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# Refugee in New England

*James C. Thomson, Jr.*

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**E**arly last spring I confided to Raymond, our Cape Cod caretaker for the past twenty-two years, that my wife and I would probably be selling our Truro house in the autumn. This ageless town father (permanent Fire Chief, Rescue Squad captain, trash collector, and problem-solver) — whose grandfather once owned the rugged ocean-side pasture land which developers now sell for over a hundred thousand per acre — shook his grizzled head in disbelief. “Jesus,” he said, “and I thought you folks were natives by now.”

*Natives.* I stood there silent for a while after he pulled away in his pickup, gazing into the pines and listening to the distant surf. *Natives.* The word, the accolade, slowly sank into me. That made us Truro people, Outer Cape people rooted in the first place the Pilgrims had tried going ashore.

Was it possible that this rootless wanderer “et ux” (as the town tax bills refer to my wife) had quite inadvertently become New Englanders?

New England? I don’t recall mention of any such place back in Nanking, China, where I grew up in the 1930s. For me, America had seemed simply one shimmering golden blur. I knew it had Princeton, New Jersey, where I had been born on furlough in 1931, before I was whisked back to China by my educational-missionary parents. (This meant I could someday be president, unlike my China-born brother and sisters.) I knew it had New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Great-Aunts Annie and Emma lived, in a big old house with an ever-flowering garden where my mother grew up. (I had endless conversations with both aunts on the unconnected telephone in the den off our living room.) I knew it had Middlebush, New Jersey, where Grandpa Thomson, who looked a lot like God, was a Dutch Reformed minister. I knew it had Uncle Dick’s farm in a part of New Jersey called New York State, where my father had spent his boyhood summers with cows and blueberry bushes and bears. And I knew for a fact that unlike China, America was a country so clean that you could pick pennies off the sidewalk and put them in your mouth.

But about New England I knew virtually nothing. There was, as I think about it, one fleeting exception. My mother, who felt she had moved somewhat downward on the social scale when she married a nonconformist village preacher’s son, had a subtle way of reminding us periodically that she was descended from Captain Seabury, out of Porlock in

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Cornwall, who had arrived in Plymouth on the *Mayflower* and married a daughter of John and Priscilla Alden. Such a sustaining truth or legend should have given me some sense of New England rooting. But it seems I never doubted that Captain Seabury, upon disembarking, took the first available coach to New Brunswick. I should add that this ancestor from Porlock was later to become as elusive as Coleridge's visitor; for in the 1950s my mother spent many hours poring through the ancient baptismal records of that Cornish parish in a vain attempt to find anyone ca. 1600 who bore the name of Seabury.

So it was that when my Nanking idyll came to an abrupt end in mid-1937, thanks to the Japanese invasion, I confidently expected that our exodus from our summer house in mountainous Kuling meant a long boat ride to my fabled New Jersey. Instead, we ended up on a trainload of foreign refugees destined for Hong Kong, where hundreds of us lived for two months on camp cots in the once sumptuous public rooms of the Peninsular Hotel. And the boat, once we found one, took us only to teeming Shanghai, where the authorities of the nicely campused Shanghai American School packed us into rooms otherwise intended for boarding students. There my mother and I lived out of suitcases for a year and a half while my father ingeniously commuted between Japanese-occupied Nanking and the far western reaches of China where his university-in-exile had relocated.

By December 1939, with the war becoming worldwide, my mother and I embarked at last on the long-anticipated boat trip across the Pacific to the land of my birth, where my three much older siblings were off at college. What a shock it was, some weeks later, to end up in a grim factory town called Wallingford, Connecticut, north of New Haven.

I should explain that Wallingford made some sense to my distracted mother, whose biochemist husband was still off in Asia helping to ferry medical supplies into Free China. Wallingford was where Uncle Sam and Aunt Mary, old China missionary friends, were teaching at Choate School, and they had kindly found us half a house for a cheap rent.

But for me at eight, no stranger or more formidably unwelcoming place ever existed than the Grade 3 classroom of the North Main Street Elementary School in Wallingford that frigid January. Back in Nanking I had long grown accustomed to being considered an oddity by my contemporaries — from my Chinese playmates, to the rickshaw men's children who lived in huts outside our walled garden, to the peddlers of fried breads and spun sweets — in fact, to the entire population of insatiably curious but genial onlookers everywhere I went. We foreigners were exotic and hilarious, with our pink skin, big noses, funny-colored eyes, and general hairiness. In China I felt special, different, but appreciated.

