Colette Brooks

# *Somewhere in the Eighties*

*We do not gain all our experience at once, but by degrees; thus our determinations continue to be assailed incessantly by fresh experience; and the mind, if we may use the expression, must always be "under arms."*

—Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 1832

ONE day, during a quiet moment in what was to prove our last visit together before her death, my grandmother looked up from her coffee and spoke of her son, breaking a virtual silence of decades in so simple a manner that I knew she'd been asking the question of herself for thirty-some years. "I suppose you've often wondered," she said, "what would have happened if your father had been the one to live, if he'd been the one to raise you."

I cannot now recall what I said in response to this remark, this irruption, but I remember my utter surprise. She had never before spoken so directly of a subject so difficult for her; but beyond this, beyond this surrender of a reserve I had always respected, lay a realization more startling to me. I had often wondered about many things—about what would have happened if, say, electricity had never been discovered, or what would have happened if Germany had won the war—but it had never occurred to me to question something as fundamental, as seemingly unalterable, as the very personal givens I'd grown up with. It was as though there were no circumstances less Protean than those in which my family, over the years, had found itself. Even after my grandmother had raised the issue, I found it difficult to speculate about possibility, the past, its varying permutations, but I began to think about *her*, to wonder what it would be like to have spent the greater part of one's life immersed, on some level, in conjecture—always wondering, silently, *what if* . . .

What if she hadn't been born in January 1900, at the very start of this exceedingly difficult century? What if she hadn't been widowed at the age of twenty-two, having sent her young husband off to war, only to watch him return to die of tuberculosis incurred overseas? What if she hadn't raised and sent their only child off to fight again, to watch him

return, alive, only to realize that he had brought the war home with him, that within eight years of his discharge he too would be dead, would fall at age thirty-two to a recurrence of jungle diseases so numerous they couldn't all be noted on the death certificate? What if she hadn't forced herself not to interfere in the raising of his young children, to leave this to a troubled and increasingly beleaguered woman who found her own situation in the world overwhelming? *What if?*

I wanted to ask her about all these things, to determine how a person I knew to be loving and vital had fashioned a life around these seeming voids. And I wanted to learn more about my father, a man whom no one in the family could bear to mention. But by the time I had come to this pass, in my early thirties, my grandmother and mother were dead themselves, and there was no one left who could answer the questions I had finally formulated.

*Evaluation and Interpretation of Information*
*1. All information no matter how trivial is important.*
*2. Is it information of the enemy or of terrain not under our control?*
*3. Is it information needed immediately and if so by whom?*
*4. Is it information of future value?*
*5. Is the information confirmed by other information previously received?*
*6. What does it mean in connection with what is already known?*

—William J. Brooks, Class notes, U.S. Army Basic Training, 1942

It seems I've seen a hundred movies in which archaeologists *get lucky*: at the very point of despair, after years of fruitless digging about in some barren area, one throws one's tools aside in a last futile gesture and *there it is*—at the very periphery, under a cloud of dust, the find of a lifetime. Traces of ancient civilizations, shards of past lives to be pieced together, with patience and care, as if the slightest jolt will forever etherealize these simulacra of other selves. So it was, in a way, with my own search. Among my grandmother's effects were a group of letters, two parcels bound with rubber bands—a strangely haphazard method, I thought, of preserving documents that seemed to have lain purposely undisturbed for a very long time. No one in the family had known of their existence, and in years since I have often wondered where she could have kept them, in what closet corner or bureau drawer I hadn't myself ever rooted through.

The letters were, of course, my father's: scores of pages written and received by a man of whom I'd read nothing more than his name, penned in the flyleaves of books collected in a long-abandoned family library.

The letters were accompanied by various papers and documents, the whole seeming to center upon his army service—a period, according to the Enlisted Record and Report of Separation, that spanned 3 years 4 months 2 days, from 28 July 1942 to 16 November 1945; of which 1 year 2 months 2 days were spent in the Continental United States, 2 years 2 months 0 days overseas. He had served in the Asiatic Pacific Theater of Operations, first in Australia, later in the New Guinea campaign. REASON AND AUTHORITY OF SEPARATION: *Convenience of Government.* DISCHARGE: *Honorable.* WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION: *None.*

Hoping to piece together a fuller picture of the person so tersely sketched in those stark facts, I began to sift through these strange papers, yellowed and worn. (*Dear Mother . . . This letter seems to be built on "ifs" but so is my life at this time. If we boys are not "iffing" about what we'd be doing in civilian life we are "iffing" about the army . . . Love, Son Bill*) I took as my guiding principle the puzzle I had found at the bottom of the box—one of those novelty items of the 1940's, a letter written out and then broken apart, to be mailed to (and reassembled by) the recipient. It had obviously been quite difficult to begin with—a jumble of tiny irregular sections covered with microscopic writing—and many of its pieces were now missing forty years after the fact. It had no apparent beginning or end, no conventional structure whatsoever, though it had clearly been written to be read. I took heart in the suspicion that it had never been completely reconstructed in the first place.

