

ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM  
**MANHATTAN**  
Guillermo Fesser



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## October

During the first week of October, daybreak reveals a red “X” painted on the bark of the 100-year-old tree on our street. George Wyant, the village foreman of the highway department, put it there. A horse lover who patrols the streets in his green pickup and cowboy hat, George has his own horse farm and personally attends to his mare when she gives birth. Thanks to George, I’ve learned that animals’ placentas are odorless so that when they give birth, defenseless in the middle of the forest, there is no smell to attract enemies. Otherwise, they would face certain death, like the maple tree on which George has drawn the X. It is a sign that, very soon, people will climb its branches with power saws and ropes and take it down in pieces. The immense sadness that I feel witnessing the disappearance of such an organic giant is balanced by observing the woodcutters’ expert skills. Not even a splinter of bark hits the roof of the nearest house. The tree disappears within a few hours, as if it had never been planted. As if the Earth had swallowed it up.

Several of the houses in the area were built around 1850 and the average lifespan of the trees planted along the streets is 150 years. Do the math. Thus, at the dawn of the new century, they are falling down, one after another. These giants have gone from being jewels in the landscape to terrible threats. They could fall at any moment, splitting a house in two like a knife through butter. Good thing there is a local reforestation program. The village of Rhinebeck will give you a 6-foot tree if you dig a

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

hole next to the sidewalk and promise to water it. Of course, depending upon how it grows, village officials reserve the right to trim it as they see fit. Here, telephone, electricity and television cables still circulate above ground. The aerial tangle is so surprising I've even seen tourists taking photos. Debates about burying the cables are heard on the radio every time a storm causes a blackout and leaves thousands of families without light or electricity. It seems like infrastructure was neglected during prosperous times (profit, profit, profit, without reinvesting in improvements) and now companies don't have the money to undertake this project. However, some people don't think the cables should be buried because it would make it harder to reach damaged sections and consequently will drive up repair costs. For this reason, the utility workers are forced to emulate Edward Scissorhands, reshaping the treetops so that wires and cables can cross over them without touching the branches. Rhinebeck has donut-trees, with round holes in the center of the treetops; one-armed trees, with branches growing only on one side; slingshot trees, which extend in a Y-shaped form and wig-trees, whose tops look like heads whose faces someone has cut away, leaving only the hair. Tim Burton would be very proud of this crew.

Thank goodness that some lovely arboreal specimens still remain. My favorites are the splendid sequoia in the Hills' yard, which you can see from Route 9 at the curve before the hospital, and the ginkgo in the yard of Dr. Sussin, the chiropractor. No one would dare to mark an X on any of those giants, at least not for a long time. If that ginkgo manages to thrive like its relatives do in Asia, the incredible insect resistance of its bark and its capacity to form aerial roots could ensure a lifespan of nearly 2,500 years. Can you imagine?

The sequoia was planted as a seedling in the 1920s by Anna Hill, my wife's grandmother, who got this rare genus of redwood coniferous species, by then believed to be extinct already in China, as a gift from the New York Botanical Garden due to her generous contributions. The Sussins' ginkgo is a true wonder. Its branches sport leaves resembling

## OCTOBER

oriental fans that the autumn has dyed bright yellow. It is at the corner of Mulberry and Livingston streets, where I pass on my way to town. A few yards further down, I take advantage of a heavy stone block next to the sidewalk to retie my shoelaces. It's one of the pedestals that residents used in Victorian times to climb onto their horses. It is carved of bluestone, as are the enormous slabs that form the sidewalk. The thick flagstones are placed in a row like piano keys, which, despite their weight, have been shifted in some places by the troublemaking roots of the silver maples, swampy trees that crush everything in their path. On some stretches of sidewalk, the stone has been replaced by cement. I suppose that liability has something to do with this decision. However, on the sidewalks, as in politics, you can observe two opposing trends among the new house buyers: those who remove the uneven old bluestone and replace it with flat cement and those who remove the even cement and bring back the classy bluestone. The pedestal on which I'm leaning is a fancy one. Its north face is rounded, so as to avoid scraping the horse, I assume, and includes a middle step to enable people to climb its 21 inches comfortably. It belongs to the Mansard house, which would capture the attention of any passerby. It's the house where Helen Reed Delaporte lived, the first woman elected to a board of education in Dutchess County. She was the home's second owner. The millionaire O'Brien family built it in 1875 as a wedding gift for their son who did not stay there long because his wife, Sarah Lane, died. Apparently, the ghost of the dead woman has wandered through its rooms ever since. The house is higher than it is wide because it was designed to fit on a narrow lot while maintaining the hallmark roofline and the iron-crested tower of traditional Second Empire features, including the French style that the Louvre Museum made popular. It's an architectural jewel that claimed for itself the glory of having been the first house in the Village of Rhinebeck to use gas lighting. I don't know whether or not it's really haunted, but it reminds me a lot of the house Hitchcock used to film *Psycho*. Every time I walk by it, I can't help to look out of the corner of my eye to check whether Anthony Perkins is leaning

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

out the window, wearing a wig and holding a knife on his hand. I thought I saw him once, but I was told it was only a Vassar professor who owned the house.

Kitty-corner to Helen Reed Delaporte's house is a much more colorful one—a masterpiece of marquetry in light green with red and orange details. Helen's sister, Sarah Reed Herrick, lived there. Their brother, Thomas Reed, one of the first members of the New York Stock Exchange, would frequently come to visit them. This corner was a powerful enclave in the late 19th century, and Rhinebeck owes the preservation of a large part of its architectural heritage to its distinguished inhabitants. It seems that John Jacob Astor IV, founder of the Astoria Hotel, who was swallowed up by the sea on his return trip from Europe on the *Titanic*, was born in Rhinebeck and was the owner of what is now Ferncliff Forest. Married for the second time, scandalously, to an 18-year-old woman, he decided to enlarge his estate. Astor's idea was to buy all the land between his property and the village, knock down the buildings on those lands and incorporate the new land into his estate. Delaporte, Herrick, Reed and other notable citizens prevented him from doing so. They bought the land before Astor could to prevent the demolitions and to give the community some public green areas. This is how the fairgrounds originated and the land was granted on which the hospital was built.

*Uuuuuh...* a ghostly voice startles me from behind, as if from beyond the grave. I turn towards the Second Empire house. "Is that you, Sarah Lane?" I ask, fearing I will run into the ghost of the late Mrs. O'Brien. No, it's not her, thank God. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's just my friend Jay Dorin, whose actual name would have remained Yacob Docsitsky if his grandparents had stayed in Russia. Both sides of his family came through Ellis Island—though at slightly different times. Jay's mother was born some years later in 1912 in an apartment on 112th Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue in an area of Harlem that was settled by a lot of the Jewish emigrants. The superintendent's wife, who was also a midwife, assisted her birth at home. His father, Nathaniel Dorin, was

## OCTOBER

born on the Lower East Side. The neighborhood was made up mostly of Italians and Jews that often didn't mix well. There were also Germans and Irish as well as the original New Yorkers, mostly stemming from the Dutch, and they all lived in separate enclaves. When Jay was a kid, the Dorins decided to move to Brooklyn to look for a place of upward mobility. But the neighborhood was still full of poor and struggling emigrants. His mother remembers only having one change of clothes that her mother and grandmother washed each night, so she could start the next day fresh and clean.

Jay grew up hearing stories of those times in Brooklyn and was intrigued. He was told that Natie was tough, protected his family like a street fighter and became a semi-professional boxer. The family lived near President Street, where a group of gangsters called "Murder Incorporated" took roots. The gang was formed by Jewish immigrants and became deeply affiliated with the Italian Mafia as contract killers and enforcers. Jay asked questions about the past, but his father never said too much. Jay couldn't figure out why. Eventually, it was his father's father, Barnet, a troubled man who sometimes would go to the saloons at night, from whom Jay gleaned some information. Barnet alluded to the fact that his son knew one or two gangsters. Yes. And, even though they were not friends, he said, they would nod hello to each other in passing. So, at the end of the day, all Jay knew was that his daddy was an angry, tough guy with a lot of integrity. A man who dressed impeccably, carried himself confidently and worked hard. Jay was told that his father made it to middle school and then began earning money for his family. At the age of nine he would sell gum and newspapers on the elevated trains that run through Manhattan. Then he became a runner on Wall Street when messengers carried trade information between the brokerage houses. Natie also loved to dance, and was a competitive dancer at the Audubon Ballroom.

There were seven kids in Jay's father's family. Survival was paramount. Most of the kids slept in the same room and during the winter months, they all moved into the kitchen of the downtown tenement, as

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

the stove was the only source of heat. The family tells a funny story of those times. Grandma Rose sent her daughter Helen to the butcher to pick up a chicken for dinner. It was a first for Aunt Helen, who was young but anxious for the responsibility of shopping. The butcher took the chicken out and Helen looked at it. "Just wait a minute! What are you trying to pull? Where are the other two legs?" Like her brothers and sisters, Helen had never seen any land besides the asphalt of New York City, so she figured out that a chicken probably had four legs. But that swindler of a butcher, that good for nothing guy without scruples, had the audacity to try to sell her a mutilated specimen. She wouldn't get the chicken. Aunt Helen went back home, told her mom ... and that was it. She was not allowed to go shopping anymore for the family.

