

MAINE SEEMED TO STRETCH ON ENDLESSLY. I FELT as Peary must have when he approached what he thought was the North Pole. But I wanted to see Aroostook County, the big northern county of Maine. There are three great potato-raising sections—Idaho, Suffolk County on Long Island, and Aroostook, Maine. Lots of people had talked of Aroostook County, but I had never met anyone who had actually been there. I had been told that the crop is harvested by Canucks from Canada who flood over the border at harvest time. My way went endlessly through forest country and past many lakes, not yet frozen. As often as I could I chose the small wood roads, and they are not conducive to speed. The temperature lifted and it rained endlessly and the forests wept. Charley never got dry, and smelled as though he were mildewed. The sky was the color of wet gray aluminum and there was no indication on the translucent shield where the sun might be, so I couldn't tell direction. On a curving road I might have been traveling east or south or west instead of the north I wanted. That old fake about the moss growing on the north sides of trees lied to me when I was a Boy Scout. Moss grows on the shady side, and that may be any side. I determined to buy a compass in the next town, but there wasn't any next town on the road I was traveling. The darkness crept down and the rain drummed on the steel roof of the cab and the windshield wipers sobbed their arcs. Tall dark trees lined the road, crowding the gravel. It seemed hours since I had passed a car or a house or a store, for this was the country gone back to for-

est. A desolate loneliness settled on me—almost a frightening loneliness. Charley, wet and shivering, curled up in his corner of the seat and offered no companionship. I pulled in behind the approach to a concrete bridge, but couldn't find a level place on the sloping roadside.

Even the cabin was dismal and damp. I turned the gas mantle high, lit the kerosene lamp, and lighted two burners of my stove to drive the loneliness away. The rain drummed on the metal roof. Nothing in my stock of foods looked edible. The darkness fell and the trees moved closer. Over the rain drums I seemed to hear voices, as though a crowd of people muttered and mumbled offstage. Charley was restless. He didn't bark an alarm, but he growled and whined uneasily, which is very unlike him, and he didn't eat his supper and he left his water dish untouched—and that by a dog who drinks his weight in water every day and needs to because of the outgo. I succumbed utterly to my desolation, made two peanut-butter sandwiches, and went to bed and wrote letters home, passing my loneliness around. Then the rain stopped falling and the trees dripped and I helped to spawn a school of secret dangers. Oh, we can populate the dark with horrors, even we who think ourselves informed and sure, believing nothing we cannot measure or weigh. I knew beyond all doubt that the dark things crowding in on me either did not exist or were not dangerous to me, and still I was afraid. I thought how terrible the nights must have been in a time when men knew the things were there and were deadly. But no, that's wrong. If I knew they were there, I would have weapons against them, charms, prayers, some kind of alliance with forces equally strong but on my side. Knowing they were not there made me defenseless against them and perhaps more afraid.

Long ago I owned a little ranch in the Santa Cruz mountains in California. In one place a forest of giant madrone trees joined their tops over a true tarn, a black, spring-fed

56 lake. If there is such a thing as a haunted place, that one was haunted, made so by dim light strained through the leaves and various tricks of perspective. I had working for me a Filipino man, a hill man, short and dark and silent, of the Maori people perhaps. Once, thinking he must have come from a tribal system which recognizes the unseen as a part of reality, I asked this man if he was not afraid of the haunted place, particularly at night. He said he was not afraid because years before a witch doctor gave him a charm against evil spirits.

“Let me see that charm,” I asked.

“It’s words,” he said. “It’s a word charm.”

“Can you say them to me?”

“Sure,” he said and he droned, “*In nomine Patris et Fillii et Spiritus Sancti.*”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

He raised his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s a charm against evil spirits so I am not afraid of them.”

I’ve dredged this conversation out of a strange-sounding Spanish but there is no doubt of his charm; and it worked for him.