Not so at the North Main Street School. That first day the well-meaning teacher had announced a new boy's recent arrival from China. At recess I was surrounded. "You can tell he's a Chinaman," said one sallow Italian. "Yeah," said some other swarthy ethnic, "those frigging slanty eyes." "Hey, speakee Chineese, Chink," demanded a third. I murmured, "Please, couldn't we be friends?" Those words drew hoots and jeers. They all agreed the accent was Chinese. But then, before they could beat me up, I agreeably began to say things in Chinese. I called them little foreign devils and turtle's eggs ("bastards" in Chinese) but claimed that I was saying "How are you" and "Happy Birthday." Slowly, respect began to seep in. An uncomfortable scene; from that time on, I knew that I was different and rootless in America.

Now according to both tradition and the map, southern Connecticut is part of New England. Yet back then, and to this day, I would dispute it. Wallingford, and its even seamier neighbor Meriden (where I went to see *Gone With the Wind*, my first movie, that winter), are backwaters of New Haven. And New Haven is not really New England. It's a satellite of New York City. By June 1940 I had still no sense of a place called New England, but all



that was shortly to change. For that June my mother announced that the five of us, including my siblings, were taking off for some watering spot in western Massachusetts where our globe-trotting father would soon join us for that extreme rarity, a family reunion.

That summer it was Mrs. Livingston W. Cleveland who first introduced me to the flinty grandeur of the New England Dowager, a personage recurrent in my ensuing odyssey. She was the duchess of what seemed to me, at age nine, a magical country estate in the hamlet of Lithia, Massachusetts, two miles west of Goshen in the lower Berkshires.

Mrs. Cleveland — the redoubtable widow of two, some said three, eminent Congregational ministers — greeted her disparate guests with warm hauteur, saying she hoped they would be comfortable and (by unmistakable implication) tidy. It was she who presided over the long trestle head table at all our communal meals in the establishment's gabled clapboard manor house. Once she had regally swept to her seat (with bustles, it seemed to me, though that cannot be true), she would signify to a college-student waitress the particular blessing to be sung — the Doxology, or "O Give Thanks," or some brighter tune like "In My Heart There Rings a Melody," often sung in rounds and even with descants — and her quavering but clear contralto voice would lead us all. After the blessing, she would add her wintry smile to the ritual applause that greeted, as a not so gentle admonition, each guest who scuttled into the hall late. Punctuality was central to her regimen.

Actually, Mrs. Cleveland wasn't a New Englander at all, but spoke in the elegance of upper-class Old England. This made her even more formidable, though the rumor in my set was that she had first come to America sixty years before as a nanny in some clergyman's household and had soon moved from Downstairs to Upstairs.

"Mountain Rest," Mrs. Cleveland's duchy, was a summer colony for retirees as well as overseas Protestant missionaries on furlough, founded by the Congregational Church headquarters in Boston around the turn of the century. The seventy or so guests, who sought the coolness of the hills for varying periods of vacation, ranged in age from babies to the very old but vigorous. (Hardiness was also central to the regimen, and missionary habits seemed to sustain vigor well into the twilight years.) Some guests were annual repeaters, single women long retired from decades of teaching, nursing, or evangelism in Africa, Asia, India, the Levant. Others were whole families on home leave from remote places and, from time to time, large multigenerational families holding reunions.

For me, Mountain Rest began with a long and gritty train ride up the Connecticut River valley in the oppressive heat of June. At Northampton we were met by the Carleton student from India who drove the colony's antique wooden-sided station wagon, redolent of old leather and exhaust fumes but never tobacco. The road west seemed up and ever up, gradually cooler, winding through Florence, Haydenville, and Williamsburg and then steeply ascending to the summit at Goshen where narrow rich farmland suddenly spread below us as we dipped down to Lithia. Everyone's ears popped just before the Whale Inn.

On that first trip our fellow passenger, the Reverend Mr. Vokel, a fundamentalist Presbyterian from Korea who saw Satan in every possible pleasure including the cinema, was apoplectic that Northampton's movie theatre was named the "Calvin"; his association was Genevan rather than presidential, and the fact that Calvin Coolidge had been mayor of the college town did not keep him from fulminating for the rest of the summer.

Fundamentalists were one of the hazards of Mountain Rest for us liberals who were taught to believe in good works rather than evangelism. The fundamentalists forbade their children to join in even such juvenile card games as Rook, Old Maid, Pit. They would glower at the edges of our makeshift Saturday night square dances in the old barn (the

liberal Miss Sims, lately of Uganda, played a wicked “Turkey in the Straw” for the Virginia reels) to be sure none of their offspring got too close to a partner. And they never ceased denouncing my hero, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for repealing the Eighteenth Amendment, thereby turning the nation into a giant gin mill.

