Local Color

When I visit my old friend Wally in Brighton, England, he hands me the keys to 37A, a cozy apartment down eight tiled steps that descend directly from the Kensington Place sidewalk. When I am expected, the year-round renter of 37A is forgiven a payment and sent packing, once his many sneakers have been stowed away to accommodate my swishy skirts. 37A does not communicate with number 37, the narrow two-story house above where my host lives. One day Wally will satisfy his mortgages on house and apartment, then unite his sundered demesne with an interior stairway.

Windy Brighton is poised on the English Channel, where it is usually raining, or drizzling, or weeping, or the skies are in some manner incontinent of their humidity. The tile stairs to my apartment are slippery when wet, and wet they always are. This, more than their steep pitch and narrowness, reminds me poignantly of my increasing age and declining balance.

Upstairs in Wally's house, the staircase that connects the ground floor to the first, though steeper than the stairs to my apartment, is at least carpeted and has a solid wooden banister to grip. I proceed on it with utmost care nevertheless. Wally's collection of 18th and 19th century prints, glazed and displayed in antique frames, is hung in dense arrangement along the length and height of the staircase walls. With every pass, the full, wholesome hips of an American matron threaten to dislodge this gallery and bring it crashing down like the Word of the Lord in an oratorio.

Over years I have acquired enough body memory to lessen my anxiety on Wally's straitened stairs. But when we recently enjoyed a country weekend at our friend Lewis's home in the village of Rottingdean, I was reminded that muscle memory does not transfer.

The great dimensions of Lewis's house can only be appreciated from the outside because the structure, which dates from the 16th century, has been so often revised across the centuries that the interior is a crazy maze of slanting floors, zigzag hallways, demi-floors with odd drops, and rooms defiant of geometry.

One example of the structure's charming nonconformity is the failure of the ground-level hallway to meet any of its adjoining thresholds evenly. Hall and rooms join by means of uprisings or declivities tantamount to domestic landmines, undetectable by any but the sensitized foot. To walk the ground floor of Lewis's house is to drift into the lush and dreamy world of *Country Life*, while one's feet falter through the ruts of *Successful Farming Magazine.*

The polished door of the sitting room, for instance, swings into a scene of upholstered furnishings done up in floral fabrics—peonies! roses!—amply provided with plumped pink pillows, and silk-shaded reading lamps deployed at every perfect place. Gilt and glass coffee tables are piled with luxury editions on fine art and the leisure pursuits of royalty. French porcelain statuettes and candles in cut glass columns grace every surface; the room is perfumed with heirloom roses from Lewis's garden.

Whenever I approach this charming room, my hand is adorned with a sparkling cocktail ring and a crystal stem of chilled Chardonnay. A silky pleated skirt rustles around my legs. I advance a well-shod foot, only to have it run afoul of an irregular uprising of floorboards with no conceivable reason to be there. This initiates what the athletic call a squawking double stumble. Eager neither to break my neck nor to spill my wine on the sofa cushions—above, all, to save face—I attempt graceful recovery with a wrenching lead of the left buttock. The sitting room threshold's quarter-inch rise has undoubtedly provided similar low comedy for centuries. Or so I attempt to console myself.

On this most recent visit, Lewis accommodated me overnight in a garret room of fairy-tale charm. Taking my bag in hand, he opened the door to the staircase and gallantly gestured me ahead. Compared to this one, the staircase at Wally's suddenly seemed expansive, as if imported from the Biltmore Estate. I tottered up the tower of wedge-shaped stairs—some listing left, some tilting right, but no two of equal rise. I focused fanatically on my feet because my size eight was longer by half than most of the stairs were deep, and by proportion greater still as the turns got tighter. This attention to my step meant inattention to everything else. Consequently, I took a couple of vicious blows to my crown when I failed to duck the next floorboards lurking to level me from above. Each floor left only a narrow hole for the steps—and me—to rise through.

The final passage of stairs, which brought us to the garret, was the narrowest of all, with the tiniest treads. The declining slope of the final landing heaved us directly into my little room, where I couldn't straighten myselfbeneath the gabledroof without further trauma to my head. But the room was quaint, tidy, and spare, with a small bureau, a chair, and a little bed tucked under the beams. It was a storybook room, and I felt myself become a dreamy child as I knelt to peer out the tiny window so high above the English village, all built of flint and flowers.

Unfortunately for the adult bladder in me, the loo was downstairs: No chamber pot provided. Certainly countless humans over six centuries have achieved muscular heroics rather than risk the picturesque, life-threatening stairs of that Rottingdean landmark in the dark of night.

Being American and used to modern construction makes me perhaps too quick to whine about such details, but during none of my trips to England have I ever visited a public building—station, restaurant, or hotel lobby—where the facilities were not in the basement and accessible only by foot. Perhaps it's the inevitable dark descent to the toilet and the toilsome climb back to the light that gives the English that public air of Demeter, a little world weary, regretful, and sad, always awaiting their Persephone's returns from downstairs.

But I should be grateful to encounter indoor plumbing at all in the Old World, and should forbear from such inconsiderate whinging about the inconvenience of peeing in fifteenth or seventeenth-century structures built well before the invention of incontinence. It seems that England still awaits even the discovery of handicapped, disabled, and elderly people who will someday need to use the toilet without an hour's prior planning.

Where would more lifts be placed, anyway, in ancient structures? Fitting only a couple of commodes into these buildings had to have required the utmost ingenuity of the keenest engineers. Is the stout national character formed from this general lack of lifts, from the burden of lives lived without opportunities to take a load off?

