1/6/1963

My Dear:

This is a very personal letter that you can just put aside to read some day when you have time. It deals not with current matters, but with events of 40 years ago. All I ask is that you read this letter some time and the enclosures. It will take a bit of time. When you finally finish, return the enclosures to me. There is no hurry.

As you well know, you are closer to me than anyone else is. It is only human to wish to have at least one close friend – one is really enough – to whom one may speak freely about everything, without reservations and without fear that confidences will be revealed to the world. My life has been so full, so complicated, so fraught with great emotional experiences that I really need to be able to talk to someone. I have many, many friends, wonderful friends. But I am separated from all of them by walls of reserve. They may or may not recognize the reserve, but I always know it exists. You are the only person who knows the real inner me. I can think out loud with you and tell you quite frankly what makes me tick. That’s why I value your friendship so very much. I have no such relationship with anyone else. Unfortunately, I did not have it with B. I did have it with my scientist. I hope you will realize that I am paying you a high compliment, for the relationship I had with my scientist was one that is seldom experienced. One goes through life meeting many people of all kinds. One forms friendships of varying degrees of intimacy. But only in rare instances does one have the good fortune to meet a person who seems to be completely satisfying in all ways – emotionally, intellectually, socially, sexually, and for day-by-day living.

Many people — perhaps most of them – go through life without ever having such a satisfying experience. Perhaps they lack the capacity to recognize greatness in others, to recognize the fullness of an unusual personality. Perhaps, too, they lack the ability to respond in kind to a full and exceptional personality. There must be a mutual attraction, a mutual ability to give, to understand, to appreciate. Well, all that I had with my scientist. Don’t toss this letter in the scrap basket at this point and say: “To hell with it! What do I care about her scientist? I wish she’d shut up.”

Read on and you will see why you should.

I have been working myself to death recently cleaning up old stuff, going through files, burning, throwing out, reorganizing. Partly it has been to make my working conditions better. But partly, too, because I wanted to get the house cleaned out so that when I die someone won’t be suck with the job of getting rid of my accumulation of stuff. I’ve been stuck with that job three times – after the death of my mother, my father, and my husband.

I’ve been looking for a lost bankbook the past day or two and had occasion to go through and clean out three strong boxes. In these I have real estate papers, auto papers, life insurance policy, securities data, etc. Then I found several compartments devoted to personal matters – old photographs from way back, a few old letters from friends now dead, mother’s teacher’s diploma from 9/17/1884, etc. Suddenly I came upon two letters dated 1923. From my scientist. I had completely forgotten I had them. Before I married I burned all my scientist’s letters and returned all his gifts of jewelry. All the letters save these two – and I think there is a third somewhere.

I want you to read these letters, if you will. The first one is very long. No one but you knows anything at all about my scientist. I’d like you to know a bit more because he meant so much to me and had such a big part in shaping my life. He developed me, brought out the best in me, was my guide and teacher all through graduate school. You may have been inclined to think at times that I was putting it on a bit thick when I spoke of his love for me. Women often imagine men in the past thought a great deal of them when actually the men were scarcely aware of their existence. In a way, it is almost as though my scientist and I had been married for a decade.

He was a full professor at Columbia. I was 19, he 38 when we met. I had finished 2 years of college and was taking summer courses with a view to finishing up in 3 yrs., which I did. He taught at Columbia in summer school and I signed up for one of his courses, elementary geology. I got “A” in everything, no matter what it was, and always came to the notice of my professors. (When I was in high school some professor said I was a genius). Anyway, as a result of that one course, I signed up for two courses in geology in my Junior (actually Senior) year at college, with the woman professor who headed the Geol. Dept. at Barnard. I was specializing in math. and so took geology as a minor. I finished up with general honors, honors in math., geology, and zoology, Phi Beta Kappa, and the decision to enter Columbia Graduate School for a geology major, specializing in paleontology, not economic geology. That is, I went in primarily for work in evolution, rather than in oil geology and other economic aspects. I spent 5 yrs. in graduate school, published extensively even before getting my Ph.D. degree, made Sigma Xi when 24, as soon as a chapter was organized at Columbia for women, took prizes, won scholarships and a fellowship (in world competition), and whiz banged through like nobody’s business, taking half again as many courses as I needed for a Ph.D. degree. I was on the faculty in graduate school, teaching my fellow students who were also working for a doctorate.

