

Fri. Sept 17, 1971

My dearest Françoise:- Thank you for your two beautiful postcards which were forwarded to me here at the St. Lawrence. We return to Creten this coming Wednesday, the 22nd. Everything you say about wanting "une grande heure" for a letter to me exactly matches my own thoughts concerning you. As I go through life I collect impressions, small descriptions, big descriptions, etc., etc., which are placed in my imaginary "Françoise folder" but which, unfortunately, never are put into concrete form. - Our immediate family is not large but the individual members seem to us extraordinarily demanding of our time, attention, emotion and so forth. This is just as it should be, now that PB and I have moved up to the rank of Chefs de famille. We would not want it otherwise -- indeed we have no choice in the matter -- but sometimes we wish that there weren't so many problems floating around under our noses and screaming for attention.

I, being the eldest of my family, receive telephone calls from aunts demanding "XXXX" "passez de something about your brother Shirley". This situation has been painful for all concerned. Shirley was in a motor accident a few years ago and has since then had to cope with the scar tissue from a head wound that has made him an epileptic. The winter just past was especially bad -- sometimes he had two seizures in a single day. His wife Betty, not surprisingly, had what everyone thought was either a nervous breakdown or a Crise de Fois in May. Now it turns out that she is an alcoholic and has been for several years. Her eldest daughter Anne turned to me via the telephone asking advice about her mother's problem. She confided to me, sadly "Mama doesn't want to listen to anything I say". I assured the girl there was nothing personal about this and that she, Anne, just could not win as she is the eldest daughter and the eldest of her family -- I know only too well from ~~XXXXXX~~ from my own experience how this can happen.

We had two sudden deaths in the family about 3 weeks ago -- two cousins in their 70's who were stricken within hours of each other. One of them, John Morgan, was my father and mother's favorite cousin and much loved by us and by our children. Just a week before he died he'd sold his 10 acres of St. Lawrence River property to my brother David, who flew over here with Pauline to view their new purchase and happened to be here when John was struck down. The other cousin, Aunt Pelly Morgan Dodge, met her end in a happier way: swiftly and peacefully, on her St. Lawrence Island which she dearly loved, and surrounded by her children, grand-children and even great-grandchildren. These events brought me a session with the long-distance telephone (which I hate as much as I do snakes) and then several beat-rides in stormy weather to carry the bad news to relatives who have no phone.

Your description of La Beule and the string of friends and family who came to visit could be applied exactly to Phil and me on Whiskey Island. Every spring we say "we must not have so many visitors" and by the end of August it has been a seemingly endless procession. The reason we stay up here so late into September is to give us a breathing period, during which we hope to repair our frayed nerves, soothe our tempers (PB's particularly) and so forth and so on before we are confronted again with Creten and its own set of different problems. This time we will have only 6 weeks until we leave for Guatemala & a lot to do about getting ready for the journey which we will again do by car. We are trying to find a mini-truck with a high wheel base; the idea is to get down to Gust., in the usual 3 weeks, unload our stuff (at the same rented house as last year) and go off on side trips from there. Gust. is still very undeveloped and there were times last year when we wished we didn't have to depend on the little dirty hotels and other unappetizing facilities which were offered at such rare intervals: we'll just take mattresses and bedding along and sleep in our truck, if we ever find this vehicle of our dreams.

My mother's annual visit will take place in mid-October. Last November she came to Croton for a long weekend just 2 days before our scheduled departure. Not only were Phil and I frenetic with the details of putting away our horse, packing the car and other problems, but we both felt sick from typhoid shots. Mama's presence came close to preventing us from leaving altogether.

I enclose a contact black-and-white of Linda's child. It's not a great photo but it will give you some idea of her looks. I've examined old photos of her mother at the same age and there is a marked resemblance, but Isabel is beautiful whereas poor Linda was about as plain a little kid as anyone ever owned -- we, of course, thought her perfect in every way, and she's certainly getting her full share of looks now at 32. In typical grandfather fashion Phil took rolls and rolls of Isabel during hers and Linda's 10-day visit here. There are some charming ones in colour (also some of your god-daughter) and I have ordered prints made in Switzerland. As soon as we get them back they will be forwarded to you post-haste -- or is it "air haste"? Linda had a miscarriage in March, which distressed us all, but she wasn't more than a few weeks along and recovered very fast. I do hope she hasn't inherited my tendencies. Even though my mother could fall downstairs while pregnant & suffer no damage, I had extraordinary difficulty producing 3 children -- 5 miscarriages, including one of twins.

