

“Noble Encounters” for January, 1999

by The Delvings

I was sitting in my car — stuck in my car, more like it — on the side of an ice-covered hill. I was trying to get to work, but each time I stepped on the gas the wheels just spun. Occasionally I would creep forward an inch or two, only to slide back down moments later. I could feel myself becoming really angry but I had no one to take it out on. What could I do? Curse at the hill?

Eventually, I put the car in reverse and slid back down the hill, defeated by the weather, the hill and a pair of tires with thirty thousand more miles on them than the warrantee recommended. When I returned to my apartment I received a phone call. There would be no school today. I didn't have to come in! I was simultaneously elated and shocked. Elated first because I didn't have to go to school. And neither my maturity, nor the fact that I was a teacher and not a student, could suppress the wonderful feeling I get when I hear those words “no school.” It resonates deep down into my soul, past all the adult knowledge and grown-up world lessons, and strikes at my core. And shocked, because it touched that little piece of childhood we all hold on to.

I believe that no matter how old I become those words will always have that effect. I even feel good when I hear them and they don't affect me. It's as if some fellow prisoner is being given a reprieve, a last-minute call from the governor. If you listened hard enough you could almost hear the cries of joy from all over the neighborhood.

That experience of mine happened eleven more times that winter. It was 1992 and I was teaching in rural Pennsylvania. Apparently, they don't believe in snow removal in Pennsylvania. They just sit on the side of the road in their plows and wait for it to stop snowing. Coming from the City, I found this behavior quite baffling. In the City, mayoral elections are won and lost on how quickly snow was removed from the streets. In all my years growing up there, I can recall only two snow days off from school. And they weren't even because of the snow, but from the cold and ice which took out the power lines.

I thought my luck might be better when I went to high school because I had to ride the bus. All it meant was that I spent hours sitting on a crowded bus in traffic-clogged, ice-covered streets. You see, I was lucky enough to go to the one high school that was located directly across the street from the district superintendent of schools. He loved to reassure the parents that if he could get to school, the school would be open. You can imagine how the parents loved him. You can imagine how the kids felt about him as well. You can also imagine how many snow days we had.

So it is with some little anxiety that I await the winter in our new home in Indiana. We live on the top of a hill, there is no way around it. Having never experienced the snow removal processes of Northeast Indiana I have no way of knowing what to expect. Will it be Chicago or Pennsylvania? Snow days or work days? A comfortably stocked refrigerator or mild starvation? The latter wouldn't be so bad as I could lose a few pounds after the holiday gorge.

I wonder to myself, is this why people in the country can everything (“putting up,” as Madeline down the street calls it)? To keep from starving to death over the winter? Should we go ahead and buy the four-wheel-drive, with the winch on the front, and the optional snow chains, or can we get through one more winter with the same car that safely backed me down that hill in 1992? After all, the tires are new.

Well, the snows have now come and gone, come and gone, come and gone, etcetera. Any desire for a mild winter has been blown away with the covers of our garbage cans. “I'm sure they're just under the snow” I told my husband George, but he didn't find that reassuring. He mumbled back something about “this snow could go melt” someplace and a “need more Advil” comment.

Our neighbor George to the North stopped by. He told us about the Purdue mailbox he's putting up for his wife Paula. It seems his wonderfully hand-made fish mailbox had been eaten by Mr. Plow. I guess we shouldn't complain about having to dig ours out of a three foot drift; at least it was still in one piece.

The kitchen pipes have frozen up twice. We keep the faucet dripping constantly, and George has ripped half the wall out of the laundry room trying to get heat tape wrapped around the pipes. But the furnace, gas heater and two space heaters keep us (almost) comfortably lukewarm. We have the water bed turned up to about 100 degrees. At least we're warm in our dreams.

But I have to say, I like it here, I really do. George and I went down by the lake the other night. We'd never heard a lake freeze up before and never realized how noisy it could be. I identified three distinct sounds. One was the ice cracking, and it sounded just how you'd think it would. The second sounded like a giant 400-million-gallon stomach rumbling, and the third sounded as if humpback whales were moaning under the ice. It was incredible.

We bundled ourselves up, grabbed an old blanket, put sweaters on the dogs (don't laugh) and headed out onto the icy, cold steps. We enjoyed the lake, the moonlight and the quiet still of the night in winter. We went back in when the dogs' teeth began chattering.

