

AS WE  
ARE NOW

*a novel*

May Sarton



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As you are now, so once was I;  
Prepare for death and follow me.

*New England tombstone*

I am not mad, only old. I make this statement to give me courage. To give you an idea what I mean by courage, suffice it to say that it has taken two weeks for me to obtain this notebook and a pen. I am in a concentration camp for the old, a place where people dump their parents or relatives exactly as though it were an ash can.

My brother, John, brought me here two weeks ago. Of course I knew from the beginning that living with him would never work. I had to close my own house after the heart attack (the stairs were too much for me). John is four years older than I am and married a much younger woman after Elizabeth, his first wife, died. Ginny never liked me. I make her feel inferior and I cannot help it. John is a reader and always has been. So am I. John is interested in politics. So am I. Ginny's only interests appear to be malicious gossip, bridge, and trying out new recipes. Unfortunately she is not a born cook. I find the above paragraph extremely boring and it has been a very great effort to set it down. No one wants to look hard at disagreeable things. I am not alone in that.

I am forcing myself to get everything clear in my mind by writing it down so I know where I am at. There is no reality now except what I can sustain inside me. My memory is failing. I have to hang on to every scrap of information I have to keep my sanity, and it is for that purpose that I am keeping a journal. Then if I forget things later, I can always go back and read them here.

I call it *The Book of the Dead*. By the time I finish it I shall be dead. I want to be ready, to have gathered everything together and sorted it out, as if I were preparing for a great final journey. I intend to make myself whole here in this Hell. It is the thing that is set before me to do. So, in a way, this path inward and back into the past is like a map, the map of my world. If I can draw it accurately, I shall know where I am.

I do not blame John. That is the first thing. In his way he is fighting to keep whole, as I am, and Ginny was making life intolerable for both of us. Far better to dump me here than lose me in a quicksand of jealousy and hatred. He had to make a choice. The only thing I do not know is why he has not come to see me. Perhaps he is ill. Perhaps they have gone away. It does seem queer.

Also, although it is clear in my mind that I had to go somewhere, it is not clear why the place chosen should seem a place of punishment. But I must not dwell on this if possible. Sometimes old people imagine that everyone is against them. They have delusions of persecution. I must not fall into that trap.

It is better to smile at the image of that big white Cadillac turning off macadam onto a rough dirt road, the rain—of course it had to be raining, and not just a quiet rain, but a real downpour that would make almost anyone consider building an ark! I wondered whether Ginny had taken a wrong turning. When we stopped at a small red farmhouse that looked as though it had been gradually sinking into the mud for years, I

thought it must be to ask directions. There was no sign, only two elms—the nursing home is called “Twin Elms.” Five enormous geese stretched out their necks and hissed at us when we got out of the car. I noticed there was a barn over to the right. In the rain, the whole place seemed enclosed in darkness.

“Well,” John said, “here we are, Caro.” His voice had become unnaturally cheerful in the way voices do when addressing children or the feeble-minded.

There were two doors, but the front door opened into a sea of mud and was evidently not used. Ginny had parked close to the side door. We pushed our way in without ringing because of the downpour. Even in those few minutes I got soaking wet. There was no hall. We found ourselves in a large room with four or five beds in it. There was no light on. It took a moment before I realized that beside each bed an old man sat on a straight chair. One had his head in his hands. A younger man, whose legs were bandaged and who was half lying and half sitting in a sort of medical rocker, tried to speak but half choked. He was clearly out of his mind. However, he smiled, the only person in that room who did or who could.

Ginny called out loudly, “Here we are! Is there anyone home?”

Then an enormous woman filled the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Oh ... well,” she said, as if she had been taken by surprise. “My daughter is just making up Miss Spencer’s room. But I guess you can go in now.” She laughed. “We’re up tight these days, no place to ask you to sit down.”

I had had so many shocks by then that I felt quite numb and only wanted to be left alone as soon as possible. My heart started up and I was afraid I might faint. But it was a comfort to find that I had a room of my own, just big enough for a bed, an armchair, and a bureau. The bed was parallel to the window, and the window looked out, much to my astonishment, on a long field with tall trees at the end and, beyond them, gentle hills.

“Look at the view,” Ginny said. “Isn’t it marvelous?”

“What is that woman’s name?” I asked in a whisper. I had the feeling already that even a whisper would be heard.

“Mrs. Hatfield—Harriet Hatfield. She is a trained nurse.” (That is what Ginny said, but of course she must have known that Mrs. Hatfield’s only experience had been as an aide in the State Hospital for two years.) “She and her daughter work very hard to keep things going here.”

There was dust under the bureau and an old piece of Kleenex.

John disappeared for a time. They brought me a cup of tea and a cheap biscuit, which I didn’t eat. They offered to help me unpack my two suitcases, but I managed to make it clear that I am not infirm. I set the photographs of my mother and father and one of me with John when I was fourteen and he was in college on the bureau, and three things I treasure: a Japanese bronze turtle, a small Swedish glass vase, and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. I found my little pillow and lay down on the bed then. After a while I recited the Lord’s Prayer three times. I do not believe this prayer is heard by the Person to whom it is addressed, but I find it comforting, like a rune, something to hold onto.

When John and Ginny left, he said, “We’ll be seeing you.”

After a while I slept. The rain drummed on the roof. I felt that for a time I must be

absolutely passive, float from moment to moment and from hour to hour, shut out feeling and thought. They were both too dangerous. And I feared the weeping. Lately, since the hospital, I have cried a lot, and that may be one reason John felt I must go. Tears are an offense and make other people not so much suffer as feel attacked and irritable. When the inner world overflows in this way, it forces something entirely private out into the open where it does not belong, not at my age anyway. Only children are permitted tears, so in a way perhaps my being sent here is a punishment. Oh dear, I must not think about that now. Everything is dangerous that is not passive. I am learning to accept.

