

KINDS
OF LOVE

a novel

May Sarton



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author wishes to thank the National Foundation of the Arts and the Humanities for a generous grant toward the writing of this novel, and Marjory Gane Harkness for permission to use Eli Bunker's letter, page 242 of *The Tamworth Narrative* (Freeport, Maine: The Bond Wheelright Company, 1958).

CHIEF CHARACTERS

THE LIVING

Ellen Comstock (formerly Lockhart), a widow

Nick, her unmarried son

Christina Chapman (formerly Holt)

Cornelius Chapman

John, married to Sybille

Marianne, married to Bruno Spencer

Olivia, unmarried

}

Children of
Christina and
Cornelius

Cathy, youngest daughter of Marianne and Bruno Eben Fifield, native of Willard, retired
businessman and

diplomat

Jem Grindell, town historian

Jim Heald, his friend, married to Sarie

Jane Tuttle, botanist, long-time resident of Willard

Susie Plummer, librarian and retired missionary

Mary Loveland, matriarch of the Loveland clan

Sally and Timothy Webster, summer people

Mamzelle, the Chapmans' old governess

Ed Taggart, road agent

Dinnock Corey, mailman

Johnny Dole, policeman

Orin Gregg, warden

Mrs. Molly Goodnow, housekeeper for Eben

Hannah, housekeeper for Jane Turtle

Old Pete, jack of all trades

Joel Smith, a Dartmouth student

THE DEAD

Rufus Comstock, Ellen's husband, a farmer

Seth Lockhart, Ellen's grandfather, a schoolteacher

Judge Gordon Chapman, Cornelius's father

Olive Fifield, Eben's wife

Sophia Dole, his great-grandmother

Erica Portland, an artist

Miss Morse, General Morse's daughter, a schoolteacher

The untameable, the live, the gentle.
Have you not known them? Whom? They carry
Time looped so river-wise about their house
There's no way in by history's road
To name or number them.

—ROBERT GRAVES, "Through Nightmare"

A Walk Through the Woods

CHAPTER 1

Old Pete, out chopping wood beside his shack, saw the two women go past down the dirt road toward the brook and watched them, as he watched everything within range, with lively curiosity. Ellen must be seventy-five if she's a day, and Christina Chapman can't be much younger, he thought, but they walk like gazelles—"gazelles"—he savored the word. Christina was tall, lean as a beanpole; beside her Ellen looked like a skinny little kid. But whatever the difference in height, their stride was easy.

"Going to explore the old lumber road, I'll bet. They'll find it changed."

Many were the times in the last forty years that Old Pete had watched those two go off together as if they were kin. He could remember back to when Christina had come up from Boston and spent the winter with Ellen's family, when they were eleven or twelve years old. Christina had married into the Chapman clan, and they went back three generations, among the earliest of the summer people, built a grand place on top of the hill, raised horses and sheep for the fun of it, kept gardeners and stable boys. They came with the swallows and left after Thanksgiving. No one could call them natives. They had a smoother grain. They had not had to struggle just to keep alive, like Ellen and her family, and the difference showed in the two women's faces. Christina stood straight as ever, held her head high, and showed hardly a wrinkle except that deep one between her eyes that made her look curiously interested. But her dark blue eyes could still take a man by surprise with the fire that flashed out when she was pleased or angered.

Ellen showed the strain of the winters, the strain of a hard life. Her thin face was covered with a veil of fine wrinkles now. Her brown eyes had sunk deep into the bone with time. But she had kept her slight figure, and from the back, as Old Pete watched her now, she might have been a girl.

A sight like this would keep him dreaming for the next hour. He had moved about the village from one abandoned sugarhouse or shack to another for the past sixty years, unwilling to work more than now and then, a living encyclopedia of Willard lore, a great talker, hunter, and fisherman. He knew the rich, for he and his dog, Flicker, hunted and fished with them, and he knew the poor as one of them. In the winter he sat by many a stove and gossiped. But he had not been welcome at Ellen's, because he liked to drink as well as Rufus, her husband, and when Rufus got liquor in him he had been a hard man to live with. Ellen had managed by sheer grit, and by her silences that surely had been punishment for that gregarious man.

"Seems like the women around here have been given a grain or two more pluck than the men, and that's an odd thing." Old Pete sat down to cogitate, for he was not a man to let an idea go unchewed over, especially as thinking gave him a chance to light his pipe and lay his ax down.

Christina lifted her head and flashed a smile at her companion. They were walking under a golden and scarlet cloud of maple leaves, and it was irresistible to look up and through to the blue overhead. You could get drunk on the color. It banged like a clash of cymbals.

"I wonder how the old road will be."

"So overgrown you won't recognize it," Ellen answered.

Then they were silent, absorbed in the walk itself, content to be together.

"You can still outpace me." Christina stopped to catch her breath. "As you've been doing for the last sixty years. Sixty! Can you believe it, Ellen? Where has it all gone?"

"Seems like yesterday that we set out with a picnic basket and got lost up the minister's hill, lo

the trail altogether—do you remember?”

“~~We were fifteen then. We could still run away!~~” And Christina laughed her loud boyish laugh which, Ellen thought, had not changed at all. “The worst thing about old age is that you can’t run away. Life has you all right—caught in such a net, it’s little short of a miracle to get off for a walk in the morning with an old friend. As it was, Cornelius didn’t want me to go. But I needed to see you, Ellen—I needed a breath of fresh air.”

“It can’t be easy for you, with him so down these days.”

“It’s harder on him. The stroke made him a cripple in a few seconds. After all, he played tennis when he was past sixty, sailed his own boat when he was seventy. It’s hard with all that in you to find it next to impossible to get up out of a chair. Hard to believe it was just six weeks ago.”

They had reached what had once been the entrance to the lumber road, but the town graders had torn up the whole bank and left huge boulders and rubble where, a few years before, painted trillium and wake-robin and small ferns had grown. The alders had grown up around old stumps.

“It’s horrible!” Christina called out, trying to pick a way in. “How can they do this to the roadside? Does nobody care?”

Ellen smiled a thin smile. Christina’s vehemence, her outrage before what could not be changed had always amused her, for it seemed so innocent. She herself expected the worst and was never surprised when it happened. She followed her tall friend, scratching her face on a sharp twig, but at last they had scrambled their way through and stood in the tangle of brush, close to an old cellar hole where, in the eighteenth century, there had been a clothespin factory.

