

Coming Home

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I want to tell you what it's like to come back to the United States after a sobering month or more in Britain, and what daily life here feels and looks like in comparison. I came back with a couple of thousand G I brides. The first shock came shortly after the Queen Mary, still in wartime camouflage, thundered its great horn as we slipped away from the dock at Southampton. All the others clung to the rail, and all the babies clung to their mothers and watched England slide away. Along the entire main deck of the ship the handkerchiefs fluttered in an unbroken line, like washing day in Manchester or Leeds; and then a small Coast Guard cutter came scuttering alongside the liner like a playful puppy. An American soldier stood at the cutter's bow, cupped his hands, and yelled, "You don't want to go back, do you?" And the young mothers and wives, weeping like mad, yelled, "No." The ship turned about, we headed into the Channel, night began to fall, and we moved below deck. And then came the first surprise. There was a meal, with meat and a vegetable that was not easy to recognize right away. It was not, you see, Brussels sprouts. It was lima beans and corn. I say it, because in combination they constitute a favorite American vegetable known as "succotash," and the British brides had their first practical encounter with an American Indian word. Succotash means "the grains are whole." Well, the grains were whole, the corn was green, the butter was fresh and plentiful, and the oranges were to take away. This went on for five days, though few ironies of peace are so delicate as the sight of a G I bride on the very rolling waves refusing to touch butter, plum pudding, French beans, or even a steak and kidney pie—for reasons too agonizing to go into. In other words, there were days on the ocean waves when many of them regarded the whole food problem as very academic. [Unless you want to ID Sir Don Smith.]

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The fifth day out we sighted land way off on our left. A way ahead there, rising like a rim of mist was the almost dewy coast of New Jersey. On the right was the flat, twinkling line of the South Shore of Long Island, and then for a half day, with the blue sky swooping all over us, we came slowly up New York Harbor. And then we saw the towering cluster of the downtown skyscrapers, crowned with a small cloud of smoke and mist. Somebody asked why this should be so, when all around was sparkling sun and blue sky, which recalled that New York is in one minor way a war casualty. Before the war there was a soft-coal law in New York City that forbid any office building or factory to burn soft coal—or let's just say smoky coal—for more than ten minutes a day. Before that, it was banned altogether. But in 1940, when war factories were cooking on sites in the boroughs of New York, the law was suspended, and it has not been put back yet.

Well, scores of little freighters and tugs would pipe out three toots as we went by, and each time the Queen Mary would terrify the children by roaring back three thunderous blasts. A specially chartered ferryboat tagged along by the Mary's side, playing jazzed-up versions of "Why Did I Kiss That Girl?" and "Here Comes the Bride." And the captains of tugboats would look up and wave at the brides, and soon we saw great signs painted on the ends of docks, and on the roofs of pier buildings that said "Welcome Home" and "Well Done." A soldier friend of mine told me about the lump that came in his throat when he heard the bands and saw these signs. Full of pride and bounce, he came down the gangplank to meet New York and its grateful citizens, and then he started to look for a hotel room. Then just a room. He wound up begging a man who ran a Turkish bath to rig up a cot for him just for the night. That was the due of fame, that was his welcome home.

And that's a normal thing to happen to you these days. My own disillusionment started the moment I was off the ship. I made a telephone call and noticed how much more tinny and battered our telephones were than those in Britain, though I should add that the New York ones work like a charm: that is to say, like an American telephone. The taxi cab I rode in had one door tied on with string. The other door stayed in a droopy sort of balance,

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somewhere between the door frame and the running-board. That night I was in another cab. The driver couldn't use his first gear, which had given up shortly before VE Day, and he couldn't go in third, which had been out of condition since the Battle of the Bulge. He also couldn't go in reverse. If he went too far past the address you wanted, he had to go right round the block again to land just right. This is a useful money-making device that I offer without patent.

And I thought back to the London cabs, those solid almost luxurious blue boxes that turn in small alleys like trick bicycle riders do on one wheel. The next morning I went to my office. At intervals of possibly six or eight blocks, buildings that I knew quite well only six weeks before were now in powdered ruins, or in their place was an empty lot boarded up at the corner. It was very much like London, except that cranes and concrete mixers were busy in some of them, building the skeletons of new shops and office buildings that would be up by next autumn.

