10/24/1959

Dear Friend,

For better, for worse, I wrote to Dr. L. this morning. I had intended to plant lilies and irises this afternoon, but it’s raining. Warm and humid, awfully wet. I’ve been going full tilt since 6:00 a.m. Haven’t I earned some free time away from it all with an old friend?

I’d like just to talk as I would if we were sitting before an open fire. I have a fire going from about 6:15 a.m. to whenever I go to bed. It’s cheery. I love it. I got to thinking recently that I’ve been in this professional field for 25 yrs. but there isn’t a solitary person who knows me as a person. Horrible thought! Everyone thinks of me as that brain in Washington which puts out a weekly paper and answers questions. Gosh! I’ve left it that way because it’s easier. My life has been so complex and really cockeyed that I found it simpler to keep quiet. I am a professional woman. I’m taken at my face value just as a doctor is accepted by his patients. Who knows whether a doctor lives in hell or is heavy-laden with tragedy.

The funny thing is that even my personal friends – small in number – don’t know much more about me than my professional friends. I have ten personal friends – 9 women, one man – husband of my best friend. One friend from childhood, two from college, one immediately after college, one from the 20’s (early), three late 20’s, two in Washington. What a lifetime record! Not a one of these personal friends knows anything to speak of about my childhood and my life before I was 30. Without lying (except as one may lie by silence) I have succeeded in talking about superficial aspects of my childhood without really telling anything at all. Yet the highlights of my life came before I was 30. By then I had reached the heights and the depths of emotional experience. This is not to say that I might not yet reach greater heights and greater depths. Thus far I just don’t happen to have done so. But I have great potential – and I’m a long way from being dead, despite mortality statistics.

You know a woman can’t trust another woman. Too gabby they are. So I clam up. I can talk volubly without saying anything about myself.

Now as for you. I still carry the image you left years ago when you talked at the AAPS meeting. I felt then that you were a very human guy, full of fun – before life hit you so hard – and with a good sense of humor. Since then I’ve come to think I could trust you. So, I’d like to make this deposit in your mental safety deposit box, after which you can put it in the fireplace.

You can’t really know me at all if you don’t know what moulded me. Here it is. My very intellectual parents came to the parting of the ways when I was a year old. Their marital relations ended then. Gradually they came to hate each other as only intellectual people can. By the time I was 12, the family pattern was deeply etched. There was no family life. Since I owed support, education, inspiration, and my ethical teaching to my mother, I was lined up solidly with her. My father, whom I never even began to know or understand until after he was dead at age 72, was the villain in my life. I had no love at all for him. My parents fought bitterly, especially at meal times where each was a captive audience for acrimony and I was the third-party recipient of brickbats.

When I was 12 there was a marked change in my life. We moved to a somewhat better neighborhood, to an 8-room apartment. For the preceding 7 yrs. we had had a maid ($10 a month, then, sleep in). We dropped the maid to help to meet extra cost of rent, I was to run the house, handle weekly budget, and take care of my father, while mother went to work. We kept five of the rooms for our own use and rented three to medical students from Roosevelt Hospital which was right across the way, (NYC) I never saw the students who popped out early and came in at night after I was asleep. I made all the beds each day after school and cleaned the 8-room apartment. I also shopped for food and cooked the meals. (Mother was very intellectual and hated to keep house). One chore I hated with all the venom I could summon: I had to iron my father’s white shirts with their starched cuffs and collars. Inwardly I cussed all the time I was ironing the darned things. One day he watched me with amusement and said: “Well, the Kid can iron with both mitts.” Sure I could. My dear second mother had taught me how to iron beautifully before the turn of the century when little girls’ dresses and petticoats were yards around – all starched.

I forgot to say that when my parents agreed to end their marriage in 1891 it was stipulated that they’d live under the same roof till I was grown so as to provide adequate protection for me. This became important later when mother went to work and I was left home at night alone except for my father. Also, of course, is gave a semblance of chaperonage for a teen-ager when we rented rooms to medical students. Actually, they had no interest in me nor I in them.

