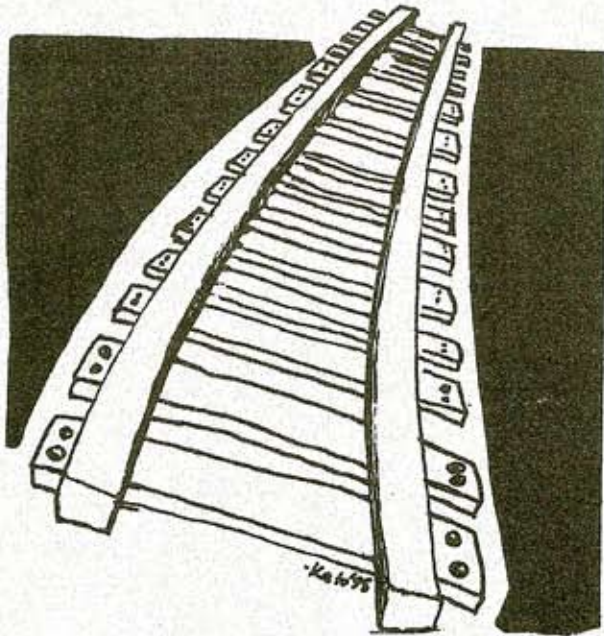


# Sleeping with solar



## Yours from the Perimeter

by Paul Lefebvre

There's a power plant in my bedroom that hangs on the wall and hums softly like my mother used to do when engaged in something she really liked, such as braiding a rug. But since no man wants to see his mother in his bedroom I have decided to call my new roommate Victoria, a name my mother admittedly would no doubt approve. A compact, well-stacked little unit, she has a regal, purposeful presence and represents something of a victory — a step out of one era and into another. Now the bedroom is no longer dark as she is constantly blinking in color — green and red and sometimes yellow but mostly green as in green for go. I have been pining for someone like her ever since I moved back into the woods in the late eighties.

At the time I had been living in Lyndon Center with Rocky at a place well known among college students as the Red House. The fact that no college students were living there any more had not affected its character or reputation as a place to hang out and sit on the stoop of what had been a century ago a two-family apartment house with identical quarters, including front doors that opened on to stairways that led to facing bedrooms, easily large enough to accommodate a

family of four. Only our next door neighbor was a single, younger guy, who lived a rather solitary life with a dog named Frank. All four of us were getting along and doing fine when the place was sold, and just like that the Red House wasn't the Red House any more.

"Let's move to Newark," I said to Rocky. "I've only got a couple more months of work to do on the house before we can move in. How much time do we have before we have to get out of here?"

We had been together a year and were still feeling each other out as couples do who have fallen in love before and failed to make it work. My house was far enough off the beaten track to discourage the kind of drop-in visits we had come to expect from our friends. But there was something else beyond its remote location that was causing Rocky to feel apprehensive.

"What is it?" I said to her one night, fearing she might be having a change of heart.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I guess it's the thought of moving back into the woods and the darkness. You know, after living all those years in Lost Nation with kerosene and gaslights, I've gotten so I like television and electricity. I'm sorry. I just don't want to spoil it for you."

"Look, we'll be fine," I said. "The house is wired and I've got a generator. We're not going back to Lost Nation."

We moved to Newark on Halloween in the rain and on a night my grandmother might say was "as dark as a pocket." I left first and by the time Rocky arrived, the generator was running and the house was lit up like a palace. The next night the generator failed to start and we ran around gathering every kerosene lamp we could find.

"I knew it," she said, as we sat across from one another at the kitchen table. Unpacked boxes were still scattered across the floor.

I took a deep breath and looked at her in the lamp's flickering light. She was smiling. A few days later my father came to our rescue and bought us a new generator. "You can't live up there in the dark," he said in the scolding voice he sometimes assumed to mask his affection.

As a person who was thought to be mechanically brain dead, I evolved over the years to where I could make a generator run in all but the most extreme cases. I could re-gap a spark plug while holding a flashlight, fix a fuel line, and

siphon bad gas out of a tank using a small rubber hose. In the 20 years or so I've lived in Newark, I can count on one hand the nights we had to make do without electricity. But things change.

All those years of fiddling with a faulty plug or carrying the generator into the house on winter nights when the temperature was falling to obscene depths had begun to take their toll. The price, though, for bringing in power still remained exorbitant. And with Rocky's death, I was learning the effort you extend for two people is far more satisfying than it is for one. Still, when Tom, who owns a camp up the hill, came through the door one day with a new solar panel for sale at a better than reasonable price, I jumped on it.

Whatever my expectations were at the time, they didn't get me very far. It's been more than two years since I've had a solar panel stored on my porch, collecting nothing else but dust. It is still there today and will be there tomorrow if no one comes by and takes it off my hands. I've moved on in a direction I didn't see coming until I met a big-hearted fellow who has an evangelical passion for all things solar. On a winter day when I had an itch to change my life around, I took a drive out to his place of business in Sutton to see what he might recommend I do with my solitary panel.

"I think I know where there's a complete,

state-of-the-art system that sounds like it might fit your needs," he said. "If you're interested, I'll check to see if it's still available."

A week or so later, we drove to Newport and inspected a system designed for a place off the grid with four panels capable of producing 520 watts of power. One didn't have to be an expert to see that it had been impeccably maintained, right down to the batteries that the owner had kept charged during the entire time the system had been idle. Two days later I bought it for less money than I spent recently on a 12-year-old car.

It has taken a couple of months and a few false starts to get the panels hung on the south wall of the house and connected. It cost a little more than I anticipated and like most projects, I've got a few extra parts left over that could go begging for a home. But I couldn't be more pleased with the results. And better still, the friends who engineered the job and provided the elbow grease are still my friends.

Today, on a partially cloudy day, the panels are putting out between seven and 11 amps of power. People who have more experience with solar tell me I shouldn't have to start my generator once this summer. Perhaps. All I know is that I still have the note Rich left after initially hooking up the batteries to the system.

"Paul," it reads. "Go ahead — turn on a light. No generator required."