

A NOTE ON CUMMINGS AND MY FAMILY AT SILVER LAKE

I started summering at Silver Lake, New Hampshire, as a little girl around 1930. “Estlin” was someone very familiar to the several big people in the two generations of my family who brought me there from Princeton each June and supervised me and took me back in September.

It all began early in the century in Cambridge. The Reverend Edward Cummings persuaded his friend, Dr. Theobald Smith, my grandfather, then teaching at the Harvard Medical School, to buy land across from land he had acquired on Silver Lake. Available in 1912, as summer as well as winter friends, were my grandparents, their daughters 22 and 20, and son, Philip, 17, about Estlin’s age. Roomy comfortable camps went up on opposing sides of the lake.

At this time the Cummings family preferred summering on the lake, even renting out Joy Farm. Estlin’s tree house on Hurricane Point, about a third of a mile away from their house, for writing (later *The Enormous Room*) and being alone, was a magic place for me as it was still standing years later while I was growing up. Philip and Estlin would swim as well as boat the half mile across the lake to each other. A story that has come down is that my uncle Philip fired a gun to celebrate news of his acceptance at Harvard, forgetting that this had been agreed on by the two families as a distress signal and bringing them in haste across the lake. (The lake was still practically an untouched wilderness, so no one would know where the shot was fired.) The friendships extended among all family members. When my aunt was doing graduate work at Radcliffe, she stayed at 104 Irving Street, the Cummingses’ winter residence, for a year and a half.

When Estlin moved back up into the hills, to Joy Farm, he became a rarer presence in my family’s lives. Elizabeth, Estlin’s sister, and Carlton Qualey, her husband, across the lake, were the enduring companions. My mother would often go over to play tennis. (It seemed there was only one place on all the Cummings acres where there was flat land the size of a tennis court. At some point it was allowed to “go back to nature,” as they used to say, and the only sign left is the same maximum diameter of all the first trees that grew up there.) Carlton would come over to use our electricity to shave. There would be tea parties with conversation and enjoyment of the views. Both families loved sailing, and Carlton rescued my mother when she capsized while sailing, at eighty-two.

Estlin I often saw at mail time at the post office, getting out of or back into his high old car, usually with no more than a word or two or perhaps an abstracted nod. I think that later on it was mostly Marion who came down to the village. I remember Estlin coming over after getting his mail and sitting on the beach and talking with my mother; I, then a teenager, apart as usual. He seemed a not unfamiliar presence there but probably came only seldom. When my uncle Philip would come to stay for a couple of days, he always visited at Joy Farm. A closer friend to Estlin than the rest of the family, he kept in touch with him in New York as well.

Sam Ward, the Cummings family's and our caretaker, was a well-loved presence in all our lives. When he died, my sister walked in with a copy of Estlin's poem, "rain or hail" (*Complete* 568), which he had given to us after taking one copy around to Sam's widow. This elegant simple collection of brush strokes bringing Sam in front of one's eyes again and back into one's ears had an impact I will never forget.

rain or hail
sam done
the best he kin
till they digged his hole

:sam was a man

stout as a bridge
rugged as a bear
slickern a weazel
how be you

(sun or snow)

gone into what
like all them kings
you read about
and on him sings

a whippoorwill;

heart was big
as the world aint square
with room for the devil
and his angels too

yes,sir

what may be better
or what may be worse
and what may be clover
clover clover

(nobody'll know)

sam was a man
grinned his grin
done his chores
laid him down.

Sleep well

I early gleaned the aesthetic and moral values and customs common to both families but distinct from those of the “native” New Hampshireites and also Princeton folk. For us, it seemed that nature was the great good that must hold sway: for example, if one built a house near the lake, it must be far enough back, with the trees left standing in between, so as to be hardly visible from the lake. Later settlers who bared their houses and decks to the lake were bad, as were those who tamed the wilderness around their houses by trying to have lawns. People should not much ornament and beautify themselves, but should drink in the beauty around them. Nature and God practically coalesced, and the minister in my family, one generation farther back than in the Cummingses', had published some books on trees. Morally, sex was embarrassingly both evil (as residue of all our early training) and good as rite of nature. It was acceptable in practice only under the most limiting conditions. It was important to keep it out of one's mind.

Related to this was the goodness of hard work. Officially, we scorned the latest inventions promoting comfort and ease. This served also as a way of economizing that one could pride oneself on. Half a century later, when my husband and I bought the Cummings lakeside camp from Carlton Qualey after Elizabeth Cummings Qualey died, we saw his pride in their having lived without electricity, telephone, hot water, or car access nearer than a third of a mile. They had carried their groceries in, and their dead out, on a deer carrier. A slim tall Norseman nearing eighty, Carlton dropped like an arrow into a deep knee bend to show me almost at floor level how the kerosene refrigerator (World War II surplus—they were used on the reconquered Pacific islands) worked. He showed us all his tricks, such as heating water in the morning and filling three thermoses to last the day. He saw as noxious surrender our getting our own telephone and electricity. We built a driveway to the house that, against his principles, he used when he subsequently stayed there (he blamed me for this!).

Lest the reader think I'm talking about one individual rather than a mini-culture, my uncle Philip Smith, a writer, far away on an old hilltop farm in Pawling, New York, took satisfaction in living past the mid-century without telephone or electricity, and never did replace his outhouse with indoor plumbing. The New England slogan of "Eat it up, wear it out, make it do" is well known. My mother made soap out of saved-up cooking grease and ashes; it was grayish and gave minimal lather. This she would not have done in Princeton. Bathtubs were for the old and sick; everyone else occasionally took a cake of soap down to the lake, a practice later proscribed by ecologists. Rather than buy sailboats, we all sailed for decades in canoes fitted out with masts and leeboards to aid in steering, and exciting sailing it was.

How this ethos was expressed in Estlin's patterns, after he retreated to Joy Farm but also joined metropolitan life, I do not know. When his second wife, Anne Barton, wanted electricity at Joy Farm, a way was found to provide it. But he surely spent his early years under the banner of "Plain Living and High Thinking." One can see certain echoes in his writings: "Take the so-called standard of living. What do most people mean by 'living'? They don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity . . ." (Introduction to *Collected Poems*, 1938).

I was brought up never to presume on acquaintance, and I had the next-door evidence of my austere grandfather's not suffering fools gladly, so I never did express to Estlin Cummings what his poetry (that my family showed no great liking for) meant to me. Clearly he knew all about the adventures in feelings and meanings that make up life.

—*New York City*