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The Moveable Feast:

by Juilene Osborne-McKnight

I belong to a transfer family. Every couple of years, my husband's company gets the wanderlust on his behalf and sends us to new and exotic locations. One month I may live an hour from New York City in the writing mecca of the civilized world. By the next month I very well could be in Moosehead, Maine or Wolfkill, Michigan.

My situation is not unique. America has become a nation of wanderers. The military, the big corporations and the bad economy have created a country in which we no longer live and die in the town, or even the state, of our birth.

For those of us who are writers, wandering can be doubly difficult. While writing itself is the most portable of careers, actual writing jobs are hard to come by. However, with organization and persistence, you can find writing jobs (and other writers) wherever you go. The following eight steps should help to make your transition less painful. Even if you are not moving, some of these tips may help you to find more writing work right where you are.

1. As soon as you know where you will live, call or write to the Chamber

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of Commerce in your new town. (I also phone the Chambers in all other towns within a forty-five mile driving radius. When you are moving to another place, there is no such thing as too much information.)

Ask the Chamber of Commerce to send you a packet for new residents. This packet will contain population information, addresses and information on schools, lists of businesses and most importantly, the names and addresses of all newspapers, radio and television stations and magazines.

2. Now call the editors of those papers or magazines, etc. Using the phone may seem to violate all the usual rules of publishing courtesy, but I have found that it works much better with local editors than a resume and clip packet. Mail does not always bring a response. I have had packets get lost in the shuffle or be completely ignored.

Be personable and brief on the phone. Tell the editor that you are a freelancer/columnist/stringer/editor, or whatever, and that you will move to his city soon. Ask if you may send the editor your packet. Tell him that you would be willing to string features, cover town meetings or even proofread copy to begin. Then send the packet immediately while the conversation is fresh in his mind.

Do be prepared to start at the bottom wherever you go, no matter how well-placed you were in your pre-

vious writing job. I have covered such weighty topics as prom dresses and early snowfalls. I have gone fishing in the pouring April rain for a story. Plum assignments are not handed to newcomers. Each editor must learn to trust you and your work before he will let you review theater on Broadway or write your own column.

If you fail to land writing work right away, don't give up. Once you have lived in an area for a few months, you will meet people and get involved in various events. Soon you will be able to call the same editor with a specific story proposal. Remind him of who you are and that you previously sent him your packet. Often, this professional reminder, combined with a focused story idea, will be enough to get you started.

3. As soon as you arrive in an area, head for the library. Ask the librarian if she knows of any functioning writers' groups. Many writers' groups list their meetings along with a contact phone number in the calendar sections of the newspaper. (Most calendar sections run on Thursdays.)

As soon as you find a writers' group, attend a meeting, join and become active. Of course you will be starving for contact with other writers by now, but the reason for joining a group is far more than social. Writers know other writers; they know editors; they know which companies are looking for ad

writers and which newspapers are about to expand or lose staffers. In every place I have lived, writers from my group have put me onto jobs that I did not know existed.

You may find that the association you join is not quite right for you. Some groups are too large; in one place where I lived, the local writers organization boasted seventy-five members! Some clubs may be too social, others too interested in producing their own literary magazines. No matter. Join anyway. Eventually you can find a smaller, more tailored group to match your own reading and writing style. In the meantime, the contacts are invaluable.

4. While you are at the library, check also for the possibility that publishing companies are headquartered locally, since not all are based in New York City. I have worked for publishers in upstate New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Within a scant hour's drive of where I live now are two religious houses, a huge children's publishing house and a health/nutrition company.

When you offer your services, be prepared again to start at the bottom. You might copyproof galleys of books or be a first reader for manuscripts. You might prepare advertising or promotional copy. Don't look down your nose at work that does not provide a byline. Such work will bring you a modicum of income and give you contacts within the writing business which could lead to better things.

If nothing else, I have found that editing other people's work is one of the best ways to learn to become a better writer yourself.

5. As soon as possible, contact universities, community colleges and vocational/technical schools. Ask

them to send their listings of adult and continuing education courses.

If there are writing courses in place, sign up for one. Here, as with a writers' group, you will meet other writers and set up the contacts and networking you will need to get your writing going again.

If no such writing courses exist, volunteer to teach one. I have taught writing courses in every state where I have lived. They have brought me lifelong friendships, forced me to examine how I write, helped me organize my time, and made me feel that each move expands the web of writers with whom I am linked.

6. From the first week that you move into your new home, begin to explore the region, but do your adventuring as a journalist. Wherever you go—to the state park, to the historic section of the city—take your notebook, camera and shoulder bag. Take slide photos of everything. Jot down notes. Stuff your shoulder bag with brochures, maps and information on tourist attractions.


People who have lived for a long time in a region take it for granted; they no longer see it as a place to visit. However, you will see it with a fresh eye. Regional magazines and newspaper travel sections are always on the lookout for that fresh perspective. When I moved to New York, tourist attractions that the locals hadn't bothered to visit landed me four assignments with travel and regional magazines within the first four months of my move.

7. If you do not land writing work immediately, don't despair. Get a writing-related job where you will be in contact with people who like to read or write. I took a job in a bookstore

when regular writing did not materialize after one of my moves. Simply by talking to patrons, I found three writers, a magazine editor and a number of teachers who asked me to come and speak to their students. As a side bonus, I found that I loved working with books, I learned a great deal about the publishing industry that my teaching and writing had not taught me and I received a 35% discount on my favorite (and most expensive) hobby. When writing and teaching work did materialize, I liked the bookstore so much that I stayed part-time.

8. Right now, before you pack a single dish or change a single address, begin that major writing project you have been promising yourself. Start your novel. Begin the family history you want to write for your children.

You'll have some lonely, empty spells during the transition from one location to another, but beginning a big project now will give you a feeling of continuity in your new location. You also will have work to tide you over. In just this fashion, I have finished one novel and gotten well into a second. When writing, teaching or editing jobs begin to materialize after your move, time for the big projects may be lost, and you may have to set them aside until your next move.

Moving to a new area constitutes a major life-change and ranks high on the stress list. If you are currently in the throes of relocation, you probably are feeling scared, resentful and more than a little lonely. Those feelings will pass with time. Working on your writing goals can help shorten your adjustment and speed the feeling that you are getting your life back on track. Get busy. *Vaya con Dios.* 

How to Take Your Writing on the Road