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Confessions of a Failed Yooper
by Erin Anderson

The light in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan woke me on the couch, which was not as debauched as waking up on the bathroom floor. Unconsciousness had given me a few warnings, and if I had been a civilized individual, I would have gone upstairs to the bedroom heated by a floor grate in a house built in the first decades of the 20th century by Norwegian immigrants. But my woodstove was rocking hot, and one of the pleasures of divorced life was that you could sleep when you wanted, where you wanted.

Six years before, a brighter light woke me in the suburbs of Simi Valley, California, where I tried not to be terrified by long highway commutes and expensive housing. Then I met a man who made me laugh. Was it a coincidence? Or an answered prayer? What if God had brought this man into my life not to fulfill Old World tribal obligations--the breeding of the next generation and the establishment of property to be bequeathed--but to get me out of the suburbs? On a camping trip my husband, who'd grown up in the suburbs north of Detroit, said, "This is what the U.P. is like."

"Well, let's move there, then."

But we were children of the suburbs. We lived for ready-made, and what was not ready made, what had to be planned and carried out, step-by-repetitive-step was something neither of us was prepared for.

I had chosen not to read the *Mother Earth News* or the historical farming books he bought. I just wanted to be somewhere green, somewhere cool and moist. So we moved to the U.P. and bought a three-bedroom farmhouse with outbuildings on seventy-seven acres. We looked at the place in the winter, when the water table was frozen, so if there were any drainage problems, we didn't notice. There was no running water when we signed the papers, so we took the owners' word for the fact that the water was potable. And we didn't know that legally we had no access to the back forty because it didn't abut the front section, but only touched the corner diagonally.

on Yalmer Rd. in Skandia

In the suburbs, my money anxieties were curtailed by warehouse shopping outlets and the chance to rent out our spare room. And those freeways I hated so much could at least get me to economic opportunities. But in the country, women had to sell Avon products to supplement the paychecks their husbands earned doing seasonal logging and construction.

In the suburbs, I could enjoy my husband's good humor and sunny outlook on life. I might have noticed that he had a tendency to not be particularly realistic about things. It should have been a clue to me that I was the one to scoop up the dog poop in the back yard. I should have also guessed that his tendency to accumulate animals and his reluctance to deal with poop would compound in the country. And I might have guessed that hard country labor would strip my husband's dreams of their glamor, and that this would strip him of his joy.

But however stressful this transition time was, we were glad we had moved to the U.P., and we were not alone. The birds who ate the sunflower seeds were real happy we had moved. And so were the deer who ate the corn and the raccoons and skunks who feasted on the 14 ducks who had gotten stuck in the alder trees. And, of course the 10 geese who fertilized the lawn were real happy we had come. The remaining solitary duck was probably not so happy. Now that her boyfriend and their mutual friends were gone,

she probably thought we would have been better off in the suburbs where we would not have been able to play with the lives of defenseless, slow-moving fowl.

Since guilt was counter-productive to a stress-free life, we compensated by reminding ourselves of how well we treated our chickens, who raced around in a huge grassy area, flapping their wings, scratching the dirt and pecking at bugs. Our chickens were happy and healthy. They lived an active life before we killed them.

I didn't want to be so *yang*, the constricting force, a spoilsport, the one waiving the checkbook, stepping in and putting a stop to things, but that's what I found myself doing. In the suburbs, our combined income allowed for entrepreneurial ventures that never flowered, but the country required scaling back and changing tactics.

My husband ended up sitting with his coffee in a deep funk on Sunday mornings because according to the plans he could not learn to scale down, there was just too much to do, too much trash in the outbuildings and too many bushes to pull out by the roots, and I wasn't helping. After abandoning him in a field of oats, his scythe still in hand, I no longer allowed myself to be drawn into the seemingly romantic yet labor-intensive hobbies he planned for himself. It didn't much matter to me if he grew our food or if I plucked it out of refrigerated cases. We both had day jobs, after all. I was just happy to be out of the suburbs.

I left him in his Sunday funk, while I took the tent and the dogs and the *Chicago Times* and went through the back pasture and the swampy forest to the river to enjoy the day, the farm stuff having always been his thing, as I kept pointing out. I wouldn't have minded his joining me, but he didn't. So, when he told me that all he needed to make the farm thing work was another poop producer, and I was the one to give birth to it, I balked.

