

Mrs. Van Allen Addresses the Babysitter

I've left the number where I'll be on this card, Milo. Genie and Frank Weber live on 91st between 3rd and Lexington. Just dinner and cocktails tonight, so I should be home by ten at the latest.

This is the number for Doctor Polk's answering service. If it's a dire emergency and you can't reach me or Doctor Polk, then call an ambulance, but otherwise, what's the order?

Good. Now that you're an exalted teenager, I know you're capable of anything.

If Anne wakes you can take her a glass of milk. Winnie may ask for a Milk Bone. Milk Bones are here, in this. Oh my! Pardon the mess. It's been utter chaos since we got home from the Cape.

Questions? No? You'll do fine, I know it.

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Thank you for coming early this evening. My friend Malcolm insisted we have dinner before the opera.

In case you get hungry, let me show you, here, in the fridge, there's some cantaloupe. Do you like cantaloupe? Over here is a lamb chop with mashed potatoes. And for dessert, lurking underneath the foil, is a piece of blueberry pie. My friend Margaret carried back six crates from Maine. Wasn't that kind of her?

Plates are here, silverware, over here. Napkins, ah, where are the napkins? Here. When you're done, you can rinse everything and put it in the dishwasher. I'll pour in detergent, like so, and all you have to do is push the button, like so.

Why don't you come into the living room for a moment and make yourself comfortable. Let me open the shades. There. That's

better. Marvelous sunset.

Let's rest our feet, shall we? I have a few minutes before Malcolm arrives.

You can try out my new silver nutcracker. I realize this is the 70's, not the 40's, but I couldn't resist. That's it. Bravo! Would you mind passing me the ashtray, Milo?

I love autumn. I love it because it's the start of everything. The men have gotten new suits, the women are wearing new outfits. And the symphony, the opera, all of the arts are getting underway, the air is crisp, everyone's walking a little faster.

What are you—oh, for heaven's sake, cufflinks! Those must be Malcolm's. Hand them over and I'll return them to their rightful owner. Let's see. M.S.H. Malcolm S. Holmes. Stephen. Sterling. Sherlock. Hah! Malcolm Sherlock Holmes, do you think that could be it?

I'll put them in my purse for safekeeping. There.

The irony is that Malcolm probably *would* have been better off as Sherlock Holmes. He was mad about forensics, crime scenes, anything to do with police work. Malcolm and my ex-husband were college roommates, you see. Henry encouraged Malcolm to be a police detective, but his family wouldn't hear of it. They insisted he turn himself into a respectable lawyer.

Lately Malcolm's become so serious. The system at these firms is that you work and work and work like a little beaver for seven years, and then one day they tell you whether they like you. If they like you, then you get to stay. If not, then you can stay, but it's not done. Poor Malcolm has started reading things into every little gesture. I hope he doesn't have a nervous breakdown.

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Anne has a cough, poor thing. We got stuck in the rain last week without an umbrella. Then the cold snap. Mommy's fault. Now mommy's feeling guilty.

Why don't you come upstairs while I take a peek. Mind the banister. That's another item that needs fixing. Henry used to take care of all that. You can follow me. It's all right. Tiptoe. Shhh.

Still feverish. I'll take her temperature in the morning. Let me show you where I keep the medicine. Here's Anne's bathroom. Here's the medicine cabinet. One capful. Oof, childproof caps! Adult-proof, if they were completely honest with themselves. I'll leave it open with the lid on like this, just fill the cap and give it to her.

Good.

I need to grab something out of the study. Hang on a moment.

Have you seen Henry's study? Come, take a look. Over here is where he used to work on his sailboats. Let me turn on a light so you can see. This contraption is a French curve. What you're supposed to do is lay down a bunch of dots like you can see Henry did, and connect them with the French curve. Voilá! It's all a game of connect-the-dots when you get down to it.

I should get rid of this drafting table, but it's very decorative. Henry said I should keep it. I'm not a fan of living museums, but there it is.

He used to get me so excited about his boats. You raise the sail, grasp the tiller, and you do have a wonderful sense of freedom out on the open water. That's a picture of me on *Claribelle* imitating Jacqueline Kennedy. Don't I look glamorous in my Polaroids?

Malcolm came with us once. We threw out the anchor, and he had a marvelous time diving off the bow. Like a puppy. Then he began seeing, what was her name? Rita. Rita something. She was afraid of open water. And that, young man, was that.

* * *

I hear you've begun lobbying your mother to stop smoking. Good luck. We all started in college and don't seem to be able to

give it up, do we? You're absolutely right, though; we should quit. Can you pass the ashtray, dear?