Lying in my bed under the weeping night I did my best to read to take my mind out of misery, but while my eyes moved on the lines I listened to the night. On the edge of sleep a new sound jerked me awake, the sound of footsteps, I thought, moving stealthily on gravel. On the bed beside me I had a flashlight two feet long, made for coon hunters. It throws a powerful beam at least a mile. I got up from bed and lifted my 30/30 carbine from the wall and listened again near the door of Rocinante—and I heard the steps come closer. Then Charley roared his warning and I opened the door and sprayed the road with light. It was a man in boots and a yellow oilskin. The light pinned him still.

“What do you want?” I called.

He must have been startled. It took him a moment to answer. "I want to go home. I live up the road." 57

And now I felt the whole silly thing, the ridiculous pattern that had piled up layer on layer. "Would you like a cup of coffee, or a drink?"

"No, it's late. If you'll take that light out of my face I'll get along."

I snapped off the light and he disappeared but his voice in passing said, "Come to think of it, what are you doing here?"

"Camping," I said, "just camped for the night." And I went to sleep the moment I hit the bed.

The sun was up when I awakened and the world was remade and shining. There are as many worlds as there are kinds of days, and as an opal changes its colors and its fire to match the nature of a day, so do I. The night fears and loneliness were so far gone that I could hardly remember them.

Even Rocinante, dirty and pine-needle-covered as she was, seemed to leap over the road with joy. Now there were open fields among the lakes and forests, fields with the crumbly friable soil potatoes love. Trucks with flat beds loaded with empty potato barrels moved on the roads, and the mechanical potato digger turned up long windrows of pale-skinned tubers.

In Spanish there is a word for which I can't find a counterword in English. It is the verb *vacilar*, present participle *vacilando*. It does not mean vacillating at all. If one is *vacilando*, he is going somewhere but doesn't greatly care whether or not he gets there, although he has direction. My friend Jack Wagner has often, in Mexico, assumed this state of being. Let us say we wanted to walk in the streets of Mexico City but not at random. We would choose some article almost certain not to exist there and then diligently try to find it.

58 I wanted to go to the rooftree of Maine to start my trip before turning west. It seemed to give the journey a design, and everything in the world must have design or the human mind rejects it. But in addition it must have purpose or the human conscience shies away from it. Maine was my design, potatoes my purpose. If I had not seen a single potato my status as *vacilador* would not have been affected. As it turned out I saw almost more potatoes than I needed to see. I saw mountains of potatoes—oceans—more potatoes than you would think the world's population could consume in a hundred years.

I've seen many migrant crop-picking people about the country: Hindus, Filipinos, Mexicans, Okies away from their states. Here in Maine a great many were French Canadians who came over the border for the harvest season. It occurs to me that, just as the Carthaginians hired mercenaries to do their fighting for them, we Americans bring in mercenaries to do our hard and humble work. I hope we may not be overwhelmed one day by peoples not too proud or too lazy or too soft to bend to the earth and pick up the things we eat.

These Canucks were a hardy people. They traveled and camped by families and groups of families, perhaps even clans: men, women, boys, girls, and small children too. Only the nurslings did not work at picking up the potatoes and placing them in the barrels. Americans drove the trucks and used a windlass and a kind of davit to pull the filled barrels aboard. Then they drove away to deposit the crop in the potato barns with earth heaped high about their sides to prevent freezing.

My knowledge of Canuck French derives from motion pictures usually with Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, and it consists largely of "By gar." It's odd, but I didn't hear a single one of the potato pickers say "By gar," and they must have seen the pictures and known what is

right. The women and girls wore pants usually of corduroy and thick sweaters, and they covered their heads with bright-colored scarves to protect their hair from the dust that rises from the fields with the smallest wind. Most of these people traveled in big trucks covered with dark canvas tarpaulins, but there were some trailers and a few camper tops like Rocinante. At night some slept in the trucks and trailers, but also there were tents pitched in pleasant places, and the smells that came from their cooking fires indicated that they had not lost their French genius for making soup. 59

Fortunately the tents and trucks and two trailers were settled on the edge of a clear and lovely lake. I parked Rocinante about ninety-five yards away but also on the lake's edge. Then I put on coffee to boil and brought out my garbage-bucket laundry, which had been jouncing for two days, and rinsed the detergent out at the edge of the lake. Attitudes toward strangers crop up mysteriously. I was downwind from the camp and the odor of their soup drifted to me. Those people might have been murderers, sadists, brutes, ugly apish subhumans for all I knew, but I found myself thinking, "What charming people, what flair, how beautiful they are. How I wish I knew them." And all based on the delicious smell of soup.