“Noble Encounters” for February, 1999

by The Delvings

It was the end of a long day at work, and George wanted only to get home. As he turned onto SR20 near home, something big and hairy wandered out into the path of his headlights. He slammed on his brakes and just missed what appeared to be an old dog, gray and black, oblivious of the car and the near-miss. As the dog limped his way down the road, George passed him and had got about fifty feet further when he stopped the car.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he said to himself. “Every dog I’ve tried to help in the City either tried to bite my hand off, or made it real clear he wanted to. Still, we live in the Country now. Maybe...” Aware of his own doubt, George pulled the car over to the side and got out. The old dog, an odd mix of huskie and collie, was still limping down the road toward him, sniffing at the discarded bags of fast food and the occasional beer can. “He must be really hungry,” George said to himself.

As the dog got closer, George could see the white around the dog’s muzzle, the milkiness in his eyes, the burs in his long hair. “C’mon, let’s bring you home to Kara and her good home cooking.” George bent down, and the dog limped up slowly, sniffed twice, then put his muzzle in George’s palms.

“Alright, let’s get in the car, now.” George tried to lead the dog to the open door, but the old dog wouldn’t budge. George gently pulled on the old, worn blue collar the dog wore, worried the dog might turn and snap. But the dog, too big to carry and too heavy to push, simply turned and gazed at George with its sad, almost-blind eyes. “I get it. You and cars aren’t exactly friends.” George let go of the dog’s collar, and the old boy limped and sniffed his way back down the shoulder again.

“Wait a minute,” George said quickly. He leaned into the car and emerged with one of Lightning’s chew toys. He caught up with the dog and held the toy out. The dog sniffed quickly, aware of the other dog’s scent, and when George pulled the toy back to the car, the old dog limped after it.

They road together to the top of the hill by the antique store, when George noticed the young couple from down the street, Perry and his wife Sal, and their two kids. George slowed the car as he approached them, and rolled down the window. “Hi kids. Say, you all wouldn’t know if anyone’s lost —”

“Woof!” yelled the old dog in the back seat. The two kids heard the bark and ran up to the car.

“Daddy! Daddy! He’s found Marshey!”

George smiled and opened the rear door. Marshey hopped out, and was instantly covered with hugs from the two kids. As Marshey was led into the house, George asked Perry, “Marshey?”

Perry smiled. “When he was a pup, he ate a whole bag of marshmallows.”

“Oh.” They shook hands and George drove off, but stopped after only a few feet. He rolled down the window and yelled, “Bring him over tomorrow and we’ll see if he likes brownies!”

“Noble Encounters” for March, 1999

by The Delvings

The auction at Auburn had been going for a good five hours, but the pieces that George was waiting for had yet to come up. The auctioneers had a system, Kara told George. “They keep some of the best items ‘till the last. That keeps the bidders around.

Some of the more active bidders had indeed stayed around. The Amish fellow was still buying tools, stacking them in a neat pile behind the ropes, next to the chopped ‘57 Ford. There was another young couple, a mirror-image of George and Kara, who picked up a couple of the power tools George had his eye on. The family of seven who bid on the collection of eight-track tapes (which Kara, seeing their desire for them, let go without a bid) was still looking for a few more knick-knacks.

And then there was Ed. George had heard one of the auctioneers call him that and shake his hand before the auction started. Ed looked to be about six-and-a-half feet tall, all of one hundred seventy pounds, about seventy years old and as tall and thin as an elm tree. Years of working Indiana cornfields had etched deep furrows on his cheeks and forehead. Ed’s interests this Saturday afternoon were the handfuls of tools that the auctioneers would bundle together on the spur of the moment, hoping to fan buyer interest in the old tools. Rakes, shovels, picks, whatever they were selling, Ed bought, and for a pretty decent price.

“Look at that,” George exclaimed after one of Ed’s purchases. “A decent spade, a practically new axe and a crowbar for three bucks! Heck, you couldn’t get one of those at the store for less than ten!”

