

## 2-Mother Knows Best

Our feelings for each other developed slowly. We did not leap into bed. I knew that whatever was going to happen between us would need time. After the Exposition, I returned to Los Angeles and John went back and forth to Mexico for his work on *Forgotten Village*. He had a great affection for Mexico and its people. During this period he wrote me letters and told me he had written “some poems” for me and he wrote about his love for me. Actually, he wrote twenty-five love poems to me, a suite. In his letters, there was an anxiousness, although he urged me to wait for him, always to wait for him. Frankly, I was in no hurry to become his permanent acquisition; besides, I did not want to hurt his wife, Carol. Apparently something was happening that was causing a rift in their marriage. What, I did not know and did not want to know. It was none of my business. I later found out that Carol had no knowledge then, of his relationship and feelings toward me.

Life went on and John continued to send me letters and little pieces of paper with messages scribbled on them. They were sad writings, secret and furtive little things. And then, during one of his trips he called and announced his arrival in Los Angeles. John’s coming and going during this period was like predicting the tides in a universe without a moon!

“I have some presents for you, darling” he said. He loved to give presents, especially crazy presents and, being a woman, I naturally liked to receive them. When I could afford it, I also liked to give them. In those days, I could rarely afford it.

The presents he gave me were a voodoo bird in a coffin and a silver bracelet – and a small book of love poems. I must admit that the voodoo bird gift surprised me, but later I found out that John enjoyed and delved into the mystical. Some people have denied it, (and they still do), but while John was and may have been many things he was, too, a firm believer in the supernatural. He also had a habit of picking up pebbles from the ocean floor and, if it was a soft stone and had what he called a “culture” then he kept it in his pocket. As the Greeks have their worry beads and the Chinese keep jade in their sleeves, so John kept his stones in his pocket.

Another weekend, when he returned from Mexico, he again brought me presents. This time it was an opal ring. He bought it because he thought opal was my birthstone, yet I am a late October child. That was a beautiful thing about John, his love of surprising people. Whenever he gave a gift he was as excited as a little boy at Christmastime. He told me the story of how he found the opal ring and it was then I received my first insight into a man who, once he wanted something, he never stopped until he had it – no matter what means he had to take to get it. I have met some women who are like that, too.

John first saw the opal around the neck of Trini, a witch doctor. It had a bubble in it, and, according to Trini, the god of evil hairs lived there and she used the opal to cure children from pneumonia by placing it on their chest. As I said, John was determined to have Trini’s opal for me. It was not easy for him to get it. The old woman at first refused to sell it, but John was not a man to be outdone, so he went to a nearby village and bought chairs for Trini. The chairs were a sign of stature, and she thanked him, took them, but still kept the opal! Again, John returned to the village and bought two more chairs which created an even greater thrill among the people of Trini’s village. Still he could not get the opal. By now, he was really irritated. Back he went to the village, some 20 miles away, and found a cow that had just been freshened and was quite pregnant. He took the cow back to Trini. She gave him the opal.

Later, he took it to Mexico City and had it mounted by one of the primitive artists. The top of the ring represents two cow horns and the hole inside is lined with gold. It reads in Spanish "Yo Te Quido" which means, "I protect you" and one side has the initials "J" and the other reads "G".

The weekend he gave me the opal ring, we made contact with Max (Wagner) and went on the town in Los Angeles drinking tequila and eating all kinds of Mexican foods. We had a ball. We ended up on Olivera Street. John liked good food, all kinds, and it's well known he liked a good drink. That was a wonderful night, one of many I was to have with him, but, as with all good things in this life of ours, it had to have its ending. None of us wanted the night to end, so as a remembrance I bought three little silver rings with clam shells on them, little bells, and we performed what was like a brotherhood ceremony, we each kept a ring.

