

PREPARATION FOR THE WINTER IN NEW ENGLAND is drastic. The summer population must be large and the roads and highways gorged with refugees from the sticky heat of Boston and New York. Now the hot-dog stands, the ice-cream parlors, the curiosity shops, deerskin-mocasin-and-glove places, were all shuttered and closed, many of them with cards saying "Open Next Summer." I can never get used to the thousands of antique shops along the roads, all bulging with authentic and attested trash from an earlier time. I believe the population of the thirteen colonies was less than four million souls, and every one of them must have been frantically turning out tables, chairs, china, glass, candle molds, and oddly shaped bits of iron, copper, and brass for future sale to twentieth-century tourists. There are enough antiques for sale along the roads of New England alone to furnish the houses of a population of fifty million. If I were a good businessman, and cared a tittle for my unborn great grandchildren, which I do not, I would gather all the junk and the wrecked automobiles, comb the city dumps, and pile these gleanings in mountains and spray the whole thing with that stuff the Navy uses to mothball ships. At the end of a hundred years my descendants would be permitted to open this treasure trove and would be the antique kings of the world. If the battered, cracked, and broken stuff our ancestors tried to get rid of now brings so much money, think what a 1954 Oldsmobile, or a 1960 toastmaster will bring—and a vintage

Waring Mixor—Lord, the possibilities are endless! Things we have to pay to have hauled away could bring fortunes. 41

If I seem to be over-interested in junk, it is because I am, and I have a lot of it, too—half a garage full of bits and broken pieces. I use these things for repairing other things. Recently I stopped my car in front of the display yard of a junk dealer near Sag Harbor. As I was looking courteously at the stock, it suddenly occurred to me that I had more than he had. But it can be seen that I do have a genuine and almost miserly interest in worthless objects. My excuse is that in this era of planned obsolescence, when a thing breaks down I can usually find something in my collection to repair it—a toilet, or a motor, or a lawn mower. But I guess the truth is that I simply like junk.

Before I started my tour, I had known that at intervals of every few days I would have to stop at auto courts or motels, not so much to sleep but for the sake of hot, luxurious bathing. In Rocinante I heated water in a tea kettle and took sponge baths, but bathing in a bucket delivers little cleanliness and no pleasure whatever. A deep-dish sit-down in a tub with scalding water is a pure joy. Quite early on my trip, however, I invented a method for washing clothes which you will go a long way to better. It came about this way. I had a large plastic garbage bucket with cover and bail. Since the normal movement of the truck tipped it over, I tethered it by a length of strong elastic rope of cotton-covered rubber to the clothes pole in my little closet, where it could jiggle to its heart's content without spilling. After a day of this, I opened it to dispose of the stuff at a roadside garbage can and found the most thoroughly mixed and kneaded garbage I have ever seen. I suppose all great inventions spring from some such experience. The next morning, I washed the plastic bucket, put in two shirts, underwear, and socks, added hot water and detergent, and hung it by its rubber rope to the clothes

42 pole, where it jiggled and danced crazily all day. That night I rinsed the clothes in a stream, and you've never seen clothes so clean. Inside Rocinante I strung a nylon line close to the window and hung the clothes to dry. From that time on, my clothing was washed on one day of driving and dried on the next. I even went overboard and washed sheets and pillow cases that way. So much for daintiness, but it didn't take care of hot baths.

Not far outside of Bangor I stopped at an auto court and rented a room. It wasn't expensive. The sign said "Greatly Reduced Winter Rates." It was immaculate; everything was done in plastics—the floors, the curtain, table tops of stainless burnless plastic, lamp shades of plastic. Only the bedding and the towels were of a natural material. I went to the small restaurant run in conjunction. It was all plastic too—the table linen, the butter dish. The sugar and crackers were wrapped in cellophane, the jelly in a small plastic coffin sealed with cellophane. It was early evening and I was the only customer. Even the waitress wore a sponge-off apron. She wasn't happy, but then she wasn't unhappy. She wasn't anything. But I don't believe anyone is a nothing. There has to be something inside, if only to keep the skin from collapsing. This vacant eye, listless hand, this damask cheek dusted like a doughnut with plastic powder, had to have a memory or a dream.

On a chance I asked, "How soon you going to Florida?"

