

Welcome News

He had some doubts about the daily practice of saying “good night” to Diane the news anchor, or to David, if Diane was away. He was just responding to them, after all. They were welcome in his home anytime.

He wasn't supposed to have been here, by himself, this long. They'd found the cottage home last summer. Cute, it was, and exotic, in the sense that it was on the Gulf coast, not in the hills of western New York.

He had been retired a couple of years. She was still working, and her income would be needed to pull this off, to keep the old house up north, while buying the cottage down south. She saw this as a permanent move to a new place, she who was still up north. She was looking for a new job so she could move too. So far, it hadn't happened.

He was the one, she said, who was giving the mixed signals. He was very conscious of when he would and would not say 'home'. When friends asked if he was going to be a snow bird, he would say, after taking a half breath, “For now,” and they would smile, a little, not sure what else they might expect he would say. He wasn't saying. Not any more than, “You know, maybe at some point....”

When the look on their faces was one of uncertainty, worry, he felt his heart being pulled toward the place where he had lived his whole life, until now. He only hoped that his breast bones, his ribs, would remain intact through all the strain. When, on the other hand, the look that friends gave was one of envy or better yet, celebration, he felt his heart begin to soar to a place he did not know yet. At the least it meant he was not standing still. He was off, flying, waving at them, heading to a place of sun, promise, adventure.

It came in waves, the emotions, the taste of panic in his mouth. This would be followed by its opposite, the reassuring touch of such warm air at this of the year. There was as well the bright view of midday, sunshine that fell in the almost familiar slanting light of January but more softly here, more expansively. Even the tides, he noticed,

were different. Twelve hours apiece, not the six hour cycles up north. Everything seemed to be in less of a hurry.

She was fully supportive whenever she could be. She was terribly busy back home, surrounded by her colleagues, the fullness of such non-stop life and relations. Sometimes she would simply text, at the end of a particularly long day, "Exhausted. Will call you tomorrow." She had anointed him as "the homesteader", a kind of go-ahead 21st century pioneer. When they'd packed the car, he'd been forced to leave a lot behind. There was only so much room. As it was, they could barely see out the rear view mirror, for all the things piled in the back seat.

He would try to remind himself that he had it made. He had the luxury of time and space so craved by others. He could, almost, write his own ticket regarding how he might spend each and every moment of the passing days. There were so many of them, passing days, making it difficult to tell which one was Tuesday, for example. The TV Guide had become his new Day Minder.

"Yes," he was starting to meet some people, "yes," he had already made one commitment for volunteer work. That would start next month, February.

She kept saying that she was eager to get down to the new house, that she was looking regularly for new job postings. It would be a kind of transfer. Made more sense to stay with the same company, a lot more sense.

She had driven down with him in that packed car, stayed the week, and flown back the following Sunday. On Monday, he heard some strange noises late at night, tried to track them down, but always got to the adjoining room too late to find anything. On Tuesday night the sounds were a little louder. A small scampering. Still no evidence.

The cottage, built in typical Coastal style, had a significant crawl space underneath, the house itself elevated on two foot cement blocks. The cottage was, after all, a cottage. It was not the solidly made two story plus attic and full basement home that he'd left behind. The cottage's walls were thin, the floor consisted of red pine planks atop an imagined sub-floor. The roof was made of metal. When it rained, the whole house shouted 'shelter'.

On Wednesday night, he heard a sudden noise, something had been tipped over in the back room. He got up slowly from the couch, walked in his senior version of tip toe, and headed for the dark narrow hallway. When he reached the room, he slowly felt for the light switch. As if hit by a bolt of lightning, there was a race along the baseboard to the corner before disappearing.

“Well, for god’s sake,” he said aloud in the nearly empty utility room. And as if the illuminated air needed any more explanation, he said simply, “a mouse.”

Success, it appeared, would take more than a couple trips to Walmart. They had the best prices. On one of his visits down the familiar aisle, he saw a middle aged couple staring at the precise shelves toward which he was headed. He hesitated, hoping they might move on. They appeared to be in a serious discussion about optimal pest control. When at last he approached and stood next to them, the husband turned toward him.

“Looks like you have the same problem we do.”

“Oh, yeah.” Surprised, pleased. Accepting a friendly overture. “They are very tricky, fast. I had two of the plain wooden traps and I got cleaned twice. Took the bait, but no mouse in the trap.”

