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FIGHTING NATURE IN VERMONT BY JEN LIMARZI



To outsiders, the idea of Vermont conjures up visions of maple syrup dripping from the sky as rugged and friendly woodsmen hand out pints of Ben and Jerry's ice cream to passersby. In Vermont, Rosemary Clooney and Bing Crosby made it snow in *White Christmas*, Chevy Chase bought a *Funny Farm*, and Diane Keaton created a natural baby food empire in *Baby Boom*. In Vermont, Senator Bernie Sanders reigns over a

mythical land where national onlookers wonder if sanity may actually intersect with politics. In Vermont, I figured out who I was and it turns out I wasn't a Vermonter.

In 2009, with visions of maple-doused fairies dancing in our heads, my husband Eric and I relocated from Sunnyside, Queens to Burlington, Vermont ultimately settling in the neighboring town of Winooski. Our plan was to embark on a new adventure, experience a change of pace, and revitalize lives that had become jaded by years of New York City living.

As reflected by friends' and family's shocked reactions to the news, I was an unlikely candidate for a Vermont move. I never was what one would consider an "outside gal". During childhood family camping vacations, I would secretly hope for trip-stopping torrential rainstorms that would force us to seek refuge in a hotel where I could marvel at small soaps, shampoos, and cable television. As an adult living in New York City, my jaunts to outdoorsy places typically ended with sunburn, bug bites, bruises, and a promise to all involved that for my own safety I would never venture beyond areas accessible by subway.

I'd abandoned bicycle riding at the age of twelve when I got into an argument with my father that resulted in me almost running over an old lady and causing a car accident all with one right turn. I didn't really love driving, I routinely slept on the subway because I found it calming, and I proudly enjoyed people-watching out my apartment window like a professional busybody-in-training.

That said, in my early thirties, I was coming to a point in my life where many of my friends were moving out of the city and having babies. While parenthood beyond dog-ownership was not something my husband and I wanted to partake in, we did want to take the plunge into home ownership. Financially and logistically we knew this couldn't happen in New York City where prices of co-ops in our neighborhood in Queens were outpacing our salaries. We needed a change of scenery and we opted for the biggest change we could think of.

We'd visited Eric's sister in northern Vermont several times. Visit would be a key word, as visits and vacations produce the dreamy scenes that social media envy are made of. During one visit fully engulfed in an artisan cheese and craft-beer filled high, the infamous phrase "We should move here" was uttered. My job as a remote medical writer was fully portable, but Eric would need to find something new. At the height of a crappy economy we decided to play Russian roulette with our future.

"If you find a job in Vermont," I said, "we'll move."

To our mutual astonishment, he did just that.

The initial months of living in Vermont's largest city were akin to scenes depicted in *Funny Farm*, *Baby Boom* and *White Christmas*. Our delight in now having a dedicated parking space, dishwasher, and natural food co-op that boasted local and organic produce was tempered by feelings of being two odd-men-out in a sea of old hippies and young lumbersexuals. During those first few months I found myself bursting into tears in front of tourists at nature preserves, freaking out because there were no billboards on the side of the roads, and thoroughly distressed by the fact that nearly every establishment had a Phish-story tacked to a bulletin board boasting of a Trey Anastasio encounter.

An interesting breed of New Englanders, Vermonters are generally accommodating but fairly stoic. True Vermonters, those who can claim a lineage of multiple generations of state natives, will tolerate outsiders, but never truly embrace those that many derogatorily call Flatlanders.

Realizing that you get out of a situation what you put into it, I made it my mission to meet new people any way I could. I attempted to join a drag queen group I found on Craigslist despite not wearing drag or being a Queen. I tried Meetup groups where, to my dismay, the "Women Without Children" group sat around discussing how and when they wanted to get pregnant rather than planning fun child-free outings. The Stitch and Bitch knitting group resembled a Norman Rockwell painting where my mere presence and sarcastic sense of humor made me look more like I belonged hanging out with Norman Bates. I also took tap dancing lessons where when I showed up wearing a bright hair flower and red lipstick for our big stage recital, a fellow classmate said, "I thought about wearing makeup, but didn't want to be too showy." I stared at her processing this back-handed non-compliment and ultimately responded quizzically, "But it's a show?"

In a state that proudly promotes t-shirts stating "Keep Vermont Weird," what Vermonters are accepting of as weird, to me, seemed limited to fitting in among a culture of fleece and tie-dyed clothing and having a penchant for recreational drug use.

Despite feeling disconnected from Vermont natives, we did make a few close friends among fellow transplants who encountered similar experiences to ours. We explored the great outdoors by going hiking, snowshoeing, and I took up riding a bicycle, albeit poorly. However, for me these activities felt more like things one did to pass the time rather than something I passionately engaged in.