Another hazard in those early summers was the super-patriots. The colony was infused, of course, with Christian (or at least Protestant) one-world belief that all men are brothers. The Mountain Rest Cheer, which cannot be intelligibly reproduced here, included words from nine far-flung languages. But every morning, after post-breakfast prayers in the parlour and calisthenics on the front lawn (where the octogenarian Dr. Scudder of India excelled in Jumping Jacks), all guests would attend the raising of the flag while solemnly intoning the Pledge of Allegiance. Many of these veteran sojourners abroad seemed to love Old Glory in a way that would bring tears to the eyes of George Bush.

The daily embarrassment for me, in 1940, was that my two college-age sisters, who were going through a Quaker pacifist phase, conspicuously refused to join in a pledge that reeked of nationalism; my sisters stood there silent with arms folded stolidly across their beautiful breasts. While the old folks bristled and my playmates whispered and tittered, I would blush and shout too loud the words I had only just learned in public school that spring. My own patriotism was questionable since three years before I had been daily honoring the Chinese Nationalist flag, listening to the reading of Sun Yat-sen’s will, and bowing three times before the portrait of the Founding President in a Nanking kindergarten.

Such hazards aside, being at Mountain Rest was a giddy adventure. Few missionaries could afford cars, and virtually all missionaries were trekkers exploring their territories back in their rugged fields of service. As a result, each fair day’s centerpiece was a huge hike, not organized but entirely spontaneous. People simply set forth in all directions, from the colony’s clapboard cottages, covering much of Hampshire County by foot in the months of the summer.

The locals found such behavior odd. “Why you folks *do* this?” the roadstand lady who sold us root beers always asked as our ragtag band sweated its way two miles uphill to Goshen. “Because *we like* to walk,” my mother would reply in a way that suggested the questioner was indolent. At the Whale Inn, our regular destination on these shorter strolls, the two very ample Smith alumnae who ran the place would look welcoming but resigned to the fact that their profits from the usual iced teas and lemonades would be paltry considering the mess we left behind. Once my father was on the scene, however, chocolate éclairs, ice cream sundaes, and strawberry shortcake for everybody made the proprietors more cheerful. On the really fine days we would swim at the lake in the D.A.R. State Forest and then wolf down tinned Vienna sausages and fried-egg sandwiches that the women had cooked over the picnic fire.

Sometimes I went on the longer walks as well, though my preference was to spend those days down by the deep pool in the stream my father had dammed. My parents liked to average ten miles or more a day (and did so into their seventies when a double-decker London bus ran over my mother and neatly “de-treaded” her foot). Those longer walks took us to Swift River and Cummington, where Mother liked to check in at the William Cullen Bryant homestead and wistfully talked about someday buying a farm. There were hikes past the beaver dam to Spruce Corner on the Ashfield road where a little old lady sold wild blackberry and raspberry preserves. If I was good and didn’t whine too much, I was allowed to dip fingers in the jars on the way home. When the going got really tough, my father would miraculously produce chocolate bars and wedges of Gruyère cheese wrapped in tinfoil. His British Army canteen was always full of cold spring water (we



could never figure out how and where he had filled it). Sometimes my sturdy brother would carry me on his shoulders for a while, as he had done for years back in China.

And then there was the super-long walk — for which we sometimes cheated and took the Mountain Rest station wagon part way — to Chesterfield Gorge. There was an ancient and ferocious bearded man near the gorge, a hermit they said, who did beautiful wood carving — napkin rings and bowls and gnarled figures and whistles. The gorge was dark and cold and scary. On Chesterfield Gorge days I usually went to the brook pool or played tennis on the bumpy dirt court.

Outside our cosmopolitan enclave on the Lithia hilltop, most locals we encountered were vendors and innkeepers. A big exception, however, was Farmer Barrus. Farmer Barrus's forebears must have come over with Captain Seabury, for the family had apparently lived in Hampshire County since time immemorial. Unlike other colonists who had the sense to move to New York State, Ohio, and points west, they had stayed on trying to scratch a living out of that hopelessly rocky soil. In the process they had become pillars of Church and Commonwealth, and the current patriarch was both a state senator (Republican, of course) and the presiding elder of the Goshen Congregational Church. Decades before, when times were better, some Barrus had donated the land for Mountain Rest. So our boundary adjoined the Barrus pastures, and the trail walk through the woods to Barrus View for the sunset was an obligatory post-dinner constitutional, right after the obligatory newscast from Lowell Thomas on the parlour radio.

