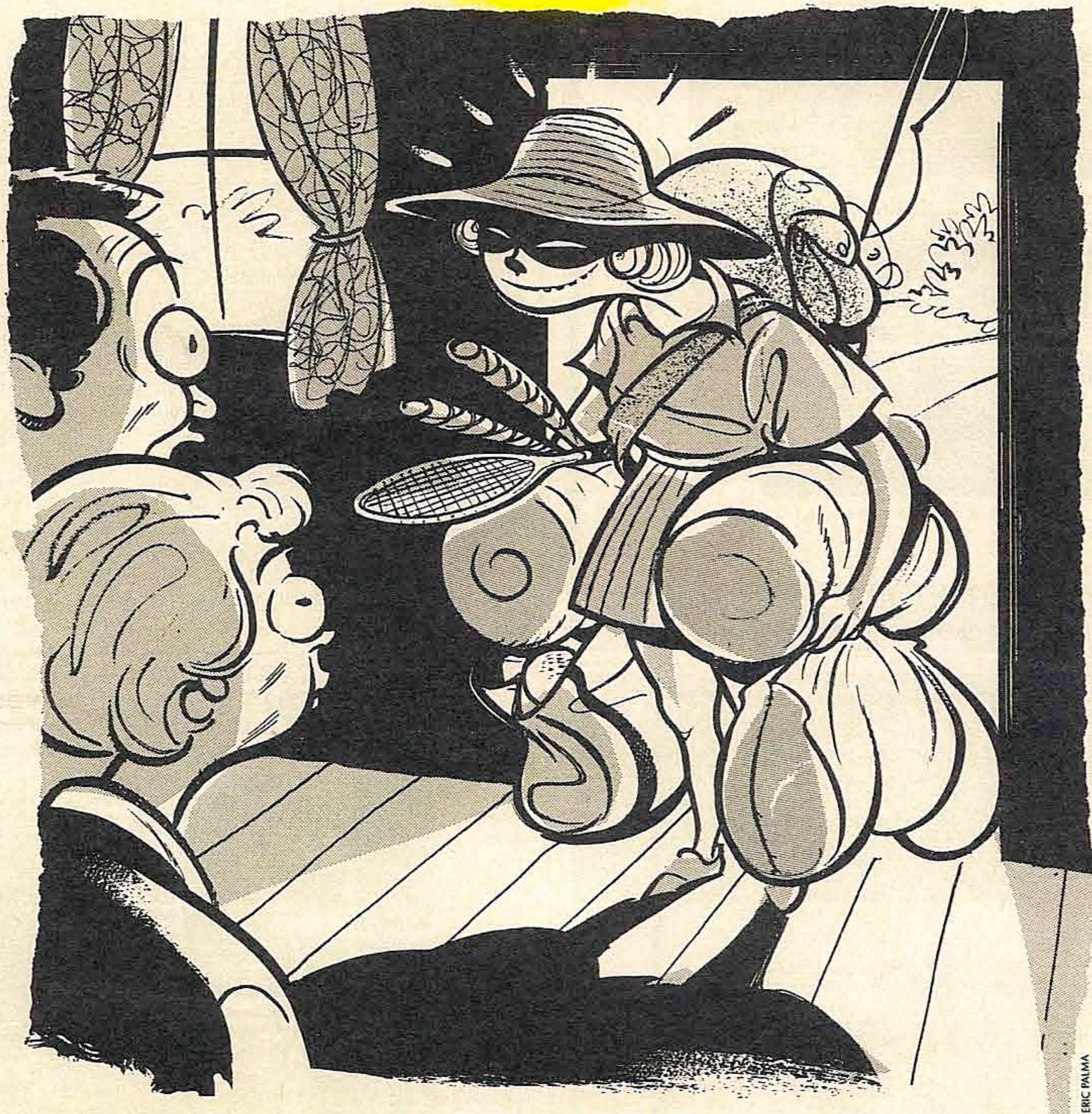


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Life as a Professional Guest

THE ART OF THE MOOCH

by Aimee Lee Ball

Dateline: Litchfield County, Conn. I am deep-sunk in a hammock. Forgetting, just for the moment, that I have borrowed a flea-and-tick collar from a neighbor's dog to ward off the dreaded Lyme disease, I am the very picture of sybaritic relaxation—the new Alice Walker in one hand, and iced mint tea in the other. I may ignore them both and snooze. Not to worry: someone will wake me for dinner, which, I hear rumored, will be swordfish marinated and grilled over coals I will not have to stoke and partaken at a 19th-century scrubbed-pine table shopped for and paid for by somebody else. This, thank God, is not my house.