In establishing contact with strange people, Charley is my ambassador. I release him, and he drifts toward the objective, or rather to whatever the objective may be preparing for dinner. I retrieve him so that he will not be a nuisance to my neighbors—*et voilà!* A child can do the same thing, but a dog is better.

The incident came off as smoothly as one might expect of a tested and well-rehearsed script. I sent out my ambassador and drank a cup of coffee while I gave him time to operate. Then I strolled to the camp to relieve my neighbors of the inconvenience of my miserable cur. They were nice-looking people, a dozen of them, not counting children,

60 three of the girls pretty and given to giggling, two of the wives buxom and a third even buxomer with child, a patriarch, two brothers-in-law, and a couple of young men who were working toward being brothers-in-law. But the operating chieftain, with deference of course to the patriarch, was a fine-looking man of about thirty-five, broad-shouldered and lithe, with the cream-and-berries complexion of a girl and crisp black curling hair.

The dog had caused no trouble, he said. The truth was that they had remarked that he was a handsome dog. I of course found myself prejudiced in spite of his deficiencies, being his owner, but the dog had one advantage over most dogs. He was born and raised in France.

The group closed ranks. The three pretty girls giggled and were instantly smothered by the navy-blue eye of the chieftain, backed by a hiss from the patriarch.

Was that the truth? Where in France?

In Bercy, on the outskirts of Paris, did they know it?

No, unfortunately they had never been to the fatherland.

I hoped they might remedy that.

They should have known Charley for a French national by his manners. They had observed my *roulotte* with admiration.

It was simple but comfortable. If they found it convenient, I should be pleased to show it to them.

I was very kind. It would give them pleasure.

If the elevated tone indicates to you that it was carried on in French, you are wrong. The chieftain spoke a very pure and careful English. The one French word used was *roulotte*. The asides among themselves were in Canuck. My French is ridiculous, anyway. No, the elevated tone was a part and parcel of the pageantry of establishing a rapport. I gathered Charley to me. Might I expect them after their supper, which I smelled on the fire?

They would be honored.

I set my cabin in order, heated and ate a can of chili con carne, made sure the beer was cold, and even picked a bouquet of autumn leaves and put them in a milk bottle on the table. The roll of paper cups laid in for just such an occasion had got squashed flat by a flying dictionary my first day out, but I made coasters from folded paper towels. It's amazing what trouble you will go to for a party. Then Charley barked them in and I was host in my own house. Six people can squeeze in behind my table, and they did. Two others beside me stood up, and the back door was wreathed with children's faces. They were very nice people but quite formal. I opened beer for the big ones and pop for the outsiders.

In due course these people told me quite a bit about themselves. They came over the border every year for the potato harvest. With everyone working, it made a nice little pool against the winter. Did they have any trouble with immigration people at the border? Well, no. The rules seemed to relax during the harvest season, and besides, the way was smoothed by a contractor to whom they paid a small percentage of their pay. But they didn't really pay him. He collected directly from the farmers. I've known quite a few migrant people over the years—Okies and Mexican wetbacks, and the Negroes who move into New Jersey and Long Island. And wherever I've seen them there has always been a contractor in the background to smooth the way for them for a consideration. Years ago the farmers tried to draw more labor than they needed so that they could lower wages. This seems to be no longer true, for government agencies channel only as many laborers as are needed, and some kind of minimum wage is maintained. In other cases the migrants have been driven to movement and seasonal work by poverty and terrible need.



Surely my guests for the evening were neither mistreated nor driven. This clan, having put their own small farm to bed for the winter in the Province of Quebec, came over the line to make a small nest egg. They even carried a little feeling of holiday with them almost like the hops- and strawberry-pickers from London and the Midland cities of England. These were a hardy and self-sufficient people, quite capable of taking care of themselves.