Jenny was on Whiskey for 2 or 3 weeks. She brought along a young man whom none of us can stand. His name is Lou and he is the son of an Italian immigrant brick-layer who is now fulfilling the old American dream: saved up his money & is putting his children through college. We tried and tried to find what Jen sees in Lou, but he remained impenetrable, frozen in the ~~XXXXXX~~ new-fancier rebellious phase of the early 20's. Thank heaven they will be apart for the next few months and, knowing my youngest daughter, I can only pray that she will get her normal self and find another young man very soon. She is right now in Croton, working as apprentice to a ceramicist, if there is such a word. Lou remains at Goddard College in Vermont and I hope he meets the girl of his dreams and marries her. I don't want my child to suffer unhappiness, but her relationship with the Italian boy seems most unpromising to the rest of us and I hope she sees the light soon. As you will ~~max~~ see from the photos we send, she is quite beautiful of face. Her skin continues to give trouble but I told her (and she listened, miraculously) that she's obviously inherited my allergy to soap and should never use it on her face; I also gave her vitamins and she looked better when she left us. Her figure would be perfect if she chose to be a Winter's model. She reminds me of a Maillol sculpture and I cannot figure out what ancestor passed on to her the curvy aspect which would have delighted Rubens. This man is an ancestor of mine but how could that have anything to do with it? But I keep forgetting you've seen Jenny! She looks better than in 1970 and will probably (and I hope) show steady improvement in looks and other, more important departments: her state of soul, degree of maturity, greater decisiveness as to just where she is going in life, etc.

Ben David turned 30 last month. This was such a shock to him that he stayed at home, out of sight, on August 24. He owns a tiny island near here with a still tinier shack where he holes up with his dogs, cats and typewriter. Something has gone wrong somewhere and we find it impossible to carry on a conversation with him except on something like Birds (He's developed a real interest in these). His wife Wendy arrives at infrequent intervals. God knows what is happening. We've been told to ask no questions and all we can do is stand by and try not to watch our boy suffer. When his first marriage turned sour, Phil was making a fair amount of money and I offered David some visits to a psychiatrist. David turned down the suggestion with stony finality. Now we haven't the money. Did I tell all this before? If so please forgive. John Cheever, who has visited us for a few days, says we've all reached the age where we repeat stories only it doesn't matter because the listener has forgotten the story anyway.

With Linda all is well. I don't imagine her life is as easy as one would hope. The man she married has been divorced and there are two sons, now 12 and 14, by the first marriage. Instant parenthood of a couple of teenaged boys must have been hard for Linda to get used to. We find it surprising enough to be "instant grand-parents". I wish that PBoyer felt more kindly towards his son-in-law. Is this a normal state of affairs? Phil really can't stand the sight of Arch and when he and Linda and the children come visiting we're all edgy and apprehensive. Linda cries on my shoulder and Arch stays out of sight as much as possible. But then there are meals when we can no longer avoid gathering together. Why is it that, in legend and literature, the mother-in-law has always been vilified? What of the male of the species? I guess the legend and the books were mostly written by men. I can't think of any other reason why Belle-Mère is the only one at which the accusing finger points. When we get back to Craton I will ring up J. Cheever and see if he can find me a wise and sympathetic priest or minister with whom I can talk. Rabbi Robinson is a terrific guy; I wonder if he would consent to sparing a few moments to a non-jew. If you have any thoughts on this or have observed a similar hangup among some of your friends, please tell me. It's a real source of misery and PB himself is unhappy about it -- but can do nothing to control his emotions. I remember being somewhat edgy when Phil and my father were together: my two favorite men, I so wanted them to get along! But things never got so bad that Phil was obliged to keep out of Pa's range of vision. PB and my mother have since the beginning quarrelled with great gusto, but this I find rather gratifying because he is usually defending some action or attitude of mine.

On letters to Guatemala, if you have time to write me (and how important are letters such as yours are to both of us in what is still to us a foreign country!), don't try to use our Central American address. The mails in that republic are dreadful. We leave money with the Craton post-office and all our first-class and air mail is forwarded. If you choose to comment on the above paragraph, would you please put it on a separate piece of paper for my eyes only? Phil enjoys your letters so much and I don't want to deprive him of this pleasure.

I found several other photographs I thought you'd enjoy. One is of me at work in my summer studio, surrounded by the usual mess. It must have been a hot day when Phil took the picture. I don't usually tie my hair up in that unbecoming fashion unless I am perspiring freely. I'm describing the pictures here because it's hard to write on the backs. The big red house is on Whiskey Island. As you see it is not very pretty. My great-grandfather, David Leavitt, built the central core in 1875 and succeeding generations have added according to family-size. The fat black dog at left is Jenny's Paraphone, the two at right belong to David and the middle one is Phil's Bubba Smith.

Last summer David started building Phil and me a tiny house on one of the points that stretches in the direction of Canada. He finished the job with great travail this summer. I would suggest to anyone who has a son Don't Ever Let Him Build You a House. Our relations with him, bad as they were, got even worse as we tried to coax him into putting up the number of shelves I needed and performing other finishing touches long after he'd grown bored with the job. As a matter of fact I am being unfair to him: without him we would still be saying to each other "wouldn't it be nice to have a small house on the point?" Knowing me and my perpetual sense of chill he put in lots of weather stripping and electric baseboard heaters all over the place. I persuaded him to complete the upstairs studio in July and have been working here all summer, away from the tramping feet of visiting children, curious eyes and the rest. We started sleeping out here about 2 weeks ago and find it delightful. This morning there was a slight hint of autumn in the air and I was grateful to wake up without the usual arthritic pains which assail me when the thermometer dips below 60X degrees Fahrenheit. We brought a few bits of furniture from Craton and stole odd things from the big house. I'll send you a picture of this place (No name yet, except Little House).

Much to be you and Jim,