It seemed that everybody in the family had to work to overcome poverty, but Jewish law promotes education, and there was Grandma Rose. She was a devoted student of the Old Testament, one of the few women in her village back in Russia who had actually learned how to read, and the first woman in New York asked to sit with the Rabbis to help interpret Talmudic law. Grandma Rose decided it was her job to continue on the journey and point her descendants toward more ambitious targets than she had achieved herself. At that time, the City University of New York was open to teaching emigrant children at a very low rate. Grandma Rose saved every penny so she could pay at least for one child to go to college. Uncle Henry, who was probably the brightest one in the clan, was chosen to go. He worked very hard and became a high school chemistry teacher, then a professor of chemistry at New York University, and eventually wrote one of the most popular high school chemistry text books in the United States. Go Henry!

As Henry moved into the world of education, Jay's father, Natie, learned the shoe business as a teenager working for a variety of shoe stores in the city, and became set on opening his own store. In 1938, Natie was already married to Jay's mother, also called Rose. Rose's parents had saved a little money, so together with his brother-in-law, Natie was able to

## OCTOBER

borrow \$500 from them and open D&B Inc. at 128 West 57th Street. It was a major step for a kid who lived through the Depression eating only an apple and a roll over the course of a day. Wow! But that's all history. Now Jay is taking his little dog out for a walk. *Hola mi hermano*, he says to me, dusting off the Spanish phrase some Puerto Rican friends of his youth had taught him. "Hi Jay, you scared me to death. I thought you were a ghost." Jay can't help but smile. "Are you heading to town?" "Yes. I'll go with you." We walk together and Jay takes the opportunity to tell me about his Puerto Rican friend Rafael's encounter with a real ghost. Jay is a guidance counselor at Kingston Senior High School and the most prolific source of anecdotes I've ever met. Every time I'm with him, I'm disappointed that I haven't brought a tape recorder along. He lives two blocks from us and invited us to take a dip in his pool the summer we arrived. That's where we met his wife, Lisa Henderling, a successful illustrator who specializes in fashion illustrations. Google her.

Jay is Jewish and Lisa is not. Until only recently, Rhinebeck had few Jews. In the 1960s, there were only two Jewish families in town and although a few more families moved here later, it was not until after 9/11 that the process accelerated. After the attacks, many New Yorkers were looking for a small town to raise their children—a place of trust and comfort; a place where you know the people you have to deal with on a daily basis. A lot of Jewish families in New York City packed up and moved north, some of them to permanently reside in their summer or weekend homes. At the same time, Mexicans began to arrive in Rhinebeck. The exponential growth of local restaurants created a need for more kitchen staff. People started spreading the word and a lot of families arrived from Oaxaca and Morelos. The two migrations are still so recent that their cultural reality has not had time to filter into the popular knowledge of the community. Thus, in Max's fifth grade class, a girl recently mentioned that her brother was going to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah. "Really? Wow!" said one of her friends. "A Bar Mitzvah? I didn't know your brother was Mexican!"

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

Jay Dorin grew up in Washington Heights in a building a few doors up from the home of the great escape artist Harry Houdini. Natie's shoe store was doing well and the Dorins were part of the upwardly mobile middle class. At the end of the 1940s, new immigrants from Europe began flooding the neighborhood—people with strange tattoos on their arms and deep sadness in their faces. A lot of moms with kids, but not a lot of dads. There was a woman upstairs from Jay who was crazy, but her daughter told him that the Nazis had forced her to stand and watch her brothers and sisters executed for no reason. Another Italian neighbor's aunt had crooked hands. She had crossed the Alps to get into Yugoslavia, but got caught by the Nazis and all her fingers were broken during the interrogation. The concentrations camps were never spoken about. Everyone wanted to forget. Remembering was too painful and traumatic. So there was never an utterance about the Nazi horrors that had consumed Jay's neighbors' lives. The pain along with the physical and spiritual devastation could not be mentioned. It was another kind of exodus, a time to plant the seeds of desire to survive and move their lives forward.

Jay and his friends spent most of their time on the streets. An innocent "good morning" from a passerby was taken as an affront. "Good morning????? What the hell do you mean by that?" An attitude of mistrust prevailed in the neighborhood where many cultures converged. The Jewish universe intermingled with the Puerto Rican, Greek, Irish and the Italian. And all of them ended up in front of the display case of a French bakery, where the inaccessible dreams of the majority of local inhabitants took the form of brioche.

In the 1950s New York still had a sense of segregation. African Americans had occupied mostly Harlem and some areas East of Broadway, but black people began to move into the houses on both sides of Jay's block as well as the beautiful brownstone houses around the corner. They were the great-grandchildren of slaves who were moving up north from the Carolinas, Virginia and Georgia to build their own middle-class families. It was common for many of the Jewish families who were making extra

## OCTOBER

money to hire help from that black community. Jay's brother Barry was pretty wild and the Dorins hired a full-time nanny named Eveling. She was the only person who could keep Barry under control with a lot of discipline and a lot of love. They also hired a woman named Leola who helped his mother with the household chores once a week. She always listened to what Jay was saying and made him feel good about himself. When he told her a story, Leola would put her arms on her hips, shake her head, and say with great incredulity "Hmm, can you beat that."

There was a courtyard in the back of the building where, every once in a while, some of the black ladies would come and sing songs in perfect Yiddish. They memorized the lyrics at work and passed them through the sieve of blues, creating a moving spectacle of musical fusion. The sad Yiddish songs probably paralleled their own pain. People would lean out the windows that faced the courtyard to listen and toss down nickels wrapped in tissues to soften the blow of metal against concrete. A shower of rolled-up paper rained down appreciation for the heartfelt memories.

Jay went to a rough school. His parents felt he'd better learn all the skills necessary to survive and public school was the best place for that. He always saw New York as a living theatre where one could decide during the course of the day the role that he wanted to play and there would be a cast of thousands willing to lend support. It was a fun place full of excitement and games, and sometimes mischief, with a lot of freedom to be and freedom to become. There were days when Jay went out from morning to early evening and never crossed a street, yet had a full day. As Jay grew up, he had a large variety of mixed friends, like his father. Some would become very successful and some would go to the dark side of life. A contrast that was not so surprising in a neighborhood where characters as disparate as Alan Greenspan, the boy who ended up heading the Federal Reserve Bank, shared the sidewalk with Joe Rodríguez, the Puerto Rican gangster who only managed to become an apprentice of the bully on the corner. He carried a gun always and was obsessed with imminent death. Jay tells the story of one day when he was in his twenties

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

and took a walk with Joe. “Are you ready to die, Jay?” Jay got scared. What is this guy talking about? “No, I’m not ready to die. What do you mean, Joe?” His heart was pounding and his mind racing to figure out what he had done wrong, what code he had broken. But then Rodriguez looked him in the eye and went into a philosophical rant. “Is your life complete, Jay? Do you feel that you did everything that you have to do? Are you living fully and properly, always being true to yourself and having no regrets? When you have the guys upstairs saying, ‘Pencils down,’ you have to be ready to go, Jay. We have to be brave, because we’re going to die soon.” “What are you saying, Joe? Stop it; nobody’s going to die here. Don’t be such a downer, man.” But Joe insisted that death was on his heels and that he needed to prepare himself to face it with honor. “You never know when it’s coming. And when it comes you have to accept it with elegance. With bravery. Like a man. We have to be strong, Jay.” “Okay, Joe, okay.” “We have to be on guard, Jay. We have to be on the alert to confront with dignity the instant in which the Grim Reaper comes for us.” “Knock it off, Joe, please.” But he wouldn’t drop the subject. “We’re going to die, Jay.” “Listen, Joe, you can die if you want to, but just let me be!” Then one winter morning, just when Joe’s anxiety had finally seemed to ease and he had made plans for staying on this Earth, he was killed. The bullets from his own bodyguard’s gun threw him into the air. The man received a nice payout to do this heinous deed and finish Joe like a puppet. None of his friends knew whether the shots caught Joe prepared to begin his journey into the void. But they chose to believe that he was ready. Rest in peace.

By the time Joe died, the gang that used to meet under the George Washington Bridge had already dissolved. However, its members recall with resonating laughter the day when Buffalo, a kid with an unusually large rear end, was hit by a car. The accident was a source of hilarity for many weeks on the northern edge of Harlem. TV was around by then, but kids were allowed to watch only a certain amount. Everybody just wanted to be outside. There was so much to do on Riverside Drive at the

## OCTOBER

park and the playground, on rooftops and in basements. Their favorite game was called Carlo Demalo. “You ran from one side of the street to the other side,” Jay tells me, “and if you got caught in the middle by the other team they beat you up.” That was the deal. They were also engaged in a war. They would pick up sticks and look for dog crap, which was plentiful and easy to find, dip the sticks into the crap and begin chasing one another. The object of the game was to avoid getting touched and hopefully land a hit on someone else.

