



JEAN SHEPHERD

• We all have our little secret kicks that we hardly ever talk to anybody about, if ever. Some guys secretly count the number of steps in every stairway they struggle up or down throughout their chaotic lives. They can't tell you why they do it, it just somehow gives them pleasure. Others carefully avoid ever stepping on a crack in the sidewalk, maybe out of secret fear of breaking their mothers' backs. Who knows? Now, like I said, none of us ever really talk about these things. We just go on doing it, whatever it is, mutely throughout our days. Now me, I'm a License Plate Freak. I can't stop looking at license plates. I don't collect them or anything like that. My hangup is far more subtle. I just look at them and read the slogans. "Live Free or Die." Now there's a ballsy statement. How many of you know what state carries that beauty on its tags? It's one of the very few that carries a philosophical message. Most smack of the Rotary Club. "Land of Enchantment." "The Peachtree State." "Heart of Dixie." How about this one—"North to the Future." Now you can hardly, if you have any blood at all in your veins, read that one without something grabbing you somewhere.

Sometimes, not often, a slogan will mysteriously disappear. For example, for years New York's tags stated bluntly but with fine arrogance: "The Empire State." Then the word "empire" became a social no-no. You just didn't go around yelling about how you were an empire. New York tags have pulled in their horns. True, we still have the Empire State Building but nobody talks much about that anymore, not in imperial terms anyway. Most of the slogans on license plates are really vague generalities.

They don't have much basis in reality. There is at least one exception. Minnesota.

For as long as I can remember its plates carried the legend "10,000 Lakes." Now if you grow up in a state that specializes in cornfields, used car lots, telephone poles and concrete, with maybe four or five mud-

dy lakes scattered over the entire statewide landscape and you grow up reading *Field & Stream* avidly, hoping one day to meet a Walleye or a Great Northern Pike, or maybe even a Muskellunge face to face, "10,000 Lakes" is a hell of an exciting thing for a license plate to promise. Naturally then, when I got an invitation from the English Department of Bemidji State College to participate in the Upper Midwest Writers' Conference to lecture for two weeks on the dubious art of Fiction, I grabbed it.

Bemidji. Just let it roll off your tongue. Even the name is exciting. It just isn't Indianapolis or Pasadena. It's way up there in the interior of the State, in Chippewa country not too far from the Canadian Border. In fact, the country around Bemidji yearly records some of the lowest temperatures on the North American continent; 35°, 40°, 45° below is *normal*. Then, of course, they have those really *cold* days that make brass monkeys fear. These are the facts but, like most facts, they don't even begin to tell you much about the realities of a place.

Being somewhat of a big-city smart-ass type, I figured life around Bemidji had to be straight. I should have known better. I've been around enough to know that nothing turns out to be what you always thought it was. Now, I know that . . . but I keep getting mousetrapped.

Flying in from Chicago in the North Central turboprop, the country below really knocks you out, so green it almost hurts the eyes to look at it and from horizon to hori-

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zon the tinfoil glint of endless pine-shrouded lakes. The closest I've ever seen anywhere to this kind of country is Sweden, which has a lot of the same flavor and even the same people. In fact, in Sweden itself, Minnesota is a kind of legend. In some countries they ask you about California, in others, New York or Florida. In Sweden, they always bring up Minnesota.

"Yep, there are good people around here but they're kind of funny," said my landlady who ran the ramshackle tourist camp on the shore of the lake. "You never know which way they're going to go."

"How do you mean?" I asked, trying not to sound bored.

"Well, they either like you or they don't, and sometimes it don't matter which. Like the time that couple come up from Chicago . . ." she trailed off and plucked at some

lint on the battered sofa that looked as though it had actually been made of lint.

"Well, they been comin' down here for years on vacation. He was an electrician. They got to like the place so much, he and his wife, they bought an old farm and come up here to live. They sure found out."

"What do you mean?" I asked, this time really interested.

"Well, folks never had nothin' against 'em. They were kind of nice, actually. They just froze 'em out. They never give 'em no work and nobody invited them to anything. After a year they just sold out and left." A faint chill wind blew in from the lake, or maybe from the story.

That night I squatted at the bar in the gloom of The Blue Ox.

"What'll you have?" The bartender, who looked a little like Sidney Greenstreet but with more hair and a tan, moved up and down behind the mahogany like a polar bear on a short leash. Bartenders call a bar "the stick" in case you're interested. The phrase is used thusly: One bartender to another: "I'm working the stick Wednesday, but I'm off all day Thursday. You wanna go out to the track?"

Second bartender: "Hell, I got the stick all day Thursday and I'm workin' a double shift." Incidental information like this may one day save your life. You may need a friend in a bar sometime.

"Gin. You got Plymouth?"

"Yep. How'll you have it?"

"Neat. With rocks on the side."

Now, an order like that establishes something very fast in a bar like The Blue Ox, especially if you squint when you lay it out. He poured the gin with respect and I laid a buck on the bar. Behind me action was picking up in the booths. Four middle-aged ladies, well into their cups, were getting down to the core of things.

"I tell you, I'm not gonna take it much longer from the sonovabitch," one old hen croaked, waving her empty stein wildly in the air. "I don't care if he is your brother." The old crow opposite her, without missing a beat, yelled "I'll tell you, you ought to get down on your knees every night and give thanks you've got a man like that!" The other two harpies cackled and dug into the oily wooden bowl of potato chips.

"Jee-zus. They're at it again." The dark laconic drinker squatting next to me at the bar muttered in my ear. He had the curious flat metallic quacking accent of the far Upper Midwest. This bird looked like Merle Haggard's twin brother, only maybe meaner and a hell of a lot tougher. He laughed as the biddies ordered another round and went back to steady fighting. The old doll who had the bad husband was buying.

"Yep, they been here every night at this time as long as I can remember, and sayin' the same things." I grunted and waved at Greenstreet for another gin.

"What you drinkin'?" I asked my new friend, without looking directly at him. In

I walked down past the shore of the lake. Out there in the darkness I could see the shrouded form of a Great Blue Heron standing silently amid the reeds. Somewhere across the lake an owl hooted and a Great Northern or maybe a Muskie slapped at a frog in the shallows. Behind me, The Blue Ox roared on. Minnesota. 10,000 Lakes. A different world. ●



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