Harriet Hatfield woke me, not ungently, and pretty soon her daughter, Rose, came in with my supper on a tray. At least I do not have to eat with the others and watch them spill their soup. I can lie here and look out at the hills. Supper was cornflakes with milk and a banana that first evening. I enjoyed it far more than one of Ginny's "gourmet" concoctions. But then I could not sleep. I had to get accustomed to the noises, queer little creaks, the groans and snores in the big room where the men are. It seemed a terribly long night. When I went to the bathroom I bumped into a chair in the hall and bruised my leg. Perhaps John will bring me a flashlight when he comes. I will ask for note paper and stamps, a daily newspaper, and maybe a bottle of Scotch. It would be a help to have a small drink measured out each evening before supper.

That thought was a comfort when I wrote it several days ago. Now I know that good things like that are not going to happen. Old age, they say, is a gradual giving up. But it is strange when it all happens at once. That is a real test of character, a kind of solitary confinement. Whatever I have now is in my own mind.

Lately I have thought often of Doug, a former student of mine, who was put in solitary for two years by the Russians. When he came back he talked and talked about it and I listened. I thought I was helping him by listening. I never imagined that one day all he told me would be helping me. One thing he did was make a study of spiders, and later of mice. He remembered all the people he had known in school and tried to imagine exactly what had happened to them since, which amounted to making up novels in his head. He did mathematical problems. But he was under forty when this happened to him, and I, Caro Spencer, am over seventy—seventy-six. Time gets muddled up and what I lack, I fear, is the capacity to stick with a routine, to discipline myself—my mind goes wandering off. I see this all around me—when the TV is on, the old men stare at it in a daze. They do not pay attention for more than a few minutes, even to a ball game. I must try to pay attention to something for at least an hour every day. This last remark struck me as humorous and I laughed aloud after I had read it again. What difference does it make what I do or do not do? (No, that is the

devil speaking. Do not listen to the devil.)

My first study became the two women who have me in their dominion. I observed them as if they were mice or spiders. It is better to think of them as beings remote from the human, as another species that flourishes on the despair and impotence of the weak. They are both grossly fat. When they make the beds and their enormous breasts jiggle, the old men leer and wink at each other. Harriet has a lover, an intense wizened little man ten years younger than she who smokes horrible cigars in the kitchen and rarely speaks. There are three children, Rose's, who come to play in the yard while she is here—she sleeps somewhere else. They chase the geese and climb trees and it is nice to have them around although they scream and fight a great deal—all girls. I would prefer boys.

Harriet is a dishonest woman so it is hard to pin her down. She puts on a terrific act when relatives come, coos over some old man whom she has treated roughly when changing his diapers a few moments before. She is full of false compassion at all times. "Imagine," I have heard her say, "we take them in, poor things." (We are talked about always as "them," as if we were abandoned animals thrown out of a car.) "Their families bring them here and sometimes never come back at all!" And the relatives look properly shocked and praise her for taking in these waifs and strays. But it is next to impossible for anyone "outside" to bear this atmosphere of decay for long, I have noticed. People come in, full of good cheer, bringing a carton of cigarettes or a magazine, but after about five minutes they begin to fade out, look hunted, have nothing to say after the first few exchanges about the weather and how their father or aunt is feeling. Paralysis sets in and suddenly they are compelled to flee.

I wonder whether a person who has complete power over others does not always become wicked. I try to separate what Harriet has become from what she may have been ten years ago. Her face is now that of a greedy and sullen pig—small blue eyes, a mean little mouth. It is true that both she and Rose are overworked. It seems as though they were always changing beds, washing someone, or bringing in trays. They too are no doubt affected by the atmosphere, tired most of the time, dealing with crotchety old people who are (let's face it) most of them not lovable. I gather that the old men are chiefly on welfare.

It is terrible to have to admit that even here one does not change one's class. I am a snob. I went to college, taught school for forty years, come of gentle people. Most of the others here worked with their hands. Deprived of work, they have no resources at all. Two of the old men play cards for hours at a time. One reads the only newspaper very slowly for most of the morning. I have no peer, no one I can talk to. Harriet and Rose address me always as "Miss Spencer" with heavy irony. I am afraid to admit it even to myself but I feel sure that I was resented from the start as "superior."

The idea is that we are all one big family in a cozy old farmhouse, that this is to be truly a "home." Oh dear me! But we are free to wander about. Sometimes I am invited into the kitchen, the one really nice room in the house, with its good smells of cooking, its warmth and bright colors (red and white checked curtains, a new blue linoleum floor, and a big new stove and frigidaire). I sit for a half hour with the family and am given a cup of tea.

"How are you feeling this morning, dear?" Harriet may ask, but she never waits to

hear my answer. With me she is subservient in a nasty way, never rude, but she has, of course, many ways to humiliate me. Thank Heavens I can wash myself and am not bedridden! My body is still my own, not to be degraded by those coarse, hard hands. For how long? At present I have a bath every day—rarely hot, but at least then I can lock the door and have total privacy for a quarter of an hour. The bath is my confessional. I can weep there and no one will see me.

Otherwise there is a house law that doors must not be closed. The two women are always in and out of every room, and one never knows when they are listening. Sometimes I go in and visit with the only other inmate who has a private room. Standish Flint is a retired farmer, American Gothic face, a noble man, but he is extremely deaf now and rarely gets out of bed. Since I have to shout to be heard, we converse more with signs and smiles, with ironic smiles, and sudden guffaws on his part. He whispers, “I never thought it would end like this,” then looks hunted for fear “they” will be listening. I understand from Harriet that his wife is living but seriously ill, bedridden, being taken care of by a daughter. So that explains why no one comes to visit him—no one, anyway, in the two weeks I have been here.