I grew up in the country, with plots of tomatoes and clothes dried on the line and lightning bugs caught in a

pickle jar with holes punched in the lid on sultry June nights. I have long since embraced the good, the bad, and the very bad of city life, but I still require frequent reminders of my pastoral past. I am poor, so I have adopted a Blanche DuBoisian reliance on the kindness of others: I am a professional guest. This year I will be summering in (working roughly from Northwest to Southeast) Narragansett, Kent, New Milford, Millbrook, Westport, New Hope, Quogue, Sag Harbor, and an undiscovered little jewel box of a town on the Jersey shore that shall go nameless, lest it be overtaken by Benetton, Mrs. Fields, and either Regis or Kathie Lee. (I still have Labor Day free, if anyone is interested.) I realize that this litany sounds impossibly smug and hateful, like the idiot model in the shampoo ad saying, "Don't hate me because I'm

beautiful." But like anything done well, professional mooching requires finesse and forethought—to wit, a system—to ensure the continued goodwill of both host and guest beyond the weekend at hand. And I am prepared to share my system.

People with places in the country are always saying, sometime around January or March, "You'll have to come out to the house this summer." You must resist the urge to whip out your Filofax and say, "When?" since it is my considered opinion that many if not most people do not actually want company, regret the moment an invitation is out of their mouths, and leave you longing for your own hearth and home should you take up their insincere offers. The extreme example of this befell my friends Sharon and

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MOOCH

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Sam, who were invited to spend a weekend at the Wellfleet home a city neighbor had rented for the month of July. This should have been a tip-off to the basic niggardliness of the neighbor: one stinky weekend, despite the fact that Sharon and Sam had a flexible work schedule *and* had gone to the expense of traveling to the cape by plane. Their host insisted on restaurant meals because he couldn't stand "cooking smells" in the house and made everyone spend the day at the beach with no umbrella, turning in the sun like rotisserie chickens and offering a sandy picnic consisting of chunks of cheese and bread, stored in his workout bag along with his Nikes and athletic socks. He awoke at 7 for a run, read the paper and threw it on the kindling pile by the fireplace before anyone else had awakened, and got petulant when Sharon and Sam brought in a blueberry pie from a local stand—he was on a diet.

You want to avoid this kind of weekend. You only want to go where you are actually welcome (as opposed to where you are asked out of obligation or pity for your poor hot self) or where you are at least ignored and left to your own devices, rather than recruited for volleyball games or sand crabbing with exhortations to get with the program. Some hosts think of a country weekend as a sort of extended dinner invitation—a marathon of entertainment for which they are endlessly respon-

sible—and that's not fair either.

In the best of all possible worlds, Perfect Host and Perfect Guest enter into an arrangement of reciprocity: PH picks you up in the Jeep at your front door, in return for which PG has a thoughtful stash of car food for the crawl through the Midtown Tunnel. Perfect Host supplies clean linen and plenty of towels for shampooing and swimming, in return for which Perfect Guest makes the bed on Saturday morning and strips it on Sunday afternoon, rather than assuming the next occupant will be honored to sleep in your smell. Perfect Host does not surprise you with unannounced roommates or pets, in return for which Perfect Guest does not pack as if leaving Anatevka, gunnysacks filled with options and possibilities. (Hopefully, you are among friends. If it gets cold, someone will lend you a sweater. If it rains, someone will offer a pair of dry socks. And Willard is always wrong anyway.)