All these intellectual fireworks resulted from the fact that I was madly in love. I worked like a slave all right. My love finds ways. I had a darling 4-room apt. with my piano and a big scientific library. We would work there many a night until 3:00 or 4:00 on his books. He was a prolific writer and published many of the standard texts used in colleges and graduate schools throughout the country. I learned my research methods by helping him. I learned to proofread and edit. Pretty soon I was editing everything he turned out – scientific papers for specialty journals, etc. In time I edited thousands of pages of text for him. As I progressed I acquired expert knowledge. I read in French and German and covered world literature. I did research and writing on my own, reaching a point where I could discuss any scientific matter with him on a par. My original research work and publications attracted attention and pretty soon I was being offered the top jobs in my field throughout the country – professorships at women’s colleges, top museum jobs, and even a job on the U.S. Geological Survey. I passed their Civil Service tests way back, around 1916 or 1918. The cream of the jobs awaited me as soon as I should take my Ph.D., which I did in 1916. I had entered a world-competition thing for women Ph.D.s – and won it in 1916.

Actually, I didn’t care a hoot about prizes and fellowships and all that. I was thinking about marriage and all I wanted to do was help my scientist with his work. I had reached the point where I could edit and correct his ms. I could even write a paragraph or page and he couldn’t detect the difference, though I always told him. We were completely attuned, intellectually. Somehow we brought out the best in each other. At my apartment we weren’t always making love by a long shot. We were working like blazes. I had a wonderful time. Life was rich and full and held such promise. I was inordinately happy. We took some time out to go to fascinating places for dinner and an evening together. New York is full of out-of-the-ordinary places. He loved good food and drank in moderation. He introduced me to wines and liqueurs of which I’d never heard. We went to German, Hungarian, Italian, and French places. I was a little greenhorn, barely graduated from fairy stories. I had never been anywhere worth going to and I knew nothing of social graces. But he taught me patiently and never made fun of me if I made mistakes. He was very kind and loving.

And then, quite by accident, I caught him in a lie. My world crashed, completely. It was long ago and I forget details. He lied more than once in the same area, but in no other. I couldn’t forgive. I was hard, cruel, bitter, intransigent. He humbled himself. He got down on his knees, and kissed my shoes, and begged for forgiveness. I was hard as steel. Yet I would lie on the floor all night crying my eyes out after he had gone. And get up to face another day of professional life. I was the victim of my upbringing and of my religious beliefs.

I turned my apartment over to him and moved into a furnished room down near the American Museum of Natural History where I was doing research on the strength of the fellowship I had won. I worked alone at the Museum every night and earned the reputation of being devoted to science. Hell! I was just trying to discipline myself and keep alive. My heart was broken. I thought a lot about suicide. But I kept on producing my scientific papers. I beat myself into submission. I kept saying: “Work! Write!” And I did. Honors rolled in. I thanked the world then went to my room to weep.

I was recommended for a high scientific post in Peking. I turned it down and recommended my scientist for the position. It was offered to him and he accepted. I never told him the offer came to me first. He left for China. I wouldn’t kiss him goodbye.

I have been terrible. But I’ve suffered with a lifetime of realization of the mistake I made. I should have forgiven. He had an excellent excuse. He was a very honorable man. I should have recognized his intrinsic worth, his greatness. Who was I to be so damned righteous? Had I no faults? Of course, I had plenty and perhaps they were worse than his. I’ve learned through a lifetime of suffering. Learned, when it won’t do me any good.

And yet, perhaps it did do me some good. It is now almost two years since you talked to me hour after hour in room 668 at the Statler, on January 15, 1961. What you told me was devastating. After my original first shock, I suddenly discovered that my long years of suffering had taught me one good lesson, namely, not to be self righteous. As I thought about what you had told me I went back over my own life. I had paid a terrible price for being so damned noble. I had once sat in judgment like God Almighty and had hurt another human being because I would not forgive. I would not see his point of view. And so, as I thought about you, I realized I couldn’t be hard and unforgiving.