Like me he cannot be beaten down yet. He is still his own man. So he is tortured in mean little ways—made to wait too long for the bedpan. Very often he refuses to eat what they bring him (he is on a dull diet of soft foods) and turns his head away. I sometimes think he is trying to starve himself to death. Every one of us still in his right mind must have fantasies of escape, and death is the only practical one. I have indulged in these fantasies myself—but I am still waiting for what will happen next. I want to see my brother. (He can’t stay away forever.) There are things I have to do inside myself before I can die. And I have the belief that we make our deaths, that we ripen toward death, and only when the fruit is ripe may it drop. I still believe in life as a process and would not wish to end the process by an unnatural means. Old-fashioned of me, I suppose. Then I suspect that suicide is a kind of murder, an act of rage. I want to keep my soul from that sort of corroding impurity. My soul? What do I mean when I use that word?

Something deep down, true, detached from impurities, the instrument we have been given for making distinctions between right and wrong, true and false—the intrinsic *being* that is still alive even when memory goes. I treasure my soul as something given into my keeping, something that I must keep intact—more, keep in a state of growth and awareness whatever the odds. For whom? For what? That is the mystery. Only when we can conceive of it as belonging to some larger unity, some communion that includes stars and frogs and trees, does it seem valid to “treasure” it at all. I sometimes feel I am melting into the lovely landscape outside my window. Am floated. For an hour I do nothing else but rest in it. Afterwards I feel nourished. I am one with those gentle old hills.

Did they always hate me, my family I mean, because I was different, because I never married, because I didn’t play bridge and went off to Europe alone every summer? A high-school teacher in a small town is (or was in the years when I taught math) not exactly suspect, but set apart. Only in the very last years when I was established as a dear old eccentric did I ever dare have a drink in public! And even among my colleagues, mostly good simple-minded fellows, I did not quite fit in. They

had their own club and went off fishing together and on an occasional spree to New York, but of course they didn't want an old maid tagging along and their pleasures would hardly have been mine. I can go almost crazy with joy in a museum. I can get drunk on Vermeer or Brueghel, but the average nightclub is sheer misery to me because of the noise. My most intense pleasures were always reading, listening to records, and learning poetry by heart. That has come in handy here, as I sometimes spend two hours saying poems to myself.

"Talking to yourself again?" Harriet sneers when she comes in with my lunch. Why bother to answer? I am too old to try to make connections with boors and sadists.

I can still make connections with an animal and it must be said for this infernal place that it is in no way an "institution," and if it is dirty, at least there are a few animals around. There is a very old collie who wags her tail at the sound of a footstep and likes to be stroked around her ears. She licks my hand when I caress her. And, best of all, there is a cat called Pansy, a black cat with very soft fur, maybe a little coon in her. She has round golden eyes. I have been told categorically that she must not get up on the bed. But occasionally she manages to sneak in late at night and climb up, first curling into a tight ball, then later, when I stroke her, uncurling to lie full length, upside down, sometimes with one paw over her nose. It is hard to express the joy it gives me to stroke this little creature and to feel the purrs begin in her throat. Those nights I sleep well, a lively sleep rather than a deathly sleep. It makes all the difference!

Everybody here is waiting ... all the time. Standish has been demanding to see the doctor for days now, and I hear Harriet trying to get through. But I guess all the doctors around here are terribly busy, and it's a long way to come. Standish tells me he is in pain—kidneys, he says. He looks white and drawn.

Most of the old men are on tranquilizers, I have discovered—that explains why they are so dull and passive. Only the feeble-minded man, who is quite dear in his own strange way, is eager to talk and smiles when I go in there, but it is next to impossible to understand him. His speech is a sort of gurgle. I cannot imagine why his legs are bandaged all the time. He waits for his father to come; the old men wait for married daughters or sons. I wait for John.

I think it is almost three weeks since they left me here. I get frightened of losing all sense of time. I can't remember when it was I did come—some time in June, I guess. It has been too damp or too buggy for me to sit outdoors. But I could insist on going out at least for a short walk. Why don't I? I think it is because after a short time, even a very few days here, one begins to feel like an animal in a cage. Even if the door were open, one would not dare move. It is the sense of being totally abandoned, so at first one goes way down deep into oneself and stays there just as a frightened animal does. I have an idea now that John was *told* to stay away. I have often thought about those visits to people in jail—a few minutes, a visit long looked forward to, but bringing with it chiefly wild nostalgia or despair. The difference is that it is hope that is hard to

handle. Most prisoners foresee a time when they will get out. Here we know there is no way out, only down, little by little, till death do us join with whatever comes next, if only dust to dust. Hope is one thing of which we are deprived.

One of my problems is that John, after all, is eighty and has no very clear sense of time passing. He may honestly believe that he has left me here only a few days. Or Ginny may have forced him to go on a trip to her people in Ohio, or somewhere. I have thought of writing but I wonder whether the letter would be mailed, and I cringe at the thought that it might be read and thrown away. Also, if it did get there, Ginny might do the same.

Lately I have come to see that John and I never really understood each other. We took each other for granted, I suppose. But I cannot remember any real talk we ever had—about ourselves, I mean. We talked for hours about books and about the state of the world. We had fierce arguments that we enjoyed, but our parents were troubled by our ferocity. Their philosophy was peace at any price, and if possible under a Republican administration! The fight went out of John when he married Ginny. Thank God I never got married, never gave my body and soul into the keeping of anyone. Unregenerate I surely am, but I'm myself alone. There is some dignity in that. And I guess that is why I have not written—"dumb from human dignity" as Yeats said, but that was about passionate love.

