

Letter From the Countryside

by Mary Berry Smith

Real Homeland Security



I was picking tomatoes on our small farm in north-central Kentucky when I heard the news of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It took me some time before I understood that what Bob Edwards of National Public Radio was talking about was not a book or movie. I was horrified and frightened when I realized what he was describing was real, but I wasn't surprised. It seems that I live waiting for the next awful thing to happen somewhere in the world.

Our farm sits near a small town in a world made up mostly of small places—places affected by the policies of their governments but seldom consulted or considered. This place has been my “homeland” all of my life, and my family's for eight generations. The government that now wants to talk about “homeland security,” an obnoxious phrase, has been working at economically destroying our homeland for a good deal of that time.

Because we now know what we should have known all along—that we are vulnerable to terrorist attack—maybe we are ready to think about what a secure homeland might really mean and how country places like ours might fit into it.

In a *New York Times* article dated October 28, 2001, Neil Harl, a professor of agriculture and economics at Iowa State University, says that “The terrorists know that the surest way to bring a country to its knees is to attack the food system and water systems.” The problem, the article goes on to say, is that “the food chain is nearly impossible to secure fully because of its massive scale.” People should have been plenty worried about this before September 11, and they should be asking to hear some serious talk about it now. I'm asking, and I have been for 20 years. All I've heard from our leaders, elected and otherwise, is talk of hiring more food

inspectors. This is ridiculous for many reasons, not the least of which is that the food inspection system is currently failing to find manure on meat, some of which can be seen with the naked eye.

Our country, through its ruinous desire for cheap food, has nearly destroyed the safest food system we could have: farmers feeding the people closest to them. Our current farm policy permits mergers, allows for concentration, favors agribusiness, and teaches that small farms can't survive, while subsidizing large farms with what amounts to welfare payments. These policies ruin the market for small, independent producers who want fair prices, not welfare. And so what has happened to America's small farmers has not been inevitable; it has been the result of policy.

The further loss of small farms is not inevitable, either. My uncle John M. Berry, a farmer and a lawyer, says that we must keep bringing these things up because we're talking about the next generation's ability to eat. He says politicians won't take up these questions because there is another election between now and then.

Which brings me back to picking tomatoes on the morning of September 11. When my husband and I bought our farm in 1981, we thought of ourselves as conventional farmers. We had a dairy, raised corn and hay to feed the dairy cows, and raised tobacco. Over the next six or seven years, it became clear that what we were doing didn't make any sense. We were working ourselves and the farm to death. And so we began a change that is ongoing. We began to ask ourselves some questions that we hadn't thought of before:

How does our place look?

Is the soil on our farm improving?

Are we keeping the areas of our farm that we're not farming, such as waterways and woodlands, healthy?

Are we including our neighborhood in our decisions about what we do here?

Are we doing something that we

would be glad, and proud, to pass on to our children?

Of course, economics must be considered, and it is. My husband and I, with the help of our three daughters, raise and process pastured poultry (chickens and turkeys), and raise organic vegetables and organic beef. For the most part, we sell products directly to our customers. There is no one in the middle, and trust ensures safety and quality. Our customers trust us to provide delicious, healthy, safe food; we trust them to pay us a fair price. Along the way, many of our customers have become our friends, which is certainly an added pleasure.

Can we imagine a community, a city, a state, a nation, and finally a world running on this kind of *real* economy? Can we imagine little places like ours as an integral part of a secure homeland? In these days of fear and foreboding, can we not see a better way? After all, what do we need to be secure? Certainly not instructions from our President that patriotism means buying more useless stuff to keep a false economy going.

We need clean food, water, and air. We need decent places to live: healthy cities and a prosperous countryside. That would be real homeland security—and a homeland worth fighting for.

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Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

Hot, Cold, and Tepid



The only substantive change to my character that I have observed over time is in the workings of the spleen, the abdominal organ once regarded as the seat of what are now called the negative emotions. When I was young, the objects of my hate were precious few, though, of course, I used to fulminate against them at the top of my voice; nowadays, I seem to loathe just about everybody and every-

thing, while saying little or nothing about it. This must be why we tend to imagine death as a kind of engulfing stillness, because, by the time it comes, we have grown to despise the world so perfectly and completely that silent rage is the only commentary really suited to the occasion. Sometimes I think that, if everybody's spleens functioned as well as mine, running like trains under Mussolini, we would all be living and dying in a more enlightened Christian way.

Overheard in Piazza S. Marco the other evening, as the band in the middle distance, probably Florian's, let flow the tears for the vanquished in "The Hills of Manchuria," a microwave-quick female voice from a group of married couples, walking back to their hotel in Riva degli Schiavoni after a day of sightseeing: "Moe, Curly, and wass dee udder'n?" The creakier voice of a somewhat older woman, waddling excitedly beside the life of the party: "Leh-ah-rrry!"

The life of the party, flirtatiously, to the three men dragging their feet behind them: "Larry, Curly, and Moel!" Provocative laughter from the three women. A man's voice in stern rebuke: "Now *don't start*, Maryann."

