

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES *is a monthly feature of Scribner's magazine containing short articles on distinctively American subjects and scenes*

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## Song of Myself

by MURRAY GITLIN

WE had expected the house to be absolutely barren. When we drove in, that cold April evening, with our tuberculous truck (one lung had gone completely bad)—we were two moth-eaten youngsters expecting a night of martyrdom.

There was a stove in the kitchen! Hallelujah! A stove, a table, and one chair. A little handful of kindling, some firewood in a shed. The things people give thanks for. Through that night the rain descended upon us in great bursts of impatience. But in the morning the sky was again pale and clean. Earth started to warm up. A southerly breeze carried off the city grime from our hair. And we had that mighty chorus of voices: sap climbing higher in the trees, the wind, and the birds. And April was only the beginning of our friendship.

That past of ours was like a catapult. It rammed us head on against the wall of life. But we did not complain. For there is nothing better than a drab past to numb the senses. When feet grumbled because they had to follow a plow all day, when the palate wanted steak and got spaghetti, or when our one cow amused herself by stepping into the bucket of milk, or when a weasel sowed death in our chicken coop—there was no whining from me, no self-pity. That went for her, too. Because superimposed upon the present picture were those five years of—*ah, my man, what are you blubbering about? Think of the monotony of the employment agency waiting-rooms, of the New York subways, of those instructive sessions with her parents when they asked: Why can't you stick to one job? That's the way it's gone on ever since our daughter married you. What have you got to say for yourself?*

### I

Spring is an outside force there in the city. But here we were with it; Spring

was in our walk and our words. Plowing in the field one day, I took some of the warm soil in my hand, pressed it and then let it slip through my fingers to the ground. It wasn't a gesture. Walking across a meadow, looking at a tree, isn't enough. You get impatient just standing there and stuttering before Nature, just staring at her, admiring her like an art critic. Elsie tried going barefoot. Always smelling leaves, tasting grass, planting or transplanting something or other. It was a process of cleansing without soap or broom.

Altogether we had \$400 at the start. My brother, who ran a general store near Hartford, gave us \$100 to pay for the first half-year's rent on the farm. Elsie's father had given us \$300. That was gone by August—\$25 for the tuberculous truck—a cow—a horse, too—and exactly \$135 left us for machinery, tools, food, other essentials.

We managed.

From morning to night we hammered away. Up at five-thirty, out to milk the cow, feed the chickens, breakfast hot and heavy, then to the field hoeing corn, mowing grass, cultivating potatoes, tending to this, fixing that; Elsie by my side leading the horse, or in the house cleaning, cooking, baking. We had found each other through sweat—sweet sweat—which drenched us both in majesty. How beautiful she had become—she was so brown and free in her movements. She was tender, essential.

Had I known nothing at all about farming I doubt whether we could have withstood the difficulties. But my father had had a farm when I was a boy, so the soil became more friendly. I knew something about gardens. Rotation of crops wasn't a jumble of words to me. I hadn't forgotten that a cow is milked from the right side. The familiar cannot be altogether intimidating. You can look ahead and plan a little. You

you spray your potatoes every week or two you won't have any in the Fall to put in the cellar. You get to know that by caponizing the broilers you'll make a few more cents a pound when you're ready to sell them. And we didn't pamper ourselves. If we had no meat, we did without it. Because we sold our few quarts of milk to a neighbor who had come to his place for the summer we denied ourselves butter. But there wasn't a chirp out of us. We were fighting for something that made sense.

### II

It is on the farm that you are conscious of the passing of time through the seasons. In the city it is through calendars, or through the change of clothing. If you have a summer suit you put that on when it gets too hot; when it's cold you haul a heavier garment out of the closet. What does Winter or Spring or Fall signify there, really? You go on the way you did before—your routine doesn't vary in the slightest.

