

Neither Here Nor There

by Ben Schwartz '10

I take a swig of Moxie and look out at the valley. This is rural all right; not a big box retailer in sight. Just clusters of homes, farms, and church steeples. I take another sip of this odd love-child of root beer and bitters and screw the cap back on the orange-labeled bottle. A dapper, fifties-styled gentleman points at me from his perch above the beverage's logotype and I respond by lazily reaching into my pocket and pulling out a Sacagawea dollar coin. I've got dozens of them, and there's something intrinsically exciting about picking out a good and shiny one, setting it in your palm, and contemplating the fact that its value is equivalent to one good old American greenback. My brothers could care less; they've each got a pair of wireless headphones on and are watching an old B-movie horror flick through our Toyota Highlander's built-in DVD system. How they actually enjoy such films is beyond me. All I need to enjoy the ride is my bottle of Moxie-Cola, the unofficial beverage of northern New England, my lucky golden dollar coin, and my iPod, whose playlist is set on the music of The Guess Who and the Barenaked Ladies. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Regardless of the foreignness or familiarity of a different culture, I want to immerse myself in it to the fullest.

Northern New England is by no means an exotic jungle to me, of course. I've traveled through here countless times. But there is something different, some sort of crispness in the air which manifests itself once you leave the plains of Rhode Island behind and venture towards the ancient, rugged White and Green Mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont. I shuffle through "American Woman" and "If I Had a Million Dollars" on my iPod and notice that our Toyota is rumbling through Franconia Notch on Interstate 93. So I grasp my Canon Rebel and look through the viewfinder at Profile Rock. "Look," I nudge my elbow into my brother Jordan's stomach and point towards a rock outcropping. "Remember the Old Man of the Mountain?" "Where is it?" Jordan asks. I shift my outstretched index finger slightly to the right, pause a moment for effect, and answer, "That's where it was." We drive past, and I salute the fractured cliff ledge with the intonation "Rest in pieces, Old Man." Halfway up the Granite State, we're surely on our way to the Promised Land.

Over the river and into Vermont. The Green Mountains here pale in comparison to those of Franconia Notch. They're smooth, weathered, and rolling, and, true to their word, lushly covered in deciduous vegetation. Cows cluster on either side of the highway, mocking us by confirming every stereotype one could have about Vermont. It's almost too good to be true. Green rolling pastures? Black-and-white dairy cows? You mean Vermont is actually like that? That it is. And we're getting closer and closer, with every thousandth of a degree of latitude we travel northward. And we know we're nearly there when a nondescript sign by the road proudly proclaims that we've hit forty-five degrees north exactly-halfway between the Equator and the North Pole! If not for a nineteenth century cartographic error, we'd have already been there by now. Just a few more minutes to go. I count the seconds.

And there it is! Clogging up Interstate 91, just in the distance, is a jam of cars. Wow. We might as well be at the top of the world. It's as if being just over halfway to the top of the world is just as good. That it is.

Lisa, the car's driver and my mother (why replace a perfectly good name "Lisa" with the perfectly overused "Mom"?), deftly swerves into the right lane and takes exit twenty-nine. By this point, my brothers, Alex and Jordan, feel the excitement and have turned off the DVD player. Our car maneuvers up the exit ramp, up a windswept hill. Things are getting serious now, because right at the end of this exit ramp is a Duty Free Americas location, a standalone shop, no vegetation near it save grass. This is No Man's Land, for sure. Lisa turns left onto a road which carries us to an overpass above Interstate 91. We look out at the hundreds of cars in line, the traffic we had just avoided, and note the huge, imposing, white-brick building straddling the highway. We note the word *canada* emblazoned on one of its exterior walls, and we note the Canadian Maple Leaf flag fluttering not a football field's length away from us. But we're not driving towards the border.

We're driving west, *along* the border, over the overpass and past rough-hewn farmhouses sitting on large plots on either side of the road. As our car motors along, I catch a distinct, ephemeral flash of yellow-tinted light. That's it. It's a yellow-brick building. We get closer, and I see the yellow bricks sparkle in the sunlight. It's a beautiful summer's day. Now the whole building is in view; we see its granite foundation and granite-topped tower, its windows, and its grassy backyard. We notice a house adjacent to this yellow-brick building with a swing-set assembled on its side of a large grassy field. Do the kids who play on the swings realize the significance of this location? My goodness, this grassy field, surrounded on all sides by homes, yellow-brick buildings, swing-sets, and two-lane country roads, is officially bisected by the United States-Canada international boundary!

Welcome to Derby Line, Vermont. Or, if you are standing a few feet to the north, how's it going in Stanstead, Québec? This is one of those communities where history and tradition have conspired to yield an utmost eccentricity. Apparently, before the boundary was agreed upon in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, this was a community of like-minded, hardy colonists. Then, the boundary was arbitrarily prescribed along the Forty-fifth Parallel, and furthermore was arbitrarily surveyed by a team which failed to calibrate its instruments correctly and ended up about one kilometer north of where it should have been. Good news for the United States-more land. Bad news for Derby Line-half Canadian, half American, and all hassle. Imagine having to report to customs every time you wanted to cross the street to borrow of cup of sugar from a neighbor.

