

The Bans of Portland, Maine

At first it was just the upholstered chairs with names like Chippendale and Queen Anne. A few days later, all chairs, no matter their style or raw material.

We were ordered to bring them to the redistribution Center in South Portland by midnight or else the National Sanitation Squad would remove them by force from our homes. No exemptions except wheelchairs. But anyone caught trying to create a fake wheelchair by attaching rollers to regular chairs would face imprisonment or worse.

Each chair would be given a number,

— Can you believe it? They're making this big hollow smack in the middle of the state. And you know what they're going to fill it with?

— New York City. Just take old Francine's word for it.

which would be entered into a file, so future historians would be able to check the records.

By Barbara F. Lefcowitz

Of course. Another sign of our leaders' superb efficiency, my neighbor Marilyn laughed. Another rumor calculated to terrify people into supporting their whim of the moment. Marilyn would be damned if she was going to give up the Rococo Revival balloon-back sidechair that had been in her family for generations.

Pavel, another neighbor, was distraught. Surely he'd be punished for not delivering a chair. But he did not own any, preferring cushions and mats. Would they take his word? "In America this is happening, I cannot believe it..." To be

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safe, he asked me to lend him a chair so he could offer it as his contribution.

Francine, a 90-year-old woman across the way, was more resigned.

"Governments do this all the time. Just you wait and see. Beds will be next. They'll forbid us from sleeping."

I myself figured I'd just hide my Renaissance Revival sofa with its well-worn tufted velvet seat, one of the few items that, along with me, had immigrated to Maine from my New York apartment. Of course, a sofa was not the same as a chair, but it was best to avert any semiotic issues. My plastic kitchen chairs could go; I was planning to buy new ones anyway.

"Trust me," Pavel said. "I lived through the time of the Martial Law in Poland... Once they begin —"

I reminded him of the official government explanation: the decree had been issued in order to protect people from the toxic effects of chairs. Their seats interfered with the proper alignment of the lower spine, as well as the coccyx.

"Yes, now I see," he said. "It's a cover for the socialist revolution. To redistribute goods in order to create a more egalitarian society. Just like in old country. All chairs go to needy public institutions like clinics, halfway houses, prisons. At least they say..."

"Crazy," Marilyn said. "If chairs are bad for human health, why give them to the needy? It's like shipping all those Marlboro cigarettes to Third World countries along with our dented cans."

She laughed one of her heartiest laughs. "Ach, you Americans. So naive," Pavel said. "Not like Europeans..."

Less than a week later the decree was expanded to a ban on anything made of pine — tables, cabinets, shelves, cabins, even pine coffins should any of the city's observant Jews be saving such for their burial containers.

Why? Discovery that the wood of pine trees contains a microorganism smaller and far more dangerous than anthrax spores.

Pavel immediately complied, though he had to spread his canned goods and dishware on the floor as well as clothing previously hidden inside pine cabinets. Not only his sweaters and overalls, but mateless socks as well. Should he jettison the clothing, too, since it had been in contact with the killer pine? Better wait for orders. If indeed all were contaminated, he'd have nothing to wear except

bathing trunks. And soon the weather would turn cold.

Something new was banned each day thereafter. Maine potatoes. Wild blueberries. Flowery wallpaper. All L.L. Bean merchandise...

Marilyn, still skeptical but not laughing as much, begged me to hide her Salem rocker, hand-carved by her grandfather from trees in his own pine grove. And the pine cradle he'd bargained so hard for at a garage sale... Oh, and how could she forget the hand-painted Renaissance Revival pedestal, even though its pine had been bonized and gilded. Not that she was afraid of the Sanitation Squad, but if I could help her out this one time...

It turned out to be more than one time, and Marilyn was not the only person for whom I provided hiding places for their pine artifacts.

It was not until the first Chair and Pine Burning that I began to take the decrees seriously. I could, of course, turn over all my neighbors' contraband to the government, but, as Pavel warned me, not only would everything be burnt in the next such spectacle, but probably I myself.

"Trust me," he said. "Before the Martial Law I lived through Germans and Russians."

He advised me to burn the items myself, even if the result was destruction of my house. Luckily, everything else survived, including my mahogany bed. SRO everywhere, as you can imagine. To watch a movie one had to stand the whole time, all seats having been removed from theaters. And to attend a sports event, a church service, or a formal dinner (of the sort until recently called sit-down").

Either stand, no matter how wobbly and painful, or lie down. At least, Francine repeated, until beds joined the list of the verboten.

Even the words "chair" and "pine" were banned. No more chairwomen or hairmen, no more chairs of academic departments, no more pining for the good old days, pining away from grief over lost loves.

To further justify the purge, some official claimed he had learned via the Internet that terrorists were particularly



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targeting those who sat, since sitting was a sign of bourgeois comfort.

So they announced that to increase homeland security the bans were more than justified. We must show them we stand up tall for America, stand on our own two feet. And pine was doubly suspicious: not only did it carry deadly spores, but sometimes contained knots that resembled eyes. Evil eyes. The eyes of Satan out to destroy all decent human values.

"Bullshit. It's just an ecological trick to help preserve our pine forests," Marilyn said. "You can't trust anyone these days."

"You learn fast," Pavel smiled. "For an American."

The public burnings became more frequent, often accompanied by music and speeches. At first thousands attended, standing, of course, through the five-hour spectacles. Then attendance began to drop. Were people afraid to venture outside their homes? More likely they stayed away because they needed time to dig their underground shelters in anticipation that beds would be next on the list of the banned.