One day they noticed that Buffalo had no stick ... so he became the prime target. The gang chased him and Buffalo ran for his life. Contact with the deadly stick was not only disgusting, it also brought shame. So Buffalo ran here and there and then between two parked cars into the narrow street. His timing was really bad. A car was speeding down the block. The driver of the car hit his brakes. Buffalo, alerted by the sound of the horn, increased his speed towards the other side of the road to avoid the fatal impact. It looked as if his body would clear the vehicle, except that he had underestimated his anatomical proportions. His rear end failed to make it. The enormous backside Mother Nature had given him remained exposed. The Mercury whacked him right in the middle of his keister. Bam!!! Time froze as everyone watched him being thrown into the air in slow motion, contorting and grimacing along the way. He was tossed straight up and a bit forward with a perplexed look on his face. Whaaat? He landed on the ground in a seated position—on his very own airbag. It was a rump landing, two bounces, and in the end all was well. The driver, sweating with worry, apologized to everyone. The gang was so amazed that Buffalo was unscathed by the accident that he was left untouched by the deadly stick. He had earned a free pass. Life on the block continued, and the laughter over Buffalo lasted for months. It would calm down for a few days only to resume weeks later, when the memory would be refreshed. This lasted until the first thaws of spring, when Buffalo’s story gave way to the gang’s silent admiration for another potential victim: Rafael Vélez.

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

Rafael and his brother Jorge moved to the neighborhood when they all were teenagers. Rafael was a bony, scrawny humanoid and a *jebero*, a hick from the countryside of Puerto Rico. He saw his first flush toilet in his new apartment at 835 Riverside Drive and told the other kids stories of the *gaga-torey*, a man who came around with a big wagon to collect the town's waste. Rafael was the new kid and new kids had to be initiated into their new world. It happened one day when the gang was walking through the connected hallway between 845 and 839. A quick glance was enough for the group to decide to beat Rafael up. "Man, we're going to kick your ass, and that is the way it is." Rafael looked at the whole group, carefully assessing the situation as he was pushed up against the wall. And then he said in his thick Puerto Rican accent, "Ju can kick my ass if ju want to, but first I want to show ju something." They were confused, as that had never happened before. However, intrigued by the victim's excessive flattery and unexpected confession, the boys agreed with the requested stay of execution. And then it happened. Rafael quietly put his hand down to his fly and slowly unzipped it to reveal a member of unusual proportions. The force of gravity acted on the lower jaws of those present, distorting their mouths in amazement. In a semicircle, surrounding the boy who had instantly become a hero, they observed with astonishment an organ that must have been half of Rafael's body weight. Time stood still and space evaporated. Not longitude, latitude or height. Adios to the metric system, to the imperial system and Newton's laws. The universe yielded before the theory of unique thought. Incredible!

After a few moments during which coordinates ceased to exist, Rafael put it back into his pants, zipped up his fly and quietly walked out of the hallway. No one dared to lift a hand to him. No one wanted to act on the threats made. Fully excited, young Oscar pointed out that if Rafael ever got fully excited so much blood would have to flow to his "bad-boy" that he would faint from lack of blood on his brain. But that was it. No more comments emerged from their throats. That night, the gang members' thoughts ruminated on their pillows. The following day, the

## OCTOBER

group unanimously adopted a resolution without discussion: Rafael Vélez was proclaimed the king of the neighborhood. Long live King Rafael!

I first got to hear these kinds of stories at Jay's house the night we took a dip in his pool and had dinner together. We had shrimp, but without the heads. Americans can't stand it when their food looks at them. The butcher and the fisherman don't work in public. Here in America, they go about eliminating all relationship between the animal and the cut of meat. At the supermarket, a mysterious door opens, and a guy in a white coat places trays of plastic-wrapped filets on the shelf. "Eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel," as the old Spanish saying goes. This custom is incomprehensible to me because happiness is most easily achieved when a person feels connected to nature, when he understands what is going on and knows that it forms part of a process. But here a missing link is created in the chain of life. The whole fish disappears and, as if by magic, orange fillets of salmon appear in the display case. What's more, those of us who like to cook are denied the best part to make a fish broth: the head. The system forces you to buy a prepared broth with preservatives, which does not taste the same. Not surprisingly, given this disconnection between food and the animal world, some city kids believe that the most common breed of cow is the "2 percent." It gives way to incidents like the one I heard when I accompanied my father-in-law to Blondie's, where he goes every morning to have breakfast and chat with friends. Buss, a retired plumber with a passion for hunting and fishing, told this story. It seems a couple who had come from New York City to hunt deer in Milan (a small town pronounced My-lan that these outsiders called Meelan with an affected Italian intonation) were stopped by police on the Taconic Parkway with a sheep, dead from a bullet wound secured to the car roof with bungee cords.

Hunting is an increasingly serious problem. Until only recently, many people born in this part of the world grew up with a fishing rod in one hand and a shotgun in the other. Hunters are necessary for lots of reasons, perhaps most importantly that by going out to the field frequently, they become familiar with nature and learn to respect it. The

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

decline in hunting and fishing licenses is troubling. It's not good for the animals, because overpopulation causes starvation and the spread of diseases that make their existence miserable. Nor is it good for people, because car accidents increase and backyards are destroyed by deer, which even go into the village at night to munch on tulips.

The request for hunting licenses has declined drastically for three reasons. The first, which is indeed a serious matter, is the transmission of Lyme disease by deer ticks. Many hunters have stopped going into the woods to avoid the problem. The second reality is simply economic. In New York State, hunting for pure pleasure is not permitted. If you kill an animal, you are obligated to butcher it and use its meat. It is illegal to kill a deer and leave the carcass abandoned in field. But few people need to hunt to feed their family and survive over the long winter. The third reason is the increasing influence of the conservationist movement, which proposes to preserve nature as it is, without human intervention. This mentality does not take into account that human beings are part of nature and that, as a predatory animal, we also play a role in the chain of life. If human beings were meant to eat grass, we'd have eyes on the sides of our heads like ruminants rather than in the center of our face to spot our prey, like carnivores. It's another thing altogether if we make the cultural decision to give up meat. To each his own. But to attempt to deny the evidence that we are a predatory species is like asking a tiger to eat carrots or a robin to stop taking worms to her nest to feed her young. I am not defending those who go on an African safari to kill a lion, or someone who enjoys shooting an eagle in full flight. I refer to those who hunt a deer to help cull the invasive population and/or to enjoy its meat. These people also contribute to maintaining the network of U.S. national parks by paying a license fee. In hunting, the shot is the least important thing. Hunting means spending seven hours in a tree and understanding which chirp corresponds to each bird species, knowing the direction that the wind is blowing so you can place yourself where animals can't smell you, holding the trigger when you spot a female in heat, because you

## OCTOBER

know a male will be right behind her. It means feeling you are part of the landscape and loving it.

Controlling hunting is necessary; prohibiting it would be a disaster. In 1996, a curious incident occurred, which proves how crucial it is to have the knowledge of the people in the area where you want to take action. The organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) encouraged the citizens of Fishkill, New York, to consider changing the name of their town to “Fishsave” because the current one suggested cruelty to animals. But the reality was that the town’s name didn’t encourage the killing of fish at all. Fishkill was founded by the Dutch in the early 1600s. Many waterways throughout New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey were named by the Dutch settlers and have “kill” in their names because that is the Dutch word for stream. Rhinebeck’s local creek, the Landsman Kill, is one example. It would have been enough for PETA to consult with anyone who grew up in the Hudson Valley to avoid this entirely useless campaign which was led, no doubt, with good intentions.

Jay and I are approaching the bank parking lot. He has just finished telling me about his Puerto Rican friend Rafael’s encounter with a ghost. It seems that on one occasion, Rafael came running out of his house nervous and white, and told the gang that his grandfather had died a couple of days ago. “Oh, no...” “It was okay,” he said, “because he was old and sick. But last night I got up to go to the bathroom and found the ghost of *mi abuelo* sitting peacefully on the toilet.” Rafael, terrified, couldn’t piss. He ran to his room screaming and dove into bed. The gang waited a prudent amount of time until the story could be corroborated by Georgie, Jorge el Gordo, Rafael’s older brother and antithesis. And, sure enough, the heavyset, tall and muscular guy claimed he had also had an encounter of that type with his grandfather. The same night, about an hour later, he walked to the bathroom and, to his amazement the ghost of the old man was still sitting at the toilet. So Georgy confirmed that the ghost story was true! The gang was fascinated. “So what happened?” And Georgy said, “Nothing. I don’t care he was sitting there, man, I

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

had to take a *chit*.” So Gordo had not run. He had no fear for anything. Unperturbed, Georgy gestured to the spirit to get up off the commode so he could use it. “Take a hike, buddy,” he’d said. But the *abuelito* didn’t move. So he just sat on top of him and let loose. “And then what?” “Nothing,” Georgy said. “He was gone!” And life continued as usual.

Jay waits outside while I do some business at Rhinebeck Bank. I watch him through the window. He’s older than I am. He’s broken the sound barrier of 60, but doesn’t make a big deal about it. According to his own definition, he was simply invited to the party of life before I was and he’s been enjoying it for longer. “I’ve had that luck,” he tells me. That’s it. Well, almost. He also believes that major changes arrive in 40-year installments. His parents experienced the roaring 1920s. Forty years later the 1960s took hold. And, doing the math, he believes we are in the midst of a 2K revolution that corresponds to his son’s generation.