When I found the two letters here enclosed today, my thoughts went back for 40 years and more. I met B. in St. Louis on his birthday in 1922 – Sept. 17. I had left science in utter despair and had gone on my 2,000-mile hike, landing in St. Louis in the spring of 1922. I had worked at two or three things and was selling real estate when I met B. He was a clerk in a casualty insurance co. and also President of a real estate loan co. He had been having difficulties with his wife and finally left her. I saw him occasionally in connection with real estate operations and after a year or so we formed a real estate company with me as office manager. I listed and sold real estate and ran the office. Well, B. and I were in, shall we say, a receptive mood? His marriage was on the rocks and I was heart broken. My scientist had gone to China in 1918. We wrote from time to time.

Early in 1923, B. declared his love, said he had asked for a divorce, and asked me to wait for him. Well, the situation wasn’t too hot. His wife at first refused, then agreed, but asked for so much money B. didn’t see what he could do. It was at that time, in the spring of 1923 that I wrote my scientist and told him what I had done and said I had agreed to marry B. as soon as he got his divorce. I did not know then that my scientist was seriously ill and actually was hospitalized for three months. When he returned home in Peking he found my letter saying I had agreed to marry B. Wasn’t that too sad? For my scientist to get that news on returning from the hospital. Well, anyway, he wrote me the long letter which I enclose (mailed Peking May 27, 1923).

I can’t see now why I paid no attention to his two letters in 1923. I’ll have to confess I was still feeling righteous. I couldn’t stomach a lie. But, gosh! B. had nothing to offer a person like me. He was a high school graduate. Not brilliant. His highest salary had been $3,000. He didn’t have any particular social standing. It is true he was a student. He spent every moment he could get reading or attending courses at night at the university in St. Louis. He was honorable. He never told me even a white lie in the 38 yrs. I knew him. He loved me. But it wasn’t a good basis for a marriage. Read what my scientist offered in 1923 – 4 yrs. before I married. I just think I was the damnedest fool. He offered me my kind of life, the life I was fitted for and would have loved. He was crazy to have children and so was I. We were perfectly matched in every way. But I wouldn’t go to Peking. Oh no! I left St. Louis in 1924 and returned to N.Y., telling B. I would wait for him while he worked things out with his wife. She was a difficult customer. Her demands were excessive. She wanted their home and all the furnishings, alimony, and $1,000 in cash. Poor B. lived in a shack in the woods in order to save money. I felt awfully sorry for him. I went into business and by 1925 was making $5,200 a year. That was a lot then. It looked like a fortune to B. and me. I sent him $50 a week – almost as much as he was earning -- and he dickered with his wife. Well, my scientist wrote occasionally and sent me his publications. In the meantime, I was making good in business and living with mother on Long Island. I sure was miserable. I paid her $25 a week and kept $25 of my earnings for me.

At any time I could have gone to Peking, but I felt committed. B. finally got his divorce in 1926 and we married 6 mos. later. He resigned from his St. Louis job and counted on my $100 a week. He earned a little as a salesman after he came to N.Y., but that ended in 1933 and he was never on payroll again.

I moved from one thing to another to make a living for B. and me. I was like a fish out of water in business. Indeed, while I have “succeeded” in a number of things, the only professional field I was cut out for was science. I left that 41 years ago. Life is strange. I’ve tried to make the best of things. I’ve always worked hard. I’ve tried to live up to my responsibilities. Life with B. was hard. He had no friends to speak of. He didn’t know professional people. He didn’t want anyone to come in the house. I was marooned.

I saw my scientist in 1934 when he came to Wash. for an international scientific meeting. That was over a yr. before I came to Wash. I was still living on Long Island. I was very conscious of being a married woman. I wouldn’t kiss him. We had luncheon and an afternoon together. I never saw him again. He died in 1946, whether in Peking or here, I do not know.

Why am I telling you all this? Some of it you know, but not all. Partly it’s because I was swept away when I found those two letters. The years dropped away. Everything was as vivid in memory as though it had happened yesterday. I wept a bit, not much. Of course, I could have read the letters and said nothing to anyone. But you are very close to me. I thought maybe they would go a long way toward explaining me to you. Deep down inside me is a life to which I never refer except to you. In a way, it is all part of the dead past. But those experiences of 40 years ago are strongly reflected in what I do right now from day to day. Whenever I’m inclined to be too self-righteous I ask myself why I should be. The suffering of 40 years ago has made me tender inside even when I may appear hard outside.