Slowly, as I looked through the letters, I caught glimpses of the man I recognized from what little I had heard about him in the past—"gentle," "bookish," "a dreamer"—from people I'd known to be voluble on other subjects. ("*Tonight I am in a mellow mood and slightly sad because I have been thinking of my books and dogs. My collections are something I long for. They will be somewhat behind times when I get back.*") As I read on, however, I realized that the letters were themselves elliptical; beyond the expected difficulties of a very young man trying to write about the largest event of his life ("*I want to say so many things but I cannot find the proper words*") there were lacunae of other kinds, other things about which nothing could be said ("*You must excuse the brevity of this letter, but there is nothing to write about. Things military are out and everything we do is military, as it should be with a soldier*"). Even his location could never be disclosed; according to that cryptic military locution, he was always "Somewhere in California," "Somewhere in Australia," "Somewhere in the Southwest Pacific Area." Wherever he

was, however, whatever the constraints of communication, he clearly looked to these letters as a lifeline, and as I studied them I recognized an impulse that I was beginning to find in myself—the simple need for contact. ("*I have read all of your letters over and over again.*")

> My Dear Son:
>
> Well, my dear, it is again Christmas Eve but how different from all those that have gone before and, I hope, different from all those to come. Still, we have much for which I am thankful but I would be happier if you were in a better frame of mind. I know the going is pretty tough, but you have opportunities there, too, of which you should take advantage. The time will pass quickly enough and we do not know what lies ahead and you may never again get to that part of the country—for that reason, on your time off, get the most out of what lies around you. Learn to know the people and the country. Visit historical spots if possible so that in days that follow, you will remember some of the high spots of that community. This sounds like a lecture but it is not that at all. I just want you to realize now while you are there that there is something right there by which you may profit . . .
>
> Your loving Mother always
>
> Mother

*Methods of Orientation*

*a. Use two prominent terrain features.*
*b. Place pins of terrain features on map and sight one with straight edge; then do same for other landmark; place where two lines intersect is where you are.*

—Class notes, Basic Training

In addition to the letters, the cache I came upon also included snapshots with the serrated edges I recognized as being of period vintage. My grandmother had once given us a framed photograph of our father, a formal head and shoulder shot, but beyond that I had seen only a handful of other images and so these new shots too were something of a revelation. The one that I looked at the longest, and have since taken as a kind of talisman, is of my grandmother and father, arm in arm, on the beach; sunglasses, cigarettes, those baggy pants favored in the forties. They are staring straight into the camera and smiling. There is an ease to this picture, a casual grace, as though it was to be just one of many such moments immortalized in the family album. They could not have known,

then, that this one image would be the only one to survive them, the only one with just the two of them together, or that future family members would scrutinize it with such intensity. It seems, then, an especially fortuitous survival, for unlike the other more daunting group shots—men in military regalia, women with pinched smiles, leave obviously over—this one is simple, private, as though the claims of posterity had been satisfied in the other shots, with the uniforms and other world-historical emblems; as though this one were only for them. Perhaps, however, its survival was no accident; perhaps she kept it apart because she knew, even then, that it was irreplaceable. ("*Mother, this you may not realize but I have you to thank for all the nice things I have had all these years. You have made sacrifices and someday I will have an opportunity to pay that debt which I owe you . . . your intelligence and thoughtfulness in guiding me have been responsible for my appreciation of those things which bring me joy.*")

My very dear Son:

. . . I'm sure your living conditions leave much to be hoped for. Your picture does not seem very bright but then none of this business is and if you are not too cold or too hot, dry quarters too—those are most important. I hope you have that at least.

