest with myself . . . If we are honest with ourselves, we owe DHS our lives. Don't be so naïve to believe we are immune from harm.

It's a privilege to seek protection, the privilege of having something to protect: my home, my homeland, my body. But asking for protection is an admission of weakness and a surrender to someone else's strength.

I'd rather protect myself, but no matter the Krav Maga classes, the keys between knuckles, the wheedling, the laughter, the digging my heels—when the moment arrives, will I? I may still give in. I may worry the dance: have I stepped forward and not back? Have I stepped on his toes?

I second-guess. Third-guess, fourth. If I can't guarantee he will listen to my words, why bother saying them at all?

*This is a fundamental concept of liberty . . . You will never be completely free from risk if you're free. — Edward Snowden*

I google DHS. I'm sure he's done the same. What kind of persona is DHS constructing about me?

I try to be more graceful in my gestures, not so loud in my voice. He doesn't see the elephant. He thinks I'm a deer, a doe, lean and elegant, poised against the landscape, a docile tilt to my neck as I listen so attentively to him, my ears finely attuned and delicately furred.

If DHS were a man and I were the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) so like DHS, but a whisper more sibilant, would I nurture him in exchange for protection? To ensure he considered me his number-one, above all others in the nation? Under God.

It's so easy to get it wrong. Obviously, he's not a rope. C'mon.

But all those years of giving them the benefit of the doubt, the open-hearted years, those take-me-as-I-am years, have jangled my instincts. Crossed my wires.

Is that buzzing the frisson of anticipation, the kindling of sparks, or is it a warning signal?

A shadow swoops and circles, lazy as a breeze.

Is that a drone?

I'm driving myself crazy trying to read my own mind.

You'd think my instincts would be more sharply honed after all these years trying to ferret out the "bad guys," but these are not double-blind experiments. Since I don't know the alternate outcomes of other choices, each decision, right or wrong, returns garbage data.

Summer of my twenty-third year I drove foreign tourists in a Ford Econoline van across America's expanse—Great Smoky Mountains, Great Plains, Grand Canyon. At summer's end, depleted from a four-and-a-half day solo haul from Los Angeles to Connecticut, I arrived back at headquarters to a house full of men. I'd crossed paths with one of them weeks earlier in a Mexican border town. We'd nursed Cokes at the bar while our passengers clowned in sombreros and pounded margaritas. Now he drew me close with his enticing Oklahoma accent.

I found myself on a mattress on a floor in a room with black-marker obscenities scrawled across yellow walls. Crudely drawn tits and exuberant dismissals of bitches. I didn't want sex (I told him) but a little something, a touch, a kiss. I'd been

attending to my passengers night and day for weeks and was empty and dry. A mouth on my mouth or a mouth on my neck (I told him) would do the trick.

Twenty-three was decades before the MeToo movement and years before I understood sex was not sunk cost, an automatic follow-through once you hit the start button. Still, I expected him to hear me. I turned my mouth to his ear.

*He's a tree stump! He's a rope!*

Here's the catch (we all know it): Intimacy demands vulnerability. Freedom requires risk.

If I treat him like a rope—a knot, a noose, an ersatz snake—if I treat him like he's made of twisted fibers, wrenched and turned and turned again to multiply his strength, I've doomed the enterprise from the start. I can't expect him to behave like a cozy, soft-spun mitten, can I?

But what if he *is* a rope?

He agreed with his words but not with his hands, and when I repeated my words, the ones he had agreed with, he pulled my hand down. Needing lotion to ease his way he frantically squeezed and squeezed a near-empty bottle of Jergens . . . . .  
 . . . . . and when it expelled only moist farting sounds, a spent and desperate retching I will never forget, he called me a frigid bitch.

Why didn't I get up and leave the room, but wilt into his accusation?

When he discarded the bottle but not his needs and straddled my chest, how could I know my unconscious would swoop to my rescue, drag me away from Connecticut to a dissociative state?

My damp skin pulled away sticky from the blue vinyl bench of my van. Was that just this morning? A Toledo truck stop, hemmed in by 18-wheelers. Windows rolled up. Doors locked. Stifling. They wouldn't pay for motels. I slept in my van, did as I was told. How'd I drive fourteen hours to end up here on this mattress on this floor in this room, yellow walls, Sharpie scrawl, with Oklahoma dick in my face? Toledo, truck stop, fourteen hours, mattress, floor, dick, fourteen Toledo, yellow bitches.

A switch flipped at the absurdity of this sequence. This garbage data. This panoramic view of his jeans unzipped. Not the Great Plains rolling past my window, a canyon, a mountain range. This billboard of feeble meat.

I laughed. Out of nowhere, it seemed. But from somewhere. I laughed and laughed.

When he rolled off and zipped up, flung more profanity at me and slammed out of the room, did that count as protecting myself?

I'm older, my path strewn with boulders.

DHS and I spoon under heavy covers. In a night dark with promises, I am attentive to his nightmares. They are my nightmares too: airplanes become bombs; bombs turn into fires; buildings to craters.

People say a tower was demolished, he explains to me, or a forest plundered, a car stripped bare, a community ravaged. Well actually, he continues, this is not destruction, but transformation: a tree into fire, into coal, into diamond.

I know diamonds aren't formed from coal, but I don't correct him. *He said diamond!*

I know better than to embrace a man like this. And yet, wrapping my arms across the continental breadth of his back leaves me breathless and reassured. Steadied. Supported.

Have you ever said that someone "destroyed you"? You weren't destroyed. You're still here, transformed. You crumble, collapse to rubble. You're a mound, a heap. Recompiled, you're a cairn.

What a perverse habit—this nightly surrender of consciousness to sleep's heavy vault. What is meanwhile happening to my body, my bed, the tree scratching at my window; to my home: my snail shell, my carapace, my bunker?

It's hard to breathe, matching my shallow pace to his commanding rhythm.

Protective. Reassuring.

Reassuring. Protective.

I'm going to need a sleep aid. To relinquish self-determination for a sense of peace.

END

### Endnotes

Page 1: The graphic of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security House Style Guidelines for imagery is an edited version of the guidelines found on page 5 of this document from October 2003.

Pages 2 and 6: The Edward Snowden quotes are from an interview with John Oliver on HBO's *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, first broadcast on April 5, 2015