

LEAVING YOUR BABY OUT IN THE RAIN

Sept. 15, 1963

Winnie –

To be in the habit of something, you need to have done it more than twice. Saying you've made a routine of "running boys' hearts through a blender" is unwarranted. (Also, please pick a different image). You only have a pair of experiences. The first was Theo, I remember, but that was a minor affair. He was more concerned with dodging the two years he'd otherwise spend on a mission for his church. I think you believed (and who could blame you) he'd benefit from the company of a girl who read something besides G.K. Chesterton. Maybe you thought you could lure him from the church. But his aimlessness, alas, wasn't so easily solved. You must have heard he *did* go on a mission for the church, but did you also know he was booted from the program after getting spotted drinking with the locals? What a boob, bumbling through his first, adult sin. He skulked back to Maine and put himself in the family way with a girl he met at a Hojo. In any case, these don't sound like the actions of a boy trying to win someone back (i.e. you).

The second boy I still don't know much about. You held him more tightly and I couldn't pry the details from your knobby, little hands. Do you remember standing me up

when I invited the two of you over last summer? (Your own aunt, Winnie!) I had even whipped up a batch of Tom & Jerry batter to get the pair of you sauced. Only enough to answer some embarrassing questions. When you didn't show, I spent the evening lying on my bed in a nearly-new dress, licking dollops of the sticky-sweet batter and reading a book that went on and on. I woke to find my arm glued to the bedspread, the cat trying to free me. I'm only one-quarter actually hurt. I'll blindly suppose you met him through your last volunteer position, but it seems only fair for you to fill in the other who's and what's: How did it start and why did it end? Is he married? Has he turned you terribly wicked? If I don't hear otherwise from you, I'll continue assuming the worst.

All the best (for now).

` Collette

Oct. 8, 1963

Winnie –

In my defense: you can't condemn my radio silence after your last note. On Friday, I was stuck at Herr Schicklgruber's annual autumn festival, exchanging inanities with the library donors. I was stumbling through rounds of lawn darts and badminton and the only tonic for my introversion had quite a bit of gin mixed into it. I weaved home on my bicycle in a sour mood and found your letter, which didn't soothe me. My first take: he sounds too old for you. If he is, as you said, depressed over the impending loss of his hearing, it might be time to return his class ring. That reads coldly, I'll bet, but trust me when I say the crippled neither need nor desire our sympathy. In fact, it's our feminine duty to treat them as we would anyone else: to say yes and to say no, emphatically, as we would with any person lacking that irresistible limp.

Secondly, I was unaware he had followed you back to university. After your last note, I naturally assumed you'd turned him loose. But now, I can't help picturing the oily mallard who tailed you around the zoo so many years ago, only to nab the other half of your sandwich when you weren't looking. There's something disconcerting, or mildly pathetic, or even ominous or insane, about a man, juiced heart and hard-of-hearing, who changes his postal code in pursuit of a little company.

When I tried to call you at the university to relay all this, I was so flustered I dialed your home number by rote. Your mother picked up and we backed ourselves into a sisterly skirmish. I'm sure you received her report. I'm embarrassed and I apologize. Secondhand, it probably sounded like I was going out of my head again. But I slept off the anger, and the gin, before finally deciding against calling you altogether and sitting down, instead, to write you this note.

Please, please keep me posted about everything, Winnie love. I hope you regard me as something beyond the aunt who pokes around in your life and warns you about the potholes that twisted my ankles at your age. I'm afraid I am that person but I'm also your greatest admirer, your most vocal champion, and your *superlativest* friend. There is nothing hiding behind my questions and notes other than love, love, and more love for my dear Winnie.

`C.

Nov. 30, 1963

Winnie –

Another postman delivers another apology from your favorite aunt. Here it is: a bad spirit appeared in my mind about a month ago and I had to take a few days off from the

library to shake him. I could have sworn someone was talking to me, Winnie – a man with a young and raspy voice, asking, “Have we met somewhere before? You seem so familiar.” – but every time I’d turn, in the midst of shelving a book or sharpening a pencil, I was alone. I stopped doing anything on my own. After I’d stepped on her heels a fifteenth time, Mrs. Pueslewaite asked me to go home and lie down. I mounted a decent defense but when I’d actually returned to the apartment and began my sentence, I felt relieved. But it was just a few days later when a man from Texas laid out the President and I suddenly wondered if I’d ever open the front door again, even to welcome you back for Thanksgiving. Thank you for dropping in to say hello, by the way. I worried about our visit having made you depressed that I think it made me depressed.

