

**Things That Start to Seem "Normal" When You've Lived Here Long Enough**

When you've lived here long enough it seems normal that ...

You go to a party at a friend's house ... you travel by motorboat across the channel to the house, which is a cabin on Pennock Island. And those who drink wine are asked to stay the night because friends do not let their friends drive drunk ... especially on the water.

Your husband calls to say he'll be late for dinner ... he calls by radio, because he's a helicopter pilot and got weathered in on a beach. So he'll be delayed until morning. You try not to worry because you know he's got survival gear. Besides, in his line of work, this is normal.

Your best friend is having a baby in two weeks ... but she needs to say with you in Ketchikan because her cabin on an island is hours from medical care and Ketchikan General Hospital is the only facility for hundreds of miles.

You go to a party and meet some "interesting people" .... In one room there's a doctor who scuba dives, a lawyer who writes music, a marine biologist who just kayaked up the Pacific coast, a mother raising 11 kids on her houseboat, a person who does odd jobs for a living, a woman who just returned from studying geese in the Arctic, a librarian who just got back from climbing Mount McKinley, a former forester who's raising twins at home, a visitor from Australia who just sailed around the world, and an Alaska man who's preparing to leave for Tibet next week.

The weather report says rain today ... and it rained yesterday, and the day before that and the day before that. In fact, if it's October, it could have rained non-stop, 24 hours a day, for 25 days or more. You squelch your disgust with an affirmation. You want to live in a rain forest? It always RAINS in a rain forest.

You have a friend who lost her home in a fire ... and

within 24 hours she has clothes for the kids, bedding, food for a month, and a dozen volunteers who will help rebuild the house.

There's no symphony orchestra in Ketchikan ... so a floatplane pilot who's also a composer, starts one.

There's nowhere to go for espresso and conversation ... so a retired state employment worker refurbishes a historical landmark that used to be a brothel. Now you can get cappuccino AND vegetarian food without leaving town.

Several friends are non-stop tinkerers. They build cabins. They restore boats. Their cars have run for 100,000 miles. You look at all those tires and generators, bumpers and wood scraps, wiring and widgets in their front yards ... and realize that's NOT litter. Those things are spare parts.

You have several friends who lock their front door but not their back door .... The front lock prevents random criminal entry ... but the back stays open in case a friend needs to borrow a hammer, or feed your cat, or water the plants.

You save all year to afford to get off the island and go somewhere else .... Then you can't wait to get back to Alaska.

You go to cultural events and it's okay to let your kids wander through the auditorium. You know they will be safely returned. They just need to visit with a few dozen people.

You don't have a bookcase ... so a friend helps you build one. He's never built one either. But he knows where to borrow some tools ... and in Alaska people are used to figuring things out.

You go out for an evening with your married friends ... but no one has a partner, because one spouse is on a fishing boat for four months, one is at a logging camp for three, one is south fighting forest fires, another is cooking on a tugboat all summer, and the last one is on an archaeological dig.

You hear about a floatplane crash on the news ... the families have not been informed yet so the names are not announced ... but already you're sobbing with grief because you know that you'll know the victims.

A native Alaskan friend invites you to lunch after a

subsistence harvest ... and the menu includes sea cucumber chowder, fried ooligan fish, sauteed fiddlehead ferns, licorice root tea and seaweed roll-ups.

A bunch of educators gather around to compare notes about summer vacation .... One climbed Machu Pichu in South America, one spent time with reindeer in Lapland, one trekked in the Himalayas of Nepal, one completed the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada, and one crewed on an all-woman sailing adventure.

You volunteer to cook Thanksgiving dinner ... because you have a gas stove, and when the wind blows 60 miles an hour, and knocks out the power, yours will be the only turkey that's cooked.

You go for dinner to a place with a view ... and while you're waiting for the baked salmon to arrive you look out the window and count three cruise ships, one helicopter, two floatplanes, five sailing vessels, a tugboat, a jet airplane, a dozen motorboats, two kayaks, a log barge, an Asian freighter, a yacht, three fishing boats and a jet skier.

It's winter solstice and you're ice-skating ... not at a rink, but on a frozen lake at midnight in the middle of old growth forest ... and the Northern Lights have begun dashing around in a dance of green and red ... and you and your spouse are the only ones at the lake.

You realize that four of your friends are widows ... three of them before the age of 30 ... all of them because of boating, aviation, fishing and hunting accidents. You also realize that no one here has lost anyone to drive-by shootings ... but everyone has lost someone to a boat sinking, plane crash or the natural elements.

You get a knock at your door from a stranger and you cautiously ask who it is. "Well, you don't know me, but I'm the son of John Smith from Anchorage, and I'm working on the fishing vessel Aurora, and my skipper used to go sailing with your friend Tom, who moved from Kodiak to Juneau, and Tom's ex-wife is now teaching in Ketchikan, and she said you had a place near the harbor, so do you think maybe I could use your shower



## RANDI SULKIN

---

facilities?" And, since you met John Smith's brother the last time you were in Fairbanks, and you met Tom at the Alaska Folk Festival in Juneau, you let this person in to take a shower. The next day he returns, smiling a big thank-you and carrying two fresh king salmon for your freezer.

You realize that many of your kitchen utensils are not really yours .... The giant Tupperware was left by Mary when she brought the oatmeal cookies to your potluck. The pie plate is from Carolyn's Christmas dinner, when she insisted you take home the leftovers. The spaghetti pot is the one you borrowed when you served Italian dinner for 20 people in a house that holds only 10. But that's okay ... since Mary has the audio tapes of your favorite dulcimer player, Carolyn has the Alaskan video that she borrowed from you, and whoever belongs to the spaghetti pot will reclaim it at the next Italian potluck.

You interrupt a discussion in your kitchen because three bald eagles just skimmed your rooftop and swooped down the hillside. That same spring day you see hummingbirds en route northward, and on a hike that weekend you spot a black bear and two cubs.

So you realize it's okay that there is no Smithsonian Institute in Ketchikan, and no Chicago Art Institute and no Minneapolis Guthrie Theater. It's okay that major performers only pass through here for a few events a year. We do have the occasional Oregon Shakespeare Theater or drummers from Senegal or Chinese acrobats .... The rest of the time we have to make our own music, and act in our own community theater, and dance in our own ballet, and cook our own gourmet cuisine, and create our own artistic projects .... And then it finally sinks in that Alaska is the land of participants rather than observers. People don't wait for a parade to watch. We ARE the parade ... even though in Ketchikan parades always get rained on.

You have friends who live on houseboats, friends who live in floathouses, friends who fly in floatplanes and friends who work in boathouses.

You live in a street that's not really a street because it's really a STAIRWAY with houses stacked vertically and no one can

park there because the street (which is really a stairway) goes straight uphill, but that's where your mailbox is, so that's the street name on your address.

You meet people who wear a zillion hats and you never know which hat she or he will wear next. Your doctor is a jazz musician, the mayor is a radio disc jockey, your pharmacist built her wooden boat, your minister is a puppeteer, and your child's school principal impersonates Elvis.

Your parents call from Florida and ask, after you've lived here 14 years, "So when are you coming home?" and you answer, thinking of a Cheyenne proverb that home is wherever the center of one's being resides, "I'll be down to visit next summer ... but I AM home already."