You should hear Malcolm lecturing me. He's become a regular apostle since he stopped smoking. He's playing squash, jogging around the reservoir. I wonder what's gotten into him.

Between you and me, sometimes I think Malcolm and I are not that well suited to each other. He's become very didactic. That was never Henry's problem. With Henry it was like prying open an oyster. It became. Well, it was frustrating.

* * *

Your mother and I are officially agreeing to disagree about politics.

I don't mean to imply she's a Kennedy-style limousine liberal, thank God, more like a well-intentioned, Hubert Humphrey kind of liberal. I'm a Republican, you see, even though my parents were Democrats. Most of my relatives are from Eastern Europe. I left all that behind when I married Henry.

Nowadays my political sensibilities are closest to William F. Buckley. Are you familiar with his work? He did a marvelous interview on *Firing Line* with Stokely Carmichael in which he absolutely laid bare the contradictions of the so-called Black Panther Movement.

I like Buckley because he's a Republican, but not one of those Goldwater fanatics. A sensible Republican. I suppose that's what I am, a sensible Republican.

Ah, that will be Malcolm calling. No doubt he's running late.

* * *

Go ahead, open it. Have you read Salinger? I hope your mother won't be scandalized. She doesn't seem like the type. Merry

Christmas.

There's a very nice man I want her to meet, by the way. A lawyer. Surprise.

Oh, hello, Winnie, sweet girl! What's a nice little Great Dane doing in an apartment like this? Are you done with your nap, sweet thing?

Speaking of naps, Milo, one thing I want to discuss is your habit of falling asleep on the job. I discussed this with your mother. It may mean we have to discontinue our little arrangement for a while. Please do try to stay awake while you're here. Winnie will make a racket in the front hall if someone tries to enter, but I would rather have a competent human being watching things. Are we in agreement?

* * *

I've put your lovely holiday card up here on the mantel. You needn't have gone to so much trouble. And from now on, I must insist that you not thank me for buying you books! You should think of it as an obligation on my part—older generation educating the younger generation, et cetera.

New Year's resolutions? No? You should. It's important that we resolve things. Now look at this stain on my blouse. Where did that come from?

My friend Ruth and I are going to the theatre tonight. Ruth is recently divorced, too. Just a moment. Quick trip.

God, I look like a wreck. In the end, what they all want is a snappy blonde in a snappy mini-skirt. Can you hand me the cigarette lighter, dear?

When you're older, Milo, you'll find that people do the strangest things. My friend Malcolm, whom I've told you about, said he wanted to stop seeing me this week. Imagine if your best friend from soccer said he didn't want to be on the team anymore. Wouldn't that be odd?

After Malcolm heard on Monday that his firm had decided not to make him partner, he began to act out, because for seven years he's done everything they wanted him to do: he shined his shoes, pressed his shirts, tied his bow ties. He's been a darling to everyone, even when they haven't been very nice to him in return. On Monday, poof! It was as if he had been expelled from school after seven years of perfect attendance.

Now he's begun to do some very childish things. He decided he would rather start spending more time with a woman who has been his secretary these last four years. Her name is Charlene LeClaire. Well.

I don't want to cast aspersions, but I will say that Charlene is not in Malcolm's league at all. Which isn't to say there aren't other redeeming qualities he may find in her. The apartment in Flatbush. He may also find her, I mean. Well.

Damn. There's the telephone. Hand me a tissue, will you, dear? Let me see who's calling.

Ruth's not feeling well. I suppose that's all right. Now I can stay home and wallow in self-pity. Much better than going out to a stupid old theatre production.

If you want to go home, please do. I'll pay you right now. For the whole evening. I would have been home at eleven o'clock, that's four hours, let's call it five.

On the other hand, if you want to stay a while, that would be fine too. Do you feel like staying? I'll pay you for the whole evening, regardless. You can tell your mother you stayed and listened to Mrs. Van Allen babble on about her little problems.

Are you sure you don't want something to eat, dear, or drink? Chocolate chip cookies? I have some ginger ale in the fridge. Excuse me, will you?

There. That's much better. Scotch on the rocks, stockinged feet. These shoes have been giving me fits. There was a nice little man at the corner of 97th and Madison who used to fix my shoes, but according to his daughter he's suffered a stroke. Now I have no

place to go. You can see where these shoes give me blisters on my toes.

Look at this run in my stocking. Up, up, behind the knee, up the thigh, oh my, so much for this pair! I'll keep my legs crossed so you won't notice, how's that?