“There is this one,” the wife said, pointing to a small black rotunda looking device, “traps them and then you just take it outside and let them go.”

“Peanut butter,” said the husband.”

“That’s what I used. They still got away.”

“Well...so we live twenty feet up, and somehow they’ve gotten in the wall.”

“They’re not in the house,” the wife added.

“Twenty feet up?”

“Yeah, you know, since the storm. The new construction.”

“Yeah but they’re not in the house,” the wife repeated.

Both of the men nodded in agreement.

A learning curve, of course. Along the way, one of the things he discovered was that Styrofoam stuffed into crevices did not deter entry. What it did was to amplify the sounds of chewing. Especially loud when awakened at 4:15 in the morning, the apparent choice time for small forced entries, miniature home invasions.

It was steel wool that stopped him, or her, or the small family that had eyes on the place. No more chewing in the night, no more tell tale remains.

“Steel wool,” he told her on the phone.

“What?”

“That’s what finally worked. You have to figure out how they’re coming in.”

She didn’t respond right away. He thought he overheard the diminished sound of mail being sorted, tossed aside. Finally she said, “So…” and he could tell that she was trying, again, to do two or more things at once. It always caused this conversational slowdown, a rubbernecker of little curiosity in the back and forth flow of talk.

He asked, “How was your day?”

“Oh, really, we had a lot of… it was okay.”

“So…”

“You’re doing a lot.”

“What?”

“I know that you are taking care of business there. And I appreciate it. I would really like to have no mice, if possible. We had mice here too, remember, a few years ago?”

“I do. The traps worked then.”

“Maybe northern mice aren’t as quick on their feet.”

“They get distracted. So much more to pay attention to.”

“Hmm. More likely the cold. Slows everything down.”

It was one of those brilliantly sunny days. He had developed the habit of driving the short distance down to the coast, its wide sandy beaches. He was glad to know that in winter the humidity could be very low. On this particular day, the water reflected the deep blue of the sky perfectly, a mirror with slight ripples.

He had noticed a jumping, swirling motion in the water close to shore and had gone down to the water’s edge for a closer look. He thought he was completely alone on the beach.

A voice came up from behind. "Redfish?"

"What?"

"Are those redfish in there, moving like that?" The fellow was wearing a bike helmet. He had left his bike up by the road.

"No, I think it's a sandbar, the way the water pours over it, comes back around."

A moment of shared reflection. The newcomer said, "Yeah. See it. Sandbar."

"Aren't redfish only out in deep water?"

"Oh no," said the bicyclist, "they can come in very close."

They stood there, side by side, looking at the swirling water, then looking out further at the simplest of waves, helplessly drawn to look beyond, right out to the very edge where sea and sky joined.

For a time neither man spoke. Then the bicyclist said, "I came down here two years ago when I retired. We were in Hattiesburg, a hundred miles up the road. The wife and I love it."

"Nice."

"You're not from here?"

This would be the moment to say 'Rochester' but not as in Minnesota, or 'New York' but not as in Manhattan, or 'Lake Ontario' hoping the other party had some sense of geography.

Turned out the bicyclist had a cousin who had lived in Buffalo for a couple years. "Is there a Seneca Falls up there?"

"Yes!"

"Finger Lakes. He used to talk about it. He's in Baton Rouge now."

He wanted to ask about this sense of...he might call it otherness, of being from away. He wondered how long it might take before it faded into the background, became altogether invisible, a distant memory, rarely recalled.

What he said was, "I'd like to get to know more about fish."

The man from Hattiesburg hesitated, drawled, "Fish?"

“Well, fishing. Saltwater fishing. Finger Lakes I know, but this,” he said pointing to the expanse of Gulf in front of them, “I know nothing about.”

“Well...I could take you out...”

“Beg pardon?”

“If you’re interested, fishing, I have a boat.”

They had chatted and finally exchanged phone numbers, email addresses. He watched as the bicyclist walked back up the beach, retrieved his bike. The bicyclist turned, they waved to each other.

The water shimmered in the blue reflected light. Walking on the finely sifted sand always took that extra bit of forward movement, balance. Gulls were swooping in to their favorite meeting place close to several larger sandbars.

What he was going to do was this: he was going to keep walking on the sandy beach, breathing in the air that was tinted with hidden life, air that had crossed over the great water, air that flowed freely above the unknown depths, and all the life that lived therein.