The Slithery-Dee Came Out of the Sea

By Kathryn

There were a lot of things I didn't know about the United States when I first moved here. Americans always assume that everyone knows everything about their culture. They're correct, for the most part, but there are plenty of aspects of American life that no one would ever think to put in a movie.

Lunchables, for example, or why anyone would want to eat such a thing. Gushers and Fruit Roll-Ups belong to the same category, and to this day I have never tasted a Dorito. I had to google Lisa Frank and Beanie Babies when people brought them up at parties, and I had to figure out for myself that "let's get coffee" doesn't mean anything except that the conversation is over.

I was always interested in American culture, and my English wasn't bad. When my university advisor suggested that I get a graduate degree in the United States, I figured there was no harm in applying. I got accepted, and then I got my green card. I eventually got married as well.

My wife is American. I met her in grad school, but I left after I finished my Master's degree. Freelance work pays better, and I followed the money. My wife stayed longer, but she decided to leave her program when it became clear that there were no jobs in her field. Instead of becoming an adjunct, she accepted a position as a real estate agent at her uncle's firm in Maine. The first decision was a smart one. The second, I'm not so sure.

We were both sick of living in Boston, so we were happy to move to the small coastal town of Freeport. You might know Freeport as the home of L.L. Bean, but I didn't. This was yet another bit of American culture that I had to learn about from Wikipedia.

Freeport has a central street lined with stores and restaurants, as well as an outlet mall that caters to the summer tourists. It's a nice place to visit. After eating only slightly overpriced seafood, you can walk along a trail on the low cliffs next to the ocean and take a scenic photo of the lighthouse tower.

A few years ago, it wasn't unusual for visitors to be so charmed by Freeport that they'd buy property here. My wife writes the house listings for the promotional magazine published by her real estate firm, and it's always the same story: let the ocean wind sweep away your troubles.

I went to school for electrical engineering, but I make my living as a computer technician and digital systems manager. Freeport is surrounded by medical clinics for the old folks who retire here, and I'm the one who sets up their networks and updates their security protocols. I leave most of the routine admin work to my staff, two overqualified women in their mid-twenties who moved back in with their parents after they graduated from college.

Along with the work I do for the clinics, I also make house visits for private clients, usually older people who need help setting up their modems. Their internet providers should cover this service, but I'm local and more reliable. These house calls don't pay much, but they've given me connections to local businesses. Poking around the dusty corners of people's houses to hook up ethernet cables isn't what I thought I'd be doing when I came to America, but I can't complain.

Most of my clients want to talk, especially when they learn that I'm from Poland. I ask them where they're from, and they always have stories. This is how I learned about the Big Butter Jesus statue looming over the interstate in central Ohio, and the factory next to Detroit that makes a type of popcorn candy called Cracker Jacks, and the Amish pie buffets in rural Pennsylvania run by women in nineteenth-century clothing.

When people hear I'm a fan of American culture, they often give me antiques. It would be rude not to accept them, but I leave them at the office. My wife grew up in a small town near Pittsburgh, and she hates anything she considers too "folksy." I don't blame her for not wanting to be reminded of flea markets run by gun collectors out in the boondocks, and my two employees like to post photos of all the twentieth-century memorabilia online.

Still, I appreciate the gifts, especially the books. One of my favorites was *Little House on the Prairie*, a fantasy about self-sufficiency on the plains of Minnesota. I've gotten a handful of copies of a children's series called *The Baby-Sitter's Club,* which is about enterprising teenagers in a suburb of Connecticut. A retired dentist from Baltimore gave me a tattered copy of another children's book, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark,* a collection of urban legends from the 1970s. The stories all seem to be about the loneliness of wide-open spaces, and their characters always seem to be driving along empty roads or sitting alone in their giant houses.

There was one part of the *Scary Stories* book that stuck with me, a short poem whose opening lines read:

The slithery-dee came out of the sea
He ate all the others, but he didn't eat me

The poem's narrator gets eaten in the end, but only after all of her friends are taken by the monster. Despite the danger, she never stops watching the ocean. I suppose she's in denial. After all, bad things only happen to other people. You never think it's going to happen to you.

I suppose the same could be said about Freeport. Bad things happen to other small towns in Maine, but not here. Other towns aren't so conveniently located along the highway, and other towns don't have an outlet mall. In other towns, the weather damage from the winter storms isn't repaired. In other towns, the lobster traps rot along the decaying docks. In other towns, young people leave and never come back. But none of that could ever happen in Freeport.

At least this is what my wife tells herself, but the truth is that not that many people are buying houses here these days. My wife's firm decided to discontinue their magazine, which sat unread in dusty bins in the foyers of restaurants that have been empty since the pandemic.

When I met her, my wife was doing a PhD in American literature, and she always imagined herself as an author. She liked to pretend she was slumming it by writing for a real estate magazine, but she did decent work. Now that she doesn't have that work anymore, she's restless. She tries to read novels that don't interest her – for market research, she insists – and she snaps at me when I interrupt her. I keep saying that we should go on vacation, but my wife isn't interested. She says that people who want to go on vacation come to Freeport.