The yellow-brick and granite building is particularly peculiar. It is the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, and in 1904

it was built *intentionally* smack on the international boundary. I direct Lisa to a little dirt parking lot against the east side of the building, where several other cars are parked. Mind you, we've not crossed any borders yet. But I'm sure that at some point, based on my cartographic and directional knowledge, as Lisa pulls into the parking spot, our Highlander grazes the invisible border. No border guards in sight. Just a couple of cars with the green Vermont license plate, one car with Québec's provincial *fleur-de-lys* license plate, an expansive grass field, a swing-set, and the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.

"Is this the border?" asks Jordan as he unfastens his seat belt. "I'm hungry," moans Alex. He's always hungry-for Chicken McNuggets. "Let's make this quick, Ben," Lisa huffs as we empty out of the car and waltz toward the main entrance. They're not particularly fond of my unhealthy fascination with international boundaries. But that doesn't stop me; I've got my Canon Rebel cocked and ready to go. In fact, I'm taking several shots of the grassy field with the swing-set and planning to digitally draw in the border back home with Photoshop.

We approach the impressive entrance. It's all granite, and mounted just next to the door is an historical plaque presented by...what? The government of Québec? We're still in America! Not for long. Upon entering, our eyes are drawn to the mahogany-paneled foyer. "Wow, Ben, look at the tin ceiling," Lisa sends my eyes upward. An ancient portrait of the library's benefactor and namesake, one Martha Haskell, stares down at us. Stained glass windows surround us where we stand. So does the acrid smell of dust. Huge bookcases line the walls, filled with decaying tomes of North American history and geography. And there, running at a forty-five degree angle to the foyer, is *the line*. Straight as an arrow. As conspicuous as a *Fabergé* in your supermarket egg carton. A line of black masking tape applied over the parquet floor, slicing the foyer in half. Slicing a *bookcase* in half, a bookcase on whose ledge rests two miniature souvenir flags, the Stars and Stripes and the Maple Leaf, one on each side of the black tape. I hold my breath, close my eyes, and shuffle over the masking tape.

Whoosh! All of a sudden, I hear "O Canada! Our home and native land! True patriot love in all thy sons command!" Visions of polar bears, hockey players, maple syrup soufflé, and the Queen dance in my head. I have just entered the Commonwealth. "Nice, eh," I exclaim, trying the local lingo on for size. And then, just as simply, I return to my family across the border, and a wave of patriotism overcomes me. "O say can you see?" Lewis and Clark, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, baseball, apple pie, Disneyland, liberty and justice for all! This has been my dream.

I've always fantasized about buying a piece of property adjacent to an international boundary, somewhere out in the boonies, and erecting a little shack right on the line. Inside, I'd consecrate a candle-lit altar to internationality. Like the Haskell Free Library, I'd set down a line of masking tape across the floor and ceiling of the shack. Setting politics aside, on each side of the line I'd place a framed portrait of the heads of state (the President of the United States on one side, the Queen and Prime Minister of Canada on the other). I'd then drape each country's flag behind the portraits, and scatter various units of the local currency in front of them. In front of the President, hundreds of Sacagawea coins and Washington dollar bills. In front of the Prime Minister and Her Majesty, thousands of Loonies. On the American side: A scale replica of the Statue of Liberty. On the Canadian side: A scale replica of the CN Tower. American: A neon Budweiser sign. Canadian: A neon Molson sign. American: A New York Yankees baseball. Canadian: A Montreal Canadiens puck. I'd put a television set, radio, and computer somewhere in that shack, and pick up reception from both countries. I'd use the computer to blog away about how cool it is that I can travel to a different country every day on a whim. And I'd buy my electricity, water, cable, and gasoline from the lowest bidder on either side, based on exchange rates. That would be nice.

But it would also be a little absurd. Imagine one whole entity, split by an invisible line and put under the complete and sovereign jurisdiction of two separate parties. It calls to mind King Solomon's methods of justice. Well, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, and indeed the entire community of Derby Line, is split by an invisible line. It's not wholly invisible-after all, it manifests itself in the black masking tape; in the granite obelisks which dot the continental landscape at regular intervals from the Bay of Fundy in the Atlantic to Boundary Bay in the Pacific; in the sudden variation in the pavement of rural roads, where all of a sudden freshly-paved, jet-black roads overtake bumpy old, white-gray ones; in the homes of Derby Line, where when some chimneys are in use, single fires burn in two countries; and in the tall street light posts in villages such as this which, upon closer inspection, host a variety of hidden cameras and sensors. The beauty of it all is that visitors to or residents of Derby Line can proudly and rightfully proclaim that they're in two places at once. Who hasn't wanted to be in two places at once? It's a literary fantasy, a science-fiction goal, a source of childhood wonderment and bewilderment. And it's a dream that *can* come true if you know where to go. But that's the absurdity of it all, because when you try to be in two places at once, you find yourself in a single place so unique that it's neither here nor there.