When I was 12 my parents had a terrible quarrel. Mother and I had gone out to a New Year’s dinner with our good friends, Mr. and Mrs. M. (my substitute parents). Mr. M. and mother had a bit too much of the cup that cheers. Mrs. M. and I had nothing. Mother and I came home at around 1:00 a.m., mother a bit too happy. My father – who certainly had no right to dictate to my mother – cussed her out, accused her of infidelity – which was too absurd – and vowed he’d never speak to her again. So, for 5 yrs. he didn’t say one solitary word to her.

My formative teen-age years were spent in that atmosphere. When the three of us ate together at the table it was “Hey, Kid, tell your mother to give me some more steak.” Or, “Ask your father to pass the rolls.” But that was the least of it. They quarreled just as much as ever, and at great length. All with me as the message carrier. Each parent saw in me the summation of all the other’s faults. I was scolded for being like my father and then for being like my mother.

I was painfully shy and sensitive. During these 5 yrs., when mother was out for the evening, I cooked dinner for father and me, served him in his room – since he wouldn’t come to the table with me alone – and then served myself. I put my doll, Elizabeth, in one chair and my cat sat next me on the floor. We had quite a conversation. And I read a book of fairy tales. This is how it was till I entered college.

There was one other very serious complication during this period. (I had vowed to myself I wouldn’t tell you, but gee whiz, I might as well, since it profoundly affected me). Please, this is ultra secret. When I was about 8 or 9 mother started to drink whiskey in her free time – over Sundays and on her Wed. afternoons off. She had been reared a strict Methodist, went to church and Sunday school four times on Sundays, and was a staunch member of WCTU. She gradually eased away from all that after marriage. She managed to hold her job by selecting her times to drink. Over a weekend she could consume a quart by herself. She became terribly ill. We slept together, but she was so nauseated I had to sleep on the floor. I needn’t go into details. As a physician, you know all there is to know about alcoholism. SO DO I!

Sometimes on Saturday afternoons, when she really wasn’t fit to appear, mother would insist on going out to local stores. When I couldn’t dissuade her, I went with her. I curled up inside and died 10,000 deaths as I saw people recognizing mother’s condition. I would steer her home, head held high in defiance.

During my final years in high school I was extremely unhappy. I was painfully immature socially. I really didn’t know a thing about what I should have known. No one could possibly believe that a child could grow up in New York City in a state of such perfect innocence as surrounded me. I learned very early to create an inner world of my own. I was not exposed to social contacts. I didn’t have any boy friends. The only contacts I had with boys were in school in classes or when I played baseball – which I liked very much. But socially? Oh, my! When I was 17 a classmate asked my mother if I could go ice skating with him. Indeed not! I entered college without ever having had a date with a boy. I had never been kissed. My ignorance was so profound you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. So, I won’t!

But there I was with life on my hands. I loved school. A wonderful private school where I earned a scholarship for myself from age 3 to 18. [Note: Ethical Culture School; https://www.ecfs.org/about-ecfs/history-of-ecfs]. They had a swell library of mathematics and scientific books. So I read straight through the library by the time I was 16. The principal wrote mother what a whiz bang I was. He little knew what was back of my whiz banging! Then I ate up Latin – 4 yrs. of it, till, at 17 I was translating 100 lines of Virgil a day. And, of course, I was cramming for college entrance. And while all this hectic intellectual stuff was going on, believe it or not, I’d get up on top of the old icebox and reread *Robinson Crusoe* or some other travel volume and then I’d wind up with my doll and fairy tales for dinner. The split, the gap, between my intellectual and my emotional life was something out of this world. I guess nobody would really believe me. It doesn’t sound quite right.

Well, anyway, in my last year of high school, my father suddenly started talking to my mother, after a 5-yr. silence. Mother asked him if he were dying; I just listened in amazement. But as soon as he started talking to her he stopped speaking to me. That lasted for the next 5 yrs. After I had been in college for a yr. we moved to a very nice apartment far uptown in upper Manhattan. (I always hated everything about N.Y. – noise, dirt, foreigners, crowds, dirty streets, no woods and fields). A year later my father left us and took a little apartment near by. He was just able to scratch along as a free lance writer. His health was poor, but he could get out for fresh air and seemed to enjoy himself. I didn’t see him for nearly 20 yrs. Mother called on him weekly and they fought bitterly, mostly over intellectual matters, such as why Blaine lost the presidency, etc.