The times now when I am hard and critical are when I am dealing with someone who lies for personal profit, as Annis does. I just can’t bear a mercenary person or an overly ambitious person like Annis. But I can forgive most other things. I shall never forgive myself for having been so hard on my scientist. He loved me truly and deeply. I was inexperienced and lacked discernment. I hadn’t lived enough. My background was too Puritanical. If only I could see my scientist long enough to say these things to him. He would forgive me.

It’s terrible how many things one has to live with, knowing that atonement is impossible. I cannot repair the damage I have done. Of course, I don’t sit around moping over the past. I try to learn my lessons from past errors and not repeat. But occasionally the past catches up with you all of a sudden, like my finding these two letters today. I felt I simply had to talk to you. My suffering was so poignant when I thought how much suffering I had caused.

So often I find life almost unendurable. The burden of memories is heavy. I’m not really cut out for what I’m doing. If I had enough money, I’d close out. I don’t like the Washington atmosphere. I’ve always hated business, even when successful. I’m lonely for a way of life I threw out 41 years ago.

Perhaps all I’ve written has bored you. Perhaps you aren’t interested in my scientist’s letters. But all this has a bearing on you. You will read his estimate of my ability in science. You will, perhaps, understand how I perked up when you expressed an interest in research in life sciences. I fear I may have made you feel that I was a wet blanket. I’m not at all. Indeed, if you are genuinely interested and choose to knuckle down (I do believe I spelled that “nuckle” yesterday), I’d be delighted. And I’d be so happy if I could help you in any way. I’m really very competent in science. I wish we weren’t so far apart. I’d love to talk to you about things.

I will be starting in this week on another year of publishing. My heart isn’t in it. But I do try my best. I feel I must keep faith with those who have supported me so generously.

What a horrible, horrible mess I have made of my life. I’ve been too head-strong, too stubborn. The errors of my youth have pursued me relentlessly. It doesn’t seem to avail me very much to recognize all the things I did wrong. I don’t seem to have any chance to follow a different course. It makes you wonder why you have to go through so much in order to acquire wisdom you don’t get a chance to use.

Read the description of life in Peking 40 yrs. ago. Then think of the life I’ve had, scrubbing floors, grubbing for money, doing work I hated, being deprived of intellectual contacts and social life. See the great men who came to Peking, as to the cross roads of the world. It was a great intellectual center. And I so prepared to be a part of it. Wasn’t I the damnedest nitwit?

I do the best I can with Argentum, but it’s a faint shadow of what I might do with myself. I really try very hard to make each day count. But the loneliness is overpowering much of the time. I am entirely alone 8, 10, 12 hrs. at a time. Like today. I was up at 6:45 a.m. I won’t say one word to a soul this entire day.

I had been working at hard work up till the time I discovered those two letters and decided to write to you. I am working too hard. Much too hard.

I wish I were free of Washington.

I’ll tell you a secret. Here I write to you by the hour when I should be doing other things. You are surely the preferred correspondent. Ray wrote me a lovely 3-page letter weeks ago. I’ve never had time to answer. I feel guilty. I owe so many people letters. And then I sit down and write at length to you.

Now I must stop. Forgive me for imposing on you as I have. You are the only person who knows about my scientist. There are times when loneliness overpowers me. Writing to someone else besides you wouldn’t do any good at all. You are a confidant sui generis. Perhaps I give you credit for understanding more than you really do. But it makes me happy to think you understand.

You may think it’s funny I always call him my scientist. Actually, I never called him by his first name, even when alone. It was always “professor” or some term of endearment. Things were more formal in those days. Not a student I knew in graduate school ever thought of calling me “Marjorie,” even at social gatherings.

Bye now. Thanks so very much for listening. Marjorie

P.S. You’ll notice reference in his letter to sending me some money. He returned $200 to me on account of what he owed. I had loaned and given him some before he left for China. I’ve never been money-minded and have always been glad to give it to those I love.