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PALM BEACH SENDS E-MAIL

by Larry Freeman

Palm Beach glanced anxiously toward our home on Lake Echo. The winter had been long, filled with blowing winds and drifting snow. Now spring was on the way. The days were stretching longer. The northern lights grew dim.

Palm Beach was becoming impatient. He tried to raise up on his haunches for a better view, but his air bags were empty. He needed help. He longed for company. Where were his owners? What were they doing? Didn't they know it was time for action, time for spring house cleaning, time to be on the road again? He spied us sitting in the breakfast nook, just inside the glass patio doors, sipping hot tea by the pot-bellied stove. Better they could be sipping tea with me, Palm Beach thought. He stretched. He yawned. He contemplated. His icicle eyebrows blinked. A sly look spread across his countenance. Slowly, he started letting air out of the right-front tire.

Eva set her cup of tea on the counter and moved to look out the glass doors. A battered blue-and-white Chevrolet with classic fins was rolling down the driveway. "Wouldn't you know it! Here comes Pierre with the new radio and we don't have the motorhome cleaned yet. And look! There's something strange about Palm Beach. I think his front tire is flat."

Four months of solitude had been well spent on a variety of projects. One of them, amateur radio, was rapidly maturing into an exciting new hobby. When ice storms had disconnected electricity for three days throughout the Laurentian ski resorts, leaving wood stoves responsible for warmth and comfort, the computer and its radio sidekick had provided reliable communications. Even e-mail flourished uninterrupted. An exciting sense of new independence had been born. This year, it would be comforting to know that road assistance during an off-the-track emergency would be just a click of the microphone away.

Inside Palm Beach there was calamity. Red Squirrel was running frantically from cupboard to

cupboard, quickly gathering his things. Until now, the winter's sublease had worked out well. But the spring thaw had turned the skating rink next to the leaking side door into water, making his nest beside the propane heater a soggy mess. Worse, he was about to be invaded. The side door was creaking. Spring house cleaners were arriving. Red Squirrel ran to the front of the passenger seat and quickly ducked out through his secret passage.

"We need to fix that door, have it rebent or something. It looks like a waterfall when it rains. Just look at the floor!" Eva was recalling a growing list of repairs collected from last year's sojourns. "And remember the cold air that was blowing on my feet up by the passenger seat? I stuffed a towel under the dashboard, but it didn't stop the draft. I think animals have been coming in there."

Pierre grunted as his ample frame filled the open doorway. He was an expert on anything related to electronics. He tuned in satellite television when others could not, manufactured state-of-the-art computers at discount prices from his converted garage, and advised local hams on worldwide communications. The installation of our equipment was a courtesy, one ham to another.

On the exterior, Palm Beach had assumed the aspect of a porcupine. He seemed to be sprouting miniature antennas in all directions. In the autumn, an 18-inch satellite dish had been added to the existing AM/FM and CB units. Now Pierre was mounting a ham-radio antenna on the passenger-side, rear-view mirror.

Inside Palm Beach, a bookcase-shaped rack had been attached to the forward wall behind the driver's seat where the bunk beds used to be located. Last year it held the computer, TV and an array of literature. This year an amateur radio and a small box called a Terminal Node Controller (TNC) would be added to the shelves. The TNC connects the radio to the computer. It functions as an interpreter, translating the computer's output for dis-

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