

ESSAY

Human Groundhog Day

BY KAY MACDONALD
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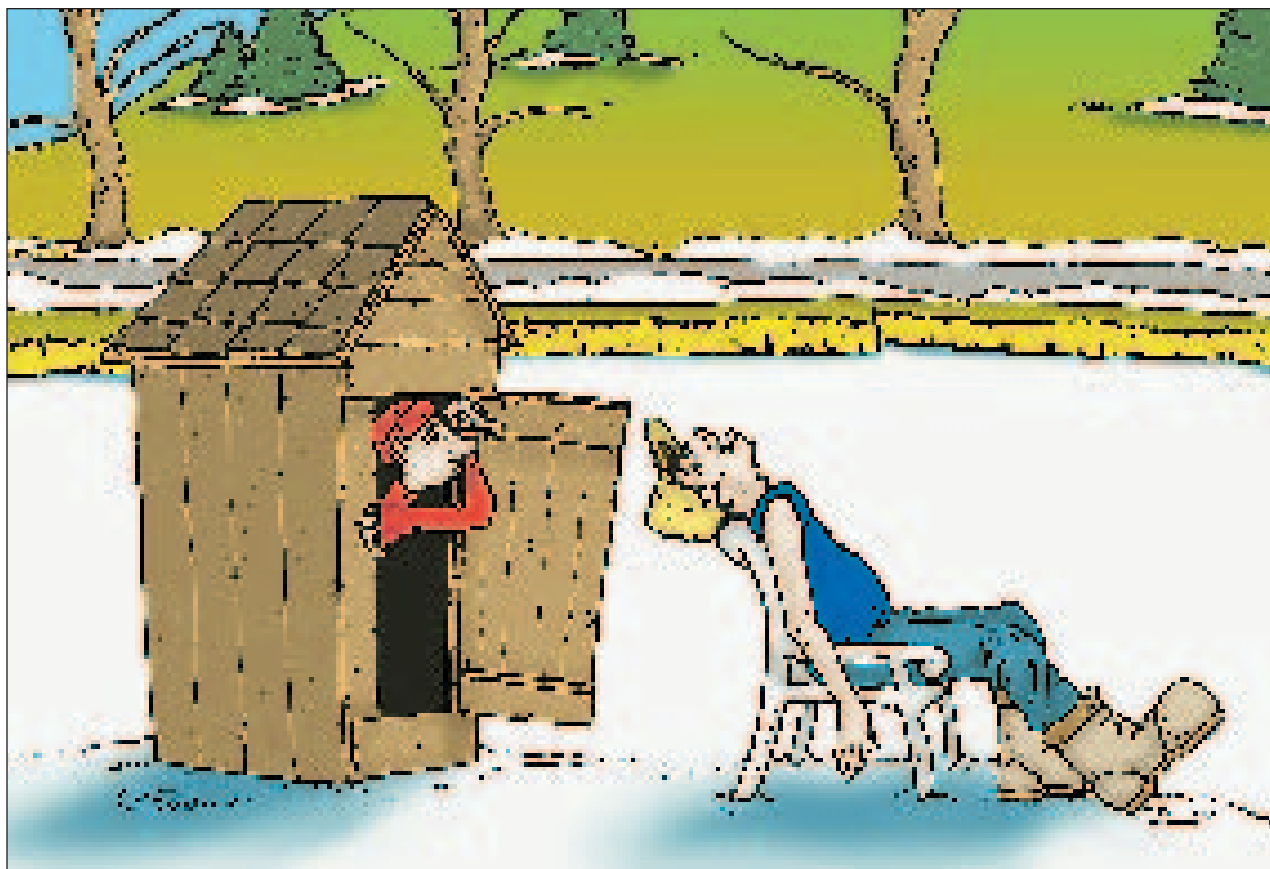
We were hungry for the sun after a long, very long, cold winter. So when it showed its face over the trees along the river one Saturday morning, we thought we'd won the weather lottery.

Just in case this was another one of Mother Nature's little jokes and she'd change her mind in a few hours, we quickly planned our first picnic of the year. How could she be so heartless as to disappoint us at that stage?

I packed tuna sandwiches and chips and cheese and coffee and a baggie full of dog biscuits and put all three dogs in the Jeep and headed out before 9 o'clock. It didn't even need to be spring for the dogs to be excited. Any car ride will do and if they see wildlife along the trail, that's a bonus.

We wanted to see sky and water after months of our narrow view of pines and snow, so we headed for Lake Michigan. The snow along the road was dirty and tired, ready to give up now. Where the Manistee River widens into a delta at Manistee Lake, the yellow marsh grass was coming alive with flocks of red-winged blackbirds.

North of Manistee along M-22 at Onekema, Portage Lake ice fishermen had taken up residence on the ice. It must be a frightening picture if you're from the



South, dozens of people basking in the sun on top of the water. There were men and women, indistinguishable in their layers of warmies, lolling about in lawn chairs, strolling around socializing, eating and drinking, keeping their eyes on tip-ups which seemed to be a secondary purpose to just being out in the sun.

It came to us then that it was Human Groundhog Day, all those two-legged creatures with pale faces and dazed eyes, blinking their way up out of the darkness of the winter.

Unfortunately, the welcome sun also threatened six more weeks of winter, which none of us from Michigan doubted anyway.

Driving on up the lakeshore road, we could see from a distance big

fluffy snowballs floating on Arcadia Lake. Getting closer, we saw that they were dozens and dozens of swans, a great swan jamboree of those lovely, haughty birds.

We stopped to watch them paddling lazily in the sun. The dogs were hysterical at the sight of so many live birds they weren't allowed to chase. The swans were not amused.

In Elberta, the human groundhogs were still underground or, in this case, their cars at least were nosed in around a tavern that I know serves great hamburgers. We drove around some of the new projects there, a restaurant whimsically called Trick Dog and a playground where our un-trick dogs nosed through the slush and mud. I helped Bandit and Pogo go down the small

slide, but they were not impressed with child's play. Fresh earth scents were so much better.

Across the bay at Frankfort, we parked at the end of the main street on the Lake Michigan shore. The lake was gray and forbidding looking and there were still mega-sized chunks of ice thrown up on the beach, but people were struggling over them to fish and walk.

A dozen or so cars with Michigan license plates were parked with us. What out-of-stater would consider this entertainment? Those of us from this frozen place, however, were anxious for any sort of activity that could stretch our neglected muscles and brains. We were human groundhogs, coming back to life.

We ate in the Jeep. It was

as good a meal as we've had anywhere anytime. All around us, people leaned against their snow-mud encrusted vehicles and ate a sandwich, drank a beer, laughed, talked, their faces and ears red, as it was a deceptive sun — bright but no match for the wind off the lake.

Finally we started down U.S. 31 toward home. At Benzonia, we made a stop at the shopping center where a grocery store has the best, least expensive donuts in northern Michigan. The crullers there are world class and we can never resist them when we're in

the area. We each ate one with the last of our coffee and the dogs shared one as if they had never eaten before.

Bear Lake was still hibernating. The sun was weakening by afternoon and residents had returned to their burrows. We wanted to get to ours as well. Too much sun and wind causes fresh air poisoning, of which the symptoms are yawning and insatiable hunger.

We hurried toward home and dinner and our recliners. As we drove down our trail, snow was falling.

But we had poked our noses out of our tunnels and had seen Spring in the distance.

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