I wonder about that. There are fewer people here than last year, and fewer than the year before. The old people are getting older, and nobody buys the houses they leave behind. I expect a tourist town to be deserted at Christmas, but it didn't used to feel so empty in October.

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I've got that rhyme stuck in my head, and it won't leave me alone. I keep thinking that you don't need a monster to make people disappear from a seaside town in the middle of nowhere.

One of the women who used to handle my office admin work quit last fall. She didn't say anything; she just picked up and left. No note, no forwarding address. Nothing. My other employee says she doesn't know anything. I'll respect that, though it surprises me. The three of us always got along so well.

One of my contractors quit earlier this year too. He was a younger guy, around the same age as the women in the office. Still young enough to have his life ahead of him, in other words. I can imagine why he'd want to leave Freeport, but he could have at least come by and taken the check for his last job. His mother actually visited me and my wife at home, asking if we knew where he'd gone. When we invited her inside, she cried her way through an entire bottle of wine, but she seemed like a nice enough woman. She said might be leaving town soon herself.

I gave her my number, but she hasn't called. I hope she and her son are doing better now, wherever they are.

I hope my former employee is doing better too, though I can't say it's not a relief to have fewer salaries to worry about. The medical clinics by the highway are closing, and I've been losing business. Times have been tough for everyone since the pandemic, and that includes me. I've been accepting whatever work I can get, whenever I can get it. I never did take my wife on that vacation, come to think of it.



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It's tough to admit this, but even my wife has disappeared.

She wasn't cut out for real estate, and an office job didn't suit her. I knew this from the beginning, and I always assumed she'd go back to school. I'm sure that's what she did. It's weird, though. She didn't take the car, and she didn't take a suitcase. The only thing she took was her laptop. She just went out for coffee one morning and never came back.

I knew she hadn't been doing well, so I've been giving her space. A week has passed, but she hasn't returned any of my messages. Her family back in Pittsburgh told me that they haven't heard from her either, so I drove over to the police station and filed a missing person report. The officer took my wife's description and the photos I printed, but he didn't seem concerned. It's a summer town, he said. People leave all the time.

My mother had the same response when I called her on WhatsApp. What did you expect, she said. This is what happens when you marry an American. All they know is hamburgers and divorce.

Sure, I thought. Hamburgers and divorce, and also wide skies and open roads. In this country, there's more than enough space to move to a different place and become a different person. In America, you can just get in a car and go.

Truth be told, I'm not so crazy about this town myself. Everything seemed quaint and wholesome at first, but familiarity has dulled the charm. I wanted to get away from the stink of exhaust fumes in Boston, but the constant fishy smell of saltwater here in Freeport isn't much better. Now that work has dried up, I almost miss the odor of dust and cat urine in the houses of the retired people who asked me to set up their modems. I wish I'd kept more of the little tchotchkes they gave me, all of the porcelain figurines and vinyl action figures and cracked souvenir coffee mugs. They might make my house a little less lonely.

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I started taking morning walks on the trail by the ocean, and I keep thinking about that rhyme. The sea monster picks off everyone surrounding the narrator, one by one, and still the narrator stays. Does she really think the monster won't get her, or has she just resigned herself to the inevitable?

In October, the wind coming off the ocean is bracing, but that doesn't stop me from sitting on the seagull-stained benches and looking out over the waves. My home country is on the other side of the sea. My mother is there, divorced like I'm afraid I might soon be myself. She's not getting any younger. My sister just had her first child, a cute baby girl. It would be nice to meet the kid in her photos in person.

I'm starting to think that America was a nice vacation. I enjoyed myself, but it's time to go back to the real world on the other side of the ocean.

I'd taken out my phone to check the price of international flights from Portland, and that's when I saw it. It wasn't in the corner of my eye or hidden by shadows; it was right in front of me, right in broad daylight. It didn't move, so I initially mistook it for a rock. But no, it was a creature.

It was an extremely *large* creature, and it was watching me. It looked like an alligator, what with its dark scales and long snout, except it was easily three times the size of the alligators I'd seen in videos. And even someone like me knows that alligators don't live in the ocean.

As I sat there and stared at the thing, a passing car startled a flock of seagulls, which took off and flew low over the ocean. In the blink of an eye, the creature reared up and snapped one of the birds between its massive jaws before sliding back into the waves. It was, I realized, much larger than I thought. Much larger, and much faster. It would be no effort at all for the thing to scale the low cliff and grab someone sitting on a bench. Someone like myself, in fact.

Maybe it was a whale, you might be thinking, but I can't emphasize strongly enough that whales don't have teeth like that. Not even sharks have teeth like that. And whales, as far as I know, don't have tentacles.