At least I won't have to move for a while. That's right, I signed a new lease today. Have you ever seen a lease? Beastly document. Not as bad as divorce papers, but beastly nonetheless.

It was all so straightforward before Anne was born. Henry and I had a pied-à-terre—that's a kind of tiny apartment—on Bank Street in the Village. We had a darling little patio on the ground floor, not much space, but I fixed it up with roses and wisteria. Henry would come home from work and sit in the garden working on his blue-prints while I read. When it got dark we lit candles. It was a wonderful time to be in the Village.

Anne's birth was the happiest day of my life, as I'm sure your birth was for your mother, but things do change. Henry decided he wanted to move to the Sound. Locust Valley. He has a brother there, and an uncle named Richard. Richard's a complete drunk.

That was always Henry's style, you see, he'd sit there like an oyster for months, not saying a thing, and then he'd do something drastic.

I said we could get spacious digs uptown for not much money, and wasn't it premature to leave all the advantages of the city behind? And we did find a duplex, didn't we. But then Henry started working longer hours, and when he was home he holed himself up with his keels and his plumb lines. Not that we had time to go sailing. I was about to read him the riot act, but he beat me to it. I'm moving out, he said. You're being unreasonable about staying in the city. Common sense dictates, et cetera.

I said, goodness Henry, can't we talk about this? No, it wasn't something he wanted to discuss. I said, well, if you're not willing to negotiate, then it's not going to be much fun living together, is it.

Poof! No more Henry.

Now he comes to visit Anne once every two weeks, but I mean, we might as well be going to the butcher. Take a number, lady.

Now here we are: three girls, one duplex. Goodness grief.

That's all right, I've had enough refreshments for one evening. Thank you.

Can I ask you for one small favor, though? Would you mind coming over here and giving me a little hug? Is that all right? Would you mind, terribly?

There. That's wonderful. Thank you. You're very nice to sit here for ages listening to me. Now I think you should run home. It's getting late. Run along now.

* * *

You're an angel, Milo. My feet are forever in your debt! Let me give you a kiss.

After you talked to your mother, she sent me to Mr. Lim, and my life took a dramatic turn for the better. Hooray!

Something to eat? I saved you some delicious salmon. No? You can always have a bite later if you get the urge.

Ah, comfort. Soda for you, Scotch for me, what else could we possibly need?

Ruth's bringing along another divorcée tonight. Eileen Hurwitz. We're going to a piano recital. The way it developed was that Eileen wanted to see *The French Connection*, but of course I had to remind them that movies offend me as an art form. You've never heard me say that? Yes, my view is that if it's not live, it's not art, books being the exception.

It turns out this woman Eileen lives two blocks from where I grew up on West End Avenue. Have I told you about my upbringing? No?

Back then it was my sister and me and my parents, the four of us on the Upper West. That's where you moved in those

days. My father was an attorney, and the thing that caused him quite a lot of heartburn, I think, was the feeling that he was being discriminated against by other men in the firm. There was another Jewish fellow there who quit to form his own firm. Milton Sterns. Milton did spectacularly well, parenthetically.

My father wouldn't budge. He put his head down and kept at it for 25 years. Then, at a certain point, he set out on a crusade to make my sister and me acceptable to that crowd. Voice lessons. Dance lessons. Piano lessons. We were sent to Chez Nicole, that's a salon on the East Side where all the ladies get their hair done.

Now my sister's married to a Jewish man. Happy as a lark.

At the end of senior year in college, one of the girls in my dorm had a party on Cape Cod. In Osterville. Lanterns, jazz bands. We spent weeks preparing for it. That's where I met Henry. He was a high school chum of my roommate's brother. Henry and I talked and talked, and then we strolled down to the water and took off our shoes. We were both tipsy from the champagne.

Van Allen. Won't father be pleased, I thought. Well. He was delirious.

7:20! Oh, my goodness. They're probably waiting downstairs for me, wondering where I am. I'll tell them I was up here divulging secrets to my young friend Milo, and they'll really begin to wonder.

Around nine o'clock, if you would be so kind as to give Winnie one of her heart pills; also please check up on Anne to make sure she's comfortable. She had a bout with the stomach flu, poor thing.

Well, off into the night I go!

* * *

Come in.

Come in, dear.

It's all right. Don't be afraid. Not as bad as it looks. A simple mugging. From your mother? Isn't she a dear. Put it down on the

dresser. Next to the flowers.

You'd think I'd been in a boxing match. Ow. Ouch!

