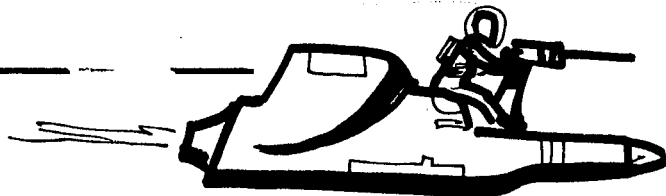


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STEVE STUFF

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We crossed the line into Maine a few minutes after noon. Fifty hours earlier we'd been standing in front of barred windows and coded gates in Randallstown, holding the keys to that dismal kingdom. Keys to the office for Public Storage, keys to empty storage bins and the bins of the poor and lazy, keys to the house -- the first true house for Sharon and I -- keys to the golf cart, keys to the Area office. Keys to a four million dollar shoddily built collection of garages and parking lots.

And then I'd handed my keys to Sharon, and she stuffed them into an envelope and stuffed that into the mail slot.

Free. Released. Let go.

She gave a thumbs up and waved at me in the truck.

A check of our CB and off we went: a day late, more than a dollar short, with a tri-cat doomsday chorus telling us we were all wrong all wrong... In less than an hour they'd given up, settling into their niches -- Archie on cat harness and Brandee in her box in the back seat of Bandit (our black Beretta); Arwen in her box on the front seat of the Ryder Rentavan with me.

The next hours saw us crawl across the map. We'd opted to avoid I-95 and other interstates. We backroaded our way north and east. Only the first hour or two was familiar territory.

A right onto Liberty Rd., a left to Offutt Rd., thence to newly deconstructed McDonough Rd. and up Reisterstown Rd. So many memories along that route, so many friends: Linda and the gang at the 7-11 -- we drove by, no last soda, on past Bert and Sandy at the High's at Chartley where we hung out on Saturday and Sunday mornings consternating the locals -- up route 30, bypassing the turn-off to the vets who've taken care of Arwen since she was tiny and Archie and Brandee since they came into our household.

Reisterstown to Hanover, PA. Hanover to Hershey, Hershey to Allentown, Allentown-- listen, what I'm telling you is that since we left Baltimore the biggest city we've been in is Harrisburg, PA. We drove the mountain route, down state and county roads. We saw fall foiliage galore. We found traffic jams in the Poconos.

Twice we found serious bridges. The one over the Susquehanna was breath-taking in the slow lane: high, high over the water, with a view of the other bridges north and south, at a lower level. The next day we found an amazingly beautiful view from the middle of the Rhinebeck bridge in New York, crossing the Hudson.

We found Mount Washington. Snow on top in early October!

The trip might have been better if we both hadn't had colds, if we hadn't started exhausted, if our former boss had paid the cash reimbursements he'd promised. It would have helped if I'd factored in cat rest stops before starting. It would have been easier if the truck odometer hadn't gone slowly kaput -- it died over a few hundred miles, giving false readings and finally locking -- convincing me for hours that I'd underestimated the



trek by several days! There was inertial urge to drive. Why stop? We put off lunch too long, causing an argument and much tension. Later we drove until dark on the mountain roads, automatons at the wheel. The CB saved us; a shouted "you're drifting!" brought me back onto the road. We stopped at the next motel.

The CB kept us together when I made instant changes in the route; it helped us stay awake, and it helped convince Archie that he need not panic because Sharon had driven away and left me behind. A word or two via CB and he settled right down. We chatted sometimes, sometimes let an hour go by without saying a word, always leaving the link open. We noted lake and mountain vistas; we talked about just "stopping here" in New York, in Vermont, in New Hampshire. Still travelling north and east.

Maine came. As we hit the line -- Sharon just ahead -- we used the CB to celebrate and call a rest stop. The air was chill; we let the cats out on the leash to investigate the riverside. They'd long since given up being surprised and now were attentive when we showed them something new like a river at first paw.

Over the line it went Rumford, Mexico, Farmington, Mercer (home of Mercer Bog) Norridgewock, Skowhegan.

In Skowhegan we stopped, 50 miles from Bangor, 40 miles from Augusta, 90 miles from Canada, and a million miles going on 683 from Randallstown.

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Steve and Sharon did it. They moved to concentrate on their writing, just like they've been threatening for these many years. Joined a writer's group, started new projects. Imagine! Maine!

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WHY SKOWHEGAN

Take a road map of Maine or the Northeastern US and Canada. You'll find I-95 going through the state. Rt 2 parallels I-95. Between Farmington and Bangor, on Rt. 2 and Rt. 201, convenient to Bangor, Waterville, Augusta, and Farmington, is Skowhegan.

Unlike Norridgewock, Madison, and Cornville, Skowhegan has a hospital. Waterville has two hospitals as well as several colleges about 20 minutes south. As shiretown Skowhegan has courts and other administrative offices. There is a river through the town. Hills and distant mountains encircle it.

Skowhegan has a real rock radio station.

Oddly enough we decided on Skowhegan after thinking about moving to Cumberland, Md. Central Maine looks and feels like Western Maryland: rivers run through the center of town, forests cover nearby mountains and hills. But the Baltimore and DC real estate markets are close to Cumberland and Rt 48 is replacing Rt 40 to Western Maryland -- soon the only access to Cumberland from the east will be by expressway! Jobs are hard to come by in Western Maryland, even at \$3.35 per hour. Here the unemployment rate is about 4% and is lower statewide.

Truth be told, we may not stay here. Fairfield /Waterville is a nice area and if Skowhegan is just too tiny this winter we might relocate there.

On the other hand Skowhegan is showing signs of growth. The biggest shopping center is advertising it's expansion, the second largest is filling in it's vacant store. The office supply store

is moving to larger quarters.

