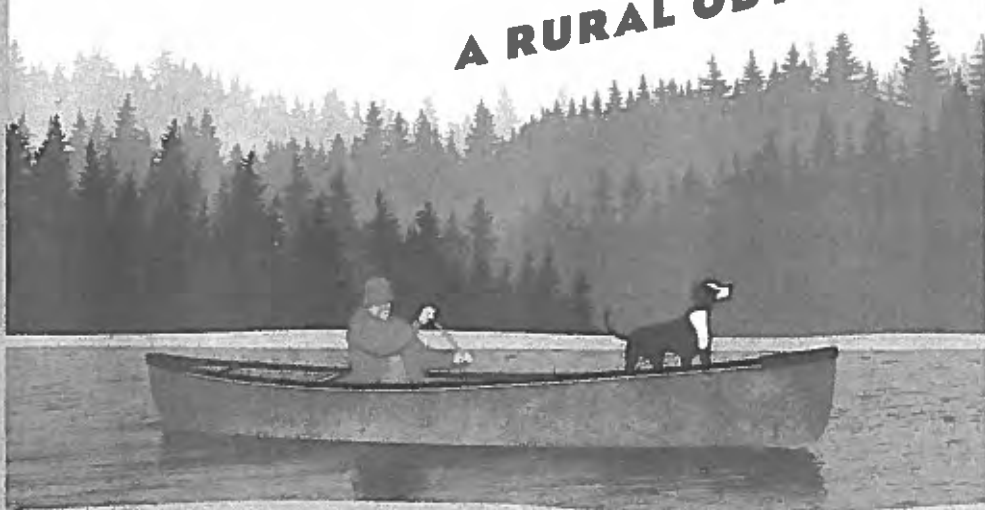


"You'll be homesick for a place you've never visited."

TEMPLE

A RURAL ODYSSEY



ROORBACH

of pickup trucks and big American cars from the seventies. The place is a classic, magnificent in stainless steel and broken signage, a holdout against standardization, not a hundred yards east of the Sandy River (and often flooded by her), not a hundred yards west of its own slow assassin: McDonald's. Inside, there's a constant, whirling social scene that affords a look into the heart of Farmington's humanity, a cross section of appetite and style (absent, perhaps, a good many vegetarians).

In the weeks after Fred Ouellette drove off with our inherited '36 Ford coupe, I kept thinking about him—had he taken me? I leafed through *Uncle Henry's*, which is a voluminous weekly compendium of classified ads, and searched out vintage car bodies. The going price was "You tow." So my heart softened. Still, I wondered about Fred's relationship to the moose man, Earl Pomeroy. Were they a team?

Earl had assumed mountainous proportions in my psychic landscape: I couldn't stop thinking about him. Somehow, I had gotten the idea—not fully formulated—that Earl had something useful for me, some bit of knowledge to impart, some sort of wisdom, perhaps even a backwoods version of something like *grace*. This was a mistake, of course, yet true in its own way, in the way of delusions: Earl did have something to offer, just not what I thought.

One morning late in July of 1994, a flicker woke me at twenty till five, banging on the tin roof exactly over our bedroom to announce his territory in the rosy-fingered dawn. I got up and ran outside naked—this bird with his handsome speckled breast and red bib had been torturing us for some weeks—and flung pebbles at the roof around him till he flew

off. Fully awake, I decided to get dressed and take advantage of the early hour to go dry-flying for a couple of brown trout. Of course, the diner was on the way to the Sandy River, where I meant to wet my line.

I walked in the door at five-thirty, and there was Earl, taking up a whole booth, the table pushed all the way to the further bench to accommodate his enormity. I was weirdly excited to see him, still angry with him in some dark corner of my heart. But I walked right up to his table: take him by surprise, ha. Earl looked up and, not the least bit startled, said, "Hello, Professor."

"Hello, Mr. Pomeroy." If he was puzzled as to how I might know his name, he didn't let it show, not at all.

I said, "Mind if I join?"

Coolly he said, "Buy my breakfast?"

Trying for jocular, I said, "Well, why not?"

I found a loose chair, sat at the head of his booth. Pretty soon my favorite waitress, Zimbabwe (who had modeled for a painting by Juliet and who—don't ask her where the name came from—was not from devastated Africa but from Starks, Maine, auburn hair to her waist, hurt brown eyes), brought his food: one western omelet with home fries, toast and sausage, one stack blueberry pancakes with bacon, one double-hamburger platter mounded with french fries and onion rings, a triple-sized fruit salad, and four large glasses of orange juice.

