11/5 and 11/6 (excerpts – writings about health care legislation and her finances not transcribed)

But about the next chapter. Which one of many shall I pick? I incline to “Life with Edna.” Doesn’t that sound inviting? I’m telling you, that year with Edna was worth its weight in gold. What if it happened years ago? It’s real, it’s human, it’s exciting, it’s life in the raw, it’s New York, it’s Broadway. To put it mildly, it’s the scientist and the drunk. But that’s not to disparage Edna. You’ll love her as I did. Drunks can be adorable when sober. Mighty real and basic and human.

Of course, I have thought of other chapters I might write. For instance, “How I Crossed the New Jersey Flats (Meadows) in a Horse-Drawn Pie Wagon”; or “Saved in Alabama by a Rum-Runner”; or “My First True Love” – I was Six and he was Thirty-six”; “Wearing a Salvation Army Hat I Rescue Flood Victims in Illinois But Pass Up Souls”; or, “What Happened When the Light Went Out in a Deep Mine One Mile from the Shaft?”; or “Trapped in a Bohemian Wine Cellar in Little Old New York”; or, -- well! You get the idea. Of course, you could take your pick or you could leave it to the Editor to do the picking. I say, Edna comes first. She’s something out of this world. You’ll love her, I just know.

11/6/1959

Dear Bob, “Life With Edna”

I was winding up last night’s letter as midnight came around. Now, at 9:30 p.m., I’m writing again. Too, too much. But, jiminy, I’ve put in 15 hrs. of hard work and now I want a bit of time for my own entertainment. And I can assure you, it’s lots more fun writing to you than reading a book on gardening or architectural design. My schedule is thickening up fast and I’d better grab what time I may. I’m dying to write about “Life With Edna.” For your entertainment and to go over my own happy memories. One thing, please. Do always believe what I say. It would break my heart if you doubted my veracity at any time. If my tale at times seems like a tall one, it is, nonetheless, true.

1918. Two years before, I had taken my Ph.D. degree. One year before I had won a fellowship in scientific research in international competition with 40 other women. I was one of two women engaged in scientific research at the American Museum of Natural History in NYC. Henry Fairfield Osborn was then president of the Museum. I had broken my engagement and was trying to remake my life. A chance observation by a Museum secretary had made me decide to learn ice skating.

I had bought a pair of deluxe skates, hired a teacher, and gained reasonable proficiency. Three nights a week I went to the rink and skated for three hours without stopping. I found that was conducive to sleep which up to then had eluded me. I had sublet my little apartment in upper New York and had taken a very nice furnished room near the Museum. It was in a very fine home – one of those 3-story brownstone houses which marked the more genteel streets of Manhattan at the turn of the century. I had a small hall bedroom on the top floor in a house that sported Oriental rugs and oozed respectability. It was on West 68th Street near Central Park West – if you know New York geography.

One evening I took my skates and walked down toward the rink which was on Broadway in the forties. ‘Twas before the era of neon lights, but Broadway was ablaze with electric signs and I always got a lift as I walked the mile from my rooming house down The Gay White Way, window shopping.

I had reached 50th Street when I noticed a well-dressed woman standing in the middle of the street, just in from Broadway. A small crowd had collected on the curb. People were laughing. The woman just stood there, swaying a bit; uncertain. I thought she was ill and approached her, saying: “Are you ill? May I see you home?”

“Go to Hell,” she replied. “I want a drink.” I was astonished, because she was very beautiful and handsomely gowned. She was a lovely natural blonde, about my build, but an inch or so taller.

I said, “Well, let’s walk along and talk it over.” She strode off suddenly and rapidly, I in tow. I kept up with her as we walked down Broadway. Presently she spotted a saloon. “There,” she said, “I’m going to have a drink.”

I replied, “Well, I’ve never been in a saloon, but if you’re going in, I’ll go too.” In we went. There was a small room at the rear for “Ladies.” We sat down and I put my skates on the table. She ordered a straight whiskey and I took a ginger ale. After the drink she confided that she had not had any food in three days and that her hotel had locked her out for non-payment of room rent and had kept some three trunks full of beautiful clothes as well as $700 worth of pawn tickets. She ordered another whiskey. Downed it. And then she just slid from her chair to the floor, out cold. We were alone in the room.

What to do? I could have walked out. She was none of my business. Or was she? I’ve never dodged life so I went out and hailed a taxi. I explained the situation to the driver. He was sympathetic. I told him I didn’t see how I could leave another woman lying unconscious on the floor of a saloon and I asked him to help me get her to my room. She was a dead weight. Between us we hauled her to the taxi and dumped her on the floor. Then we drove to my ultra-respectable neighborhood and somehow we carried that drunk up the three flights of stairs to my little room. I don’t know just how we did it, because she couldn’t stand. I had only a $20 bill. I gave it to the driver to get change and he came back with the money. Right in rotten Little Old New York.

