

3/6/64

Dear Bileen:- This letter is overdue by about 4 years. If I were writing it as an office memo, with the word "Subject" at the top of the page I wouldn't be able to think of anything, any group of words that would convey this Subject. All I can do is plunge in.

In the summer of 1959 Pete and Nat Horwitz spent a week with us on my parents' island in the St. Lawrence River. Up there, on what we in my family call The River, my large tribe of cousins, great-aunts and so forth, has for the past 100 years been running what amounts to a summer camping-ground for the clan.

One evening of a particularly hot day (remember the discomfort of that summer of '59?) the 4 of us sat on the porch, with drinks in hand. Nat and I proceeded to get into a sort of rumble à deux. It was extraordinary and very upsetting; one minute all was friendly and the next we were hard at it with the meat-cleavers. The spark was a comment Nat made about a cousin of mine, Camilla Churchill: "A shame Camilla neglects her appearance. She could be lovely. I always say women who let themselves go...." It was here I stepped in with protests and the conversation degenerated. My boiling point is rather high and I don't reach it often -- something like 2 or 3 times a year at most. But a verbal slap at a blood relative gets me feeling prickly very fast; here in addition there were previous events that still tugged at my heart and made Nat's remark, no matter how trivial, just about unbearable to me. The week before I had stood with Camilla and Crighton Churchill, their 8 children and assorted relatives while my uncle read the burial service over a new grave; Camilla's oldest boy, Barney, a brilliant child who had been born with a defective pancreas and died that summer at the age of 14. Nat did not know about this, I am quite sure.

What came next, between Nat and me, was purest fish-wifery. We've had clashes before, but nothing has ever been so virulent as this one. Peter told me afterwards that listening to us was like watching the re-run of an old movie; you want to stop the action or change its course but you can do nothing but sit by helplessly. Camilla's appearance ~~is~~ got left far behind while I and my appearance became the target. This subject I can only describe as a bloody battlefield. My mother and I have raked it with broadsides, large cannon and everything else you can name for over 40 years -- small arms fire can still be heard whenever we meet, even though she is now 70 and I 48.

I'll admit right off that a bad psychological bloc has existed in me re clothes & the physical details of appearance, etc. I won't bore you with a long analysis of this. Anyway I'm not sure I yet know all that's involved. One element I am sure of is Ma herself; her extreme preoccupation with particularities of dress has, in the past, acted like all extremes -- encouraged the very opposite. You know how devilish teenagers can be. I clearly remember what fiendish joy I took in slopping around, looking ragged, dirty and altogether reprehensible. A second element was my French childhood. Little French Catholics get told over and over again that concern with clothes is Vanity, that it's the Spirit that counts, etc. Well, I learned how to be a French child to perfection and then missed out on the transition period to adulthood. #3: from a very plain duck I suddenly turned, at age 19, to something beautiful. No doing of mine -- genes, heredity, that stuff. An outside observer might declare this to be a very happy experience. Yup, except I wasn't prepared for it. All of a sudden I couldn't look a boy in the eye without his saying "don't look at me that way!" nor could I make any remark and hope to be heard. I suppose it's a form of compliment to have someone sigh out in the middle of a conversation "I haven't heard a word you said, but just keep talking; it's a joy to just sit and look at you". This I found insulting. After a short while my looks became something which annoyed me and I began to camouflage -- i.e. continue the same tactics I had used earlier to annoy my mother.

Poor Eileen; you must indeed be wondering what you did to deserve this avalanche of words and self-explorations! Back in that evening of 1959, just before I left the porch and stalked off into the darkness with tears of rage spilling all around, Nat, by misfortune, happened to quote you: "Eileen was ashamed to be seen in public with you the night of Tommy Brockman's concert!". The Quoting Ploy I have been guilty of myself on occasion, during arguments with Phil. Afterwards I always feel nasty, as if I had thrown dirt at myself and also the person I quoted. It's a cowardly trick (for me, anyway) to which I resort only when I'm in bad enough shape to start playing dirty. My "quotes" are not really what the word describes; I put words and whole phrases into the mouths of people who have never, in the memory of man, been known to utter such opinions. Nat, having already told me that she herself felt ashamed of walking down the street with me (and obviously made little impression), dragged you in to give her point some needed weight.