Here we can walk downtown, and if we drive, we can park without meter fees. We're 1 block from the city park, 4 from the footbridge over the Kennebec River, 5 from downtown.

It's quiet here. It feels like home. Come visit.

** SHARON STUFF **

I've acquired a southern accent.

This is, to say the least, unexpected, because I've never had an accent before. None. Not even a LITTLE one. Well, besides the accent I instantly, inevitably and unconsciously acquire when I'm talking to someone who DOES have an accent -- and you'd be surprised how many people do. Of course, that's THEIR accent I'm talking back to them in, and after they've gone I go back to my normal, accentless speech.

And I have an accent when I'm telling stories to people. I tell a lot of stories -- my conversation is a string of anecdotes, and each character has his own distinctive voice. And accent.

The Maine accent is elusive. There's a shadow 'r' at the end of words ending in 'a' ('Auguster', leaps to mind); and sometimes words ending in 'r' get an 'h' instead ('deah' for the human of the species, though, curiously, the four-legged variety seems to get his 'r'; and 'cah' for that thing with the steering wheel and tires). (Car sighted on Route 201 with Maine vanity plates reading 'Spenca'. Somebody call Robert Pahka...) Phrases are interesting, too: 'wicked nice man', 'she's a good go-in' cah', 'you betcha!' (or, 'you bet!'). There are also delicate shifts in emphasis, so that WINSLOW (unaccented rendering) is winSLOW (Mainer version), Jefferson becomes Jeffasin and Polly becomes something my ear insists is Pauline.

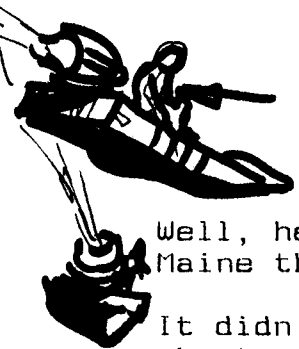


Many place-names here are Indian, which creates another problem in accent. The name of the town we live in, for instance, is SkowHEGAN (like WauKEGAN, yes?), and the University of Maine has a campus in Orono (which is not OrROno, but are-in-o).

At any rate, as I hear my voice against the background of Maine voices, I find that I say things like 'fahve' for 'five' and 'Ah' for 'I' and that, though I speak very quickly (Mainers tend to be clipped, rather than rapid, in their speech), there's a definite lag to the pattern of my words -- almost (gasp), a drawl. Also, my habit of taking the part of all characters in an anecdote (with accents ranging from inner-city jive to Russian) has caused some consternation here and there. ("How are you DOING that?" demands Chris, as I'm telling her the story of the two Texans who wanted to rent a space without paying for it.)

Mindy tells me that women acquire accents quickly (because of bird song. Truly.), but it sounds like moving north has made a southerner out of me.

November's special dates include: Paul's birthday, on 11/2; Lee's, on 11/12; Kim's, on 11/26; Ben Schuman's Bar Mitzvah, also on 11/26; and the Lee/Miller Gala Eighth Wedding Anniversary, Formal Ball and Car Wash, on 11/6. Joy and the Goddess' smile to us all!



Well, here we are, and there's more that's different about Maine than you'd think. Or, at least, than I apparently thought.

It didn't come as much of a surprise that there is a severe shortage of Giant Food Creamy Italian dressing (a condiment to which I am hopelessly addicted), or that submarines have been transformed into something called 'grinders' or that the shopping district closes up tight at 6 p.m. on weekdays, earlier on Saturday and never opens on Sunday at all.

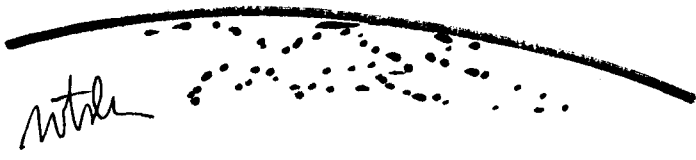
It was confusing, but not distressing, to learn that there is only one grocery store (that's SUPERmarket, as opposed to CORNER market) serving Skowhegan. It's a perfectly adequate grocery, with an in-house bakery and a salad bar; and some towns have no supermarket at all. The alternative to the Skowhegan Shop 'n Save is George's Banana Stand, which is a cross between a 7-11 and an old-style IGA store. Bananas are cheap, and apples, and other local grown or made foods. George's isn't open on Sundays -- and neither is the Shop 'n Save -- but I tend to think that a town with a George's Banana Stand cuddled in its center can't be all bad.

It's also confusing to learn that Skowhegan is partially a resort town. All the ice-cream stands -- three, within the town limits -- are Closed For The Season, and that's hard for a woman who loves her fresh-dipped cone, though there be a raging blizzard outside.

And it's not at all distressing that Skowhegan has a wooden Indian (the World's Largest Wooden Indian) overlooking much of the town. I like the Indian. I might like the Indian best of anything I've seen in Skowhegan, including the Kennebec River.

What IS distressing is that, though everyone has been very kind, there are no friends here. I had not thought myself a person who depended overmuch on her friends -- had not thought myself a person WITH so many friends; yet suddenly I find myself wondering, wanting to see, wanting to hear a certain voice...

My life has been this way over the last decade: there is little enough money, even in good years; we cover necessities, we achieve an unexpected luxury. There has never been enough money for travel, as between Baltimore, say, and Skowhegan. So, it seems to me that the people I've left behind in Baltimore are lost forever, whatever that means; and some days that makes me unbearably sad. In a way it's funny, that the part of the Lee/Miller team who has been homeless should be homesick; that the one who did not seek out people should count the people she loves over and over, like gold coins, and wonder how they are.



spaceship illos by
Wm Rotsler. Thanks!