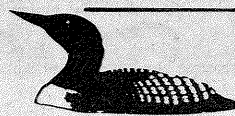


# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

## Hibernating

1-8-85

They were just sitting around in the American Legion Bar up in Three Lakes the other night—"testing the brandy for impurities," as Steady Eddy would say—and they got to talking about the best way to get through a north country winter.

"The very best way," Gene the bartender said, "is to go away. Someplace where the only ice is in the frozen daiquiris."

He waited for a reaction from his customers, all two of them: the good priest and the good doctor.

"The very best way to get through winter up here," Doc said, "is to be 10 years old. Nothing fazes you when you're 10 years old. You can get through winter wearing shorts and Adidas."

"The worst way to get through the winter up here," Father Joe said, "is the way we do it—hauling these old carapaces around like a couple of Galapagos tortoises."

Gene put his elbow on the bar and rested his chin in his hand, because that way his fingers covered up his smile.

"I think what is really the *worst* thing about the winter," Father Joe said, "is that as you get older, you start worrying about what it can do to you. Like breaking your neck or an arm or a leg. Or both legs.

"When you're a kid, you don't worry about that, about how dangerous just walking on ice is. I remember we used to run full speed in our buckle galoshes and go sliding down every ice patch in town, because you knew that was making all the sidewalks unsafe for the old folks.

"It was your way of getting back at the old folks because—remember, Doc?—it was always the old folks, your father and your mother and your teachers...."

"And," Doc interrupted, "your parish priest."

"That's right," Father Joe said. "All those old folks, those authority figures, always telling you every winter that you shouldn't be sliding on all those ice patches because it was dangerous and that you were gonna fall and kill yourself or at least break something bad, maybe your back. Just wreck your whole life because you were doing a dumb thing like sliding.

"And it was always those same old folks who took little-bitty baby steps all winter long, and you watched them looking at their feet in the rubbers, and they were all tense and stiff, and then it came to you like a revelation: The old folks were afraid of falling on the ice and killing themselves or breaking something.

"And when they yelled at all the young kids having fun sliding, they were projecting their fears onto us."

"When you realize how wise our good shepherd is," Doc said to Gene, "you sometimes think he might be in the wrong line of work. He would have made a great barber."

Or," Gene said into his fingers, "a bartender."

"Now I take the little baby steps on the ice," Father Joe said. "God, I must look like Tim Conway out there."

"We all look like Tim Conway out there," Doc said. "That's why we spend so much time in here."

"It's that wild abandon that you miss," Father Joe said. "We never thought about falling, and when we *did* fall, we never broke anything, because we always tried to fall on our little keisters, and then the whole gang would be falling down and laughing like idiots, and ice and snow would get ground down right into your corduroy knickers and your seat would be wet right through your long johns. And you all sat down with that little-boy smell, and Sister Agatha would wrinkle her nose and try to teach us something. God, it must have been like being in a room with four dozen wet puppies.

"That's what I miss—that wild, wild abandon. You just throw yourself into it and you don't worry about what could happen to you. You start worrying about what could happen to you and you'd never leave the bedroom."

"Or the barroom," Doc added.

*Na roch*, Steady Eddy says in moments like this. Your health. Your luck.

"You talk about getting through the winter with wild abandon," Doc said. "Let me tell you about a character who really had abandon. He abandoned *everything* every single winter. His wife. His friends. His business. He just left them all."

"Went to Florida," Gene mumbled.

"Nope," Doc said. "Went to bed."

*Hibernated*. For the whole winter. I got this from Jay Keepman. You know—Doc Keepman down in Madison. He says when he was growing up in Watertown, there was a tavernkeeper there—everybody called him Turkey, when Turkey didn't have the present-day connotation. A great guy, Jay said. Had a great business, loved people, loved his wife, loved life, loved everything except the winter in Watertown.

"So every winter, like a bear, Turkey hibernated. He took to his bed and he stayed down all winter long. His wife ran the tavern, took in the money and paid the bills, and Turkey just settled in for a long winter's nap."

"He slept all winter?" Father Joe asked.

"Well," Doc said, "I don't know how much he slept. But according to Doc Keepman, Turkey was actually in bed all winter long. His wife would bring him food and drink and, presumably, news of the outside world. All through Christmas and New Year's Turkey was in bed—sometimes, I guess, right through Easter. Doc Keepman says that after you got to know Turkey, it didn't seem so strange. What else was there to do in Watertown?"

Behind the bar, Gene's eyes were closed. His head slumped, and he was making the sleeping sounds of a wintering bear.

"All right, Doc," he said, as he sprang to his feet and clapped his hands. "Nice story. House buys a round for Turkey. That's the only jarring note, Doc: 'Turkey' was the wrong name for a smart bird like that."

"*Na roch*," Doc said.