

A5U5PAUL'S 30- YEAR MILESTONE MAINE, JULY 2001

Wednesday, July 18

After many years of wanting to visit the northernmost tip of the United States, I finally had my chance. With buddy pass in hand I headed to JAX. I arrived Wednesday evening to take a two-legged flight to Portland, Maine. Lots of seats according to the Delta Web site; a free and clear trip to John Irving-land.

When I arrived at the gate it was a mob scene. Turns out, there was a mechanical to ATL two flights ahead of me. There were more than 70 passengers held over. Oh man ... this doesn't look good.

As the standbys cleared I joined the crowd near the gate agents. The flight door soon closed. It was over. I took my sad little face home and debated over trying to go the next morning. The flights the next day were pretty booked. That's why I'd decided to go Wednesday night.

The thing is, my bag had gone without me. When I got home I called the car rental place, I called the baggage office in Portland. The guy there was so helpful. He knew I might have problems — they'd rerouted me through Cincinnati (CVG) — but he said I had a slim chance. There were four seats on that flight.

Paul and I went back and forth. His sister, my other cousin, had had an emergency c-section that day. Her baby was born at 31 weeks. He was on a respirator and they weren't sure how it was going to go. I thought that was a sign that maybe I should just stay home. But Paul finally said he thought I should try to come. The worst that would happen is I'd get a first-class trip to CVG and back. I'd be home before dinner, one vacation day and one buddy pass burned.

It was Paul's 30th birthday. We've always been close. I decided to go for it.

Thursday, July 19

I arrive at the airport in JAX once again. I get a first-class seat to CVG. I arrive and begin the nail biting until the Portland flight begins to clear. I'm ON! They called me! I happily traipse to my last-row seat (behind a gaggle of 12-year-old girls on their way to summer camp) and open up my novel. I was reading the third Harry Potter novel, "The Prisoner of Azkaban." The older military woman sitting next to me wanted to discuss the series. It really is a cultural phenomenon.

I arrive in Portland around noon. Yay! I'm so excited. I head right downstairs to get my rental car. I'm planning a day on the road since Paul has to work until 4 p.m. As I'm standing in line I suddenly realize that I don't have my driver's license. This can't be

right. I keep digging through my purse, my bag, my pockets. It isn't there. I call my mom, she hasn't seen it. We find out later that it had fallen out of my purse in my room. She faxed me a copy the next day. But I still couldn't get a car.

So Paul comes down and picks me up (everything in Portland is within 10 minutes' drive). He takes me to his place and drops me off. It's a beautiful day so I have some time to walk around the neighborhood. I go to a great pizza place down the street and have a small pie. It was incredible. Like everywhere in the northeast, there are lots of good Italian places. I was in there with a local cop and the owner, who's been eating a pizza a day for 47 years. She can also talk your ear off. It was fun. Definitely some local color. Her twin sister owns a pizza place in town as well. Their dough is in competition.

I walk back home past the little barber shop that offers \$4 haircuts. Two old men have been peering in the window each time I pass by. They're waiting for the owner to return from a particularly long lunch I guess. Just can't beat that price anywhere I guess.

When Paul gets home we go to The Great Lost Bear for dinner. I had a delicious salad and some signature buffalo wing chicken fingers. The place has tons of atmosphere and lots of locals. Then we head to the Maine Roasters Coffee House for an Italian soda and coffee. After that it's to the Old Port where we visit \$3 Deweys for a drink. It's a great little pub. Paul gets a beer and I try to order a Number Blue, but they don't have the blue. So I get a Stoli Razzberry, Sprite and a lime. The bartender gives me a funny look but he makes a good one. Paul decides it tastes like the clear-colored gummi bears. He's right, so from now on I guess it's a Gummi Bear.

Then we went downstairs at Molly's to the Mojo Lounge. It's a cute place with a cute bartender who made me an excellent Number Blue. On the way home we stop for Hood ice cream, I bought a half-gallon of chocolate. Hood is one of the local dairies up there. The ice cream is light and yummy. I have it for breakfast the next morning too.

Friday, July 20 — Paul's 30th birthday

Paul has to work until 1 p.m. so I take a cab to the Old Port to do some shopping. I got some great stuff. About 11 a.m. I'm a little hungry so I stop into Mister Bagel and end up having the best rice krispie treat I've ever tasted.

Paul arrives after work and we go to Boone's Restaurant. It's been there for like 50 years. It's a dive with some of the best seafood around. Though neither of us really eat seafood, I must have a lobster roll while I'm in Maine. I order. It really is good. We're joined by a hardy, black dock cat. He's friendly and not remotely skinny, but he's missing half an ear and you can tell he's been living on a fishing dock for his entire life. He ate a lot of my lobster. And plenty of other treats from the other tables.