It was from visits to the Barrus farm at milking time that I first learned about rural New England. The working Barruses, in their twenties, were taciturn, devoid of small talk. There was seldom a greeting in the dim-lit cow barn, and I would lurk shyly in the shadows for a while. Then, "Can I pet the calf?" "Yup." "Can I put my fingers in its mouth?" "Yup." "Will it bite me?" "Not likely." (Oh, the bliss of a calf sucking on my fingers!) Then, "Are you going to milk this cow next?" "Yup." "Can I try doing it?" "Nope." It was from some Barrus that I first heard the local weather described as "Nine months winter, three months damned cold weather" — and ran home to tell my mother, who thought it funny but didn't like *that* word. (The strongest expletive-my father ever used was "Great Scot!" and very occasionally "Pshaw!" — which I never heard or saw anywhere else except in some comic strip.) The Barruses had a henhouse that smelled really terrible, but Mountain Rest got its share of the fresh eggs. There were work horses, too — very large, old, and sagging. Their property was generally a mess — unpainted dilapidated buildings and rusting abandoned machines. Indeed, these dour farmers seemed to me about as poor as the rickshaw families outside our Nanking back gate, and a lot less cheerful. But the word among the grown-ups was that Grandpa Barrus had stashed away lots of money.

Lithia locals I came to know better were the postmistress and her husband. In those days the village did have a Post Office, though absolutely nothing else, and it occupied one room in the small farmhouse at the foot of Mountain Rest's hill. The lady was a Barrus relative of some sort and made her husband do the boring stuff. The dark old quarters smelled of pipe tobacco and wood smoke from the pot-bellied stove. As Mrs. Cleveland got to like me, she allowed me to bring down the outgoing mail and pick up the delivery. After a while the postmistress would let me ink up the round rubber stamper with the wooden stem and assault the letters with a postmark. In his travels my father had started me on a stamp collection, opening me up to faraway lands from Abyssinia and Afghanistan to Zanzibar and Zululand. To actually play postmaster with mail addressed to such places by the Mountain Rest denizens was a heady experience.

By early September, Mrs. Cleveland, who had decided that my mother was a fellow patrician, offered the whole Thomson family the use of the station wagon, together with the Carleton driver, for a day-long foliage tour of something called the Mohawk Trail — from Lithia up to Greenfield and then along Route 2 to Williamstown and beyond. At the summit of Mt. Greylock I decided that New England had at least one mountain worth mentioning — something like Kuling in the massif of central China, where we spent our summers before the Japanese spoiled everything. But Greylock was lacking in Buddhist temples, sacred ginkgo trees, Taoist shrines, and views of the brown Yangtze as Poyang Lake's blue-green waters swirled into it. I was somewhat more taken with the roadside Indian teepees and souvenirs since my father's family tree was said to include Prince Henry of the Mohawks and a handful of brave Palatinate forebears who had died at the Battle of Oriskany in the French and Indian Wars. On the drive home I threw up. Cars were new to me, and the Carleton boy had to stop at five-mile intervals for my stomach and head to settle. That night we missed not only the ritual applause for being late but dinner itself. Nonetheless, like a cat cautiously widening its turf in a new place, I had tasted a bit more of New England. It had been a nice place to visit, but China was still home.

That autumn we moved out of Wallingford and shifted our base southward by degrees — first, for two years, to an apartment on Morningside Heights in New York City and then to missionary housing in Princeton, New Jersey, in the same building we'd lived in at the time of my birth. New Jersey at last, the reader may say. Well, yes. But it really wasn't at all like the place of my Nanking daydreams. There was the drive across the Hackensack Meadows, to begin with; the rural environs of Nanking, draped regularly in nightsoil, smelled pleasant by contrast. The train ride to Princeton Junction, and especially the "dinkie" to Princeton, had its charms. But there was no denying that Elizabeth, Rahway, Metuchen, and the others were a downer; and New Brunswick wasn't much better ever since Rutgers University had turned my mother's manorial house, a flat-top on Bleeker Place, into a gloomy shell of classrooms. (Mother wept and wouldn't set foot inside.) Princeton itself was lovely, a joy for a teenager with a bicycle; but the rowdy undergraduates, confident that they owned the place, made me feel an outsider. At the Garden and Playhouse cinemas their hoots and catcalls drowned out the movies. Meanwhile, my father was shortly off to China again; my mother decided that my grades at the public school were too high, and I should go somewhere I would be "challenged"; and away I was sent, in September 1943, as a day-boy commuter at the Lawrenceville School, five miles down the road to Trenton.