Thank you, also, for keeping me apprised of the affair with the ancient Texan. I’m giving you a hard time, of course, but I am curious if his suddenly finding himself in “a healthier place” now, mentally, is actually the symptom of a larger problem. You might ask if mania or manic depressives are hanging anywhere in his family tree. Electro shock therapy seems to be the analeptic nowadays for mental health, but I’d certainly want to know if someone walking me to the movies had been treated like a lightbulb. Maybe it seems forward, but these are the types of lines you want to draw when you’re considering the start of a family.

A sudden vision: you’re sitting there, reading this and asking yourself: “How did she suddenly jump to *that*?” But there’s many a girl, still in school, who found themselves accidentally starting a family late one night, after a drive with a man in uniform, who smells like he just stepped out of the bath, after burning your tongue on a sip of whisky from a flask under the seat, after he’s taken the top down to look at the stars, after a few of his laughs that could split icebergs, after a hand on your knee.... As the most sensible girl I

know, you shouldn't care if you're called a *spoilsport* or *bookish* or a *prude* or a *priss* for passing on those car rides.

Am I interfering too much? All right, I promise I won't ask any more questions, suggest any refusals or offer any wisdom for at least a month. As I said, you're too smart for it and I forget myself (which I'm prone to do anyway). I love you endlessly.

`C.

Jan. 11, 1964

Winnie –

What a relief it was to see you over the holidays. When you ran away to school the fall before last, I tried so hard to feel only grateful, only pride, and excitement. Grief, sadness, jealousy – no, don't let those darker emotions pace in the wings, Collette. But it was a struggle, my child. Your parents pulled away from the curb to drive you to the station and I faced the door to cry.

For a few months, I couldn't stop replaying the afternoons we'd spend in my kitchen, baking blue and red batches of cookies, you manning the trigger of the spritz gun. Your mother used to come and watch me while I watched you (making sure I didn't let you climb inside the oven, I suppose). Do you remember any of this, Winnie? Do you miss it? Do you find yourself stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, thinking about it? Do you sometimes tear up when you're waiting in a department store, the cashier reaching out to pat your hand and offer you a tissue and a mint? Does it make you feel something like grief?

God, I'm sorry. I'm waning when I should be waxing.

I hope your Texan didn't think I was rude. For whatever reason, I missed the chapter in your letter where you said he'd be joining you over the break. I think we all selfishly

hoped to spend as much time with you as possible. Maybe that's not realistic now that you've grown up and I am, as I've already confessed, selfish for expecting it.

I've resolved not to say another bad word about the Texan. I commend him for his service in Korea and I only wish you had mentioned his being a veteran earlier on. Soldiers have such a big block of maladies to contend with, physical and otherwise, it's a wonder they're able to function outside a foxhole. They take to drinking or chasing after women or telling stories you're never quite sure are true. Not your Texan, I'm sure, but soldiers as a whole seem to have an inner switch; when it's on, they're either giving or receiving orders and all is well. When it's off, when they're expected to take command of themselves, they tend to fire their gun without aiming beforehand.

Let me know how spring quarter is playing out. Don't take after your aunt and spend too much time at the library. And don't forget to eat. I once worked with a girl at the library (she's gone and married now) who had apparently stopped eating all together and she became so thin I worried a falling book might flatten her. I said this to her one day and she said it was neither appropriate to discuss a woman's weight nor polite to talk to someone while they were using the bathroom. My generation is so sensitive, Winnie. It's a slog making friends through casual conversation; I've practically given it up.

I miss you and all the best.

`C.

Jan. 18, 1964

Winnie –

Just a quick note, hon, about a book just arrived at the library I think you'd enjoy. It's a biography of Clara Barton, in whom you used to say you say was a "kindred spirit." I've hardly cracked the spine myself but I think you'd enjoy it.

The other night, I gussied myself to an appropriate level and saw a play about a family renting a cabin up in the Catskills. It was a farce, I suppose, and very funny, gauging by the audience around me. But for whatever reason, I found myself hilariously sad somewhere during the second act. A nice man in my row ushered me into the foyer after my crying upset the row in front of me.