That's perfect. Thank you.

Love to talk, but I'm a little drowsy. Pain killers.

We'll chat another time. Thank you for walking Winnie. All right? O.K. I'll see you. See you later.

* * *

These pears are delicious. Thank your mother for me, will you? I need to send her a card. You two were wonderful, ministering to me like that. I'm not sure what I would have done without you.

I suppose this has been hardest on Anne. It doesn't do any good to see your mother like that. She wouldn't come near me when I got home from the hospital. I had to coax her out of her room with lollipops.

It's all very hard to fathom.

What was startling was how everything changed from lovely spring day to quote scene of the crime unquote.

I was standing on the curb at Bloomingdale's waiting for the light. I felt something tugging at me, so I turned around, and this big Puerto Rican character with sideburns had got hold of my purse and was yanking against me. It was clear he wished he was halfway down the block with my purse, not engaged in a tug-of-war with some unreasonable broad from 96th Street.

Now they tell you not to resist, and I know I shouldn't have, but that's just not how I felt at the moment. That bastard, excuse my language, dear, that bastard was not going to take my purse. And when he started to get rough I hit back, and that obviously made him angrier still. I can't remember the last time I've used my fists. Certainly not with Henry. Can you imagine? Oh, God, it hurts to laugh. Can you fetch me that pillow, dear? I'm told I need to keep my legs elevated. You can move the books. My mother always said that, given the choice between reading and brushing one's teeth,

one should choose to read since one can always buy false teeth.

The daffodils are from Henry. The irises are from Malcolm. They both came by to see me. Separately. We're trying to avoid a scene.

The bathroom? Please do.

Oh, Milo! Would you mind fetching me a fresh pair of socks? Upstairs, top drawer of my dresser. Blue or black would be best! Thank you!

That's wonderful. Would you do me one last favor and help me on with these? It's hard bending over. Here.

That's it. Oh, marvelous. Thank you so much. Fresh socks, oh joy.

Something to eat? No?

I had an interesting, well, I'm not sure what to call it. This past week I found myself viewing them, Henry and Malcolm, from a distance, as if I was a parrot sitting on my own shoulder. A wise parrot with a tape recorder. Sounds silly, I know. I was trying to describe something to each of them. I wanted them to know how it felt getting into a fistfight with a young man I'd never met, how it felt to hit him, and how I felt when he hit me back. But when I looked at them, as they were sitting where you're sitting now, separated by a few hours, it was clear how little they were listening to me. And it dawned on me how little either of them had listened to me while I was with them over the months and years.

Isn't that strange? Do you see, Milo? When you're describing how it feels to be in a fight on a sidewalk, with all that anger pouring out of you, you want the person you're with to listen to you. That's the miraculous thing about someone your age, or someone Anne's age. You're actually listening. Aren't you? You're not thinking about your sailboat, or Charlene LeClaire, or your taxes for next year. You're paying attention. That's a miracle. It may not seem like a miracle to you, but it's a miracle to me.

You see, sometimes I worry that I'm not such a terribly good listener myself. It's not just what I think. I've heard this from other

people. Henry, Malcolm. Not to mention my father. You know, you remind me a little of my father. Another earnest man in my life, that's what I need. He had dark eyebrows, and he used to cross his legs like that, and jiggle his foot.

I can see him now, burrowing away, biding his time. They mocked him! He wanted to leave my mother, but he didn't have the guts. There. I've said it. How do I know? If you were older I'd tell you quite a story.

Would you pass the Scotch, dear? Reserve rations, as you can see.

So what do you think? Do you think I'm a good listener?

Are you this quiet around your mother? I doubt that. I'll bet when you're with her you talk nonstop. Anne is so animated with me. We have a marvelous relationship, she and I. I can't imagine how anything could ever come between us.

I'm fine now. I'm really fine. My cast will come off in a couple weeks. My bruises are healing. I'm feeling much better about everything.

You do think I talk too much, don't you? Answer me. Tell me the truth. A bad listener. That's what I am. You think I'm an old windbag who can't keep a man. That's what you think. I've driven away Henry and Malcolm, and I'll drive away the next man I get my hands on. Isn't that what you think?

Ah-hah! A nod. Just what I thought. A nod, a sign, the truth will out! Hallelujah, the truth will out!

Oh, no, don't go. Come back. I'm sorry. Come, Milo. Please don't be angry with me. Please. I'm emotional after everything that's happened. Let me give you a hug.

There, that's better. You're very nice to me. You're the dearest young man. Let's not be angry with each other. Let's be the way we've been. O.K.? Friends.

