

The Little Things You Do  
by Traci Clark

It was the first warm day of the year. That'll explain what happens next, especially if you live in a blue state; blue as in cold as hell, bordering Canada, doesn't-get-warm-until-June blue. There's no explaining what the first warm day in a blue state is like; it'd be like a newly de-flowered virgin trying to explain his first orgasm with a girl. In the desert countries of the Middle East, when a Sirocco hits, it's said that hell has come to earth. It is believed that the weather is a harbinger of madness and those that harm others are given a reprieve. People in blue states don't even gasp when they hear this. If it wasn't for the layers and layers of protective winter clothing, there'd surely be more casualties each winter in Minnesota alone than in the entire history of the Sirocco; blue-staters watch hockey—they know how dumb it is to fight in full pads. So when the first warm day comes, blue-staters are reminded that there is a god, that hell hasn't frozen over, and most importantly, eighteen inches of snow could fall the next day. Carpe diem is an understatement; sleeping with your best friend's girl, quitting your mindless job, running around the block naked and drunk—all is forgiven on the first warm day of the year. That is why when Henry, on the first warm day of the year, decided to move to the small town of Falls Creek, Wisconsin from Minneapolis because he had a dream of making a coffee-table book out of photos of the Northern Lights, no one—not his friends nor family—tried to argue with him.

For his book, Henry knew it would have made more sense to move across the border, but after the last election he had heard Canada was watching the Boundary Waters

like US Immigration watches the Rio Grande. Besides, he wasn't sure if Canadians held true to the same Sirocco provisions—he based what he knew about Wisconsin on the reciprocity of in-state tuition it shared with Minnesota, and decided it must have done the same with winter madness otherwise the two states never could have reached such an agreement. In Minneapolis, he had been a bartender. He knew what he didn't want to do with his life, and he thought bartending was a good a way as any to pass the time until he figured out what he actually wanted to do. It was five years since he graduated from U of M with a B.S. in Soil Systems Management and the only decent thought that he had about something other than sex, beer or music was the project of the Northern Lights coffee-table book.

It's not that he chose Falls Creek, more like it chose him. He went for a morning run (the first time he wore shorts in six months), then spent the rest of the first warm day packing. He drove straight east for three hours, and after spending most of that time on his cell—quitting his job, breaking up with his girlfriend, and letting his parents know he wasn't able to come to dinner on Sunday—he needed a drink. He stopped at the first place that didn't scare the bejesus out of him; a neon clad tavern called *The Headless Chicken*. He ordered three tappers and the chicken plate—all of which cost him \$4.75. When he saw the Help Wanted sign posted in the window for a daytime bartender, he knew he could live here—off the land and the Headless Chicken—without having to dip too far into his savings. The interview consisted of him making a Bloody Mary; when Henry told Jake, the owner, that he thought the Bloody Mary was as sacred as the eucharist itself, he was hired—even before Jake had taken his first sip.

Henry rented a cabin from Jake that was on a small lake. There was still snow on the ground in Falls Creek, but the water was mostly unfrozen. Motorboats were prohibited after dark, and each night he would row out to the middle of the lake on the small, dilapidated boat that was left on the property by former tenants in the hopes of catching shots for his coffee-table book. Henry learned not to swat at bats, not to breathe too deeply or he would eat more mosquitoes than ate him, to always have an extra set of batteries for his flashlight, and to run like hell back up the hill to the cabin when he heard something move in the black, black woods. He tried all hours of the night, but didn't have much luck. He had seen the Northern Lights off in the distance, but they weren't close enough to feel, much less film. He didn't want any old picture—he knew what he could do with his camera and he wanted to be so close that he was able to breathe in the Lights so he could then give mouth-to-mouth to his shots. He had heard the Northern Lights were as elusive as a woman, and they teased him every chance they got, like a striptease that ended before any of the good parts were shown.

Henry never had much problems with the ladies before, so the realization that he was out of his league made him feel like, as they say in Falls Creek, a live chicken whose head's been chopped off. Apparently this had happened once. In the 1920s there was an exhibition that came to town featuring a chicken who survived its head being cut off and Jake's grampa—the son of a Ho-Chunk mother and French immigrant father; important because everyone knows how everyone else came to be in the Northwoods—was so impressed that he named his tavern after it. The chicken plate at the Shack was

sort of a tribute to Jake’s great-grampa and the fry bread had a hole in the middle of it because Jake’s great-gramma said there needed to be one to let the spirit into the dough.

