Chapter 6

Fifth Notebook

I can still look back upon the fortnight following Mother's death as if that period belongs to my immediate past. I was moved into the room we had formerly inhabited in the main house. "I was moved," I write, because, after Mother's passing I was incapable of acting under my own volition: Sarah G. Bateson and the Spanish Flu had taken charge of my life. Large private gatherings were discouraged and public assemblages prohibited, thus your grandmother's burial in Mountain View Cemetery, organized and paid for by the Batesons, must have been a perfunctory affair. Regardless, I could not have attended. I was being kept in bed, vigilantly observed to determine if my general collapse were due to the shock of sudden loss or if I had been infected, too. The Bateson's physician examined me and prescribed medicines that, to the best of my recollection, kept me asleep for days. Upon his subsequent visits, he concluded that it was a crisis of nerves and a broken heart, not a case of influenza, which rendered me dysfunctional.

I find no pleasure recreating the hours when I did lie awake in our old room. I can still conjure up the walls and irregular angles of that ceiling covered with one and the same wall-paper, its tedious

motif of petite roses enough to sicken me, not remind me of happier days. Would it have been any better recuperating in the cottage? No, for there Thomas Lowrie's ghost, though far paler than Mother's, would have co-joined her white-hot presence in my mind, the both of them swarming over me. What caught me most off guard were the incessant, uninvited hallucinations of my mother's voice delivering snippets from the poetry she had, over and over, read aloud to me during our last years together. I could neither stopper my ears nor hold back my tears as I involuntarily heard her recite bits and pieces: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." "This above all: to thine own self be true…" Alice's once delightful line during her adventures—"Où est ma chatte?"—was transformed into "Où est maman?" Worse still, when the November rains began to fall (albeit not in the Biblical proportions of our recent storm), the sound and sight of her performing Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Renascence" could not be evicted from the room. I tried to keep my eyes open whenever I was awake because, if I closed them, I was forced to witness her pacing the floor as if it were a stage, her copy of "Renascence and Other Poems" held close against her breast, her arm upswept. I can recall many lines of that poem that I committed to memory, not by any great endeavor on my part but through my exposure to her repetitions when I was such an impressionable adolescent. Lest a great riptide of emotion sweep this narration away even now, I will write no more about "Renascence" but simply refer you to it and its "pitying rain."

During my breakdown, Mercedes became my bulwark of support, acting as a go-between with my host family and other visitors, while more than fulfilling her assignment as my nursemaid. Mrs. Bateson might sit bedside, guiding her youngest daughter through a reading of the Twenty-Third Psalm or a recital of the Lord's Prayer. Marie knew to hold my hand in silence, or else conspiratorially whisper her grand design to whisk me off to live with her in the Deauclaire family's Berkeley residence forever. It was into Mercedes' arms that I would sob.

I cannot single out the reason I trusted her so but I did, enough to ask her to fetch things for me from the cottage and check the loose stone in the chimney behind which my mother's wedding ring and Communion Medal were hidden along with the gold nugget; she counseled me to keep their location secret. If I linger now in contemplation of the service that woman provided me, it is partly because, however paltry this expression of gratitude, it is the only tribute I can pay to her. For the next half-year, my last half-year chez Bateson, Mercedes behaved as a mother toward me, never as if I were some extra chore. One could diminish the emotional charge of this encounter by saying that her "maternal instincts" were "only natural." I would agree, but let us not hastily boil off all flavor of such maternal love when it comes into play, as if dismissively reducing its ingredients to so many chemical ingredients. If such motherly love for one another were always made so manifest, what a different world we would be living in!

After the news of the Armistice, it was determined that a Memorial Mass for Liliane Lowrie should be conducted prior to the onset of the Holiday season, and it was Mercedes who escorted me to the service, respectful of my fragile state and safeguarding my privacy. With her protective presence at my side, I remember feeling strangely unmoved by the liturgy. Mother had never said much about religion, but it now seems clear to me that my own "irreligious" upbringing, outside either the Protestant or Roman Catholic Church, was a consequence of the trauma of her marriage's annulment and the fact of my having been "born out of wedlock." I think Mother sometimes slipped away to attend services on some Christian holidays, but she never encouraged or enforced me to join her. I had never been baptized, never taken Holy Communion, and never joined a congregation. Sitting side-by-side in the pew with my guardian angel, I must have been swallowed up in that abiding sense of "looking in on others from an outsider's point of view." Nevertheless, the priest's incantations eventually provoked an unstoppable outburst of tears. I think now that it may have been some

association with the mostly happy hours when, still my stepfather's sidekick, I had tagged along with him, while he bombarded me with the binomial Latinate names of the garden's plants. We may never have melded as father and child, but hearing that language at your grandmother's Mass broke down my reserve, and tears for a lost past would not be staunched.