"Oh, no trouble for me. I've always had very good night vision," he said.

I had asked if he ever felt overtaken by darkness. Apparently, I found this response incredibly poetic and leaned in to nuzzle his neck, the smell of chipped beef and cedar shavings too strong an aphrodisiac to resist. He pushed me away, obviously, and practically ran back into the theatre. I bicycled home and spent some quality time in the bath feeling sorry for myself.

The place I call home has never felt less comforting or more empty and now I'm sorry for having written you a sad note. Forgive me, please.

`C.

May 9, 1964

Winnie –

Greetings from Bedlam. I'm joking of course, but by now you've probably heard I'm taking time to open my pores at The Estate, as I like to call it. The place isn't as fancy as

you'd hope. It lets out a constant whiff of white vinegar and old shoes. I share a room with a woman who feels so overwhelmed she sometimes struggles to lift her spoon.

“There’s a girl, Vanessa,” I say, which is such a ravishing name. “Just another spoonful and we’ll go for a walk and flirt with the handsome lawyer in the garden who can’t remember he’s already married.”

Nothing I say motivates her. I watch her and I ache, Winnie.

Now: thinking back over everything I’ve offered as advice regarding your Texan, I realize I may need show you a secret chapter from my memoir (even if I’m not exactly supposed to). Bear with me.

It’s hard to imagine but I used to be young, like you. In fact, when I was volunteering for the Women’s Auxiliary at the hospital over the war, I was younger than you. Sixteen and skipping school without my mother, your grandmother, suspecting a thing. The position wasn’t anything heroic, or even taxing. Mostly, I changed bed linens and helped in whatever way a sixteen-year-old could help with anything. I hardly ever saw the wounded, the object of my work – the rooms were emptied and waiting for new sheets and fresh blood by the time I walked through the doorway.

But there was a particular day I entered a room with a pile of warm sheets and was surprised to see a soldier sitting in a chair by the window. His left leg was sheathed in a plaster cast up to the knee, a pair of crutches leaning against the sill, and he was staring at me with a funny smile spread across his face. As if he were expecting me.

“You’re too late,” he said. “The fella who was in here died from his dirty sheets. They’ve already taken him to Arlington. Now, don’t you feel bad?”

It knocked me off my guard and I laughed. I sat at the corner of the bed and talked with him, though fraternization with patients, as they called it, was forbidden. His hair was

blonde and he wore it an inch or two longer than most soldiers did in those days. But it was combed like a little boy on Sunday and didn't bother me. He had the most remarkable nose – large but not bulbous, sharp with a small crest in the middle, very handsome. I was smitten, you can probably see. He was in his properly-pressed uniform, discharged that same morning, and he looked ready to hobble back to the front.

“Oh, but they got me,” he said, patting his leg. “Whoever they is. It could have been one of our boys, for all I know. Doesn't matter now, does it, Minnie Mouse?”

He talked me into following him outside, where he could “breathe something other than iodine and Salisbury steak.” We chatted for about ten minutes and agreed on a place to meet after my shift ended. I returned to dress the beds and could hardly tell the fitted from the flats. I was so flush with anticipation, so alive from talking and the bit of attention, I stripped mattresses of clean sheets and stretched dirty linens across empty beds until my floor supervisor sent me home early. I'd accidentally given myself an extra hour to pace the sidewalk in front of the hardware store, waiting for the soldier.

We were together a week. Or maybe it was only six days. (Have you ever experienced something that seems to last, alternately, a minute and a decade?) He had rented or borrowed a car, a convertible, from a friend and we breezed down the coast. Every place we pulled over – a boutique under a carved, wooden sign where he held a green dress up against me and said “there she is,” crab shacks in tattered, seaside towns, an ocean-view restaurant, with a dress code, the string of perfectly honest hotels, with carefully stacked piles of soft, white towels – he introduced me as his wife. We walked with arms hooked, shared a bed, we knew each others scent, his unwashed hair like burnt almonds and motor oil. *We were* married, I thought.

But what's the half-life of any joy? At the end of our honeymoon, he dropped me off down the street from my house, brushed his mouth against my forehead and became a memory. My parents and sisters had already figured I was dead or kidnapped and I remember feeling bothered by how quickly their relief turned to anger. The hospital took me back, with conditions, after I invented a dying relative. And the soldier dissolved into a cold bath of mistakes I'd probably make again.