The other day I was lying on my bed having a rather good think about Alex, the Englishman I loved, off and on, for twenty years, married of course, so I saw him only in the summer for brief weekends, and only twice for journeys we made together, once to Greece and once to Italy. Harriet interrupted here, and with her sharp needle thrust into this reverie.

"What are you dreaming about, Miss Spencer?"

"My lover," I said.

I saw her gesture as Rose came in, pointing to her head, saying without words "crazy as a loon, of course. This poor old thing never had a lover—senile." It was written on her face as clear as clear.

Am I senile, I wonder? The trouble is that old age is not interesting until one gets there, a foreign country with an unknown language to the young, and even to the middle-aged. I wish now that I had found out more about it. Loss of memory—but some things remain so vivid! In some ways I am not myself, that is true. In the first days I tried setting up mathematical problems, but I couldn't seem to concentrate. It is not so much that, though, as that I am not interested in the abstract cogitation any longer. I am interested in me. I am a long way still from the fulfillment, the total self-understanding that I long for now. I remain a mystery to myself. I want to get right down to the core, make a final perfect equation before I am through, balance it all up into a tidy *whole*. If I could think of this place not as the House of the Dead but as the House of Gathering—the house where I have to come to terms with everything, sort it all out, accept it all, I think that might be salvation, a rock on which to stand at least. It is all quicksand and threat still. I cannot get used to being here. It feels so makeshift. No paintings on the wall. Dust under the bureau. I never thought I should be asked to sleep in muslin sheets, or have to swallow daily doses of sheer vulgarity and meanness of spirit. If this is Purgatory it is hard to imagine Paradise as in any way attainable, or

only in the imagination as a self-created place.

I am amazed at how much time I can spend apparently doing nothing, when in fact I am extremely busy with this kind of dreaming-awake that sustains me.

I have never liked women very much, too intense. I have been passionately attracted to one or two in my life, but that is different from liking. I like men much better. No woman would bear what Standish does in the way he does—so tart and bitter, so authentic. He is too angry most of the time to be sorry for himself. Anger keeps him alive. It is truly hard that we cannot *talk*. If only he were not so deaf. He looks at me with very bright clear eyes when he is awake and (how absurd this is!) I find that I try to look as well as I can for him. My hair needs washing and a rinse. They promise, but of course these things never do get done. But Standish notices a bright scarf or a piece of jewelry and gives me a wink of approval. I would write him messages, but apparently they have lost his glasses—he says he can't read anymore. But sometimes he talks about his life, how hard it has been, how hard he worked, how finally he realized he would have to give up the farm as he couldn't take care of the herd of cows himself and could not afford help. He had saved ten thousand dollars but it all got eaten up when his wife became ill, or almost all—he says he pays for himself here. I do hope it is true. Probably it is or he would not be allowed a room of his own.

What keeps him alive is a deep, buried fire of anger that never goes out, apparently. Out of rage he refuses to eat anything for several days. I feel he is always planning a way to get around “them,” a way to get back at “them” by sheer tenacity, by passive resistance. Among the sheeplike herd we two are a different breed, rebels. Standish manages usually to get rid of the tranquilizers, hides them, then gives them to me to throw down the john. “They won't get my head,” he whispers to me. “They won't castrate me in that way. I'm still alive from here up,” he whispers, his hand at his throat. He has good hands, worn, but thin and sensitive. Sometimes I wish I could take one in mine and hold it hard—“We shall overcome.” I don't because he is a touchy old man, and probably his chief escape is sexual fantasy.

He talks about Harriet and Rose as if they were prostitutes, with considerable relish, and expatiates on their enormous bums and breasts. He has a repertoire of dirty jokes—childish jokes they are. I do not mind them and some are even quite funny. He gives a loud guffaw after telling me one, and then a quick look hoping he has shocked me. I suppose he imagines I am an old maid—I could tell him some things but they are not to be shouted. So I let him talk, and when he falls asleep I go back to my room. The conversational opportunities here are certainly at a minimum. But then we all talk to ourselves in a perpetual exercise of free association.

I never thought much of psychiatry, but occasionally I imagine when I am lying here on my bed that I am talking to a wise and omniscient listener, a Doctor of Souls to whom I can say things I might not dare say to myself alone. Next time Harriet asks whom I am talking to, I'll tell her, “My psychiatrist, so you'd better leave us alone.” Then she'll be sure I'm crazy. And perhaps that is not a good idea. One could make

oneself mad by pretending to be, I have sometimes thought. The borderline between reality and fantasy is so thin in this confined, dreadfully lonely place.

I have not been able to write for days. I feel very bewildered and undone by John's visit—at last—after *four* weeks! Of course Ginny stayed with us the whole time. It was a terrible failure on my part, because as soon as I saw them I began to cry so terribly that I couldn't speak. I begged them to take me away. That was my second mistake. John sweated it out, I suppose, and Ginny talked a blue streak. Luckily I had made a short list of absolute necessities and Ginny promised to see to them and to come back alone in a few days. The list was stamps, note paper, lavender cologne, to order me the daily Boston *Globe*, to see that mail is forwarded (there must have been *some* since I left their house, magazines if nothing else), a summer wrapper, a pair of comfortable shoes, a raincoat, and several books.

John did kiss me goodbye, but he couldn't offer any comfort. He gave me a ten-dollar bill to put in my purse. It was done rather awkwardly, and I did not thank him. They stayed about fifteen minutes. I witnessed in my own flesh that we become moral lepers here, untouchables, from whom relatives flee because they can't bear what they have done.

"It'll get better, Caro," Ginny kept saying in her bright sharp voice. "Change is always hard at your age." But I am *not* ninety, nor am I insane! They brought me a carton of cigarettes. The doctor warned me—they must know that—that smoking could be fatal after the heart attack. Well, perhaps, the kindest way of offering suicide! I shall ration myself, and see. More likely they simply forgot about the heart because they have shut me out of their minds.