"Buy mine?" I said.

"Nup," said Earl.

Zimbabwe took my order, disappeared.

My oversized companion ate with the utmost delicacy,

started with a little fruit salad, picked out the half grapes one at a time with his fork, chewed each one, nodded his head with private pleasure. He picked up the ketchup dispenser then and made the laciest, prettiest webbing of red across his omelet, used knife and fork to carve off a modest bite. He held his beard down below the table, carefully pulled to one side. He didn't look up at me but worked his plates, a bite from each item in turn. He'd barely dented his breakfast when Zimbabwe dropped mine in front of me, huge platter: eggs over, home fries, toast. It looked like a snack.

I ate. Earl ate. But we weren't exactly eating together.

When every bite was done—and Earl was not fast about it—he finally cast his cold blue eyes upon me. “You're out and about powerful early,” he said.

Suddenly I felt exhausted.

He said, “Did Fred get his car?”

“Fred did.”

“What'd he pay for it?”

“I don't know. Nothing. I told him he could have it. I mean, that's good work he's doing, recycling old wrecks.”

“So he'll tell you. The noble work of salvage. He's a sharp one, that Fred. You might have got some ready cash there.”

“I could have used it to buy your breakfast!”

No response at all to the joke. Just this, in the same bemused tone: “You might have got five hundred bucks for that cah.”

“Nah.”

“Oh, yes.”

Defensively: “Well, I feel good about it. He's got his car. I've got it off my property. There'll be a nicely restored coupe to

look at one day. I can't sit here and worry about whether I got ripped off by Fred Ouellette.”

Earl wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin, inspected his beard for food. His hands were like blocks, monstrously wide, but he used them tenderly, wiping the table, stacking his plates. He said, “You're one to talk about ripping people off.”

Jocular: “What's that supposed to mean, Mr. Pomeroy?”

Dead serious: “Oh, you know what I'm talking about. You think I don't read the paper? We all know the professor scam. Pretend to teach what can't be taught. Set your sails to the prevailing wind. Let your graduate students do all the heavy lifting while you sit around home in your gym shorts, mowing the lawn and *fattig* when the rest of us are working!”

Under sudden attack, I grinned fiercely, said, “That's not fair, Earl. And it's not true. We don't even have grad students at UMF.”

“Oh, you can't tell me that! And you can't tell me you've been to work one day this *summah!*”

“In summer I study! I write! That's my job!”

His eyes glittered, but not with humor. He said, “That's not a job. That's grinding your stump.”

Zimbabwe arrived just then to pick up plates. Kidding, she said, “You fellas take it outside, you.”

“This one's a professor,” Earl said.

“That's what I hear,” Zimbabwe said wryly. “Now you keep your voices down, you two, or I'll have to take you over my knee!”

I laughed, picturing Earl in that position.

Earl did not laugh. He struggled out of the booth, rose to

his full height, looked down upon me, shook his head in elaborate disgust, turned and lumbered to the door, emphatically leaving the check.



MUSKRAT. HE DIDN'T SEE ME RIGHT AWAY, DIDN'T HEAR ME with all the bridge-traffic white noise up ahead; he just calmly swam in front of me carrying a big leaf and stem from a weed I recognized from my childhood bog adventures but couldn't name—swamp smartweed, as it turns out. He paddled calmly, trailed his food, became aware of me only slowly, perhaps because of the telegraphing ripples of my bow. And casually he turned his head, made frank eye contact with me, held it a second, then simply picked up his pace.

My speed was slightly greater than Muskrat's (Musquash, the Abenaki called him, and so Thoreau), and I gained on him. Bridge brat. What's a canoe to he who's seen a hundred eighteen-wheelers an hour his whole life? When I got too close, he dropped his leaf and hurried faster—still no panic, no dive—and twenty feet further ducked easily into the mud bank.

I pulled up at the next riffle, which flowed under a fallen oak, sat poised a minute holding a dead branch to keep me steady against the bole. At the fat end of the oak a gravel bar had formed. And right there I spied two baby muskrats, about one-third adult size, clearly new in the world, darling. They saw me at the same moment I saw them, bumped into each other in surprise, then rushed headlong *toward* me along the