There was thus a sizable hiatus in my probing of New England. My older sister had bought an abandoned farm in upstate New York as a surprise for her new husband, who was off at war; and we spent parts of the next few summers there trying to resurrect it. To be sure, we also returned for portions of each summer to the simple pleasures of Mountain Rest — "the most innocent place on earth," in the words of my mother. But these were the war years, before and after Pearl Harbor, and nothing much changed in our old routines. There were more spouseless mothers, for the men tended to stay at their overseas posts and work in refugee relief. And the college boys of draft age had all but disappeared. A few more cars, perhaps; but with gasoline tightly rationed, we stuck to our hiking ways. One winter the aged Mrs. Cleveland drifted off in her sleep. But her daughter, Mrs. Perkins, previously a sourpuss under her mother's autocratic rule, blossomed overnight



and ascended to the throne with astonishing Yankee grace. After that things loosened up quickly; I even sometimes smelled beer on the breath of older boys returning from dances up in Goshen.

In the summer of 1945 New England grew larger for me. My sister Sydney, courted by an Amherst man now studying for the Navy chaplaincy at Union Theological Seminary, got herself a job as an *au pair* to those eminent Union gurus, Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, at their country home in Heath, Massachusetts, on the border of Vermont. And to Heath I came for one splendid week in July. It was there that I first encountered my second New England Dowager, the formidable Mrs. Edward Staples Drown, widow this time of two Episcopal clergymen-professors. But I also encountered much more.

Heath, west of Greenfield and a steep two miles above Charlemont, was the summer hideaway of Protestant divines. There was Angus Dun, Bishop of Washington, D.C.; there was William Appleton Lawrence, Bishop of western Massachusetts; there was Dean James Pike, eventually to become Bishop of northern California; there were the two Niebuhrs, each of whom deserved a bishopric. And there were many more, theology professors and seminarians. Among the latter was my sister's boyfriend, who had hired out as a temporary farmhand with a local dairyman in order to press his suit between milkings and haymaking. The atmosphere for me was so religiously bracing that on the day I found myself in Bishop Dun's pool with Niebuhr and two other wearers of the purple, I decided that my swim had constituted adult baptism.

"Reinie," as Niebuhr was affectionately known to one and all, hardly belongs in my story line since he was a Midwesterner transplanted to New York. But I cannot mention him without saying that his respectful attention to the questions of a thirteen-year-old that week left me filled with affectionate awe for him, in particular, and for great theologians in general. We talked for literally hours about his friends Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, about Harry Truman and the Potsdam Declaration, about the concept of "unconditional surrender" for Japan (he didn't like it), and about the future of the world after peace. He talked to me as if I were a grown-up. I was not all that precocious; his rare knack was to make a young boy feel so. Long after he died in 1971 there were times when I would have given anything to be able to pick up the telephone and ask Reinhold Niebuhr's advice.

As for Mrs. Drown: she was without doubt the reigning sovereign of Heath. It is hard, in retrospect, to say exactly why. But back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she lived in a house at the center of the Episcopal Theological School, this gaunt, imperious woman, her thin grey hair escaping from its bun, had captured and captivated two generations of aspiring divinity students, who learned fast to come to tea or Sunday dinner when summoned; and as these tutees in Brahmin manners and Anglican gossip ascended in the church hierarchy, Mrs. Drown's clout ascended with them. In Heath, clergy and laity, farmers and gentlemen-farmers alike, were compelled to respond with alacrity to Mrs. Drown's beck and call. She was, as I think about it, a better-hearted version of Trollope's Mrs. Proudie; but since she had no Dr. Proudie, Bishop of Barset, to push around, she pushed everyone else. She seemed to know everyone who mattered, and she had an uncanny memory for people and connections. A decade later, when I met her again in Cambridge, she said, "Of course. You're Sydney's little brother. In Heath you talked a bit too much." And once, in a snowstorm, when I drove the now very old, arthritic, and nearly blind Mrs. Drown to Massachusetts General Hospital, she asked, "Jimmy, where are we now?" "On Storrow Drive," I replied. "Oh yes," she said. "I knew him well."

Towards the end of those Princeton years in the damp flatlands of New Jersey, I had two



further exposures to New England, one intensely bovine, the second intensely musical. In 1946 my mother reluctantly decided that my father back in postwar China needed her surveillance more than I did, so I became a boarding student at Lawrenceville. Summers got arranged by relatives, and in the first instance the Heath connection produced a one-month job offer from the same farmer who had previously employed my sister's suitor. The wages were unspecified, and I was too polite to ask.