Outside the building that contains my office, along with those for about thirty-thousand others, was a long queue about eighty yards long, mostly of women, but there was a sprinkling of men reading newspapers and shifting wearily from foot to foot. It was a queue for nylon stockings. At several places the queue had to be broken and patrolled by policemen to allow workers to have a smooth right-of-way into the building. I have seen this queue, sometimes a hundred yards long, every day since, and yesterday I saw two others in midtown New York. Now here is a situation that is quite typical of what happens when it is announced in this country that you'll soon be able to get all you want of something that you want very much. Before nylons could be legitimately released, they could be bought at exorbitant prices in the Black Market. Then the big stores sent letters to all their customers with charge accounts, and, in America, mostly good-class housewives have charge accounts at lots of stores, even ones they never use. This may be a convenience for when you're just passing by sometime. These letters gave you a certificate, asking you to appear on a certain day to pick up a pair or two of nylons that they would save for you. When the day came, the ladies discovered that the stockings were not fully fashioned, and the American housewife in disgust would not claim her pair,

deciding to wait a month or two till the genuine article was available. Now by this time, there are in theory enough nylons to provide most women with a single pair, but at this point starts what might be called “Operation Greed.” People get so afraid they’ll miss their pair that they queue up for one pair and get their husbands to queue up for another. There are also standing in these queues very smooth-looking gentlemen and swarthy-looking youths in leather jackets, probably with faked certificates, who have no personal use for nylons and no wife to be a hero for. They are doing the rounds of the queues and running their own modest Black Market on the side.

Now nylons is not a unique case by any means. Since I got back I have only once had butter offered me in a restaurant. The other times it has been marmalade or nothing at all. I was irritated to recall that in Britain, with your strict controls, there was not much butter, but at least everybody got his little share. Here again, a wholesaler in the Black Market hears that there’s going to be a natural shortage of butter in the New York area, or the Chicago area, or wherever—not a serious shortage. New York for instance is still trying to catch up on supplies that didn’t come in when there was a tugboat strike last month. And remember that New York, Manhattan, is an island, and most of its food must come in by ferry cross-river. Now, this is the insidious thing that happens. There is a natural brief shortage, maybe only for a day or two. The Black Market cannot depend these days on long shortages, so it has to make hay while the sun shines; so it corners the market and forces along the shortage and knows there are plenty of people who will pay a little extra to get some butter. Mind you, I think it’s very important to point out that 90 percent of the people who deal with the Black Market, people like my friends, are unaware of that fact; they just notice when they get home that butter costs two cents more this week than last. The big hotels and fancy restaurants, many of them simply will not go for two days without butter. They are busy laying the foundations for their prosperous, peacetime patronage, so they lay in extra supplies. And in the end, in a week or two, almost everybody is the loser. Two weeks ago a strike of dairy distributors was the last straw; last week you could roam the stores of Manhattan and not find any butter to buy. And now we’ve been told we shall soon be eating “grey bread.” The fact that what

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you call black bread (what we call grey) is far more nutritious and also tastes better has not been well enough publicized—you know what I’m talking about, bread with more of the wheat kernel. But in this country, the mere fact that somebody puts his finger beside his nose and says, “You’re not going to have much more white bread,” doesn’t cause, as you might expect, loud and prolonged cheering; for I should tell you that the ordinary store bread in America looks like dehydrated snow and tastes like blown-up blind paper. This announcement causes a panic among housewives, who fear they’re going to go short of something vital, so they’ve been rushing around buying up stacks of white flour. This of course produces an even worse shortage of flour, and will lead to further reductions of grain to the farmer for his feed, and to the brewers for their beer.

The artificial panic is based on chronic fear, the constant absurdity in a land of plenty of fearing that you may go short and become like Europe. The result of this fear was that, during the war, Americans ate more meat than ever before in their history, all because they were chronically afraid they might be forced to eat less. And now, because several hundred thousand housewives make a rush for the white flour they should have been glad to let go of, it’s still the farmer who will have to make up for this sudden drain on the market, and add to this the fact that the new wheat extraction process leaves less what they call “mule feed.” That’s the residue from milling that farmers feed their cows and chickens. And this will mean in another month, or maybe less, fewer chickens, perhaps a big and unnecessary egg shortage, and a beer shortage, the likes of which the United States has not seen since Prohibition.

So, when you’re inclined to grumble at your drastic ration controls, think on these things, as the prophet says, and consider how hectic and unpredictable it is to be a housewife in a country where the government does not buy food in the first place, and where controls start mainly with the rather bewildered retailer. I thought you’d like to know how it feels to get back to the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.

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