As Uncle Mario drove us home from church, I experienced one of those frissons when the world seems to split itself open without forewarning. I gazed at the familiar neighborhoods through which we passed and felt more than thought this epiphany: Truly, I was now an orphan in the world. Mr. and Mrs. Bateson were assuming legal guardianship for me as a minor, and Mercedes' womanly succor stayed me from falling into some unimaginable abyss. Yet during that drive from the service, a new, clear, definitive awareness of being parentless congealed and has ever since affected the foundational balance, or imbalance, of my life.

Liliane Piagère Lowrie had died, been buried, and was memorialized. The World War was over. In San Francisco and in Oakland, the first fierce wave of the Influenza Epidemic had crested. Thanksgiving was due, then Christmas and the New Year. I had been granted a two-month leave of absence from Miss Garrison's School and invited to finish out my senior year in the New Year, to be graduated with the rest of my class in 1919. There was no nonsense about my making up course work missed, for I was out of commission during that very time of the year when, excepting summer, academic expectations were most lax and familial obligations most acute—but now I was an orphan! During that second phase of my recovery, there settled over me, not just a desire for withdrawal from the traditional festivities of the season, but also a mood of pure remove from all earthly circumstance.

Back on my feet, in possession of a clean bill of health, I donned an apron and fell into the habit of shadowing Mercedes, assisting her throughout the house. Looking back, I see how aligning myself with her met my need to skirt any pretense of being

a celebrant in the activities taking place among the Piedmonters. Abstaining from the holiday gaiety would have been tolerated, in any case, as a sign of my grief, but disguising myself as a junior servant served a purpose even more basic, that is, I was, in fact, refusing to pretend that I would become an honorary second-class member of the Bateson family proper.

At their New Year's Eve bash, I may still have been hypersensitive, for I did detect something other than altruism, something more like supercilious disdain for the pathetic orphan girl, in the facile expressions of condolence in the words and gestures of the avuncular husbands and their wives. Perhaps I merely projected that attitude onto them. After the businessmen's serious imbibing of alcohol, I did notice their uninhibited looking's-me-over, as if studying my youthful figure had sent them scurrying back into their lecherous collective memory for the exact terms of engaging the droits de seigneur. Approaching midnight, after the umpteenth bottle of champagne had been poured, I declined to serve those men who had retired to the billiard room upstairs without their wives. Mercedes comprehended and kept me in the kitchen, working side-by-side with the temporary help.

As the revelers brought in 1919, I must have known I was in a fix, for I did depend upon the Bateson's beneficence and, legally, I was their "ward." Yet I already knew, as would become the case, that upon reaching my majority, I could be neither servant nor adopted child. Empowered by adolescence, I felt repulsed by any hints of pity or condescension directed my way. I even mistrusted the sympathy over my loss expressed by Mary Ellen Bateson and her circle of friends home for the Holidays, supposing their gestures thick with a sense of noblesse oblige but thin in spontaneous, heartfelt compassion.

I emerged from my "crisis of nerves" confident that I was to become neither a maid nor an adopted daughter in the Bateson household. But who was I to become? It seemed I had two options: First, I could move in with the Deauclaires, where I already knew the

advantages and disadvantages. If not an imposter there, I might be something of an imposition, yet I would nevertheless be welcomed as Marie's supplemental sister (she already had two). Second, I could apply for residence in one of the cottages at the "Home for Friendless Girls."

At the turn-of-the-century, on acreage adjacent to their renowned Arbor Villa estate, Mr. and Mrs. F. M. "Borax" Smith had built a dozen houses designed by the most progressive architects of the time. By 1918, each so-called "cottage" was housing five to eight white Protestant girls "in need of a home and worthy of aid." Motivated by concern for girls from well-to-do families who had fallen on hard times, the wife of businessman and civic leader Francis M. Smith, "the Borax King," had been inspired to create conditions where residents could become respectable, self-supporting women under the influence of her Christian program.

When I visited the Normal School on 13th Street with a gaggle of Miss Garrison's girls, a student docent named Florence, who proudly announced that she herself was living on Cottage Hill, gave the orientation tour for we prospective students. Thus I learned that residence there and studies at the nearby Normal School were compatible. Unfamiliar with the details of life on Cottage Hill in East Oakland, I decided to research the place and arranged to meet with Florence for tea at the Home Club, their community center, where I am afraid I grilled her rather relentlessly, curious how Mrs. Smith's ideals were being realized. I learned that the "friendless girls" were of mixed ages from four to twenty-four and lived in mixed-age groups mimicking conditions in real homes. Florence spoke fondly of her own housemother and assured me that many of the residents did move on to become nurses, stenographers, and teachers, as well as married women raising families of their own. She offered to introduce me to the staff at "The Lodge" that served as the organization's intake office, and, upon parting, she encouraged me to call on her again, when she would be happy to take me for a peek inside the Flick Cottage that served as the initial housing for orphans new to the

system. I would probably be placed there, she said, pending determination of which unit might suit me best.