He ended up here after a journey of initiation that first led him to Woodstock in the 60s. During a time when many let themselves be led by the blues, Buddhism, Kerouac’s *On the Road* and many other spiritual and experimental creations and events. The hippie movement brought to young people the idea of a world in which there was no place for urgency. Jay gladly embraced it at the time of the Woodstock rock festival—the real one, that of 1969, the one that included Richie Havens; Joan Baez; Santana; Janis Joplin; the Grateful Dead; Creedence Clearwater Revival; The Who; Jefferson Airplane; Joe Cocker; The Band; Blood, Sweat and Tears; Johnny Winter; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young and Jimi Hendrix. Jay acted as if he was wearing a wristwatch whose 12 numbers represented the months of the year, not the hours in the day. If someone asked him, “Hey man, what time you got?” he would look at the hands on his imaginary watch and respond: “Mid-February.” Or “Close to summer.” And he was happy.

Jay finished a Master’s degree in guidance counseling at NYU and hung it up on the wall not knowing if he would ever use it. A couple of years went on without him doing much and then he figured out that

## OCTOBER

he'd better move on with his life. That's when he decided he wanted to go into film. Without having any foundation he thought he would love to do that kind of work. His friend Billy was an assistant cameraman at that time, so he approached him about it. Billy asked him, "Are you sure?" "Yes." So he got him an interview with Mike Jackson, one of the people in Bob Drew's Cinema Verité crowd. Mike asked Jay what he knew about filmmaking. Jay looked up at the sky, reached deep inside and told Mike the truth: "Nothing ... except I really want to do it." Mike looked at him and said: "Oh, that will do. Pack your bags; you're going to California with us January 1." For Jay, that was the start of the best years ever. His career as a still photographer lasted for over 20 years.

Back in New York he got into therapy. He tried counseling, personal growth workshops, bio-energetics and Loving Relationships Training with an introduction to Rebirthing. The city was too stressful, though. So Jay headed to Florida in search of a more positive lifestyle. In Miami he met Lisa. He attended a litany of personal growth programs, and went back to school at the University of Miami, earning a degree in Chemical Dependency Training. He took advantage of the course to assess the pathways in his life and learned that, no matter how long the tunnel, there would always be light at the end if you worked for it.

Yes. In a confusing world in which many young people lost their way in an ocean of drugs, he proposed to show them the exit—which is the Latin word for success (*exitus*), for finding your way out of a problem. In other words, Jay wanted to help adolescents achieve their full potential. He began to work both as a guidance counselor and photographer—the former for money and compassion, the latter for passion without money.

Lisa and Jay got married in 1989 and had a grand wedding. Life in Miami was active and productive and they created a large group of friends. Jay began working as a Project Trust specialist with kids at risk in Miami Beach High School. Using his new training, along with what he had gained in his years of therapy, he conducted a very successful and recognized program in drug and alcohol prevention, education and

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

intervention. He felt that he saved many kids—people with whom, to this day, he is still in touch. Then his son Max was born and Lisa and Jay knew that the time had come to move on and seek their fortune in another state. But they made some moves that were not really thought through.

They first went to Mill Valley, outside of San Francisco. It was too expensive to live there. It seemed like an impossible place. Jay went to classes, got certified to sell insurance and mutual funds, and started working for Prudential, where the real money could be made. But he didn't have it in him to do this kind of a work and left the field. Soon he and Lisa realized that spending a year in California without making money is a feat only the very wealthy can afford. So they packed their bags again. At the time, everyone was saying wonderful things about Oregon. It was the hot spot of the moment and its population was growing at the dizzying rate of 3 percent annually. So giddy-up! They packed up their belongings and arrived in Ashland, a charming town in Southern Oregon. But they didn't fit in. It was PBB: Perfect But Boring. They found themselves roaming endlessly with no other goal than the next great meal. Everyone was politically correct. Jay called the place "the wounded hippie town." There was not a single family who had not adopted a rescue dog that had undergone some sort of physical abuse from the local animal shelter. There was Lithia Park that had Lithium in water so nobody was bi-polar. Its basic population was extremely liberal. In the areas around Ashland were those to the very far right. The town was made up of Native Americans and an assortment of local bikers, most of whom had been there for generations. There wasn't much to do in this area. The high point of his day was taking a walk with his two-year-old son in the afternoon to the sheep farm that was down the road from where they lived and looking at the sheep testicles. For some reason, sheep testicles are huge and Max at his two-year-old height could get a great angle of vision.

Consumed by boredom, Jay showed Lisa a poster with a white dove sitting on the neck of a guitar that had hung in his room in Woodstock, and they decided to try their luck on the western banks of

## OCTOBER

the Hudson. But they were disappointed. The place appeared stuck in time. Twenty-five years after the big concert (which actually took place at Bethel, about an hour's drive away), the same guys were there, doing the same things and with the same attitude towards life. The women with their gray hair untouched by hair dye; the men had white beards and ponytails tied with rubber bands. And tourists were taking pictures of them. People Jay had known from the 1960s were there. They turned around, crossed the Kingston Bridge and looked for a spot on the east side of the river. And they began to do what you have to do to try to settle in. Max started school and, after a rocky start, Jay landed a decent job as a guidance counselor at Kingston High School.

I exit the Rhinebeck Bank and we head back home. Jay accompanies me because he lives a few blocks east of my house. A wooded area borders his backyard and a litter of foxes was born a few feet from his pool. In my garage, the rake awaits me; it's trembling just thinking about all the leaves it will have to help me rake from the yard to the curb. Leaves fall through September and all throughout October and later, when you think it is not possible for more to fall, they fall again in November. You rake them to the curb and men from the village take them away, passing by in a truck that looks like an elephant. A giant vacuum cleaner sucks up the leaves, which are converted to mulch that sits in giant mounds behind the village garage; you can buy it very cheap in spring. So the trees return to the earth they came from. Dust we are and to dust we shall return. Mulch holds humidity and help plants germinate better. It also prevents excess weeds. For this process to be possible in spring, you have to rake in autumn. Those who go to the IXL gym at this time of year do so to justify the monthly payment because you do the same amount of exercise raking leaves, with the added benefit that it's outside.

Jay looks at the diabolical scarecrow in a bale of hay we put out for Halloween, which is nearly here. We filled some old jeans and a shirt with hay and then glued a rubber mask on top. Since mid-October, the houses have been assaulted by jack-o-lanterns and gory decorations. With

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

respect to Halloween, Jay and I talk about parallel universes and places where we all struggle against our dark side. He steers the conversation to the intriguing subject of space travel. He encourages me to spend a day at his house sometime soon to get involved in the process of rebirthing, which is a powerful breathing technique. “Okay ... I don’t know what to tell you, Jay,” I say. He warns me that the first time I’m reborn, my joints may seize up and my knuckles may twist. “Oh.” I want to tell him that I’ll think about it, that I need more time to decide, but simultaneous translation betrays me and I give him a categorical confirmation in two words: “Okay, great.” “Okay, great?” He sets up an appointment, just like at a doctor’s office, for several weeks later.

There’s no turning back. Dear God, why have you abandoned me? Will my knuckles twist? Will my joints seize up? My pulse quickens. I grab the shopping cart where I have loaded a lot of leaves this morning and empty the contents in the curb at my friend’s feet. “Are you okay, brother?” “Yes, Jay, it’s nothing.” It’s just that it would have been better to be reborn now because the twisted fingers would have been great for Halloween night.

All Hallows’ Eve, the night before All Saints’ Day. Halloween originates from the ancient Celtic custom of honoring the dead on the night of transition between summer and winter. At the time, it was believed that souls came down from heaven, united in the procession of spirits, which, covered by white shrouds, wandered along paths. People placed oil lamps at crossings to light the way, basically encouraging the spirits to leave as soon as possible. The poor sucker who ran into the macabre procession knew he was condemned to join it. Once this unfortunate encounter occurred, the dead would continue to appear night after night to irreversibly undermine his health. Of course, there was always the possibility of being saved, thanks to the old trick of conquering the ghost by way of his stomach. To this end, people roasted chestnuts in cemeteries and offered sweets to the dead. There were celebrations in which the wine flowed and participants blackened their faces with coal

## OCTOBER

to scare one another. For centuries, the oil lamps, sweets and costumes formed part of the popular imagination of the Celtic world: Ireland and a large part of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal)—until Pope Gregory IV Christianized the ceremony in the 840s and insisted that it made no sense.

After the Catholic Church eliminated all possibilities of associating the holiday with pagan beliefs, people had to invent a legend that would reconnect it with a celebration they were not willing to give up. The tale of Jack of the Lantern appeared in Ireland. Jack mocked the devil, which punished him by making him wander in the dark with a burning stick placed in a carved tuber. Jack took over the job of the souls in purgatory and Halloween continued. Later, after the discovery of the Americas, pumpkins arrived and this greatly facilitated the expansion of the celebration. Oil lamps illuminated animal skulls and it was fashionable to put wax candles in the hard rind of this newly-discovered vegetable. The lamps moved to the front doors of houses. The terrifying faces cut in *Cucurbitaceae* were designed to frighten the errant spirit of the crafty Jack. An illustrious neighbor of this valley, the writer Washington Irving, was responsible for transferring the tradition.