After moving to Marquette on the shore of Lake Superior, I expected him to find a young local girl who would have the babies he felt were missing. I thought that had been his dream. I thought that by leaving him after the fulfillment of his dream, I could live mine without feeling too guilty. But I was wrong.

"You're going where?" I asked him.

"Back down to Detroit."

"But why? I thought you hated it down there!"

"I can't explain."

So he left the farm, and I moved back to the scene of the crime. But I did not worry about using the land and trees. I did not think about winches and four-wheel-drive vehicles. I did not have a John Deere tractor riding the back of my budget. I was even relieved when the chainsaw disappeared. Since I held myself to no manly standards of self-sufficiency, I could order wood. As a woman, I had no intention of taming or building, and I had no plan-spawning husband designating resources that were quickly dwindling.

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I finally dragged myself off the couch, made some coffee, and went out to the enclosed porch where I'd tacked yards of a glossy gold damask curtain over the old siding a la *Green Acres.* Directly in front of the house was a small yard with a wild rose bush, whose petals I'd dried to make into potpourri sachets. Beyond that were fifteen apples

trees, whose wormy fruit had nourised insects and microbes. Around the base of these trunks, wild grasses had sprung up.

What was a lawn really, but a huge expanse of short, useless grass? We didn't eat our lawns. They didn't provide grazing for livestock, unless you had free-range poultry, at which point you no longer had a lawn—you had a barnyard. Safe behind the thermo-panes, lawns just didn't make sense. But then I forced myself outside. The grass whipped my bare legs. I stopped, gazing back, and lawns suddenly made sense.

In the country, lawns provided a much-needed barrier between human habitation and perceived chaos. If I didn't have a lawn, the meadow would march right up and knock on the front door. "You know this house isn't going to stand around forever. Why put off the inevitable? Just let me get my job done."

And I saw a vision of the house reduced to a rotting roof, grass spiking through the soft boards. Maybe we cut grass, taming it into unnatural squares and rectangles to show it who's boss—a vain attempt to forget not only the mortality of our wooden structures, but our own.

The caffeine was coursing through my veins at this point, and I was going to be damned if that grass was going to get the better of me! I had a machine, a weapon!

I pulled the cord on my mower with a vicious urgency, spurring it to an angry hum. As I started to cut my way to boundary security, I didn't stop to admire the daisies and the little blue and orange flowers that got chopped up and spit out with all the rest of the useless vegetation. I didn't savor the green scent. I didn't have time.

The world of nature was a complex web. There were forces against my taming a plot of grass, and I hadn't realized these forces would fight to the death for their cause. They rose in clouds, piercing my fleshy armor, unleasing the full force of their chemical arsenal. I felt a perverse thrill in baring my sweaty, tasty flesh to their thrusting stingers. I continued to propel my mower while splatting their angry bodies to mine like the heads of victims stuck on poles. Let all comers beware!

Their fury only incited me to greater ambition. Whereas before I had planned a contained conflict, now I pushed my mower ever outward. I would control more grass, make more lawn. It would all be mine!

I finally ran out of gas before I ran out of grass, and I had to stop and take a break. My enemies ceased when the wind kicked up, and I surveyed the rising welts on my arms, legs and neck, and looked around with a sinking feeling. No more free time for me. I'd be spending my weekends mowing my damned empire. Maybe next time I decided to cut my lawn out of the meadow, I wouldn't drink so much coffee.

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One night after work I went to what looked like a party. People in nice clothes stood around drinking something with alcohol in it and eating something with calories in it. Only there weren't any men.

I noticed a couple of gals from my singles' volleyball group. We played in the rec-room of the Redeemer Lutheran Church in Marquette. Once in a while a few men showed up to play with us. They were the ones who spiked the ball, the ones who played to win, but we didn't mind. It was our only chance to get sweaty in front of the opposite sex.

Then some woman wheeled in a clothing rack with a blanket draped over it. She

gave a little clap. "Ladies, can I have your attention? Please take your seats so we can begin."

I was thinking about how to pick up a cracker without the whipped cheese toppling over.

"We need everyone's participation!"

I left the table and tried to wedge in between two women on the couch.

"Now, please answer the following questions. How many of you took a bubble bath by candlelight while sipping champagne with the man of your choice last week?"

I didn't have a very good feeling about this test.

"How many of you have had your lover trace a path the full length of your naked body with a feather? When was the last time you had sex in a room other than your bedroom?"