I opened more beer. After the night of desolate loneliness I felt very good to be surrounded by warm and friendly but cautious people. I tapped an artesian well of good feeling and made a small speech in my pidgin type of French. It began: "Messy dam. *Je vous porte un cher souvenir de la belle France—en particulier du Departement de Charente.*"

They looked startled but interested. Then John the chieftain slowly translated my speech into high-school English and put it back into Canadian French. "Charente?" he asked. "Why Charente?" I leaned down and opened a compartment under my sink and lifted out a bottle of very old and reverend brandy brought along for weddings, frost bite, and heart attacks. John studied the label with the devout attention a good Christian might give to the holy sacrament. And his words were reverent: "Jesus Christ," he said. "I forgot. Charente—that's where Cognac is." Then he read the purported year of the bottle's nativity and softly repeated his first words.

He passed the bottle to the patriarch in his corner, and the old man smiled so sweetly that for the first time I could see he lacked front teeth. The brother-in-law growled in his throat like a happy tomcat and the pregnant ladies twittered like *alouettes* singing to the sun. I handed John a corkscrew while I laid out the crystal—three plastic coffee cups, a jelly glass, a shaving mug, and several wide-mouthed

pill bottles. I emptied their capsules into a saucepan and rinsed out the odor of wheat germ with water from the tap. The cognac was very, very good, and from the first muttered "*Santé*" and the first clicking sip you could feel the Brotherhood of Man growing until it filled Rocinante full—and the sisterhood also. 63

They refused seconds and I insisted. And the division of thirds was put on the basis that there wasn't enough to save. And with the few divided drops of that third there came into Rocinante a triumphant human magic that can bless a house, or a truck for that matter—nine people gathered in complete silence and the nine parts making a whole as surely as my arms and legs are part of me, separate and inseparable. Rocinante took on a glow it never quite lost.

Such a fabric cannot be prolonged and should not be. The patriarch gave some kind of signal. My guests squirmed out of their squeezed-up seats behind the table and the adieux, as they should be, were short and formal. Then they went into the night, their way home lighted by the chieftain John carrying a tin kerosene lantern. They walked in silence among sleepy stumbling children and I never saw them again. But I like them.

I didn't make down my bed because I wanted to start very early. I curled up behind the table and slept a little while until in the dim false dawn Charley looked into my face and said "Ftt." While I heated my coffee, I made a little sign on cardboard and stuck it in the neck of the empty brandy bottle, then passing the sleeping camp I stopped and stood the bottle where they would see it. The sign read: "*Enfant de France, Mort pour la Patrie.*" And I drove as quietly as I could, for on this day I intended to drive a little west and then take the long road south down the long reach of Maine. There are times that one

64 treasures for all one's life, and such times are burned clearly and sharply on the material of total recall. I felt very fortunate that morning.

On such a trip as mine, so much there is to see and to think about that event and thought set down as they occurred would roil and stir like a slow-cooking *minestrone*. There are map people whose joy is to lavish more attention on the sheets of colored paper than on the colored land rolling by. I have listened to accounts by such travelers in which every road number was remembered, every mileage recalled, and every little countryside discovered. Another kind of traveler requires to know in terms of maps exactly where he is pin-pointed every moment, as though there were some kind of safety in black and red lines, in dotted indications and squirming blue of lakes and the shadings that indicate mountains. It is not so with me. I was born lost and take no pleasure in being found, nor much identification from shapes which symbolize continents and states. Besides, roads change, increase, are widened or abandoned so often in our country that one must buy road maps like daily newspapers. But since I know the passions of the mapifiers I can report that I moved north in Maine roughly or parallel to U. S. Highway 1 through Houlton, Mars Hill, Presque Isle, Caribou, Van Buren, turned westward, still on U. S. 1, past Madawaska, Upper Frenchville, and Fort Kent, then went due south on State Highway 11 past Eagle Lake, Winterville, Portage, Squa Pan, Masardis, Knowles Corner, Patten, Sherman, Grindstone, and so to Millinocket.