It has been said, of the first A Bomb, that its use shortened the War and saved many lives. This it may have done, but look at the fringe benefits! -- Pandora's Box, the Sorcerer's Apprentice (without the ending). When Nat dropped her Quote, it did stop the blood-shed, but the after-effects have been pretty miserable. Our friendship, if we ever had one, suddenly didn't exist. On the plus side, I am convinced that fight was our last. For the sake of Peter and Phil, who have a deep and warm affection for each other, we keep up a cool something-or-other with a minimum of words.

Nat and I ~~are~~ are diametrically opposed in everything: tastes, pastimes, opinions, values. What enraged me for quite a long time was her having so recklessly dragged in your name. Now I realize it doesn't really matter. Whether Nat made up the quote, used something you had said in distorted form or even repeated your very words, what on earth does it matter? I had been so happy over the good time you and Phil and I and our girls all had had together. Could we just pick up where things got interrupted? Telling you of this "interruption" is really unfair since you probably had no idea that it had taken place. I may never mail this letter. The instinctive urge to tell you about it has been very strong, however...

When was the Foulkes' 25th wedding anniversary party? Wasn't it in October, '59? Anyway I remember meeting you at their house on the stairs in a crowd of people. At the sight of you I nearly burst into tears and felt like seeking Nat out and kicking her in the shins in payment for the trouble she'd caused. Now I figure this "trouble" existed only within my injured vanity. I don't know what you're supposed to say in reply to all this. If you would just put O.K. on a post-card and send it to me I'd be so happy and reassured. What do you do in the summer-time? I now own Whiskey Island on the St. Lawrence; my father, who died in 1961, left it to me. Jenny and I will be up there this summer during July and August. Would you and daughter be persuaded to pay us a visit? We would love that!

Much love to you,

Eileen 3/6/64

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The following day, after a breakfast through which I sat looking like something the cat wouldn't have bothered bringing in (I'd spent most of the night wandering about the island, weeping and looking at the stars), Pete took me aside, saying "I want to explain a couple of things about Nat..." One of these was that Nat is incapable of picturing someone who is accident-prone in matters of dress. My mother is fond of saying I am the only woman she knows who can get on a subway and arrive at destination minus one shoe. During the war, when I had a job at Fairchild Aviation, my co-workers ~~WMM~~ used to wait around hoping to be on the scene of my next mishap; my skirt has fallen off on the street, I've stepped through thousands of hems, if I try a hat with a veil the veil part gets caught in a revolving door... In fact I'm ridiculous. These things happen to me still, years and years after I quit trying to shock my mother with garbage-pail hats and floor-mop hair-dos. I get annoyed at being forever the Comic Relief in this department and put out big efforts at changing things. However my efforts only make the situation worse. My personal solution is to avoid getting bugged by the notion that a gremlin is pursuing me and to be as good-humored as possible about my pratfalls -- if I took them seriously then I'd wind up in suicide or the mentally-disturbed ward. Here in Croton our friends chide me lovingly ("there you go again..") and make nothing more of it. I get a lot of comfort from John Cheever who is himself so accident-prone with clothes that he has been known to walk out of the house minus trousers, and never fails to get shown the Service Entrance when delivering a manuscript to a publisher. He put me in a story, in one of several up-dated versions he wrote of some of Ovid's "Metamorphoses"; I'm a nymph who was put on this earth to remind "those who inhabit a well-ordered world of the basic pathos and awkwardness of humankind".

Enough of this. Dear Eileen, it thrills me to hear of your happiness. When can we meet your wonderful guy? Is Wallingford near Phila.?
We have a tentative date to visit the Horwitzes sometime this spring..

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If we cannot get together this year, then let us look forward to the next. Is your daughter going to boarding-school? Our local schools are so bad that we have to send Jenny away. Just now she's busy filling out questionnaires from Farmington and Milton. Remains to be seen which...

Much much love to you,