The Lady Who Inhales Bad Air

Y York

I know people, who when they go on vacation, go out of their way to find the New York Times. I go on vacation to get away from the New York Times. An extreme of this was some years ago when I left town to avoid seeing a review. I get so mad when I think that my fate and the fate of anybody trying to do anything in America is somehow contained within these flimsy pages. So I borrow money and fly to Rimini on the Adriatic Sea where I have five carefree days in the sun, but I'm supposed to have ten. on the sixth day, heavy crude washes up on the beach in front of my hotel. Italians wearing string bikinis shout their indignation outside my room--Italians in their swimming apparel are more naked than Americans are naked. In the midst of this sea of skin, is a woman, notable for how much clothing and zinc oxide she's wearing. I hear her unmistakable up-country British accent saying "I say, this is quite bad" as vials and test tubes disappear into her knap sack. A few yards away in the oily serf, her male counterpart is shouting, "come this way, Vera." I am so glad to hear English in the middle of this disaster that I follow along and start a conversation.

Vera and Tony Giles are experts in this new field of oil spill cleanup. Until four years before, they lived a quiet country life in Wales, working for a non-profit biological research firm. But their brilliance attracted the attention of the multinational oil community.

Vera and Tony don't work for oil companies, they do the next

worst thing; they work for environmental consulting firms that tell oil companies how to skirt international regulations. They do it for the money, so they can send their kids to college.

I don't find this out in one walk along the beach; they're English after all, we don't really get down to it until we've finished our third pint of imported English bitter.

The Gileses and I don't have much in common. I write, they don't read, I like the sun, they see it as a carcinogen. So, after Rimini, our friendship degenerates to Christmas cards. Until a few years later when I'm working on a novel in which an oil spill is very heavily featured. I suddenly have a lot of questions to ask the Gileses.

I fly to London, catch a shuttle to Gloucester, where Tony picks me up for the drive to Ross on Wye, a river I have long longed to visit.

Vera and Tony are between spills, spending some domestic time in their beloved house on the Wye river. It's a story book setting, huge stone house, fire places, enormous kitchen in which Vera makes bread and something called pudding, which is different every time we eat it. The only fly in this ointment is listening to Margaret Thatcher on the telly, talking about the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl. She reassures the Brits that they shouldn't worry because their nuclear power plants are the good clean safe kind, not the dirty unreliable communist kind.

We switch off Margaret; Vera confides that she bakes because it is a piece of the world over which a body has some control. The Gileses talk my ears off. stories about oil spills and

corporate decisions--about the slime on the beaches and in the board rooms. Our last walk is a rainy river walk, Tony, 5-year-old Tycho, and me. We walk in a Welsh rain, the water doesn't really fall. It emulsifies in the air. Tycho keeps losing his hat. At one point a hatless Tycho grabs my hat and runs off. Just then we see an eagle, and stand very still watching it; for some reason the other birds aren't chasing it away. An uncanny silence. Being hatless doesn't seem very important. Big world problems are very far away.

After I get back to America I have a lot of work to do so, of course I come down with a cold I can't shake; some other minor health problems that I lay at the feet of stress, nose bleeds, rashes, endless periods. I finish the book between visits to the clinic and get it to the publisher. The Gileses all along send me letters with tidbits they'd forgotten to say during my visit; Tony and Tycho seem to have my cold. I send them the publication date, and they call. I am very touched. Tony and Vera have that relationship to money that many of the previously poor do, and they don't make transcontinental telephone calls. Tony asks me if I've seen the New York Times, the Chernobyl story. I pick up my unopened copy, wondering why Chernobyl is back in the news. Page one of the New York Times is a map showing the path of the Chernobyl nuclear cloud. It's detailed enough to have the name Ross on Wye. The date, my last day in Wales, a rainy river walk. No hats. Suddenly, nose bleeds and rashes have a connection. I am very frightened for my friends. Vera and the girls are fine, everybody who stayed inside is fine; Tycho's not fine. I try to

remember why we went out, why we let Tycho go out in the rain, I remember the bird, a silence. In bold face type in the middle of the article it says that the British government knew when the cloud would pass, but was afraid of panic, so gave no warning. Everyone who stayed inside is fine. I get off the phone, so I can read the whole article. I want to take my time; my fate, once again contained between the pages of the New York Times.