That the English present a cheerless face to the world is no wonder. It could be explained alone by the necessity of heroic expense of effort for an activity as necessary and routine as trip to the loo. I should consider the dreary fashion paraded across the sidewalks in south of England simply as collateral damage. Why dress up for another day

of sweating up and down basement steps? Even on a rare fine day, the public massed on Brighton's streets form a dull, sulking cloud, a gathering thunderhead of navy nylon windbreakers, black tees, gray hooded sweatshirts, and every cut of badly fitted blue jeans—that scourge imported from the U.S., that reductive disease of the sartorial world.

Still, it's one thing to appear stooped and dreary as the result of perpetual warfare with hostile architecture. It is another to go about in navy, brown, and black, shrouded like dead saints but lacking their auras. Why the English do not enlist their reserves of pluck to mount a daily color assault against their rainy climate and bone-crunching structures is a question for which I lack an answer.

This is particularly perplexing to me because the English are ardent gardeners. At every season, I've seen Sussex abundant with the flowers that its citizens nurture. Even in late February, Brighton's winter-weary cityscape twinkles with yellow, pink, and blue primroses that thrust themselves through rough rings of dark foliage. Daffodils spring en masse from emerald lawns.

On my recent June visit, every shop in this densely built city displayed window boxes, hanging baskets, or handsome planters of purple trumpeting petunias, sunny coreopsis, ferns, and romantically draping ivy. Where there were geraniums (and the city was ablaze with geraniums) they sprouted from ancient gnarled limbs on bushes big as prize sheep.

At every home in long, ploychromebrick terraces of attached houses, any minute lawn bloomed with a unique floral display. Some were elegantly urban, featuring climbing roses and wisteria vines, trellised and trained amidst palm trees and trim boxwood borders. These gardens sat chock-a-block with cottage gardens that momentarily transported the passerby to the country, where hollyhocks, snapdragons, sweet peas, and daisies nodded in sweet harmony.

Do the people's hearts lift with so much beauty, cultivated despite lowering skies and the daily challenges to their frames? Or do their despondent sartorial selections show that they have grown indifferent to charm; even to the flowers their Edenic island sends forth?

Perhaps the truth is that the English simply cut a middle course between despair and happiness, remaining cautious of desire. Perhaps their roses are abundant and exuberant because they are loved unsentimentally, with sharpened pruning shears.

I felt conspicuously American as I went about Brighton last June with my head held high in a bright red rain hat. I purchased it straight from a Trafalgar Street milliner's window. I saw not another glimpse of red on any other head. Maybe they stock red for tourists. I know I stood out in the red hat and my coat with rows of elephants marching across it.

It dawned on me how it doesn't take much to get a reputation for being forward. I think that to stand out at all in England may be to stand out in a bad way. Were a person offended by me, I could plead that I only gratified their expectation founded on stereotype. As a friend of Wally's reminded me over cocktails, Wally and I are *citizens*of the United States. The English are *subjects* of the Crown.

I believe in the concept of national character. The masses of English are different from Americans taken as a whole. For instance, that the English appear physically burdened and aesthetically timid seem like reasonable generalizations. The people tolerate individual drabness, yet every gardener adds to a greater landscape of breathtaking beauty, and that landscape is England itself. Through gardening, national unity is on display in a way that the collective virtues of physical endurance and moral courage never can be.

But when national characteristics appear undiluted in one individual, that person is likely to be something of a caricature. It occurred to me that, to an Englishman or -woman, I would indeed be a caricature of an American. I probably dressed too loudly, maybe my stride appeared too jaunty, and perhaps I was too quick to ask questions ofstrangers.

I wonder if those uniform, neutral clothing choices that I deplore don't celebrate for the English the leveling of tiresome class distinctions. The willingness to tolerate pain that I ascribe to them may be my own myth. Perhaps they didn't even register aches that my elevator-lifted life induces me to complain about. And my inclination always to fight back—against poor aesthetics, against the very weather!—may seem one of the strange

characteristics of fractious Americans, who waste their energy in useless campaigns, yet cannot pull together when times are tough.

I have a garden, but I take little care of it so that the lovely flowers—the tulips, irises, peonies, roses, and rainbow of daylilies—go unattended, to my occasional regret and surely to the despair of my neighbors. I don't think often about the message my failure to garden sends, and sometimes I even think about returning my plots to uniform, weedy lawn. "Those flowers aren't my children," I sniff to myself, in ineffectual efforts to lessen guilt about my inattention.

I'm an American. I don't have to be responsible to my neighbors. My country is big and diverse. There is land galore, land to waste with failed shopping malls, the grotesque ruins of which are abandoned with impunity even as they are replaced farther along with more and bigger ones. My garden's weedy display is nothing to the public travesty of the massive, daily ugliness we wallow in—public ugliness that undermines my sense of obligation to keep up appearances for any reason.

I am independent even of my own property—I may neglect my lawn that is large enough for eight Brighton townhouses with their gem-like gardens. My contribution to the landscape is the occasional red hat, the coat with marching elephants.

England is a small place where I bash my head and trip over subtleties the natives don't detect as impediments at all. I wonder if I wouldn't benefit from a few months to remain in 37A. What would it be like to make myself compact, to watch my step? To cultivate just one rose bush and a hollyhock of my own, while I clear out the entire stale, red inventory from every Trafalgar Street shop?

The End