An issue of *Time* magazine opened at random, while in a doctor's waiting room, to an article headlined "Putin's Bold Move": "Joining the West in its war on terrorism was the easy part. Now can he keep the generals happy and safeguard his country's backyard?" By *Maryann Bird*. Could this be the same woman I overheard in Piazza S. Marco? She quotes a Russian source: "It's not NATO that now expands to the east," writes Leonid Radzikhovski, a columnist for the weekly magazine *Itogi*. "It's Russia that is drastically expanding to the west." To anybody with eyes, the point made in *Itogi* would seem as plain as Larry, Curly, and Moe; here, however, is how Maryann extrapolates it:

Directly or indirectly, Russia and the West may begin to sort out a broad range of issues: the expansion of NATO, the proposed U.S. national missile defense system, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, nuclear weapons capabilities, Russia's bid for membership in the World Trade Organization, debt repayments to Paris Club creditors and greater Western understanding regarding Russian tactics in Chechnya.

Maryann I and Maryann II, two peas

in a pod, two housewives on a rampage, two faces of one and the same uniquely Western creature. Truth to tell, if I felt totally free to vent my gloriously healthy spleen just now, I would be asking unanswerable questions like *Who allowed people like that into S. Marco?* or *Who will answer for the decision to fill reputable journals with housewifely twaddle?* With a twinge of something like remorse, I realize that such questions are not merely splenetic or rude; they sound elitist and even authoritarian. Alas, culture—in particular, the culture that democratic governments, their intelligence services, and their defense establishments lack so laughably—is more in tune with the workings of my spleen and other abdominal organs than with the editorial selection process at *Time* or the CIA's recruitment procedures. The proof of this assertion is that World War III—the tepid war that, in all likelihood, will be won by Russia without a single shot being fired by a Russian hand—has in effect already been lost, before it ever began, by cheeky, flirty, and fat Maryann I; by important, Ivy-League-educated, and voluble Maryann II; and by a myriad other Maryanns whose different virtues and vices are less specific than the one characteristic that they have in common, namely, their uniquely Western philistinism.

It is a quality easy to decry, but difficult to describe, although the first thing that springs to mind is the voice. It is always there, the Scourge of Air, as Catherine the Great of Russia called the tongue, raised above the music in the piazza and poised to slash the evening mist to ribbons. It is always there, the penchant for expressing what magazine editors call "opinion," rooted as it may be in 20th-century America's inability to discriminate between diversity and obesity, conservatism and conformity, originality and hooliganism, idleness and uselessness, intelligence and education, art and spectacle, knowledge and information. It is always there no matter where you go, because housewifeliness, though originally a branded product of American prosperity, is now the globally audible soul of a more and more meaningless West.

Once, many years ago, in a restaurant called the Gay Hussar in London, I was given the famous Hungarian cold cherry soup. Ever since then, whenever some Mittel-European subject is broached, deep within myself I detect the impulse (which, of course, I have the sense to

suppress immediately), to work the cold cherry soup into the conversation. And the reason I have not once mentioned that very odd dish, in all those years of convivial Mittel-Europa banter since I tasted it, is the stage whisper from my cultural conscience to the effect that I know nothing about it. That is to say, I don't know how it's made, when it's eaten, who eats and who doesn't eat it in its native land, and, indeed, whether there's such a thing as *hot* cherry soup.

The housewives who are losing World War III for democracy have no comparable restraining mechanism in place. They have no cultural conscience, and this characteristically 20th-century American defect—which, consistent to the last, I would compare with the fatal atrophy of a vital bodily organ such as the spleen—permits them to be as free and easy, as stupid and trivial, as audacious and mendacious as the newspapers they read or write in, as the political leaders they work for or want to impeach, as the teachers in their children's schools, and as the children themselves. From anthrax to Andropov, from computers to nuclear weapons, from peace treaties to Louis XIV, from the Venice Biennale to hot and cold cherry soup, they have an opinion about everything. If you disagree, just take a look at the *New York Times* one Sunday.

Throughout this tepid war, as I monitor the vital signs of Western political and cultural opinion—television commentators, government spokesmen, newspaper pundits, university experts—I am reminded of a wealthy Frenchwoman of my acquaintance who has married an artist because he *looks* artistic. I am reminded of the American book reviewer, who does not know what a poem is but always seems to know what the poem is *like*, and hardly bothers to conceal her childlike delight at the prospect of using her thousand words to tell the readers how to read it. I am reminded of the English waitress, who has certainly never seen a cappuccino in her life, but will place the scalding cup of brown cinnamon-scented dishwater in front of you with the aplomb of Phileas Fogg. And, saddest of all because this is where I now live, I am reminded of the Italian resort hotel manager, demonstrating her newly installed swimming pool, which is the size of a Palm Beach bathing cap with yellow daisies, and insisting that I agree with her that it's American.

If the remarkable fact that it is women's