

Feeling Marlene (from OPEN CITY Magazine Number 16)

by Rick Rofihe

DEAR ED,

I'm writing to you from a hotel room in Atlanta.

This hotel has passed for home for me for the last nine or ten months. I've been working here as an instructor in industrial design in a pilot project set up by the state of Georgia. They say I'm pretty good at teaching, so I guess it's true.

I got your card in the mail via my ex-wife in Saskatoon. On it you wonder where I am, if I am still writing, and if I have any stories I would send for you to look at because you think I should be published, too.

You ask also about whatever happened to the untitled novel I showed you over gin a long time ago in Montana and you wanted to take with you, the one, as you think you remember, "where the guy on the West Coast gets drunk, staggers from side to side over the British Columbia-Washington state border and has an identity crisis as to whether he feels more Canadian or American."

The problem is itchy feet. That's what Iris (oldest daughter) says. It's hard to get control of your life if you have them. By the time you get this letter I will be on my way to another place. This is the story:

1. I have this girlfriend. She is pretty young (thirty), and wants to move in with me and get married. She's a great woman with a great name (Deirdre). Most of the time I think it's a good idea.

2. Next week I leave here and fly to Winnipeg to pick her up. We're driving to Idaho to attend a fiftieth wedding anniversary of my parents. We'll be there until the end of October.

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/rick-rofihe/feeling-marlene---from-open-city-magazine-number-16»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/rick-rofihe/feeling-marlene---from-open-city-magazine-number-16)

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3. In November I'll be in Detroit for a few weeks, waiting to go to my new job. After that I'll be off to Papua New Guinea for the better part of the year. There are two electricity-generating plants being built. I'll be the Head-Coordinator for both. This sounds like something with potential.

I don't have an address for PNG as yet. I guess I'll get that when I get there. I have your address in my wallet. I liked the picture on your postcard, with those three Atlantic Canada fishermen holding the cod. I'm going to send you one like that, which I'm sure they must have in New Guinea, but the fishermen, and even the fish, are bound to look much, much different.

It has been interesting living here in a major American city, but it hasn't been interesting enough. Where I was living in Ottawa was more exciting, really. I strongly recommend Elgin Street in Ottawa. Sometimes I think I made a mistake. After I left GM and worked in Sweden and came back, I went to Ottawa-Hull because it was so interesting. Where I was living there on Elgin was downright mysterious—they called it Little Lebanon. Even though everyone could speak English—and Parisian French—they loved it when I'd throw in a few words in Arabic, which I'd picked up when I consulted on that desalinization plant in Bahrain. The Canadian government also wanted to give me a six-month contract to oversee the construction of an irrigation system in Cuba, but because I am a U.S. citizen, I began to wonder if I might not get in some trouble doing that, possibly from the Cuban direction, but more likely from the American one. Were I braver, I might have concentrated on my original plan, which was to stay put on Elgin Street and write up some things. Consulting in engineering was to be a way to pay the bills, but it took over. This is not unfortunate, since I like building things and teaching about it. Nevertheless, I suspect I might have regrets later on.

Are you doing any writing? I ask that with trepidation, since in my brief phone conversation with your ex in New Haven last year, I got the impression that your attitude toward your writing was complicated, and not an area where an outsider should venture.

Maybe I'm reading my own attitudes into your situation. When I let people read what I write they usually say that it's good. I think it's poorly executed, and that I should stick to consulting. I admire your courage.

I wrote "Feeling Marlene." An interesting old lady, obsolete, smokes a cigarette after her meal, like Marlene Dietrich. I wrote "Murder by Mathematics," where a lonely professor kills rivals on his personal computer. In "Clown Bandits," Bozos terrorize Ontario, the last place on earth with white people working in 7-Elevens. "Famous Apples" was about a poor fellow unable to adapt to growing Delicious. "Español" was about an unfortunate rich guy who was transferred to Montreal, hit on the head by a foul at an Expos game and emerged fluent in Spanish but unable to distinguish it from French. And so forth. When I move, the stories usually get lost.

Almost everybody in your stories is pretty whole. At first they seem disconnected, but they aren't. That's a good thing.

How is Prince Edward Island? I miss the wild blueberries. Sometimes I miss the way of life there.

As you can guess I have a computer and a little printer. *What do you think of that?* I wonder why anyone needs all this stuff. **All the different fonts.** I really don't know much about these things. People tell me computers are wonderful.

Atlanta has been nice enough, and I suppose I'll look back fondly on the city. I should be returning to teach for several weeks each year. Edith (youngest daughter) has graduated from the University of Toronto and opted to take an entry-level position at a think tank in Virginia. I don't expect it to last too long, frankly. In some respects I've set a poor example. Iris is currently with Canada World Youth, in Western Africa for the second time. She's married.

I apologize for not writing you sooner. Were there an excuse, I would offer it. It was really nice to hear from you. I'll write again from New Guinea and let you know if that particular Paradise is all they've made it out to be.

You'll hear from me soon. Promise.

Bobby