Here, as October 31 approaches, you have to go to a garden in search of pumpkins. We went to the Lobotsky Farm, which is in an ideal spot. You take White Schoolhouse Road and then go down a dirt road with tiremarks sunken in the mud until you reach the esplanade that offers a magnificent view of the mountains. It is an enormous field where innumerable climbing stalks form a framework like a giant spider web. Huge leaves lie dead with their wrinkled brown veins, the hairy cuttings dehydrated and without hope. All the energy that the sun has granted to these fields was used to produce the fruits whose loud color contrasts with the pale soil. Like orange sequins on a Flamenco dancer's dress. Huge round pumpkins as far as the eye can see. Whole families run around the field in search of the best specimen, one that perfectly fulfills their spherical ideal. You choose the one you like and put it in one of those

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

little red carts, an exact reproduction of those used by the Romans, which children often play with. The cash register is next to the parking lot. At the end of the day, farm employees fill in the gaps in the landscape produced by the sales of the day. They truck in more pumpkins collected in other fields and arrange them strategically so that the natural display does not lose its charm. We choose three large pumpkins for \$20. It occurs to me that somehow including a panoramic shot of this pumpkin field in my *Cándida* movie could be spectacular. After all I am thinking of ending the script with her coming to New York for a visit.

Now it's time for the mandatory stop at A.L. Stickle's to celebrate Halloween the right way. The display window of this five-and-dime looks like it's straight out of a Norman Rockwell cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*. It serves as a calendar for passersby since it marks all the main U.S. holidays. A few weeks ago, the display was dedicated to Columbus Day, which in New York, to my surprise, is the same as saying "Long live Italy!" Columbus Italian? October 12, the day Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas, is the National Day of Spain. Our July 4. Although Columbus was supposedly born in the city-state of Genoa, he is the most important figure in Spain's history. And he did the trip with our queen's money. Under our flag. So...

Anyway, today it is the witches' turn, but in a few weeks Stickle's decorations will announce Thanksgiving. Next will come toys for Christmas, hearts for Valentine's Day, leprechauns and four-leaf-clover hats for Saint Patrick's Day, colored eggs for Easter and so on and so forth, holiday after holiday, until the patriotic flags of July 4 appear again. Matt Stickle and Tim Flanagan decorate the window with all manner of items to celebrate the eve of All Saint's Day: masks, jars of acrylic blood and hairy spiders ready for hanging in windows. Strings of orange lights to wrap around trees and porch columns. Foam board tombstones with funny inscriptions to set up your own cemetery in the yard. "I told you I was sick." "Here lies the body of Jonathan Lake. Stepped on the gas, instead of the brake." At Stickle's, you can buy skeletons, mummies

## OCTOBER

and ghosts. There are tablecloths and napkins illustrated with headless horsemen, and orange plastic pumpkin-shaped buckets for children to go trick or treating.

Every time we go to Stickle's, our kids enthusiastically greet Tim and Matt as if they are Sponge Bob and the Easter Bunny. They love to go there. Both men treat them wonderfully. Tim is always ready with a joke. He's got a way with kids, who seek him out as soon as they enter the store. Sometimes Tim hides and jumps out to scare them. Or he chases them down one of the aisles to the back, where the star attraction of the store hangs: the 53-inch wide rolls of oilcloth cut to order for your picnic table. But the real reason my kids love to come here is because they can touch everything. Fishing lines, cowbells, erasers, notebooks, Slinkies ... For Halloween, Matt helped Nico reach a candle in the form of a zombie head from the shelf. The face was green and the inside red. As the wax melts, it looks like the zombie is drooling blood from its mouth. Interesting. Max is enticed by a human arm. It is a white shirtsleeve filled with foam rubber, from which a plastic hand emerges. The idea is to stick it out of the trunk of the car so that people will think there's a dead body there. Doubly interesting. Oh, and we also pick up a makeup kit to transform the kids' faces into monsters. For children our kids' age, it is hard to think of a better way to have fun in Rhinebeck than to stop by Stickle's to pick up something and then celebrate at Fosters. To the delight of our offspring, the day we went to buy the Halloween items, we fulfilled the plan to the letter. I'll rewind to mid-October to tell you about it.

Fosters Coach House Tavern, open from 11:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and on Fridays and Saturdays until midnight. An old coach house for horse-drawn carriages, the building was reconstructed after World War II and returned to its original appearance in the late 1980s. As soon as you enter, you're greeted by owner Bob Kirwood, who wears an impeccable white apron. He's been wearing it since 1965. After exchanging pleasantries, you can turn right, toward the bar with its giant plasma TV—where customers on stools and a Beck's

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

beer in hand follow sporting events—or left, where the old stables are lined with food tables. Sitting on a box between two wooden panels painted in red and topped by a black iron strip, you can enjoy the friendly atmosphere of this tavern. On the walls hang photographs of glorious afternoons at mythical horse tracks. Among these is Saratoga, which is a bit over an hour away on the thruway. Oh, and if you need to visit the restroom before looking at the menu, you'll run into the coach of Vice-president Levi P. Morton transformed into a telephone booth at the foot of the stairs.

London Broil is the specialty at Fosters. You can make it at home, but it's not the same. You remove the fat from the meat, poke some holes in it with a fork and marinate it in wine. You leave it in the fridge overnight in a glass bowl covered with a kitchen towel. You then throw out the liquid and season it with black pepper, wrap it in tinfoil and broil it at 425 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes. But let me warn you, it won't come out like that at Fosters. It is my father-in-law's favorite dish. This time Bud asks the waiter for ice water for everyone. "Ready to order?" Ready. Everyone asks for the beef, except for my daughter, who prefers a plate of steamed clams with a bowl of melted butter for dipping. My turn. A shiver runs up my spine, from coccyx to skull. I just want a hamburger. But no. If you take too long, the waitress gets impatient and the rest of the diners get antsy. Ready? Let's go.

"A hamburger, please." Her turn: "How would you like it? Rare, medium, done or well done?" I like mine a bit rare, but not as bloody as the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, so I say, "Medium, but a bit rare." "You mean medium-rare?" "Yeah, that's it, great." Now for the bread. "White, rye, whole wheat or French?" I say white, just to say something. "In a roll or a bun?" "Oh, oh..." I ask for the bun because that's what hamburgers always come in. Great. "Any extra ingredients? Cheese, onion, lettuce, tomato, pickles?" "Onion, lettuce and tomato, thanks." "French fries?" "Yes, thank you." "Soup or salad?" I think she says "super salad" so I say, "That's fine." "What's fine?" "That would be good, bring me a super salad,

## OCTOBER

please.” “Both?” “What do you mean both?” “They are two different things,” she explains. “Either soup or salad.” “Oh, darn, the salad, then.” “Green or pasta?” For the love of God! “Green,” I say. “A small green salad, please.” “Which dressing? Italian, vinaigrette, Thousand Island or ranch?” “Whatever has oil and vinegar.” “The Italian.” “That would be great, thanks.” “You are very welcome.”

The lunch is a pleasant affair. The bill arrives. The tip has to be added to the total. Twenty percent????? Where’s the defibrillator because I’m about to pass out! It’s not that I’m cheap, it’s just that I’m not used to this. But I’ve been told that in the United States, waiters earn only a modest wage so their income depends on customers’ generosity. No wonder they smile when they serve you and make a point of bringing you more butter, refilling your water glass and repeatedly asking you if everything is okay. No wonder there is so much staff turnover in the business. As soon as they find a better job, they’re gone. In Madrid, you go to a restaurant and if you return 20 years later, the same waiter will serve you, although with less hair and a graying moustache. Here it’s different. But when in Rome, do as the Romans do. So, 20 percent it is.

Back at home, it’s time to carve the pumpkins. Thank God these pumpkins’ rinds are not like those in Madrid, where you would have to take a hammer and chisel to them. The ones in this town have the texture of a watermelon rind. A kitchen knife goes through them beautifully. Sarah prepares them with the kids. First they cut a star-shaped lid from the top, which is easy to put back in place afterwards. They then use a spoon to empty the pumpkin cavity. The contents can be used for soup, but given the amount of pulp the kids drop on the floor, I don’t think soup is in our future. We toast the seeds. Now they cut out the eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth with big teeth. A little candle inside and it’s good to go. You can also make much more sophisticated figures. For \$5, Stickle’s sells a kit to draw even more sophisticated patterns on the pumpkins than those in the stained glass windows of the Episcopal Church on Chestnut Street. Some people create true masterpieces. The house on the corner of

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

South and Beech has a porch full of characters so real they look like they belong in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

For the tombstones, I went to Williams Lumber and got some sheets of white foam board that can be cut easily. I used gray watercolor to paint them so it wouldn't eat through the foam board and added a few drops of black ink to imitate the dappling of stone. Once dry, I wrote the text with pencil and then retraced the letters with a solder gun so they would be in low relief. I then painted the letters in black for contrast and they were ready for the yard. More sophisticated people put mounds of sand in front of the tombstones to simulate recent burials. Others glue a plastic raven to the tomb or hide a smoke machine behind them so fog won't be lacking. Oh ... our neighbors have also made a tombstone but much smaller. We go up to look at it and are surprised to discover that it's real and permanent. Their cat, a huge animal that occasionally wandered across our yard, has died. It is a slate headstone with the animal's name, date and the inscription "In Loving Memory." Petsmart, the huge pet store in Kingston, has hundreds of them for all tastes, with all types of messages. "We'll see you in the next life." "Friend and companion." "We won't forget you." "My sweet angel, we'll miss you." Julia and Nico offer condolences to their friends Matt and Makenzie Roush for the parting of their cat.