I suspect that the whole deal was a reluctant favor to someone. Although chubby daughter Pearl Landstrom had greeted me warmly at the Greenfield railroad station, Farmer Landstrom was bleak and monosyllabic that evening when he got back from chores and said almost nothing for the rest of the month. The Landstrom parents were Grant Wood people — he gaunt and defeated, she gaunt and anxious. Daughter Pearl, in her twenties, mothered me and laughed at my jokes. But it was teenaged Ruth, voluptuous and sultry, who filled me with a mysterious yearning. Alas, Ruth had eyes only for another — the older hired boy, probably the only one Farmer Landstrom had intended to employ, a good-looking, muscular rustic who artfully shifted the blame to me whenever things went wrong.

I was not cut out to be a farmer. The hours disagreed with my long-established habits; early rising was not my thing, and even my mother, who rose with the birds, had accommodated to this odd child who seemed to do his best work at night. I also suffered from terrible hay fever — normally brought on by ragweed in August but in this instance simply and appropriately brought on by hay. (My hay fever disappeared forever when I got married.) Furthermore, I know of no smell as toxic to my system as a predawn nightful of hot, fresh cow manure in an unaired barn. Chinese nightsoil was fragrant by comparison.

At the end of that month Farmer Landstrom deposited me at the Greenfield station, shook my hand, gave me an envelope, and, uttering more words in succession than ever before, said, “Reckon y’understand it ain’t been a good season.” I learned my first lesson in contract negotiations when I opened that envelope on the train and found, as the entirety of my wages, a ten-dollar bill.

In the spring and summer of 1947 something happened that subtly affected my unspoken search for roots. When I look back I see two moments when something inside me said, “Here I might like to live.” It happened in two places: in the village of Cotuit, on Cape Cod, and on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. And it had never happened before anywhere else but Nanking.

It had a lot to do, I think, with the magic of a huge, raucous Brunhilde I had come to adore named Lillian M. Paige. Miss Paige was my piano teacher and most favorite grown-up. Since Nanking, where I had adored both Victrola records and Sophie Liu, my beautiful young piano teacher, my mother had suspected I might be a prodigy in music (as, she believed, in most other things). A succession of good teachers had humored her along, and my imitative efforts at composing (a bit of Haydn here, a bit of Mozart there, and now some Handel) had caught the attention of Miss Paige. A peripatetic Bostonian who offered weekly lessons in New York and Princeton as well, she had swept into my life in the war years and for a while found my composing itch promising.

As my schoolboy interests turned increasingly to journalism and history, it was Miss Paige who urged in the spring of 1947 that I give music one last chance. She arranged that I spend that summer season at Tanglewood in the Berkshires, immersed in professionals and their cacophony, and see if I had the temperament for a lifetime of musical commitment. I was apprenticed to one great man, Julius Herford, sat at the feet of many others (Aaron Copland, Robert Shaw, young Leonard Bernstein), attended nonstop rehearsals and performances, and earned my keep as a stagehand and sandwich-maker. In the late

evenings we hangers-on would mix in the local roadhouses with illustrious performers, absorbing musical lore and sipping Tom Collinses.

If Mountain Rest had embodied innocence, Tanglewood breathed passion, sophistication, and brilliance. Ego was everywhere, fiercely disciplined by art. In the younger people the ego was raw. In the older ones — many of them European Jews who had known much suffering — it was tempered with sadness, kindness, and the wisdom I had felt in Niebuhr. I came to revere especially the conductors, both choral and orchestral, who had to forge beauty out of anarchy. Part of me yearned to become a conductor. But it was only part of me; and what I learned intuitively that summer was that, in music, partial commitment is nothing. I learned that music was not my way. I could never have made that decision without total immersion at Tanglewood, and I never regretted it.

On the final day of the season, one of my volatile Lenox housemates, Mr. Bedetti, the Boston Symphony's first cellist, was heard to scream, "NO MORE *MUSIC!*" as he packed up his bags. I entirely agreed.

Right after Tanglewood, Miss Paige summoned me down for a week at her cottage on Cape Cod. On the drive from Providence to Cotuit the car rocked with her peals of laughter as I recited my encounters with everyone from the awesome Koussevitsky to lesser showmen and some musicians who prey on young men. By the time we reached the sandy pine groves of the Upper Cape, we had neatly relegated music to the status of avocation and could proceed with seashore living. We swam, we walked the beaches, we feasted on mussels, clams, and lobsters. Most of all I remember breathing that Cape air, sharp and musty with sand, salt, and pine pitch. Her other houseguest was the pianist George Copeland, the great interpreter of Debussy, who possessed as well a comic spirit. Copeland forced marvelous sounds from the old upright while Lillian and I sat by the fire. When he tired, all three of us played boisterous games of Hearts well into the night. It was bliss; I found myself curling and stretching my toes like an ecstatic cat.

