

All in All, It's a Moving Experience

By Jim Sleeper

Autumn comes early to Boston, ablaze this week with orange, yellow and green rental trailers as the leaves of our lives turn once again. Where are we all going?

Pausing at the door of my friend's newest home over a carton containing a jar of miso, a waterbed lining, and a decimated set of tinkertoys, I am filled with a sudden warmth and sadness. My gaze wanders past a ridiculous old wicker table which even the Salvation Army wouldn't accept, and out over Somerville's flat three-deckers, to take in the multitude of movers sweating and yearning from here to Jamaica Plain.

For once this year I am off the merry-go-round; having taken good care of myself last spring, I'm only helping out my friend, and will soon be back in a rocking chair on the porch of a place I've come to love, a place where I'm cared about and where bread is baking and dogs are sleeping in accustomed places.

And from my now-safe niche I wonder at the tide, at its breadth and scope — at the continuing surprise of genuine cornfed freshmen seeking Life, chattering excitedly in bare dormitory rooms, hardly realizing that nobody else in this crazy world of transients-in-transit would trade places with them. And I wonder at those hoary old post-graduate students with dirty beards at the other end of the line, fixing up old houses they've bought in Newton and Arlington, places that cry for the smells of woodsmoke and cider, and where, if you close your eyes just a little, you can hear The Band and think you're back in the mountains.

I see a job-hunter from Hunter, watering begonias by the window of a freshly-painted yellow kitchen, smiling wanly at her nylon-stockinged roommate who only ten days ago was just an ad in The Phoenix; a half-crazed genius carelessly renting a dingy flat from which will spring the Great Novel or Theorem; a groping therapy groupie, hoping her newest house will be Home and somehow always missing the point; last year's dorm water-balloon champs rejoicing in their first big move off campus.

Some move because they have been told to: graduate school in Cambridge follows college as surely as Success follows Hard Work. Some move in anger, refugees from suburban pasts, new addresses unknown to parents and old lovers, clean break, fresh start. Some move in love, though it seems that there are more hopes and scary feelings than embraces in all of this moving. Some move in response to deeper rhythms in their lives which have finally overtaken both the old instructions for success and the rage at life lost; they will feel the change of season sharply as the frost touches their now-new choices and dreams once softly green, arraying them brazenly in flames of autumn under cold dark skies, like a challenge.

Some do not move. They have learned a painful secret: our transiency weakens us. They dig in for a fifth winter on Mission Hill or in East Somerville, young middle class whites who by a curious chemistry have tied their fates to the future of communities once not their own, communities in which they are now voters, communities whose children they have now taught in schools or played with in day care centers, communities whose older residents have become their friends, communities which have been spared the scourge of highways and destructive "renewals" in part through their efforts and special talents.

They stay, shedding all college-bred "taste," loving, through some special precious perversion, the pocked streets and ramshackle buildings of these neighborhoods where forty-year-old men go drinking and bowling with the same buddies they had for street hockey at age ten. They stay, savoring truths not shared among us transients who move back and forth around them, who spent last weekend with U-Hauls on our tails, who were raised in transient suburbs where the word was always "up and out."

I pick up my box of miso and tinkertoys. I am not ready for their truths, not ready to tie my fate; and yet there is a new kind of question for me this year with the turning of the leaves. Who knows where or whether we will settle? And who knows whether there will be communities for us, when someday our bones cry "Stop!" All who come here are changed, some so much that it seems there are no places for us to go back to out there beyond Route 128, unless we would band together and build them as we have never done before.

Meanwhile, we try to enjoy ourselves and find lovers and do the best we can; and if there are no buddies from street hockey days, at least we pick up the hitchhikers on Mass. Ave. and try to be gentle with one another. . .