Now it was possible to discern a faint open path through the bracken and small trees.

“Well,” Ellen said, “there’s still a road anyway. Look, there’s a deer-hoof mark in the mud.”

“So it is. Think we might see one?”

“I doubt it, with all the dogs loose in the village these days. Why, the deer used to come right out of the green ten years ago, to get the windfalls. It’s a rare sight now.”

“The wilderness is being taken from us,” Christina said, and then laughed, for they were pushing their way now into dense undergrowth along a stand of pine by the brook, “but one can’t call this exactly tame.”

“It’s just a different kind of wilderness, I guess.”

But Christina had not heard—she was stooped over to look closely at a perfect round cushion of pale green moss with a brown mushroom beside it. “Dear things,” she said. “How long is it since we have made a wild garden to take home? Oh, I do wish I had brought a basket and a trowel. Cornelius would have liked to see these.”

A jay screamed overhead. They could hear the brook trickling along somewhere to the right over boulders and under fallen trees. Everything had a wild, damp, sweet smell of moss and pine and fallen leaves. And the two women stood there a moment, just sensing the intricate, rich atmosphere around them, the woodsiness of woods.

“I’m so glad we came,” Christina said. Then, gazing around her, she added, “I wish I could have seen it before all the great trees were lumbered off,” and led the way on, holding onto the sharp branches for Ellen, handing the end of one to her so it couldn’t snap back. “Yes, a raggedy, odds-and-ends kind of wilderness it is now.”

Pretty soon the silence all around silenced them, and they were inside the adventure, for it was something of an adventure as they got deeper and deeper in, feeling their way by instinct and keeping to the road by following the sound of the brook. There was no road anymore.

“Isn’t this fun?” Christina turned round to enfold her friend in a smile.

“It ought to be close to that big rock where we used to sit. There! See it? Just beyond that pine.”

~~Here they climbed up and sat down, for auld lang syne—Ellen with quick grace, Christina cursing~~ stiff knee as she slipped and nearly fell and tore a hole in her tweed skirt. Once settled, she leaned her head against the trunk of the pine and closed her eyes.

Ellen watched the water curling round a boulder, making small eddies, and thought she could watch moving water forever and not tire of it.

They were comfortable together. They didn't need to talk, never had. It was the quality of silence between them that had made this friendship last and renew itself over all the years.

Christina lit a cigarette.

“You shouldn't do it, Christy—after pneumonia and all.”

“Don't badger me. I'm happy.” She inhaled deeply, and was seized by a spasm of coughing.

“See?”

“Oh dear ...” Her face had become quite pink with the racking cough. “I do hate carrying this decaying carcass around.”

Ellen laughed. “I can hear you saying that twenty years ago ... you've always said it.”

“Have I?” Christina was astonished. “I don't remember.”—She pushed all this talk aside. “How about Nick?” she asked.

Ellen noticed that she had put out the cigarette.

“He doesn't change much. Lately he's got interested in making bird feeders—invented a new kind that he says will keep jays and squirrels out. You might like to try one, Christina—then he could see if it works.”

“Hasn't he tried one himself?”

“Birdseed is expensive.”

Just there the perfect harmony between the two women showed a tiny crack or scratch on its surface. Ellen had learned long ago that Christina could never possibly imagine what her life was like, what it meant when a cold spell came early and the heat bill soared, how pennies must be counted. What made it worse was that Christina *thought* she understood.

Christina was dismayed. After all these years, I still do it, she thought to herself. But because her nature flowed outward, because she was an optimist and would not dwell on the darkness, she said once, “I want to buy one for Cornelius.”

Ellen did not say thank you. She was animated at these moments by fierce, bitter pride. She said, “Nick will like that,” and got up.

Christina sat there thinking about Nick, the abnormally gentle son of a hard-hitting, hard-drinking man. Either he had been born lacking any masculine drive, or something had been beaten out of him when young. He had been drafted into World War II, had come back silent and sick, and had spent five years in the state hospital. When he finally came home to the farm, his father was, perhaps mercifully, dead, and it was taken for granted that he would not ever again be asked to do a full day's work. He puttered around, adored by his mother, with whom he communicated mostly without words.

While Christina thought about Nick, Ellen had been walking on, and now Christina tried to get up to follow, but found she was absurdly stiff.

“Give me a hand, Ellen, or I'll never get these old bones perpendicular again.” Christina felt the strength in the wiry little body as Ellen gave a great tug. “Hurrah! We're in motion. Do you think we could find the old trail and go home over the hill and back?”

“Is that what you had in mind?” Ellen smiled in spite of her crossness. The trail hadn't been used for years. They were sure to get lost. But why not, after all? There was no one else in Willard who

could get Ellen out on a crazy adventure like this. "Let's give it a try. But what if we get lost?"

"We won't. Besides, I brought my compass."

"Old Pete saw us go—he'll know if we never come back," Ellen chuckled. "Send that clever hound of his after us."

The mood had lightened. And there was something about a brilliant autumn day like this that called out for adventure, for getting out of the routine. Christina whistled as they pushed their way farther and farther in, then stayed by the brook, watching for a place where they might cross over without getting soaking wet.

"Not many mushrooms this year. It's been too dry," Ellen noted.

"Wasn't there a huge pine just at the start of the trail, along that stone wall?" These were the things one remembered with one's whole system, Christina was thinking. She would never forget that pine and the shape of its trunk, split about ten feet up into two huge branches; but ask her the name of one of her schoolmates in the seventh grade and she would hesitate. Names and dates flew out of her head these days, and she hardly bothered to try to recapture them.

"Yes, and there it is, if we can get over."

"There it is!" They felt it as triumph to have come out just right like this, after fifty years or more. "Topped though," Christina added as she looked up through the great tree and saw its top cracked off and lying caught in the lower branches. "Lightning, I suppose."

They managed to scramble over the brook, although Christina got one leg pretty wet when she slipped on a wet stone.

"All right? You didn't hurt your knee?"

"Nope."

"We follow the stone wall first," Ellen directed.

"I wonder who cleared all this and dragged those stones and built a wall—not more than a hundred and fifty years ago, but it might as well never have been done. I feel for that man. He must have thought he was building a sure foundation for sons and grandsons—but no doubt they went West, and just petered out, until the homestead rotted back into the woods or burned."