After lunch we drove down to Kennebunkport. Yes, Bush country. Did some shopping, took some photos. We walked through town a little. Then we headed back north to Old Orchard Beach. I'd heard and read about this tourist trap. It was a cute little boardwalk

town. We went to the beach and Paul went swimming in that freezing water. I returned to Harry Potter and watched the “locals” who were notably sub-par on the attractiveness scale. But it wasn’t stuffy like Kennebunk. It was full of French though. I barely heard anyone speaking English. Turns out there are lots of French all over Maine.

Once we were dry we spent some time riding the boardwalk rides. The Super Star was the first, lots of fun. Then we regressed and rode the swings. It was a good view of the amusement park.

We ran home and cleaned up for Paul’s birthday dinner. He wanted to go to Margarita’s for some Mexican food. While I was waiting for Paul to get ready I met one of his neighbors, an older guy named Markku. He was from Finland. He invited us upstairs for a wine party. But I declined explaining we were going to Margarita’s to celebrate. Oh well, he was an interesting character. And now I know that people from Finland are called “Fins.” I always wondered and was proud of myself for remember to ask.

Upon arrival I was impressed with Paul’s dinner choice. The décor was nice, the servers were young and fun. I had a tequila-lime steak and Paul feasted on a plate of enchiladas. Afterward, we headed down to the bar where I had a Lime in the Coconut margarita. Meisha had raved about coconut margaritas. It was OK, but a little sweet. I also had to talk my way out of not being carded. Fortunately it was the only time it was an issue. Wait, should that be unfortunately? Whatever.

Next, we crossed back over the border and went to a place called The Ale House. This was a basement bar that had wooden swings all around. I sat in one with leopard-skin covering. I was swinging back and forth in front of the bar, trying not to smash into all the cute guys around. We saw a reggae band called Mystic Vibes. They were great. Who knew you could get great reggae in Maine? There are very few people of color at all up there. Remember, it’s mostly French. But I struck up a conversation with the band’s dread-locked singer and he later wished Paul a happy birthday. Paul ended up meeting a girl named Susan toward the end of the night (clubs close at 1 a.m. in Maine) and he got her number. Good birthday present. I also gave him a coffee mug that read “Still tempting and thrilling at 30.” Gotta have a cheesy milestone gift for a day like that. But a girl’s phone number is nice too.

Afterward, we went straight home and crashed, knowing we had a long day ahead of us.

Saturday, July 20

Paul and I arose early and went down to the Miss Portland Diner for breakfast. This place has been there for ages. It’s a little old trolley car and there’s lots of 70s tile inside. It’s where they filmed many scenes from “Man Without a Face” so many of the locals call it Mel Gibson’s Diner. Apparently he still eats there when he’s in town. I had a fabulous omelet with bacon and cheese and some of their famous pancakes.

Then we hopped in the truck and got on the road. We took the coastal drive, Route 1, and headed north. We stopped on the way in Thomaston and visited the Maine State Prison Showroom where you can buy woodworks and such made by prisoners. It was a great shop. I got in trouble for taking a picture of Paul making a purchase from a guard in uniform. There are some prisoners working in the shop and many items are patented by prisoners. Since I only “shot” Paul he didn’t get too upset or anything, but I did put my camera away. I’m sure he could be a tough guy when necessary.

We also stopped in Bath and I photographed the Bath Iron Works. We drove through Freeport, Buckland, Camden, past Friendship — where my dad’s boat the Friendship Sloop is made — and lots of other little coastal towns you’ve heard of. But we were on our way to something really cool — Acadia.

We arrived at Acadia National Park (the only national park in Maine) around 3 p.m. We headed straight for Sand Beach. This is a pink sand beach at the foot of Cadillac Mountain. It’s lovely to see the mountain backdrop and the blue horizon of the ocean. The sand wasn’t what I would call “pink” though. We spent a few hours lounging around, swimming and walking on the rocks. It was once again a perfect day (there was no rain while I was there). I read Harry Potter and Paul had packed us a picnic. It was so lovely.

After a few hours we drove through the rest of the park. Up the mountain, down the mountain, past Jordan Pond. We got to see a lot of glacial rock formations. It was so neat. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a glacial landscape for real. It was different than the monolith rocks in the Pacific Northwest. I loved it.

After we left the park we drove into Bar Harbor and oh my god! I don’t think we wanted to leave. That place is happening. There was a female bagpiper down by the water, people walking everywhere, gorgeous bed and breakfasts on every corner, cute little cottages for rent. The park by the water and the restaurants and cafes and shops were so cool. It didn’t feel touristy even though it was a resort town.

We stopped into Geddy’s Pub for dinner around 7 p.m. This place was abuzz with people eating, drinking, singing. It was too much. I had crabcakes with a wild, spicy ginger sauce. I also had some New England clam chowder that was absolutely to die for. OK, so I’d nearly completed my food tour. ☺ This because it wasn’t until the next day that we stopped for a Gifford’s cone. This is the most popular Maine-made ice cream. I had chocolate again. Good stuff. More thick and pudding-like than Hood’s. But good.