I did feel drawn to apply for residence yet what a confusion I felt! Such a change of address might free me from becoming a burden on the Deauclaires or even more beholden to the Batesons, and removing to Cottage Hill made perfect sense until I took stock of reality in broad daylight and recognized that I was by no means a “friendless girl.” Indeed, had I applied it would have been under false pretenses, for I did have friends, and I was welcome at both the Deauclaires and the Batesons, two well-to-do households where I could stay and, from either address, attend the Oakland Normal School handily enough. When so thoroughly of a mind to move away from playing any subservient, prescribed role, why was I even entertaining the idea of presenting myself as a destitute orphan without resources?

As the ethical perspective was dissuading me from pursuing residence on Cottage Hill, the revelation came to me that I was simply not, in truth, even an orphan. To the best of my knowledge, my father was still alive! I had been considering myself orphaned: first, by my stepfather’s fast finish deep inside the glacial ice and, second, by my mother’s fast and final days in deathly fever. Now, as if yanked by an invisible hand, I suddenly felt an overwhelming urgency to confirm Martin Wildeman’s existence and whereabouts. During Easter Break, I made inquiries at the California Guild of Arts and Crafts, where one of my father’s erstwhile colleagues from the former Mark Hopkins Institute of Art assured me that the sculptor could be presumed alive and well; last the man had heard, the transplanted Dutchman was still following his artistic destiny on the Monterey Peninsula. Since leaving the San Francisco Bay Area in 1902, Wildeman had been a visitor then a habitué of the burgeoning art colony of Carmel, where he made his mark in a studio shared with others after the 1906 Earthquake. My informant guessed that my father had settled in those environs and perhaps gone on to build a house of his own there.

Details were vague but all signals pointed toward Carmel. Before the end of the school year, I hatched my grand plan: There would be no future life for me in Piedmont or on Cottage Hill. Upon graduation in June, I would relocate to Marie's in Berkeley, and, before enrolling in the summer session at the college of arts and crafts, I would make an exploratory expedition to the Monterey Peninsula. In the fall, I would enroll in the Normal School and, still underage, serve out my sentence as a minor chez Deauclaire. I suppose it was the thought that Martin Wildeman lived so nearby which deluded me into imagining that, if I could track him down and present myself "as is," he would acknowledge me as his daughter and welcome me in my present state. Then we could proceed to redeem our rightful relationship as father and child. Such was the reasoning of a sixteen-year-old "orphan." But however could I get to and from Carmel?

I get the shivers when recalling the chilly reception I received from Sarah G. Bateson when I laid out my plan. After Miss Garrison's graduation ceremony, we were sitting in the rear downstairs parlor. I was still dressed in my best finery. She listened and commented. Relocation to the Deauclaires? Acceptable. Summer studies at the art college? Well-advised. The trip to Carmel in search of my phantom father? That dubious idea disconcerted her. Then, without giving me her approval or any definite response at all, Mrs. Bateson abruptly rose and led me to review my latest attempt at a rather Baroque floral arrangement in the entrance hall where the prominent rhododendron trusses had collapsed, as disappointing to me as to her. Moreover, the whole display would have to be redone immediately; I was dismissed to change my clothes and salvage the agencement post haste. It became evident that my legal guardian could not abide the notion of my traveling on such a questionable mission to Carmel, which to me was the most pressing matter of all, not correcting a flower arrangement.

The solution to my problem proved ironical. When Mary Ellen Bateson came home after being graduated from Vassar College

in May, she was reluctant to begin her re-entrenchment in the family household, and I hit upon the idea of enlisting her alliance as a chaperone on the adventurous outing. She relished the notion, championing my cause with her mother and even soliciting our travel funds from her "Papa." Our agenda was simple, an itinerary no more complicated than getting ourselves to Carmel and there initiating a search by word-of-mouth. Once our mid-June departure date was established, I expedited my relocation to Marie's, unaware that I was effectively moving out of Piedmont for good. On my last walk about the grounds, I observed that Mrs. Bateson had a crew installing new rows of pyramidal thujas and clipping corridors of hedges throughout the grounds. Thomas Lowrie's alpine rock garden had been abandoned and the creekside garden left to grow in disarray. The deceased residential head gardener had been succeeded by a day gardener under the direction of an instructor in the landscape gardening and floriculture program in the University's College of Agriculture, and Sergei had reverted to maintaining whatever portions of the grounds he had maintained before Thomas Lowrie had been hired on.