Tonight we're having dinner at the Econopoulys' house. Tim and Nola grew up with Sarah in Rhinebeck. Nola Curthoys was in Sarah's class and was the first friendly face my wife introduced me to the first summer I visited. She was serving drinks behind the bar at the Starr Bar. She has long blond hair and a permanent smile. On the other side of the bar were several potential suitors hoping that she was smiling at them. Nola used a small shot glass to measure the alcohol for the gin and tonics. Here, there's no mercy when it comes to alcoholic drinks. The tonic comes out of a hose. They can serve you three gallons' worth if you want, but the alcohol is distributed as if it were perfume. Two drops and that's it. It's not like in the bars in Spain, where the waiter keeps pouring the gin until you

## OCTOBER

tell him to stop. Here, if you want to be able to taste the alcohol in a drink, you have to ask for a double. Econopouly is a Greek name and for me it represents the ethnic and cultural fusion you find in Upstate New York. I don't know anyone more American than Tim. He's the closest to Jeremiah Johnson living in this valley, with his lumberjack shirt, passion for nature and annual lake expeditions by canoe in the Adirondacks. But Tim has a brother who is an orthodox monk on Mount Olympus. He has a part of him that is more Greek than yogurt. I would never have imagined it, but there you have it. When the Jews celebrate their Passover and the Christians their Easter, the Econopoulys prepare, at the house of another brother, Will, a gastronomic feast that seems to me to be the best possible way to break-the-fast. As the iPod in the kitchen plays the Stamatis Kokotas version of "Otrelllos," a local lamb is slowly roasting over coal. From early morning until late afternoon, it turns on the spit until it is perfectly golden brown. Depending on the temperature every year, the diners accompany the banquet with a glass of Tsantali Roditis rosé or a red Myrto. The food never stops coming: meatballs, moussaka, roast garlic tzatziki, meat-and-rice stuffed dolmas... Yum! When the time comes, the lamb is taken down from the spit and Will removes the wires. Tim and his brother-in-law Richard expertly carve the animal. This is easy for Richard, whose father was the butchery instructor at the Culinary Institute. The steaks, filet mignon ... and everyone fighting for the pieces encrusted with cloves of garlic.

Tim's paternal grandparents were Greek. They grew up in small Peloponnesian villages a few miles apart, but met in New York. His grandmother never learned English. However, his grandfather would proudly sit to read the *Daily News* every day after work. When Tim and his siblings were little, their parents took them to visit their cousins in Greece, very poor people whose only valuable possessions were two goats with which the children played. Before leaving, the animals were served on the table to celebrate the happy reunion. In Greece, that boundless generosity comes from people of the Middle East, which stretches to the east. Iran

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

is the highest expression of this generous spirit. Mr. Econopouly recalls that when he saw the goats, he called his children to the gathering, aware of the effort his relatives were making, and asked them to eat everything without complaint. To eat every last scrap of meat on the plate. And they did. Even today, the “clean bones” request is a family joke. Tim says his father is incapable of eating meat without stripping the bones bare. His plate doesn't have to go through the dishwasher.

Nola and Tim got married in the middle of the woods. It was like when Snow White became engaged to the woodcutter. A few weeks before the ceremony, I became familiar with a nasty weed that had attacked Nola and which, ever since, I've learned to avoid at all costs. It's called poison ivy. It impregnates you with oil, so the best remedy is a good shower with dishwashing liquid after having worked in the yard. Palmolive has become my best friend in the summer. Tim and Nola's house overlooks Crystal Lake, a magnificent place right in the middle of town, from whose windows you can practically dive into the water and start swimming. Or take a spin in a kayak. Before dinner, I have to pick up Nico from his friend Andrew's house, which is on the same street. Andrew Chestney is the son of Chris, the owner of the funeral home, a nice, tall guy who sponsors Max's basketball team. He must do it as a service to the community because I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to attract more customers. When I reach the house, I hear the echo of voices resounding from the far side of the yard. I walk around the side of the house and find a table full of people sitting around some bottles of wine. Chris and his wife Carol stand to greet me and with extraordinary hospitality (we may have met only a couple of times when picking up our kids from school), and ask me to sit with their friends to share a glass. Some faces are familiar to me and we exchange greetings. I'd love to stay, but I don't have time. I'm just about to tell them I'm rushing off because Nola and Tim are expecting us for dinner, but I keep quiet. In a small town like this, you quickly learn to be discreet. Everyone knows everyone else and you never know if someone might be offended for not being included in some

## OCTOBER

plan. It's not a question of concealing information, it's just trying not to offer unsolicited information. Here, you may be having a cup of coffee with someone in the afternoon and say goodbye as if you weren't going to see him in a week, but that same evening, you see him again at a friend's dinner table. Neither of you had mentioned the dinner invitation. "What are you doing tonight?" "I've got a dinner, how about you?" "Yeah, me too." But you don't say where or with whom. The weekend in Rhinebeck is full of surprises ... and tension. You never know if you'll make the cut.

At Crystal Lake, it is a cool but pleasant evening and the bats flutter about. "Won't you stay for a glass of wine?" asks Chris Chestney again. Then, loosened up by the relaxed atmosphere on the porch, I say: "With Halloween around the corner, and what with your being a funeral director and those bats circling above, I wouldn't stay here even if you tied me to the chair." Chris gives me a serious look and then laughs. Phew. Being funny in a different language is one of the hardest things to pull off and there are many ways to mess up. Nico comes out of the house with Andrew. Carol asks me if my son can sleep over. Have I heard right? "Okay," I say. "How many nights?" I know that the politically correct thing is to say that your kids are the best thing that ever happened to you and that you would just like to be able to spend more time with them. That's what the politicians say when they are forced to drop out of the electoral race: that they will have more time to spend with their families. Knowing some of those politicians, you can't help but feel sorry for their families. But in the case of normal people, those of us who really do have relationships with our kids, there's nothing better than to get a break from them every now and then. Let someone else keep them overnight to give you a chance to miss them and want to see them even more the next day. "Thanks, Carol, Nico is all yours. Is breakfast included?" I head down South Street on my way to dinner, happy to be living among such kind people.

The Dapson-Chestney Funeral Home, like other American funeral businesses, was founded in the shadow of a small cabinet-making shop.

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

Previously, building coffins was a voluntary effort carried out by those who could do so, namely cabinetmakers and carpenters. In Rhinebeck, the old Carroll Furnishing factory became Carroll Furnishing and Undertaking. The verb “to undertake” means to commit oneself to and assume a responsibility. The term “undertaker” stuck as the appropriate euphemism to refer to the mortuary executive because he was the one who took care of the dead. The prefix “under” is just a coincidence with no relation to the fact that bodies are buried underground. Way back when burials shifted from being a social labor to a lucrative business, the undertakers definitively broke off from those who crafted wooden shelves, chairs and beds.

Rhinebeck has two funeral homes, one to the east and the other to the west of Market Street. Two businesses offering exequial services for a total population of 7,000? That might seem excessive, but not many years ago, mourning took place mainly in homes. Today, Dapson-Chestney Funeral Home organizes just one wake a year in a private home, as opposed to the 80 it holds annually at its facilities. Cremation has also been on the rise, accounting for 30 percent of funeral rites. Not all towns in the county have their own funeral home. In small towns such as Milan, Tivoli or Staatsburg, neighbors have to choose between the cemetery in Rhinebeck, Red Hook or Hyde Park. Curiously, decisions seem to coincide with the town where their children went to school. It makes sense as they most likely made friends through their children and consequently, wherever that was is where they developed their social life.

In a big city like New York, there are Italian, Jewish and Irish funeral homes, all of which originated in their own neighborhoods and which follow different traditions. Here, Chris has to adapt to different beliefs. Customs vary between Protestants and Catholics. The Church of Rome believes that the prayers of the living can help the souls of the dead to travel to heaven whereas the church of Martin Luther and Calvin considers it a waste of time to pray for the dead because it is too late to help them. Ministers have no trouble going to the funeral home to console the

## OCTOBER

families whereas priests prefer families to go to the church. During the ceremony, the audience is reminded of who the deceased person was and of his or her personal or professional achievements. People recount funny or moving anecdotes about the deceased and recall the good times spent in their company. This sometimes conflicts with the stricter ideology of the Catholic Church, which insists that the rite should be a celebration of death rather than of life. It is assumed that the deceased has resuscitated and is now having a much better time in heaven. The earth is a valley of tears which, thanks to God, has ended and now there is glory in death.

