

THIS BOOK IS the product of prolonged inexperience. It's the story of a year spent in the United States, a country, as I came to realize, that you are completely unprepared for when you arrive. Everything I had learned in the course of many previous visits was no help at all. The American news we are bombarded with in Europe is like having a searchlight shine directly into your eyes: there's plenty of light but you can't see anything. Ordinary America—the country you enter as you come out of the airport, unless you're particularly unfortunate—is one of the world's best-kept secrets.

I have understood the most important things about this country—that is if I've understood anything at all—just by sitting tight and watching. There is, I was fascinated to find out, an America that goes wild about ice, that thinks discretionary tips are mandatory, that worships at the shrine of air-conditioning, and performs arcane rituals in honor of the fiendish god of the easy chair. It's an America of strange noises, strong flavors, and faint smells. That everyday America, in my view, is crucial. But few have attempted to explain how it works.

I am offering the reader a chance to explore it with me. I spent twelve months, from one spring to the next, in a small house in Georgetown, an old neighborhood where Washington turns into a normal city. It's the right place to ask your first questions (why don't they turn the air-conditioning down?) and get those first all-important answers (because that's the way they like it). Georgetown is the ideal setting in which to join battle with a plumber called Marx, to be ambushed by a seriously laconic mailperson and to be besieged by thoughtful neighbors.

Some readers may remember that in previous books I have stalked Italians abroad, spied on Eastern Europeans, and subjected the British to scrutiny. Well, it wasn't easy going from Britain, where hot means lukewarm, to America, where the same word means incandescent. And experiencing at firsthand the local sense of humor was equally traumatic. In the USA there is no such thing as understatement. If you say "I'm not very good" in Great Britain, it really means "I'm fantastic." If Americans are good at something (work, sport, sex), they come right out and tell you.

Most of the surprises were pleasant ones, though. I found out that children run things around here and that death is considered optional. I tried my hand at computer shopping, I got lost in car parks, I fought tooth and nail (failing) to acquire a credit card. I celebrated the Fourth of July. I chased a possum through my shrubbery. And I discussed politics with a neighbor called Greg. I realized why people care about neon, that soother of American angst, and I investigated the local passion for gadgets, which should not be underestimated. In its search to perfect the pocket-sized and portable, this country has covered a lot of ground.

As I was rereading this book, I became aware that my vision of America had come gradually into focus. The stupor of the early months gave way to a certain number of conclusions (right

or wrong—I'll let you be the judge of that). I decided to keep that sense of progressive discovery because I think it is the attitude many Italians—indeed, many Europeans—have toward the United States. Naturally, some of my compatriots get off the plane convinced that they know everything, but they're a minority (the same minority that knows all there is to know about politics, football, and wine). But most are happy to watch, learn, and comment (as soon as they find anyone willing to listen).

There is one thing I'd like to say to them: the discovery of America—which is as complicated today as it was in 1492—doesn't depend on how many miles you drive, or the number of states you've been to. America reveals itself in the little things. And to discover them, you need the inquisitiveness of a new arrival and the patience of a beachcomber, one of those mildly inappropriate individuals who roam the shores in search of small treasures. The seashore is America. The mildly inappropriate individual is me. Wish me luck, and let's get combing.

Washington, April 1995

Snow, at last. Eight inches of it, which is more than enough to make the TV announcers speak in contentedly alarmist tones and ordinary folk rush out to buy milk, bread, and toilet paper (they call it the nesting instinct, apparently). The newspapers carry articles that appear to have been written by elementary schoolchildren. Under headlines that say "It's snowed," women journalists with names like Terry or Marcia interview kids with sleds (carefully noting name, surname, and age), parents who are keeping an eye on them ("The kids are having a wonderful time"), snowperson artists who have been promoted to sculptors, and the inevitable fifty-year-old immigrant from Central America who has never seen snow before. I'm convinced it's always the same man from El Salvador who keeps moving round the United States, following the weather forecasts.