When it was time to go home, Miss Paige insisted on driving me to Boston where I was to take a train to New Jersey. I knew very little about Boston, except that my favorite Lawrenceville teacher had gone to Harvard. It was where people talked like Miss Paige, with loud expressive voices, very broad *A*'s, and *R*'s that came and went unexpectedly. It was very cultural, with the Boston Symphony and a museum famous for Chinese art. I knew, from my mother, the rhyme about the Lowells, the Cabots, and God. Boston also had Mrs. Cleveland and Mrs. Drown, and probably a lot more just like them. And, of course, it had History — I was no longer a complete Nanking ninny, and I did know quite a bit about the Revolutionary War (much of it from Kenneth Roberts's novels). I also associated Boston with mediocre food since my mother, deprived of Chinese servants, had learned cooking late in life from the *Fanny Farmer Boston Cooking School Cookbook*. (She usually added soy sauce.)

So I was ready for a quaint and highbrow, if poorly provisioned, city. What I remember is my astonishment at the broad tree-decked boulevard, with its stately buildings — lower Commonwealth Avenue, close to the Public Garden — where Miss Paige lived. Her "studio" was an elegant, high-ceilinged apartment with chandeliers and two baby grand pianos. She even had an Old World houseman, the courtly Riccardo Tramontano, who greeted us with bows and a flourish. Riccardo, it turned out, was a learned expert and collector of the sixteenth-century epic poet Torquato Tasso. In later years, when Lillian was dead and I visited Riccardo in his family's Sorrento hotel (which was built on Tasso's house), I belatedly realized that he had been considerably more than a houseman. But those two days in Boston I decided that Miss Paige was a noblewoman, with retinue, in a



truly noble city. When we went to Mrs. Jack Gardner's Museum (as Lillian called it), I conjured up images of Lillian Paige holding sway over that castle for a great soiree in which she played the piano by candlelight.

At the Lawrenceville commencement in June 1948, where I walked off with a hefty share of prizes, I was repeatedly announced as "James Claude Thomson Jr. of Nanking, China," causing ripples of surprise among the assembled throng of parents.

I hadn't laid eyes on Nanking in ten years. I had not seen my father in four years, my mother in two. So the Presbyterian Mission Board authorized one last round-trip for me to China, Yale unprecedentedly granted me a one-year deferment of admission, and away I went to home, in the company of my best friend from school. Our arrival in China coincided with the climax of the Chinese Civil War.

My Nanking house and garden — my Eden — were grey and battered by the long years of warfare. As our horse-carriage pulled up to the gate, the new collection of servants, lined up in their white jackets, tried to make things festive by exploding strings of fire-crackers in honor of the Young Master's return. Everything was recognizable, but smaller — especially the columns of the front portico that had once seemed as vast as the Parthenon.

It was home, but different. And within four months we were forced to flee again on a U.S. Navy LSM that took us downriver to Shanghai, where we lived out of suitcases in the Navy YMCA. We were refugees once more, and Nanking was gone forever.

There comes a time in life when transience is not only reality but also a state of mind. It surrounds the college and postgraduate years and then the early phases of a career search. We have no roots and perceive no need for them.

My rootlessness had deeper sources in the uprooting of my earlier years. As a result of the latest Nanking expulsion, I felt myself more rootless than I would have in the ordinary course of things.

There were, for instance, the four years at Yale. I loved college and did well there. But Yale was full of very rich people, many of them from Greenwich and Hartford and their environs. I, a nomad on full scholarship as usual, was in but not of the place. Yale, though in the thrall of New York, was always looking anxiously over its shoulder towards Harvard.

At Cambridge, England, I studied for two more years on yet another scholarship. In England you didn't have to be a China-boy to feel tolerated but excluded; all Americans were oddities to be politely suffered. The civility was overwhelming, the coldness palpable. Mind you, I had a marvelous time there, too, though I sped to the human warmth of the Continent at every possible opportunity.

And finally there were the graduate years at Harvard on the wasteland road to a Ph.D. degree in Chinese history. Here I was at last in the smug epicenter of New England, but on the edge, looking in from a run-down multisex boarding house crammed with Californians, New York Jews, con men, and an occasional Latvian.