I put this woman in my little bed and sat down to wait. After five hours she woke up, ravenously hungry and fairly sober. It was 1:30 a.m. I offered to take her to a restaurant and out we went to some all-night joint. She sure was starved. She finished her meal by lighting a cigarette. The proprietor came to the table and asked us to go to the women’s room since ladies didn’t smoke in the restaurant. We went. I didn’t smoke, having vowed when I was about eight that I’d never smoke. (To this day I’ve never smoked a cigarette).

I took the beautiful drunk, whose name was Edna Baker, to her hotel and paid her bill so that she’d have a place to sleep. She said she was an actress and had starred all over the United States and on Broadway. I later learned that was true. I promised to see her the next evening and returned to my room as the sun was rising.

The following evening I went to Edna’s hotel where she presented a very nice looking gentleman to me, saying: “This is Eugene Walter,”**\*** as though she were presenting the Prince of Wales. The name meant nothing to me, but I later found he was a leading Broadway playwright. They hailed a taxi and Mr. Walter explained that George M. Cohan and he were going to finance a cure for Edna at the Keeley Institute. I hadn’t heard of Cohan and the Keeley cure was nothing in my young life.

As we drove to that Institute, Mr. Walter plied me with questions. “Do you mean to tell me that you just picked up Edna last night, took her to your room, paid her hotel bill, and gave her a meal without ever having seen her before?” I said I had and asked him what else I could have done. He shook his head. “Right here in Little Old New York! My dear, do you know that if I put that sequence in a play, the critics would say it wasn’t true to life? The public wouldn’t believe it.”

The taxi drew up before a brownstone-front house on Central Park West. All the window were barred. At that point I felt a bit worried. Just what was I getting into, I thought. I decided not to run, but to see what next. We entered. The door was locked behind us. Then a physician came forward and I felt relieved. Edna was signed in and I agreed to call on her the next evening.

I learned during the next five weeks as I visited Edna every evening that the Keeley cure was something of a racket. Rich men sent their drunken sons there to be cured. They returned year after year, providing a good income for those who ran the place. Male and female alcoholics wandered around the halls and in and out of rooms in friendly fashion. I was on good terms with them and the doctors said I was good for drunks. I never preached or scolded and just acted as though I were on a social call. Five weeks of that.

Messrs. Walter and Cohan seemed to feel they were doing enough in paying for the cure. They failed to make any provisions for Edna afterwards. She didn’t have a cent. She had one wealthy sister who wouldn’t have a thing to do with her. I decided to rent the large room next to mine for Edna and then look after her while she sought a job in the theatre. I took her “home” with me and gave her a daily allowance of $3 a day for luncheon, cigarets, cosmetics, carfare, etc. I was then earning $35 a week which was good pay for scientific research. Edna’s room, meals, and allowance more than used up what I earned. I drew on my small savings account.

In no time flat I returned home from the Museum to find Edna in bed drunker than a pied owl. My disillusionment was terrible. I had counted on the “cure.” I cut off Enda’s cash allowance, but bought her meals. It made no difference. As she explained, a drunk can always get a drink, with or without cash. For some two months I went through Hell with her. I went to work each day as usual. When I returned to my room at day’s end I never knew what I’d find. If Edna was reasonably sober we went out to dinner and then took a walk. I’d steer her past saloons and other places where drinks were available and finally I’d get her home and put her to bed.

When she was sober, she was too sweet for words. Good fun, vivacious, witty. She called me “Pete” as a term of endearment. She couldn’t make me out. She wondered what I got out of life, what made me work for such a paltry salary, why I didn’t help myself to some of the easy money available along Broadway.

Edna was a Southern girl, just about my age. A ravishing beauty who had gone to N.Y. at 16 and joined a chorus. Men had gone wild over her, showering her with gifts of jewelry and clothes. She had married and been divorced. She claimed her association with men wasn’t immoral. I never found out, and really wasn’t interested. She said there were many lonely men of wealth who would pay handsomely for a woman’s company in the evening. Maybe so, maybe not. Her $700 worth of pawn tickets for expensive jewelry and furs attested to the fact that men certainly were willing to shower her with gifts.

My interest, of course, was in helping her to stop drinking. I might keep her sober for a few days by dragging her past saloons, but then she relapsed. She had no will power of her own and I soon learned I couldn’t be her backbone. I never scolded her nor preached. We just kept making fresh starts.

I never discussed my personal affairs with Edna, but I was finding life more difficult. I couldn’t adjust. I worked all right, being well disciplined, but I couldn’t see any reason for going on. Edna was in the dumps, too, and insisted she wanted to commit suicide. She couldn’t get a job while drinking, yet acting was all she cared for.