"Nex' week," she said listlessly. Then something stirred in that aching void. "Say, how do you know I'm going?"

"Read your mind, I guess."

She looked at my beard. "You with a show?"

"No."

"Then how do you mean read my mind?"

"Maybe I guessed. Like it down there?"

"Oh, sure! I go every year. Lots of waitress jobs in the winter."

“What do you do down there, I mean for fun?”

“Oh, nothing. Just fool around.”

“Do you fish or swim?”

“Not much. I just fool around. I don’t like that sand, makes me itch.”

“Make good money?”

“It’s a cheap crowd.”

“Cheap?”

“They rather spen’ it on booze.”

“Than what?”

“Than tips. Just the same here with the summer people. Cheap.”

Strange how one person can saturate a room with vitality, with excitement. Then there are others, and this dame was one of them, who can drain off energy and joy, can suck pleasure dry and get no sustenance from it. Such people spread a grayness in the air about them. I’d been driving a long time, and perhaps my energy was low and my resistance down. She got me. I felt so blue and miserable I wanted to crawl into a plastic cover and die. What a date she must be, what a lover! I tried to imagine that last and couldn’t. For a moment I considered giving her a five-dollar tip, but I knew what would happen. She wouldn’t be glad. She’d just think I was crazy.

I went back to my clean little room. I don’t ever drink alone. It’s not much fun. And I don’t think I will until I am an alcoholic. But this night I got a bottle of vodka from my stores and took it to my cell. In the bathroom two water tumblers were sealed in cellophane sacks with the words: “These glasses are sterilized for your protection.” Across the toilet seat a strip of paper bore the message: “This seat has been sterilized with ultraviolet light for your protection.” Everyone was protecting me and it was horrible. I tore the glasses from their covers. I violated the toilet-seat seal with my foot. I poured half a tumbler of

44 vodka and drank it and then another. Then I lay deep in hot water in the tub and I was utterly miserable, and nothing was good anywhere.

Charley caught it from me, but he is a gallant dog. He came into the bathroom and that old fool played with the plastic bath mat like a puppy. What strength of character, what a friend! Then he rushed to the door and barked as though I were being invaded. And if it hadn't been for all that plastic he might have succeeded.

I remember an old Arab in North Africa, a man whose hands had never felt water. He gave me mint tea in a glass so coated with use that it was opaque, but he handed me companionship, and the tea was wonderful because of it. And without any protection my teeth didn't fall out, nor did running sores develop. I began to formulate a new law describing the relationship of protection to despondency. A sad soul can kill you quicker, far quicker, than a germ.

If Charley hadn't shaken and bounced and said "Ftt," I might have forgotten that every night he gets two dog biscuits and a walk to clear his head. I put on clean clothes and went out with him into the star-raddled night. And the Aurora Borealis was out. I've seen it only a few times in my life. It hung and moved with majesty in folds like an infinite traveler upstage in an infinite theater. In colors of rose and lavender and purple it moved and pulsed against the night, and the frost-sharpened stars shone through it. What a thing to see at a time when I needed it so badly! I wondered for a moment whether I should grab that waitress and kick her behind out to look at it, but I didn't dare. She could make eternity and infinity melt and run out through your fingers. The air had a sweet burn of frost, and Charley, moving ahead, saluted in detail a whole row of clipped privet, and he steamed as he went. When he came back, he was pleased and glad for me. I gave him

three dog biscuits, rumped up the sterile bed, and went out to sleep in Rocinante. 45

It is not unlike me that in heading toward the West I should travel east. That has always been my tendency. I was going to Deer Isle for a very good reason. My long-time friend and associate, Elizabeth Otis, has been going to Deer Isle every year. When she speaks of it, she gets an other-world look in her eyes and becomes completely inarticulate. When I planned my trip she said, "Of course you'll stop at Deer Isle."

"It's out of my way."

"Nonsense," she said in a tone I know very well. I gathered from her voice and manner that if I didn't go to Deer Isle I had better never show my face in New York again. She then telephoned Miss Eleanor Brace, with whom she always stays, and that was that. I was committed. All I knew about Deer Isle was that there was nothing you could say about it, but if I didn't go I was crazy. Also, Miss Brace was waiting for me.