Harriet kept lurking around the corner and just when I tried to tell them about how awful it is, she came in ostentatiously with a cup of tea for me, cooing, "Here, dear, this will make you feel better."

"Nothing will make me feel better," I answered. I had an impulse to knock it out of her hands, but restrained myself. Then she addressed herself to Ginny as if John and I did not exist.

"Miss Spencer has been very good," she said. "Of course she's a lady and we are a bit rough and ready for someone like her, but she never complains, do you, dear? They all go through a period of adjustment, you know, and visits are quite hard on them sometimes."

I was wracked with sobs from sheer rage and despair.

"Here's a Kleenex ... blow your nose, dear, and you'll feel better."

I couldn't wait for John and Ginny to go. I felt as though I were breaking into pieces with shame and misery. Wanted only to be left alone, and now, damn fool, I am weeping again from writing this down.

How long a journey will it be and what must I do to myself to learn to control my feelings here? Let woe in and it's next to impossible to get it out again. The only person who helps me is Standish. He said, "Come in here, woman, and stop bawling.

If I were you I'd say a dirty word. I'd say several. Didn't stay long, did they? Families are great until you really need them. I never asked a living soul for anything, and now look at me! Shit," he said, "shit on the lot of them!"

But I can't curse John. He couldn't even look at me, he was so miserable.

Later I took the tranquilizer Harriet gave me. But I must not do that again. It made me feel very logy and queer. All I have is my mind and I must keep it clear. Remember that, Caro. *Don't let them steal your mind.*

Today is a dismal day, pouring rain and wind. The trees bend and strain, and leaves and twigs are torn off, a chaotic world, even outdoors. I put on my pink blouse to cheer myself up, but it seems to me I look queer and gaunt since I came here—there is already a change in my face, so it startles me each morning. Can this worn-out, haunted old body be me? My eyes used to be so blue but they have faded. And my mouth, rather stern at best, looks thin-lipped; deep lines pull it downward. My neck anyway is pretty good for an old bird—none of those scrawny tendons showing. My pearl choker hides the wrinkles. But time at a mirror is worse than wasted time, Caro. It makes you feel depressed. Better turn the mirror to the wall.

Until lunch I am going to lie here and watch the rain and remember all the picnics Alex and I had together. We used to take sketchbooks and go off in his ramshackle little car, with a bottle of wine, cheese and bread, pâté when we were in France, a pear or an orange. We had our worst arguments sometimes about choosing THE Place. How ridiculous we were! But it had to be just right, with both shade and sun if possible—once high up on a hill in a beech wood, looking down over a field, brilliant shining gold with buttercups and marvelous swanlike clouds going over all that day. For a change it did not rain. What did we talk about all those hours? Alex worked at Barclay's Bank, some sort of junior officer—he never wanted to talk about *that*. But he read everything, a very wide-awake man with a bold, strong face, bright blue eyes and a wonderful chuckle when he was amused. And for some reason I amused him very much, the violence of my language, my American accent. We met in the National Gallery, classic encounter, in front of the Piero della Francesca Nativity. I always did feel that painting says something of great importance—stark, aloof, yet so moving because of the spaces. It struck me as a kind of spiritual equation and I pondered it that day, unaware until he spoke of the man standing beside me. "Rather a jolly thing, what?" I was so taken by surprise, to be addressed in that extremely quiet place, and to be addressed by an Englishman out of the blue, and what he said seemed so ridiculously inadequate that I laughed aloud.

"What's funny?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Such a jolly understatement!"

He gave me a keen look then, taking me in, American written all over me. "What do you see in it?"

From there we talked. He guessed I must be a poet, I guessed he must be a lawyer. We agreed that Piero would appeal to a math teacher. (Oh, I do wish I had a reproduction of the painting here!) Alex asked me very good questions. He really liked women. I decided long ago that American men really don't—and before I knew what was happening we were sitting at Rules eating salmon and drinking hock. It was not an instant love, but it was instant recognition, rather a different thing. We enjoyed each

other. I felt cherished and admired in a way I never had been before. That first summer we were not lovers. I was frightened, and also dismayed when I learned that he was married. But we wrote long letters to each other the next winter and when we met the following summer we knew that we had become deeply attached. Forty-five years ago! A love affair was a momentous journey to undertake for a person of my sort. But it helped, of course, that I was far from home. No one at home need ever know. And Alex persuaded me, for my sins, that since his wife had a lover, there was no reason why he shouldn't engage himself in the same way. I got very fond of Sarah ... life is so much stranger than anyone could believe! As I think back, it seems to me that we all behaved in a rather civilized way. There was no drama, no pulling and tearing. Alex did not want to divorce Sarah and I could see why. In many ways he was dependent on her. And she had an elusive charm, was extremely feminine, chic and capable. He liked comfort, order, and beauty, and all these she provided in an amusing little house in Chelsea with an infinitesimal garden at the back that she made into something as perfect as a scene inside an Easter egg.

Did I want to marry him or did I just screen that possibility out? At one time I hoped to have a child by him—quite mad, of course, and Alex would have been dismayed at the prospect. They had two little boys, away at school when I first met Sarah.

I believe that I wanted exactly what I had—that sense of adventure, those picnics, our zany travels together, the depth and range of our communion, yet without any of the usual responsibilities. I doubt whether I would have made Alex a good wife ... the very thought of what would have been expected in the way of womanly grace and skill terrifies me even now. I was lucky. Only the goodbyes when I had to leave to go home each autumn were excruciating. I felt each time as though I were being asked to cut off an arm or a leg—an amputee. In those days we traveled by boat, of course, and the journey home was limbo. Often I stayed in bed for three days, tortured by missing him, and missing the part of myself that did not live at all in America. It was hard even to write for the first weeks, as words seemed an inadequate substitute for kisses, for all that touch made happen between us—and I am not one to write love letters. I find them embarrassing. Words, except in poems, were not meant to be used as counters in a sensual game. Alex wrote me poems but they were not very good—dear man.

