BUZZINGS IN THE BERKSHIRES

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

OTIS, MASS.

I AM SITTING in a field of classical daisies—spongy gold centers, silken white perimeters—that fronts the little house we have rented for a few weeks of respite up in the Berkshires. My thoughts at this moment (I may as well own up) are like the buzz of insects in one's ear—random, pesky and without discernible weight.

It occurs to me (buzz buzz) that daisies do not have a uniform number of petals. The count seems to vary with the circumference. The daisy under my nose has 46 petals. I should say it *had* 46 petals before I removed them, one by one, while probing that ancient mystery: *She loves me, she loves me not*. Even-numbered daisies being what they are, the answer was "not." If I want a more affectionate response, I shall either have to ask another daisy or else cheat, as in solitaire.

This particular way of acquiring knowledge (petal plucking) can use up a lot of one's time. There are no shortcuts; it's all done by hand. A wistful craft, petal plucking flourished in a more deliberate age, when the turning of the earth was as good a measure of time as a clock or a calendar. Nowadays, lovers looking for reciprocity are unlikely to pick daisies; what they might do instead is pick up their telephone and dial an 800 number: "It's 10:37 A.M. Eastern Standard Time. She doesn't love you. Have a good day."

Behind me and the daisies run an old stone wall and a wired fence, which border a miniature pasture full of clover and thistles. Two horses, a mare and her filly, seem to be renting the pasture. The mare is brown and has sharp shoulder blades; the filly is an occasionally dappled gray. Diane talks to them sometimes and feeds them carrots. Glory be to God for occasionally dappled things, and for Diane.

The other day, Diane tells me, while I was in the village, the filly went slightly bats. She jumped over the electrified fence; then she jumped back. Still not satisfied, she did it once more, this time touching the wire as she performed an equine barrel roll. Snorting and shaking off the shock, she scrambled to her feet and galloped headlong down our road, whereupon three teenage girls materialized out of the rural ether and succeeded in luring her through a gate and back to her mother's side.

"It was really scary," Diane said. "You know that wild look that horses get sometimes, their eyes rolled way up in their sockets? Well, that's how she looked." I nodded knowingly, not caring to betray my total lack of knowledge regarding lunatic horses.

No one around here, not even the teenage girls, seems to know the horses' names. That is very odd in a village where names are considered part of the civic mystique.

There are fancy towns and bigger towns
But they're just all the same;
To me there's nothing fancy
Where no one knows your name.

So goes a verse in the town's unofficial anthem, entitled "Notice Otis." The composer, of course, remains nameless.

This song is an unabashed come-on to prospective fugitives from New York and Boston. It begins with the customary critique of urban life: "The city's hot and dirty when the summer rolls around; / the people get so mean you keep your eyes right on the ground." When that happens, according to the lyrics, it's time to "notice Otis, and soon your aches will mend...."

But apparently there are mean people in Otis, too. On Otis Reservoir last weekend somebody stole a man's pleasure boat, toodled around the lake a few hours, then pulled the plug and watched

the boat sink. It was said to have been worth $19,000. That same morning an elderly man named Buell was sipping coffee at his parlor window when he saw two men stroll onto the front lawn, get into his new Buick and drive away.

I collected this information not by yanking daisies but by eavesdropping at the local post office. Crimes and their victims have become a favorite topic for discussion. People seem bewildered. As is usual in these matters, the reactions can be as ugly as the crimes. The other day at the P.O. two men were talking about a house that had recently burned down. One of them suspected arson. "If they catch the guy," he said, "they ought to do with him what the Indians did—burn him at the stake."

The problem is not Otis' alone. "Car thefts suddenly soaring in county," yesterday's *Berkshire Eagle* proclaimed; "one stolen twice." (Where there are shortages, even felons must make do.) The epidemic of larcenies has people around here taking uncharacteristically urban-like precautions: They are locking their doors at night. Mutual trust, the virtual warp and woof of village life, is rapidly unraveling in the Berkshires.

The American substitute for trust is technology—a state-of-the-art machine in the garden. Some Otis citizens have installed sophisticated alarm systems with flashing lights and hidden electric eyes. When an alarm goes off, the local police are supposed to rush to the scene. But the town has only two policemen, and most of the time they're busy with highway accidents—or else they're home in bed. So much for technology.