I can report this because I have a map before me, but what I remember has no reference to the numbers and colored lines and squiggles. I have thrown this routing in as a sop and shall not make a habit of it. What I remember are the long avenues in the frost, the farms and houses braced against the winter, the flat, laconic Maine speech in

crossroads stores where I stopped to buy supplies. The many deer that crossed the road on nimbling hooves and leaped like bounding rubber away from the passing Rocinante. The roaring lumber trucks. And always I remember that this huge area had once been much more settled and was now abandoned to the creeping forest, the animals, the lumber camps and the cold. The big towns are getting bigger and the villages smaller. The hamlet store, whether grocery, general, hardware, clothing, cannot compete with the supermarket and the chain organization. Our treasured and nostalgic picture of the village general store, the cracker-barrel store where an informed yeomanry gather to express opinions and formulate the national character, is very rapidly disappearing. People who once held family fortresses against wind and weather, against scourges of frost and drought and insect enemies, now cluster against the busy breast of the big town.

The new American finds his challenge and his love in traffic-choked streets, skies nested in smog, choking with the acids of industry, the screech of rubber and houses leashed in against one another while the townlets wither a time and die. And this, as I found, is as true in Texas as in Maine. Clarendon yields to Amarillo just as surely as Stacyville, Maine, bleeds its substance into Millinocket, where the logs are ground up, the air smells of chemicals, the rivers are choked and poisoned, and the streets swarm with this happy, hurrying breed. This is not offered in criticism but only as observation. And I am sure that, as all pendulums reverse their swing, so eventually will the swollen cities rupture like dehiscent wombs and disperse their children back to the countryside. This prophecy is underwritten by the tendency of the rich to do this already. Where the rich lead, the poor will follow, or try to.

Some years ago at Abercrombie and Fitch I bought a cattle caller, an automobile horn manipulated by a lever

66 with which nearly all cow emotions can be imitated, from the sweet lowing of a romantic heifer to the growling roar of a bull in the prime and lust of his bullhood. I had this contraption on Rocinante, and it was most effective. When its call goes out, every bovine within hearing distance raises its head from grazing and moves toward the sound.

In the silver chill of the Maine afternoon, as I bucketed and lumbered over the pitted surface of a wood road, I saw four lady mooses moving with stately heaviness across my bow. As I came near they broke into a heavy-cushioned trot. On an impulse I pressed down the lever of the cattle caller and a bellow came out like that of a Miura bull as he poises before firing himself at the butterfly sweep of his first veronica. The ladies, who were on the point of disappearing into the forest, heard the sound, stopped, turned, and then came for me with gathering speed and with what looked to me like romance in their eyes—but four romances, each weighing well over a thousand pounds! And much as I favor love in all its aspects, I trod my accelerator and got the hell out of there fast. And I remembered a story of the great Fred Allen. His character was a Maine man telling of a moose hunt. “I sat on a log and blew my moose call and waited. Then suddenly I felt something like a warm bath mat on my neck and head. Well sir, it was a moosess licking me and there was a light of passion in her eyes.”

“Did you shoot her?” he was asked.

“No, sir. I went away from there fast, but I have often thought that somewhere in Maine there’s a moose with a broken heart.”

Maine is just as long coming down as it is going up, maybe longer. I could and should have gone to Baxter State Park, but I didn’t. I had dawdled too long and it was getting cold and I had visions of Napoleon at Moscow and the Germans at Stalingrad. So I retreated smartly—Brownville Junction, Milo, Dover-Foxcroft, Guilford, Bingham, Skow-

hegan, Mexico, Rumford, where I joined a road I had already traveled through the White Mountains. Perhaps this was weak of me, but I wanted to get on with it. The rivers were full of logs, bank to bank for miles, waiting their turn at the abbatoir to give their woody hearts so that the bulwarks of our civilization such as *Time* magazine and the *Daily News* can survive, to defend us against ignorance. The mill towns, with all respect, are knots of worms. You come out of serene country and suddenly you are tossed and battered by a howling hurricane of traffic. For a time you fight your way blindly in the mad crush of hurtling metal and then suddenly it dies away and you are in serene and quiet countryside again. And there is no margin or overlap. It is a mystery but a happy one.