But being here when it snows is fun for another reason, apart from the fact that no one switches the air-conditioning on. The white stuff brings with it silent parks, adorning the cupid in our garden with an elf's hat of snow and uncovering a few interesting aspects of the American character. In London, snow is greeted

enthusiastically because it constitutes a minor emergency (the British are specialists in emergencies). In Washington, it brings out the local passion for statistics ("It hasn't snowed like this for 1,410 days"), the love of forecasts ("From midnight to five A.M. four and a half inches of snow will fall"), the spirit of initiative (seven offers to shovel the snow from my drive in one morning) as well as an attractively childish side to ordinary people's personalities. Despite all the statistics and the forecasts, people are out to have themselves a good time.

Fashion And to have a good time, they don't need the designer space-suits and state-of-the-art equipment that Italians can't wait to clamber into. A stout pair of shoes, a hat and a thick sweater is all that's necessary. It was in this spirit that we made a pair of blue plastic overshoes out of the envelopes the newspapers come in for our little boy, who didn't have any proper winter footwear. When we went out for a walk, the people we met congratulated us profusely. It seems the American winter just wouldn't be complete without an Italian toddler wandering the streets with the *New York Times* wrapped around his feet.

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IF THERE IS one aspect of American life that has been put under the microscope and studied to death, it is the workplace. Think for a minute. Half the films you've seen in the past two years have been set in offices. The U.S. film industry makes a living out of career women and sensitive, caring men. Or sensitive, caring women and career-hungry men. Or sensitive women and caring men, neither of whom generally get anywhere in their careers.

But after ten months, I believe I can say without fear of con-

tradiction that the films are little use as a guide. The few things I have come to learn about the world of work, I have understood thanks to good old-fashioned trial and error—which means learning from your own blunders.

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IT IS NOW obvious to me that America sets great store by the title you have or the job you do. In Washington, the tendency is taken to obsessional extremes. When you're introduced to someone, they don't give you an innocuous, "How do you do?" They confront you with an aggressive, "What do you do?" to find out whether you're worth wasting any time on. Secretaries in the nation's capital have developed highly sophisticated ways of humiliating their fellow human beings, even though that old classic, "Please hold," is still their main standby. Two syllables that consign the caller to a telephonic limbo.

A flourishing industry has grown up around the passion for titles—inventing important-sounding names for very ordinary jobs. As I write, I have in front of me a collection of business cards that display an astonishing ability to bend the truth without actually lying. There is an impressive selection of vice-presidents who, to the best of my knowledge, have nothing to do all day, except perhaps exchange business cards with other VPs. My personal favorite in this category is the Philippine travel agent at the end of the street, who has appointed herself executive vice-president of Astral Travel. The woman in question works in a one-room "suite" with a poster of Bermuda on the wall. She was unable to tell me the time of the train to New York.

These self-styled tycoons have much in common with the bogus aristocrats who used to populate Italy. I have the cards of a

couple of wives who have been promoted to bureau managers. Two hairstylists, who are merely ennobled barbers, four unspecified directors, several coordinators and advisors, hordes of sales associates (i.e., shop assistants), two used-vehicles representatives (which you and I know are really secondhand car dealers), and a semiretired senior editor I could hug.

The love of titles reaches its most exalted heights in the world of journalism. In comparison, we're amateurs in Italy. I know one or two people who work at the Washington weekly *The New Republic*, and I've counted on their management staff a total of thirty-three editors (including executive editors, senior editors, literary editors, managing editors, contributing editors, associate editors, assistant editors, assistant literary editors, and copy editors). I've only been able to find three journalists. If they're the ones who do all the writing while the editors sit around and edit, they must be slaving round the clock.

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WHEN I'D WORKED out the rule about job titles—exaggerate, it won't cost you anything—I then realized that the love of appearances went beyond the words on a business card to embrace a whole series of social rituals. Working breakfasts and lunches in particular caused me one or two problems.

The easiest ones to deal with are often the most formal. This is because they have European models. One such is the Cosmos Club on Massachusetts Avenue, which can boast among its members several Nobel laureates. Essentially, however, it is a London gentlemen's club that has been uprooted and transported to Washington. The only difference is that the American club looks more genuine than the real thing. Perfection is of course the proof

that the product is not original. The English, like the true artists they are, allow a little untidiness to creep in and blur the edges of the picture, as it were, thus rendering it impossible to reproduce.

