

JUST A WHIM

Virginia Hood

‘It was just a whim’, I reply when people ask how I came to be living in Vermont. After finishing my residency and training as a kidney physician in Australia, I was ready to see the world. All my non-medical friends had been, some more than once. It was time but I needed to work. A colleague suggested a group in Vermont that he knew. ‘Where?’ I asked. After finding Vermont on the map it seemed to fit the bill. It was close to New York City (NYC), Montreal and seemed not very far from Europe, all places I’d wanted to visit. The University and Medical school had a good reputation and were in a small town, a nice change from Sydney. There would also be snow and a white Christmas. I knew about the snow, not just from geography but because prior to my departure for the ‘new world’, I’d seen Jimmy Carter, campaigning in New Hampshire (NH) for the 1976 primaries, walk off a plane into about 10 feet of the white stuff. By then I knew that NH was right next-door to my destination.

I arrived in Burlington, Vermont on May 17 on a bus from Montreal; my first step in the US of A. Sun brightened the spring morning but had brought the temperature to only about 50°F. As I rode down Main Street, I noticed many very pale people sunning themselves on the roofs of the houses. What kind of a place is this, I thought. It was only in the following March that I realized how desperate one could become for even weak sun and modest warmth.

I went through the usual adjustment period. Vermonters were very hospitable. They took me into their homes for dinner and introduced me to their children. ‘This is Dr Hood. She’s a *lady* doctor from *Australia!*’ My patients enquired about my origins. ‘Who is that woman doctor, she talks funny, she must be from the south.’ Asking for a torch to examine someone’s sore throat produced a mildly terrified look on the nurse’s face. People rolled around on the floor if I talked about tip trucks or mentioned wombats. And of course, after several enquiries to ‘run that by me again’ and the need to eat, I learned to pronounce tuna and tomato sandwiches correctly.

The first winter was magical. Skiing was exciting. Skating over black ice stretching for miles across a snap frozen bay on the lake, or up a river lined by snow laden trees provided me with all the delights of a winter wonderland. During the January thaw, after I’d managed to build a half way decent-looking snow kangaroo in front of my house, a passer-by inquired if it was ‘a dinosaur’. This was too much ‘unselfconscious ignorance’ I thought. But then I remembered that I had stopped a

waiter at a NYC deli in his tracks when I had asked 'What is lox'. After a moment of incredulity, he took me from my seat up to the counter and pointed out all the different kind of lox and explained from where they had come ... a patience and kindness not usually attributed to NYC residents. So on that winter day, I gritted my teeth and clarified the misperception. The envelope of my sister's next letter captured the scene with a cartoon of my snow sculpture complete with bubble 'Me a dinosaur? No mate!'

The years passed, punctuated by misunderstandings with immigration, career successes and failures, and the gradual realization that I was not just here for the 'year or two' I'd anticipated. I travelled all over the country and the world but always returned to Vermont. Vermont with its postcard vistas, its 'no billboard' policy, the will and laws to protect and celebrate the environment, support the underserved and elect courageous politicians, made it hard to consider a substitute.

I discovered that the US was a land of great contrasts: natural beauty and squalor, wealth and poverty, ingenuity and stagnation, generosity and injustice side by side in both the cities and rural areas. The land of 'Leave it to Beaver' that I had expected when I left Australia was not reality. I was both delighted and shocked. What shocked me most was the racism. I had thought that the racial divide in the US had been solved by the civil war. My concerns in Australia in the 1960's about social injustice were with apartheid in South Africa. Mind you, I also knew little about the tragedy of the Aboriginal people at home. But the racism in the US was so raw and so seemingly inexplicable. There were all those black people, the vast majority of whom were hard working, god fearing, had served or were serving in the military, were always enthusiastically consuming, creating innovations in the language and music rapidly adopted by the majority society, pushing the limits of sporting prowess, and who were indeed more American than 'apple pie'. But they were treated worse than foreigners like me or even those foreigners whose language and cultures were even more disparate. It has taken me years to understand the deep roots, extent and tragic consequences of race in the US for both whites and blacks. But that is another story.

My life in Vermont continues to be full of surprises and delights. My mate, who is a railroad enthusiast, picked me up one warm summer Saturday morning after I'd been teaching. 'Want to go for a ride?' Sure, I replied as I stepped into the convertible. We cruised through green fields with swaths of orange, purple and blue wildflowers to visit a railroad auction viewing. Replying to an enquiry about needing assistance, he said 'I'm looking for a caboose'. Unfazed, the owner returned from the barn with a picture and an address. Two months later, we arose on a crisp autumn Saturday. 'Want to go for a ride?' asked my mate. 'I've got something to show you.' We travelled 30 miles around and over the lake, enjoying the autumnal splendour with

the convertible's heat on and top down. There, in a backyard sheltered by soft white pines and golden birch trees, was a red caboose. 'Do you like it? He asked. I'd like to buy it.'

'It's very nice but how will you get it to Grand Isle?'

'That's the problem I'll have to solve'

Thinking that it was more than a notion to move a 32,000 lb train carriage, I gave it little more thought until two months later when he announced its transportation was arranged. This was serious! Among other things, we needed track. The contractor, extending the garage at the time, agreed to dig a big pit in the back paddock and arrange for gravel to be delivered to provide a solid bed. The man bringing the gravel inquired about its use. 'I think he has bought a caboose', volunteered the contractor. 'That's interesting' said the man unperturbed, 'I've just bought a dining car'. It was December when we found the time to lay the track. So there we were on Christmas Day, transporting creosote laden ties (sleepers) to the carefully levelled gravel, setting them 24" apart in preparation for the 900 lb 33' lengths of rail. Thank goodness the caboose was only 30' long. Finally with the plates and spikes firmly in place we were ready. But there was another problem; it had been a mild winter and the ground had not frozen enough to support a crane which would be needed. So we waited for the frost. Eventually, my mate had to leave to teach in Grenada, giving me instructions to take care of the move when feasible. A week later, after returning home on a Wednesday evening, having been out of town on business of my own, I found a phone message from Monday stating that the caboose would be moved on that very Wednesday. Anxiously, I called back immediately. 'How did it go?'

'Everything went well. We just had one question about the direction of the placement'.

When he explained the direction they had chosen, I thought to myself that it was just the opposite from that which we had planned. 'Perfect' I told him. I was not even contemplating any changes. I thanked him and the men who had negotiated the two cranes and two flat bed trucks that executed the move. I then mentioned how disappointed my mate was that he could not be there to witness the whole operation.

'Not to worry' he said, 'I took pictures'.

So there it was a beautiful red caboose with Delaware and Hudson stencilled in white on the sides, standing as a sculpture among the snow and pines in the back paddock. Our neighbours have red barns and we have a red caboose. For those who inquire why we have a caboose, I reply

'It is just a whim'.



Virginia Hood is an Australian citizen born in Sydney and has lived in Burlington, Vermont, USA since 1976. As a Professor of Medicine at the University of Vermont, she cares for patients with kidney diseases, teaches physiology, epidemiology and internal medicine to medical students, residents and community physicians. She enjoys sailing, skiing, gardening and stories.

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