I got thoroughly lost in Bangor, what with traffic and trucks, horns blaring and lights changing. I vaguely remembered that I should be on U.S. Highway 1, and I found it and drove ten miles in the wrong direction, back toward New York. I had been given written directions on how to go, detailed directions, but have you ever noticed that instructions from one who knows the country get you more lost than you are, even when they are accurate? I also got lost in Ellsworth, which I am told is impossible. Then the roads narrowed and the lumber trucks roared past me. I was lost almost all day, even though I found Blue Hill and Sedgwick. Late in the despairing afternoon I stopped my truck and approached a majestic Maine state trooper. What a man he was, granite as any quarried about Port

land, a perfect model for some future equestrian statue. I wonder if future heroes will be carved in marble jeeps or patrol cars?

"I seem to be lost, officer. I wonder if you could direct me?"

"Where is it you want to go?"

"I'm trying to get to Deer Isle."

He looked at me closely, and when he was satisfied that I wasn't joking he swung on his hips and pointed across a small stretch of open water, and he didn't bother to speak.

"Is that it?"

He nodded from up to down and left his head down.

"Well, how do I get there?"

I have always heard that Maine people are rather taciturn, but for this candidate for Mount Rushmore to point twice in an afternoon was to be unbearably talkative. He swung his chin in a small arc in the direction I had been traveling. If the afternoon had not been advancing I would have tried for another word from him even if doomed to failure. "Thank you," I said, and sounded to myself as though I rattled on forever.

First there was a very high iron bridge, as high-arched as a rainbow, and after a bit a low stone bridge built in the shape of an S-curve, and I was on Deer Isle. My written directions said that I must take every road branch that turned right, and the word "every" was underlined. I climbed a hill and turned right into pine woods on a smaller road, and turned right on a very narrow road and turned right again on wheel tracks on pine needles. It is so easy once you have been over it. I couldn't believe I would find the place, but in a hundred yards there was the great old house of Miss Eleanor Brace, and there she was to welcome me. I let Charley out, and suddenly an angry streak of gray burned across the clearing in the pines and bucketed into the house. That was George. He didn't welcome

me and he particularly didn't welcome Charley. I never did rightly see George, but his sulking presence was everywhere. For George is an old gray cat who has accumulated a hatred of people and things so intense that even hidden upstairs he communicates his prayer that you will go away. If the bomb should fall and wipe out every living thing except Miss Brace, George would be happy. That's the way he would design a world if it were up to him. And he could never know that Charley's interest in him was purely courteous; if he did, he would be hurt in his misanthropy, for Charley has no interest in cats whatever, even for chasing purposes.

We didn't give George any trouble because for two nights we stayed in Rocinante, but I am told that when guests sleep in the house George goes into the pine woods and watches from afar, grumbling his dissatisfaction and pouring out his dislike. Miss Brace admits that for the purposes of a cat, whatever they are, George is worthless. He isn't good company, he is not sympathetic, and he has little aesthetic value.

"Perhaps he catches mice and rats," I suggested helpfully.

"Never," said Miss Brace. "Wouldn't think of it. And do you want to know something? George is a girl."

I had to restrain Charley because the unseen presence of George was everywhere. In a more enlightened day when witches and familiars were better understood, George would have found his, or rather her, end in a bonfire, because if ever there was a familiar, an envoy of the devil, a consorter with evil spirits, George is it.

One doesn't have to be sensitive to feel the strangeness of Deer Isle. And if people who have been going there for many years cannot describe it, what can I do after two days? It is an island that nestles like a suckling against the breast of Maine, but there are many of those. The sheltered darkling water seems to suck up light, but I've seen that