Your camp may be bad but I can't believe that all the fellows there are as bad as you say. You are too smug. Remember the old saw "there's a little bit of bad in the best of us and a little bit of good in the worst of us and it ill behooves the best of us to talk about the rest of us!" or something like that. Be a good fellow and look for the merit in a man not the school or home he came from. I am not scolding you understand. It is so hard to write because there is no voice inflection to give the words meaning but when you know in your heart that my every thought is for your good and happiness, I know you can read the way I write! You see, for the first time in your life you are coming in contact with people not of your own choosing. The hardest thing anyone sensitive as you are to the finer instincts has to do is find a common ground somewhere between up here and down there. You can do this and eventually you will find good qualities somewhere. It is not necessary for you to change inwardly at all but possibly be a little more tolerant.

You *are* a long way from home, honey, and believe me I know it but just the same you are seeing America First on Uncle Sam's time. Try not to be homesick. Cram everything you can

about the country and read all you can about its history so that when you get back home, you will bring a part of all these different places with you.

Must quit now and will write again soon. Hope you are feeling much better by now. This time next year I am *sure* we will be happier if not reunited yet. This *can't* last much longer. I thought the President's speech to Congress very encouraging.

All my love,

Mother

*Platoon Scout: Moves boldly forward and gives the enemy something to shoot at.*
—Class notes, Basic Training

When I was a child we would often visit the military cemetery in which my father was buried. I never felt frightened or uneasy about these visits; in fact, I looked forward to them. We were "going to see Daddy," after all, and the cemetery itself was always peaceful; in the early years it served as a playground for us as the adults went about their mute business. (There is a picture of my brother and myself, as toddlers, hardly as tall as the headstone, smiling beside our mother and clutching the rubber balls we'd been rolling along the thin strips of grass moments earlier.) It was also often strangely beautiful, particularly on days when senators spoke and hundreds of American flags waved against the evergreens. As I grew older, I took pride in my unerring ability to find my father's grave first, to leap out of the car, make my way up and then veer off the path, on an instinctive diagonal, shouting "here it is!" to the rest of the family lagging behind. As the years passed, though, it became more and more difficult to find my way about. The cemetery expanded, inexorably: row upon row upon row of government-issue headstones set on small plots of grass, meticulously tended mirror images of one another. As I look back on that cemetery now, I see that it was and is my Levittown, the very picture of what the fifties and postwar America will always mean for me.

*War does not consist of a single instantaneous blow.*
—Clausewitz

My mother traveled outside the continental United States only twice in her lifetime: once, to Mexico, and once, to Hawaii. The first was a typical tourist's trip, but the second was more on the order of a pilgrimage, a visitation taken late in her life to a place that must always have

loomed in her memory. There are no shots of palm trees or beaches or volcanoes in the rolls of film she took on the islands; there are only pictures of Pearl Harbor, the Memorial viewed and recorded from every possible angle, rusting hulks upended in the water, new Navy cruisers with seamen on active duty lining the decks. When I saw these pictures I was reminded immediately of something she'd once said when I was much younger, pestering her about a trunk I'd found in the basement that she refused to open. She mumbled something about mementos, and proposals, and men she'd considered marrying, and then: "*I had three boyfriends on the* Arizona." It was a statement of fact, delivered as though it would put a decisive end to our discussion, and it did. Later, I would wonder what had turned a smart and vivacious young girl into a reckless, disappointed woman, and part of the answer must surely lie in these pictures she took almost obsessively. "Something snapped in your mother when your father died," someone once said, and I believe it; but something must also have snapped earlier, something having to do with hope, and belief, something that wasn't strong enough to withstand the effects of larger forces. ("*We who are in the army call ourselves the lost generation. Some of us will be 'back numbers' when we return home from the far flung fighting fronts of the world. I do not intend to be one of those who are left behind by the strange twists of fate or events of man's own making....*")

*We do not fire from one theatre of war upon another.*
—Clausewitz

Despite the sense of loss that permeated my grandmother's life, she never seemed a particularly mournful or memory-ridden figure; on the contrary, hers was generally a festive presence—gracious, lively, fun. She turned many an ordinary moment into something more: lighting candles at lunch, or taking us to restaurants she couldn't really afford, or proposing we bet real money on the outcome of our pinochle games. She was engaged in the world around her, revealing what seemed to me an astonishing array of interests by having on hand not just books and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (faithfully updated) but also the latest *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, and *TV Guide*. I knew she'd suffered through tragic periods in her past, of course, but I knew that more from her reticence than from any open admissions. At those few moments when she did refer to "your father," she seemed, for the most part, to be fine, and at some point it occurred to me that it was only the proper

name itself that caused her real pain—and that was when I knew she lived in two worlds. When speaking of her grandson, my brother, also a "Bill," she spoke the name freely, in admonition, exasperation, or affection, without hesitation. When speaking of her son, however, the intonation altered; what had been a name became a kind of cry, as if all the heartbreak of her life had been drawn into that one word, spoken in that one sense. *Bill.* The two lives that I had seen as "past" and "present" were clearly coextensive, and in fragile balance. I think I know now why she never remarried.

