

Fleeing for Sanity: How Far Is Far Enough?

EVERYONE wants to know where I went on my vacation, so I might as well tell it once and get it over with. I went around the corner and one block north and up a stoop and into the Inn at Irving Place. For one night.

One night might not seem enough, even in a bedroom that has a wet bar and a TV, which my everynight bedroom does not, but I am still smiling because that one-night bedroom exists. You have to know you can get away. My English gardener is pulling up stakes because she feels trapped in the city. She says if there is no surcease from sirens, jackhammers, screams, one will eventually go mad or south. She chose to go south.

You see how calm I am. That's what a whole night can do. No midnight bad music from The Pit on East 15th Street, no wakeup call from Con Ed's jackhammer-as-a-second-language school.

Of course, just thinking about that noise, wincing in anticipation, begins to scrape at my mood. It's too cold to stand out in my garden right now, so I will drive my karma to the Yoga Asana Center on Third Avenue near 23d Street, where I have taken many one-hour holidays over the last four years.

While I can't stand on my head or see clearly through my third eye, I have slowly begun visiting sections of my body I had come to consider condemned. In the course of a yogic hour I can count on dialing down from a snarl to a sneer, a major reduction in stress. Sometimes I can dial down just thinking about a yoga class.

Most classes I attend are for beginners, but I am still among the least supple of students. I will never sit on my heels, I think. My teacher, Eva Grubler, says that is inappropriate thinking. There is no competition in yoga, she says, no musts, no never. She may repeat a maxim from Dharma Mitra, her husband and the guru of the Center: "Little by little. The rest is up to you."

"Nice thought," said Patricia Highland, briskly, when I offered it to her as a goodbye gift. But her mind was elsewhere, already in the warm topsoil of North Carolina.

Ms. Highland has been the guru of my garden, and one of the people I like best in the nabe. After nearly 30 years in the city, many in Stuyvesant Town, she bought a house last month outside Raleigh.

In the backyard, she will plant perennials and vegetables, which she has never grown before. Her front yard will be filled with plants indigenous to her new region.

"In the city," she told me a few days before she left, "the gardens are mostly fac-similes, crammed into containers, on terraces. They are overcrowded, hemmed in, just the way we live."

"But a garden in the city," I argued, "provides respite, a fleeting sense of vacation, of getting away. My hawthorn trees and yoga really help me from going nuts. And you wouldn't believe what that one night at the Inn..."

"Yes, of course," she said kindly. "If I owned a house in the country, I might stay. But I'm leaving the city because I don't want to deal with the noise anymore, the assault, the psychic battering." She paused. "Let me also be positive. I have always wanted to plant a tree and watch it grow. It's time to do that."

Ms. Highland, as you no doubt remember, is a small, merry, 59-year-old widow who gets a certain sly pleasure at the snob appeal of being considered an English gardener. She is Canadian and thinks the American reverence for the English-style garden is



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not only ridiculous but a betrayal of our local flora. She is a keen advocate of pruning, and while she tries to avoid sounding maximatic, she is capable of saying: "Plants are not children, but we need to treat them both the same way. Invest your time, weed, prune, discard that which is causing problems."

How could I not miss her?

Now that it's February, my least favorite month in the city, I am thinking of taking another vacation, just like the last one. My wife made that reservation — it would have been presumptuous of me to book us into the O. Henry Room — and because the Inn has no room service we brought along our own champagne and food. There happens to be an excellent restaurant, Verbena, down stairs, but you don't need to go on vacation to eat out a block away.

We had an inside room overlooking a courtyard rather than Irving Place, a strong recommendation; it was very quiet. We would have had no trouble imagining ourselves almost anywhere else in the world; we were suspended softly in time and space. The bill — the room was \$200, the various taxes \$30 more — quickly unsuspended us.

But then we didn't even need a taxi to get home.

On her way out of town, Ms. Highland called. "I don't want you to think I am abandoning you. I have a person to help you with your garden." She gave me his name and the places his green thumb had touched. "He's very nice. And I've told him all about your hawthorns."