

Other books by Helen Bevington

Doctor Johnson's Waterfall

(1946)

Nineteen Million Elephants

(1950)

A Change of Sky

(1956)

When Found, Make a Verse Of

(1961)

Charley Smith's Girl

(1965)

A BOOK &

A Love Affair



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life-enhancing people, and then it was over. None of us could have guessed in those days the horror that lay ahead.

B. and I had met the Flanderses during the winter. Donald Flanders (known since college as Moll, like Defoe's Moll) was an assistant professor of mathematics at New York University, a man of whom B. said after having lunch with him at the Faculty Club, "I've just met one of the saints. I want him for my friend."

When Sally and Moll invited us to their Morningside Avenue apartment for coffee one evening, I went eagerly to meet them. I was sorry and then incensed that I had gone.

They lived in a ramshackle building in a tawdry neighborhood, and their railroad flat was in a state of disarray that looked cyclonic. It was not clutter, it was chaos. Though tidy myself, I knew that people weren't more lovable for being neat, or for being sloppy either. You couldn't use that thin a yardstick.

Sally motioned us to overstuffed chairs occupied by two small children, a cat, and a dog. "Get down, Spinach," she said to the dog. She was extremely pregnant with her third child, a stocky woman in her thirties with a mannish bob of straight, light-brown hair, a round face, and no makeup. She was a chain-smoker with a frog in her throat. Since the staring children and animals didn't stir, we removed the debris from two straight chairs and sat down.

Sally sat opposite on the piano stool, and Moll rushed in belatedly to shake our hand. If he was a saint, it was a distracted one. Clearly he failed to recognize us or recall why we had come. He sat bemused, wrapped in deep thought, scratching his hair where it had receded from his forehead, crossing and recrossing his legs—a tallish, dark, thin man of great intensity of concentration. A knotty problem in his head was in the process of being solved. While he tussled with it, we waited in silence.



When David was eight weeks old in July, we took him to the Flanderses' farm. He rode between us in the Whippet, lying in a well-padded melon crate, up to the Berkshire hills near Pittsfield, Massachusetts. At the bottom of the perpendicular hill leading to the farmhouse, the exhausted car gasped and stalled. I got out and climbed the steep road on foot, hauling David up like a box of melons, while B. coaxed the tired little Whippet to try again. Our child would know early what a hill was.

This was the beginning of life with the Flanders family through twelve magic summers. When I think of the play *You Can't Take It with You* about Grandpa Vanderhof's crazy household, I think of us at the farm—both because everybody who came was free to move in and enjoy himself, and because it was true, we couldn't take it with us after all. It was a time of immense pleasure among life-loving,

Sally said briskly, "Good! With four voices we can get to work on some Palestrina. You'll have to sing soprano, whatever your range," pointing a finger at me. "Alto is as high as I go."

"I don't sing," I said flatly.

That broke Moll's trance. He and Sally looked as astonished as if I had said I couldn't read or write.

"I'll help you if you want help," Moll said. "We sing for the love of it, nothing professional. Don't worry about a polished performance. Just read through a part."

"You can do a solfège," Sally said. "Never mind the Latin words."

"I can't read through a part," I said mulishly. "I'm tone-deaf. I don't sing."

With a sigh as if to say Why in hell did she come? Sally stood up and leafed through the piles of music on top of the piano. She extracted three copies of the *Musica Sacra* and handed two around to B. and Moll.

"If she won't try, we'll simply have to sing without her," she said. "All right, everybody, start with the three-part Lotti, page 47, '*Vere languores nostros*.' I'll take the first tenor, Bev the second tenor, Moll the bass. Oh, what *fun*!" I went indignant to the far corner of the room, picked up a book, and fuming with rage read all evening. Nobody spoke to me. They tuned and disported themselves, sometimes doubled up with laughter. At midnight Sally served the coffee, still treating me like a mannerless child, and we could go home. They had sung for three solid hours.

When next I saw Sally, in February, she had given birth to Jane. B. asked me to visit her in the hospital, and exploding in anger I refused. Then he *told* me to go, which I resented more loudly. His friendship with Moll meant a great deal to him. He said I could stop being stiff-necked and learn to put up with Sally.