I put my answer sheet down and went back to the food. I had a better chance of getting my needs met at that table, even if it did take me all night.

When she was finished, she had everyone introduce themselves and announce their scores. When she came to the empty space on the couch where I was supposed to be, I smiled from the table and waved, hoping she'd think I didn't understand English.

Then she threw the blanket off the clothing rack and held up a hanger with a skimpy panty and bra, and I noticed the charge forms. This wasn't a party, it was a sales pitch. And that ridiculous quiz was designed to make us feel insecure about our sexuality, so we could be seduced into consuming sexist pieces of polyester in order to help this lady pay for her kids' school lunches!

She passed the items around and all the women reached out like they were grabbing life preservers in a cold ocean. I wanted to yell at my fellow sisters-in-oppression, "Don't spend your meager salaries to fuel male fantasies! Women have little enough economic power as it is!" But my mouth was full, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Then she held up a pink lace teddy, and I almost dropped my cracker. All my fantasies of being beautiful and graceful and perfect came to life. "If you wear this," whispered a little voice in my head, "He Will Come!"

So I started looking for a charge form. I didn't care if I needed to buy another two face cords of wood, but as I walked past the window in search of my purse, a ribbon of cold air wrapped itself around me. If I didn't use that money for wood, my lips would turn blue and my teeth would start to chatter, and who would get turned on by a spasmodic Bride of Frankenstein? So I went back to the table and picked up another canapé.

As it turned out, the only women who bought lacy teddies happened to come from two-income homes. The rest of us would be wearing our sweat pants in the rec-room of the Redeemer Lutheran Church.

And as I drove home, I didn't know which bothered me more—that I didn't have a man to objectify my body for, or that I didn't have the money anyway, or that somehow the two seemed to go together.

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Tyoga, off M-28 between Marquette and Munising, did not used to be a *regular*

town, a bustling center of commerce, trade or shipping, logically situated in a harbor or along a major thoroughfare. It was started as a business endeavor for a logging company that hired a bunch of people who'd leave wherever they happened to be. These people slept in the company bunk house, ate in the company mess hall, bought provisions from the company store, and danced in the company schoolhouse on Saturday nights.

And then, when the company had a couple of quarter losses, they sold the equipment and left. Voila! Instant ghost town. That was Tyoga. No rusty saw blades in sight, only a grassy, forest-reclaimed place on a slow-moving river. There might still be a few foundations, but those were covered over with grass.

Photos on pedestal signs showed what once was. You looked at the landscape, then back at the photo, then back at the landscape and said, "Oh, there used to be a sawmill in that bend in the river." You could read about Game Warden Eddy who had caught the careless capitalists dumping their sawdust into the river instead of burning it. As you walked through the forest following the painted blue dots on trees and swatting mosquitoes, you could read that the loggers hardly slept from all the bedbug bites. The schoolhouse shook every Saturday from the stomping of dancing feet, and the men were "filled to the brim with the zest for living."

At Tyoga, you could not hear the rhythmic chewing of the misery whip (two-man cross-cut saw) or see the people who lived and died during the two years this site was inhabited, but you could read and therefore think about them. If the farm I lived on met the same fate, the roof collapsing and the grass and bushes and trees growing over abandoned dreams, who would think about us?

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When I went into the forest, I tried to learn something—Mother Nature the great teacher and all that. As I followed the trail through my back forty, I noticed where game trails veered towards my neighbor's property and saw these as metaphors for being led astray in other areas of my life--romantic fantasies and escapist endeavors. But on the day my divorce was final, I learned a new lesson in the forest.

Sitting on a log at the Chocolay River, my daze was broken not by the decreasing light and increasing cold. I did not realize my predicament until my dogs came over and knocked me off the log. I had stayed too long in the forest. The light was too dim to easily see the pieces of orange plastic tape tied to tree limbs to mark the trial my ex-husband and I had hacked out of this forest nineteen months before. I did not have my flashlight with me.

Right then I should have followed the river out to U.S. 41, but no . . . that would have been too sensible, so I decided to forge through the forest on my own. I would figure it out. I would find my way home because I was in tune with the forces of Nature. There was a moon somewhere in that cloudy sky, and She was guiding me. It had something to do with tides and menstrual cycles. Only, I couldn't recognize anything about this forest—this playground of mine. There were huge dead maples whose funerals I hadn't been invited to. And it was getting colder.