Later on, George sat next to Ed on the bumper of a Model A pickup parked off to one side. George and Ed got to talking about the day’s bargains, as Kara waited to bid on a set of green Carnival glass at another table. “Got yourself a nice bunch of tools there, Ed,” George offered

Ed grunted in reply and inspected George’s collection of purchases: three ancient wooden pulleys, a set of lathe tools, a pair of handmade barrels and an old green tin lamp. “The lamp needs work. Have to solder the lampshade back on,” George admitted.

Ed’s slitted eyes appraised George knowingly, then checked out his hands. “You work with your hands, do you?”

George laughed and inspected his own soft hands. “Don’t look like workers, do they? But I’m gettin’ ‘em in shape. Started carving last month, small practice pieces, mostly. I’m planning for a large outdoor statue, something impressive. Maybe a rearing bear, for right next to the garage. What do you think?”

A wistful desire played about Ed’s features. “Gonna carve yourself a bear, huh?” Ed asked, softly. He stretched one long arm around behind him and selected a particular tool from his stack of many and handed it to George. Without another word, he scooped up the rest and headed off towards the checkout tables.

Kara returned with an armful of exquisite glass dishes. Before she could describe her great bargain, she realized George was staring at a worn but serviceable axe in his hands. “What’s the axe for?”

George glanced out across the sea of buyers and spotted Ed’s head bobbing above the rest, heading out the door. “I think it’s for a friend, who never had the time to for a hobby.”

“Noble Encounters” for March, 1999

by The Delvings

Springtime in Indiana has come upon us rather quickly. While in the city they're still waiting for the mountains of parking lot snow to melt, folks 'round here already have their leaf blowers out (will it ever stop!). Our once frozen and quiescent lake has once again turned into a commercial for a Saturday morning fishing show.

What I can't understand (and maybe some native will explain this to me) is why you need a 150 horsepower engine on your boat to catch bass? These guys (and I don't mean to be sexist here but you know who you are) fish at faster speeds than I waterski at!

Fishing has definitely come a long way from the inexpensive, relaxing activity it once was. Gone are the days of Opie and Andy Taylor whistling a merry tune as they stroll down to the pond with their bamboo rods in one hand and Aunt Bee's homemade picnic lunch in the other. And even before Opie and Andy, fishing was serious business, a way to put food on the table, an important part of the diet.

Nowadays, folks (and I don't mean guys because women have to chip in for that boat payment one way or the other) pay more for a fishing boat than they could ever offset with the fish that they catch. These folks spend \$15-20 grand to catch a \$2 fish! That's not even counting the money spent on gear: poles, reels, lures, day-glo orange rain gear, bobbers, seat cushions and let's not forget the beer and floatation devices (in case you drink too much beer). In addition, there's the money that goes to the state for the privilege of reeling in that catch: a fishing license, boat license, trailer license (have I forgotten anything?).

If I sound a little negative about fishing, that's only because there seems to be this unwritten law that you must start fishing at 5 o'clock in the morning. Not only that, but that you must roar full speed from one side of the lake to the other as fast as you can with your 150 horsepower Mercury outboard screaming as loud as it can. *For those of you who don't live on a lake refer back to my previous complaint about the leaf blowers.* What ever happened to the wise old adage about noise scaring the fish away? Really, wouldn't all that noise disrupt your appetite (if you even had one at 5 a.m. to begin with).

Maybe fishing still maintains some of its therapeutic value, as long as cell phones and beepers remain in the truck). Maybe there is something about the sound of waves lapping up against the side of a boat while the sun inches up over the horizon that is intrinsically good for the soul. Maybe there are things that can't be offset by modern technology, depth finders, fish locators, and quarter-sticks of dynamite. But I for one would appreciate fishing and fishermen a little more if it maintained the quiet serenity of a rowboat or canoe slicing silently through the water instead of reminding me of jet planes landing at O'Hare.

C'mon guys, make Andy proud. Buy a rowboat and work off some of that beer.

“Noble Encounters” for May, 1999

by The Delvings

I'd rather live poor in the country than rich in the city.

I had no idea how true those words would ring. Historically, I have been reluctant to admit that spring had really arrived. In previous years George had been so anxious for spring to arrive that he put the plants out a little too soon, only to have it frost and have to cart them all back inside again.

