An English Alien

I had to be virtually carried to the plane.

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AN ENGLISH ALIEN

The police station was assembled a year behind of our usual routine.

The phone rang several times, but I wasn't able to answer it. The

ambulance was waiting outside, and the doctor was inside.

The ambulance was full of people, and the doctor was...
Anything connected with shopping seems tremendously difficult.

Of course, the vast numbers of things which people seem to own are very much in evidence. Most of these, to my eyes, are of a surprising sort and often of some interest. The result is that you need to discuss with your friends the very different sensibilities you have, and you are often left with a sense of being very much alone.

On the other hand, English seems to make a great deal of sense, and you can see that things are arranged in a sensible manner. A strange effect, perhaps, but you become anything but confused.

If you wish to know when you have been to a place that is too old, you are often left with a sense of being very much alone.

In England, the English seem to make a great deal of sense, and you can see that things are arranged in a sensible manner.

The English and the English-speaking French are not the only ones who seem to like this sort of thing.

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The sight of the shelves of a supermarket groaning with superabundance of food induces either nauseous revulsion or helpless dithering. I would either go three times round the store and give up the attempt to decide, or buy vast quantities of the most luxurious goods and whimper with the terror that they would be snatched from me.

After months of isolation, polite conversation is extraordinarily hard. Long silences are taken as brooding displeasure while people in the street react quite badly to the sight of a man quite openly talking to himself. Adjusting to the rules of interaction also poses problems. When the milkman left unordered milk on the step one day my reaction was to race after him shouting and raging after the West African fashion. I believe I may even have seized him by the collar. The poor man was greatly discountenanced. By West African rules I was merely being firm, by English rules an insufferable lout. Seeing oneself suddenly in this light can be a humbling experience.

Some small things give enormous satisfaction. I became addicted to cream cakes; a friend conceived a hopeless passion for strawberries. Running water and electric light were frankly incredible. At the same time, I developed odd quirks. It troubled me to throw away empty bottles or paper bags; in Africa they were so valuable. The finest moment of the day was waking up with a start and feeling a warm flood of relief to be no longer in Africa. My notebooks lay neglected on the desk; I felt a deep revulsion to even touching them which lasted for months.

One of the strangest psychological experiences was the arrival of the trunk of pots that I had dispatched what seemed like months before. I had wrapped them carefully in Dowayo cloth and packed them in a metal cabin trunk plastered with stickers declaring the fragility of the contents in four languages. Zuuldibo had been appalled at such meanness. Why did I not give them to the villagers? It was known that I was quite rich enough, like the woman who made the pots themselves, to buy gaudy enamelware from Nigeria. My wives would surely not be pleased when I handed them pottery from a village.

It was strange to see the trunk that had once stood in my hut lying in a dank, cold shed in London. Its shape had been com-pletely transformed. On dispatch it had been rectangular; now it was almost wholly spherical. Large boot marks on the lid attested to the agent that had worked this wonder. I had to prise off the lid with a tyre lever. It is always odd to receive a package from oneself: it smacks of split personality, especially when the person who sent it is so rapidly becoming alien to him who receives it. My friends without exception admired the elegant simplicity of the pots. What a pity I had spoiled them by using them; could I not have bought some cheap imported pans and saved these as too beautiful to use? It would have been nice to introduce them to Zuuldibo and let them fight it out. The returned fieldworker accepts both positions, identifies with neither.

It is impossible, of course, at such moments not to try to draw up a balance sheet of profit and loss. I had certainly learnt a lot about a small and relatively unimportant people of West Africa. Finishing fieldwork is always a matter of definition, not of fact. It would have been quite possible to go on for another five years in Dowayoland, albeit with diminishing returns, without exhausting the scope of a project aimed at 'understanding' a people so different from ourselves. But more general competences always lie beneath the particular. Henceforth I was to find that the monographs of which anthropology as a subject is composed would appear to me in quite different light. I would be able to feel which passages were deliberately vague, evasive, forced, where data were inadequate or irrelevant in a way that had been impossible before Dowayoland. All this makes the work of other anthropologists more available than it had ever been before. I also felt that in attempting to understand the Dowayo view of the world I had tested the relevance of certain very general models of interpretation and cultural symbolism. On the whole they had stood up pretty well and I felt much happier about their place in the scheme of things.

Purely personally, there had also been great changes. In common with many other fieldworkers, my health had been shattered for some time to come. My vague liberal faith in the ultimate cultural and economic salvation of the Third World had received a sharp knock. It is a common trait of returned fieldworkers, as they stumble around their own culture with the
I laughed. "Really? Yes, six months later. I returned to do—"

When are you going back?"

"Yes,"

Drove to ask all the important questions?

"Yes."

Did you bring back notes you can’t make head or tail of and

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Was it boring?"

"Yes."

"Ah, you’re back."

"Yes."

whose conversation had sent me to the bed in the first place.

whom we encountered has no more effective an ablation therapy

than any other. Several weeks after my return I landed the friend

whom insidiously habituating in anthropological folklore. The

precious and valuble! I was no exception. But there is some-

All 10 of you "Westerners", living in a culture that seems suddenly very

cynicism of returned anthropologists, to be simply mutually sterile.

THE INOCENT ANTHROPOLOGIST