A decade later, when I had my Ph.D. and was making a comfortable living, I suggested that my parents get together and that we try to have some family life. We agreed we’d all talk to one another. I fixed up a nice room for father, forgot the past, and welcomed the sick old man. My dear, was I crazy! It lasted for a few months. The two old folks fought as well as ever. I was not then involved, but I finally asked to have the arrangement ended. Father moved into a little apartment where he finally came to a rather pathetic end. I sent him checks. Mother died 3 yrs. ahead of him in 1931.

Gosh almighty! Nearly three pages gone and so much more to say! What shall I select next? So much, so much from which to choose! Tired of reading? Maybe I should say: “Continued in our next.”

I’m tempted to tell you a bit about my scientist. But I guess not now. That chapter is rather extra special – very, very. If ever there was a Cinderella poised to meet Prince Charming, I was it. Imagine, if you can, reading The Blue Fairy Book and talking to my dear doll, Elizabeth, right through my first year of college. I suspect you’ll think maybe I’m spoofing. I still have Elizabeth and the fairy books.

Dear me! What next do I say? Well, with my eyes on the stars and with me myself lost in romantic dreams of love – and yet, withal, so utterly immature and unprepared for life – I met my scientist. The heavens opened up. Life became wonderful. We had such good times. I had a lot of growing up to do. I was so shy I scarcely dared open my mouth conversationally. Mother, herself a brilliant conversationalist, had overwhelmed me by saying to people: “M—doesn’t talk.” And indeed I didn’t. I was so tongue-tied, so utterly petrified that I couldn’t carry on a conversation with anyone. I would, however, get up before my fellow students in college and later in graduate school and expound with the greatest ease the solution to a problem in higher math, or give a summary of what a German scientist had said (in his German text) about geological formations in Germany!

With my scientist I found life. We loved fun! We went to the theatre, to wonderful little eating places in which N.Y. abounds. We walked and talked and played together. I had not dreamed that life could be so full, so glorious, so utterly happy. We agreed that I should take my Ph.D. degree before we married . . . If life never gives me anything more for myself, I know that I have had more than most women ever have in the way of love, of happiness, of dreams fulfilled. I’ve already had enough to last a lifetime.

Now! Let’s stop right there. I’ve said too much already. But I did want to indicate that life has had periods of overpowering beauty, radiance, ecstasy, and joy for me. I would sure rather have known the heights – and sunk to the depths of misery – than have lived dully, monotonously, stupidly of a dull level of mediocrity.

(This is not written to you as a Trustee. Heaven forbid! You were my dear, close friend long before you were a Trustee, and dei volentes, you will so remain long after you cease to be a Trustee. Actually, I don’t think of you very much as top brass or upper echelon.)

Perhaps what I would convey is that whatever may happen to me in my professional life, I still have an inner sanctum. There I have a wonderful time. I enjoy myself no end. I simply had to create a life of my own. That’s what I wanted you to understand. I’ve always had that inner sanctum. I have it now. I have erected a good stout wall between myself and the world. I have replaced Elizabeth and the fairy tales by other concepts . . . .

It is evening. We set the clocks back tonight, so I have an extra hour. Most evenings I have four or five hours alone. Part of the time I study or do various things connected with the business. But I made it a rule to give myself some pleasure time in each 24 hrs. as a leaven in life rather overloaded with work. One of the things I miss very much is laughter. That’s one reason I love my cats. They do such funny things. But I don’t get a chance to laugh with people because I don’t go to parties. On my speaking trips I had lots of fun at parties thrown for me all over the country by grateful physicians. But I have been on a trip since 1955.