Our house truly is a greenhouse during the winter. Plants line every window sill that receives even a marginal amount of sun. It's because of this lack of winter space and perhaps some kind of country bug that I have caught, that I have taken the big plunge and have finally decided to plant something in the ground. You see, coming from the City and always renting the places where we lived has left us with little experience in planting anything permanent, like perennials. After all, you can't take them with you. So we became masters at container gardening, hence our full window sills every fall.

But this year I just couldn't stand it anymore. There's just so much dang space around here. We finally have a real yard to put something in. Besides, the dandelions are popping up faster than wedding invitations in June.

So off to the greenhouse we went. Poor George, schlepped from store to store. *What do you think honey, Sedum or Astilbe?* I like marigolds, he says. We can't plant marigolds, I say. We don't have the right amount of sun, the soil is too acidic, and it's so windy the moisture doesn't stay on the hill, so it's too dry, too.

He rolls his eyes. I can hear him thinking, *Why'd she even ask me?* In my mind I agree, *Why'd I even ask him?* He does come in handy when toting around those 40 pound bags of peat moss, though.

I'm just kidding of course. George actually caught the gardening bug before I did. I'm just the one who read four books about it over the winter. Ever hear the expression 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing?' My picture should be beside it as an example.

Anyway, three hours and hundreds (and I do mean hundreds) of dollars later we are done. Home with our prizes we go, and into the ground they go. *Is this all we bought,* I ask. *Are you sure you got everything out of the car?* Again with the eye rolling. "I should have bought bigger plants," I moan. Spread out over the yard they don't look like much. Back to the store again, and again. More compost, more manure, more peat moss, more money. *At least we don't have to buy dirt. We have plenty of dirt,* George says.

"Oh, I almost forgot - and two bags of top soil. Our dirt isn't good enough." Who would've thought living in the country was going to be so expensive. By the way - anyone have a good recipe for fried dandelion greens?

“Noble Encounters” for June, 1999

by The Delvings

With summer fast approaching, the chores were mounting up. Kara had wanted to paint the Green bedroom upstairs since they had moved into the old lake house the previous year. But other duties had taken precedence. Other rooms needed carpeting or plumbing work or more insulation for the winter, or one of a hundred other fix-ups. But now, it was the Green room's turn.

It was a clear, calm late May morning, when George climbed the creaking wooden stairs to the third floor and surveyed their handiwork. Gone was the cracked and faded industrial green paint, hidden under a fresh coat of ivory on three walls. The joints had been patched, a few missing boards were replaced, and now those walls looked brand-spanking new.

The fourth wall had been tougher. Wallpaper, picked out about the same time that the room had last been painted — twenty years ago — had been stripped away, revealing plain vertical slats about four inches apart. Kara had searched through painting design books until she found an interesting idea: paint the boards in alternating bands of Sheboygan Blue and Honolulu Blue (though it looked like purple and green to George), then cover with a thin layer of clear varnish. Then after the varnish dried, add a thin coat of the ivory white. Before the ivory dried, drag a stiff plastic bristle brush down the wall, allowing a soft version of the strong colors underneath to show through. The finished pattern resembled weathered milk paint, applied in a modern technique.

George surveyed the nearly-finished room. It looked a thousand percent better than just a week before. He touched up the the rehung door (*opening the opposite way from before, but the right way now*, George thought to himself). He hung two solid brackets for an old antique shelf, and laid out new hardware for the connecting doors into the next room. With delicate strokes, he scraped off some of the excess putty around the windows, and cleaned the glass with a rag and some Windex.

With the window swung open, he could hear the sounds of the lake. Though it was nearly June, the water was still on the chilly side. It would need a couple of weeks of 80 degree temperatures and sunny skies before it was completely comfortable to swim in. The summer inhabitants usually took up residence over Memorial Day, staying until Labor Day, so many of the homes were still unoccupied. But the year-round occupants took advantage of every moment they could to use the lake, even if it meant swimming when the water temperature wasn't quite perfect.

From next door, the sound of beating feet on the grass echoed to George's ears, then a soft “Aaaaah!” followed by a loud splash. *Councilman George's young daughter Gayle must be using the swinging rope*, George decided, etching away one last strand of putty. A ferocious howl of surprise rose up from out on the lake just then, followed by Gayle's screams of comic anguish.

“Yep,” George said aloud. “Another couple of weeks before the temperature's just right.”