There are innumerable subtle differences in the religious sphere, so Chris has to be open to the requests of the deceased's family. After all, his mission is to try to ease their suffering as much as possible. The director of a funeral home is something of a psychologist. Attempts to relay a final farewell of a family member with a celebration of life make for some exciting funerals on this side of the Atlantic. Sometimes the family provides the background music. This can be as simple as a recording of the favorite song of the guest of honor to play at the funeral home. Or it may be a more complex operation. A friend who plays the violin. A niece who sings. Or, in the funeral mass celebrated at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York for Jim Henson, on the high altar, the shaggy red Muppet who loves tickling, Elmo, sang together "Lydia the Tattooed Lady," the song that Groucho Marx immortalized in *At the Circus*.

Of course, says Chris, let us not forget, that we are in America the beautiful, the kingdom of show business. Lately, marketing gurus have identified niches in the realm of funereal extravagance. So Chris offers serigraph caskets in the colors of the deceased's favorite sports team or decorated with photos of his or her favorite actors or singers. The Batesville Company embroiders commemorative panels inside the lid, with the family coat of arms, the emblem of any organization, spiritual symbols, objects or landscapes associated with hobbies, or faces of loved ones. They can also make small niches in the corners of the caskets to place decorative figures referring to the spirit, personality or interests

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

of the deceased and which the closest relatives will later take home as keepsakes. These may range from a sculpture of a bald eagle wrapped in the flag, to sporty, floral or spiritual motifs. For each casket, urn or cremation contracted, the staff at Batesville will plant a tree as part of the global reforestation program.

They also produce videos and photomontages that reconstruct the biography of the deceased, for families to show at the funeral home, give to those present or post on the Internet. Posters are printed with a photo of the deceased to decorate the room in which the celebration will take place, and keepsakes photographs are distributed among mourners. There are stamped t-shirts and personalized Bibles, candles and cushions. For those who cremate their loved ones, gold and silver pendants are sold that serve as reliquaries for carrying some ashes. In terms of caskets, the catalogue in Chestney's office offers more than 500 models, ranging in price from \$200 for a pine box to \$25,000 for the presidential-style coffin. The latest is made of hand-carved mahogany and has no religious motifs. There is an even more expensive version, which costs up to \$100,000 given the gold-plated interior. Chestney tries not to influence choices. Some funeral homes are well known for taking advantage of the emotional fragility of the moment to sell the family the most expensive casket, something which a funeral home in a small town cannot get away with. Reputation is everything in a place like this. "If I take advantage of the situation," says Chris, "the next death in Rhinebeck will not be the concern of my business." Funeral homes can get away with that in a big city where people don't know them personally because the owners know the clientele will continue to come anyway. Not here. At any rate, he tells me, paying a lot for a casket is not always the fault of the funeral home. There are people who feel bad about what they did not do for the deceased in life and believe they can fix things by spending a fortune on the coffin. Of course, this is nothing compared with the eccentricities of the guy who, in a town closer to Manhattan, was buried at the wheel of his Formula 1 car. Here, people place objects that make them feel good in the caskets: bottles of

## OCTOBER

beer, a pack of cigarettes, a lottery ticket ... The Irish include a travel bag with objects the deceased will need on his journey to paradise, like they used to do in the pharaohs' tombs. A conventional funeral runs an average of \$8,000.

At the moment, Rhinebeck doesn't have a problem with casket sizes. So far, all the deceased have fit in the normal-sized coffin, which measures 2 feet wide, or in the large size, which measures 2.5 feet. To date, no one has had to order the XXXL Goliath, measuring 3.5 feet across, with reinforced hinges and handles, which was developed in Indiana to hold the largest deceased, up to 650 lbs. The U.S. funeral industry began to readjust its technical specifications due to the considerable increase in weight, and therefore volume, of a large sector of the population. Twenty percent of the U.S. adult population is obese, for which reason the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx was recently forced to increase the size of its plots from 3 feet to 4 feet wide.

Chris's profession is viewed well socially, and, except for a few inevitable jokes, his funeral home is associated with a business that contributes to everyone's well-being. This doesn't make up for the fact that for years, some of his friends could not understand why he had opted for such a disagreeable job. Now, he tells me, many have arrived to the dreadful age when they begin to lose their parents and finally appreciate his valuable labor.

Eighty percent of bodies are embalmed. Canada and the United States are the only countries in the world that routinely carry out this procedure. It is only mandatory in Minnesota, but funeral homes refuse to show the bodies if they haven't been embalmed. There's not much to it. Basically, the procedure uses a pump that extracts fluids from the body and exchanges them for chemical products. Previously, they would place two coins on the eyelids and tie the jaw shut with a cord until rigor mortis set in. Today superglue has simplified things.

Jewish funeral rites require funeral directors to work in a hurry. The body must be buried before sunset within 24 hours after death. Since families tend to be dispersed and attending a funeral often entails

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

significant travel, there is an unwritten extension of the period to 48 hours. The synagogue in Kingston or Poughkeepsie sends someone to Chestney's to supervise the preparation of the body. According to the Jewish law of Halacha, the deceased is covered in white canvas and the undertaker, the *chevra kadisha*, initiates the *tahara* or purification rite. The cleansing is carried out without ever looking at the face of the deceased or uncovering him. Each time a body part is washed, a prayer is said: for the eyes, to cleanse the bad things he may have observed; for the mouth, for the bad words he may have spoken; for the nose, for the vile odors he may have inhaled; for the chest, for the bad impulses he may have had ... and so forth until the undertaker reaches the feet, which are washed to erase the bad steps taken. Once the body is purified, it is dressed in a type of pajamas, the *tachrichim*, consisting of white pants and a top made from 10 pieces of cotton in the case of men, and 12 pieces in the case of women. In Israel, the deceased are buried without caskets. In the U.S. and Europe, a hole is sometimes drilled in the bottom of the coffin to facilitate contact with the soil. American culture tends to protect the family from the more morbid parts of the ceremony. People do not attend cremations and at burials, people leave before the casket is lowered into the ground. Jews are the exception since mourners are expected to throw shovels of sand over the coffin.

Sometimes the burial takes place in special areas. It is not very common, of course, but it occurs with wealthy people who live on large estates and want to be buried there. Chris always urges against this: what happens if the children sell the house? Then they wouldn't have access to their parents' graves.

There are several cemeteries in the Rhinebeck area. All of them are in sloped meadows interrupted by discreet rows of vertical tombstones. Some are public whereas others belong to churches, such as that of St. Joseph's Chapel in Rhinecliff. This is the largest cemetery; it is private and admits all creeds. If the family has no money, the county covers the cost of a modest burial. War veterans get free burials. High-ranking military

## OCTOBER

officers and heroes go directly to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Many of the tombstones on Route 9 have eroded with the passage of time and the inscriptions are practically illegible. Sometimes you find a large tomb where the parents are buried and which has complete names and dates, and surrounding it, smaller graves with the initials of their children: N. H., J.M., T.C.

At last, Halloween night arrives and we have no choice but to take turns trick or treating. I go out with the kids in search of candy while Sarah stays home to serve those who come requesting it. Hundreds arrive at our house. We are right in the middle of town, in an area easily covered on foot, and the customers come in droves. Trick or treat. Let them come. We are prepared with mounds of chocolate bars, toffees and hard candies. Gangs of kids ring the doorbell. Among the groups, I recognize Ian Katowski, Susanne Callahan's son, dressed as a skunk. Susanne is another of Sarah's inseparable friends from childhood. I say hello and Ian sprays me with a water bottle. "Hey, this is a real skunk!" There are masks for every taste, but most are not scary. We learned that lesson too late. A few days ago, there was a children's costume contest in the American Legion parking lot, the home for war veterans, and our kids wanted to participate. Max and Nico are dressed as monsters and Julia as a witch. Nico is quite scary, with green makeup covering his face, and covered with wounds and pustules created with wax and fake blood. He is convinced he is going to win first place. When he stands in front of the jury, we know he doesn't have a chance. There are no deformed butlers or ghosts of any sort. One boy is dressed as a red fire hydrant, another as a medieval knight with horse included ... The winner is the boy whose ingenious father, Christian Fekete, a French architect, has hung red construction paper in the form of an apple from his neck. In the paper, he has made a hole for the left elbow, from which the boy's arm extends, covered in a sock that resembles a worm. "Wow!" I say. "Why didn't anyone tell us that Halloween costumes in the U.S. were more like those of Brazil's carnival than those of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*?"

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

“Stupid *Papá*,” Max and Nico say. “Why—are we dressed as monsters?”  
“It’s your fault we are making fools of ourselves. You’re so dumb, *Papá*.”