On the farm one's life is regulated by these changes. Before your eyes the earth transforms itself, and as it does, so do you. Spring was a period of preparation for us, of openings. Summer we were submerged by soil and crops. Fall was fulfillment. There is no happier time than that. The air is crisp, the fields lie yellow with things that are ripe, ready for cutting and eating. The oats are in the barn. The shocks of corn stand out on the lot, withering, dying. Squashes are dozing in the garden; pumpkins sit on the ground like a camp of Falstaffs; and there is a field of potatoes just dug, drying in the mellow, close sun, the moist underground soil falling away from their skins.

All that fall Elsie was as busy as a bride. It was, in fact, like preparing for a wedding feast. The house asked for fulfillment, too. Winter would soon be

upon it. Soon, those heavy crackling frosts, snow, sleet, blizzards. It would need a covering of hay around the foundations. Like the squirrels and woodchucks we were gathering our acorns and straw.

God knows how many mason jars we had bought. There were dozens of quarts of peaches and raspberries, blackberries, strawberries. Now it was chutneys and relishes, pickling of green tomatoes and cucumbers, making of wine from grapes and elderberries, sauerkraut. Day by day the cellar expanded: potatoes, celery, carrots, beets, apples, pears, onions. By the middle of October the fields were barren. Only dead stalks of weeds had any energy left for rustling when the wind grew emotional.

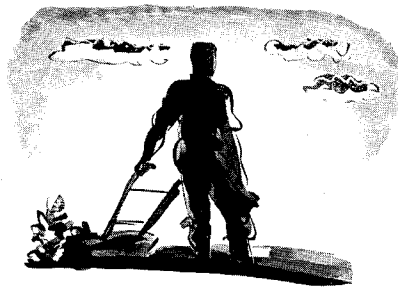
### III

With the first snow came a break. There was a change in the rhythm. Suddenly we felt tired. The mad race against time and ourselves was over. We were like two convalescents who, while still retaining their personalities and their life-energy, can no longer push themselves outward, motivate themselves. We sat still as often as we could—on a farm there is no such thing as actual cessation. Chickens, cows, horses exist and call for food and water.

I went to the woods and felled trees. But it wasn't the same any more. Each stroke took something out of me, but gave nothing back, not even a feeling of accomplishment. Elsie was going to make rag rugs. Somehow she never got around to it. She was always putting it off until later.

That was only part of it. The world had finally found us out. From all sides it started sending charmers down to us to lead us astray. The devils even entered our dreams. Theaters. Opera. Concerts. Steam-heated apartments.

This sudden descent was like a whip-lash across our eyes. So far there had been a kind of make-believe in our life on the farm. We'd each been acting a part. Interesting enough and quite enjoyable. But there was in it something of the *I Pagliacci* quality. Dance, my two children! Forget, youngsters! Hide the past! But since we couldn't dig a grave for it and cover it with six feet of sod, it had to be done through some sort of transformation of character—through the burial of memory which we had attempted. But memory refused to stay buried. We were again just two young people trying to get along in the world.



It is a terrible feeling to have, this feeling of being alone. We get our sustenance from food and also from people. That is a commonplace. If you like, consider civilization or humanity as a word, as something quite impersonal, a generality. Yet when you stop to analyze—what are you crying out for, what does your loneliness reach for, but to cling, to bury itself right in the midst of that civilization or humanity that you may despise? Earth was not enough. We ourselves were not enough. Our work was not enough.

We could not associate with the natives around us. We spoke a different language. The women were dry, salted down for an eternal winter. Elsie could not stand them. I got along well enough with the farmers; I could crack a joke as well as the next fellow, but in reality it was a pose.

What did our doubts consist of? There was nothing that you could put your palm on. All this philosophizing came much later. Now we were only conscious of lacks. A child or two might have helped, I guess; but we had none. Perhaps once a city gets into your bones it's hard to knock it out again.