This outburst was not answered as Ellen, in the lead now, picked her way upwards. If all went well they would reach the great rock from where, if you managed to scramble up, you got an unexpected view of the village, the pond, and, in the distance, all the way to Vermont on a good day. She was animated now by a strong wish to get there, and she was pushing on.

"Hey, wait for me!" Christina called. It was no longer an idle walk, she realized, but an expedition. "Hold your horses, girl, remember you're with an old lady." And, indeed, she was out of breath and sat down on a convenient rock when she caught up with Ellen.

"I wonder what Jem will do about the bicentennial. It's his baby, from what I hear."

"Oh, he's only interested in cellar holes and gravestones," Ellen said contemptuously. "Especially those of his own family."

"Well, he's asked me to do a chapter of the history on the women of Willard."

"Going to do it?"

"Yes," Christina said seriously. "The subject interests me. Besides, with Cornelius kept indoors, I've got plenty of time on my hands."

"I have to do education."

"Well, if anyone knows about it you do."

Ellen had taught school from the time she was sixteen, until she married Rufus Comstock at twenty-five. Then a Boston girl took over for a while for the sheer fun of the thing, a college graduate, but the

old brick school-house had been long abandoned. Willard children joined those of the next village and were driven to the school-house there instead of walking two or three miles as they had done a through the nineteenth century.

“Jem’s good at getting slave labor. I don’t want to do it,” Ellen said, walking on ahead.

“But you’ll do a good job. You know you will.”

“Seems like I’ve worked for this town enough for little pay and no thanks. I was Town Clerk a those years.”

“I know.” They were climbing now, and Christina needed her breath for that. So for a while there was silence. A chipmunk chattered, gave a little squeak, and disappeared like lightning under a stone. Christina’s knee bothered her, but her head was a whirl of thoughts, a kind of intersection where the scream of a flicker was noted, and the way the light struck a birch just ahead, or the silent fall of a single golden leaf wavering through the still air; and at the same time she was thinking about Ellen and Ellen’s style, which was to complain about almost everything life asked of her and then do a superlative job; Ellen was a born nay-sayer who lifted herself into action with bitter humor and who, ever a person could be counted on, could be counted on—this tiny woman battered so consistently and recklessly by life. But underneath both the physical world around them and the person plunging on ahead, this walk had another dimension for Christina: the history of the town that might have been written if Jem had not taken it over—the complex, heartbreaking tale of the slow erosion of any possibility of fanning on this rocky, poor land, and what happened to people who had to live with failure, the kinds of ingenuity, courage, and sheer stubborn grit that life here had demanded.

Not only that general a tale was in her thoughts, more alive than usual to the adventure, but something about Christina Holt, now Chapman, herself. How different a person I would be if my father had not come here as a boarder nearly a hundred years ago—if there had been only Boston and no Willard in my life! Who was going to speak of these interchanges? Of what Holts and Chapmans and Bakers and Jameses had brought to this little corner of New England, and what they had been given in exchange? It was not a simple story, and, alas, Jem Grindell was a simple man, a teller of tales, a believer in all the clichés of New England history, a professor of chemistry long retired, grown immensely fat and preposterously absorbed in genealogies. For years Christina had fled at his approach. But now she was cornered.

“There are going to be an awful lot of long-winded meetings, I’m afraid.” That is what came out of her meditations, aloud.

They had reached a kind of cliff. There seemed no way around or up it.

“Was this here? Do you think we are lost?”

But Ellen was out of sight.

“Ellen, where are you?” Christina shouted, and was relieved to get an answer from off to the left.

“Over here, bear left. We’re lost all right, but I think I know where we are.”

Christina glanced at her watch. They had been walking for only three quarters of an hour, she noted, furious to be so exhausted. It really felt as if they had been at it for half a day. Her knee, injured years ago in a fall from a horse, was complaining rather painfully. But if it was Ellen’s way to complain and then do the impossible, it was Christina’s way never to complain, never to admit that she could be in trouble or pushed beyond her strength—and then pay for her pride, and often do a botched job.

“Where do you think we are?” she asked when she had caught up with Ellen in a gloomy thicket of hemlock.

“I have an idea we have to keep bearing left and we may come out on that road near where the old people used to live.”

“You’ve a better head than I have. I haven’t a notion *where* we are.”

Christina sat down heavily on a fallen tree trunk as they emerged from hemlock into hardwood again. And Ellen, aware that her friend looked suddenly a bit done in, sat down beside her, although she was eager to find out whether her hunch about a way out onto the road was right. If not, they really were lost, and the compass might come in very handy indeed.

“Crazy old women, we are!” Christina panted, and laughed her bravura laugh.

“Better crazy than dead,” Ellen chuckled. “My heart hasn’t thumped like this since Micah fell down the well.”

“We must have borne left too far—that brook always was a deceiver—remember the time we tried to find watercress and came out, finally, miles from where we thought we were?”

“Bedraggled, all right, and pretty tuckered out.”

They exchanged a glance, mocking, tender, holding in it hundreds of such memories of escapades and all the tragedies and struggles that a long, rich life brings with it. The watercress walk, as Ellen remembered, had brought them close again after the four years when Christina was at Vassar—and more often than not, off to Europe in the summer—and seemed to have gone off into the world of the rich forever.

By that time Ellen was married and Nick in rompers, and Rufus had been furious when she got home, late for lunch. He had never understood about Christina. How many times had he stormed at her, “They’re rich and we’re poor and never the twain shall meet!” At the bottom of his resentment was not envy but contempt. He was a proud man—proud of working as hard as he did, proud of getting up at four to milk. “That man” (as he called Cornelius) “doesn’t know the meaning of work.” But pride didn’t help Rufus in the end when things just got too hard and he began to drink to put fire in his stomach against defeat. Oh, she understood ... but ...

Christina saw the shadow on Ellen’s taut face as they moved on but said nothing. When two people have known each other this long, the past is near the surface. When they met now, everything opened up, joy, grief. They knew things about each other that no one else in the world knew—the moments of failure of nerve, the secret wounds. It was to Ellen that Christina confided her anguish over her eldest son, John, who had tried to commit suicide before he was forty and still suffered from periods of depression. Cornelius, shamed deeply by this failure so close to the marrow, had never been able to help.

