

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 91
Issue 3 *Summer 2002*

Article 10

July 2002

The Last Page: Her Head on Straight

Susan Sterling

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

Recommended Citation

Sterling, Susan (2002) "The Last Page: Her Head on Straight," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 91 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol91/iss3/10>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

her head on straight

By Susan Sterling

There used to be a restaurant in Waterville called “The Silent Woman.” Its sign depicted jolly men raising their glasses at a plank-like table. Behind them, carrying a serving tray, hovered a buxom woman with no head. The restaurant advertised in the back of *The New Yorker*. “Someday,” read the ad, “you will find yourself in Waterville, Maine.”

The text proved prescient. In 1974 I spent Christmas in Waterville with my boyfriend, who had been hired to teach music history at Colby. He picked me up in Boston and we drove north. As we crossed the Maine border, snow appeared in the fields and forests bordering the highway. The lights of towns were miles apart; even in the darkness I’d never seen so many trees.

Entering Waterville, we passed the restaurant with the offending sign. “I could never live in a town that allowed a restaurant like that!” I announced. But it was a principle that would lose out to love. The following summer we married. I considered staying in Berkeley another year to teach at the university. After seven years, I had put down roots on the West Coast, and Berkeley felt like home. But I desperately missed the man I loved, so I took my degree and left.

Most of the Waterville area’s employment then was provided by two paper mills and the Hathaway shirt factory on the Kennebec River. (Since then, one mill closed and the shirt factory has struggled to remain open.) Winter came early and lasted into April. Snowflakes fell in May.

I hadn’t planned to continue teaching, but we needed money, so I looked for an academic job. Eventually I found myself at Thomas College, a business college in Waterville. Until recently it had been a for-profit college, founded by the Thomas family in two rooms above Woolworth’s on Main Street. It was now on its third campus.

At Thomas I taught three sections of freshman composition to 60 students, each of whom I also saw weekly for a brief tutorial. Thomas students came mostly from Maine. Some believed that by attending a business college they would never have to write another essay. To get them motivated I asked them to write about their own experiences. I received essays on dairy farming, on preparing a horse to show at a county fair, on deer hunting (some of these surprisingly lyrical, evoking the silence of dawn in November, frost on the ground, watchful waiting with fathers and uncles). I learned about going home every



weekend to work in a pizza shop, about growing up right on the Canadian border, about potato farming in Aroostook County, where every fall (still) children are let out of school for two weeks to help with the harvest. The students’ way of looking at the world was practical; working with them I found myself anchored in Maine culture in a way that some of my friends at Colby were not.

The majority of my students were the first in their families to go on to higher education. Their fathers owned drug stores, gas stations, grocery stores; their mothers worked as seamstresses and clerks. Some families were involved in lumbering. A few students had grown up on welfare. Many were of Franco-American origin, and of these a few had grown up speaking French at home. They were studying to be marketers, managers, medical secretaries, accountants.

At graduation these families, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, filled the Thomas College gym. They gazed with pride as their sons and daughters filed to the stage to shake the hand of Mr. Thomas and receive their diplomas. There was nothing taken for granted about what their children had achieved. Sitting in the hot gym I found myself surprisingly moved.

A few years later, my family returned to Berkeley for a year. Our old friends were happy to have us back, but they weren’t particularly interested in our experiences in Maine. For them, it was as if we’d been banished from paradise. At dinner parties the others appeared to be getting all their news from the Berkeley radio station, KPFA. No one except us—this was 1982—could believe Ronald Reagan stood a chance of being reelected.

People wondered how we’d managed without the good cheese shop, the weekly concerts, the Pacific Film Archive. It’s true, we said, we did miss those things. But that sabbatical year we were missing the fields behind our Maine house, being able to cross-country ski out the back door, the sunsets behind the barn and the friendliness of our neighbors down the road.

Our friends listened with tolerant disbelief, and so after a while I stopped trying to explain what I knew: it’s not always a misfortune to leave paradise. Some things you can learn only by leaving.

Susan Sterling is a freelance writer who has taught writing at Colby.