Come. There's a chocolate truffle for you in the refrigerator. Anne wanted you to have it. Won't that be nice? You can fetch it before you go.

* * *

You keep growing. Anne keeps growing too. Congratulations, by the way, on surviving ninth grade. That's a big achievement.

Well, I've decided several things. Number one, since Anne is starting kindergarten in the fall, we're going to have time together this summer on Cape Cod, just the two of us.

Number two, I'm going back to work in the fall. Full time.

Number three, I'm going to night school. Law school, actually. Can you imagine? The sins of the fathers, et cetera. It's a frightening pattern. It's the Terrifying Divorced Mother from Outer Space! Oh, no! Help!

I see a smile on that face. A lovely smile. You're going to make someone very happy some day. A pretty girl will fall madly for you. Now you're blushing.

It's time to go. Ruth's got tickets for something off-off-Broadway. They're doing Kafka's *Hunger Artist*. That's so Ruth.

I've left a snack for you in the kitchen. Please keep your ears open for Anne. She's been waking. I think she's still scared I'm going to go off and get mugged and not come back. Can you blame her?

* * *

Hello, Milo. Why don't you come in. How was camp? Enjoyable? That's good.

We obviously need to talk. Why don't you have a seat.

I collected the letters and postcards you sent me this summer. Here they are. I'm giving them back to you now. I appreciate your sentiments, but I'm afraid you've gotten the wrong idea about everything. You're a fine young man, and you're very sweet, and I'm very impressed with the caliber of your correspondence, but you've gotten everything twisted around in your mind. I wish we

could put everything back to where we were last year, but I'm afraid that's impossible now.

Allow me to read a passage from one of your letters.

"Dear Mrs. Van Allen: Today I played mixed doubles with a girl named Frances. Everyone here pronounces it 'Frawn-ces,' so we've started calling her 'Frawn-ces the Prawn-ces,' which she hates. Frances is pretty. She's got nice hair and nice teeth, but she's nothing compared to you. You're a beautiful woman, Mrs. Van Allen, not a girl. Being with Frances makes me think how much I enjoy your company, how intelligent and beautiful you are. Is that wrong? Is it wrong for someone my age to be in love with someone your age? What do you think?"

I want to say. This is very awkward. You've put me in a difficult position.

While I was packing for the Cape in June I noticed that you had been through my underwear drawer, and that there were several items missing. I knew it wasn't Anne, she can't reach that high, so I assumed it was you. It's all right. No, don't leave. Sit, Milo! This is important. Let's say what we need to say.

I understand you have feelings for me. I took the incident in June as an isolated prank, but the weight of your letters forces me to act. You see, the feelings you have for me are different from the way adults feel about each other. You're still a boy, a very fine boy, but a boy nonetheless. When you get a little older you'll understand how unworthy someone like me is of your love. You'll begin to understand what real love is. You'll find someone your own age to love, and it will seem different from what you're feeling now. This is not real love. It's not.

I know we can remain friends. I know that. But I'm afraid we can't continue having our conversations, and I don't think it's appropriate for you to babysit for Anne. Why don't we take a break from each other for a while. I'll call you on the telephone. We'll be

in touch.

Here are the letters. Thank you for sending them to me. Why don't we tie things up for now. We're still friends. O.K.?

Good bye, Milo. Thank you for coming down to see me.

* * *

Hello there. What's the sense in explaining, why don't we, why don't you come inside. Anne's asleep, it's all right. Did you have to sneak out of the apartment? Your mother's not returning my phone calls. Not that I blame her.

I saw Henry today. Were you in the park this morning? It was beautiful, wasn't it, with the leaves, yellow and red. Hard to believe it's raining now. After I put Anne to bed I looked out the window and saw the rain, and the leaves being swept down Madison Avenue into the gutters. That's when I decided to call you.

There's a set of stairs leading down from Fifth Avenue to the 70th street pond, the model boat pond. Do you know where I mean? I was with Anne at the pond, and I saw Henry walking down the stairs with a woman. A girl, really. Just out of college, in college, not yet matriculated, who knows.

I froze, and I thought: what if Anne sees her father with this 21-year-old or nineteen-year-old, or whatever she is? I wanted to spare her that. I pointed her the other way, and we began walking away from him. The monster. I was trying not to cry. It was, I don't know how to describe it.

Would you. Would you mind coming over here and sitting next to me? I need to sit next to someone. It's all right. We have many things to say to each other, I know. Come over here and we'll say those things. Come. It's all right. I won't hurt you.