Finally, one day I decided I had reached the end of the line. I made up my mind I’d turn on the gas after Edna was asleep. I cleaned up my desk at the Museum, leaving everything in order. No farewell notes, but my mind was made up. (In those days many of the older houses still had combination electric-gas burners. I had one in my room. Most handy.) I had dinner with Edna and got her safely to her room. But I couldn’t get her to bed. She was going to kill herself by jumping out the window. She was in earnest and got part way out the window several times. I finally calmed her down and gave her a long spiel on the wickedness and futility of suicide. I pointed out how much she had to live for if she’d just stop drinking. I noted her youth, her beauty, her charm. After a while I had her thinking that suicide wasn’t such a good idea after all. Fine! I put her to bed with a sigh of relief and then went next door to my own room to complete my plan for my own suicide. I had been through several strenuous hours with Edna and so I sat down to rest and reflect.

I didn’t think that I had any future, but I was sure that Edna had if I could help her to stop drinking. I had seen her reviews all over the country and they were good. I was convinced my own life was shot beyond repair, so I didn’t waste time thinking about myself. But I got to worrying about Edna. I had just convinced her that suicide was morally wrong, etc., etc. She respected me and believed in me. What would her sensations be in the morning if she woke up and found that I had killed myself? That was a real dilemma. The more I thought about it, the more I felt I couldn’t let Edna down. She didn’t have a soul to turn to. And I was convinced she could be cured, if I had patience and enough perseverance. I spend most of the rest of the night meditating on my responsibility to Edna. Then I went to bed and suicide never again presented any great temptation to me. I never told Edna.

“Life With Edna” is a long book – too long for me to write or you to read. I must hurry along. I sent her away to a farm in Pennsylvania for a month, paying her way, but not giving cash. Then I decided I’d take over my apartment\*\* and give Edna more homelike surroundings when she returned from the farm. I gave her my bedroom and I slept on a couch in the living room.

Edna looked well when she returned from the farm. I was hopeful. She was sober and spent much time going to booking offices, but she didn’t land anything. We had pleasant evenings together talking. It was during that period that she undertook to reform me. My brains did not impress her and neither did my clothes. “Pete,” she’s day, “You look like a piece of cheese. What a suit! The skirt’s too long, it has no style, and you just look like a frump.” I was indignant and told her I counted on my brains, not my clothes. I wouldn’t let on to her that she had made an impression, but I found myself looking at myself critically in the mirror, trying to determine if she were right.

Then one of her old flames sent her $200. I hoped she’d put a little into household expenses, but, instead, she announced that now she could get some decent clothes. I went with her on her shopping trip. I was too impressed for words. She went straight to Fifth Avenue and order the salesgirls around imperiously. I was always very mousy when I bought my cheap duds and I sure didn’t shop on Fifth Avenue. She bought a beautiful suit – expensive, simple, good lines, fine material. And a magnificent black velvet hat for $35 – a small fortune in those days. Then came all the accessories. The $200 just went. Whoosht! But Edna looked like the Queen of Sheba – ravishing, sparkling, radiant. I myself still looked like a piece of cheese, as Edna reminded me. But I was getting ideas. They took some time to germinate.

I’d like to be able to say that Edna is her new duds landed a swell job on Broadway. She didn’t. We still had a long, long row to hoe. One evening as we were sitting talking she made a couple of trips to the bedroom. I knew she didn’t have any whiskey there, but I noted her eyes become glazed, her voice thick. And the next thing I knew she had passed out like a light and had slipped to the floor. I went to the bedroom and discovered a little bottle of veronal.\*\*\* “Twas Greek to me.” But from then on I really had a time as she took to various sleeping drugs.

She’d be out for three or four days and nights at a time, coming home battered and bruised, usually around 7:00 a.m. After one such disappearance, I received a telephone call and a voice said: “This is Central Islip Hospital for the Insane. We have an Edna Baker here. She says you’re her friend. We can’t keep her because she’s not insane. They shipped her here from Bellevue. The doctor would like to have her take the nurses’ training course and work here in the hospital. Is that all right with you?”

I sure wondered how Edna had accomplished that feat. But, gosh, she could wind any man around her little finger and seemingly the psychiatrist was no exception. So, picture Edna in a nurses’ training class. After a few weeks she came home to Pete on her day off. Sober. Cold sober. Wearing sensible clothes. She had progressed . . . continued in our next! The Sat. Eve. Post would never leave you in the middle of a sentence! Meantide.

\* <https://www.amazon.com/Milking-Moon-Southerners-Story-Planet/dp/1611877660>

[https://www.amazon.com/Happy-Table-Eugene-Walter Southern/dp/0807834831/ref=sr\_1\_5?dchild=1&keywords=Happy+Table&qid=1596202629&s=books&sr=1-5](%20%20%20%20https://www.amazon.com/Happy-Table-Eugene-Walter%20%20%20%20Southern/dp/0807834831/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=Happy+Table&qid=1596202629&s=books&sr=1-5)

\*\* The four-room apartment she had sublet to Amadeus Grabau.

\*\*\* Veronal, brand name for a barbiturate, diethylmalonyl urea or diethylbarbituric acid; also known as barbitol, used to induce sleep.