I had begun to dig mine late at night; more like a ditch, which when completed would be 12 feet below the ground. No room for my bed. But I could sleep there on a pile of leaves and grasses just like our most primitive ancestors did to avoid attacks by animals or alien tribes.

For a while all was quiet. Was the ban on sitting sufficient to attain the government's goal of postural purity? And the pine ban enough to save the forests? Some people had become adept enough at the lotus position to sit fairly comfortably on the ground or floor, proving one can adjust to anything. A brave few began to cut down birch trees and shape them into tables...

"I told you so," Marilyn said. "I knew the whole thing was just a crock..."

And she demanded I return her hidden pine, which compelled me to confess my betrayal. Would what you have done?

We figured the Bed Ban would come any day. Instead, we were ordered to get rid of all lobsters in the state of Maine.

Whether underwater or, worse, already on shore, even if already in mid-boil. Out with the lobster traps! Out with all lobster stew, bisque, and sauce. Every restaurant and road stand had to jettison its lobsters at once. No lobster bibs, no paraphernalia like lobster forks. Not even postcards depicting lobsters. Because lobsters, like

the snakehead fish recently discovered in Maryland, had evolved into predatory creatures that not only spread disease but could turn everything a lobster red.

Something new was banned each day thereafter. Flowery wallpaper. All L.L. Bean merchandise. Maine potatoes. Hand-cobbled Dexter shoes. B&M Baked Beans. Wild blueberries. Paper mills. Finally, a sizeable portion of the state of Maine itself.

"Can you believe it?" Francine said. "They're making this big hollow smack in the middle of the state. And you know what they're going to fill it with?"

"Garbage," Marilyn said. "All the garbage from the rest of the country."

"Nuclear waste," Pavel said.

"Money," I said, just for the sake of saying something.

"You're all wrong. They're going to fill it with New York City. Just take old Francine's word for it."


Indeed, the next day our leaders announced that all five boroughs would be deposited into the Great Hollow as soon as the digging was complete. What a boon for tourism! Especially with our shaky economy! People hesitant about visiting the Big Apple could now do so in the comfort of our own state of Maine.

Anyone who wanted to evacuate Maine was free to do so within 48 hours. But few actually did.

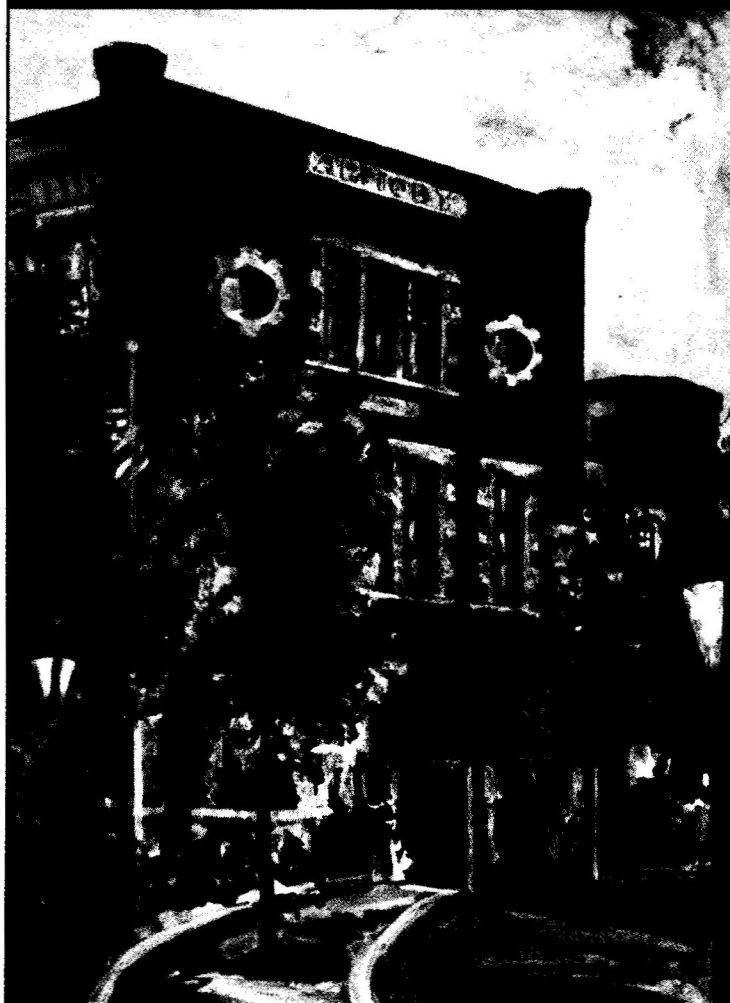
Marilyn moved from Portland to roughly where Millinocket had been and made a fortune selling Statue of Liberty souvenirs. Pavel retrieved his clothes, figuring the Pine Ban was now moot, and quickly got himself a job as a waiter in a famous Hungarian restaurant transported from 2nd Avenue to Bangor. He would teach Polish songs to the gypsy band relocated along with the restaurant.

Francine, I regret to say, disappeared, perhaps into one of the pine coffins still around.

I myself decided I would return to New York City, the real New York, which turned out to look just like Maine: white-washed cottages and lighthouses and lobsters thriving in the East River, where they had flourished as recently as a century ago. Blueberries on Broadway, log cabins on 34th Street.

When the winds cooperated, the aroma of seawater was strong enough to overcome any lingering odors of fish and rather, pulp from the paper mills... 

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