In the Spring the farm had seemed to us a way of life, a religion almost. Now, in Winter, nothing of the kind. It became a sort of pit where the derelicts, the defeated ones, came to finish out their earthly journey. We were not ready for that—yet. We wanted something else. We had thought we were standing on our feet—as if that were ever possible. It is always on shoes that you stand and shoes are made by human hands and machines.

The snow fell. We sat by the window and looked out. We read a little. Elsie went through one mystery book after another. I had intended much earlier, in August, to spend all the months between harvest and spring in the woods, chopping cordwood for our own use and to sell—every day. But the enthusiasm was missing. Always some excuse offered itself for staying home. Now it was a snow-

storm, or harness to be fixed, as if that couldn't be done in the evening as well. It wasn't easy getting up in the morning. The house was damp with the cold. A half-hour more in bed. The two cows—we had bought another one—and the calf, all begged for something to eat. Pete neighed. Let them wait, a little delay wouldn't hurt.

We didn't lose our appetites. The color in our faces remained. It felt good to sit near the stove and add another stick of oak to the fire, or doze off on the couch after supper. Snow, newly fallen, falling, isn't exactly ugly, either. We had to admit that. The sound of wheels across the hard dry crust of flakes—a slow relentless onward movement—catches the ear and holds it. Setting wooden traps for skunks (I learned the art from a neighbor) with all the trudging across the hills that goes with it, and the bundling up and the coming home to the warm kitchen and Elsie's tea—there were a few such moments, a few hints of strength.

### IV

But Spring came around again. We had doubted if it would. Suddenly something in us quickened. Our heads cleared. New powers were in ferment. There are breezes that seem to get right inside of you. The smell of Spring, the sound of it, all that preparation, the unwinding of wrappings, the steam that seems to be exuding from the soil; your body fills up on it.

By actual weight you are lighter, too. Felt boots come to about five pounds for the pair. Fleece-lined underwear, sweaters, jackets, moleskin trousers, all are discarded. It's hard to imagine what that alone is capable of doing to the spirit. It's like getting out of a hot telephone booth. Even night isn't dark. What were you yapping about? Wipe that winter molasses from your mouths, children. Take a look at those biceps and leg muscles. Wouldn't be surprised if you could stand on your bare feet now. So the charmers had you for a while? You were in the pit, were you? Now that you have clambered up its sides, again on level ground, what is the verdict? Are you still frightened by your own shadows?

The woodchucks emerged from the depths not so fat as when they went in, but more wiry, faster on their feet. There was no doubt about it; they hadn't spent a very exhilarating winter. They must have had their slough of

despond, too. They had also been vouchsafed visions—apples, spinach and beet tops, turnips. The ground was cold and frozen all winter. Look at them scampering across the lot now, the rascals.

Our movements were slower, but more solid. No nervousness in them. Nothing of that obliteration of the self of the previous year. I put a calloused hand to the plow handle, the reins over my neck, and needed no wife to help me guide the horse. Nothing at all to lift a hundred-pound sack to my shoulder. No feat to make away with a pound or two of potatoes at the table and a chunk of beef into the bargain.

Rye here; oats on that lot; corn near the wood. Ten bushels of potatoes to be planted near the barn. Millet? We reject millet. Alfalfa, too. Our soil isn't ready for it. Manure the field, plow, wheel harrow, tooth harrow, plant and bush it. Simple. Beans and peas two inches deep; beet seed a half inch, onion seed just pressed into the ground. A good feed mixture for cattle is two bags of middlings, one-half of hominy, one-half of gluten, one-half of bran. Don't plow too deep for corn. Use formaldehyde on the seed potatoes; it will keep them from rotting. Sweet corn is to go on the hill, not in the valley. Now the grass, let it dry, rake into windrows, cock, load and unload. Bowker's Mixture is about as

good as any for potato bugs. Keep the roosters and hens apart. Cheaper not to have a boar.