*All War presupposes human weakness, and against that it is directed.*
—Clausewitz

According to the letters, my father spent a great deal of his time in the service wishing he were elsewhere, and planning against the day when his whereabouts would be subject only to his own power and whim. He would make detailed sketches of cars and would compose elaborate travel itineraries—Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Natchez, Memphis, Mobile, Nashville, Atlanta, Miami Beach, Palm Beach, Key West, Tampa, Savannah, Charleston, Raleigh, Durham, Richmond, Norfolk, Williamsburg, Baltimore, Washington D.C., Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York, Connecticut, Chicago, Detroit, and home again—that he and my grandmother were to follow at their leisure, in their brand-new car, once the war was over. I don't know whether they ever made that trip, but I suspect not. It was probably akin to the cruise that Grandma and I were to make when I graduated from college. Every so often she would send me brochures, annotated with her exclamations and underlinings, and I would give them a glance, but the time was never quite right, and we never went anywhere together in the end. I regret that, now, though I also recognize that such imagined travels serve best as bulwarks against isolation, as strategies in the one struggle that only intensifies over time. ("*About sending postcards and the like—those things are against censorship regulations. The pictures for the nonce must remain mental images. Too bad I am not more of an artist because my memory will undoubtedly fail as age creeps relentlessly towards me.*")

Dear Son,
. . . I know you are lonely my dear, and I am lonely, too, but make the most of everything and every chance you have.

Just think how much you have seen so far. You have been so clear-sighted and rational about this army interlude—I know there are days when you feel the way you did when you last wrote but those days will pass, honey, and every day brings the end of the war that much closer. . . .

Love to you and write soon

Mother

*Roadster of the Future*

—Caption to car doodle, Class notes, Basic Training

By the turn of the century my grandmother's family had homesteaded in Minnesota, and she was born there in a log cabin; but within five years her father had constructed a "big house" for his brood, as well as a post office and store. He named the whole complex after his first-born son. My father too dreamed of building his own home, and he and my mother moved after their marriage into a tiny place known as "the pink house," where they began a painstaking renovation, transforming the attic area into rooms for the children who were soon to come. He did his own carpentry and design work, and took much pride in each. But work slowed as he began to sicken, and he died without completing the job. Within five years of his death the state had seized the property to make room for a new freeway. As children, we devised a game *in memoriam* for our house: whenever we rode that route we would try to guess the exact moment at which we were crossing over what had been our living room or, depending on the lane we were in, our back yard. But we lost those bearings too as years passed. Now I think how ironic it is that the great passions of my father's life, land, cars, and family, would be mingled in this manner; and how odd it is that Leonard, Minnesota, should still be on the map. ("*The war and all things relative to it go on without interruption.*")

*As the human eye in a dark room dilates its pupil, draws in the little light that there is, partially distinguishes objects by degrees, and at last knows them quite well, so it is in War with the experienced soldier, whilst the novice is only met by pitch dark night.*

—Clausewitz

When I was in my late twenties, and living alone in New York, I would often look out at the urban vista beyond the windows of my small studio apartment: a brick wall some twenty feet away, a parking

lot below me, and the brick walls of other buildings just across the street. Friends from other places expressed dismay at these cramped and denatured conditions, but I saw it differently; I saw it as small price to pay for the privilege of living in a vital city, though I spent more time in that room than I did out on the town, and though I enjoyed that time more than much spent in company. When my grandmother first sent me pictures she'd taken from her window, thousands of miles away, in the room she now occupied in a downtown residence for the ambulatory elderly, I was startled and discomfited by the similarity of our circumstances, and I resisted the parallels between my life and that of a much older woman. She surveyed a motley group of parking garages and office buildings in various stages of completion; she couldn't see the street and her view of the bay had long been obscured by the construction. Still, she looked out that window as though it opened onto a world as involving as any she might have chosen freely for herself.