“Noble Encounters” for August, 1999

by The Delvings

George was excited. “Look what I got! Three issues of Sky & Telescope!”

“Where did you get those?” I asked.

“Out of the recycling bin.”

“You picked through the recycling bin?”

“Yeah, why not?” he said. “These magazines are \$4.25 a piece at the store, and they’re only a couple months old.”

It felt odd to me, too much like picking through someone else’s trash. Recycling in the City works differently than it does out here. In the City, every household gets a colored bin, usually blue (this seems to be the official recycling color). You put your bin out on the curb along with your normal (non-recyclable) trash, and it’s picked up the same day.

The thought of going through someone’s bin had never occurred to me, and even if it had — yuck! However, since the recyclables here are separated, George was not dissuaded, and dove right in, so to speak.

It had taken him a few months to bring anything home. Perhaps it didn’t occur to him right off the bat that there was free stuff ready to be plundered at the recycling center. Or maybe no one threw away anything he cared to read. Or maybe (and I hope this is true) he would only browse if there was no one else around, lest someone think he was “looting” the recycling center.

Time has passed since that first discovery and George has continued to cart home his interesting finds. His favorites (just in case you subscribe — and we usually shop on Monday by the way) are Sky & Telescope, Scientific American, and turn-of-the-century hunting and fishing.

One day after a particularly successful forage, he commented that it was like going to a garage sale where everything is free. Well, that was about all I could take. I had to check this out for myself. So, the next time I took the recyclables back I carefully layered my glossy and my non-glossy paper so that I could linger over the bin a little longer. Fortunately, I was alone at the center that day, although that did not keep my heart from racing as I rummaged in search of free treasure.

Unfortunately, I didn’t find anything I wanted to read that I wasn’t already recycling myself. But I did discover that you can learn a great deal about your neighbors by what they read. I suppose this pursuit would be considered a minor area of study in the field of Garbology, but I do it just for fun.

Take the pastor’s wife. She subscribes to Better Homes & Gardens and Women’s Day, as would be expected, but I have yet to work up the courage to ask about her interest in Guns & Ammo. One of our neighbors, a burly construction worker, seems to be an avid reader of Cosmopolitan, complete with dog-eared pages and underlined passages. And then there’s the butcher who subscribes to Vegetarian Times. Of course, we all have the right to read (and write) what we wish, and I take the diversity of literature that I find in our local recycling bin encouraging.

I’ve learned much from my experiences there. As for recycling itself (and the free bargains provided therein), it does pay to recycle. And as for my neighbors, I’ve learned, not to judge a book — or a magazine — by its cover.

“Noble Encounters” for September, 1999

by The Delvings

They knew he was going to leave, had known it for most of the summer. Kara's Uncle Frank, father of six grown kids, had been battling bravely, but the disease that had fallen many tall trees before him, had now reduced his strong build to a wisp of what it once was.

It was difficult for Kara, trying to match the image of the bear of a man from her childhood, with the older, thinner Uncle Frank she saw this summer. And that bear-memory had been burned into her memory over most of her youth.

She'd spent most of her teenage summers here, playing with her six cousins and their countless friends, swimming in the remote lake, riding (and feeding and cleaning) the horses, climbing the trees, counting the clouds. Nights were filled with the laughter of a swarm of children playing flashlight tag, followed by the snoring of collapsed bodies strewn across the many bedrooms. The next day would find them all at it again with the unceasing optimism and limitless energy of childhood.

So when the family needed someone to take care of the acres of lawn and flower beds, Kara volunteered. She felt it would repay, in some small measure, all the good summers she'd been lucky enough to spend at Uncle Frank's.

Kara spent as much time as she could that summer, working to help keep Frank's vast estate clear of weeds, tall grass and the occasional fallen tree. She wasn't really cut out for landscaping, but she did enjoy the atmosphere. She relished working outdoors, a wondrous reprieve from all the office work she'd done in her life. She'd never seen so many weeds, so many leaves, so much lawn. Uncle Frank had a habit of driving his company's heavy equipment all over the grass, sowing the lawn with hundreds of hidden ruts. Each time she dismounted the riding mower after four hours of bouncing, jarring mowing, she strained in agony to straighten out her aching limbs.