48 before. The pine woods rustle and the wind cries over open country that is like Dartmoor. Stonington, Deer Isle's chief town, does not look like an American town at all in place or in architecture. Its houses are layered down to the calm water of the bay. This town very closely resembles Lyme Regis on the coast of Dorset, and I would willingly bet that its founding settlers came from Dorset or Somerset or Cornwall. Maine speech is very like that in West Country England, the double vowels pronounced as they are in Anglo-Saxon, but the resemblance is doubly strong on Deer Isle. And the coastal people below the Bristol Channel are secret people, and perhaps magic people. There's aught behind their eyes, hidden away so deep that perhaps even they do not know they have it. And that same thing is so in Deer Islers. To put it plainly, this Isle is like Avalon; it must disappear when you are not there. Or take for example the mystery of the coon cats, huge tailless cats with gray coats barred with black, which is why they are called coon cats. They are wild; they live in the woods and are very fierce. Once in a while a native brings in a kitten and raises it, and it is a pleasure to him, almost an honor, but coon cats are rarely even approximately tame. You take a chance of being raked or bitten all the time. These cats are obviously of Manx origin, and even interbreeding with tame cats they contribute taillessness. The story is that the great ancestors of the coon cats were brought by some ship's captain and that they soon went wild. But I wonder where they get their size. They are twice as big as any Manx cat I ever saw. Could it be that they bred with bobcat or lynx? I don't know. Nobody knows.

Down by the Stonington Harbor the summer boats were being pulled up for storage. And not only here but in other inlets nearby are very large lobster pounds crawling with those dark-shelled Maine lobsters from the dark water which are the best lobsters in the world. Miss Brace or-

dered up three, not more than a pound and a half, she said, and that night their excellence was demonstrated beyond a doubt. There are no lobsters like these—simply boiled, with no fancy sauces, only melted butter and lemon, they have no equals anywhere. Even shipped or flown alive away from their dark homes, they lose something.

At a wonderful store in Stonington, half hardware store and half ship's chandler, I bought a kerosene lamp with a tin reflector for Rocinante. I had the fear that I might somewhere run out of butane gas, and how would I read in bed then? I screwed the lamp bracket to the wall over my bed and trimmed the wick to make a golden butterfly of flame. And often on my trip I used it for warmth and color as well as light. It was exactly the same lamp that was in all the rooms at the ranch when I was a child. And no pleasanter light was ever designed, although old timers say that whale oil makes a nicer flame.

I have demonstrated that I can't describe Deer Isle. There is something about it that opens no door to words. But it stays with you afterward, and, more than that, things you didn't know you saw come back to you after you have left. One thing I remember very clearly. It might have been caused by the season with a quality of light, or the autumn clarity. Everything stood out separate from everything else, a rock, a rounded lump of sea-polished driftwood on a beach, a roof line. Each pine tree was itself and separate even if it was a part of a forest. Drawing a very long bow of relationships, could I say that the people have that same quality? Surely I never met such ardent individuals. I would hate to try to force them to do anything they didn't want to do. I heard many stories about the Isle—I remember it is Isle and not Island—and was given much taciturn advice. I will repeat only one admonishment from a native of Maine, and I will not put a name to that person for fear of reprisal.

50 "Don't ever ask directions of a Maine native," I was told.

"Why ever not?"

"Somehow we think it is funny to misdirect people and we don't smile when we do it, but we laugh inwardly. It is our nature."

I wonder if that is true. I could never test it, because through my own efforts I am lost most of the time without any help from anyone.

I have spoken with approval, even affection, of Roci-nante but not of the pick-up truck on which the camper top rode. It was a new model, with a powerful V-6 engine. It had automatic transmission and an oversized generator to give me lights inside the cabin if I should need them. The cooling system was so loaded with antifreeze that it could have withstood polar weather. I believe that American-made automobiles for passengers are made to wear out so that they must be replaced. This is not so with the trucks. A trucker requires many more thousands of miles of good service than a passenger-car owner. He is not to be dazzled with trimming or fins or doodads and he is not required by his status to buy a new model every year or so to maintain social face. Everything about my truck was made to last. Its frame was heavy, the metal rigid, the engine big and sturdy. Of course I treated it well in matters of oil changes and greasing, and I did not drive it to its limit or force it to do acrobatics required of sports cars. The cab was double-walled, and a good heater had been installed. When I returned after more than ten thousand miles the engine was only well broken in. And it never failed or stuttered even once during the journey.

