

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

GUESTWORDS: By Bette-Jane Raphael

The Good Guests

Bad house guests are legendary, like bad snowstorms. They make you want to move, just so you'll never be dumped on again. People trade stories about them, and vie with one another for the distinction of having lived through the worst of them. It's the one competition I've always felt qualified to enter.

But last summer's experiences were so awful that I was determined not to compete this year, not to have any guests at all. When the time came to issue invitations — April, May, June — I stalled.

I reminded my husband, who likes weekend guests a lot and who lobbied for more, of the friends who'd knocked over the antique oil lamp in our living room and broken its original glass shade, the couple who'd brought along their not-quite-house-trained dog, and the people who'd gotten up early for breakfast, gone out for a walk, and left their dirty dishes on the kitchen table, as if confusing our home with an IHOP. He remembered them all, but he still likes weekend guests a lot.

I understand his thinking, and

even, to some extent, share his point of view. I enjoy the conviviality of company, and it does seem churlish not to share a home where ocean breezes blow along a tree-shaded deck on a hot summer day, and from which a beautiful beach is only a short walk away. But last year's experiences were still fresh in my mind, and I held my ground.

Invitation Issued

What I hadn't reckoned on was the social pressure to offer a weekend invitation in return for others' hospitality. And it so happens that just before the summer season started, we spent an extremely pleasant afternoon and evening at the Westchester home of a couple we have known casually for years. They treated us to a leisurely cocktail hour on their terrace before sumptuously feeding not only me and my husband, but our two kids — one of whom is an adolescent and eats for five — and my mother-in-law as well.

The jig was up. I issued the invitation.

They were to be the first house guests we'd had in nearly a year, and by the time the appointed weekend rolled around in July, I felt mellow enough not to object when my husband offered them the choice of arriving on either Friday evening or Saturday morning.

Usually, I guard Friday nights as fiercely as a parking space near Zabar's. I like having an evening of privacy and pizza with my husband before gearing up to entertain, and I've always believed that cooking two company dinners in a row makes a weekend indistinguishable from community service.

Surprise Cornucopia

Although mildly chagrined to hear that our guests had chosen to show up on Friday (okay, I tore up a Suf-
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PERISCOPE

VAL SCHAFFNER

I asked my wife what she wanted for her birthday and she said rain for her garden so I called 1-800-WEATHER and ordered some. That was a month ago.

The lady on the phone did promise it would ship the next day. The company has its own delivery trucks; you may have noticed them on the highway. On their sides it says in big letters "G.O.D.— Guaranteed Overnight Delivery." The acronym's a little joke referring to the holding corporation's chairman.

Anyway, the birthday present didn't come. We were spending all our time watering that garden. I called the number again. The lady apologized sweetly. The order had been addressed by mistake to my post office box, and the Postal Service doesn't accept weather — neither snow nor rain nor anything of that nature; says so right in its motto.

I gave them my street address and waited. Still no rain. Now and then I'd see a G.O.D. truck on the highway and wonder if my order was in it. But these trucks carry a wide range of the company's products, not just rain clouds. In December, for example, you can see a lot of them heading up to Vermont, laden with what the skiers ordered for Christmas.

The ones I saw on Route 27 all seemed to be turning right toward the beach, not left toward my house. I guess the sunbathers were receiving their orders all right, and so were the surfers, but what about mine?

I called 1-800-WEATHER again. I had to wait on hold for half an hour, listening to recorded messages counseling patience and fortitude, interspersed with easy-listening excerpts of organ and harp

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Guestwords

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folk County phone book), I was happily surprised to hear they would be bringing dinner with them. Coming to Long Island by way of Maryland, where they had gone for a week's vacation that would culminate with their visit to us, they were to arrive bearing soft-shelled crabs, food that had the double virtue of being a) one of my husband's favorites, and b) easy to cook.

It turned out that the crabs were only a minor element in the veritable cornucopia of gifts our guests, Mary and Robert, unloaded from their car. There was also an assortment of other gourmet goodies, a quite beautiful cookbook for me, and, for our 2½-year-old daughter, Rose, a plush turtle hand puppet whose head could be maneuvered in and out of its shell, a trick that delighted her to the point of ecstasy.

A bottle of my husband's favorite wine, which I took to be something he'd bought and forgotten to put away, sat in our entrance hall for half the weekend before I realized that it, too, was a gift from our visitors. I was overwhelmed — for while I do think it's nice if guests express their gratitude materially as well as verbally, I never expected to actually *live* off their largesse.

The Turtle, Too

Shown to our son's room, Robert and Mary had the good grace to comment that the vicious-looking rap group glaring down on what would be their bed for the weekend made them feel quite at home, since they, too, had teenagers who were away at camp.

After they had changed their clothes, they helped us crack open the hard-shelled crabs they'd brought for hors d'oeuvres, showed us the easiest way to cook the soft-shelled variety, and then asked if they could take a walk around our lawn and gar-

den with our daughter as companion and guide.

They took the turtle, too, and as my husband and I proceeded to get dinner together, Rose's delighted shrieks produced a kind of atonal background music for our work.

For the rest of the weekend Robert and Mary kept our daughter entertained, were helpful but not intrusive around the house, and expressed appreciation for every meal we provided and every activity we suggested.

Who Could Resist?

Most important of all, they seemed to be utterly relaxed and enjoying themselves no end. They took walks together down to the beach, strolled into town to browse in the antiques shops, and toured the local whaling museum. They appeared equally happy whether engaged in a lively conversation with us or sitting in companionable silence over the newspapers.

At one quiet moment as we all lay out reading on the deck, they pronounced our place to be "a-paradise." (The couple who came with their dog had remarked on our root rot.) Who could resist such people?

On Saturday night, when our other dinner guests had gone home and Rose had finally fallen asleep in a state of happy exhaustion, having treated us to an after-dinner medley of Barney's Greatest Hits, the four of us sat out under the stars lazily eking out the evening in quiet conversation. We talked about books and movies and plays that had recently pleased or disappointed us, the murky doings of our adolescent sons, friends we had in common — adult conversation, the kind that goes well with coffee.

Come Again!

And as we talked and joked, I found myself feeling completely relaxed and at peace — almost as if I'd never had children.

The next afternoon, as Robert and Mary were packing their car and thanking us warmly for our hospitality, I suddenly blurted out, "Please come again next year."

My husband looked startled. The only people he'd ever heard me say this to were the guys who clean our furnace.

But the present invitation was just as genuine. Because I'd forgotten about the broken lamp, the puppy puddles, and the egg-caked breakfast dishes and learned a new and compelling reason for having house guests: Sometime during the weekend, if you're lucky, they can cross over from being company, to being friends.

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