

A LETTER TO MY CHILDREN

By

Earl Hamner

During the last fifteen years of my mother's life she suffered with Alzheimer's disease. Until then she had been a bright, cheerful woman deeply interested and involved in the world around her. I would go home to visit her in Virginia and she would look bewildered and ask, "Who are you?" I would answer, "I'm your son." "Where do you live?" She would ask. "In California," I would tell her. "Isn't

that interesting,” she would say, “I have a son in California.”

At the onset of the disease she seemed simply forgetful and confused, but later on she would endure periods of intense agitation. If she were unattended for a short time she would leave home and wander away. She would pace through the house she had lived in most of her life crying fretfully that she wanted to go home.

Hoping to please her and put her mind at rest I would take her for a drive, visiting sites where she had

lived as a child. In the yard of the hillside house in Shipman I sat in the car and enjoyed the vista of the old oaks and long green lawn. I

envisioned my mother there as a little girl playing with the pet lamb she had been so fond of. I looked her for some response. She shook her head and said, "I want to go home"

The house in Alberene where she had been born brought no better reaction. The house had changed little since she used to take us children there to visit our great grandparents. They were an

ancient bedridden couple, propped up side-by-side on pillows. She had a powdery medicinal smell. He had a handlebar mustache that tickled when you kissed him. They hid peppermint balls in a Mason jar under their pillows and rewarded them to us if we would kiss them. I asked my mother if she would like to visit the house, walk in the yard, sit on the porch. "No, she said, "Take me home!

Over the years I have decided that what my mother was calling home for was not a place, but a time.

I suspect it was a time when she was much younger, when her children were still underfoot, when her husband was still vigorous and attentive (My father was an adoring father and loving husband who would pick up our mother and waltz her around the kitchen all the while singing “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” I’m in looooooove with you...”

Sharing my mother’s frustration set me to wondering where I would have in mind if someday I couldn’t find home and went looking for it. In this family we tend to be long lived

and we grow fuzzy minded as the years go by. At eighty-three I have already noticed some alarming symptoms. My doctor says the forgetfulness is only natural, that it comes with age. Still the specter of Alzheimer's lurks out there. Someday when my dementia grows worst, when I am even more cloudy minded than I am now, unable to drive and unable to tell you where "home " is, I expect I will ask you to take me home. You are good and loving people and I know you will do your best to find the place I need to be. I

leave these notes for your guidance.

Often in dreams I go home to Virginia. I rent a car at Dulles and drive down Route 29. Around Culpepper the Blue Ridge comes into view in the distance and my heart lifts. Past Charlottesville I leave Route 29 and follow the curve of the narrow country road that borders the Rockfish River. The river is old and the water level is low most of the year as it flows gently over and around time worn boulders and mossy banks. It leads past farms that have moved further up the

hillside after Hurricane Camille turned the river into a wall of roiling water that swept away the owners' homes and barns. There is a spot right before Power House Number One where my brothers and I used to catch as many small mouth bass as we could carry home. There is where the road bends upward and where some domestic goats once got loose and established a wild herd on a rocky ledge.

Then for the next six miles the road curves through wooded country. These are old forests of white oak

and water oak and red oak and every kind of pine and dogwood and redbud and maple and sycamore and sassafras all of them making such a show of color in the fall that it takes your breath away.

The road leads me finally to the village of Schuyler. Mixed feelings of revulsion and love rise in my throat. I was born in this village. It is where I grew up, the storehouse of my most treasured memories. The house where we lived has gone out of the family now but it is owned by a friend who is in the process of restoring it.

My father bought from the house from The Alberene Stone Corporation when the mill closed during the Depression and employees were given the opportunity to buy the houses they were already living in. Darkness was usually gathering by the time I arrived there, but my mother and father were expecting me and would meet me at the car. Home! Three bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, a kitchen. Upstairs were the “boy’s room” and the “girl’s room.” We boys slept two to a bed. In that room I kept a journal seated at

my first desk, a contraption with four legs, a drawer, and a flat surface on which to write I built myself. It faced a window where a crab apple tree, which blossomed, lived which was covered in pinkish white blossoms in the spring and then turned to gold when flights of wild canaries flew home again and rested there. The view of the misted blue mountains from the kitchen window was stunning and the yard was filled all summer long with bird song. Even today I can still recall the aroma of bacon cooking and coffee percolating

on the woodstove while my mother started breakfast. My parents raised eight children there! The original settlers were reserved, resourceful, a stand office, a close knit neighborly group, law abiding and church going, Scotch and Irish for the most part with a smattering of Italians and a few descendants of Hessian mercenaries. They made good neighbors; good parents, and raised the kind of young people who would cut short their education so they could help out at home. Most of them had a deep love of country and,

a reverence for family that was rivaled only by Japanese Shintoist. Young people never hesitated to answer the call to the military when their country needed them. Sadly, we were a segregated community and I was robbed of knowing Black people until I went out into the larger world.