Buzz buzz buzz. The reason I have been meditating in this machineless garden is that I am waiting for Diane to come out of the house. She is getting ready for our afternoon outing, whatever that turns out to be—a swim, perhaps, in Upper Spectacle Pond; a tramp through someone's purchasable woods; or maybe a tour of some Literary Site. Herman Melville lived around here, as did Edith Wharton, William Cullen Bryant, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Daniel Chester French, who sculpted the Lincoln Memorial.

It's mainly Millay, though, to whom I'm free associating, recalling her aversion to Edmund Wilson's only novel, *I Thought of Daisy*. He had been reckless enough to send her the manuscript. "If you let this be published," she wrote back, "you will do great injury to yourself...." Strong language. She loved him—she loved him not. Was Wilson's Daisy modeled on Millay? The answer is written on the petals of literary history.

These afternoon sorties of ours are generally hit-or-miss; like petal pluckers of old, we have no pressing engagements. It was Gandhi who said, "Everything you do will be insignificant, but you must do it anyway." (A general might say the same to his troops: Duty calls in many guises.) But Gandhi, one suspects, never took a summer vacation, an indolent interlude in which not having to do anything is the only significant point. Insouciance was not his strong suit.

I HAVE SPOKEN of the woods as "purchasable." That is because on occasion Diane and I have been known to eye real estate from a consumer's perspective. Not to put too fine an edge on it, we have been lazily shopping for rural land since before the election of John F. Kennedy. Whose woods these are we always think we ought to know. Not once, however, have we done more than look. To buy anything, we seem to be saying, would spoil the sport. One upshot has been that realtors from Maine to North Carolina flee whenever they see us approaching. We are a terrible waste of their time.

A few days ago we were slowly cruising down Nash Road—a byway that took us past two nifty lakes and a 200-year-old picturebook cemetery—when we spotted a tiny "For Sale" sign on a gray birch deep in the woods. We had to climb over barbed wire to get close enough to read the owner's name, written in pencil: "Robert Minnery."

Minnery proved to be a bachelor farmer who lives across the road in a long, low house with lots of tiny windows looking out on his woods, his birds, his swamps, and his dreams. He has no phone and no electricity. An outdoor laborer by day, he remains a farmer at dawn and dusk. Behind the house is a barn and a small pasture where Minnery grazes his 10 cows. "I used to have 20," he told us the next evening, "and I used to milk 'em twice a day. Now I don't milk 'em and I don't sell 'em. I just provide for 'em."

When we arrived, at sunset, he was in the barn providing for his cows. I called to him from the front gate. He came loping our way, a hunched, muscular man of medium build. His face was that of a clown—sad and friendly.

Followed by an aging cocker spaniel and a couple of cats, Minnery led us through woods and bogs, talking all the time, telling us about his land and his life. When he was 18 (he's 56 now) he bought 300 acres of farm and forest for $10 an acre. "Could've gotten it for five," he said regretfully. He must have had a vision of sorts, back there at the crest of his youth. He must have seen himself as a pioneer or an entrepreneur, or maybe as a future farmer of America.

Now he's trying to sell off a few acres at about $3,000 per. "I've worked hard for 40 years and I'm tired. The doc says I got two hernias. All I want is my Social Security and some rest. I like these woods. I want to keep 'em as long as I don't need the cash. I got beavers here and wild turkey. Keep your eyes peeled."

This man seemed to have one foot in wealth and the other in penury. Real estate prices in the Berkshires have doubled in just two years. The remarkable boom—all the fancy condos, all the six-figure, tax-deductible vacation hideaways—has conspired to make Minnery rich in real estate but poor in most other respects, including his health and his bank account. Eventually, in order to get cash he may have to sell portions of his beloved farm and forest to developers. No more wild turkeys to watch ... no more helpless cows to care for ... no more dreaming ... buzz buzz buzz buzz....

At last Diane emerges from the house. She is holding a rolled-up Geodetic Survey of Otis in one hand and a bottle of insect repellent in the other. Tenderly I place a daisy between her teeth. We get in the car and buzz off.