

of the architect and the lawyer, the hospitable host and the polite guest, the promising politician and the enthusiastic voter. In the morning, the man of the moment is full of exquisite dreams, and it seems he can think of nothing besides his new mistress, his new vocation, or his new plan; come afternoon, neither inviting this nor aware that it contravenes his earlier state of mind, he suddenly feels himself drawn to some other object of interest glistening in the middle distance, be it a splendid racecar in a magazine advertisement or a jeweled collar round the neck of a passing poodle; come evening, he feels weary of it all, and besides he has a chest cold coming on, or else the clams have disagreed with him. *Lascia perdere*, he mutters ruefully, to hell with all those women, plans, and dogs; I am going to call my mother and then have myself a nice cup of camomile tea.

Hence the malingering for which the nation is famous. Walk into any Italian pharmacy, and you will find yourself in the town's most fashionable salon, where everyone is a grandee (though some are grander than the rest) and where the social competition turns on the issue of just whose diseases are more evanescent. The butcher's daughter feels that she has a sore on her cheek that could lead to complications, and the beauty of it is that the sore is *invisible*; five minutes of discussion. Not to be bested by a mere butcher's daughter, the chartered accountant's brother complains of a *constriction* in his lungs, one that, moreover, he experiences only at Carnival time; five minutes of animated discussion, followed by the purchase of vitamin capsules. Then an unknown lady in a voluminous fur coat, holding her own against all comers, announces that she simply has not been *well*; ten minutes of highly animated discussion, with the pharmacist coming out from behind the counter to make more elbow space for philosophical expostulation. By lunchtime closing, everyone who matters in society—that is to say, everyone who is truly delicate—has been gravely ill and miraculously cured.

This, after all, is the aboriginal Catholic country, where the wind blows where it list. Here, cause and effect are not linked with that scientific rigor or that banal literalism that has made Northern Europe what it is at the end of the day, namely, honest yet ugly, straight yet plain, educated yet stupid, rational yet credulous, efficient yet shoddy, heated

yet cold, consistent yet discontented. And the funny thing is that, of course, you *can* be in two places at the same time, if you are an Italian lover, saint, or plumber; and if, like the sweet little *bambino* you were born, you are the apple of your mother's eye, you can easily be at once sick and well; while to any lawyer your case is both A and not-A, and *lasciamo perdere* the excluded middle; and besides, who is to say that you cannot be a talented painter one day and decide to grow *radicchio di Treviso* the next?

For the freedom to sin, which presupposes the telling of lies, and to repent, which condones the invention of excuses, is the supernatural, perennial, adamant fabric that lines the motley and threadbare robe that is the Italian character. I am quite sure that the book I could write on the subject, *The Book of Italian Excuses and Lies*, would make that character even more of a laughingstock than it already is the world over. But the memory of Celeste's art and his workmen from Bergamo chastens the incorrigible mocker, the faint outline of the cathedral on the far side of the cynic's wineglass makes him lose heart, and the trusting approach of barefooted Mediterranean spring makes the satyr's harp fall soundless to the ground.

Andrei Navrozov is *Chronicles'*
European correspondent.

Letter From Chile

by Mary Kohler

A Road Too Far?



I awoke again this morning to an entirely clear sky. It is cold early in the morning in late summer in the mountains of South Chile, about 45 degrees. We are suffering through a very long dry spell. There has been no significant rain for over two months, and the clear sky is mostly obliterated by heavy smoke.

The two forest fires, *incendios*, are fortunately on the other side of the Puelo, a wide, fast river flowing right in front of our cabin door. We would never be allowed to build here, so close to the river, at home. This might be a wise restriction, because some year, before too long,

the river is going to take the land, cabin and all, in a spring flood.

With the government budget for the helicopter with the water bucket having been exceeded and a neighbor endangered by one of the fires, the firefighters, axes, pumps, shovels, sleeping bags, potatoes, flour, and a watermelon arrived at our airstrip by Twin Otter and were ferried nearer the fire by my husband and the neighbor, who own the only two motorboats on this part of the river.

Downstream from us lies a canyon, not navigable; upstream, another canyon, even more wild; beyond that, Argentina. The "road" behind our house leads past a few farms, the nearest a 25-minute walk, to a rowboat ferry across the river and on to another airstrip, a school, a few houses, and a radio-phone. By foot, it is perhaps five or six hours; by horse much less to Llanada Grande, this "town."

This year, it is still a three-day trip by horse, more or less, to the auto road. But progress is coming. They are working on the road all the way to Llanada Grande and have built the bridge over the Rio Manso. The ferry's in place to cross Lago Tagua Tagua, five miles long and impossible to walk around, where the mountains come down directly to the deep, turquoise-colored lake.

I suppose this is one of the last, mostly isolated, remaining farmed areas. The cash crop is beef, shipped on the hoof most of the way to market. That happened some weeks ago this year, when the lower pastures dried up. The hill pastures are small, and even they are barely green. The clear skies and sun raise the afternoon temperatures into the 80's—sometimes into the 90's, in a *puelche* when the hot, dry wind comes from the pampas of Argentina.

Most of the farmers are self-subsisting, needing only flour and oil from the city. From their farms come sheep and goats, apples, plums, and cherries, potatoes—wonderful potatoes—and a few vegetables. They can the cherries and make the apples and plums into *chiche*, a very hard version of hard cider. When they tire of the menu, the kids go to the river with a lure and a monofilament wound around a can.

