

FRUGALITY AND BREEDING.



“IN NO OTHER
PART OF
THE COUNTRY
ARE THE RICH
SO CHEAP”

THERE COMES A TIME FOR EVERY CHILD TO DISCOVER THAT his parents, far from being the paragons of normality that he has always imagined, are actually rather peculiar. In my

by **JOHN SEDGWICK**



- illustration by BRIAN AJHAR

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parents' frugal WASP household, that moment came for me when I was eight.

My father was driving me home to our house in Dedham, Massachusetts, when he suddenly stopped the car, climbed out, and bent over a crumpled white shape by the side of the road. I was sure he had spotted a dying cat, or a bag of money, or something extremely interesting. Instead, he had found a bath towel. To judge by the way it lay there all flat and stiff as cardboard, the towel must have been there for some time. Even at eight, I knew that you leave something like that right where it is. But my father picked up the towel and gave it a quick flap that sent a cloud of dust and grit fluttering into the air. Then he examined the material in his outstretched hands for a moment with an appraiser's eye. "It's perfectly good," he announced.

He carried the towel back to the car and, with some tenderness, put it on the backseat. He would have my mother wash it when we got home.

And my mother *did* wash the towel, and she dried it, and she folded it, and she placed it in the linen cabinet along with the other respectable monogrammed towels. And my father used that towel. It was perfectly good.

My mother sympathized with my father's hunter-gatherer eccentricities for she had her own frugal quirks. She was a saver and a reuser long before the word recycling entered the language to dignify the whole enterprise. Even as a child, I was impressed by her diligence in smoothing out aluminum foil, rinsing plastic bags, collecting used rubber bands and paper clips, and winding up chance bits of string into balls that clogged several drawers in the kitchen. She even kept a supply of empty butter wrappers on a shelf in the refrigerator, knowing how handy they can be for — now, what the heck *were* they for? [*Great for greasing cookie pans — Ed.*] Rather than waste money on store-bought notepads, she used my father's old business reports, ripped in quarters. And she had always been a marvel with wrapping paper. She saves the wrapping paper from incoming gifts, and so that others might do the same with her outgoing presents, she thoughtfully uses only a single tiny dab of tape, relying on the ribbon — otherwise a wasteful extravagance — to do the rest and leave the paper unmarred. In our family some strips of wrapping paper are still reappearing, like Halley's Comet, 20 years later.

All Yankees are known for their frugality, I suppose, but



well-to-do Yankees like my parents most perfectly embody the idea. In no other part of the country are the rich so cheap. A friend of mine was surprised to find Cambridge's David Rockefeller, great-grandson of John D. Sr., clutching a single bag of Pampers as he approached the checkout counter of a Stop & Shop. "They are *much* cheaper here," Rockefeller said gleefully. On a recent trip to Maine's Northeast Harbor, I was impressed to see Josephine Ford, heiress to the automobile fortune, tooling around in a \$5,000 Mercury Bobcat. That's the WASP way — not the top-of-the-line car, the bottom-of-the-line car. And Charles Francis Adams, the long-time president of Raytheon, was overheard berating a boatyard mechanic for having spent three dollars on some speaker wire for his yacht's sound system when, goddammit, didn't the mechanic know that Adams could have gotten it at the office for free?

Less-well-known WASPs, being purer, are worse. A friend from Cincinnati married into an old-line WASP family in Boston, apparently unaware of the WASP custom involving toothbrushes, which is that one never throws out old toothbrushes — one merely shifts them to another use. Having misplaced her own toothbrush one evening, my friend assumed that she could use the spare toothbrush she found under the bathroom sink. She casually told her husband about that afterwards, and she couldn't imagine why he suddenly turned so deathly pale. He'd been cleaning the silver with it. And another friend who had strayed from the Hub was puzzled when his Brahmin father brought him to Boston and gave him a tour of the city's major cultural institutions: The tour included Filene's Basement.

But it is the WASP grandparents who are true keepers of the flame, and I shudder to think what will happen when that generation finally passes from the scene. Jib Ellis had happy memories of the Christmas gifts from his grandmother, Jeannette Whiting Wallace, whose family had struck it rich supplying the barrels for the rum-running trade, even though they themselves were teetotalers. They had a similarly abstemious attitude toward spending money. "I remember the year I turned 21, Grandmother sent me a check for three dollars and fifty cents," Ellis says. "Not three dollars, not four dollars. But three dollars and fifty cents. Obviously, a lot of thought went into that. I sent her a thank-you on Tiffany's engraved stationery. I was tempted to put on extra postage, just to get her."

And another Bostonian fondly re- *(continued on page 136)*



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called his grandmother, a grand old lady who had shocked her little circle by purchasing a \$13,000 Mercedes 300 in 1959, a time when even the arrivistes would never think of doing such a thing. "She bought the car for its gas mileage," her grandson reports. "Though the Mercedes was about the price of a small house, she still had the feeling she was being wonderfully economical." Her husband, on the other hand, favored Rolls Royces, but he treated them like Chevs. Once, when his daughter in Albany asked him to supply her with a few chickens from the family farm, he emptied his chicken coop into the back of the car and, with the birds squawking and fluttering about the hand-tooled leather upholstery, drove them over to her personally.

Such an attitude may seem like madness to outsiders, but there is method in it. However Scroogelike WASPs might appear, they are, in fact, perfectly willing to spend money, as the couple with the Mercedes and the Rolls show. They just hate to waste

it. In strict economist's terms (and WASPs are all strict economists), they spend for investment rather than consumption. This is stretched occasionally (to justify the Rolls, for example), but for the most part accounts for the heavy WASP spending on education, for example, or blue-chip stocks, or enduring family mansions. And it also explains other oddities, like the tribe's antifashion sartorial preferences by which clothes can be passed down through the generations like AT&T stock certificates, its cocktail parties that are invariably long on booze and short on food (since booze packs more bang for a buck), its devotion to family heirlooms (which are all you have if you never buy anything), and my father's roadside scavenging.

When WASPs do relent and buy something, they want it to last. I remember my father gazing down at a pair of English leather shoes and saying with some satisfaction, "I guess these will last me to the end." They did. The shoes were too small for his sons, but my mother has kept them in an upstairs closet of her house, waiting for a grandson whom they might fit. After all, they are still perfectly good. □ □