“Now, Ellen, you’ve got to use that sixth sense of yours and get us out onto a road, my girl!”

“Well, we’ll have a try.”

Christina was slowed down by her knee and heard the good news from far off. “We’re all right, Christy! I’m out on the Mill Road ... hurry up.”

That “Christy” induced a spurt of new energy. It had been her childhood name, but only Ellen ever used it now. It acted like a spur, and within a few minutes of tough scrambling under hemlocks again and over a broken stone wall and a rather perilous dump full of broken bottles, Christina emerged panting, laughing with relief, onto the familiar road just a few yards from the Preckles’ old place.

“Bravo, old girl! I must admit I’ve had it!”

“It’s only ten minutes now down the hill to Old Pete’s and home.”

They had reached the burned-out remains of the Preckles’ house. The small barn had fallen during the last winter’s heavy snows. It was a desolate sight now, the windows all broken, door off its hinges, and the whole thing charred black. Christina, more tired than she cared to admit, shivered as they went past.

“There’s something to be said for dying together in a big blaze when you’re near ninety,” Ellen

commented.

“I suppose so. But I’ll never forget John’s face when he had gone up after the fire truck and came home.”

“Guess it would give anyone a turn—we all felt responsible in a way; don’t know quite why.”

“The loneliness ...” Christina murmured. And they left it at that. Twenty years ago it had happened those two old people burned to death and help coming long after they were gone. Sam had tried to drag his wife out, and then they had both succumbed in the doorway only a few feet from safety. That was the irony of it. “But I guess you’re right. Ninety is old enough. We won’t be climbing around like goats together when we’re that old, I can tell you.”

“It’s funny how one has always thought of dying, but never about old age,” Ellen said. “Seems like though I never wake up any more feeling really ready to git up and go. Why, I used to be up for Rufus by four o’clock!”

“Shh ...” Christina had just time to make them both stand still as a young buck, his small antlers still in velvet, stood on the rise about twenty yards from them. For one long moment the two old women and the deer looked at each other. No one breathed. Then, with a superb bound, he crossed the road, white tail up, and crashed into the woods on the other side. It had been so quick, so silent, so full of magic that they still stood there for a long moment after he was out of sight.

“Oh—oh—” Christina breathed then. “How he looked at us—those liquid eyes! What a look!”

“Worth getting lost for that sight, I’d say.”

“I understand so well why the Indians felt the animals were gods. He was like a god, wasn’t he?”

“And he’ll be shot dead, like as not, come November.”

“I’ll never get used to it—never!” Christina was vehement.

“No, neither will I. But a deer means meat. The way the cost of living has gone up, you can’t blame the people.”

“You know, it’s interesting—have you noticed as people get older they lose the wish to kill? Cornelius used to be a great hunter. Remember that time when he and Ned Turner got a bear, a wildcat, and two deer all in one morning?”

“I still have the clipping. They looked pretty proud of themselves.”

“That bearskin’s in the study still. The grandchildren still lie on it and hug the big head—but Cornelius has changed. Only the other day he told me if he ever got well he wouldn’t shoot any more, not even woodcock—‘especially not woodcock’ was what he said.”

“I wonder why—why he changed.”

“I used to hunt myself. Can’t imagine it now. Maybe we get less primitive as we get older.”

“Though hardly more ethereal.” Ellen smiled, for Cornelius had become a heavy man these last years, heavy and solid.

“Maybe not, but maybe we have pity on the living, more pity perhaps, because we feel so frail and in peril ourselves.”

“Yes ...”

They had reached the top of the final rise in the road. Flicker greeted them with loud barks and a warm welcome. There was Old Pete still sitting on the stone wall, smoking his pipe.

“Didn’t think to see you come back on this road,” he called out.

“We got lost, came out at Preckles’.”

Flicker bounded up, leaping in the air.

“Down, boy!” Christina was afraid of being knocked over and spoke sharply. Old Pete called the dog back to his side and watched them walk slowly up toward the farm.

They had been gone about an hour, Pete reckoned, but they did not look like gazelles now. Old Pete, who had his own aches and pains to contend with, looked shrewdly at Christina's limp. But to his admiring eyes the tall woman still held herself like a queen. It's the way she holds her head, he said to himself—as if nothing on earth could get her down. And Old Pete, his feet bound up in rags inside his boots, his old jacket more like the skin of an animal than a piece of clothing, enjoyed the sight of good clothes on a woman. Christina's flame-colored suede jacket and gray skirt, the white chiffon scarf round her throat, looked just right to him.

Beside her, Ellen, all in brown, looked like a frail autumn leaf, but of the two he reckoned Ellen might last the longer. She was nothing but a wiry little engine now, no flesh to wear away—well, the village would be a different place when those two went, they and maybe four or five more. Miss Tuttle—he had not seen her for years out with her basket and trowel, botanizing. She was ninety, and no one saw her often any more. But Ed, the road agent, had told Old Pete not so long ago that he had seen her sitting out on the porch only the other day. When these three women died, the village would lose some quality, some configuration it had had for fifty years. But Pete's long, quiet pause on the stone wall had not led his wandering mind to any great conclusions about why the village had been dominated by womenfolk. Maybe that's just the way things are, he thought. Maybe the Lord made them stronger in spirit and gave men the wits.

“Eh, Flicker?”

Flicker pricked his ears.

“As far as I can see, women don't invent things. They just hold together and keep going what men have invented.”

Way off in the distance he could see a little dust blown up by Nick's Ford truck. No doubt Ellen had got him to drive Christina home. It didn't look as if she could easily manage the long hill. And now that this vicarious adventure was over, and Old Pete had watched the two women go off and come back from their walk, he got slowly to his feet. A long sit certainly wasn't the thing for the rheumatism. And slowly he picked up his ax. He had better keep at it if he was to have his winter woodpile ready in time.

CHRISTINA'S JOURNAL—*October 8*

Cornelius is asleep, and I want to think a little about my walk with Ellen this morning. Sometimes I think I'm a loon to go on with this journal. I used to pretend that I was keeping it for the grandchildren—in those days, twenty years ago, I still felt that everything I did must have some justification. Now I guess I'll have to admit that I keep it up for myself. It does for me what prayer must do for the truly religious—sets things in proportion again. It is not important whether it is even read after my death. By then it will have served its purpose.