My family and our neighbors were the inspiration for my television series, “The Waltons.” Because of their love for the “Walton family” fans from all over the world came to visit the area. At first my mother would

invite them to “pass the time of day” on the front porch. She even served her guests tea, but as time passed the series became a curse. It attracted an undesirable element, outsiders, opportunists, a crude element interested in exploiting my life and my work for their own purposes. Because of a vengeful act of cruelty done to a member of my family who was acting on my behalf and subsequent attacks on me I have renounced the outsiders who have soiled my birthright. If I ever go there again it will only be to visit

the graves of friends and family. I remember the place bitterly. It was A. E. Houseman who most ably put into words what I feel today for a place I once loved.

“Into my heart an air that kills

From yon far country blows:

What are those blue remembered hills?

What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,

I see it shining plain,

The happy highways where I went

And cannot come again.”

No, my children if I ask to be taken home do not take me to Schuyler. Virginia!

Home during my first two years at the University of Richmond in the 40's was 29 Willway Ave. in the West End of the city. Out of the goodness of their hearts three of my father's sisters took me in so I might take advantage of the scholarship I had won. In addition to the three aunts the household also included my grandmother. a female cousin and a maid. I was awkward and

countrified, but the ladies took me in and tamed me as best they could. Already six feet tall, and all wrists, I fell over things and was tongue-tied much of the time. In a hand-me-down suit (narrow blue pin stripes) of my Uncle Clay's and my father's only white shirt which he had contributed to the cause, I was more Icahbod Crane than Joe College. Still I was surrounded by women and smothered with affection. It was a good time and I remember it with affection. But I think today, like my mother in Shipman, I would look at

29 Willway and say, "Take me home!"

During World War Two I lived (Oh, how I lived) in Paris for two years courtesy of the Army of the United States. From backwoods boy to boulevardier came easy once I got over the absurdity of it. I had never even been on Fifth Avenue and suddenly I was strolling with a girl on La Rue de la Paix! Formidable! My fellow soldiers and I were billeted in an apartment house in Aubervilliers, which had until a day or so before had been home to a company of German WACS. Large photos of

Adolph Hitler decorated each room and on a shelf in the closet I came across a short wave radio and a copy of "Mein Kampf. and some "lady things. After living in a pup tent in the hedgerows of Normandy warm water was an unimaginable luxury. And as soon as all the Germans were hustled out of Paris I received a Class A Pass and was off to see The City of Lights! I had a front row seat to see Edith Piaf and Yves Montand on a joint bill at the Olympia! I attended an all Beethoven series conducted by Pierre Montieus at the

Palais de Chaillot. I saw a two hundred and fifty pound lady sing Carmen at the Opera Comique. The Army lost my records and my mail went astray. It was six months before mine caught up with me and when I was too busy being a boulevardier I have to admit I was homesick. The last time I was in Paris I looked for the old barracks, but the Café des Communists that had been located on the corner of our street and the Rue d'Aubervilliers was gone. The apartment house had been torn down and a large more

imposing building had taken its place.

I have never stopped loving Paris. Some nights when I cannot sleep I retrace in my mind some of my favorite walks through the city. I used to take the subway, get off at some Metro station and explore whatever part of the city I found myself in. When I was stationed there the place I called home was in an industrial area out near Le Borget. If when I ask you to take me home, and you children decide to take me to Paris, this time I want to live near

the Bois de Boulogne. The Plaza Athene would be nice.

Cincinnati was home for many years after the war.

I rented the third floor of a private residence in a beautiful area lit by gas lamps on Reading Road. While living there I earned a degree in broadcasting at the Media Division of the College of Music of the University of Cincinnati. I found my first job writing scripts at the great midwestern radio station WLW. All Ohio girls are beautiful and I fell in love with every one I met.

Fortunately, they and I realized I wasn't ready to settle down and they sent me packing. Good step, because if I had married one of those Ohio beauties I would never have met your mother. Cincinnati was good to me, but it was a time and place of transition. It probably is not the home I may be looking for when I am in my dotage and lost in the world.

I left Cincinnati to devote full time to the writing of a novel. Home was a cottage four miles outside of Mena, Arkansas in the Ouichita Mountains.