In the short time since I had passed, the foliage of the White Mountains had changed and tattered. The leaves were falling, rolling in dusky clouds, and the conifers on the slopes were crusted with snow. I drove long and furiously, to Charley's great disgust. Any number of times he said "Ftt" to me and I ignored him, and barreled on across the upraised thumb of New Hampshire. I wanted a bath and a new bed and a drink and a little human commerce, and I thought to find it on the Connecticut River. It is very strange that when you set a goal for yourself, it is hard not to hold toward it even if it is inconvenient and not even desirable. The way was longer than I had thought and I was very tired. My years spoke for my attention with aching shoulders but I was aimed at the Connecticut River and I ignored the weariness, and this was utter nonsense. It was nearly dark when I found the place I wanted, not far from Lancaster, New Hampshire. The river was wide and pleasant, bordered with trees and edged with a pleasant meadow. And near the bank there stood what I was lusting for—a row of neat little white houses on the green meadow by the river, and a small, compactly housed office and

68 lunch room with a sign on the roadside that bore the welcome words "Open" and "Vacancy." I swung Rocinante off the road and opened the cab door to let Charley out.

The afternoon light made mirrors of the windows of the office and lunch room. My whole body ached from the road as I opened the door and went in. Not a soul was there. The register was on the desk, stools at the lunch counter, pies and cakes under plastic covers; the refrigerator hummed; a few dirty dishes soaked in soapy water in the stainless-steel sink, and a faucet dripped slowly into it.

I banged the little bell on the desk, then called out, "Anybody here?" No answer, nothing. I sat down on a stool to await the return of the management. The numbered keys to the little white houses hung on a board. The daylight slipped away and the place darkened. I went outside to collect Charley and to verify my impression that the sign said "Open" and "Vacancy." By now it was getting dark. I brought out a flashlight and looked through the office for a note saying "Back in ten minutes," but there was none. I felt strangely like a Peeping Tom; I didn't belong there. Then I went outside and moved Rocinante out of the driveway, fed Charley, made some coffee, and waited.

It would have been simple to take a key, leave a note on the desk saying that I had done so, and open one of the little houses. It wasn't right. I couldn't do it. On the highway a few cars went by and crossed the bridge over the river, but none turned in. The windows of the office and grill flashed under approaching headlights and then blacked out again. I had planned to eat a light supper and then to fall dog-weary into bed. I made my bed, found I wasn't hungry after all, and lay down. But sleep would not come to me. I listened for the return of the management. At last I lighted my gas mantle and tried to read, but with listening I could not follow the words. At last I dozed, awakened in

the dark, looked out—nothing, nobody. My little sleep was troubled and uneasy. 69

At dawn I arose and created a long, slow, time-wasting breakfast. The sun came up, searching out the windows. I walked down to the river to keep Charley company, returned, even shaved and took a sponge bath in a bucket. The sun was well up by now. I went to the office and entered. The refrigerator hummed, the faucet dripped into the cold soapy water of the sink. A new-born, heavy-winged fat fly crawled fretfully over a plastic pie cover. At nine-thirty I drove away and no one had come, nothing had moved. The sign still read "Open" and "Vacancy." I drove across the iron bridge, rattling the steel-tread plates. The empty place disturbed me deeply, and, come to think of it, it still does.

On the long journey doubts were often my companions. I've always admired those reporters who can descend on an area, talk to key people, ask key questions, take samplings of opinions, and then set down an orderly report very like a road map. I envy this technique and at the same time do not trust it as a mirror of reality. I feel that there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style. In literary criticism the critic has no choice but to make over the victim of his attention into something the size and shape of himself.

And in this report I do not fool myself into thinking I am dealing with constants. A long time ago I was in the ancient city of Prague and at the same time Joseph Alsop, the justly famous critic of places and events, was there. He talked to informed people, officials, ambassadors; he read reports, even the fine print and figures, while I in my slipshod manner roved about with actors, gypsies, vagabonds. Joe and I flew home to America in the same plane,



70 and on the way he told me about Prague, and his Prague had no relation to the city I had seen and heard. It just wasn't the same place, and yet each of us was honest, neither one a liar, both pretty good observers by any standard, and we brought home two cities, two truths. For this reason I cannot commend this account as an America that you will find. So much there is to see, but our morning eyes describe a different world than do our afternoon eyes, and surely our wearied evening eyes can report only a weary evening world.