What I was excited about were opportunities to travel outside of Vermont. Montreal, only an hour and a half away, was a welcome escape from times when northern Vermont began to feel claustrophobic. To travel beyond the surrounding area, direct flights from our small airport were limited to New York and Chicago.

As native east coasters, I'll admit Chicago was not a place we thought about regularly. I'd only visited once in my twenties for a wedding that took place in Skokie, IL. The trip ended in comedic and social disaster when my wedding date got drunk and proceeded to eat the floral centerpiece and proclaim it tasted like ham. After that weekend I mentally wrote off both him and the Chicago area as places I've visited, but never needed to revisit.

It only took a decade and a deal on a direct flight to change that and I am very thankful it did. On that first visit we had the best meal of our lives at Green Zebra, saw members of The Tossers play at the Abbey, and toured the amazing Art Institute. Talking with passionate strangers while sitting at a bar and simply people watching from a café immediately reinvigorated my zest for life. When asked where we were from, without batting an eye both Eric and I blurted out New York, leaving us to wonder why we weren't proud of our life in Vermont.

Whenever I ran into friends or acquaintances from New York and told them of our Vermont home, they would wax poetic about positive experiences they had in the state and how lucky we were to live there. I'd smile and nod, but wonder why I personally felt like it was more of a punishment than a privilege. I'd scroll through Instagram and see Vermont acquaintances posting exuberant selfies from mountain tops featuring sweeping vistas or a group of bearded and flannelled fellows happily gathered outside a pop-up brewery. It looked wonderful, but for me felt miserable. In a place that enchanted so many, I felt like I didn't belong.

Despite misgivings and misanthropic feelings we committed to Vermont and kept trying. However, over the five years we lived there the most memorable times were the ones where we took vacations away from our small northern city. On one such trip, after a few glasses of wine, Eric said, "Sometimes I think about moving back to a city. I really liked Chicago." My ears perked up like a dog hearing a dinner whistle. At that time, neither of us was willing to be the first one to commit to such an idea and admit that our running away to everyone else's Xanadu was our version of a dystopian abyss. Therefore, we couched the remainder of the discussion with plans to consider a move in the future with a flexible time table.

Returning to Vermont I delighted in playing with the vision of my future, which morphed from settling into a life that moved with the viscosity of maple syrup to one where I felt like living again. Given that our previous move was left up to the chance and the luck of a job hunt, we were determined to base this move on logic and sound reasoning.

Three days later we went to the weekly Burlington farmers market where we were approached by not one but two women in hemp clothing and dreadlocks wearing signs offering “Free Hugs”. I realized that wanting to throw a cider donut in the face of someone who simply wanted to hug me was probably a sign that it was time to go—now.

Within two months of pondering a potential move we were on our way to Chicago, where my excitement mirrored that of Dorothy journeying to the Emerald City. From the moment we unpacked our car and moved into our first apartment it was clear that Chicago just fit. I looked at the world with wonder again and instantly connected with people who would become close friends.

In those early days and weeks following the move my knee jerk reaction was to blame Vermonters and Vermont itself as a source of the misanthropic feelings I had while living there. However as time, and the city of Chicago, began to heal those wounds I finally came to the realization that everyone else already had. I didn’t feel like I belonged in Vermont, simply because I didn’t belong in Vermont. It wasn’t inherently in my nature to actually live in a place so focused on nature itself among those who would rather stare off the side of a mountain than marvel at the size of a skyscraper.

This realization was confirmed soon after completing our move. While roaming around a north side neighborhood I pointed at a building I was admiring, which caught the attention of a passing stranger.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it,” he said unprovoked. “Are you guys visiting?”

“We just moved here,” I said proudly. “We’re from New York, but spent the last five years living in Vermont.”

“Vermont?!” he said with enthusiasm. I braced myself for a story of mythical adoration like so many New Yorkers had provided in years’ past. “Vermont is where people go to get away from life and live in the woods. The city is where people go to actually live. You’re gonna love Chicago. Welcome home.”

Like some sort of weird wise prophet, the man proceeded to walk away without saying another word as I had to be held back from running after him to give him a free hug like the hippies I fled in the northeast. Sometimes you just can’t fight nature, even in Vermont.

Jen is a senior medical writer by day, humor writer by nature. A New York native who now resides in Chicago, Jen’s published humor writing and ongoing artistic pursuits can be explored at www.JenLiMarzi.com

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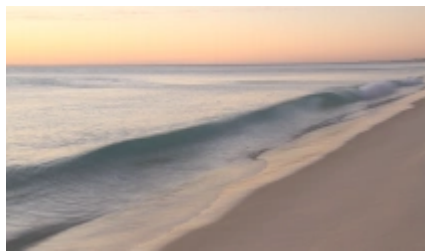
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