

Over the Back Fence
For Friday May 23, 2008
Approx 630 words

“Where y’from?”
By Alva Wood

Tessa Vanderkam took a holiday from the Post Office. She went on a three-week cruise through the Caribbean, leaving from Miami.

She flew to Miami, and went straight to the dock.

The cruise company seemed remarkably efficient at processing passengers.

There was a slight delay while they dealt with an irate passenger. He stormed up to the check-in desk. “I paid extra for a stateroom with a private balcony,” he rages.

The clerk checks his ticket. “Yes, sir,” she says, “and that’s what you got.”

“I want my cabin changed,” he insists.

The clerk looks baffled.

“My balcony looks right out onto a crappy old warehouse,” the man snorts. “I’m damned if I’m going to pay that much to stare at a warehouse for the next three weeks.”

Fortunately, Tessa didn’t have that problem with her own room. Her window looked into the creosoted pilings the ship was tied up against, but she knew that would change as soon as they left the dock.

For dinner, Tessa was seated beside a woman from Delaware.

“Where y’all from?” asks the woman.

“Schist Creek,” says Tessa. “You’ve probably never heard of it.”

“Never,” says the woman.

“It’s near River City,” says Tessa.

“Never heard of it neither,” says the woman.

“In the Okanagan Valley,” says Tessa.

“Nope.”

“In British Columbia,” says Tessa, beginning to get a little desperate.

“Colombia?” says the woman. “That’s where cocaine comes from, right?”

“That’s in South America,” explains Tessa. “We’re in North America. And our main export is marijuana. I think you folks call it ‘B.C. Gold’.”

“Gold?” says the woman. “That’s Alaska, ain’t it? Y’all from Alaska? Why din’t’ya just say so?”

“Actually, a little south of Alaska,” says Tessa, a bit desperately. “And just north of Washington.”

The woman is now genuinely puzzled. “North of Washington?” she says. “Y’mean Noo Yawk? Noo Jersey?”

“Washington STATE,” says Tessa.

“There is one?” says the woman.

Tessa asked the purser to move her to a different table. She liked her new companions much better. The man next to her, in fact, had cats of his own. They chatted happily about Tessa’s big fat lazy male, Augustus. And Julius, who hides from his own shadow. And Hannibal, who rules the household like a hyperactive superball.

“Should’a been named ‘Quark’,” says the man.

“Why?” Tessa asks.

“‘Cause a quark can spin in six different directions at once, just like your cat,” says the man.

Turns out he’s a technician at a nuclear particle accelerator in Tennessee. Tessa learns a lot more than she needed to about how many gazillion volts it takes to make one invisible particle smash into another invisible particle.

Tessa thinks it sounds like Canada Post’s operating procedures.

They didn’t actually get around to where she came from until the third dinner.

“Canada, huh?” he says. “I know where that is.”

“You do,” says Tessa, surprised.

“Yup,” he says. “I was at a convention there, once. In Toronto. Where they have that space needle thing.”

“The CN Tower,” Tessa corrects him.

“Right,” he says. “Went to see a football game. Strange way you guys play it, though. No one ever got a fourth down.”

Tessa’s jaw drops.

“Is it true that your balls are bigger?” he asks.

Tessa jaw drops further.

“You footballs, I mean,” he corrects himself, and actually blushes. Tessa figures a nuclear particle accelerator operator probably doesn’t get out very often.

“So,” he continues, once he’s regained his composure, “how far are you out of Toronto? A couple of hours, maybe?”

“A bit farther,” says Tessa. “About as far away as San Francisco.”

After dinner he offers to buy her a drink. As they settle in with some of his buddies at the bar, he introduces Tessa.

“Guys,” he says, “meet Tessa. She’s from San Francisco.”