It's just as easy to get by in the Italian restaurants. All you've got to do is say something in a strong Italian accent and make up one or two rules of table etiquette that no one will dare to challenge. As with the clubs, Americans are not content with copying. They want to copy well, and often manage to do so. Washington, so I am assured, has made stunning progress in matters Italo-gastronomic over the last few years. Some of the restaurants, such as Galileo, Café Milano, Filomena, Bice, I Matti, and I Ricchi (which is pronounced here as if it were *ricci*, Italian for sea-urchins), appear to have understood that non-Italians don't deserve the old caricatures of Italian cuisine, with their palate-scarring hot sauces and meat drowning in thick gravy. The original product from Italy is quite good enough. Other, less expensive and less well-known locales are equally praiseworthy, so don't let names like Thai Roma or Mex-Italia Rose put you off. The only real threat to your health is the waiter patrolling the tables with a pepper mill the size of a bazooka. But he's like the rain or flu in winter. There's nothing you can do about it.

For Europeans, the difficulties start with the classic rituals of American life. For example, is it impolite, during a working breakfast, to stare at the sleep-starved eyes of the person sitting next to you and inquire what on earth made them get out of bed for this? At lunch, is it courteous to ask your American host not to keep passing her fork from one hand to the other like a juggler? The official explanation for this performance—that once Americans ate with just a knife in their right hands, which was used to insert food into the mouth—is one I find unconvincing. One hundred and fifty years ago, the residents of the United States had

many other bizarre habits, like warring with the aboriginal peoples or shoot-outs in saloons, but they now manage to get along without them.

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BUSINESS LUNCHESES, I read in the introduction to a Washington restaurant guide, divide the city's population into four categories: power lunchers, hour lunchers, flower lunchers, and shower lunchers. The first group comprises influential people who discuss important business. Those in the second group are less powerful and only have sixty minutes to eat. The third are the seriously rich, who have plenty of time and flowers on the table. And the shower lunchers (from shower party, a gathering at which gifts are given to a woman who is getting married or having a baby) come in groups of ten, there is always one in the party who has something to celebrate, and they all ask for separate checks.

If we exclude the last category of fellow diners, who should in any case be avoided at all costs, one question will inevitably crop up on other occasions. Is it possible to order a beer or a glass of wine without looking like an unreformed alcoholic? The answer, I have come to realize, is not simple. Alcohol, once the fuel that drove public life in America and the lubricant that smoothed over the difficulties in any social relationship, is very much out in the nineties, at least in the presence of witnesses. In Washington, drinking beer at midday betokens a lack of seriousness. Allowing yourself a half bottle of wine is an admission of latent alcoholism. It's called "having a drinking problem" or just "problem." When it comes to covering up weaknesses, the British aren't the only ones who know how to juggle with the euphemisms.

One of the most attractive aspects of the Italian way of life—

the habit of consuming moderate quantities of alcohol with meals—is looked upon with suspicion in the United States. The youngsters who used to get so drunk at college that they couldn't tell a desk from a bed are now somewhat hypocritical adults. At working lunches, they shun the wine list as if it were radioactive. In the evening, they go back to their hotel rooms and ransack the minibar. At first, I used to get annoyed at this but now I will put up with horrors like hamburger and orange juice. Someone once wrote that "America turns any drug, from Martinis to art, into a question of public health and social morality." That's nothing. The problem is that we've now got to live with the consequences.

Part I

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THERE EXIST IN America certain communications problems that have nothing whatever to do with language. One fairly banal example is physical distance. Two people talking in Italy will stand about half a meter (eighteen inches) apart. In Germany, they will be standing one meter away from each other, and in Great Britain as far apart as they reasonably can. In the United States, they will almost be making lip contact. When I first arrived, I merely put up with it but then I began to take countermeasures. Today, my conversations have become a sort of tango. My interlocutor advances. I back away, fearing halitosis and an unwanted opportunity to inspect the individual's most recent fillings.

