

Do What the Bears Do

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE. We've all been out there in the faraway reaches, no sign of civilization in sight, and someone says, "I have to go" and the word "go" is not a reference to travel, if you know what I mean. I remember being out there when....

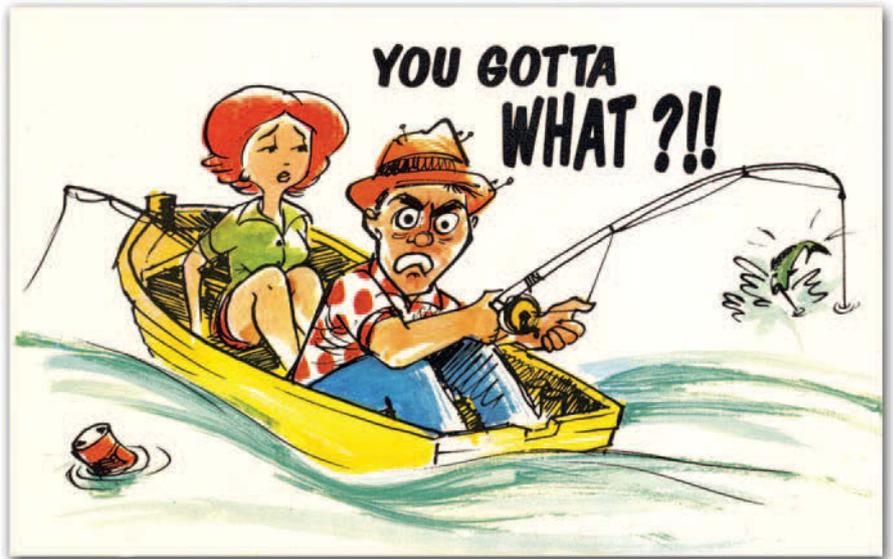
Uh, oh. Potty humor. Let's skip that. Rather, let's act like grownups and talk about a happier piscatorial time, such as many years ago when a magazine editor offered me an all-expenses-paid assignment to write a story about a genuine old-style Maine fishing camp. The camp was way out in the deep, dark woods, so far off that the town it was in didn't have a name, only a number. I said that sounded isolated and potentially boring. The editor said, "So bring a friend." I brought George.

We got in the car and started driving. We drove for hours. Primary roads, then secondary roads, then tertiary roads; through cities, then towns, then villages, then hamlets, then wide spots in the road, then nothing but trees. Late in the day we came to a dirt road. About five

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miles down that we came to a landing on a small lake. Pinned to a tree was a note. It said a boat would be along soon to pick us up.

The camp was everything L.L. Bean promised us years ago before his heirs gave us outdoorsy chic. It was a main lodge surrounded by several small cabins, right on the marge of a beautiful sheet of water. All was heated with wood,



and cooled with pond ice, and lit with kerosene lamps. The only electricity came from a generator that powered the cook's freezer. There were canoes and outboard-powered Grand Lakers pulled up on the shore. There were stupendous meals for hairy-chested men in rubber hip boots with suspenders over red-and-black woolen buffalo-check shirts. Flapjacks. Steak. Biscuits and gravy. Baked beans. Roast beef. Home-baked pies. Coffee by the pitcher. George and I settled right in.

We weren't gung-ho fishermen like the rest of the crowd. They were flogging the water from dawn to dusk; we tried a little casting from shore and hiking around the lake. I mostly took notes. But one morning a guide sat down at our table in the dining hall. "I'll be taking you fishing today," he said matter-of-factly. "Compliments of the camp owner."

I don't know if you've ever been given the genuine Maine Guide experience before, but if you haven't, I'm here to tell you that it's the outdoors version

of Ritz Carlton service. Our guide drove the boat; he chose the flies and tied them to our leaders; he took us to the fish; he netted the fish we caught; he entertained us with tales and legends of the Maine woods. For lunch he took us to a small island, built a fire, emptied a pack basket of the makings of a huge meal, and made it. Corn, grilled steak, biscuits, pie, fresh coffee, and more. Then he rolled out two soft cushions, and George and I took a brief nap while he washed the dishes and pans.

Later in the day, with the sun low in the sky, George and I sat back in the boat and drank beer. We let the guide do the fishing while we tried to think of a better day of fishing than this. We couldn't.

Oh, yes. You're probably wondering where we went when we had to go. We did what the bears do. We went in the woods. ★

Contributing Editor Peter H. Spectre lives and writes in Spruce Head. This postcard, published by Mike Roberts in Berkeley, California, is from his collection.

Loverboy, Over and Out

Risqué chitchat during the Golden Age of the marine operator

“FORGET ME NOT,” the sailor’s sweetheart says to the sailor. She looks deeply into his eyes, searching for answers. “Is he thinking of me, or of the coming voyage, or of someone else in the next port of call?”

There’s no way of telling, of course. If there is truth to the old cliché—a sweetheart in every port—our boy might be whispering sweet nothings to this one in the moment, but he’ll be doing the same to another down the line later. Anyone with ears during the Golden Age of the Marine Operator should know that to be true.

Many years ago I lived for a summer aboard a houseboat in Sausalito, San Francisco Bay. It was a grand old time, a vast change from my normal life on the coast of Maine. Entertainment of an evening involved reading or listening to the VHF radio, especially to the calls that were patched by the marine operator into the telephone system ashore from yachts and ships at sea. The books were

“Love you,” our loverboy said as he checked out. Then he called another woman. “She bought it,” he said. “Come on down.”