By letter we exchanged our lives, what we were thinking and doing. As the months of separation wore on they became quite abstract, full of philosophical speculation. Amazing that it lasted nearly twenty years, and died, finally, chiefly because of the long separation through World War II. Alex was in some secret work and couldn't tell me, anymore, anything about his day-to-day life. I sent food packages to Sarah every week, and, strangely enough, she and I wrote more intimately at that time than he and I did—the tides changed, the emotional tides. I would like to write more about this but I am tired. The word “picnic” has taken me on a long journey into the heart land, and in some way has given me peace.

John's visit seems rather irrelevant now. I am over the shock. Perhaps it is better that they do not come again, or very rarely. It just seems so unbelievable that I, Caro Spencer, should find myself here *for good*.

Well, it turned out to be one of the worst days after that small interlude of peaceful memorializing. Our lunch was some sort of luncheon meat again, bread and butter, canned beans, and jello. I asked for mustard and was told there wasn't any, a patent lie. Standish threw his lunch in the waste basket. I felt he had been getting a slow burn these last days and was sure to break out sometime. I guess the lunch was the last straw (Jell-o and bread and butter are the only things on his diet). He shouted obscenities at Rose, who burst into tears. Then Harriet came and told him he was a dirty old man and would have to be forcibly fed. I could hear him yell, "You just try that and you'll be sorry!"

But he is so weak, poor tortured beast, that the anger left him white and exhausted. If only I had a bottle of Scotch: a little drink would have done him good.

The old men in the big room were unsettled by all the shouting, and even the always cheerful feeble-minded Jack had a fit of sobbing, a thing he rarely does. We are so like caged animals that moods spread. Today the mood was violently roused *against* our keepers. Apparently no one ate lunch in the end. I could hear Harriet and Rose muttering as they threw it all into the swill pail. They should really keep a pig.

Finally we all went to sleep, that drugged hopeless sleep that is the only escape at times. When I woke at five it was still raining and pitch dark indoors. I put on my light to read in the *Oxford Book* and Harriet came in in a fury and turned it off!

"We aren't millionaires," she raged. "No lights on in summer before six, do you get that, Miss Spencer?" (Heavy irony in her tone as she said "Miss.")

"What about a candle?" I asked. "Would that be allowed?"

"And burn the place down! Are you crazy?"

I held my peace. But one day I am going to break out and smash things. That is what I most fear—the anger that Standish also feels, as it burns its way, little by little, to where it cannot be controlled. I cannot afford the punishment. I am punished beyond what I can handle now. So, Caro, hold your peace, and endure, I tell myself. Or God tells me.

Today I saw the sun rise, peaceful burst of light across the misty field. It was a small red globe at first, then it got larger and the light touched everything in long gentle rays. I felt flooded with joy, as if some inner darkness had worked itself out like a poison at last. Perhaps it has been an inch-by-inch taking hold of myself, keeping anger at bay. I suppose at its most negative it is just "getting used" to the limits of my prison. For the first days, the first three weeks until John finally came, I was sick with fear and disgust. And, in a strange way, I still had *hope*. It was when hope left me after that visit that I began the road back, the road into the central self that no environment can change or poison. I am *myself* again. I know that I must expect no help from the outside. This is it. Here I stand.

And here I see what is to be seen. Today, now that the deluge is over, there are cows in the field, a great comfort. I often discussed with Alex in the old days why cows are so peace-inducing, the way they walk along, munching, in a slow-moving

group, the swing of a tail now and then, the quiet pleasure of creatures leading their own tranquil lives, creatures eating. Soon the cows will lie down in the shade, dear things.

It has been altogether a memorable day as the days go here. At eleven I had not only a letter but the daily newspaper (so Ginny has at least attended to that for me) and it was a treat to read it slowly, every page. I suppose it is possessive to dislike reading a paper that has passed through several hands, that is slightly crumpled. I only wish there were someone I could discuss an article with now and then. I buzz with ideas, but they die away for lack of anything to hang them on, and because I find it hard to think in an abstract sense for very long at a time. It would be a good thing to regard my mind a little as though it were a body out of training, and to force myself each day to use it, to tone up the muscle, so to speak. Today I read at some length about two automobile accidents; one was the cause of death. Beside the copy about that, there was an interview with an officer back from five years in prison in North Vietnam. He said he had been appalled on his return to see how angry we Americans get at the smallest frustration. As he put it, a man gets into his car, and if it doesn't start on the first or second try, he becomes furiously angry. People held up in traffic for even a short while lose their tempers. Can it be true that everyone is so close to rage all the time that the equivalent of stubbing a toe leads to a tantrum? And how can we handle this state of disequilibrium? For that is what it is. Almost every day one reads about some crazy person who takes a shotgun and shoots several people simply to relieve intolerable pressure. But what has caused the pressure? And why must it be relieved only through murderous violence? Questions, questions I can surely never answer ...

I have saved writing about my letter till last, and now I am stupidly exhausted. It is a letter from one of my former students, married now and with children in high school and in college. Of course she has no idea what has happened to me. And she is far away in Indiana. Yet it felt like a breath of air sent to a person buried alive. For Susie I exist, and have existed all these years, maybe thirty-five years, for I was young when she first came to the school, a freckled child with red hair and immense curiosity, nervous, willful, battling her way through school, always in trouble. It was a happy chance for me that math was the one subject she could handle with grace and style—rare gift among girls at that time. So it turned out that I was able to help her with English, at which she was clumsy and inadequate. I'll always remember the day she chased me out to my car after school, breathless as always, and said, "Look, Miss Spencer! Is it a poem?"