Oh, I also had something that all Mainers seem to ingest, but no one else on the planet can stand it. Paul bought it for me and we took pictures of the experience. Yes, I had a Moxie. Moxie is a soda that imparts a flavor beyond description. It’s a little root beer and a little cough medicine. It’s not as bad as I expected from all I heard. In fact, between us Paul and I nearly finished an entire bottle.

But I digress. After Bar Harbor, Paul and I got back in the truck and headed to Bangor to meet the interstate. I wanted to see Stephen King’s house with the bat-ridden wrought

iron gate, but it was too late, too dark and we were way too tired. So we stared for Waterville. Waterville is where my aunt and uncle have their camp. “Camp” to us southerners means something along the lines of a tent and mosquitoes. But camp in New England means summer house.

When we arrived it was nearly midnight and Ronda was waiting up for us. Ronda has a definite gift for decorating and she had turned this former boys’ cottage into a gorgeous summer homestead complete with cedar paneling, three fully-appointed bedrooms and lots of little details from built-in bookshelves to a hammock outside. It was so pretty I never wanted to leave. That was the best night’s sleep too.

In the morning Paul and I got up and went kayaking. This was exhausting. I’d never done it before. I also had trouble because of my shoulder so I found it easiest to paddle backwards. Paul said that was a first. Oh well, let the other “campers” laugh. I went a lot further that way! Oh, and we saw an actual beaver house in the cove closest to the camp. It reminded me of a Hobbit hole. I’m such a geek.

After we cleaned up we drove to Lewiston to see my cousin Renee and her husband Rich. By now the baby was off the respirator and breathing on his own. For a two-and-a-half pounder he was thriving very well. This was good news. Renee seemed OK, she even walked me through the house the crazy person. Guess the painkillers were strong.

I finally got to see her first child Megan. Megan turned two that same week. Ironically, it turned out she and her new brother had the same exact birthday and only eight minutes apart. Isn’t that a strange coincidence? Megan was leery of me at first, isn’t everyone, but she warmed up after a while. Renee and Rich’s house is so cool. It was huge! They weren’t quite ready for the new baby given his early arrival, but he won’t be home for some weeks yet. Rich has taken a month off from the ER to stay home and visit the baby a lot. They were both handling it really well.

After we left their place, they had to go to the hospital, Paul and I drove through South Portland and down to Cape Elizabeth and the lighthouses. My mom spent summers in Cape Elizabeth as a child. We took photos and walked around the Portland Head Light for a while. It was yet another perfect day.

By that time it was nearly the dinner hour so we went to Esposito’s. This was a small family place recommended by the great-nephew of the owner. The kid neglected to mention that his father was the mayor of Portland. While we were there we were talking about getting a knish. The deli we wanted was closed, but a man at another table heard us and recommended the Full Belly Deli. Unfortunately, they turned out to also be closed. So we had our fill of lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs and had to settle for more boys in the Hood chocolate ice cream. The knish was the only thing I didn’t get to try, but perhaps next summer. Esposito’s was good though. A spicier sauce, but definitely good Italian homemade stuff.

We decided to rent a movie and chill out since we had to get up early and we were already beat. We got “Annie Hall” and then watched Paul’s copy of “Ghost Story” along with a documentary about the making of “Jaws 2.” Our only movie night all weekend.

Paul was also pouring a mold for an alien head. He hadn’t made enough foam the first time. It was cool to watch him work. When he’d made some dead bodies for Netherworld last year, the photo shop had called the cops. Their forensic pathologist had confirmed that the photos were real. See, Paul’s very good at what he does. When they showed up at his door in the middle of the night he had to walk them through his workshop and what he did for a living. Everything from cosmetic prosthetics to museum pieces. Everyone had a good chuckle over that one. Now he warns the photo shop, and he always goes to the same place.

The last night was the warmest there. The other nights, though warm to the locals, had me putting on a light jacket and usually jeans. They must’ve thought I was nuts. But once they heard I was from Florida all was forgiven.

By 11 p.m. I could barely keep my eyes open. I was sad that my trip was nearly over, but we’d done so much I surely couldn’t complain either. I saw a heckuva lot of Maine! And then ... snooze.

Monday, July 23

I got up early to make the first Delta flight. I had little trouble getting home, just a short delay in Portland. I finished Harry Potter on the plane while I traveled. I arrived back in JAX by 3 p.m. and got my car. Yes, I drove without a license. So arrest me.

Anyway, all was well and I had plenty of time to reflect upon my first journey into John Irving-land. But the real test of my retirement plans still required that one more hurdle be cleared — a single, long New England winter. Maybe some other time ...