What is interesting, after all, is the making of a self, an act of creation, like any other, that does imply a certain amount of conscious work. Ellen is very much aware of this, I feel. She would agree with Keats about a “vale of soul-making.” Or would she? “Soul” is not a word she uses, I realize. But she does a lot of thinking about herself.

The wonderful thing when one has known a person as long and intimately as she and I have known each other is that words no longer have the same importance. No explorations are needed of the other. No, it is rather that when we are together the past flows through the present, is, in some strange way, opened up—so often painful we tend to push it back when alone, but when we are together it is there, alive and precious. So it is being together that matters, not any longer what we may say or not say.

I was stupid about the bird feeders. Damn it. Money does make one obtuse. I sometimes feel it h

been for me like an extra skin, protective against certain currents of life which I have never experienced just because I was insulated. Ellen spends what she has on foolish things often. I count every penny I spend as taken from some good cause. Money is the only area I cannot discuss with Ellen. She has not known either my guilt or my rage about it. It has never worried Cornelius that I spend a million times what Ellen has to spend, on gardeners, horses, the whole enterprise of the wonderful summers here, not to mention the house in town—the servants, entertaining. For Cornelius this is the way things are. Can't be changed. He has no wish to be a saint, bless his heart. But I have felt held back, sometimes prevented from being myself by all that he takes for granted. He thought of my painting as a pleasant exercise, a little as he himself felt about court tennis, I suppose. To take it seriously, to be a professional, would have been not done, would have meant losing one's amateur status. And the same thing about civil liberties—it was all very well to be on the board of the union and to give a certain amount of money (never as much as I wanted to give), but, again, it must not bleed into our "real" lives.—Why have I begun to speak of this now? Because that small exchange about the cost of birdseed brought all this old anguish to the surface again. It appears to me that the New England attitude to money (at least in society) is very much like the Victorian attitude to sex. Must I tease Cornelius about this!

CHAPTER 2

Jem Grindell had called a meeting for the following Wednesday of all the heads of committees for the bicentennial history, and, to spare Miss Tuttle the long flight of steps to the library, they had agreed to meet in the old brick schoolhouse. Long since abandoned as a school-house, it was used chiefly for the Ladies' Aid sales, for an occasional exhibition of paintings, or for informal meetings. Old Pete had been alerted and had built a wood fire in the stove. The hard benches had been hauled out and set around a big square table.

Jem ponderously laid out a pencil and pad at each place. He had already spent a good deal of town money having special letter paper printed with "Willard Bicentennial, 1769–1969" in bold letters at the top. He was a born organizer when it came to such things, but not perhaps a man of great vision; he was passionate about detail. But no one else in the town cared enough in the special way that he did, and no one else would have taken on the onerous job of getting a town history written and in print. For himself he had been working for nearly a year on the genealogies that would be the meat of the book, as far as he was concerned. The essays which he had commandeered on subjects such as local flora and fauna, the part women had played in the Civil War, the missionaries who had gone out from Willard, or the history of the schools he considered to be chiefly window dressing. It was a way, also, of casting a net out for possible buyers, for he himself had undertaken to finance the project, and hoped at least to cover expenses.

Christina, who had gone to fetch Jane Tuttle, was the first to drive up, and Jem hurried out to greet them. Old Pete, of course, was sitting on the fence, smoking his pipe and taking it all in.

"Why, there's Old Pete," said Miss Tuttle. "How are you, Pete?"

"As well as yourself, I hope."

She laughed her whispery laugh.

"I hope much better."

"My dog and I got a wildcat the other day."

"Don't tell me about it, Pete. You know how I hate to hear about the wild animals getting murdered," she said lightly but firmly. "Well, Jem, you got this old creature to come out, and that too, some doing, didn't it?"

Beside her, so tiny and exquisite, her ruffled blouse tied with a blue velvet ribbon at the throat, Jem looked like a rather shabby elephant. At ninety, Miss Tuttle still held herself straight, but she seemed to have got smaller and smaller lately. She looked more than ever like a small bird a cold wind might blow away.

"You'd better come in out of the wind," Christina said, taking her arm.

"But it's a fine day," she protested, "and I must just go and see how that pink hawthorn is doing. It looked to me over-pruned." Then she hesitated. "Is everyone there, waiting? Shall I hold up the meeting?"

"All the time in the world," Jem said. "You know how they are. Christina is the only living soul in the town who has a sense of time."

"I felt responsible. After all, I was bringing a very important person."

"Nonsense." Miss Tuttle laughed again. "It's quite absurd to have asked me to participate"—and she was off to examine the hawthorn, a particular friend, as she had planted it in memory of a nephew killed in World War II.

Jem, Old Pete, and Christina watched her go.

~~“She doesn’t miss a trick, does she?”~~

“It’s the old stock,” Old Pete said. “Why, her grand-pappy climbed Monadnock when he was eight. You can’t get those Tutttles down. They live forever and keep their wits, which is more than can be said for some of us.”

Christina was always surprised, when she had a chance to hear Old Pete talk, at how well-spoken he was. In fact, one of the curious things about the town was that the uneducated of Pete’s age spoke beautiful English—far better than her own grandchildren ever had. Yet she didn’t suppose Pete had had more than six winters’ schooling, if that.

“Who was the teacher here, Pete, when you went to school?”

“General Morse’s daughter,” he said proudly. “It was a fine school in her day—spelling bees and orations; we learned poetry by heart. First thing she did was have us build a bookcase and bring over her books to put in it.”

It was a pity, Christina thought, that he was interrupted in these reflections by the arrival of Miss Plummer, the town librarian, for she would have liked to hear more about Miss Morse, who had come to teach for a year or two in the village instead of coming out in Boston, for reasons that remained mysterious.

But Miss Plummer, brisk, domineering, must be greeted now, and Jim Heald; and dear Jane led back from her botanical interests. Only the Websters were still to come.

“Jem”—she heard Miss Plummer’s rather loud voice from inside—“when are you going to get the meeting going?”

It made a counterpoint to Old Pete’s rendering of a stanza of Whittier’s that had floated back in his mind, no doubt at the mention of Miss Morse:

“‘The rigor of a frozen clime,
The harshness of an untaught ear,
The jarring words of one whose rhyme
Beat often Labor’s hurried time,
Or Duty’s rugged march through storm and strife, are here,’”

he intoned, while Jim Heald nodded.