Everyone can obtain running water by placing a hose in a nearby mountain stream—in our case, a quarter-mile away—and presto, cold, clear water runs all day, sometimes into the bucket of laundry. We have other handy amenities; they mostly do not.

We city slickers also have imported from the city by air, in the form of gasoline for a generator, electricity—enough to keep a refrigerator/freezer cold and to operate a washing machine for our clothes. The dryer, however, is semiautomatic and consists of lines between two posts.

So, since resupply happens at most once a week, we must know how to make bread, chop wood for the stove, find our way around in the dark, and walk. All of the locals—women, men, and boys—make bread, and they all ride horses. We don't have a horse.

Life is hard, but life is fun. Big bets are placed on the horse races held on our airstrip; neighbors gather together for an *asado* (roast lamb or goat) with boiled potatoes, boxed wine, and *chiche*, and if anyone has been to town, *ensalada Chilena*.

The firefighters have left, but the fires are still burning, one furiously. The houses are safe, at least for a while. Perhaps after the high pressure is gone in three or four more days, it might rain. We have asked our friends in the States to pray for rain for us; one deacon even announced it during the service.

Will it be good to have a road? That depends on what we and our neighbors believe is good. Is freedom from most oversight good? Sometimes. Sometimes it is bad, when the fires start and no one in the city cares. But once the road comes, life here will never be the same, just as it is not the same in the American Midwest as it was in times past. Perhaps that is why we come here.

Mary Kohler is the vice chairman of the board of directors of The Rockford Institute.

Letter From Texas

by Wayne Allensworth

The Next Sound You Hear



We've crammed the Suburban with about as many people as it can carry, driving the fenceline on a section of land not far from Meridian, Texas, on a cool Sunday afternoon during deer season. My brother left a message even before we

made it home from church, asking us to come with his family to check out this piece of property. I didn't bother to change, as we are to meet the seller in a couple of hours, and I look a little incongruous in my Sunday best next to my brother, who is wearing a black Stetson and boots, and the seller, wearing a cap dressed up as the Lone Star flag of my native state and a plaid, pearl-buttoned shirt.

All I can hear is the kids' breathing in my ear and the soft murmuring of the Suburban's motor. We are waiting for the flock of turkeys to crest the rise in front of us. My brother pushes back the Stetson from his forehead, quietly making a count of the flock.

He counts 25 before something alarms them and they take off into the brush, bordered by a stand of live oaks and pecan trees, near the driver's side of the lumbering SUV. We never heard the sound that spooked them—or maybe it was movement.

My brother shifts the Suburban into four-wheel drive, and we crest the steep rise and head for the big tank in the center of the property. I roll the window down and try to block out the voices and the sound of the motor's humming, listening to the stillness.

That's what I remember most. The stillness. And the silence. And the pitch-blackness of my grandparent's place, so far off the blacktop between Bryan and Waco. And the stars that decorated the sky like a coat of shimmering silver dust. We carried flashlights on our morning and evening hunts, as the deep well of country darkness made it so difficult to traverse the trails, even when the moon was up.

My grandfather kept a heavy flashlight near the screen door in case anybody had to brave the winter chill and inky blackness to answer nature's call at the out-house.

Sometimes, I would take the flashlight and go off—keeping to the trail to avoid bull nettle—and turn the light off, just to disappear into the darkness and watch the sky. Sound carried so far out there that I could still hear muffled noises echoing from the cabin, which stood on cinder blocks so that it shook when you walked across the floor in your boots.

When Pawps—my grandfather—and Daddy first built that cabin, there was no running water, no electricity, no TV—and no noise. Even then, the city was encroaching on our home in greater

Houston. The roads were paved, and the traffic was growing steadily heavier. And the sounds we didn't notice—the lawn mowers and cars and trucks and TVs—had already dulled our senses, robbing us of the pleasure of pure, unfiltered, natural sensation.

When my grandparents had to sell that place, it was like a death in the family.

It was almost intoxicating to feel that heightened sensational awareness in the country, so I try to recreate those singular moments we all experience at one time or another, to capture that sense of life again. But I can't. Everybody is talking again, and the damn motor makes too much noise. Roll the window up, it's cold in here!

When did I hunt last? It has been several years, around Christmastime. I am home, so my younger brother and I set out for the country. We only have time for an evening and morning hunt, and then we will have to go.

That evening, I take the stand in the oat patch, while my brother heads for the big tank. I don't see anything other than a mess of black hogs passing through the clearing and a cardinal perching on my stand, so I sit back and enjoy the still, cold air, looking for movement in the creeping shadows.

But there is nothing there.

It's almost dark when I meet my brother at the fenceline, and we begin the hike back to the cabin. Then, up ahead on the trail, something moves. Slowly, with a liquid viscosity of barely perceptible movement, a shape emerges from the woods and halts, eyeing us carefully. Then the shape takes form as a large bobcat, squatting down on its hind legs, pointy ears reaching for the darkening sky. Neither of us heard a sound.

Then it is gone. My brother, who had raised his rifle when he sensed the movement ahead of us, slings the .30-06 onto his shoulder. Well, he says, it would have cost too much to mount. We both agree that we wouldn't want to have shot the bobcat anyhow.

That's not what we came for.

It's near full dark, and the stars are already beginning to show.

Wayne Allensworth, who resides in Keller, Texas, is trying to talk his brother into buying their grandfather's property.