"It seems to me a lowdown, heartless thing to ask," I cried in fury.

"That is because, dearest, you are a dunce," he said.

"I am not a dunce!"

"I know," he said. "I was only quoting."

"For the love of God, B.! Will you stop *quoting* every minute?" I yelled.

"Peace, good pintpot."

Sally lay smoking Fatimas in her hospital bed, arms akimbo, full of bounce. Having a baby was no ordeal for her. While I sat coldly silent, outraged to be there, she talked for an hour about herself, how she had gone to Vassar with Edna St. Vincent Millay; how she had gone abroad with John Dos Passos, or at least on the same boat; how she had met a saint from Haverford and married him, borne him three perfect children, and had a perfect life. She had perfect relatives and perfect friends. She told me she assumed that people should please her, not that she should try to please them. God, I thought, how boring.

"That's because I'm a Murray," she said.

I didn't ask the meaning of this remark. I couldn't have cared less. Later I learned, not from Sally (who had no snobbery in her, only a vast contentment with her lot) that it meant she was one of the Murrays of Murray Hill. She was a birthright Quaker too, who had resigned from the Meeting but still used the plain language. She said *thee* to those she loved, to her family and the people who pleased her.

"Thee is expecting a child," she said abruptly as I rose to go.

"Yes."

"When?"

"In May."

"I'll come to see thee then. I know thee hates like hell to admit it, but I think we're going to be friends."

I took the warm hand she offered me. She had extraordinary gray eyes, capable of much compassion. There was approval in her voice and lovingkindness. Strangely enough I realized what a good friend she could be. She *liked* me. In spite of myself I liked her.

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The farmhouse stood at the end of a long driveway, in a wild ragged setting of woods and partial clearing. It belonged there, like the elderberry bushes, the deer and woodchucks, the hemlocks, the white birches—an old house of unpainted, weathered gray clapboard, stark and boxlike with a high roof and no porch. A large sagging barn loomed up behind.

The place always gave me the creeps. It looked lonely, even haunted, filled to the rafters though it was with noisy laughing children and equally noisy grownups. It seemed lost and adrift up in the hills, not a summer place but a remote hill farm, banished and forgotten, out of touch with the world and out of caring. You would expect the people who lived there to be half-savage and illiterate. There was something chilling about it that made me want to weep—a loneliness, an untamed look, a desolation, a solitude. Perhaps that was why, in its unlikelihood, I came to love it so deeply.

It had a grim history of murder. Frank McCabe used to tell the story, Frank who with his brother Pete still farmed a few acres a mile away over the next hill. It went back to the time when George Crew, who owned the place, married one of the Green girls of Green Hollow, Mary by name, and brought her to live on this lonely farm. Her sister Pearl came along too, an oldmaid schoolteacher, who hated George with a passion.

She tried several times to kill him, the story went. Once as George passed through the kitchen, he found the out-

side door standing open and behind it the tips of a pair of rubber boots just showing below the edge of the door. Flinging it shut, he discovered Pearl hiding there, dressed unaccountably in hip boots with an upraised axe in her hands. Not long after, George was found dead in the barn, lying in a pool of blood. According to the family, he had been repairing the floor boards and a board had snapped up, hitting a horse standing in its stall. The horse had reared and kicked him to death.

"It was a funny thing," Frank McCabe used to say. "They claimed that pony reared up and kicked George with its shoe and brained him. Maybe it did," shaking his head. "But me and Pete, we come over and seen enough to satisfy us. That pony wasn't even shod."

On the night before the funeral, Pearl slipped out in the dark, set fire to the barn, and when it blazed high ran off into the woods to hide. The flaming barn burned to the ground. The way Frank McCabe figured, Pearl was only getting rid of the bloody monkeywrench before it was found and used against her.