As custodian of my person and property, the matron of the mansion could, if she had chosen, have had significant sway in matters related to the disposition of the personal effects which had fallen to me. In the event, I was given leeway to decide what and how to dispense with them. Sergei had already appropriated Thomas Lowrie's hand tools, and rightly so. One of the University student gardeners now took possession of my stepfather's library, and another student in the College of Mining promptly snatched up whatever mountaineering gear remained. I thought that the boys in the Vulcan Club deserved my stepfather's collection of minerals and rocks, and my mother's miscellaneous teaching supplies were gathered into several boxes and likewise delivered to the Oakland Technical High School. Besides my clothes and my mother's articles of toiletry, I had not much of my own to transport to the Deauclaire house. From my diminutive bookcase, I did pull four children's books

from which I felt I could not bear to part. Like a fool, I left three beloved Anne Shirley titles on the shelf and never saw those copies again, nor was I ever again to lay eyes on my wooden rocking horse, my child-size desk, and the chalkboard and easel which had survived from my nursery. Did I sense, as I extracted the things from their hiding place in the stone chimney, that I would never set foot in that cottage again? Whatever was left behind was ultimately disposed of when Mrs. Bateson and her older daughter redecorated its interior so that Mary Ellen and her new husband could move in while waiting for the construction of their own new house in Pleasanton to be completed.

Before we left for Carmel and my subsequent relocation to the Deauclaire's, Mrs. Bateson agreed to store my valuables in the cellar of the big house: Mother's wardrobe, her Singer Company sewing machine, the baskets with her needlework supplies, and her album of examples of historical lacework. A reinforced cardboard valise containing her keepsakes was also stashed in the basement. In that small, flat suitcase I put my only photographs of her; a smattering of my childhood drawings and first letterings; knickknacks and a scrapbook with postcards, ticket stubs, concert programs, and ribbons from the Pan-Am Exposition. None of Mother's own mementos predated the Big Fire of 1906, and all the above fit into that one slim valise. All the more bitter to me was the untoward outcome of my request when, upon my eighteenth birthday in October 1920, I wrote a letter requesting that, alone among the items in storage, the little suitcase be sent to my new Cliffport address. The Batesons obliged but the valise arrived in a sorry state, impacted once by water damage in the basement and then by poor handling in transit. Would I had known better than to part with that valise, the contents of which had been saved during the last dozen years of my mother's life in the New World!

Mary Bateson and I traveled from San Francisco on the Del Monte Express, its well-maintained railway cars painted in olive green with black and gold lettering. That ride was intended to be "an

elegant experience" for all customers and proved extraordinary for me, especially since my chaperone purchased tickets allowing us to travel first-class in the most ornately furnished parlor car at the end. From Del Monte Station, a fancy two-horse carriage transported hotel passengers to the entry of the Hotel Del Monte, the ne plus ultra of comfort, convenience, and service in Monterey. That train trip to Pacific Grove made a lasting impression yet, given the overall purpose of my journey, it was hard for me to behave as if I were simply en vacances. In addition, the luxurious accommodations at the resort were so unlike conditions I had experienced while traveling second-class with my mother and stepfather when Liliane Lowrie had taught her daughter to deport herself like a young lady regardless of circumstances. My mother had always shown me how to gain the respect of those whom I would have treat me fairly, whereas the Bateson daughter pulled bills from her wallet and coins from her purse at the drop of a hat. I was not used to being associated with such a display of wealth. The Lowries never had such resources nor had we needed to take recourse to purchasing respect; we had simply earned it.

Mary Ellen and I had left Piedmont on a Sunday morning, reaching Monterey that afternoon. We spent the better part of Monday scouring the shops and eateries in little Carmel Village, where Mary Ellen stood back, giving me free rein to introduce myself to complete strangers to whom I perforce explained my mission. Without having gained any leads as to Martin Wildeman's whereabouts, we devoted Tuesday to exploring the Carmel Highlands, where a number of the bohemians and intellectuals associated with the original artists' colony were known to have settled into houses which they built from scratch, whether by dint of benefactors, inheritances, good luck, or just plain hard work with their own backs and hands. There we happened upon an Italian mason, more artisan than bricklayer, who provided us the first assurance that we were not on a wild goose chase. The man had known my father and dated the sculptor's departure from Carmel almost ten years back to 1909 or 1910,