Sunday morning, in a Vermont town, my last day in New England, I shaved, dressed in a suit, polished my shoes, whited my sepulcher, and looked for a church to attend. Several I eliminated for reasons I do not now remember, but on seeing a John Knox church I drove into a side street and parked Rocinante out of sight, gave Charley his instructions about watching the truck, and took my way with dignity to a church of blindingly white ship lap. I took my seat in the rear of the spotless, polished place of worship. The prayers were to the point, directing the attention of the Almighty to certain weaknesses and undivine tendencies I know to be mine and could only suppose were shared by others gathered there.

The service did my heart and I hope my soul some good. It had been long since I had heard such an approach. It is our practice now, at least in the large cities, to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins aren't really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister, a man of iron with tool-steel eyes and a delivery like a pneumatic drill, opened up with prayer and reassured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. And he was right. We didn't amount to much to start with, and due to our own tawdry efforts we had been slipping ever since. Then, having softened us up, he went into

a glorious sermon, a fire-and-brimstone sermon. Having proved that we, or perhaps only I, were no damn good, he painted with cool certainty what was likely to happen to us if we didn't make some basic reorganizations for which he didn't hold out much hope. He spoke of hell as an expert, not the mush-mush hell of these soft days, but a well-stoked, white-hot hell served by technicians of the first order. This reverend brought it to a point where we could understand it, a good hard coal fire, plenty of draft, and a squad of open-hearth devils who put their hearts into their work, and their work was me. I began to feel good all over. For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness, and that causes the same emptiness a father does playing softball with his son. But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it.

I felt so revived in spirit that I put five dollars in the plate, and afterward, in front of the church, shook hands warmly with the minister and as many of the congregation as I could. It gave me a lovely sense of evil-doing that lasted clear through till Tuesday. I even considered beating Charley to give him some satisfaction too, because Charley is only a little less sinful than I am. All across the country I went to church on Sundays, a different denomination every week, but nowhere did I find the quality of that Vermont preacher. He forged a religion designed to last, not predigested obsolescence.

I crossed into New York State at Rouses Point and stayed as near to Lake Ontario as I could because it was my inten-

72 tion to look at Niagara Falls, which I had never seen, and then to slip into Canada, from Hamilton to Windsor, keeping Lake Erie on the south, and to emerge at Detroit—a kind of end run, a small triumph over geography. We know, of course, that each of our states is an individual and proud of it. Not content with their names, they take descriptive titles also—the Empire State, the Garden State, the Granite State—titles proudly borne and little given to understatement. But now for the first time I became aware that each state had also its individual prose style, made sharply evident in its highway signs. Crossing state lines one is aware of this change of language. The New England states use a terse form of instruction, a tight-lipped, laconic style sheet, wasting no words and few letters. New York State shouts at you the whole time. Do this. Do that. Squeeze left. Squeeze right. Every few feet an imperious command. In Ohio the signs are more benign. They offer friendly advice, and are more like suggestions. Some states use a turgid style which can get you lost with the greatest ease. There are states which tell you what you may expect to find in the way of road conditions ahead, while others let you find out for yourself. Nearly all have abandoned the adverb for the adjective. Drive Slow. Drive Safe.

I am an avid reader of all signs, and I find that in the historical markers the prose of statehood reaches its glorious best, and most lyric. I have further established, at least to my own satisfaction, that those states with the shortest histories and the least world-shaking events have the most historical markers. Some Western states even find glory in half-forgotten murders and bank robberies. The towns not to be left behind proudly announce their celebrated sons, so the traveler is informed by signs and banners—Birthplace of Elvis Presley, of Cole Porter, of Alan P. Huggins. This is no new thing, of course. I seem to