Pearl died years later in the state lunatic asylum. The last of the Greens still alive in the countryside was her sister Susie, married to halfwitted Lester Bolton, living in a shack somewhere in these thickly wooded hills. On moonlight nights Susie, mad as the vex'd sea, howled like a hound dog and bayed at the moon. We often heard her barking as we walked along the moonlit road or sat out under the stars. "My God, there's Susie!" we would say in hushed voices, shuddering at the eerie sound. I'd rather listen to a spook any time than to mad Susie baying her heart out under a bright moon.

Moll and Sally bought the old Crew place, standing empty and lost, abandoned for years. They chased out the bats, kept the mice and chipmunks, added a few improvements like a drilled well, an upright piano, some peonies

and lilac bushes, and named it Skipton—which hardly suited its nature but Sally named everything.

Sally's sister Bobby and her husband Tom Fansler had found a second farm, also unoccupied, on the opposite hillside and bought it. They named it Heyshott, a white frame farmhouse with unpainted barns, neglected orchards and pasturelands. You could holler across the valley from Skipton to Heyshott, but it took ten minutes to walk around by the dirt road, down one steep hill and toiling up the next.

The two farms and their families made a company that in good time I loved more than any other I have known. They became my family, closer than blood kin, the friends of a lifetime. But for a day or two I had to fight it out with Sally.

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Sally was a boss, running the show singlehanded, bawling out orders like a camp director, ruling her empire like Catherine of Russia. From the moment of our arrival that afternoon she told me what to do, when to do it, and how to bring up my child.

"Go change Dave's pants and put him to bed, *quickly*," she said before we reached the front door. "Come back and tea will be ready. After tea, we'll sing."

"It's time for his orange juice," I said.

"It is *not* time for orange juice. Don't be an idiot. It's time for tea," Sally said. "Put him in the back bedroom where we can't hear him if he cries. And don't keep us waiting. Hurry up!"

Infuriated, I went to do as she said. My feeling for days after was one of open hostility. "I'm damned if I will!" I thought each time she pushed me around. "I'll do as I damn please!" Yet when she told me not to wear lipstick

in the country or to take my nose out of a book, I muttered to myself and, sorely insulted, obeyed. She was undermining my character. At least I was allowed to walk barefoot in the grass.

B. caught on, but not I. He relaxed from the start, let her manage him, ignored my suffering, and enjoyed himself. Though in general B. hated bossy women as man-eaters and emasculators, he recognized at once the essential difference in Sally. He grasped what it took me years to accept—which was the infinite wisdom, the profit to oneself, of giving Sally her way. If you yielded and let her, she would run your life as a personal service better than you could yourself. She had a natural bent for it. She gave her time and her heart, planning your duties and multiplying your pleasures, directing your existence. It took not so much a submissive mind as a generous one to grasp her worth. She offered her great talent for living, her love of life. And it was all free.

Accepting Sally on her own terms was a bitter lesson, hard but reasonable. It worked to my endless advantage and enriched my life. Harder still, now that she is dead, is to write of her at all when it was she, the bountiful one, who was so passionately alive.

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After breakfast next morning, Sally sent the men to the cellar to work ankle-deep in mud at jacking up the foundations of the house. Upstairs resembled a medieval kitchen, with me the scullion set to preparing the day's food—cutting up string beans, shelling peas, peeling potatoes—while Sally made blackberry jam, canned tomatoes in the pressure cooker, and washed diapers in the kitchen sink. Peter, five, and Ellen, four, ran whooping in and out of the house. The two babies, each in a cardboard carton

at my feet, alternately slept or screamed. Sally took this idle leisure time, free of distraction, to teach me how to sing.

I objected strenuously, clenching my teeth, cursing her under my breath, but it did no good. She began with school rounds and progressed to simple canons.

Man's life's a vapor [we sang]

Full of woes.

He cuts a caper,

Down he goes.

Down, down, down, down, down, down he goes.

Sally's voice was husky, the notes came out a little blurred but accurate enough. "*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis*," she rumbled, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. "Go ahead! Sing! Thee comes in two beats behind me." She drilled like an army sergeant, beating out the time with a soapy hand from the kitchen sink. Meanwhile the pressure cooker gath-ered steam and threatened to explode. The babies woke and wailed, with scarcely a hope of being heard or attended to.