Part II

Convincing one's acquaintances to maintain a safety distance is only one of the problems posed by communication and it is far from being the most serious. There is worse. After ten months, I have been forced to come to the following, disturbing, conclusion: When Americans ask you a question, they expect an answer.

Used as I am to the British, who make do with a snappy one-liner instead of a proper reply, and the Italians, who will tend to make a definite statement, I have often been at a loss for words.

Americans, I have decided, are ignorant of the art of conversation. The harmless social conventions of the Old World bewilder them. Here people simply don't realize that at a party nobody really wants to listen to what someone else is howling into their ear. In such cases, talking is only a way of keeping your mouth occupied and not eating too many olives.

Frequently, I have witnessed scenes like the following. Before dinner, a European is introduced to an American and asks a nice, general question, such as, "Have you been in Europe recently?" The American, who could be a professional, an academic, or a business executive, then begins to answer, explaining when he or she was in Europe. Where they went. What there was to see, and whether or not the experience was an enjoyable one. After a few minutes, the eyes of the European begin to wander round the room. (The French are best at this. No one lets their eyes wander the way the French do.) As a result, the American will interrupt the story but the wounded pride will be obvious.

It was with pleasure, then, that I read that certain communications experts have decided that such behavior is no longer acceptable. Because of differences in race, income, and age, American public discourse, according to these studies, is becoming verbose, emotional psychobabble and is headed down the road that leads to incommunicability. In short, Americans are moving round to the European way of conversation. Everyone talks. Almost no one listens.

Although this may look like a positive development—it would mean, for example, no more third degrees at cocktail parties—I must confess to having some doubts. It is hard to imagine such a practical, optimistic nation giving up discussing how to solve

problems. This is the homeland of "Let's talk about it," the magical recipe of a country young enough still to believe in the miracle-working powers of the spoken word. The intricacies of Baroque rhetoric are unsuited to Americans. Woody Allen, anywhere in the United States outside Manhattan, might just as well be a Martian. He even looks a bit like one.

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AMERICAN TELEPHONES AND European ones look, on the face of it, the same. This is partly because they are both often made in Japan. But the way the telephone is used in the two continents is very different. Not just because American phones work better and cost less. It's because in the States, the telephone is a means, that is, it is used to say something. Often in Europe the phone becomes the end. The aim is not to say anything but simply to be talking.

Staying too long on the phone is regarded as a sign of immaturity in America. A teenager can get away with it but not the teenager's mother. For Americans, the phone is basically a machine. It has not been invested with the moral and social connotations it has acquired in Europe. On this side of the Atlantic, everything has to be able to be done over the telephone. "Working the phone" is an expression that is almost impossible to translate into Italian (*lavorare il telefono* is unconvincing). It means having an objective and phoning around right, left, and center until you achieve it.

It is perfectly normal for an American to telephone ten stores to find out if they have a certain item before leaving the house. This behavior can be explained by reference to some of the characteristics of the country. Shopkeepers actually answer the

phone. Local calls are paid for with a flat monthly charge. And the distances are enormous. Moving from one mall to another can be a major journey and it just wouldn't be worth it for the sake of a new shirt.

Nevertheless, Europeans won't accept this. They won't believe that the store has precisely the shirt they want. They won't buy things they haven't seen. An insurance policy taken out over the phone leaves you wondering whether you spoke to a ghost. A bureaucratic snarl-up solved over the phone might not have been solved at all. A French anthropologist has written that her fellow citizens are deeply convinced that to obtain anything at all you need to go in person. The same thing could be said of the Italians, some of whom are also quite likely to slip the clerk a sweetener.

Americans find this distrust baffling. On occasion, when I have phoned back for confirmation, and been recognized, the person on the other end of the line has been genuinely surprised. ("What's that? Didn't I tell you yesterday?") The life of the entire nation hinges on the phone, which has been simplified as far as is humanly possible. Every number has seven figures. Every area code has three. Americans can't understand why Rome has a two-digit code, Sassari's has three, and Vicenza's four. Nor do they see why there should be short (four-digit) and long (eight-digit) numbers in Milan. When I call my paper in Italy—area code and number, seven digits—the American operator always thinks I've forgotten some of the numbers. The only difficulty in America is making a long-distance call from a public phone. You need to have exactly the right change and get involved in detailed negotiations with the operator. But this is only a problem for tourists. Americans will either have a calling card, a telephone credit card, or make a collect call at the expense of the party they are ringing.