Group living demands some concessions to group dynamics, particularly with regard to personal hygiene and deportment. If you sleep in the buff and get up to pee, you grab a towel or a T-shirt rather than streaking to the bathroom. (But do you flush, especially if it causes the house to shake and pitch? This is a question for the sages.) You listen for other people's bathroom noises and door slams in the morning, let the homeowners shower first, don't use up all the hot water, and avert your eyes if you see two people not heretofore known as a couple emerging from the

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bathroom at the same time. (But if you're traveling in tandem, do you make love in someone else's thin-walled, creaky-floored house? Another one for the sages, although in this, as in other areas, you want to err on the side of propriety.) Personally, I was rather looking forward to the group showers that seemed imminent until the easing of the reservoir crisis, but then I'm an old camper and I left my modesty back in the Poconos in the '60s, with all of my bunkmates crowded into the bathroom, instructing me on the correct use of training bras and Tampax.

Weekend guesting is like a return to camp, in the suspension of all modesty—and vanity. I once came down to breakfast with makeup on at my friend Sarah's house and was made to feel that I was breaking some sort of Dutchess County ordinance. It can be quite unsettling to live, however temporarily, with people you otherwise see only in the nonprivacy of New York, which is always a masked ball. Put a Molson in a man's hand in the Amagansett dusk, and he will start stripping, revealing a paunch and a pair of bowed legs that are more gently camouflaged by Barneys. Chances are, you will be seeing others for the first time without contact lenses or styling gel, and unless you are known to frighten small children without eyeliner, it's really much more in the spirit of things to do the same.

There are some children you might actually *wish* to scare off—the ill-mannered or untrained ones who come with the weekend package rate, the ones who stand outside your door at dawn saying in stage whispers, "Is she awake?" I often visit one house where my wake-up call is an 8-year-old boy jumping on my stomach on the sofa bed, and it is one of my favorite parts of the weekend, but other people might not find it so adorable. I also know this 8-year-old well enough to dissuade him from the routine if he wishes to be 9. When you're not on close enough terms to discipline someone else's obnoxious brat, and it's the brat's house, you sometimes have to play along. My friend Karen once stopped a little girl from crossing Dune Road by herself in the face of incoming cars, and the little girl's mother was affronted. "We don't like to scare her," said the mom. (If she has trouble talking about traffic, whatever will she do about sex and drugs?)

I always assume a certain grown-up behavior on the part of grown-ups—at least a certain gracious civility, a modicum of manners. I'm often wrong, and a summer house seems to bring out the thoughtless adolescent in some people with Pavlovian dependability. Grown-ups do not greet you at the station with news of a party at the neighbor's: they're invited, you're not. It's possible to witness inappropriately un-grown-up behavior at any age or tax bracket, but the "group share" brings out an especially pernicious variety. It's usually wise to avoid guesting at such houses, going back to my theory of showing up where you are truly welcome—it's a safe bet that if someone is computing your share of "gas money" you are less than truly welcome.

In my fantasy of a group share, there are great bacchanalian feasts—one team grilling the ribs, another shucking the corn, another dribbling basil vinaigrette over the tomatoes—and everyone eats and drinks and talks and sings until they fall comatose on the beach. It is an only child's fantasy of a big Catholic family, and I do visit one such house every sum-

mer. There is bright conversation and the thrashing of the Atlantic as a lullaby, and I try not to think about the cleanliness of the sheets (in a Mediterranean context, these accommodations might be deemed quaint). I have also come to look with less irritation, more bemusement, at the behavior of one housemate, a woman with a serious six-figure income, who brings out frozen individual servings of her mother's lasagna or pot roast, sits down with her meal at a table for eight and asks, "Does anyone want a taste?" She puts her plate in the kitchen sink, and it could grow spores before she would wash it. Her behavior is condoned because, it is wisely observed, she is too old and obtuse to change, and because there are, after all, worse species of housemates—the kind who can spread communicable diseases and don't pay their phone bills.

The quid pro quo on the part of the grateful guest is a nebulous territory: it is a given that you will bring an irresistible, decadent, or much-needed gift. I believe in mass quantities of food, and I always include my private-stock brownies. (My theory about chocolate is that if you are eating something chocolate and it should fall on your foot, your foot should break. We are talking intense chocolate.) It is also a given that you will be reasonably accommodating about the host's idea of camaraderie, whether it's ritual perusing of local flea markets for the world's most perfect Hall pitcher or after-dinner parlor games. Last year I invented a game to replace the dreaded Trivial Pursuit. It's called Slime Island: you create an imaginary shipwrecked community of life's greatest sleazeballs and scumbags, Leona Helmsley being the Queen of Slime Island and Roy Cohn being the King (posthumous nominations are accepted), with special honorable mention this week for Lee Atwater.