Sometimes the gentry let me in for a tribal rite. Brahmin acquaintances needed extra men for the traditional Waltz Evenings at the Copley Plaza. Cambridge matrons needed presentable escorts to their Boston Symphony boxes. One of my old teachers took me to the Tavern Club. Mrs. Alfred North Whitehead, bedridden in her nineties, got my name from one of her husband's Yale disciples and had me read to her over hot chocolate. Mrs. Drown decreed me an honorary student of divinity, which meant lots of teas and Sunday luncheons. The matriarch of Louisburg Square had me to dinner once. She excoriated me



in front of the others for lighting a cigarette before she poured her late husband's dessert wine. The wine, to my delight, had turned to vinegar. As for Miss Paige, her great heart had finally stopped; I spent many Sundays walking her stately avenue.

There is no place more conscious of distinctions between the permanent and the transient than Cambridge, Massachusetts. All my really close friends seemed to leave. I knew then it was only a way station — and still feel so today although I have lived here now for nineteen years in my Cambridge house, and my Harvard chair for twenty-five years of service sits in the entrance hall.

Those graduate years brought one great change. One day in the cooperative kitchen of our Irving Street house I met the love of my life, a very beautiful young divorcée, a poet. Our first date was a Waltz Evening to which Brahmin friends forced her to invite me as her escort. The child of Bohemian New York writers, she was as rootless as I, although her mother's forebears (as she frequently reminded me) had come on the first boat of Puritans to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, *far* outclassing Captain Seabury. On her adored father's side she was Irish — and was careful to announce it at dinner parties before the conversation turned to the inevitable vicious Irish-bashing. Four years later we got married and went off to Washington to perfect the world with the help of John F. Kennedy.

Twice, during the early Cambridge years, I ventured down to Cape Cod. One time I visited Orleans friends who had long ago fled from West Cummington in the Berkshires and now seldom crossed the Cape Cod Canal lest they be stranded on the mainland. Once my girl and I spent a July weekend with two bachelor professors in a lovely rented house on Wellfleet's Gull Pond, one hundred yards from the Atlantic. (She was apoplectic that their *délicatesse* forced her to lodge apart in a local inn; that was still the 1950s.) Down the road from Wellfleet stretched the Outer Cape to Provincetown's Land's End, and from the ocean side, except for the bulge of the earth, one might have seen the Azores. Once again, as with Lillian Paige in Cotuit, I felt a rare sense of peace.

It was in the summer of 1966, as I was preparing to flee the Vietnam calamity and the Lyndon Johnson National Security Council staff, that we learned of a house for rent in the Truro woods on the Cape. Harvard had beckoned me back to teach history, and I had by then despaired of changing from within a policy of national suicide.

That, I now see, was the start of it all. The pine-scented quietude of our Truro hilltop, with a crescent-moon glimpse of the ocean, began to work its healing. One day we saw the children of two psychiatrists playing Scrabble on the beach; the one word on the board was TRUST. And one day we went sea-clamming with our Washington psychiatrist who had thought us both grandiose. As we waded out of the bay, hand in hand with a basket of clams between us, like God, he looked on his creation and saw that it was good.

The summer people were welcoming, though somewhat too competitive in socializing and artsiness for our evolving taste. In time it was the local people we came to like and trust — Raymond the caretaker, Jack the postmaster, Eddie the carpenter, Bob the plumber, Bryan the well-digger, even Ellie, the sharp-tongued boss of Schoonie's general store.

Five years later we bought that Truro house, newly winterized, and started coming down from Cambridge in the fall, winter, and spring as well as the summer. Curiously enough, the beginning and end of those weekends caused me agony. It was all my wife could do to calm my anxiety as we packed up our bags and boxes for the two-hour drive each way. One day I had the insight: I was still the small-boy refugee, leaving Kuling for the Hong Kong camp cots, leaving China for Wallingford, leaving Nanking again for the Shanghai YMCA, eternally on the move. The cat was still a stray, and no place was home.

Very slowly things changed. The house, with its spectacular walk through the National Seashore to the ocean's high dunes, became a haven for our two children. My wife, the writer and teacher, became a preserver — tomatoes, jellies, pickles, chutneys, and, every year, wild beach plum jam. She also became an expert mycologist, scouring the woods to classify and to find edible mushrooms I rarely dared to sample. Some seasons we rented a piano, and I played some of the music George Copeland had played for Lillian and me in Cotuit. I also began to write — about China policy, the Vietnam War, and my Nanking childhood. Gradually my tantrums about the drive to and from the Cape began to recede. I was not being expelled; I was maybe just going home.

Since last spring, when we decided to sell the house, I have thought a lot about Raymond's words: "I thought you folks were natives by now." *Natives*, he had said.

Why sell a house when you have found your roots? Maybe that is exactly why. Once you have roots, you can go anywhere on earth and still know where you come from. 🐼