I think, while I’m at it, I’ll tell you a bit about my marriage. It’s a subject I never discuss. I married when I was 36, old enough to know what I was doing. I had known B. for 5 yrs., though we had been 1,000 mi. apart for the three yrs. before our marriage and I hadn’t seen anything of him. I made three major mistakes: first, I married a divorced man who had had his family and wasn’t interested in more children, though I didn’t know that at the time. Second, he was 19 yrs. older than I, a differential not pronounced at that time, but tragically important later on. Third, he was a high school graduate, not a professional man. B. was an avid reader of science and math. His father had been a lawyer (Yale and Harvard) and a State Senator in Tennessee. Good family.

Those three mistakes I made 32 yrs. ago have come home to roost with compound interest. I was making almost twice as much as B. when we married shortly before the depression. I had hoped to stop work, but never did except in 1934 when I was unemployed 8 mos. B’s job folded at the same time. I started in a new professional field and took on all family financial obligations, including payment of B’s alimony, which I paid for 20 yrs. In the 30’s, I paid his tuition at two colleges for six years. He shifted majors, didn’t get the right grouping of subjects, and failed to earn his A.B. Then 15 years ago, his health declined with onset of cancer. He’s been an invalid ever since; 5 major operations, pneumonia twice, chronic bronchitis, failing eyesight.

I was determined to have a happy marriage and willing to make any concessions to keep things on an even keel. I have created a home; furnished it and run it. I have made a very beautiful garden. Bill wanted home comforts, companionship, good meals, and me – exclusively. He is perfectly content if I am in the house. He doesn’t want anyone else around. I have bought him good clothes, the books he wants, and anything he expresses a wish for. I serve the food he wants, make all his special puddings (which I don’t eat), bake pies and hot breads, and wait on him endlessly. I like to see him happy and comfortable. About once every two weeks I take him to a good movie and go to a good restaurant for luncheon. We observe the amenities. He loves me. I am sorry for him, he is very dependent on me for everything. I handle all business transactions, pay all bills, make bank loans, establish credit, decide how the money shall be spent, study investments and buy such securities as we have on the strength of my own judgment. I’d drop dead if a man ever paid a store bill for me or bought me a dress or any of the things a woman appreciates. I wear the pants – and how! The joke of it is that I never wanted to. The job had to be done. I carry life insurance for B., he carries none for me. After all, the important thing was to protect him against loss of income by my death.

Now I am about to do something very foolish. I am committed. I do get myself into the darnedest squeeze plays. During last Easter vacation we made a second trip to Florida hunting for a place to go when we should leave Washington. I just didn’t like the State, but B. was keen to move there to escape the cold winters. We were both absolutely positive I would not publish next year and that we’d be out of Washington by now. A friend had recommended Monticello, on the Tallahassee Highway. We went there and looked around. Pretty little place in which to vegetate and die. Then we visited some other places. B. was determined to return to Monticello. He wanted to buy a place then and there so as to be sure of a place when the business failed. We wound up by signing a purchase contract for seven very beautiful acres. I made a down payment and agreed to complete the payment this fall. (After paying off the business debts with the proceeds of the sale of a piece of property in Md., I had put the balance in the savings bank to invest for income for my old age.) B., however, wanted the land. I didn’t care one way or the other if I was going to lose my work. I agreed. Now I’m stuck. I’ve just written the real estate agent I’ll either go to Monticello early in Nov., or send a check to close the deal. I need 7 acres of Florida land like I need a “hole in the head,” as the saying goes. I’d a lot rather have the case for investment. If B died I sure wouldn’t live in Florida, at least not under the conditions that would be likely to be available to me.

For Pete’s sake, don’t tell me what a funny bunny I am. I know. I see myself getting euchred into something and I don’t know quite how to wriggle out.

I’ll bet you could wring my neck for taking so much of your good time. Well, I’ve given untold amounts of time to doctors all over the lot, so maybe I shall be forgiven if I help myself to a few hours of one doctor’s time. It’s a sort of vicarious payment by you for services I’ve rendered to others. I’m more grateful than you can possibly realize just to have this talk with someone I can trust. I’ve had so much bottled up.

Sunday is here. I decided to retype the second page of the letter to Dr. L. I don’t know the man! So hard to write. Anyway, do you know what? Having seen that my savings will last through one more year, I’ve suddenly stopped worrying about money. I hate thinking about money.

