



I'M A STRANGER

HERE MYSELF

NOTES ON RETURNING

TO AMERICA AFTER

TWENTY YEARS AWAY

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COMING HOME

I once joked in a book that there are three things you can't do in life. You can't beat the phone company, you can't make a waiter see you until he is ready to see you, and you can't go home again. Since the spring of 1995, I have been quietly, even gamely, reassessing point number three.

In May of that year, after nearly two decades in England, I moved back to the United States with my English wife and four children. We settled in Hanover, New Hampshire, for no other reason than that it seemed an awfully nice place. Founded in 1761, it is a friendly, well-ordered, prettily steeped community with a big central green, an old-fashioned Main Street, and a rich and prestigious university, Dartmouth College, whose benignly dominant presence gives the town a backdrop of graceful buildings, an air of privileged endeavor, and the presence of five thousand students, not one of whom can be trusted to cross a road in safety. With this came other attractions—good schools, an excellent bookstore

and library, a venerable movie theater (The Nugget, founded in 1916), a good choice of restaurants, and a convivial bar called Murphy's. Helplessly beguiled, we bought a house near the center of town and moved in.

Coming back to your native land after an absence of many years is a surprisingly unsettling business, a little like waking from a long coma. Time, you discover, has wrought changes that leave you feeling mildly foolish and out of touch. You proffer hopelessly inadequate sums when making small purchases. You puzzle over ATM machines and automated gas pumps and pay phones, and are astounded to discover, by means of a stern grip on your elbow, that gas station road maps are no longer free.

In my case, the problem was intensified by the fact that I had left as a youth and was returning in middle age. All those things that you do as an adult—take out mortgages, have children, accumulate pension plans, take an interest in the state of your guttering—I had only ever done in England. Things like furnaces and storm windows were, in an American context, the preserve of my father. So finding myself suddenly in charge of an old New England house, with its mysterious pipes and thermostats, its temperamental garbage disposal and life-threatening automatic garage door, was both unnerving and rather exhilarating.

It is disconcerting to find yourself so simultaneously in your element and out of it. I can enumerate all manner of minutiae that mark me out as an American—which of the fifty states has a unicameral legislature, what a squeeze play is in baseball, who played Captain Kangaroo on TV. I even know about two-thirds of the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner," which is more than some people know who have sung it publicly.

But send me to the hardware store and even now I am totally lost. For months I had conversations with the clerk at our local True-Value that went something like this:

"Hi. I need some of that goopy stuff you fill nail holes in walls with. My wife's people call it Pollyfilla."

"Ah, you mean spackle."

"Very possibly. And I need some of those little plastic things that you use to hold screws in the wall when you put shelves up. I know them as rawl plugs."

"We call them anchors."

"I shall make a mental note of it."

Really, I could hardly have felt more foreign if I had stood there dressed in lederhosen. All this was a shock to me. Although I was always very happy in Britain, I never stopped thinking of America as home, in the fundamental sense of the term. It was where I came from, what I really understood, the base against which all else was measured.

In a funny way nothing makes you feel more like a native of your own country than to live where nearly everyone is not. For twenty years, being an American was my defining quality. It was how I was identified, differentiated. I even got a job on the strength of it once when, in a moment of youthful audacity, I asserted to a managing editor of the *London Times* that I would be the only person on his staff who could reliably spell Cincinnati. (And it was so.)

Happily, there is a flipside to this. The many good things about America also took on a bewitching air of novelty. I was as dazzled as any newcomer by the famous ease and convenience of daily life, the giddy abundance of absolutely everything, the boundless friendliness of strangers, the wondrous unfillable vastness of an American basement, the delight of encountering waitresses and other service providers who actually seemed to enjoy their work, the curiously giddy notion that ice is not a luxury item and that rooms can have more than one electrical socket.

As well, there has been the constant, unexpected joy of reencountering all those things I grew up with but had largely forgotten: baseball on the radio, the deeply satisfying *whoing-bang* slam of a screen door in summer, insects that glow, sudden run-for-your-life thunderstorms, really big snowfalls, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, the smell of a skunk from just the distance that you have to sniff the air quizzically

and say: "Is that a skunk?", Jell-O with stuff in it, the pleasingly comical sight of oneself in shorts. All that counts for a lot, in a strange way.

So, on balance, I was wrong. You can go home again. Just bring extra money for road maps and remember to ask for spackle.