remember that small cities in ancient Greece quarreled bitterly over which was the birthplace of Homer. Within my memory an outraged home-town citizenry wanted Red Lewis back for tarring and feathering after he wrote *Main Street*. And today Sauk Centre celebrates itself for having produced him. We, as a nation, are as hungry for history as was England when Geoffrey of Monmouth concocted his *History of British Kings*, many of whom he manufactured to meet a growing demand. And as in states and communities, so in individual Americans this hunger for decent association with the past. Genealogists are worked to death winnowing the debris of ancestry for grains of greatness. Not long ago it was proved that Dwight D. Eisenhower was descended from the royal line of Britain, a proof if one were needed that everyone is descended from everyone. The then little town where I was born, which within my grandfather's memory was a blacksmith shop in a swamp, recalls with yearly pageantry a glowing past of Spanish dons and rose-eating señoritas who have in public memory wiped out the small, desolate tribe of grub- and grasshopper-eating Indians who were our true first settlers.

I find this interesting, but it does make for suspicion of history as a record of reality. I thought of these things as I read the historical markers across the country, thought how the myth wipes out the fact. On a very low level the following is the process of a myth. Visiting in the town where I was born, I talked with a very old man who had known me as a child. He remembered vividly seeing me, a peaked, shivering child walking past his house one freezing morning, my inadequate overcoat fastened across my little chest with horse-blanket pins. This in its small way is the very stuff of myths—the poor and suffering child who rises to glory, on a limited scale of course. Even though I didn't remember the episode, I knew it could not be true.

74 My mother was a passionate sewer-on of buttons. A button off was more than sloppiness; it was a sin. If I had pinned my coat, my mother would have whaled me. The story could not be true, but this old gentleman so loved it that I could never convince him of its falsity, so I didn't try. If my home town wants me in horse-blanket pins, nothing I can do is likely to change it, particularly the truth.

It rained in New York State, the Empire State, rained cold and pitiless, as the highway-sign writers would put it. Indeed the dismal downpour made my intended visit to Niagara Falls seem redundant. I was then hopelessly lost in the streets of a small but endless town in the neighborhood of Medina, I think. I pulled to the side of the street and got out my book of road maps. But to find where you are going, you must know where you are, and I didn't. The windows of the cab were tightly closed and opaque with streaming rain. My car radio played softly. Suddenly there was a knock on the window, the door was wrenched open, and a man slipped into the seat beside me. The man was quite red of face, quite whisky of breath. His trousers were held up by red braces over the long gray underwear that covered his chest.

"Turn that damn thing off," he said, and then turned off my radio himself. "My daughter saw you out the window," he continued. "Thought you was in trouble." He looked at my maps. "Throw those things away. Now, where is it you want to go?"

I don't know why it is a man can't answer such a question with the truth. The truth was that I had turned off the big highway 104 and into the smaller roads because the traffic was heavy and passing vehicles threw sheets of water on my windshield. I wanted to go to Niagara Falls. Why couldn't I have admitted it? I looked down at my map and said, "I'm trying to get to Erie, Pennsylvania."

"Good," he said. "Now, throw those maps away. Now

you turn around, go two traffic lights, that'll bring you to Egg Street. Turn left there and about two hundred yards on Egg turn right at an angle. That's a twisty kind of street and you'll come to an overpass, but don't take it. You turn left there and it will curve around like this—see? Like this.” His hand made a curving motion. “Now, when the curve straightens out you'll come to three branching roads. There's a big red house on the left-hand branch so you don't take that, you take the right-hand branch. Now, have you got that so far?”

“Sure,” I said. “That's easy.”

“Well repeat it back so I'll know you're going right.”

I had stopped listening at the curving road. I said, “Maybe you better tell me again.”

“I thought so. Turn around and go two traffic lights to Egg Street, turn left for two hundred yards and turn right at an angle on a twisty street till you come to an overpass but don't take it.”

“That clears it up for me,” I said quickly. “I sure do thank you for helping me out.”

“Hell,” he said, “I ain't even got you out of town yet.”

Well, he got me out of town by a route which, if I could have remembered it, let alone followed it, would have made the path into the Labyrinth at Knossos seem like a throughway. When he was finally satisfied and thanked, he got out and slammed the door, but such is my social cowardice that I actually did turn around, knowing he would be watching out the window. I drove around two blocks and blundered my way back to 104, traffic or not.