“Good gracious, Pete, what a memory you have!” Christina hurried off to lead the wandering Miss Tuttle back into the fold. And just then the Websters’ Land Rover drove up. So at last the committee had all arrived, and Jem shouted from inside, “Come on, friends, we are waiting for you!”

Finally they were settled round the table—all except Ellen, the only one of the group who might be said to have work to do, and who slipped in just as Jem coughed and called the meeting to order. Jane Tuttle leaned over to whisper, “Good to see you, Ellen.”

I know more about this town, the real history of it, than any of them in there, Old Pete thought as he sat out in the sun on the fence. Well, might as well find Flicker and go down to the store and leave them to it. Too deaf to hear what’s going on from here. Jem will be at it for hours, with nothing to say.

And with this comforting thought Old Pete wandered off.

Jem had never been short-winded, and with the years, and now his sense of responsibility, it took him a half hour to get anywhere near his point—which appeared to be, when one could untangle from the endless digressions, that he wished each of the members of the Bicentennial Committee

lay before the meeting any ideas he or she might have. Christina had not been listening. As always this sort of meeting, she felt terribly sleepy even before it got well started. She felt cramped and caught, her nature being to act rather than to explore possible avenues of action. Occasionally she and Ellen, sitting at opposite sides of the table, exchanged an amused or impatient glance. The Webster imperturbably polite, as always, listened judiciously. Jane Tuttle doodled, and several times sighed deeply. Only Jim Heald managed to wear an alert expression. Miss Plummer appeared to have fallen asleep, her chin on her hand, her eyes closed.

Well, we are an odd enough group, Christina considered. Cornelius, with his cheerful, incisive mind, would have been a help, and she missed him sorely. But here we are—a pretty fair sample of what Willard was all about when you came to think of it. Few young people, but a singular range of character in the elderly. Miss Plummer might deal with the world as if it were a horde of natives she must tame and order about, to whom she must set a good example (she had been for years a missionary in Hawaii and, at one time earlier, for a few years in China), but one had to admit that she was a woman of extreme courage and good will—not so much a follower of Christ, one sometimes thought, as a captain in the army of her church. She had taken over the tiny memorial library as her headquarters, cleaned it up, organized it, and commanded all parents of small children to be there certain hours, or else. Children loved her, recognizing at once a true Girl Scout or den mother in disguise. There was not the slightest doubt where she stood on any subject. Christina swallowed a smile as she remembered that penetrating voice only the other day saying to little Sammy Preckler, “Go out, boy, and spit as hard as you can. That word you just uttered must be gotten rid of *at once*.” The only trouble was that she could have no possible understanding of the extraordinary woman she would be asked to celebrate in her essay on the town library. Miss Erica Portland had been an artist of something like genius, an eccentric, and in almost every way the exact opposite (oh, that subtle charm and that sly humor!) of Miss Plummer. And Miss Portland’s symbolic vision of Willard as a phoenix, rendered in a remarkably modern painting which hung over the mantel in the library, was quite beyond Miss Plummer’s ken.

“It’s a bird, that’s all. Apparently being burned on a funeral pyre—but why that crazy old creature thought it resembled the town of Willard I cannot tell you.” So she admonished anyone who had the temerity to ask her about it.

Christina was startled out of these ruminations by a question.

“Well, Mrs. Chapman, may we have your ideas?”

“Oh ... well ... about the phoenix.”

“The phoenix, Mrs. Chapman?” Jem repeated, at a total loss.

“Well, you all know, Erica Portland used it as an image for Willard. I think we should resurrect her vision and perhaps find some appropriate quotations, and use it as the device for the bicentennial.”

“An interesting thought.”

Miss Tuttle raised her head from what looked like a large ornamental flower she had been drawing and recited:

“‘Glory, like the phoenix ’midst her fires,
Exhales her odours, blazes, and expires.’—Lord Byron,”
she added with a twinkle.

“Well ... er ...” Jem hesitated, sensing a ripple of laughter rising. “Perhaps not quite appropriate. But we may come to something. I propose shelving Mrs. Chapman’s thought for a later meeting.”

“Except,” Mrs. Webster intervened, “that if we build the bicentennial around a central idea, perhaps we should decide what it is now.”

“I never could understand that bird,” Miss Plummer said *sotto voce*.

“Yet,” Christina came down firmly, “it is, when you think about it, not a bad image for this town, is it? I mean, it has died several times and been reborn, and that’s the whole point—Erica’s point, mean, and it might well be ours.”

“Could you explain, Mrs. Chapman?” Jem asked cautiously.

“Well, Willard began, like all these towns, as a congregation of small farms. Sheep and the manufacture of woolen garments from the wool brought in the first mills, but all that went before the Civil War, so the town had to find a way of existing. Then the war—and the beginning of the flow west, and the lack of manpower. And finally the summer people, who certainly helped the phoenix rise from his ashes, didn’t they?”

“It’s a most original proposal.” Jem held his pencil balanced horizontally between the palms of his hands. “May I just venture my thought about the theme of the bicentennial?”

Miss Tuttle gave one of her loud, unconscious sighs and began a new doodle, and they all resigned themselves to what would surely be long. It lasted interminably, but Mr. Webster saved the day by summing up the gist succinctly at the end.

“You are saying, Jem, that our emphasis should be on the good citizen.”

“Well ... well ... yes, I suppose that is what I had in mind.”

“What do you think, Jane?” Ellen had not spoken until now, but Christina recognized the edge in her voice. Time was oozing away and they were getting nowhere.

“I?” Jane Tuttle lifted her pale gray eyes in a dreamy look and smiled. “I prefer phoenixes to good citizens.”

“Bravo!” Mr. Webster called out.

Jem looked bewildered and sad. It had never entered his mind that there would be any real discussion. He had come prepared to lay down his plans and to have them accepted. It was disturbing to have time wasted by quite unnecessary argument at this point. So he turned now to Jim Heald, old crony and dispenser of balm. Jim’s solution was to go round the table, limiting each person to three minutes, and to ask for overall suggestions about the actual celebrations.

“Fireworks,” Miss Plummer said loudly. “We must have fireworks on the pond. The children will love that. It brings everyone together.”

“Yes, we could even have a phoenix in fireworks,” Mr. Webster said happily.

