

Kay in America (1963)

These notes were kept in an exercise book (The Madison Exercise Book) and consist of one extended piece, followed by a number of lists jotted down from time to time.

On the day before I was due to sail for New York to join my husband who was teaching there for a year I received a cable containing our new address. It was improbable, and evocative of Red Indian stories¹, but when we eventually crunched our way through the snow to the front door a week or so later we found it to be a pleasant suburban house with a welcome glow of warmth provided by a central heating system apparently operated by some strange beast heaving and sighing in the basement and fed by oil through a pipe protruding from the snow in the middle of the lawn. We seemed to be settling down in another and perhaps more comfortable suburbia, substituting the Long Island Railroad for the Southern Electric, but as time went on we found there were many differences.

Having left more than half my family behind in England I think the first thing that hit me was the mail. The postman came any time in the morning from nine o'clock onwards, according to how many trade circulars, free samples or books and records of the month he had to deliver. We found out later that we were luckier than many of our friends in getting a morning delivery at all. This seemed strange for hustling bustling America but we had more surprises in store. Unless you sent a letter by first class mail it could be days getting to its destination in another part of the city, and weeks to another part of the continent. "Oh well you see," our friends would tell us, "the postal services are run by the Feds." They left it at that. The Federal Government had not the benefit of their tax money, so what could you expect? On the other hand the Garbage collecting, and road cleaning run by the local community were two excellent services. The 'household' trash was collected three times a week and ground down in a great mechanical mouth whose loud mastications were one of the familiar early morning sounds. Big Trash—anything from an old bath, a bed or garden rubbish—had to be left in the front near the pavement and was efficiently spirited away. A new snowfall or freeze up would bring out a horde of sweeping, salt sprinkling mechanical monsters so that the huge Cadillacs and Buicks would have the freedom of the roads with the least possible delay. Here I think ruefully of our once a week selective garbage collections in London, the special arrangements one makes with difficulty to have anything old and lumbering disposed of, whereas in America it is relentlessly labelled 'trash' and as relentlessly destroyed. I also remembered our quiet suburban road with weeks of frozen snow piled up in the gutters leaving a narrow perilous track for slithering vehicles.²

Then the schools. My eleven year old daughter was soon integrated into Grade VI of the elementary school, She went to school in sneakers and long white socks carrying her ringbook, clipboard and a pile of text books; no New York kid has a satchel, it is considered square I was told. The PTA was active here as at most American schools; this is because the parents, besides being interested, as most of them are intensely, in the welfare and education of their young, actually maintain the school with their taxes. This particular school had to my mind, although built in 1915, most things a good school should have—a gymnasium, a beautiful auditorium, adequate classrooms—but there was great agitation abroad to have it demolished and replaced by a bigger and better one.³ We were puzzled by all this, but particularly mystified when we found later that the residents had voted for the new building but against the budget which was to pay for it. We thought it was a beautiful school, thinking of the noble way the staff cope with the teaching of PT and their excursions into drama at the meagre between-the-wars built LCC Primary School which our daughter had happily attended in London. I liked school ending at 3 o'clock and the half-day on Wednesday when the teachers conferred with parents on a pre-arranged rota. This conference system seemed to us a sensible liaison, a routine link between school and home which must be mutually beneficial.

1 The area was called Great Neck. 'Red Indian' was the term then used in Britain to refer to native Americans.

2 Kay left for America when Britain was only a week or so into the great freeze of 1963. The snow was to lie in our quiet suburban gutters for months on end.

3 The Great Neck Public Schools website (<http://www.greatneck.k12.ny.us/>) lists the schools in the area. Only one was open in 1915, Arrandale School West, built in 1914 and noted at the time for its gymnasium; it was demolished in 1978.

But it was the larder which really staggered us—the great American larder, displayed in all its regalia of polythene, cellophane packets and giant and jumbo cartons. As we pushed our cart along the sumptuous aisles to the strains of ‘Tea for Two’ or ‘In a Monastery Garden’ we became almost hysterical. If you bought four Jellos you saved 5 cents; three tins of fruit you saved ten cents; giant packets of detergent were accompanied by free toothpaste; giant tubes of toothpaste brought a free tablet of soap; Tomato soup was ‘special’ this week.

But it was Instant Puddings which finally brought me to my senses. One week they were four small packets for 27 cents so I bought [illegible] and the next week, needing another vanilla for a special dessert I found I had to buy four double packets to get the bargain, so the larder began to look as if it belonged to an instant Pudding addict. So I decided to call a halt and buy just what I needed, but the girl at the till took exception to this as she had to work out the price. She would say, icily, ‘Are you only taking one Jello?’ and I would instantly see that I had done a wrong and foolish thing and would send my daughter back along the aisles to get me three more.