Though he'd retired some months earlier, Uncle Frank still tried to maintain control over everything around him. She accepted his gruff but well-meaning advice on mowing directions and watering. As the summer waned, Frank's energy waned, too. He fought to the end, overseeing one final addition to his wondrous house, the castle of Kara's memories, but his hard-edged directions slipped lower in intensity.

It was a cool September night as she drove down the long tree-lined lane. It was odd coming here at night, without the prospect of the bright summer sun to warm her. But this visit was for a very different reason. Uncle Frank had been slipping farther and farther away this past week, and he might leave any time now. She took a few deep breaths as she parked next to her cousins' cars, then put on her best smile and headed inside.

Mike, Mary, Melissa and Matthew were there already, gathered around their father's bed, which had been moved downstairs into the living room so he could feel like he was in the middle of the house, at the center of things. Maude and Monica had gone home already, having spent most of the day there and heading home for a needed rest. The house seemed empty, devoid of the traditional laughter and family cheer that usually filled it to overflowing.

Mary greeted her, led her in and retook her seat beside Matthew. Kara hugged the others and then looked down at Frank. His pajamas covering his lanky frame like they were four sizes too big. She grasped his weak hand and fought back the tears as he fought for each breath.

They prayed and wept, then prayed some more. Mary kept telling her father, “We love you, Dad.” Kara thought something more needed to be said.

She looked out through the darkened front window at the hidden landscape outside, knew all the effort she'd put into keeping it green this long, dry summer, knew her effort paled in comparison to the decades of work Uncle Frank had put in. But now, his time was over. He'd done all he could do, raised six strong, smart kids, had been a hard worker, a fair boss, the best uncle she could ever imagine.

She squeezed his hand tighter, swallowed the building lump in her throat and whispered, “It's okay, Uncle Frank. Go ahead. We'll be okay. You can go now.”

And just like that, his breathing stopped.

They all leaned closer, and soon the room was awash in tearful grief, and some hidden relief that the long ordeal was over, for them and for him.

The service was a blur of emotions, a collage of distant relatives rarely seen, greeted with shared sadness rather than joy. Kara had suggested the choice of hymns, and when the organist struggled through “How Great Thou Art” even the staunchest of the congregation broke down in tears.

Afterwards, there was a reception in town, filled with good-natured support and dozens of “I remember the time when Uncle Frank...” stories. After that, the family took refuge at the house, filled with family joy again. George strolled down the lane with Kara as the sun dipped down into the trees.

Near the turn by the front forty, a tall old oak had toppled, probably pushed over by the windstorm from two nights ago. Small saplings already stretched skyward to fill the newly opened void. George gripped her tighter as Kara stared at its gnarled trunk. “Shame that old tree fell. Aren't enough of 'em to go around.”

“Yes, but that's okay,” she said softly. “We're the tall trees now.”

This story is a tribute to the life and memory of Jim Demuyt. Your passing leaves a huge hole in the forest.

“Noble Encounters” for October, 1999

by The Delvings

Working in an office full of men makes football a hot topic, with both the Colts and the Bears playing decent ball (for the Colts and the Bears.) I am a football fan myself. I'm not sure why. I only played one game of touch football when I was young. I didn't enjoy it much. The boys never threw me the ball. Sometimes it's hard to be the girl.

Our own East Noble High boys are playing extraordinary ball themselves. In fact if they were a pro team with this kind of winning record, they'd be front page news. We had a couple of the boys over the other day. They were helping George take the Shore Station out of the water, something I prefer not to be involved in since it requires getting in the water in November.

We always seem to be the last people on the lake to take this bulky 400-plus pounds of metal out of the water, painfully putting it up on shore where it doesn't really fit and was never designed to go. The shores of the lake are lined with the things. It looks like a shore station graveyard. What was a bright shiny new boat lift at the beginning of the summer is now covered in green and brown slime. Not the kind of thing most people would want sitting in their front yard for even a week, let alone six months, but lake people, well it just goes with the territory.

When I was a child these lifts were an anomaly. Your boat sat in the water all summer, tied between a couple of piers. It would slam back and forth in the waves like it was on a roller coaster ride. Eventually it would rip out the cleats (if you kept your boat long enough), forcing folks to come up with all sorts of inventive ways of mooring their boats.

