

-1-

Low Season

H.

2 October

Dear Mother,

I hear them refer to the season here as they do in the tourist business, as "low" season—when the trade is down. How ironic. Beaches are vacant, waves are up, tides are out, streets no longer swell bumper to bumper with traffic ; the coffee shop is empty except for local fisherman. The rains return, the cold arrives, the heat is too oppressive, wherever it is, these smiling fools call it "low" when the season is contrary. So be it: if they want to say it is "low", then by all means, I shall agree. Keep them smiling: I am not prepared to concede that anything else might be amiss, though I am not happy to have arrived at such an inauspicious time.

No sooner had I arrived in the capitol at H., than I ran into Y_____, waiting for me in the lobby of the pension where lodgings were reserved for me by an anonymous benefactor. He explained that he had been "assigned" to look in on me from time to time. Can you imagine? Mysteriously provided for, then met by someone I have not seen in at least a decade who, on top of it all is assigned to

be—what? my guide? my official babysitter? The last I had heard, Y's health was failing, but there he was, in his three-piece suit, his gold watch chains crossed neatly, gold stickpin in his tie—fresh handkerchief sticking out of his jacket pocket—"Just in time to go to a gallery opening," he said, upon greeting me. "Low season, you know. We have to pack the house."

We met others along the way, all of whom were apparently well-acquainted with Y_____. "You seem quite the bon vivant here," I told him. He simply flared those thin, carved nostrils of his and smiled. An auburn-haired woman with an unpleasantly handsome man, tall and fifty-ish with blue eyes and Asiatic high cheekbones, joined us. I know I have seen him somewhere before: I remember wanting to throw a rotten tomato in his face, anything, to unseat that vacant look. His wife—I never got her name—his wife described our destination as a combination of a mansion and a haunted house, but when we got there, I thought her description was appallingly inaccurate. It was a huge neo-classical house that could well have served as— that is, you could have put my urn there. Friends and family could have paid their respects, you could have thrown your arms around it and sobbed, "poor O.!" The foyer and main room seemed to be made of nothing but marble; we were greeted with kisses by complete strangers, immediately shown to stairs leading down into a gallery where a table full of lovely wine glasses was set out. It took me a moment to realize that this was an installation—not a buffet. One alcove had a domed ceiling covered with plaster of Paris pebbles, coral, and scallop shells; in the middle was the pipe skeleton of a shower, complete with shower head. No water. The hot and cold water knobs, were turned to the outside, so you could twist them on: fire rained down from the shower head and then—foof!—steam rose from the

tiles underneath. It was a bit startling, I admit. Other than the shower, nothing about the display moved me in the slightest.

Over the table where the wine glasses were arranged hung an ersatz chandelier with great swoops of imitation bronze, but only four lights—I think that is so beautiful, my companions chorused. What was I supposed to say? It was awful, Mother! Awful. It reminded me of Sinclair Lewis' *Winesburg, Ohio*.

All four stories of the house surrounded a central wooden staircase that wound up and up till it reached a rather elegant garret with a view looking out to the city and the water beyond—minarets lit up with spotlights, boats skating to and fro—all distant and suffused with a dark pinkish glow. On the third floor below was a fireplace with a fire just burning out, then the next had a study on one side which people were filling with cigar smoke; on the opposite side, the father of the painter sat, embraced in a chair with huge arms, the exhibition books spread out on a table before him. Someone had obviously just asked a question about one of the paintings in the exhibition book, as I heard proud papa exclaim, "this one is of my dog; it always makes me cry."

On the main floor, glass doors opened onto a garden with white gravel spread over the ground—oh, how French!—and a more obscured view of the city and water beyond. I was tempted to go to sleep in an empty chair behind a bush, but suppose no one noticed, locked the doors, and left me there?

Waiters ran up and down the stairs serving hors d'oeuvres on odd trays: a dart board, a small, heated grill, a slab of wood with spikes. They offered rounds of zucchini with pepper cheese, calamari artfully folded into a large spoon—guests slurped off the tidbit and deposited the spoon into a central glass. But to my

distress, the food had no taste, so all I could do was wash the odd texture of the food down with some of the wine that was passed—"M'sieu, red or white?"

Y. pointed out a huge woman, dressed in black, with several chins —The Woman Who Feeds Cats—and with her, The Woman Who Publishes Books, "awfully written—nothing but bad detective stories or bodice ripper novels," Y. informed me with a shudder. "Both are Expatriate Wives, " he confided.

"Does that mean that they are expatriated from their husbands?" I asked.

Y. smirked.

But it was rather remarkable that with these drab, acclimated women, was not a single husband; like female finches, their flashy mates must have made their yearly hadj to the south.

The painter had hair that flopped across his face and slack features; he praised his parents (well he might since they apparently paid a pretty penny to rent this place) and spoke of his work as a "commemoration" of his father's "homeland."

The guests begin to chatter halfway through his speech; the hostess started passing out her calling cards—

Mother, just suppose—I know its reputation, but what if H. isn't so bad after all? Oh the house was cold and the people, vapid, the art banal; but you get all the free drinks, free hors d'oeuvres, free pomegranate seeds— Outside is perpetual autumn—the height of its colors.

Well, I must rest. It's only the first day.

Your devoted offspring,

O.

15 October

Dear Eustace,

Well, old fellow, here at last! Though, I confess, I hadn't really expected it—figured there would be some sort of divine reprieve; but, oh no. *He* had already made up his mind. I have been transferred, willy-nilly, like it or not, as soon as the big bash you all gave me was over. Really, Eusie., it was quite a splash; but as my closest friend on earth, couldn't you have spared a little cash for my poor sainted Mater instead of blowing so much on a mere goodbye party? You know there's no way to get anything to her from *here*, for blank's sake.

I won't bore you with an account of my first social event. I have written to Mother about it, and you are free to ask—in fact, I rather hoped you would call on her by now. Suffice it to say that H. has a reputation which seems not to be deserved—it's not half the hole it's supposed to be. I am lodged comfortably: window with a view over the water, slightly obscured by a tall building next to mine, room service relatively prompt, decent-looking fare. A few things are unsettling, however: I can't seem to taste anything. I have no idea whether this is permanent or just a passing condition due to the transition. Where in hell, I should like to know, are my blankety-blank taste buds?

Bronwyn Mills

Secondly, I have been unable to get any appointments with the Grand Panjam who runs the place. Oh, the waiters, the doorman, those people you can always ask, and they are very polite and will offer to take messages for you, to put in a word to hurry the process along, etcetera, etcetera. But nothing happens, absolutely nothing. Nada.

Yr. Old Pal,

O.