“One at a time, please. Mrs. Comstock is next.” Now that Jem was forced to listen, he was anxious to limit the speaker’s time.

“Well,” Ellen said quietly, “I think we should perhaps stick to the history at this meeting. The bicentennial is a year off, and surely we can decide about the actual celebration later on. You have given us each a subject, Jem. How long do you see these essays as being? And who, by the way, is to work on missionaries?”

“Jim Heald has volunteered for that important task.”

“Then I want to know whether we are going to try to tell the true history, or are we just going to flatter ourselves?”

Jem cleared his throat several times. He felt bewildered by the turn things were taking, as if all these old friends around the table and the great work in his care were in some strange way being taken over by a group of conspirators—of antibodies, so to speak.

While he shuffled papers over in his briefcase, trying to find something, Miss Tuttle said, “It would be most unusual if we told the truth. It has never been done on these occasions of celebration and self-congratulation, as far as I know, and that would demand a kind of genius which, I fear, with all due

respect to our various talents, none of us can command. By the way, Jem, I must say that I shall be happy to make a general outline and fill in *viva voce* details about the flora and fauna, but to write an essay of even a few pages, worthy of the subject, is really beyond my powers.”

“Nonsense, you’ll do it splendidly, Jane!” Miss Plummer at seventy-two could not imagine that one might feel different at ninety.

“Here, here it is.” Jem looked up over his glasses, not having heard this last exchange, in his agitation. “Here we have it!” he announced triumphantly. “This is what I have chosen as epigraph for the history of Willard.”

He adjusted his glasses, waited for their complete attention and read:

“‘What can you raise on your cold and rocky hill farms?’ said a Southerner to the greatest of New England statesmen.

“‘Daniel Webster’s answer was a proud one: ‘We raise men.’””

“Hear, hear!” assented Jim Heald.

Sally Webster, usually so perfect a lady, unfortunately caught Christina’s raised eyebrow and was captured by one of those irrepressible fits of the giggles that are apt to seize on children in church.

“What about the women?” Ellen asked ironically.

“What women?” Jem did not follow her thought.

“Well, didn’t the cold and rocky pastures raise women, Jem?”

“Of course,” he said, frowning, “naturally. That’s understood, that’s what is meant, surely.”

“Is it?” Christina knew it was dangerous—and time-consuming—to try to argue with Jem, whose mind had been made up before this meeting, and who might listen but would hardly change his plan whatever anyone might say. But there was an electric current in the room now, and she responded to it.

“If we were to examine the history of this town we might discover that the men have been not only generally outnumbered by the women but dominated by them. That those cold and rocky hill farms raised weak men and strong women is my guess. The strong men left even before the Civil War, and those who stayed either died in the war or came back from it changed.”

Jem looked at her with dreary amazement. It was, he considered, typical of women never to be able to stick to the subject in hand.

“Well, since you have been assigned the chapter on the women of Willard, there is nothing to prevent your saying your say, Christina.”

“I shall, Jem. I shall.” Christina was flushed, cross with herself for nearly losing her temper as she had—saved in the nick of time by Ellen’s cautionary glance.

“Now, Sally and Timothy Webster, it is your turn to speak.” Jem turned to them hopefully. Newcomers to the town in the last five years, they were rich, handsome, and generous, and still somewhat in awe of the local gentry such as Jem.

“We really don’t feel equipped for our task. You did mention on the telephone a possible chapter about the non-residents, but, well ... what do you think, Tim?” Sally turned to her husband with relief. Tim was a lawyer and very good at laying the gist of any matter before a jury such as this.

“In the first place, I’d call a spade a spade. I think what you’re after is an assessment of what the summer people have meant to Willard. ‘Summer people’ has a ring to it—it contains, as a phrase, a certain amount of resentment, of course.”

Tim Webster looked around the table with a smile.

“Let’s face it,” Miss Plummer said warmly, “without the summer people the town would have died seventy or more years ago. The summer people rescued the town. Also they brought some men in.”

“Though not the kind Daniel Webster had in mind, perhaps,” Ellen added *sotto voce*.

“By 1878 Willard was a dead duck, I’ll grant you that.” Jim Heald, interested for the first time, leaned forward. “The mill had gone. There were fewer and fewer working farms. Second growth was covering the pasture-land. The town had no money to keep the roads up. The schools were terrible.”

“Well, if so, that’s one legend we might explode,” Christina said, “the legend of the little red schoolhouse.”

Jem had grown red in the face. He felt badgered and disregarded. “What’s the point of a bicentennial if all you’re interested in is tearing the town and all its history to pieces, I ask you!”

“Oh, come on, Jem,” Christina laughed, “we have a chance to do something really useful.”

“I want to give my grandchildren something to hold onto,” Jem said with quiet passion. “I want them to see what we have back of us—a firm foundation.”

Miss Tuttle laid a gentle hand on his sleeve. “Of course, Jem.”

“I’d like to say something, if I may.” Tim Webster looked to Jem for his assent. “It is something to hold onto, it seems to me, that here in all these towns from the turn of the century on, a kind of rich exchange took place between urban and rural people, between the so-called summer people and the so-called natives. It worked. It was to everyone’s advantage, it seems to me. If I may speak for us, Sally and me, we feel immeasurably enriched by what we have learned here since we bought our house. Our children feel the same way. Willard has become home.”

“Well”—and Jem coughed his nervous cough—“all this is very interesting, and I’m sure you will all make a great effort. I need not ask Miss Plummer to speak. We know she will have excellent material in the history of the library and especially a sketch of Erica Portland, one of the eminent women of Willard ... or,” he caught himself up, “would her story really be in Christina Chapman’s domain?” But he did not wait for an answer, as he was clearly now very anxious to get back to his own thoughts.

The hour, which had seemed interminable already, stretched into almost two while Jem explained in detail his various projects to do with genealogies, the tracking down of all stones in the cemetery and, if possible, the houses, or cellar holes, or sites of all the houses where the dead had lived.

“I am having signboards made with the names and dates printed clearly on them, and one of these days I’ll be around to tack them up.”

Everyone present was too exhausted by now to raise questions or objections, although it did occur to Christina that not every person in this secretive place might wish to have his name advertised, or that of the former owners of his house. But this time she held her peace. Miss Tuttle had begun to look withered (there was no other word), and every now and then her head nodded.