At another time, I might have construed the intensity of her interest in that limited landscape as a symptom of compensatory attention, the fascination that the elderly find in whatever sharply circumscribed field of action they are themselves confined to. Here, and now, I see that choice and circumstance are complicitous; that we were both, as it were, counting windows and bricks, both adapting to conditions—just as she had adjusted when I moved away, after college, and she knew (as I did not) that a period in our lives had ended. On her Christmas card that year, she wrote "God bless you forever," a flourish I found just a bit dramatic. I understand it now. In her papers, after her death, I found a poem she had copied onto stationery that dated from the time when my father was still a young boy. It bears the imprimatur of The Old National Bank and Union Trust Co. of Spokane, the firm where she found one of her first jobs, and I imagine that she read it many times in private moments, perhaps especially when she gave up wondering *what if,* or *whether*, when she left rebuke aside and simply looked back:

> Let fate do her worst, there are relics of joy
> Bright dreams of the past, which she cannot destroy . . .

My dear Son,

. . . You asked me if I could feel a change in you thru your letters. Well, I can honestly say that your letters from the first have surprised me. The frequency and the time you have taken to write to me so often has been a very happy experience for

me. Your numerous confidences and your frankness is more apparent when in black and white. I think your mind is steadying. You have always had such a delicious sense of humor, whatever you do, don't lose that will you? Of course you are changing but from everything I can read and feel, it is for the better. I hope when we are together again we may continue the comradeship that I have enjoyed thru your letters. You know, there have been many times that I felt that you thought me just a little superficial. But I hope as you grow older you will realize that a giddy exterior often hides a lonely heart. I want you to know and always remember that your letters will always be a source of deep joy and comfort to me. And I hope, too, that you will never doubt the depth of my love for you or the intense pride I have in knowing that I have such a fine son. I only wish that your father might have lived to see you grow up to fine clean young manhood. He would have been very proud of you too. You know that he was your age when he was in the last war and he would now be 45 years old. . . .

The French scuttled their fleet today and I am glad to know that it did not fall into the hands of the Germans. I feel sure that the war cannot last so very much longer.

Good night, my son, and God keep you.

Your loving Mother

The only formal photograph of my family that I have ever seen was taken on Easter, 1953. My father, hair already whitening, is holding me; my mother stands beside him; my two sisters stand in front, and my yet-unborn brother is indicated only by the curve of my mother's coat. As I study this image, and think of the funeral that will take place five months later, I am still unable to wonder much about what might have been, but I have greater respect for the more resistant mystery of what actually was, for the complexities that would work themselves into the fate of this one family. I can wonder what kind of person my father was, using his own words as an indication, but I would rather rely on the report of an eyewitness—the testimony of my oldest sister, child of my mother's brief first marriage, the baby who was hidden during the early stages of courtship for fear that she, being another man's child, would frighten my father away; the baby he found, after investigating odd cries from upstairs, and brought down at once to resume her proper place in the family. According to my sister, who remembers, he was, simply, "the nicest man I ever knew."

Dear Mother,

Your letters full of clippings have arrived. They were very interesting. Thanks so much. I am glad to know that the Neapolitan historical treasures and works of art are for the greater part safe from war damage and vandalism. I am constantly being shocked and surprised by the number of persons who take no interest in or who are actively hostile to the great works, spiritual and material, of the past. They fail to see that only by looking back can we see where we are going. History and experience are the great teachers. But what is history? It is merely a tabulation of man's experiences through the ages. How can they all regard experience as the greatest teacher and yet put so little value on history? They do this because they do not understand history. People consider it as being only a series of dates and boring people. What escapes them is that the historical dates are worthless while it is the idea behind the actions that is important. History is merely a series of related ideas. As such it unfolds the future for us. . . .

. . . My biggest news is that we are doing business at a new stand. Australia is behind us now and what lies ahead is like most of the future, certain but unknown. So far everything is all right. When I start to worry you should too.

Love,
Son Bill

During that last visit, my grandmother described for me how my father, as a very distraught nine-year-old, had run into the house one day and had asked her how come he couldn't have a father like his friends, how come this terrible thing had happened only to him. She had had no real answer, nothing that would appease him. When I heard of his outburst, I thought of the loss and confusion I too had felt as a child, looking at other families and other fathers, and sensing that a part of my own life seemed to have vanished, gone before I could even begin to wonder why. Now I am older than my father was when his life ended, yet still far short of the eighty-two years granted my grandmother, and I see that they have both taught me as best they could to look back. To look back, so that I might make peace with the past and move forward, taking my rightful place in this lineage, time and loss redeemed.