My menstrual magic didn't work. I forced myself to backtrack to where I'd gone astray, which was something I hated to do. That was admitting failure. I would have preferred to just forge ahead through life, not paying attention to where I was going, just

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dreamin' and movin,' dreamin' and movin'—like driving south on the Hollywood Freeway at midnight, the air warm and thick, and even though it was late, a million lights burned. Ahead, red taillights converged, sliding up the hill like a reverse surge of lava by Mulholland Drive. When I crested the hill, the ocean breeze whipped through my car, chasing away the warm smog. And if I felt like it, I could drive all night 'til I hit Mexico.

But I wasn't in Southern California. I was in a forest in the U.P., and it was cold, and it was dark, and I was very lost. And even though I had backtracked to my trail, I got lost again.

Okay, my womb didn't help me, backtracking didn't help me, but I could still figure this out. I decided that if I kept the sound of traffic from U.S. 41 to my right, that would keep me on a southerly course. I would eventually hit my road.

Only the sounds of traffic became dim. Was I keeping traffic to my right side or to my right front or to my right back? And why were there so few cars? Had it gotten so late that traffic had died down that drastically?

Then I crashed through the top crust of ice and submerged my right boot. Not a good sign. I was not only lost, but my foot was immersed in icy water. Now it seemed a matter of some importance to get unlost relatively quickly before major tissue damage set in.

I crashed around some more, trying to get back to dry land, plunging my other foot through the ice. What the hell? I was never going to be a ballerina at this stage.

It was very dark by now. I plunged into the forest, shielding my face from the onslaught of attacking branches, alternately swearing and whimpering.

I was really lost.

Finally, I stopped trying to figure out how to get out of the forest. I stopped trying to be clever. God, I have no idea where I am, or how to get out of here, so please help me.

In the distance I heard a car, and I figured it was a sign, and this time I wasn't going to blow it. I didn't just go rushing through the woods, assuming that I could figure out the exact direction I needed from the sound of one little car. I took a few steps toward the sound and then stopped and waited for the next car. When I heard that one, I took a few steps toward that sound, and so on.

It drove me nuts! This was harder for me than backtracking. I was Aries, the Ram. I waited for no one. But I wouldn't have much waiting to do, period, if I froze to death a mile from my back door.

I finally came to a clearing. There were no buildings, no tangible artifacts of human civilization, only the canary reed grass of untended pasture, but I knew this way led to civilization. All I hoped for was a rusted car body or a couple of oil drums—good old human trash.

Then I saw a headlight. Hallelujah! I threw aside my deliberation and scrambled through some alder trees, and I came across a camouflaged jeep. Then I saw a house.

My dogs and I snuck by. We didn't get shot for trespassing and made it safely to the road, which meant that the infrequent traffic noises I'd been hearing, the ones I was trying to keep to my right, were not coming from U.S. 41. I hadn't been heading south. I'd been heading east, deeper and deeper into the Escanaba River State Forest.

The next day at work I tried to tell a grandfatherly co-worker my charming story, but his face darkened. He was not amused. He left the office shortly afterwards and came back with a glow-in-the-dark compass I was to pin to my jacket. And I was touched.

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When God slaps me around, it was nice when She softened the blow.

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When I started seeing Christmas trees strapped to car roofs like so many verdant carcasses, my first liberal impulse was to mourn the senseless herbage. Then when I saw the bushy green trees sprawled at a roadside store, their limbs mutilated into unnatural symmetry, I wanted to get angry. But it was too easy to flare up in self-righteous anger (hypocritical, too, since I'd opened my own back forty up as a private Christmas tree farm, and I was feeling guilty about not having nicely-shaped trees). So what was I really angry at? Then it hit me. It was that damned Holiday Joy, and this year it promised to get ugly.

Maybe the best way to avoid the burden of Holiday Joy would be to just pretend it wasn't Christmas—experience a sort of holiday schizophrenia. I'd drive through town on my way to work and see the lights; I'd hear the Christmas music on the radio; I'd hear my co-workers talk about their holiday plans; and then I would retreat to my undecorated house and go about my domestic business as though this were any other winter month with snow to shovel, wood to burn, and bread to bake.

But the other day I came across a box of stuff, and I realized that in the year-and-a-half my husband and I had lived in the U.P., we hadn't put up a Christmas tree together. Our first Christmas, I had rationalized away my miserliness by pointing out that it was too much hassle. We'd just moved into a rental house, my husband was starting a new joy, and wasn't it such a materialistic, sentimental holiday to begin with? Our second year, we went downstate and stayed with his family, and they had so much damned Holiday Joy, it made up for the previous year.

