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Happy Holidays, 1999!

Hi everybody,

In the big surprise of the year, Anne's boss applied for, and landed, a job. Since Anne now doesn't have a boss to sit in the office and sign checks, that means she may not have a job much past the first of the year.

In light of that, we went to the Keys on vacation and had a wonderful visit with my folks.

We sat on the beach, drove to the mainland for a day, sat on the beach, drove to Key West for a day, and sat on the beach. Oh, yeah, we sat on the beach, too. 80 degree days, white sands, crystal clear water (It's as green up close as it is from 30,000 feet), and the occasional Microsoft cloud in the sky.

Anne, and I got together in Hollywood with a Florida writer we had never met before. We knew that we were staying about 150 miles from our meeting place in Hollywood; we discovered that Florida thinks we were about eleventy-three bucks in tolls from there. Can anyone spell Garden State Parkway? Stop every two miles to drop another six bits in the basket. Toll road commissions instituted the coin drop baskets to speed travelers and to reduce labor costs (automation means no need for human oversight). Did you know that every automatic toll basket on Florida's Turnpike has a standup bureaucrat in attendance? We discovered why. Some drivers, upon depositing said change, need guidance to leave the toll station. The bureaucrat is there to wave such drivers on. <Sigh>

After that trip, the furbrains are ruined.

We rented Wendy to a family in Burlington. They had recently lost their dog and wanted to "try out" having another one underfoot. Wendy is the archetypal Golden Retriever, underfoot all the time. She leans, she coaxes, she whines, she hopes. She ate with them, played with them, frolicked in the rain with them, ate their popcorn and table scraps, and slept in their beds. Guess where she expects to sleep now. Ruined, I tell you.

The Ruff is not much better. He immediately trained his temporary owners by finding a hiding place. Temporary Mom went ballistic trying to find him.

"We moved every piece of furniture 300 times," she said. "And we ran up and down the roads calling him until midnight.

"I couldn't sleep. Every time I heard a noise, I'd have to get up and look for him. By 4 a.m., I had decided to tell you I took him back to your daughter's and she lost him!"

Damn cat came out, "Meow?" from hiding about breakfast time.

His temporary mom not only allowed him to sleep in bed after that, I suspect she doubled his rations, too (that means two scoops of kitty kibble and all the mouses he could eat). Ruff is the only cat I know who has lost a dead mouse. It confuses him terribly when that happens.

As an aside, UPS made a delivery today. The mutt really really likes the UPS guy, so she climbed right into his truck. Again. She is such a slut.

After a couple of years of waiting, Writer's Digest published an article I wrote with a collaborator.

Fortunately, they had paid on acceptance in 1997. Mary Kay Klim and I wrote it entirely by email and still have never met in real life.

The girls threw me a surprise party for my 50th birthday. The party wasn't a surprise, but the guests were: my folks drove up from Florida, Bob Post (who said he couldn't get a SuperSaver into Burlington) flew in, and college roommate Tom Dodd and his wife Lydia really surprised us by driving up from New Jersey. The weather cooperated, the new driveway was beautiful, the house was clean, and we all had a great time.

We had considered buying a half-barrel of beer for the party, but the local beer guy reminded us of all the legalities, waivers, and potential for making our insurance company mad. Apparently if we simply have the identical quantity in bottles in an icy tub, no one cares. We served Three Stooges Premium Lager, brewed using the Slowly I Turn process by the Panther Brewing Company. I bought seven cases sight unseen, tongue untested, on the recommendation of said beer guy who called it, "Better than Budweiser, less than Pale Ale." These were full cases of 24, not those wimpy 12-packs sold in stores. Yup. It was panther piss.

Sometime between the Sunday evening when we left for a Summer Sounds concert and an early Monday morning in August when Anne left for work, somebody stole our truck. One would think we would have noticed it gone when we returned from the concert, but it was, after all, dark.

The most likely possibility? Someone jumped the border, saw "free transportation" and sputtered south. Since it didn't cross the border northbound, we immediately discounted its export for resale in a foreign land. Police discovered the truck a week later in Lebanon NH but the insurance company didn't discover it for months. The settlement came after 85 days of irritated bowel.

In the meantime, we went looking for a replacement and kissed a lot of frogs.

I finally bought a manly truck. It's an old 4x4 with a great big plow, and a great big V8, and a great big yellow beacon, and great big rust holes. And it's red. After the money changed hands, I realized that if the new driveway gravel ends up in the lawn, blaming the plow guy is not going to do a whole helluva lot of good.

Anne says she won't drive that rust bucket, so we bought her a Camry. That means we now have three vehicles for two drivers with one job.

Every couple of years we get the itch for a carnival (Anne says it's more like a masochistic twitch). This year, we booked Artrain USA for our Railroad Days Festival in St Albans, With an 80 piece exhibit called Artistry of Space from the NASA collection, Artrain brought us the work of Peter Max, Norman Rockwell, Andy Warhol, Jamie Wyeth, and more. Our festival was its first-ever stop Vermont.

Naturally, we needed a couple of other things to keep busy. Railroad Days included a major All Arts Council exhibit, the NASA Mobile Aeronautics Education Lab, and community wide special events such as a farmers market, history tours, movies, two Gate Players plays, and train and model train memorabilia. We reenacted a Civil War Days bank robbery and a train robbery. We invited John Glenn, but he couldn't make it.

Sometime soon, we will get the new business website up: www.northpuffin.com It will have all the neat news about what I should be doing for a living as well as an online gallery for my mom's fine watercolor paintings, interesting photographs, wonderful words for sale or rent, and vacation pix.

As usual, commiseration, visits, job offers, or long phone calls welcome.