In my early days here, two phone-related phenomena left me

vaguely perturbed. One was the readiness with which acquaintances would say, "I can't talk now. I'll call you back." The other was the habit of phoning people at home (for work reasons, even people you don't know, and even at eight o'clock in the morning). The only thing that continues to irritate me is the eight o'clock caller, an individual beyond the pale of civilization. Calling people at home, whether they are distinguished academics, public officials, or my insurance agent, is something I've got quite used to doing.

A word of warning. This willingness to answer the phone does not show that America is a relaxed, informal community. It proves instead that protracted phone conversations are unusual. You don't mind answering the phone at home because you are unlikely to be kept on the line for half an hour. In the States, no one over the age of four plays silly games like, "Guess who-o?" Here, people don't use the telephone to engage in an emotional workout, or take a windcheck on the state of a friendship, or see how quickly you react. A brief exchange of pleasantries and then it's down to business.

To return to the world of work, family and health matters are not avoided in initial greetings, as they are in Great Britain. I have in the past had occasion to call an official at the State Department who justified his lengthy absence by describing in detail his own particular case of arthritis. This apparent friendliness sometimes tempts us Italians to go too far. When we do, we are punished, for as we are embarking on our own enthusiastic tale, another phone call will usually arrive and we will be on hold for the next five minutes. The vital thing is to realize what is happening in time, otherwise you may have to go through the entire routine again.

A final note. While Italian telephone manners have barely emerged from the Stone Age (represented by those who ring up

and ask, *Pronto, chi parla?*—"Hello, who's that speaking?"), America is racing ahead with new technology. At the cost of dropping some horrendous clangers, I have learned that:

- When you hear the signal for an incoming call, it is acceptable to put your current interlocutor on hold for a short time (unless it happens to be the president of the United States).
- Lying about where you are calling from is not only rude. It can be dangerous. The Caller ID service lets you read the number of the person calling you. Another service, activated by the sequence *69, lets you call back automatically the person you have just been speaking to. Unless, of course, they tapped in *67 before your number when they called you to disable the service.
- It is not impolite to use your answering machine to check incoming calls. It's annoying when other people do it to you, though.
- It is advisable not to leave on other people's answering machines (or in your own recorded message) funny quips, squeals, riddles, or weird music. As we have said, the telephone is a tool to be used for work and everyday life. In any case, Americans haven't got a great sense of humor.

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I ARRIVED IN this country convinced that political correctness—all the precautions one has to adopt so as not to offend women, ethnic minorities, and everybody else who feels like taking offense—was a joke. After ten months, I have discovered that it is actually a joke, but there's more to the story.

The phrase *politically correct*, which has been fashionable for a number of years now, means two different things. The first interpretation is "avoid all implicit discrimination in the language you use." The second definition is much simpler and less controversial: "be polite to others."

The former kind of political correctness has led to excesses, and media-fueled reactions, that prove that America may well be a fascinating country but it is full of people who love telling their fellow human beings how they should behave.

This neoconformism deserves all the ridicule it has attracted and I am certainly not going to defend it. Only a fanatic would use *womyn* instead of *women* to avoid the male chauvinist sound of the syllable *men*, prefer *Superperson* to *Superman*, or opt for *waitron* to eliminate the distinction between *waiter* and *waitress*. Equally, I have difficulty in believing that anyone wanting to avoid the adjective *black* would talk about the African American leader, Nelson Mandela, who is, in any case, South African. Or that there are people so irresolute as to want to eliminate references to Indians and the like from the names of basketball or football teams. The Washington Redskins are safe, for the moment.

I take a firm stand against such extreme views. They'll have to torture me before I call an elderly person "chronologically advantaged," a bald person "differently hirsute," or a homeless individual "involuntarily domiciled." Those who hope to impose such expressions are not just fanatics. They are deluding themselves. Neologisms like these will never catch on because they fly in the face of what we have seen is the first commandment of the American language: Shorten and simplify. In America, polysyllables are about as popular as nettle rash.