Max, John and I had great times together, times when we laughed, joked, sang, raised constant hell in an almost childlike fashion. Oddly enough, in those early days of our relationship John and I were never alone, although when we were, John certainly tried to make love to me as any man would. He tried hard to get me into bed but I resisted. I knew I was in love with him, but I simply was not ready to jump head first into a sex relationship. Besides, I was afraid of getting hurt, and my mother felt I was getting into a relationship that would break my heart. I thought she was being silly and being one of those ever-worrying, over protective mothers. After all, I was twenty years old and knew that the world was no rose garden even though there were roses in it. During our growing relationship there was a great deal of zipping back and forth to Mexico. I never knew from one day to the next when John would appear. It was nothing for him to call in the middle of the night and say, "I am coming". When I did not want to see him I had his letters and poems that drew me close to him, letters that always spoke of us being together again, somehow. Each of his letters told me "I need you...you give me comfort...wait for me..." but I was young, full of life, pretty, not rich and not prepared to sit at home and wait for my knight to arrive. I had fun. Why not? I went with Max, went to parties and entertained my friends. I shared what was a deep and loving friendship with Max, although some of our friends felt that our relationship was more, but it was not. I was in love with John, Max knew that. And John was his friend since childhood. In an admiring way, Max loved John, and I suppose that John's friendship with him was for Max a kind of claim to fame. If he had known John as I came to know him, would he have kept the same feelings as in those early days? Like so many, Max knew only one John Steinbeck – the hero. There were others.

After the weekend that ended up on Olivera Street, John said, quite casually, "why don't you and Max come up to Monterey some weekend? We'll have fun, all of us." By that he meant Ed Ricketts, his closest friend and confidant, and Carol, his wife. Max would be with me as a front. The only reason for the weekend was so John could see me again.

Max and I drove to Monterey, that beautiful place on the north California coast, for what turned out to be a crazy weekend. My feelings for Monterey were simple – it was beautiful Steinbeck country and like its people, another world. Monterey has so many wonderful characteristics that John has revealed to millions. We stayed at an old hotel in Salinas and went on one long bar crawl. John liked bar crawls. We hit bar after bar, on foot, until I just could not walk anymore. We were in one bar, I don't remember which one as there were so many, and I told Ed Ricketts, "I can't go on, I just can't." Ed left the bar and came back some time smiling.

"Come on", he said smiling, "I have solved the problem." We all trooped outside and there was this little red wagon. "I have rented it from a kid from the flats for twenty five cents, and we've got it for an hour." Ed bowed to me. "Your taxi service awaits." We continued our bar hopping with me riding in the little red wagon. In one bar I remember sitting on the piano and singing for them *Some Day I'll*

*Find You and Just My Bill.* I remember a red chequered tablecloth that I used at the Chanteuse Helen Morgan. Nobody went to bed that night, and we ended up at Ed's laboratory where Ed cooked Wing Chong's home cured bacon and scrambled eggs, topped off with pineapple pie and blue cheese. Chong was the Chinese grocer John immortalised in "Cannery Row."

With that to fortify us, Max and I drove back to Los Angeles. On the way we heard the news: "War in Europe." We pulled over to the side of the road and, for a few minutes, we cried. We both had the feeling that the future held a kind of horror, that the world had never seen before.

Things quietened down after that weekend, but not for long. John was back at his ranch in Los Gatos, and I was back singing in Los Angeles. Not long after I had returned to work, John called. "Must see you," he said. He sounded completely despondent. He was. Apparently, he and Carol had had another family tiff. John drove down and picked me up and we went to Oceanside, a nice little town not far from Los Angeles. Not very romantic, however. We stayed in a small hotel by the sea, and I could see that John was mentally shaken up, but I did not ask why. It was easy to guess.

That weekend it rained. That weekend I went to bed with John Steinbeck for the first time. I gave myself to him, willingly. It seemed like years since our first meeting. I thought of nothing but him. My feelings were unexplainable. It was one of the greatest and most beautiful happenings. John was strong in bed. I was ready for him, and he for me. We wanted each other, and we gave ourselves to each other, passionately. But while that weekend of sex and passion was wonderful it was also bewildering. John became moody. He called Ed Ricketts constantly, always asking about Carol, and phoned his agents. I did not know what to do. There was nothing I could do so I accepted John's strange, brooding behaviour because I was in love.

I wrote in my diary "He is so wonderful. He is so beautiful, but I wish to God he would stop trying to play God!"

During our life together John tried to play God many times. So many times he declared that no matter what he did or said – it was always right. He hated to be wrong; he wanted to be perfect yet he was not, for he was only a man.