It is incumbent on a good guest to be a good sport about any kind of adversity—no hot water, an invasion of gypsy moths, or car trouble. Recently, my friend Leslee and I left the Upper West Side at 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon and arrived in Connecticut close to midnight after the car—from National Car Rental—do you hear me? NATIONAL!—conked out in the middle of the Saw Mill River Parkway. Up the highway we walked (no socks, no bras) to the tollbooth where we waited for the state police, who loaded us in the back of a paddy wagon (no door handles, no rolling-down-of-windows) and called a tow truck, which took us to Luther's garage in Yonkers (in the dark, in the rain) where we listened to stories about cutting people out of wrecked cars ("Sometimes their heads are smashed like grapes," says Luther) until we got a cab to the Westchester County Airport (in the pitch dark, in the pouring rain) for a replacement car. Which stalled all weekend long. Leslee says I am invited for summer fun and car trouble anytime I want because I kept up a steady good cheer during this eight-hour trip through hell. She did get mad when she left me in the stalled car to make a call and returned to find I'd put on lip gloss. Who knew? The cop could've been cute.

Mostly, as a guest, you are being really polite and available. (The only time I was a complete bitch was on my friend Steve's sailboat—a sort of waterlogged summer house—when he didn't warn me we'd be *motoring* down the Hudson to his new slip at City Island. I got a headache and sat in a rubber dinghy trailing behind the boat for

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MOOCH

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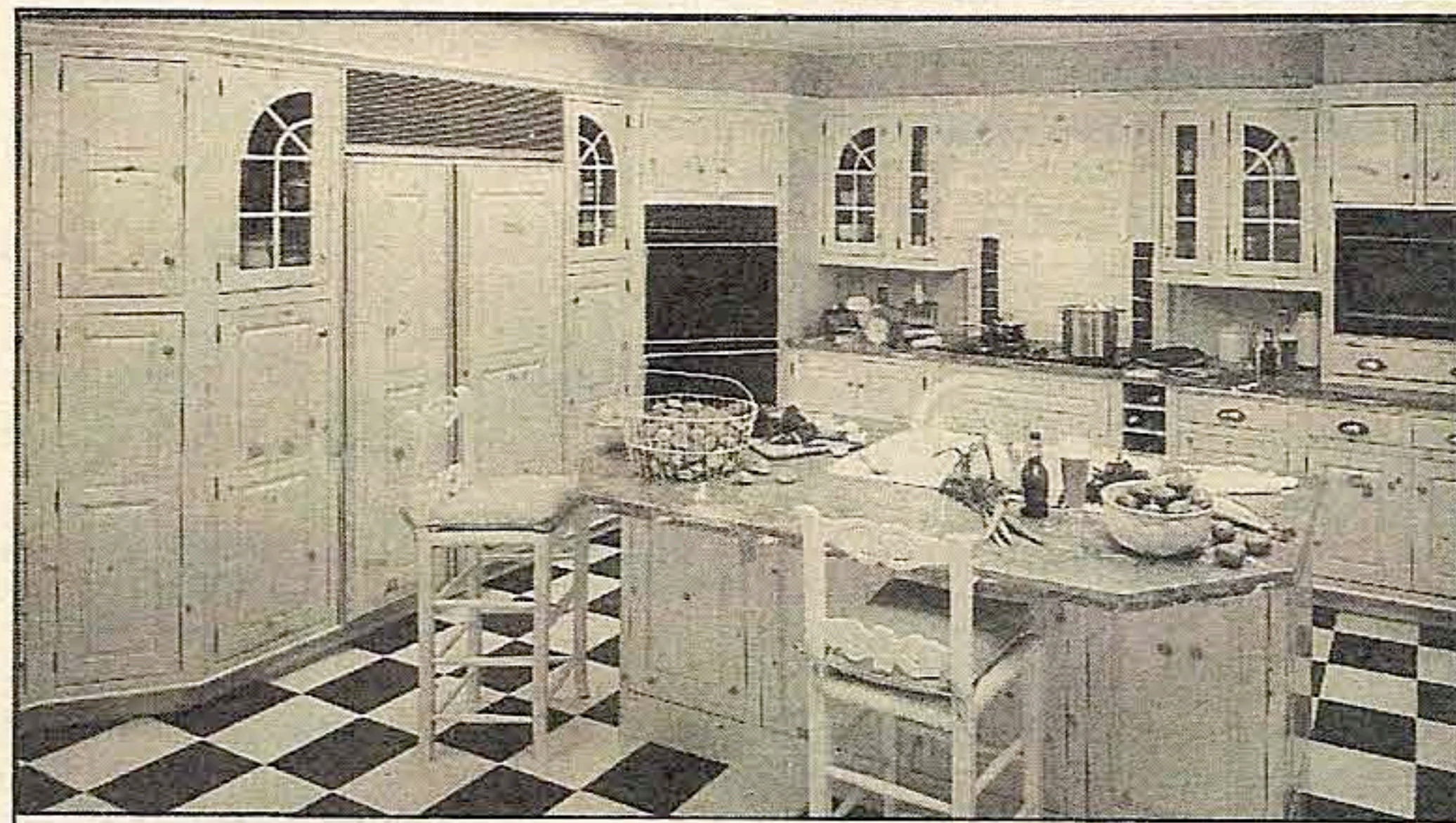
most of the trip. The prisoners on shore at Sing Sing were quite amused.) Mostly you're being nicer than you ever are to your mother or your boss. But when are you allowed to go to bed without seeming antisocial? And if you're the first one up, do you make coffee for everybody or do you make yourself a one-cupper with a spaghetti colander and a paper towel for a filter? And can you start to fill in the crossword puzzle in the *Sunday Times*?