The practice of asking for sweets, observed from a respectable distance by parents, is reserved for elementary school kids. By middle school, ages 11 and up, the kids have other plans. The gangs hang out near the old South Street cemetery and come armed with shaving cream, eggs and firecrackers. Occasionally, they get involved in some dispute and the police do everything they can to patrol the streets to prevent them. I have yet to face this reality. We go to the firehouse station instead. I’ve ridden the train of terror for the youngest kids. Upstairs, they pass out hot chocolate to anyone who wants it. The evening is freezing cold and the light from the lampposts shines on tiny snowflakes, the first of the season.

November 1 begins on a sad note. We hear suspicious noises and go out to see what’s going on. Some hooligans have squashed Julia’s jack-o-lantern against the front steps. We suspect two thugs who are nervously running up the street. Julia can’t hold back her tears. “They did it,” she says as she points in the kids’ direction. “We don’t know that,” I tell her, lowering her hand. “Don’t worry, we’ll carve another pumpkin.” The disagreeable episode unlocks the key for deciphering the meaning of the name of an alternative Chicago rock group whose name never made any sense in Spanish: The Smashing Pumpkins. What’s that? Who would ever smash a pumpkin? Well, it turns out that in America some people will. I always thought that the name of the band was a surreal invention, like Blind Melon and the like. Apparently not. There really are pumpkin smashers out there. Julia and I go out to look around the area in search of clues.

Curiously, I had met the members of Blind Melon during the celebration of the second Woodstock Festival, also known as Mudstock, in the summer of 1994. The 25th anniversary of the mythical musical event of 1969 was not celebrated in Bethel, the site of the original concert, or in the Village of Woodstock, but rather 16.5 kilometers away, at the Saugerties Farm. Promoter Michael Lang had gone to H.H. Hill Real Estate in Rhinebeck to ask my brother-in-law for help finding a location,

## OCTOBER

and Huck put him in touch with Winston Farm. So of course Huck had tickets. At the time, we were on vacation, visiting Sarah's family. One afternoon, Huck suggested we cross the Hudson with him to go to the concert and hang out in the VIP section used by the artists. Sarah declined because she was pregnant with our second child and the photos in the newspaper suggested a real risk of slipping in the mud amid the crowds. Some good friends of ours, Laura Lee Berlingieri and David Ferris, were spending the weekend with us. We met them in Madrid where they were teaching English at the Instituto Norteamericano. We were introduced to them by Metta Callahan, another Rhinebeck native who also lived in Spain's capital at the time. That summer, David and Laura Lee had decided to make a change in their lives and were studying for their MBAs at Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona, and had come to visit us. Later, they would work on Wall Street, then in London, Bombay and Hong Kong. Today they live in Melbourne, Australia. But back in August 1994, they gladly accepted the invitation to cross the Hudson and go to the Woodstock anniversary concert on the wharf that Lang had rented from the Unification Church for the event.

When we reached Rose Hill Lane, a handful of people were waiting for the boat. The four of us were engaged in conversation as we awaited the ferry when a man rushed up screaming something unintelligible. "What's wrong?" "Nothing," said the babbling stranger. "The helicopter with Jimmy Cliff is going to take off and there's a free space. Who wants to go?" Before we had a chance to react, Huck had disappeared. The chorus of "You Can Get It If You Really Want" must have been going through his head and made him forget that he had the festival tickets in his pocket. We began to laugh nervously. A bit confused, we got on the ferry with the group that had been waiting with us. They served us a glass of champagne. Very civilized. "What should we do?" "Enjoy this crazy life while it lasts." We greeted our travel companions. It turns out they were the members of Blind Melon, who were playing that night. They came to success with their song "No Rain" and opened for Neil Young, Lenny

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

Kravitz and the Rolling Stones. Very nice guys. The vocalist had the name of an immoral person: Hoon. Nevertheless, that afternoon while we crossed the Hudson, Hoon seemed like a calm, reserved guy. This was based more on observation than anything else because we exchanged no more than two and a half sentences with him before we arrived on the west bank. "See you later." "Good luck." "Thanks." That evening we would watch him perform while wearing his girlfriend's dress on stage. A year and a half later, Shannon Hoon would leave this world, the victim of an overdose.

We got off the ferry. The area was cordoned off. A bodyguard the size of a Louis XV armoire cut off the retinue. "Who are you?" he asked the Indiana vocalist in a dry voice. "We are Blind Melon," Hoon responded. The bodyguard tweaked his earpiece and activated the microphone of his walkie-talkie to give an order: "Limousine for Blind Melon, please." Seemingly out of nowhere, a black train-car sized vehicle on wheels pulled up. He lifted his arm and let them through. A driver opened the car door and they were gone seconds later. "Who are you? Excuse me?" The Incredible Hulk stood before me, connected to his radio in real time with the heads of the New York State Police. One word from him and the response would have been immediate from the hundreds of agents patrolling the area that had been overtaken by 50,000 rock music addicts. One gesture from that man and they would have the three of us face down on the grass, a boot to the head, handcuffs on the hands and shackles on the legs. "Who are you?" he repeated impatiently, staring at me. A helicopter rose up from behind the locust trees and passed over us. It had just left Jimmy and Huck enjoying a cold Coronita at the organization's headquarters and was going back to pick up the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The repetition of the question brought me back to reality: "Who are you?" My voice sounded weak and desperate: "We are friends of Huck." "Friends of whom?" My brother-in-law's name meant nothing to this representative of law and order. "I can't understand you," he said. "We are friends of Huck!" I said, raising my voice. He activated the walkie-talkie. "Security?" ... ggggg... "Copy?" ... Gggggggg.... "Security,

## OCTOBER

copy?” ... Ggggggg... A metallic voice emerged from the other side. Yes, security. I copy you... Ggggg... Our legs were shaking. “Please...” ggggg ... “Send over a limousine for the group Friends of Huck.” A huge black car appeared. The officer raised his arm. He wished us good luck. “Roger, over and out.” A friendly driver told us to get in. Yippee....

We went for it. Doubling over with laughter, the three members of the rock group Friends of Huck—Laura Lee Berlingieri, David Ferris and Guillermo Fesser—traveled in a car so long that it appeared to have been assembled by placing six Cadillac cabins together. It was as big as an Amtrak car. The guards were opening the roadblocks for us. We left Route 32, which was packed with thousands of cars trying to reach the site, and entered the festival headquarters. The limo stopped before what appeared to be a group of bungalows from a hotel on the Mayan coast. The driver kindly opened the door. A man greeted us and led us to one of the wooden huts. “I hope you find everything to your liking. Just let me know if you need anything.” The only thing he didn’t say was that we had clean towels in the closet. “Of course, thanks so much.” We stood at the door not knowing what to do. On the little porch of the hut next to us, a guy with a mustache and bandana plucked an old Santana tune on his guitar. *Tantan tan tantan tatataaaaaaan, tantan tan tantan tatatan... Samba Pa Ti*. The guy got it exactly right and he even looked a bit like the Mexican composer. It was him! Carlos Santana. “Hi, how’s it going?” “Peace and love. Just warming up the fingers.” “It sounds good. I think you should do that professionally,” I said. “Yeah,” he joked. “Let’s see if the light shines down on us.” “Yeah, sure.” “What about you?” “Everything’s fine. A bit... well, you know... everything’s fine. Even better than we thought.” “I’m glad.” We turned away surreptitiously, as if we had something urgent to do, and quickly took off. Who was that character in the cabin next to us? The answer is blowing in the wind.

Mustache, goatee and endive-curly hair: There was Bob Dylan. He was doing his own thing, but it didn’t matter to us. It was Bob Dylan, you know? We could have rolled on down like a rolling stone and we

## ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM MANHATTAN

would have given him the same smile. How many times had I listened to *Desire*? That little song lasted eight minutes and 33 seconds. But I never got tired of it. As soon as it finished, I would place the needle at the beginning again. Until a scratch led to the record's retirement. "Hi." Nothing. It seemed like he was in a bad mood. A volunteer in the vicinity told us that he was angry because the organization had let his ex-wife into the VIP area. "Sara, Sara, sweet virgin angel, sweet love of my life. Sara, Sara, radiant jewel, mystical wife." The poet had complained to the handler that they had been separated for 30 years. "Doesn't that seem like enough time?" That day, the filters at several entrances were failing. Woodstock security was full of holes.

We decided to get away from headquarters before someone asked us to get on stage as the opening act for the Neville Brothers. We walked along the edge of the enormous mud pit. Like two boats stranded on the beach, right in the center of the pit, a pair of fat, bearded, tattooed guys in sleeveless shirts slept in two mud-incrusted canvas chairs. Two gigantic stages were operating at the same time. On the north stage, 100,000 scantily-clad, sweaty souls congregated. To avoid suffocating, we headed toward the south stage, where we breathed a sigh of relief when we discovered we'd only have to share the space with 40,000 other people. There we enjoyed "Mr. Senegal," Youssou N'Dour. "Seven seconds away. Just as long as I stay. I'll be waiting ..."

"What are you singing, *Papá*?" asks Julia, who prefers the theme song from *Dora the Explorer*. "Nothing," I say. We continue to inspect our backyard and the neighborhood in search of some clue as to the identity of the pumpkin smashers. No luck.

ONE HUNDRED MILES FROM  
**MANHATTAN**  
Guillermo Fesser