OK, but the radio—oh, the radio!—was spectacular. Because the callers were on VHF, anyone tuned to the right channel could listen to everything. What conversations I heard; sailors aboard tankers coming up from Los Angeles calling ahead to hookers in Oakland, yachtsmen planning a night of revelry at the club after a weekend of racing, boatloads of hairy-chested commercial fishermen calling every available



woman they knew to meet them when they docked at Fishermen’s Wharf.

The best single call I heard was from a deckhand aboard a ship west of the Golden Gate to a woman ashore. He wouldn’t be able to be with her that night, he said, because the ship had been unexpectedly rerouted to Seattle instead of San Francisco. “But that’s OK,” he said. “We can always chat about what we would be doing if there hadn’t been a change of plans.” What followed was the most spectacular ship-to-shore-radio sex that I, and probably anyone else within hearing range, ever heard.

The best two-call set I heard was by a yachtsman who called his wife to tell her he was fogged in at Tiburon and wouldn’t be able to get home until the next day. “It’s wet and raw,” he said, “but I have a can of beans and some cold

cuts, and I’ll muddle through.”

“Love you,” our loverboy said as he checked out. Then he called another woman. “She bought it,” he said. “Come on down.”

When you think about it, the Golden Age of the Marine Operator did not last very long. The end came with the arrival of the cell phone. Before it was strictly station-to-station wireless, which was almost all commercial and primarily formal. Before that there was no radio at all. Communication then was line-of-sight via signal flags, using either the International Code or private signals.

Considering what I know about the morals of the time, I suspect there wasn’t a private code for signal-flag sex, but there was for most anything else. I have on hand the 1914 Yearbook of the Eastern Yacht Club, Marblehead, Massachusetts, which regularly cruised en masse to downeast waters. Here is a short story in their private flag signal code:

- FT — Wish to communicate with you
- Y — Come within hail
- BW — Where are you from?
- QS — Hampton Roads, Virginia
- BU — Where are you bound?
- NH — Bar Harbor, Maine
- GC — Will you lunch with me?
- C — Yes
- GI — And bring your guests
- FW — Thank you
- GE, JA — Will meet you at the Club at noon
- GJ — Send a boat for me
- GW — At once



Contributing Editor Peter H. Spectre lives and writes in Spruce Head. This postcard is from his collection.

The Winner A glorious victory lap

ONE SUMMER DAY many years ago I got a call from the owner of the mooring I rented for my boat. He was working on a fund-raising campaign on behalf of the Camden YMCA and wondered if I would like to buy a \$200 raffle ticket.

When I finally stopped laughing I pointed out that I had three children who were nearing college age, that my wife and I were trying to save every penny we could to that end, and that I wouldn't even buy a \$1 ticket unless it were a sure thing.

"But Pete," he said. "It is a sure thing. There are two grand prizes—a car and a truck—and we're limiting sales to 200 tickets."

"Bullpuckey," I said.

"I'll tell you what," he said, pushing hard. "If you buy a ticket, I'll give you the mooring free and clear."

Now we're cooking with gas, I thought to myself. I was paying \$200 a year to rent the mooring. For the same amount I could own it forever. I bought the ticket.

The YMCA hosted a banquet at the Samoset Resort in Rockport for the buyers of the raffle tickets and their family and friends, at the conclusion of which a drawing was held. I won the car.

You heard that right. I WON THE CAR!

They handed me the keys and said to go get it, it's yours, it's downstairs in the indoor tennis court. It was a brand-new Toyota Corolla with all the bells and whistles.

I stumbled onto the court. I was in shock. There was a fellow standing next to the car. "Did you win?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Well then, drive it out of here," he said. "I'll open the door."

I didn't sleep much that night. I kept getting up to make sure the car was still in the driveway, that all this wasn't a cruel hoax. In the morning I skipped



breakfast and took the car for a spin. I drove to Augusta and beyond, to Lake Cobbosseecontee. My youngest daughter was at the YMCA camp there, and I wanted to show her what a brilliant

I drove to Augusta and beyond, to Lake Cobbosseecontee. My youngest daughter was at the YMCA camp there, and I wanted to show her what a brilliant father she had.

father she had. The proof was this brand-new Toyota Corolla with all the bells and whistles.

The campers were down at the waterfront, looking exactly as in this postcard. The woman in the camp office said she was sorry, but parents weren't allowed except at the beginning of a session and at the end. There were to be no exceptions.

"But...," I said.

"No buts," she said.

Then I told her about the raffle ticket and the mooring and the drawing and

the indoor tennis court and the car and how I hadn't slept all night and how I hadn't had any breakfast and how I had driven all the way there to show my daughter how brilliant her father was and if I didn't see her soon there was no telling what I might....

She must have seen something in my eyes that scared her, because she said, "Wait here," and a few minutes later she returned with my daughter. "You have ten minutes," she said.

Was my daughter impressed? I'd say so. I drove her around the parking lot for ten minutes, then kissed her goodbye and drove home.

Remember the bit about 15 minutes of fame? I got more than that. For months afterwards I couldn't go anywhere around town without someone saying "Hey Pete, how about that car?" Even to this day, roughly 30 years later, every once in awhile it'll come up in conversation, and I'll bask in the glory of, for once in my life, being declared the Winner. ★

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