The weekend ended and he drove me back to his ranch. I did not know when or if I would ever see him again. He did not even say goodbye. He said simply, "I guess I'll see you around, honey," and drove away. Once more for me it was back to Los Angeles, yet I knew that whatever happened I would have one beautiful, beautiful memory.

That weekend in Oceanside became a storm after a rainbow. I discovered that I was pregnant. We took no precautions, because John had a thing about using contraceptives. He didn't. He said they made him "impotent." I did not complain about my situation; it always takes two. I called Ed Ricketts and told him. He called John. When John called me he did not seem particularly upset or concerned, but then, that was his way, his manner. It was not his problem.

"I am sorry. Can I do anything?" Then he asked, "Why don't you have the baby?"

"I can't. It's impossible. I don't want the baby. I don't have the money for it, either. Besides, I have a career," I answered.

"Come and see me," he said.

I flew to Monterey the next morning and when we met he said, "Somehow we'll work things out."

He forgot to say how, and nothing was worked out.

It was obvious that John did not give a damn about me being pregnant. There was only one thing to do. I left and flew back to Los Angeles the same day. How does a young and pregnant and unmarried woman feel? I felt like crap. I felt completely alone while John was back in his cocoon of married life with Carol, secure. Our weekend of passion was seemingly nothing. I was mentally depressed and even thought of committing suicide. But then I turned to my mother and told her. My mother was a wonderful woman, even though John never liked her. Like many mothers, she had told her daughter many times "if ever you are in trouble, come to me." Who else could I turn to? She took me to a doctor and he gave me some kind of medicine. Fortunately, I was not that too far along, and the medicine removed the pregnancy. I felt rotten.

Several months later John called. Casually, he asked: "How are you?" How kind. Then he said, "I am terribly upset. I have to see you. I need you." He spoke the words in his usual quiet voice. It began to have a familiar melody. He sent me a plane ticket and I joined him in Monterey. Flying up there my mind asked me: "Why are you doing this? Are you being used?" I still loved him and had the feeling that our relationship was incomplete and some decision had to be made.

That weekend we talked a lot, and drank a lot, and spent the evenings with Ed Ricketts. By now, John was working on a prose outline of *Sea of Cortez* which became a journal of travel and research which he co-authored with Ed Ricketts. By then, *The Forgotten Village* had been edited and was almost ready for release.

That weekend in 1941 was a strange one. It seemed as if he was looking to his greatest friend Ed for support and silently looking to him for an answer to his relationship with me. I felt as if I was being inspected by Ed, but not unkindly. John drove me back to the hotel where I was staying, and on the way said that something would work out; all I had to do was "hang on." He also said, "Ed likes you very much." With that remark I felt as if I had passed the supreme test. I returned to Los Angeles but still did not know really where I was going. I had to be content to let life show me the way. Sometimes, we all have to do that.

For a long time there was nothing, and then, from nowhere, a telephone call, "I have to see you. Will you fly up? I will arrange everything." John was back in Monterey. He and Carol had bought a house in Pacific Grove. Here we go again. What would it be this time? He met me at the airport.

"I have had some things brought down from the ranch," he said as we drove from the airport. I knew John fairly well by now, and knew he had not sent for me just to show me the house. "I finally told Carol all about you. I have done all I can to make her happy. What more can I do? She says she's tired of living at the ranch. She says she is too lonely, the ranch is too remote. I don't understand. She wanted the ranch so badly..."

We arrived at the new house. It was dark and gloomy and surrounded by an eight foot fence, solid mattress vice. It looked like something from one of those old horror movies. It was not helped by the fact that it was one of those grey Monterey days. Any moment I expected Boris Karloff to greet us. We went through a very narrow gate. It was a funny, ugly little old house and it smelled of age and decay. There were packing cases here and there. Obviously, John and Carol had had a few drinks. I felt like a ninny as I sat down on a crate.

"Like a drink? Pink champagne?" asked John.

"Thanks." I took it. I needed it although I was not in the mood for drinking as it was in the middle of the afternoon. Carol sat in a chair and John spread himself out on a funny-looking over-stuffed couch. He quickly came to the point. "I know you both love me" he began "and I have been thinking.