Henry wasn’t getting much sleep and he was forming a fried chicken and beer gut; after a few months, people began to think of him as if he’d been there for years. It started to feel that way to Henry too. He found a strange sort of peace in Falls Creek; he was fat, virtually celibate, and failing for the first time in his life at something that he actually tried to do. But somehow the company of the folks at the bar, the chicken plate washed down by a tapper of PBR, and the stupid outdated songs on the jukebox became home to him.

The Headless Chicken crowd was particularly impressed with the dance hits of the early 90s and, although the playlist would have killed him when he living in Minneapolis, he looked forward to his daily dosage. He would even find himself popping in a quarter or two to hear some of the old songs that reminded him of high school and pot smoking and pretty girls with bouncy hair that always let him find their young breasts. He could only stand to wait an hour or so to see if anyone else would select his favorites before sliding some coins down the throat of the old juke box. If he doesn’t hear one song in particular—*Rump Shaker*, the one and only hit of the now defunct Wreckx-N-Effect—he is always pulled to the jukebox like the coked up girls in Minneapolis who used to follow ugly dudes into the bathroom just to score a line or two. He craves it and if he doesn’t hear it, he knows he’ll be plagued for the rest of the day with one catch or another from it; the *zoom-a-zoom-zoom* and a *poom poom*—*JUST*

*SHAKE YA RUMP*. Months passed, and Henry spent his days listening to *Rump Shaker* and his nights clicking snapshots of blackness.

Eventually, *Rump Shaker* became a full-blown addiction; like his morning coffee, he didn't want to see or speak to anyone until he had some. He still didn't have enough decent shots of the Northern Lights to fill a roll of film, much less a coffee-table book, but as long as he heard *Rump Shaker*, it didn't seem to bother him as much. The lake had frozen over sometime back in October, but he still went out on it every night anyway; he had heard that the cold would bring the Northern Lights. He had found an old, Elmer Fudd, red-and-black plaid hunter's coat in a closet that kept him warm even when it was below zero and, after deer season, Jake lent him his blaze orange snow pants. He had set up a roofless shack to block out the cold wind and rigged up a space heater with six 150-foot extension cords that he ran from his cabin out onto the middle of the lake. There was no danger of exposure, so he spent most of his nights sitting on the lake, looking at the stars, waiting. He tried to meditate, but was always distracted by the *Rump Shaker* beat and wished he wouldn't have cut out so much on the yoga class that he took in college. He was hardly sleeping at all now, the lyrics ran through his head—*shake it, shake it, shake it now SHAKE IT*.

After the twelfth night of this; no sleeping, just *Check baby check baby one two three four* and waiting on a black and white starry sky to firework into color, he decided that *Rump Shaker* was ruining his life. He remembered Jake telling him the story about his Ho-Chunk great-grandma dancing around his bed when he was just a boy and had caught the measles. Jake was convinced, to this day, that the dance saved his life—that

as his great-gramma danced, he actually saw the virus leave his body, saw it seep out of his skin. Henry knew he needed the song to leave him, that it was what was best for him, but he also knew he craved it with something deeper; the same way a lung cancer patient craves a cigarette. He knew the dance was his only chance too.

He jumped out of his shed and started wiggling and dancing and screaming all the words to *Rump Shaker* out to the black woods. But when he got to his favorite line he stopped and whispered to the blank sky *It's just the little things you do, UH!, that make me wanna get with you UH!*. He fell to his knees, bowing and offering all that he had, the *Rump Shaker*, to the night. The snow on the lake began to soften with light and Henry assumed it was the dawn, but when he looked up he saw the green glimmer of the Northern Lights right in front of him, dancing on the lake, then back towards the trees, then on the lake again. He felt like a dream had come true; when he was little, his gramma would tell him about what it was like to be in the audience watching the Wizard of Oz, seeing for the first time a movie in color. He had always wondered what it would have been like to be there; now he knew. He stopped singing and grabbed his camera, but like a shy eleven-year-old at a piano recital, the Northern Lights ran back behind stage, into the woods. He called after her; she paused long enough for him to take a quick shot. He started to sing *Rump Shaker* again and the Northern Lights came closer. He put the camera down and danced with her instead. As he sang, he knew there would be many more nights like these, knew that the book would come and it would be a best seller, knew that he didn't need to be saved from himself or the *Rump Shaker*—he had all kinds of time and that was all he needed.