I moved up the coast of Maine, through Millbridge and Addison and Machias and Perry and South Robbinston, until there was no more coast. I never knew or had forgotten how much of Maine sticks up like a thumb into Canada with New Brunswick on the east. We know so little of our own

geography. Why, Maine extends northward almost to the mouth of the St. Lawrence, and its upper border is perhaps a hundred miles north of Quebec. And another thing I had conveniently forgotten was how incredibly huge America is. As I drove north through the little towns and the increasing forest rolling away to the horizon, the season changed quickly and out of all proportion. Perhaps it was my getting away from the steadying hand of the sea, and also perhaps I was getting very far north. The houses had a snow-beaten look, and many were crushed and deserted, driven to earth by the winters. Except in the towns there was evidence of a population which had once lived here and farmed and had its being and had then been driven out. The forests were marching back, and where farm wagons once had been only the big logging trucks rumbled along. And the game had come back, too; deer strayed on the roads and there were marks of bear.

There are customs, attitudes, myths and directions and changes that seem to be part of the structure of America. And I propose to discuss them as they were first thrust on my attention. While these discussions go on you are to imagine me bowling along on some little road or pulled up behind a bridge, or cooking a big pot of lima beans and salt pork. And the first of these has to do with hunting. I could not have escaped hunting if I had wanted to, for open seasons spangle the autumn. We have inherited many attitudes from our recent ancestors who wrestled this continent as Jacob wrestled the angel, and the pioneers won. From them we take a belief that every American is a natural-born hunter. And every fall a great number of men set out to prove that without talent, training, knowledge, or practice they are dead shots with rifle or shotgun. The results are horrid. From the moment I left Sag Harbor the guns were booming at the migrating ducks, and as I drove in Maine the rifle shots in the forests would have fright-

52 ened off any number of redcoats so long as they didn't know what was happening. This is bound to get me a bad name as a sportsman, but let me say at once that I have nothing against the killing of animals. Something has to kill them, I suppose. In my youth I often crawled miles on my belly through freezing wind for the pure glory of blasting a mudhen which even soaked in salt water made poor eating. I don't greatly care for venison or bear or moose or elk except for the livers. The recipes, the herbs, the wine, the preparation that goes into a good venison dish would make an old shoe a gourmet's delight. If I were hungry, I would happily hunt anything that runs or crawls or flies, even relatives, and tear them down with my teeth. But it isn't hunger that drives millions of armed American males to forests and hills every autumn, as the high incidence of heart failure among the hunters will prove. Somehow the hunting process has to do with masculinity, but I don't quite know how. I know there are any number of good and efficient hunters who know what they are doing; but many more are overweight gentlemen, primed with whisky and armed with high-powered rifles. They shoot at anything that moves or looks as though it might, and their success in killing one another may well prevent a population explosion. If the casualties were limited to their own kind there would be no problem, but the slaughter of cows, pigs, farmers, dogs, and highway signs makes autumn a dangerous season in which to travel. A farmer in upper New York State painted the word cow in big black letters on both sides of his white bossy, but the hunters shot it anyway. In Wisconsin, as I was driving through, a hunter shot his own guide between the shoulder blades. The coroner questioning this nimrod asked, "Did you think he was a deer?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"But you weren't sure he was a deer."

"Well, no sir. I guess not."

With the rolling barrage going on in Maine, of course I was afraid for myself. Four automobiles were hit on opening day, but mainly I was afraid for Charley. I know that a poodle looks very like a buck deer to one of these hunters, and I had to find some way of protecting him. In Rocinante there was a box of red Kleenex that someone had given me as a present. I wrapped Charley's tail in red Kleenex and fastened it with rubber bands. Every morning I renewed his flag, and he wore it all the way west while bullets whined and whistled around us. This is not intended to be funny. The radios warned against carrying a white handkerchief. Too many hunters seeing a flash of white have taken it for the tail of a running deer and cured a head cold with a single shot.

But this legacy of the frontiersman is not a new thing. When I was a child on the ranch near Salinas, California, we had a Chinese cook who regularly made a modest good thing of it. On a ridge not far away, a sycamore log lay on its side supported by two of its broken branches. Lee's attention was drawn to this speckled fawn-colored chunk of wood by the bullet holes in it. He nailed a pair of horns to one end and then retired to his cabin until deer season was over. Then he harvested the lead from the old tree trunk. Some seasons he got fifty or sixty pounds of it. It wasn't a fortune but it was wages. After a couple of years, when the tree was completely shot away, Lee replaced it with four gunny sacks of sand and the same antlers. Then it was even easier to harvest his crop. If he had put out fifty of them it would have been a fortune, but Lee was a humble man who didn't care for mass production.