The building was a small stone cottage that had been built by a Belgian artist named Benti. I found the place through an ad in “The Writer’s Digest” (Paradise on Five Dollars A Day). I rented it sight unseen. It was one of the most productive writing locations I have ever known and while there I wrote the best stuff I have written before or after. There was no electricity, no telephone, no radio, no running water, and no kitchen. My only companion was a six foot long black snake that ventured from under the

house and into the living room when the sun went down and scared the hell out of me. There was one other drawback to such High Living. You have never known thirst until you live in a dry county, and that part of Arkansas in those days was DRY! I had to walk four miles to the Oklahoma border for a beer. I wrote well that summer, but when the leaves began to fall and the first frost came to Rich Mountain I packed my beat up old portable Royal, caught a ride to Mena with the rural mail carrier, took a bus to Hot Springs,

and then went by train to Virginia. If you are looking to take me home, don't take me to Arkansas. I might get thirsty and I don't think I could make that hike to the Oklahoma border any more.

New York was my spiritual home. It was where I had always known it was where God intended me to be. Ever since I had read the E. B. White's essay "Here is New York" I knew that I had to go there. When I eventually arrived there it was with the elation of achieving a long sought after goal. It mattered not at all that I

had only two dollars left after I paid my first month's rent for a room off of 96th Street and Riverside Drive. I passed the Christmas holidays enjoying any diversion that was free, mostly they were concerts of Christmas music that ranged from Bach cantatas in the Episcopalian Churches to Russian folk songs in a Ukrainian Chapel not far from where I lived.

New York was generous from the day I arrived.

In a short time I found a job at NBC and could

hardly believe that my office was on
the second
floor(Room 211) of the RCA Building.
My window (yes,window) in an
office in the RCA Building – we
have come a long way from the
backwoods of Virginia here!)
looked out over the Radio City
Music Hall sign, which in time
would advertise the premiere of a
movie based on one of my books!
With a steady income I was able
to move to West 87th Street in an
apartment that was advertised in
The New York Times: “For the

Discerning Few!" I managed to convince the owner that I was "discerning" and moved in! It was actually one large room stripped down to its original brick walls now painted white. You entered on a landing and a stairway led down into the "sunken living room". The kitchen was hidden behind folding doors and the bed disappeared under the stairway. I bought my first car, an ancient Ford Convertible!

Heady days!

They were to become even

headier when I met and married your mother. We had two apartments in The Village and I will still accept either of them as “home” because we were happy in both places.

The first apartment, right after we were married, was a loft in a professional building on 13th Street. There was an upstairs bedroom with a view of the downtowns New York skyline that in the world of my jazz oriented friend, Jack Wilson, claimed was “too good for white people.” There was no stove so your mother cooked on a hot plate and a portable

electric oven and frying pan, which had been wedding gifts. We had Clementine, the first of our neurotic Cocker Spaniels. We went to the theater to see plays and musicals. We even had a place in the country – a cottage on a small lake up in Westchester. We knew lots of other young people, writers, actors, musicians, and artists. It was a party. We could not have been happier.

The second Village apartment was at 44 West 13th street. It was a “garden” apartment. It had all sorts of wonders including an actual garden

where I planted wild flowers which I collected along back roads up in Westchester Country. It had a fireplace and the first night we moved in, not knowing that it was inoperable, we started an enormous fire and smoked everybody out of the apartments above us. It had a glassed in back porch which we called the "Ice Palace" It became our bedroom after you people were born and when we would wake sometimes on a winter morning snow would have fallen during the night and the entire room would be encased in

snow and ice., It had an interesting history. The last tenant had been a man named Harry Somebody, and the song “When the Red, Red Robbin, Comes Bobbin Bob Bobbling Along.” was supposed to have been written in our living room. . We left New York reluctantly because television had moved to the West Coast and we had to move with it. And because of the responsibilities of parenthood and the fact that the city was changing it had become a party that we couldn’t attend anymore.. But even now when we are in New

York we walk past 44 West 12th Street and wonder who lives in “our apartment.”

In Los Angeles we rented a house for a brief time and then one day, after I had found work, we were driving around, lost in the hills above Studio City, and came upon a house for sale. It is the same house where we now live, a wood and glass structure with a sweeping view of the valley and the San Gabriels on beyond. You know the house. You grew up here and the house still echoes with the sounds of your

voices and the memories of you as children, your growing up and the mixed emotions upon seeing you leave for college knowing that whenever you came home again it would be to visit. It was our dream house when we found it and it still is today.

.

When my dementia becomes more

severe than it is now, when I am even more cloudy minded, unable to drive, yearning for some home that I can't even identify, I will probably ask my you to "take me home," When that happens humor me and drive around. the block and tell me I am home, back to a place and time where I have enjoyed the happiest years of my life. here where my fondest memories live, where your mother and I grow old and where we live today to this winding street in the rolling hills below Mullholland Drive in Studio City, California.

▪

PAGE

PAGE 18

PAGE 18 PAGE 18