Our neighbors Buck and Connie tell an interesting tale. The water was very rough the first time Buck brought home his new boat. So he decided to turn it around backwards so that the bow was facing out into the lake. He thought this way, the v-shaped bow could divert the water around the boat. He then left for a ride on the boat of some friends.

His plan worked perfectly. The bow of the boat allowed the waves to slide effortlessly around the boat, slamming with full force into the seawall and then over the boat's stern (that's the back of the boat for the nautically challenged), flooding the boat with water. Buck returned just in time to see his new boat sink to the bottom of the lake.

Buck laughs about this now, but then it's been twenty years and several boats later. But like I said before, lake folks are different, they take these things in stride. It just goes with the territory.

We were set to take the cover off the shore station the day they picked up the boat. But last year the marina picked up our boat a couple of days early, leaving us with a shore station with the top still on it and no 2,000 pound boat holding it down. You could say the 60 mph. wind storm that blew up the very same afternoon was a fluke of nature. Imagine a giant 400 pound aluminum umbrella tumbling through the air. Imagine explaining to the insurance company how your shore station got flipped upside down. Now imagine trying to figure out how you're going to get it back right side up.

The water was very cold that November as well. The men had all my sympathy. Oh yes, sometimes it's good to be the girl. George says were taking it out earlier next year. We'll see.

“Noble Encounters” for December, 1999

by The Delvings

The second snowfall of the season, a light, confectioner’s sugar kind of powder, drifted casually down out of the sky as George walked their two dogs through the woods near their home. George tried to walk the dogs, Lightning and Droopy, every morning when he got home from his late-night shift at the factory. But more often than not, he was just too beat to wrangle the wild dogs down the trails. But this morning, with the snow draped lazily across tree limbs and wild wheat stands, he felt the urge to hike in the woods, and Lightning just had to come along.

Droopy didn’t much care, one way or the other. If George was going to go to sleep, he’d jump up on the waterbed and snooze right along. If George was going for walk in the woods, well, that was okay, too.

The stand of trees was close to fifty acres, held in trust by one of the elder families along the Lake. Some decades ago, it was only a fallow field with a few non-native poplars and elms. But a local agricultural school noticed it harbored some rare local varieties, and offered to plant the rest of the woods with more trees and weed out the vines and low scrubs. That being done, the acres now were home to deer and raccoon, fox and rabbit, and a pair of hoot owls that called eerily during the summer.

But this was winter; at least, it would officially turn so in a week. Little sign of life could be found without serious searching. Some deer tracks appeared on the trail George walked, while Lightning and Droopy followed other less visible trails off to the side. As he watched their happy browsings, George mulled over the few gifts he had still to locate for Kara’s Christmas presents. An antique lamp from an Auburn antique store, a certificate for stained-glass-window classes from the Genesis Glass Works, and a set of hand weights for her tai chi-inspired workouts.

He recalled what Christmas used to mean back in the City. Racing from overcrowded mall to overcrowded mall, the futile search for parking, the even more futile search through dwindling supplies of decent presents. Working ten- and twelve-hour days to complete projects for demanding clients, while trying to get the house ready for the Holidays. And through it all, few people seemed to welcome the season. Most seemed far too stressed out to enjoy the spreading white, the brilliant light displays, the scores of children who seemed to have so immediately recognized their ability to behave and be good.

But not out here. His coworkers seemed to find boundless energy for office-decorating and cookie-baking, for Secret Santas and special cards, for handmade gifts and honest wishes. His neighbors seemed to greet each day with renewed enjoyment. And even the land seemed pleased, no matter what the temperature or precipitation.

George and the dogs rounded the bend and came upon a proud buck and his two companions, one a small doe, the other a smaller offspring. In months past on their walks, the dogs would take off in a flash after any deer they spotted (and sooner in Droopy’s case, who’d take off if he stumbled upon anything that smelled even remotely like a deer). But for some reason the dogs looked up with some sort of compassion for the snow-draped trio. The dogs stared across at the deer, who had been surprised by the other trio wandering through ‘their’ woods. With simple majesty, the two smaller deer continued across the trail, following some barely-visible trace, while the buck stood guard. With a snort, he followed them into deeper trees and in a few short heartbeats, all three had disappeared.

“Well, boys,” George said softly to his still-poised companions, “I think we had one of our presents early.”