It would be useless to run from the thing if it wanted to chase me. I ran anyway.

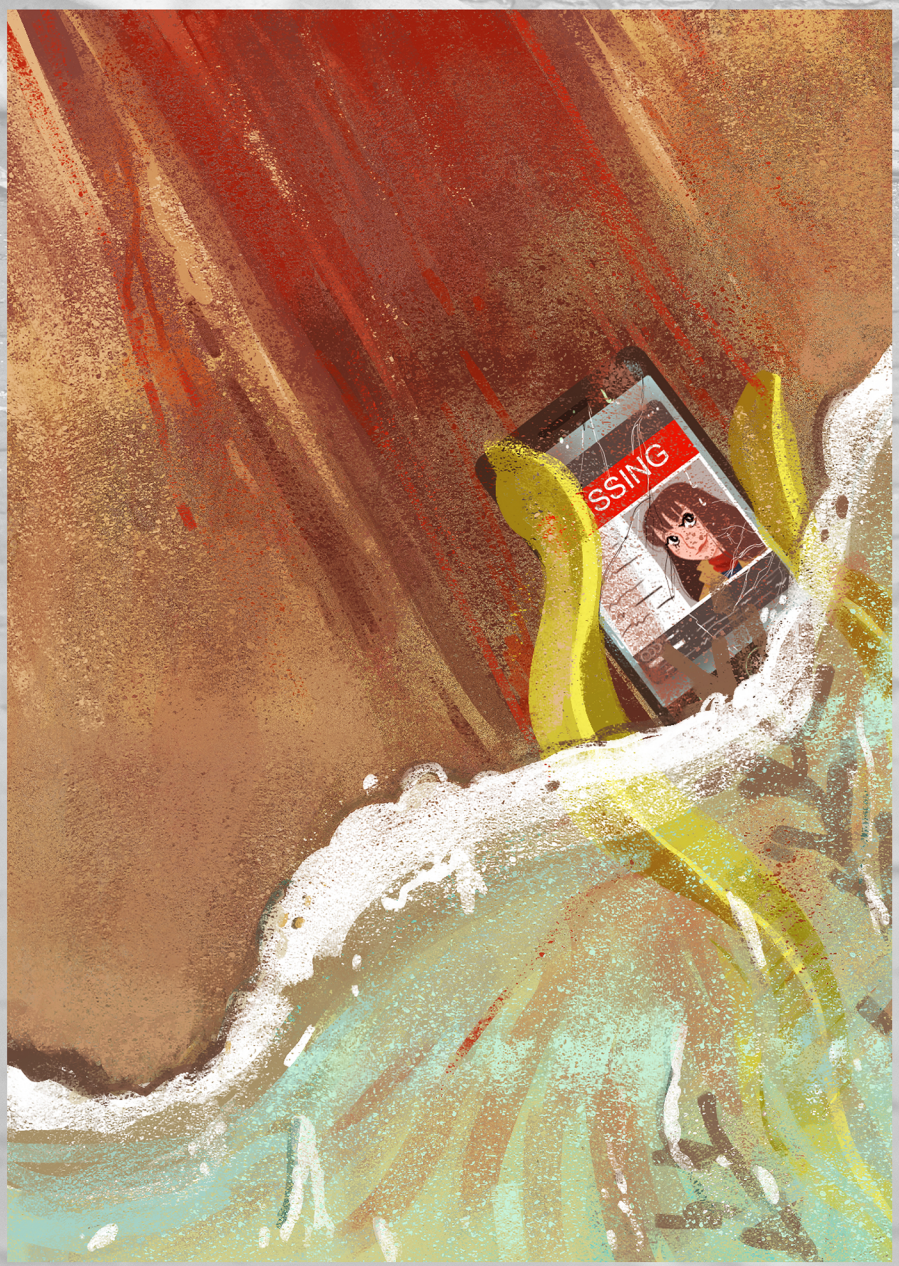
I hate to say this, but everything is starting to make more sense now. How possible is it really, when you actually sit down and think about it, for someone to disappear without a trace? No transactions on their bank statement, no credit card charges for hotel rooms, no calls to their family. No posts on social media, no likes on other people's photos, no log-ins to Netflix, nothing. I can understand wanting to leave a dying town like Freeport, but that's still strange.

And then I think about the empty spaces that open up when people leave these small towns in the middle of nowhere, and I think about the things that creep in to reclaim their territory.

In any case, I'm done watching the sea. The slithery-dee may have eaten the others, and you can probably guess how I feel about that.

There's just one problem. When I ran away from the shore, I dropped my phone. I know I shouldn't go back to that bench. I know what I saw, and I know that I shouldn't go anywhere near the ocean at all. But what if my wife called? What if she finally replied to my texts?

I can't shake the idea that this isn't the sort of thing that should happen to me. I did everything right, didn't I? I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding. A part of me knows that it's time to leave, and that's exactly what I intend to do. But first I have to go back and get my phone.



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