I was so afraid of having to disappoint her. While she scanned my face, I read ten or twelve lines describing a seagull, a poem about freedom, I suppose it was meant to be.

"Yes," I said, "it's a poem."

"Oh boy!" She shouted and jumped up and down with excitement. "Oh, thank you"—and she tore off without waiting for whatever else I might have found to say.

I was touched that she had asked me to read it rather than her English teacher, Miss Flood. Miss Flood was a stickler for grammar and punctuation, but she did not exactly inspire her students. And of course she resented me because I did.

I was a good teacher, as I look back on that self now. The point is that I loved math

with a passion. I loved the order, the clarity of it, the absolute in it. And I think my students felt that, for me, something more than mere math was involved, an attitude toward life itself. I liked a straight answer to a straight question, in just the way that I felt the beauty of a perfect equation or, even more, a geometric figure.

“You’re mad about math, aren’t you?” Susie asked me once.

“Am I? Well, maybe. I suppose I see a certain order in the universe and math is one way of making it visible.”

She was twelve or thirteen by then, but I always talked to her as if she were grown up. Her mind was worthy of that treatment. And she has not failed. Even when her children were small she got a job with a law firm as a secretary, then when they were in high school, she went to law school herself. Her husband is a Unitarian minister. She studied law with the idea of helping some of the indigent people he has in his ministry who keep getting rooked by loan companies or dealers who persuade them into things they can’t afford. Apparently they live in a border district of their industrial town, the church still supported by “old families” who have moved elsewhere, the church building itself now in a part of the city that is at least half black. I’m proud of Susie.

How am I to answer? Shall I tell her my plight? How could she believe it? What can she do? I shall have to think about this—it will come up again. What is my stance as far as old friends go? Pride enters in. I want Susie to think of me as the vital influence I have been. Teachers should perhaps never let their students into their own problems. It is to lay an unfair burden, a little as if a psychiatrist allowed former patients into his private dilemmas. A teacher cannot become too human or too vulnerable or he ceases to be the rock every young person needs. But Susie is forty now—perhaps more. She is grown up. Am I not to honor that fact with the hard truth? How usable would that hard truth be for her? How devastating? And what is the truth? Perhaps there is none. People disintegrate and have to be “taken care of.” Why haven’t I had the guts to make an escape, she might well wonder. But it is impossible to describe how isolated we are here. The village is at least five miles away, and there is nothing there, no motel, nothing but a General Store which is the P.O. If I called a taxi—and I have thought of this—and simply left, where would I go? I cannot impose myself for life on some friend from the past. The fact is my friends are scattered and there is really no one in my own town, a hundred miles away, whom I could ask for help. I just about pay my own way here. Are there other better places? Horribly expensive and perhaps, *au fond*, no more agreeable. I am no longer the person Susie needed and perhaps still needs. I am an old woman, fighting for her sanity against the odds.

But before I rest, I am going to rough out a letter. Then I can change it if necessary when I copy it out and send it. It could be, at least, a test of whether anything at all can get through—whether a letter will be mailed or censored or thrown away. If I write I am sure she will answer, *if* she gets my letter.

Sometime in September

Dear Susie,

Your letter was a lifeline and I’m afraid I fasten onto it as the only helpful thing

that has come to me for a month. I am now stowed away in an old people's home. My brother, who is eighty and remarried, has done this and cannot really help himself. After a serious heart attack some months ago, I had to give up the little house you remember and go to them. But it did not, and could not, work. So I am here, more or less denuded of everything that might make life livable. I am losing my memory, but otherwise intact. I believe that I have to take this as some final test of my courage and endurance. I want to meet death fully myself.

What is precious is your writing and remembering what I once was, and still am at times. I need your belief that I can make it to the end—not pity, *faith*. If I were tapping this out to you from a prison cell to a fellow prisoner it could not seem more strange or wonderful to communicate with a real human being. I am proud of you. Please believe in the foxiness of this very old party ... I mean to outwit “them” in the only possible way, that is by not being brainwashed and by remaining,

Yours very truly,

Caroline Spencer

P.S. I still believe there is some order in the universe: only man seems to stray from it.

The day when I roughed out that letter that never got sent, and probably never will, was some time ago ... I do not know how many days have elapsed. I am back in my own room again, weak and grateful for small favors. What I had been most afraid would happen, happened ... it was because of Standish in pain, his face to the wall ... I heard him begging them to get the doctor. And when Harriet answered finally in that hard, bright, we-know-better voice, “You’re not in pain. You’re just stubborn, throw your medicine away, won’t eat. If you’re in pain, it’s your own fault—” Well, I went berserk, I guess. All the frustration and anger and pity seized me like a fit. I screamed awful things at Harriet. I think I may have even tried to hit her, but she held me at arm’s length. When she let go, I was blind with rage and tears and hurled a chair across the room and broke it. “You pigs! You horrible pigs!” I remember sobbing. Finally Harriet, Rose, and the woman’s lover pinned me down and got me into a room without windows where I lay in the dark for several days and nights—I do not know how long—heavily sedated, I suppose. During that time Ginny came and left what I had asked for, but was not allowed to see me—for fear I would talk, I suppose. What a relief for her! That awful attack of anger tore me open to grief. Also I think the pills they give me are depressants. I wake up weeping about 3 A.M. and cannot stop. It is happening now, I cannot see to write and must lie down.