Now, my dear Friend! Just some little oddments! Then you’ll have a fair picture of the Editor. Generally I get up about six. In fall and winter I make a fire because B. likes to dress before one. Then I let the cats in. They bound in joyously, full of love and cute tricks. Each goes to his or her eating place and I serve their breakfast while I cook my own and listen to the radio – news, music, etc. I really have quite a jolly time. I eat and read the paper, clipping anything I think would interest B. He gets up between 7 and 8. Breakfast is a leisurely time for me. I read the paper carefully for professional information and I study the market. I do job lots of household chores and generally start work at 9:00. However, when publishing, all is different. On the day I publish, I’m up at 5:00 to complete proofreading of copy left about 11:00 p.m. the night before (generally Tuesdays).

Generally, I retire around midnight. I need six hrs. sleep; can do with four or none. I try to reserve the last hour of each day for myself – for fun, relaxation, jolly reading. I don’t need, and have never touched, sleeping pills. I go to bed to sleep and that’s what I do. I wake up feeling like a million dollars, eager for the new day. Who knows what a new day will bring? Certainly, not always grief.

Today is brilliant sunshine. Glorious day. I’ll mow the grass and get some planting done. B. opposes my gardening. Waste of time, he says. Ah, he does not know! Gardening refreshes the soul, eases tensions, makes life bearable. B. hates the cats. Well, those are two things for which I have fought. I will not surrender either. I can give in on matters of less importance to me. B. thinks I should spend my entire time on the business. I cannot do so. I must have a fair proportion of work and recreation. It is essential. I’ve worked out a pattern that’s good for me. I feel marvelous all the time. No colds, no aches, and comparatively little depression. I have a little inner machine that bubbles up, so to speak, with enthusiasm and love of life. I have such fun all by myself. That’s not to say I couldn’t have more fun with congenial companionship, a sharing of adventure, of pleasures, of love, or life itself.

It has been sinking in on me that I’ve spent nearly half my life – that’s a long time – trying to wring the most from, and give the most to, a marriage that lacked certain essential ingredients to begin with. Now it is too late to do one solitary thing to correct the situation. I have missed, more than I can put into words, certain normal aspects of marriage. There really aren’t any substitutes. So, I reach out for a great variety of activities to fill the void. Dear me, I guess that doesn’t make much sense. I’ll change the subject.

Here’s something I sure do want to say to you. About our Dr. R. He is a precious dear. I mean it, though I’d never tell him so. He’d blush. I just know. He is a perfectly darling Southern gentleman of the old school, so deferential, so courtly. Priceless, in this day and age! I know he lies awake nights thinking of ways to help me and devising schemes to justify sending me big and little checks. This summer he sent a check which I didn’t deposit for two months. I had to wait until I thought I’d really earned it. One thing bothers me. He thinks I’m better than I am. I have truly meant every word I’ve written to him about my determination to remain in this fight. I am indeed dedicated, professionally, to exactly what I’m doing. But there’s another half of me that cries out for a continuation of my work, and that’s the half I can’t explain to Dr. R. I never could, in a hundred years. I couldn’t write this letter to him. Not ever. Yet this is what explains me. I could be terribly wrong; I don’t have much to go on. Yet you seem to me to be closer to life’s heartaches; to be more deeply perceptive (despite your superficial kidding, which I regard as a cover-up for deeper emotions). Goodness gracious! Another page gone! I could go on and on! Don’t tell me I’m 67 kinds of a fool. I’d want to weep. Don’t call me a “poor dear.” I’m not! Just don’t say a thing, because, really, there isn’t a thing to say. But thanks from me. M.”

P.S. I’ve purposefully not used my letterhead and not used any names. Strange things sometimes happen before a letter is consigned to the fire. This has so much of me I don’t want it to bear any identification. Savvy?

Note at the top of the first page: PRIVILEGED – PLEASE! This is long! No rush at all. Sometime, at day’s end when you’d pick up a who-done-it or a western to rest your weary mind and body, just read this instead. It isn’t fiction, but at times truth is stranger than fiction. And this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – so help me!