“Jem, I’m sorry, but can you excuse us? I promised Hannah to get Jane Tuttle home by five and it’s now half past. You know what a tyrant Hannah is.”

So at last they were freed from bondage. Ellen ran home to get supper for Nick; the others, too, were eager to be off. And suddenly Jem and Jim Heald were left alone in the dusk to gather the papers and pencils together, just as Old Pete came back to put out the fire and lock up.

“Those women are all so clever, Jim, but I think we’re going to stick to my idea and celebrate the town!”

Old Pete grunted as he beat out the fire with a poker—what was left of it.

“Thanks, Pete. I know you’ll be sure that’s safe before you lock up,” Jem said in his authoritative voice.

But Pete had not had his innings, and he had had a couple of beers, and even one beer acted fast. For a drinking man, as he surely was, Pete could not hold his liquor.

“Let me tell you,” he said, holding up the poker like a schoolmarm’s ruler, “trying to work with

women is like putting an ox and a horse in tandem. Those women will run away with you, Jem, before you know it.”

“I’m not so sure,” Jim Heald said, spreading his arms behind him comfortably along the bench back and stretching his legs out. “Jem has a pretty strong notion of how things will be.”

“Giddyap!” Pete yelled in a hoarse whisper about an octave higher than his normal tone. “Giddyap!” and then he sat down too, he was laughing so hard.

“You come home with me, Jim, and we’ll talk things over,” Jem said, ignoring Pete.

“Wish I could, but Sarie’s waiting on me, and I guess I’d better get home,” and he slipped away.

Pete caught the guilty look on Jim’s face and commented, “Never saw a town or heard of one where people had so little time for getting together. At the very hint of a meeting of any kind they start running for cover like rabbits,” and Old Pete gave Jem a gentle slap on the back. “You did well, Jem, to get them to come—very well.”

“Thanks,” Jem said with a short laugh. “Glad someone appreciates the accomplishment.”

“You haven’t got a drink on you, Jem, have you? I’m dry as a dry well.” Old Pete never asked for a drink when he was sober.

“Now, Pete, you’ve had enough. You take care of things here and go home and have something to eat. So long, man,” and Jem went out into the dusk like some great lonely animal.

Pete sat down, rubbed his hand across his eyes and had a little talk with himself. “Miss Morse,” he muttered, “she’d ought to be here—she’d know—standing up there, I can see her now, with her red hair, tall as a beanpole, telling me I had a beautiful voice and to let it out. He staggered to his feet and shouted hoarsely:

‘Then out spake brave Horatius, The Captain of the Gate:
To every man upon this earth Death cometh soon or late.
And how can man die better Than facing fearful odds’ ...

Oh dear, it’s gone, Miss Morse ... te turn te turn te tum ... Forgotten.”

CHRISTINA’S JOURNAL—October 16

Oh, what a relief it was to come home to Cornelius after that interminable meeting! It’s strange that since his stroke, especially now that we know he will get almost entirely well, we have been having such a lovely time *together*. The children will be here for Thanksgiving, and six of the grandchildren, I hope, but I almost dread the interruption. We are reading *Swann’s Way* aloud. We go for little drives and have been soaking in this glorious autumn—the leaves are only just starting to fall and the maples are so stupendous. I am so grateful that we can stay on this year, maybe even right through Christmas, although Cornelius begins to talk about going back to the office, optimist that he is.

The most wonderful thing is that for the first time since John tried to commit suicide I’ve been able to talk about him with Cornelius without one of us getting too angry or upset for words. Cornelius is beginning to see that, without meaning to, he always managed to make John feel inferior—he jeered at John’s interests—how well I remember the fearful incident over the butterfly-chasing when John was twelve and was starting his collection. Cornelius simply would not accept that this could be as valid a occupation as playing touch football. Oh dear me, I am so glad I am a woman! At least women don’t have to make such desperate efforts to prove they are women as men seem to have to do to prove they are men! Darling John is just as stubborn as his father, and for so many years they behaved like two stags, horns locked. I tried so hard to explain them to each other but always failed. The anger went to

deep—it is stupid to open these wounds. I just have to accept that we made terrible cruel mistakes with our firstborn, but we loved him, and some of the love must have been good.

Family life! The United Nations is child's play compared to the tugs and splits and need to understand and forgive in any family. That's the truth, I am sure, but, like every hard truth, we all tend to pretend it isn't true.

It was so moving to see John's tenderness when he first went to see his father in the hospital three months ago. I'm sure Cornelius felt it and that is why, perhaps, we have been able to talk about the boy—man, I should say. John is fifty, and since he was twenty, for thirty years, he has fought through a terrible depression and managed to stay alive. If only Cornelius could admit the courage!

That's what dear Jane said when I drove her home. She laughed about the meeting. "Christina, I don't want to do it for Jem. He tries so hard, you know. But my head was swimming off somewhere all by itself most of the time." But she wanted to talk about John and insisted that I come in and have a glass of sherry while Hannah hovered about to be sure I didn't overstay. I have learned so much from Jane over the years and the last thing is this seraphic way she has of accepting dependence—it can't have been easy for a person of her spirit. How does she do it? She floats—why do I say that? I mean she lets herself be carried by Hannah, yet never becomes a baby, the baby Hannah wants her to be. It takes wisdom to be able to do that with grace.

"We can't measure the courage of that man," she said to me about John. "But has he given up his interest in moths? Tell him to come and see me, Christina—if he comes for Thanksgiving. I do so much want to have a talk with him. He mustn't give up on those things that are in him to do." And she added, when Hannah was out of the room for a moment, "I'm not going to live forever, and I want to see John."

Blessed person. That whole house just breathes with life. Every window is crowded with plants and books everywhere. "You know I'm the luckiest woman in the world still to be able to read—I have to choose, a little at a time—but I still *can*."

I asked her whether she would let me come and make a drawing. I want to do it so much, Jane sitting in the little chair by the window, the plants on the window sill beside her, reading. If I could only get it right! (For once.) She said a curious thing: "It would be interesting to see it. The person inside seems to have so little relation to the person outside these days. Yesterday I got into a fit of giggles when I looked at this wild old creature in the mirror—before Hannah comes to do my hair I don't look very odd."

But she really looks like a small moss rose, crinkled and soft and so sweet! And she smells of lavender and sweet peas, always has. I felt when I left that I had literally rested my eyes on her face.

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