At the end of the day Elsie and I sat on the porch and planned. Quite a difference, however, from last year. Last spring and summer our eyes could not penetrate much farther than the orchard a quarter of a mile away. Now we went past it; past the woods even. Our minds leaped over brooks and fences like young deer. The *Now* was taken care of; it was the *Beyond* which began to fascinate us. The next day. The next year. The lot on the other side of the road. The pasture still farther on. (Its grass was sweet and matted deep and heavy.) Two cows became eight, then ten. One horse, three. No silos, two silos. We played around with the ingredients of life as though we were playing pinochle. I'll trump that. That's my trick. That's yours. I'll bid higher. I'll raise you fifty.

The fact was that the farm had got too small. It couldn't contain us. Last year it had been a refuge; a place for poor tattered birds who came from a long and difficult journey across barren land. Now we were hemmed in here. There wasn't enough resistance. It was too smooth. We weren't utilizing our whole strength. World, we are ready for you this time! We come prepared to give

you a proper lacing! We won't take any backtalk!

We had paid rent for another six months. I had plowed and planted. The sow had farrowed. The second cow was to drop her calf within three weeks. Our summer neighbor was back again and wanted our milk, cream, butter, cheese, eggs—as much as we could give him. Radishes were ready for eating the first week in June. The sugar peas were filling out their pods. We would have early sweet corn, to be sold at sixty cents a dozen. It was impossible to shake ourselves loose from all that—too challenging. We would see the summer through and gain more strength. We could wait. We weren't afraid.

So Fall arrived, and now we said, "It's our duty to go out and do a little laying-about ourselves. Farm life is too simple and easy. We must get into the city and butt our heads against it."

It was a warm fine afternoon when we left. The leaves were predominantly red. The landscape was rich and strong. We took a last glance at the place and rattled away with our few belongings in our truck which, miraculously, had also been as one reborn by the country air. Well, we were on our way somewhere.

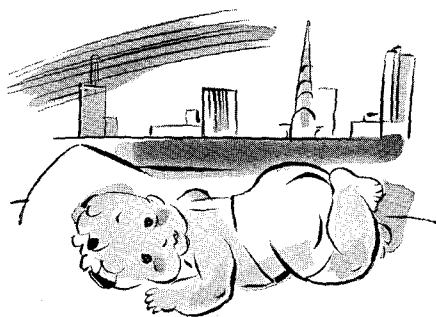
Open wide your portals! Stand aside, men and women! Make way before we bowl you over!

## I Wish I Lived in New York

by RITA HALLE KLEEMAN

My daughter lives in New York. She had been married just six months when, to her surprise, she received a neat white envelope enclosing a blossom-bordered announcement that the foresighted X. Y. Z. department store's layette department was prepared to take care of her any needs in that line in the most efficient and happy manner, and without trouble to her.

The store enclosed a list of all the things that would be needed with the coming of "the little stranger," and suggested that she bring the list down and talk it over with one of the "understanding trained nurses" who were in the department only to serve her. Everything, they assured her, could be done in one place; nursery furniture, sterilizing outfits, clothing. She needed only to make



her selection, tell them the dates on which she wished delivery, and go home to await her baby.

When she showed me this announcement, so cleverly worded and timed, I realized anew how right I had been always to sigh, "I wish I lived in a city." When my babies were coming, I had lived in an unenlightened little town

where one had had to buy furniture in one store, layettes in another and—in those days of home-born babies—order a sterilized obstetrical outfit from the neighboring city. Life was certainly made easy in the modern city.

Diapers, my daughter told me, were automatically eliminated from her list. All the younger generation now use diaper services variously called "Dainty-didies," "Tidy-didy," "Sani-didy" and so on. These services deliver at your door each day "clean, sterile, fresh and fluffy" diapers and remove the used ones. I do not know whether this is also done in the small town; but I do know that it cannot possibly be done there with the social advantages that accrue to it in the city.

My daughter selected a service that listed among its diaper users many of