But I have to pull myself together. I can’t let them win, not yet. So, Caro, you’ve got to build yourself back from scratch. I have to think ahead of things I can do. Tomorrow, perhaps I can copy the letter and get it off to Susie. Oh dear, I am not strong enough to think of goodness and gentleness, of belief. They shatter me. I am not worthy, a leper—an old woman without control over herself. When I cried so much in the dark it was a small punished child crying, but that is what I have to battle against—the longing to be forgiven, to be accepted again. When they let me out and brought me

back, even Harriet was horribly kind, kind as a master is to a slave who has been tortured and will now, presumably, behave herself. I am still in bed, not allowed to get up, but at least I can see the precious light, and the cows, and Pansy comes to purr on my bed. I did not appreciate how lucky I was to have these comforts before. Now I do. Ginny brought lavender water. I can put it behind my ears as my mother used to do when I was feverish. Ginny brought me a light pink summer bedjacket ... that was so kind of her. Must I learn that even the wicked *mean* well, at least at times?

I have been a snob about these people, that is true. I have felt myself superior. It was one way of surviving. I have also allowed myself to hate. That is wrong. That is to be inferior as a human being. It takes so long to learn these things. It takes time and suffering, the worst kind of suffering, admitting that one has been wrong, admitting that one has failed, abysmally. All my life anger has been my undoing, and now I must pay for it. And I must begin the serious work of self-making that will conquer it forever.

What I long for with a deep ache inside me is sacred music. I long for the Fauré Requiem, for the Haydn “Mass in Time of War,” for some pure celestial music that could lift me above myself, into that sphere where great art lives, beyond what man can be in himself, the intimation of the sacred—what cannot be dirtied or smudged by wickedness or by anger, which no threat can touch.

How can I help Standish now? He welcomed me back from the dark place with tears in his eyes and squeezed my hand—how frail his hand is now! I feared to break it with my clasp. But that amount of human trust did us both good. I am so grateful that, wrapped in dignity, and in pain as he is, he found it in him to do that. It was to thank me for fighting in his behalf, clumsy and bad though my fight turned out to be.

Did the doctor come while I was “away?” I hope so much that perhaps they did get him, but I do not dare ask. I would have to shout to ask Standish and I fear punishment. I do not dare ask Harriet or Rose as it will remind them of my tantrum. Would feeble-minded Jack remember? Would he hear a whisper? Do I dare risk it? The old men sit there like miserable caged owls, but they hear and notice everything.

Sometimes I dream that another woman might be sent. I have never wanted a woman around before, but I feel it would help a lot. The place has the reek of old men and old men’s fantasies, sexual of course. I long for a woman with whom to share quite ordinary things, like how I can get my hair washed.

Since my outbreak I feel so unlovable, beyond the pale. And this is childhood again. How many times was I sent to bed without supper because I had a tantrum? And how is it that through all my life I never came to terms with this anger inside me? Yet, Caro, remember that anger is the wicked side of fire—you had fire and that fire made you a good teacher and a brave fighter sometimes. Fire can be purifying. It was purifying when the art teacher, a homosexual, was threatened with dismissal for moral turpitude, and I went to the head of the school first and then to the superintendent and managed to save Bob—he got his tenure. I withered those two affable and bewildered men and it was not by being gentle. So, Caro, try to think now and then that you are a human being, full of unregenerate anger and sometimes inhabited by sacred fire. “Child, you are not all bad!” Who said that?

Or am I thinking of Herbert ... let me find it in the *Oxford Book* ... Oh, what a

comfort to find it again, *The Collar*:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Me thought I heard one crying, *Child!*  
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

At least when I come to the very nub, to the place where there is nothing, not even belief in the self, I can still contemplate purity in Euclid, for instance, and in dear George Herbert. Now I can sleep. I have reached an island in the ocean of despair.

I think they want to persuade me that I'm not quite sane. Every now and then Harriet tells me I have done something (broken a glass, burnt a hole in my sheet) or said something ("I won't stay here another minute") that I cannot remember *at all*. There are also things I *have* done—or believe I have done—like copying out the letter to Susie, that I may not have done. Losing one's memory is terribly disorienting. The danger is to lose track altogether and begin to be whirled about on time like a leaf in the eddy of a brook—then you begin to wonder what is real and what is not, and where you are, and how long you have been there. And finally it is frightening because I can see that what happens next is a growing distrust of everyone and everything. How can I tell truth from falsehood if I can't remember anything?

Well, Caro, you do remember that you write things down in this notebook. Today, as a "temporary stay against confusion," I read it all. Here I have been for at least a month, maybe two—the leaves are beginning to turn. One swamp maple far down the field is scarlet already. Here I have been all that time and I see that this experience is real and that quite a lot has happened. And I am still able to experience it in all its agony and truth. That is something. The old men in the other room have given up or have become totally passive. They are covered over by time like weeds in water, swaying as the currents move, agitated by a change in the atmosphere, but so remote that it is as if they had ceased to live except deep down inside themselves—and what goes on there? A long daydream where food and sex loom large? In an abstract way, hardly real, or attached to reality—it is not a wife they remember but the titillation of watching Harriet's breasts waggle as she stoops, or Rose's immense bum. Ice cream brings a clatter of spoons and toothless smiles. They watch TV with the expressions of cattle, in a stupor, mesmerized but untouched. Is that the way it goes, the way it must go with me? As I re-read what I have written I see that I must make a constant effort to keep as alert as possible, not to let go even about small things—my appearance, for one.

I am keeping the tranquilizers concealed in the bottom of a box of Kleenex. I feel much more alert since I decided not to take them. And I still have that ten dollars John gave me. Someday I can pay someone to make a phone call *outside*, if someone ever comes whom I could ask. I could even get a taxi up here and escape! But if so, where to? No, Caro, there is no escape here. Don't begin to hope again. That is too