There is, however, a more reasonable side. Since it is less desirable, it tends to get less attention but for the majority of Amer-

icans, a minimum of political correctness is merely being polite. To put it another way, avoiding the words *short* or *fat*, especially in front of individuals afflicted by the conditions, is a question of good manners. The British have a similar way with words. All the short people in the British Isles are automatically promoted into the category of not very tall. The unpleasant are merely not very nice and the fat are frequently referred to as "robustly built" or "generously proportioned."

On other occasions, things aren't quite so straightforward. The subject of ethnic origin, for example, always has me in difficulty. I have no objections to calling blacks African Americans, or Indians Native Americans. Other words have come and gone in English and Italian before *black* and *Indian*. In 1953, for example, Guido Piovene wrote about his contacts with the *negri* of Washington. He would select another word today. But I do refuse to give up the adjective *white* in favor of *Caucasian*. I have never believed that we whites have any reason to think ourselves superior but I don't see why we should get the most embarrassing name of the lot.

These American obsessions (the late flowerings of Puritanism, perhaps?) are not in any way scandalous. Sometimes, however, they verge on the grotesque. Asking whether a necklace you fancy is a product of Native American craftsmanship makes the desire to acquire it evaporate. The same thing goes for the syntactical contortions that are necessary to avoid making the subject of the sentence—thankfully, in Italian you can often simply leave the subject out—only masculine. Here's an example from a newspaper article: "Who is the ideal candidate? He (or she) should be experienced. His (or her) reputation, untainted. And he (or she) should be bold." This has to be done even if there are no women candidates. You never know.

It is an arduous and—let's face it—depressing task to have to do without so many comebacks and snide remarks. In America, as I have come to see, you are well advised not to joke about the following subjects: sex, race, and death. Once you have forsworn these topics—the juiciest sources of humor—you can try to smile about anything else you like.

The British simply don't understand this determination to go without so many of life's little pleasures. A funny funeral joke is still one way to make a good impression in polite London society. But Americans will have none of it. Political correctness, as we have noted, inhibits them on the subjects of race and sex. And when it comes to the Grim Reaper, there is an unspoken but widely held belief that death is optional. If only the subject were studied in sufficient depth—and not joked about—then it might not ever be necessary to shake off this mortal coil. And here practically minded U.S. publishers have found a gold mine.

That leaves the mentally ill. But here, too, the hunting season is over. American humor on the subject of mental illness—where it exists—is entirely involuntary. According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (a million copies sold of each edition), the number of such maladies has increased in only fifteen years from 106 to 333. The list appears to include every human activity that is not positively health-enhancing. And so we find nicotine abuse and caffeine intoxication, defined as the "recent consumption of caffeine usually in excess of 250 mg (more than 2–3 cups of brewed coffee) followed by restlessness, nervousness, excitement, insomnia and flushed face." There's the disorder of written expression, whose symptoms are "grammatical or punctuation errors within sentences, poor paragraph organization, multiple spelling errors and excessively poor handwriting." As things stand, I won't ever be able to say to my fellow journal-

ists that they drink far too much coffee, smoke like a chimney, and write abysmally. Since they'll be suffering from three distinct mental disorders, I'll have to treat them with kid gloves.

To sum up, foreigners should avoid going to extremes and looking ridiculous. But it's wise to get to know the ground rules so as not to embarrass anyone. Remember that American embarrassment isn't a fleeting shadow that, British-style, barely darkens the brow. It is highly visible and very audible. In fact, it always has been.

A nineteenth-century English traveler, Charles Janson, addressed a maid during his stay in America using the appellation "servant." The young woman was not impressed. She replied, "I'd have you to know, man, that I am no sarvant. None but negers are sarvants." She went on to inform the stranger that she was the landlord's help. The story is an example of proto-political correctness. It shows that the (white) servant's hour had come. African Americans would have to wait. Janson, the inconsiderate traveler, is the archetype of contemporary visitors from Europe, who risk saying something untoward every time they open their mouths. A robust Italian accent, in some circumstances, means forgiveness in advance.

March