Moll called out from the cellar, "Sounds pretty good from here. Her voice is true, it reminds me of my mother's."

"She's been lying all the while, damn her," answered Sally. "We'll do some four-part Palestrina after tea."

It was the Palestrina Mass in perpetual canon that became the master work to bind us together in a four-part eternal friendship. Moll drilled us that summer as if we were the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and we laughed and wept to hear ourselves, especially the first time we managed to keep going from the splendid opening, the *Kyrie eleison*, through the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* to the powerful, tremendous Amen of the *Credo*. I had never known the pride of polyphonic song before, but I knew it now. We sat hud-

dled on the lawn on a blanket, with Moll up on his knees to lead us—Moll, who heard every note and provided one when we lost it, who carried us struggling mightily through the lofty *Sanctus*, the shouting *Hosanna in excelsis*, the prayerful *Benedictus*, the melodious, seraphic *Agnus dei*, after which Sally embraced her child prodigy, and we four fell back exhausted on the blanket, helpless with laughter at our sweating but victorious performance, the holy conquest of Palestrina.

And of the four of us choristers who achieved this triumph, I am the only one left, the only one still alive to say that it was so. And I say that it was so.

*

Tom Fansler taught English at New York University. Bobby, his wife, was a lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a woman of infinite charm who collected friends like art works, and the friends adorned her life and turned up uninvited at either house, sure of a welcome—artists who hurriedly set up an easel to paint the View, art critics and historians who sat down to discuss it. Musicians gathered over the weekends, fiddler and cellist to play chamber music with Moll. At sunset children walked the road up to Pop Gowan's for the milk. We danced on the lawn to Moll's fiddle or played a fierce game of bowls that kept on after dark to flashlights and lanterns. Most of all we talked, dogged talkers who never flagged nor failed. And while we talked we laughed.

B. and I climbed daily the hill to the little Bacon Hill schoolhouse with the idea of buying it and staying on forever in this countryside. It was an abandoned one-room schoolhouse equipped with scarred desks, a potbellied stove, two outdoor toilets, and a yardful of sugar maples. The two toilets made it somehow irresistible.

Once when Moll and I were returning from Canaan, the

small village two miles away where we bought groceries, he drove me up past mad Susie's shack in the hills. At the sound of the car, Susie rushed out of the house brandishing a large butcher knife, her stringy gray hair hanging down her back, her eyes crazy and glittering. She raced to the road waving her arms, yelling obscenities as she came, and when Moll politely drew up she thrust her head inside the front window where I sat holding David on my lap. Pointing her knife at my throat, she grinned like a witch, staring into my eyes.

"Lift up your skirts, dear, and let him put it to you," she cried, menacing with her knife. "It's all men want anyhow."

"Listen to her," said Moll. "Do you hear the natural music, the simple, easy rhythm, the flow of her speech? It's almost a folk song."

"She sounds like a poet," I said dryly.

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I don't know how much less extraordinary the summer might have been had I grown up with a big family or been part of a tumult before. Since B. was one of five children, it appeared less remarkable to him. But I was shaken and happy in this roaring household.

For however violent or calm the intervals, it was good, it was lovely at the Farm. It was as if—the Kantian as if—all would be well and we would stay absurdly young and alive forever. Much virtue in *as if*. Our only fault was that, however ardent of life, we were unable to do so.

7



"Life is just a bowl of cherries" went a popular song in 1931. The banks began to collapse that fall—the great Bank of the United States had failed—and by the end of the year there were some ten million (soon to be fifteen million) unemployed. People lived in tents and caves, slept in doorways, flophouses, boxcars, telephone booths. They scoured the dumps for food, and they starved. There were hunger marches, coal strikes, lockouts, suicides. It was an ailing world, a sickening time of chronic misery and despairing lives. Some of the losers were our friends.

In October B. and I moved to an apartment in the Bronx, exchanging one campus for another, Columbia for New York University, and I became no longer a graduate student but a faculty wife wheeling a baby carriage. By now I couldn't have found a job. I was one of the unemployed.