I tried to find him, of course. I played Miss Marple for a few days, asked around. Then, a nurse on the night shift said my soldier had returned to his wife and kid somewhere outside of Milwaukee. Was it true? Had he lied to me? Or had the nurse gotten her phone lines crossed? I was in purgatory, Winnie. I'm still unsure if I was a six-day mistress to a married man, but I sat next to a mop in a closet for half a day when I heard. Three shifts after talking my way back onto the job, I left my apron and didn't return.

Maybe you know which direction we're headed, Winnie, although I hope you don't. I hope you're distracted by the tiny handful of respect you (may) still have for me. I can't expect you to keep it when I tell you I had a baby a certain number of months later. The lie I'd first told was growing inside me, until it became impossible to hide. The news outed, Father left the house without his hat and my mother sat and cried on the sofa. I threw up in my lap and ruined a dress for good. It took the birth for my sisters to begin speaking to me again, longer for my mother. Father became something like a disapproving uncle or an old neighbor who pops in to ask about everyone but me. It didn't matter – she was unexpected and she was a perfectly healthy baby, the finest thing I'd ever been responsible for, at least partly. Like a doll, I used to think. She hardly fussed.

I took her for a stroll in the park near our house one day, not long after we'd first met. I left without telling my mother, even though she'd said it looked like rain. We lay on a

blanket in the grass, my fingers walking down her doughy arms. I thought of nothing else. Not the rest of today, not tomorrow. I must have dozed because the rain startled me and I ran home, into the back door off the kitchen, my sweater still pulled up over my head. My mother greeted me with a horrified look, her hands buried in a bowl of ground meat.

“Do you not have her?” she said.

We sprinted back to the park, me sobbing and my mother yelling at me to shut up. I only forgot, I said, again and again, but even I wasn't totally convinced: I remembered running home in the rain and thinking about you, specifically, while I did it. Was I that stupid, that villainous? Had I really treated you like a doll, leaving you on the stairs, under the bed, out in the rain? We reached the spot in the park and there you were. And if your clothes weren't pasted to your skin and you hadn't been screaming and I didn't feel like someone had wrapped something around my throat, I might have kicked harder against what was to happen next. My mother scooped you up and slid you inside her coat, unbuttoning her sweater and pressing you against her skin. Then she ran home. I didn't follow but collapsed to the ground and watched you both disappear across the grass, around the corner and down the street. It got dark and sometime later, one of my sisters came and walked me home, where you were already being divided like the babe in Solomon's court.

This was supposed to remain untold, Winnie, something we all decided years ago. Balancing on top of that promise has been the easiest and hardest thing I've ever done and now that I've fallen off it, I'm not sure why I feel so relieved.

I'll write you again soon, if you'll let me.

`C.

June 1, 1964

Winnie –

Congratulations. Your mother tells me you're engaged. His name is Alvin, she reminded me, more than once, and I should be more polite. I will try, Winnie. I hope your Texan, Alvin, is the Gilbert Blythe to your Anne Shirley. Honestly and truly.

While I was surprised about your engagement, I was more shocked when your mother said nothing about my confession. I can only assume you didn't tell her, which is, I suppose, the best for everyone. And now that I mention it, I hope you'll consider forgetting the whole, pathetic account. In the end, it doesn't change how we breath; I'm still sitting here, writing you letters and you are still coming into your own at university. I know asking you to disremember a story is probably a futile assignment. Would you forget your own name? Can you keep the cat from scratching at the door? Forgive yourself for leaving your baby out in the rain? There are so few moments, anymore, where I don't consider an alternate universe where I'd taken two seconds to bend down, scoop you up and onto my chest before walking home. Our lives are so easily bent by the weight of happenstance. Sitting too long in the sun, a poor night's sleep, daydreaming, a burning need to prove someone wrong. Tiny acts with, sometimes, brutal reactions. I'm reminded of the time the cat limped inside with a bloody foot and how, for years, I'd discover a dried, red paw print whenever I swept under my dresser or the hutch that belonged to your great-grandmother.

I'll visit you next month, before you leave for school again. I pray you'll see me as you always have, if you're able: as your aunt who can't hardly move but out of love for our dear, dear Winnie.

` Collette