One of the most mouth-watering sections of the supermarket is that devoted to Fruit and Vegetables. They are in such profusion, and so appetising and if not cheap, at least good value. They call to mind the vast hinterland of New York⁴—oranges and tomatoes from California and Florida, great water-melons, strawberries, sharp and fresh-tasting at all times of the year, crisp “iceberg” lettuce, about the best product of the United States we have decided, and sweet rosy apples of consistent good quality. There are as a matter of course things like yams, peppers, sweet potatoes, corn on the cob etc which we consider slightly exotic in England, but which this rich beautiful continent has grown up on.

Super Markets get another good mark from me for the way goods are packaged. Obviously the food merchant’s image of an American housewife is of a helpless delicate creature who has no strength to her arm and must not soil her hands (in fact one thinks of Jane Austen’s Emma who would “order” and then “lie down”⁵). The American housewife must open a package and then call her friends. This is not a true image as American women never stop being busy at something, luncheons, coffee mornings, beauty parlours, driving children to school or aged parents to the station, antiquing furniture, decorating rooms, gardening, chasing round to Maceys or [illegible] for Spring or Summer or Washington or Lincoln or Memorial or Mother’s Day or what-have-you sales, or studying—a surprising number are post-graduate students at one of the many colleges. According to the powers behind the super markets however this helpless ninny must have everything explained to her and so even vegetables have instructions for cooking printed on the cellophane wrapping. Should you want to make a cake you add an egg, or not, and mix with water—time and speed given for the automatic mixer. Some packets even include a tin foil baking tin, no greasing required. Rice takes one minute and fluffing with a fork, and the package has at least three delicious recipes printed on it. Spaghetti, and noodles and Uncle Sam’s Curried Rice all give a galaxy of quickly prepared meals. All are alleged to have an old world, real country, deep south, “New England”, home baked, like grandmother made flavour—and, by Uncle Sam, they mostly have!

All this brings me back to consideration of differences in life at the dormitory end of the Long Island Railroad rather than the Southern Electric. It is not so much leisure as ease. Of course the basis of this is central heating which is almost universal. You are more or less destitute before you live in a “cold-water-walkup”. The standard of middle class luxury is certainly higher and life is very pleasant, interesting and full for the middle class wife. But whenever I feel an envious streak creeping into my reflections I pull myself up with a jerk for heaven help you if you are poor in the city where “eight million citizens live in peace and harmony and enjoy the benefits of democracy”. That should be explained. It is reiterated by the City Broadcasting Station at midday and 7 o’clock in the evening. It is always a comforting thought.

4 This is the Londoner speaking, translated into a New Yorker, regarding the whole of America as the hinterland of New York as all of Britain is the hinterland of London.

5 This doesn’t sound like the energetic Emma. Kay must be thinking of one of Jane Austen’s more delicate ladies, perhaps even Emma’s hypochondriac sister Isabella.

Weather commentary paternalism

Some dirty weather coming up so leave your yacht in dock and loaf on your terrace —ad deal?

Trip to Virginia

Highlights: Honeysuckle hedges and festooning trees. Vast forested slopes. Shenandoah River. Mrs Page Schenk and Brookside Restaurant.

Sunny in warm southern evening. Fireflies and bullfrogs and leaping deer at Gettysberg.

[Illegible] and Harpers Ferry. Confluence of Shenandoah and Potomac. John Brown Waxworks. Drinking iced coke. Cleopatra's strange behaviour.⁶

Laws: "Whites only" on restaurant in Maryland. Negro quarters round M. Street in Washington.

New Jersey Turnpike.

Children

"I'm scared."

"How come?"

Super Markets

Packaging: sugar, meat, green vegetables.

Piled carts: 8 turkey dinners, 12 heads of corn on the cob. Cigarettes by the carton, a lighter if you buy two, free matches.

Electronically opened door.

Brown paper bags.

Car parks go with supermarket as bathroom with house.

Ice cold water melons, peaches 29 cents for 2lbs.

Mornings: ladies in rollers, presence of a man an embarrassment.

Phrases

make a left

beat up

coldwater walk up

a plush seat on the gravy train - [Illegible]

not entitled to one

high near 70

low near 30

step out of line

Ads and Medication

poly-unsaturates

medication will take care of it

squint wrinkles

sick of the stomach

Bathroom tissue, whisper soft

Last summer's bugs, last winter's draughts: aluminium storm and screen windows, make call now, no payment for 6 months (Sunday advertising subtly slanted to father)

Schools and Education

Multiple choice

Cultural enrichment

Problems

"A kiddigarten Baby / Dip her in the gravy"

counsellors

conference

⁶ Cleopatra was Rowwy's pet terrapin.