I want you two to talk this out. What do you women want to do about me?" This was a jolting statement, to say the least, and at least to me. I wasn't used to that kind of situation. I am sure that Carol felt the same. Then he said, "Whichever of you ladies needs me the most and wants me the most, then that's the woman I'm going to have," he added, smiling. I thought he was joking. He wasn't. This certainly revealed his ego.

Carol started to talk. With all due credit to her she told me, "You don't want him and you don't really love him. I love him, terribly, but he hasn't slept with me for three years. I have done a great deal for John, and we've done a great deal together..." John went into the kitchen, poured another drink, came back and said, "I'm going for a walk and you two argue it out. Whichever one wants me I guess gets me." Just like that. He left the house and the two of us were alone. I wasn't ready for that kind of shit. It was like a Nixon/Kennedy debate.

"You'll never be accepted by his family," Carol warned. "You won't because they're very possessive of him and extremely clannish." There she proved to be right. "And furthermore, he won't be faithful to you..." There again she was right. "And he is a jealous, nasty man, and if you get him..." She paused and then said "I'm going to take him for every goddamned f\*\*\*ing cent! I want him!"

She went on talking, telling me about the intimate details of their marriage. It only embarrassed me more, and I'm far from being a prude. What I heard from Carol that day I could not believe, but I know she was speaking the truth. She loved him, too; no matter what might have happened in their married life; she loved him.

John returned a short time later and by this time Carol was pretty well along with her sipping. She asked me to follow her to the bathroom. I sat on the tub. She was a little unsteady on her feet. She pleaded, "Give me a chance and get out of John's life."

"If this is what you want, then I will," I said. She continued with more intimate details of their life together, but it was just too much for me to take. We went back into the room and I finished my drink. The three of us had gone through three bottles of vintage pink champagne, that grey afternoon. And it was grey, inside and out.

"I am leaving," I said. "Please take me to a hotel, John." It was done without any drama. He suggested I stay with Barbara and Ellwood Graham, the artists, which I did. The next morning I flew home and that was the last I heard from John for several weeks.

While Carol was experiencing an emotional upheaval I, too, was living traumatic days and nights. In fact, I became very ill. Mother took me to a ranch in Cherry Valley, just outside of Palm Springs. It was raining and cold and I was, in every sense of the word, physically and mentally exhausted. Now my mother's Welsh spirit was aroused over the protracted situation with John, and she called his attorney and then took a train to see him. It was a brief visit and to the point: What was John going to do? Was he going to break it off? Gwyn has to know so she can go back to work or do something, mother told the lawyer.

She returned two days later and told me the attorney's answer was, "Well, I'll tell you, Bird Eyes, once upon a time Carol was a sweet girl and John made her into a monster, and if he gets Gwyn he will make her into a monster, too." He said he would see what he could do.

Mother and I stayed at the Cherry Valley ranch a while longer and then went home to Los Angeles. A wire was there.. All it said was "Coming. John."

A week later he was in Los Angeles.

“Carol’s going to New York and we have come to an agreement. I love you and I need you. Come back to Monterey with me,” he pleaded, yes, I swear, pleaded. Mother did not exactly approve.

But it was my life. It was no snap decision. Mother, John and I discussed it for several days, and then I made up my mind. I was going. Early one morning we set out for the old house at 425, Eardley Street in Pacific Grove. It began to rain hard. We stopped on the way in Andersonville, and went into this dismal little restaurant and sat at the counter. John knew the place and told me they had good split-pea soup. Behind the counter was a pubescent, pimply-faced girl who paid no attention to us. She was bowed over a spiral notebook, writing. John leaned and read, upside down, what she was writing. She had written, “Dear Clark Gable...” She stopped and served us. John never forgot that pimply-faced girl, and stored her until he was ready to use her, like he stored so many people and things. He used her in *The Wayward Bus*.

As we sped towards Pacific Grove, I felt exhilarated for the first time in many months, although I felt apprehensive, as to what the future would hold. There was little conversation. The swishing of the windshield wipers gave me no answer. I looked out into the rain.

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