

The Heroic Mode

thanks to Jan Wojcik

Several years ago I saw an ad for “free housing” on an estate on Fishers Island in exchange for “light groundskeeping.” I applied and won the job over many applicants, because I could be convincing that I was handy with tools. The “housing” turned out to be a large, dreary garage apartment, on a run-down estate. The new owners were in their early thirties, with five young kids. The estate had a huge, shaggy lawn, neglected fruit trees, a garden infested with rabbit warrens, and a trout pond whose resident eels ate all the trout as soon as they were stocked. The agreement was that I would cut the huge lawn each week with a lawn tractor, and with whatever hours were left over after that, would do gardening and handy work—up to sixteen hours a week. I would have to work only during the summer months, when the family was in residence. During the winter they lived in Manhattan; I would get the house, though I’d have to pay utilities.

I found it took almost twelve hours to cut the lawn. But I also fixed a dock and garden gate, planted a big garden. At the owners’ insistence, I pruned the fruit trees after they had already begun to leaf. The owners wildly complimented my first efforts and began smilingly asking me to do this and that. Once I was called into the main house to fit a loose hinge on a cabinet door. I could tell by the gouges in the wood that the owners couldn’t figure out which way a wood screw turned out. They put pressure on me to do more and more. I resisted, citing the original agreement. Eventually the owners and I had a screaming fight, and I quit. I lasted out the winter by doing a lot of fishing for food.

Before things turned sour, though, I enjoyed the making of the family portrait. The owners had hired a famous portrait painter much admired by the rich of Manhattan. He could paint you representationally, but heroically moderne. He took a huge photo of the family all posed outside the house on Fishers Island. He agreed to paint in for a background a wild point of land on the island reaching

into the turbulent waters of Long Island Sound. This was a place where I and others surf-fished on the island at dusk, but where summer people never dared tread at any time of day. It was near the end of the small airstrip on the island where several light planes bringing in the rich for weekends had recent fatal crashes in the fog.

The artist went back to New York City for a month and painted in the bodies as posed in the photo. Then he came back to the island to do the faces. He did one at a time, posing the person as his or her body had already been painted in, on the grass of the lawn of the shabby estate. But all the subjects were restless. They had no contemplative skills. They couldn't hold themselves still for more than several minutes.

The painter fixed on the strategy of running an extension cord out of the garage and plugging in a portable TV set just to the side of the painter. The subjects would watch TV and the painter would paint the faces. I saw the painting for the first time when the painter took it to Race Rock Point for the background. Race Rock Point is the last piece of earth that got deposited by the receding glacier.