The problem is, everybody has a quirky and idiosyncratic idea about the running of a country house, and unless it's spelled out, you can easily step on somebody else's Fifth Commandment—thou shalt not sleep till noon. My friend Sylvia expects guests to put out. She is known to ask, "How do you feel about raking?" or to hand you an ax for splitting firewood, and if you complain, as I once did, that you want to veg out, she will say, "Whaddya think this is—Grossinger's?" The genuine warmth of her home notwithstanding, she has a rigid notion about meals: she prepares bountiful, exhausting multicourse dinners (and gets grouchy if you stop eating after the pasta), and she grudgingly provides sandwiches for lunch, but she draws a line at breakfast, when she wants nothing to do with being a short-order cook. I came downstairs in her house one Saturday morning (she had long since departed for her gardening chores, some poor schnook following with spade and trowel) to find four guests gathered

around the stove, each preparing the one true version of bacon and eggs, each eying the other versions with the suspicion of a 4-year-old facing liver ("You mean you don't even toast the bread?" "How can you let your yolks seep into your whites?"). On Sunday morning I got everybody to shut up by making muffins—it's hard to complain with a warm mouthful of blueberries and butter.

Once, when I was feeling sick, Silvia brought me meals on a tray, at first in bed and then in the shade of her maple tree. Once, when I was feeling tentative, my friend Arthur took me marketing on the way to his country house, making sure he knew that I'm allergic to green peppers and take my coffee black. (That the relationship didn't work out is no reflection on the merits of the gesture.) Once, when I was feeling weepy, my friends Chris and Len gave me a sun-filled room stocked with fresh wildflowers and up-to-the-minute magazines, made me a bubble bath in their tub, and did my laundry. (I'm usually much more cheerful than this, really. And remember, I still have Labor Day free.) I have been the beneficiary of more hospitality than I could possibly reward if I won the lottery and started paybacks next week. But I'd never be as good a host as I am a guest. I swear, it's those brownies.

These days I'm packing two essentials for the weekend: One is bug spray. (My goddaughter says my winter fragrance is Infini and my summer fragrance is Cutter's.) The other is champagne. If everybody stays slightly pickled, I foresee no problems. At all.



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