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## *Home in Water Mill*

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**A**s time went by, we realized we were leading a life of just so many bubbles that flew up and vanished into nothing, and although we were surrounded by friends who had become very dear to us, we actually wanted to get back to a normal life among people who were not blinded by the constant gleam of an active social life. We were eager for a clean break. We longed to witness the changing seasons without having to look at the calendar to remind us.

There was no question: the ideal place for us would be Southampton where our very first memories had begun, and where Craig had grown up to the sound of the ocean spreading into his room. He'd be among his old school mates surrounded by the northern landscapes that were so precious to him. He was also pleased to be near New York where he was born, and which is only two hours from Southampton. However the idea of leaving our house in Palm Beach was sad for me. It has always been painful for me to leave the places where I have taken root. I became so strongly attached to all those

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fragments of life that, even if short-lived, left me heartbroken when the time came to say goodbye. Another chapter was closing—and I had already closed so many—and I would be skimming through those pages filled with memories that sometimes fade too quickly.

After almost four years in Florida, we surprised everyone with our decision to leave a place that most people considered a heavenly retreat, which it is from many points of view. There were a number of small and large farewell receptions for us, and in the warm words and good wishes from our friends, we could feel they were truly saddened to see us leave.

So at the end of 1979, Craig and I began a new life on the east end of Long Island, that strip of land jutting into the Atlantic Ocean with unpredictable, capricious, sometimes violent weather, swinging from one extreme to the other. The house we found after a brief search seemed almost like a dream. Far from the large imposing house on the dunes like the one in which Craig had lived as a youngster, our little shingle house was the perfect choice for the simple life we wanted to live. The place was easy to manage, materializing out of who-knows-what dreams that once in a while turn into reality. It was an old wooden saltbox on two floors with little white windows, on a quiet street in rural Water Mill. Nestled among fields of corn and potatoes, surrounded by oak trees that attracted thousands of songbirds and families of hungry deer that came to welcome us on our doorstep, it looked like a fairytale home familiar to children. It gave us the feeling of having finally landed in a safe haven that had long been waiting for us.

The finishing touches on the house were coming along, and in no time at all we settled down to furnish it. What I remember most about that busy period is that we put our entire heart and soul into making it comfortable and cozy. On our long walks through the fields, in search of new shortcuts and out-of-the-way paths, we were curious to discover picturesque views, and we'd return with our arms



Our Water Mill home

loaded with wildflowers, leafy boughs and branches to fill vases around the house.

What a difference, what a change in our life with the stillness that was interrupted only by the call of the Canada geese with their beautiful and mournful cry as they flew low at sunset in groups forming a “V.” The contrast with the sky was a dark blur in the pink light of evening as their cries rose scattering like echoes of a prayer. There could be nothing more evocative on a late fall or winter walk. We were silent when we heard the rustling of deer suddenly coming to a halt, frozen like statues and barely discernible in the woods as we passed near. I had never thought that Craig would be enchanted by such simple, precious, moments.

I started to paint again in the toolshed full of spiderwebs among the shovels and rakes that every once in a while would fall on my head. We decided it would be better to convert the big garage into a “super atelier” where I could work undisturbed, with light from the dormer windows, heating and music all around. I was in seventh

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heaven there surrounded only by peace, never aware of the time, nor how long I had been at the easel painting, inebriated by the penetrating scent of turpentine, which for me is better than perfume.

The little toolshed was magically turned into a small cottage for friends, brothers, or nephews and nieces to stay. They announced their arrival from Italy with their children still babies, and I would happily rush to New York to pick them up. There was a permanent bustle filling the house with sound and laughter. In my Chevrolet station wagon I drove them to the beach with picnics, on expeditions all over Long Island, on ferry boats to reach some of the semi-deserted little islands, to the local Native American pow-wow in early September, and to pick huge pumpkins in the fields. These were sights not to be missed. Yet in the midst of all the excitement of those days, I was planning an exhibition of my paintings in New York.

It was 1980, and with spring blossoming and the magic of that season, its invariable, punctual return, I'd search the garden for any small, timid hint of revival: the daisies, violets, and daffodils that bloomed like brush-strokes of color.

I would go to New York for the entire day to take care of the countless things that had to be done before an exhibition. The gallery, Madison 90, very well known in the heart of Manhattan was run by two business partners who were friendly, amusing, extremely competent and true connoisseurs of modern art. I liked their dynamic, enterprising personality and most of all, their enthusiasm in wanting to exhibit my landscapes. Every year they would visit my studio selecting about thirty paintings. Quite elated, I flung myself headfirst into that mammoth undertaking, full of plans and dates to set, travelling back and forth from Water Mill to New York for appointments.

There were endless lists of addresses looming before my eyes: a multitude of friends old and new to invite, plus many more belonging to the art world, and to the vast New York crowd of devoted friends who in those years were in their most dazzling splendor. The



In my Water Mill studio

whole affair stirred up anyone who happened to be near me, even Craig, who while maintaining his enviable Anglo-Saxon composure was most helpful to me by contacting all the friends he had known for years, and giving me valuable advice. I don't know how I would have managed without him. Organizing art shows is no simple matter: you live in a whirlwind of exhilarating events that come up daily.

For some reason, most of my exhibitions took place around the end of October, near my birthday, and so did this one. All the most brilliant people in New York were there, as well as the younger generation, besides the usual mix of Europeans. The gallery only had room for a certain number, between its ground floor on Madison, full of lights and traffic, and the basement that was reached by a terribly narrow spiral staircase. Among those who kept arriving, a number of them had to stand outside on the sidewalk with their drinks, chatting happily as though they were in a comfortable living

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room. Inside, packed like sardines, people hugged, joked, smiled, and bought my pictures. The guests were extremely attractive, dressed in their particularly fashionable urban style—the best of New York in those years. I wonder if that world exists any more. I treasure those pictures in my photo albums that bring me back to the 1980s.

My openings were always followed by very pleasant dinner parties in friends' homes where we were guests during the days of the show. Sometimes we were at the Russells, Cinzia and Edwin (who had been married to Sarah Churchill years before). They were very good company, and they occasionally came to visit us in spring in Water Mill. For other shows we would stay with Paul Chase and Flossy (Flo), Lilly Pulitzer's sister. She was previously married to Nelson Doubleday; they were great fun and we had a lot of good laughs. They had great vitality organizing evenings at the theatre, the opera, or dinner-parties, and it was a pleasure to see other friends we hadn't seen for a while. After a week, it was certainly relaxing to return to the quiet of our little house in Water Mill.

That same year Craig was asked to write three articles for *Town & Country* magazine. He was well known for his wit, his experience, and his eloquence, and he finished the articles in no time, without need of corrections. The first was called "Retiring Right" (or "How to retire wisely from work"), in which he wrote about spending a new life in harmony and happiness, doing as much as possible by oneself: raking leaves in the fall, chopping firewood for the fireplace, going daily to the post office to pick up mail, even paying tiresome bills, and taking care of the house and garden, besides training our beloved four-legged companions who did not heed our commands. In the spring, we planted flowers and Craig even mowed the lawn with an easy-to-manage, silent hand mower, not those infernal modern ones that turn your eardrums and brain to pulp, aside from letting off noxious fumes of gasoline that penetrate the house through the slightest cracks.