My liberal guilt raised a plaintive whine: How could I even consider taking the innocent life of a happy spruce tree only to deck it's decaying body for my visual pleasure?

Then I thought of the people in the single's support group. They would say, "Go for it! Deck the halls!" You see, single people were supposed to indulge themselves—within moderation. If we indulged ourselves, we wouldn't look to outside sources for fulfillment. We wouldn't latch onto the first eligible mate.

But putting up a Christmas tree wasn't just an indulgence. It was an act of participation. It was one thing to talk my husband into not having Christmas. That way I at least had some support for being unconventional, but being alone and not participating was like being at a party and sulking in the corner. So I drove to Shopko to get a tree stand.

When I returned home, I hiked to my back forty and picked out a scraggly spruce, hacked at its trunk and dragged it back to the house. I strung the lights and hung the bulbs, grabbed my glass of wine and proceeded to do what I'd done to countless Christmas trees throughout my life—stare at it. And I liked the fact that all over the county, all over the country, and in many parts of the world, other people were staring at their Christmas trees. I was sure those people had their own obstacles to Holiday Joy, but for that moment, we could simply enjoy how pretty those lights were.

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The farm was on the market for a little over two months when I started to worry that no one else would ever be as idealistic about this ramshackle collection of buildings on 77 acres as my husband had been.

We had come from a county in Southern California where families living in over-priced stucco boxes exactly like their neighbors aspired to live in 'bridal ranch' houses. The difference was that these bridal ranch homes were in the "country." Lest one not realize the radical departure from suburbia these newer homes represented, some clever architect had made all these homes look like barns. They had to do something like this. They couldn't leave the surrounding land undeveloped.

Each barn had a two-car attached garage and a fenced-off acre featuring a three-walled structure with a flat roof that looked like a carport. This was where the family put their horse. Running parallel to the concrete sidewalk was a sandy trial, and like any well-run civic project, a service was provided to whisk away the untidy, smelly bits extruded from the family pet.

I didn't blame them. If I'd spent a quarter of a million dollars on a building designed to hold hay, I'd want to protect my investment, too.

So when my husband and I came to the U.P., we found that we could not only buy a house that actually *looked* like a house on acres and acres of land, but we could pay cash for it and not be indebted to a lending institution for the rest of our lives.

I got a kick out of all the farm trash accumulated in the outbuildings—a chipped blue-and-white porcelain crock, an old refrigerator, and a wooden chair missing a spindle or two—nothing a little glue and paint couldn't fix up. I stored my yarn in the old GE icebox, turned the chipped side of the flour crock to the wall and tried to remember not to sit in that chair. Instead, it came in handy to catch my hat and mittens as I threw them across the room.

I wandered out to the back forty to pick wild blueberries. As my feet trod the spongy sphagnum moss, I peered through the morning mist and breathed in that moist mix of decay and life. I'd never realized before how starved my olfactory senses were. The predominant odors I remembered from drought-ravaged California were car exhaust and pool chlorine. But here I could smell the sharp exhilaration of pine and rancid sourness of swamp. And once in a while, the smack of skunk.

And it was great to be in a place that marked the seasons a little more dramatically than by an angle of light. There was just something about a winter forest pierced by the staccato of a chick-a-dee-dee-dee, or the breathless gush of water beneath a sheath of ice, or the explosion of color in a snowy crystal prism, showing me that reality could be so much more dazzling than the opiate of dreams.

And then it was time for me to finish what had been started, to get rid of the frozen chicken carcasses, to find a home for the geese, to paint that third bedroom, and to find someone to buy this place. I needed someone who was prepared to waterproof the basement, pull down the staggering outbuildings, and sand the scarred hardwood floor in the living room. This place had never needed the idealism of two suburbanites. It had needed hard work.

So, on second thought, I was glad I did not find someone idealistic. My realtor found a U.P. realist, a young fellow who knew what he was doing. He would whip this place into shape. It would take him years to do it, but once he had gotten it the way he

wanted it, it would be ready for a family, and that was the way it should be.

Since giving up the farm, Erin Anderson has lived and worked in Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Siberia. The U.P., however, remains the only place she likes to live when she is in the United States.