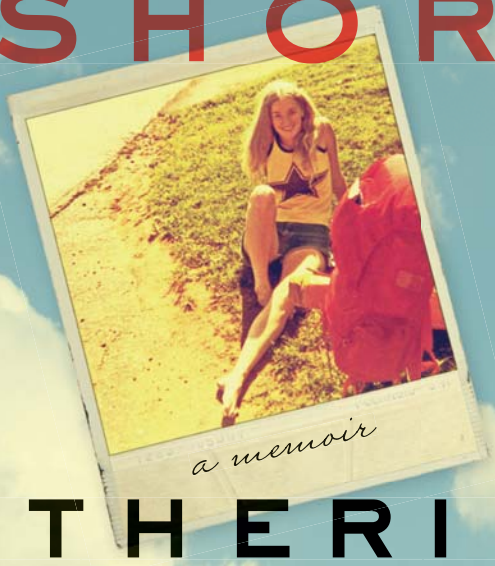
From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Too Close to the Falls* and *After the Falls*

COMING ASHORE



a memoir

CATHERINE GILDINER

"An irresistible roller-coaster ride full of humor, wise insights and poignant reflections." —PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

CHAPTER 1

hoisting the sails

When we get out of the glass bottle of our ego and when we escape like the squirrels in the cage of our personality and get into the forest again, we shall shiver with cold and fright. But things will happen to us so that we don't know ourselves. Cool, unlying life will rush in.

— D.H. Lawrence

You can get into a bad situation and have no idea how you got there. I'd done it many times, and I was barely out of my teenage years. One second you can think you're helping humanity and the next you have to get out of the country.

I'd been kicked out of grade schools, arrested at age thirteen,

caused a three-alarm fire — all the normal things for an American girl. However, when the FBI turned up on my doorstep, flashing their identity cards and letting me know I was implicated in insurrection, drugs and murder, I realized this episode had trumped my other escapades by a long shot.

The FBI coming knocking was just the last in a series of several shocks. The civil rights organization I had been in for years no longer wanted white people in the rank and file, so I was summarily kicked out. Laurie, the black poet I had been involved with, turned out to be married with children. Splits, our mutual friend in the movement, turned out to be a drug dealer and was killed behind a building at the University of Buffalo in what remained an unsolved crime.

On Thanksgiving weekend in 1968, I was home visiting from Ohio University when the two agents arrived at my home in Buffalo, New York. Fortunately my mother was at a master bridge lesson, and my father, who was in his sixth year of a brain tumour, thought that the FBI men were selling Hoover vacuums.

One FBI agent, who had a red flushed face, a dark suit and must have bathed in English Leather, carried a grey satchel, which he plopped onto the kitchen table, then began leafing through its contents. Each letter I'd written to the poet was individually wrapped and sealed in a plastic cover. There were also mementos of our time together that Laurie must have kept such as playbills, which were carefully inscribed with the date and notes like *cool spring evening — magical*. I saw the beer coasters on which I'd written rhyming couplets when we were in bars. There was the tiny felt zebra I'd bought him when I was eighteen — I'd written *interracial dating* on its tag. I was surprised he'd saved it all.

Each of these bags contained a cherished memory for me. There was a pile of bagged, broken dreams on my table. I looked at them bewildered. I wanted to light them as kindling and have a bonfire in honour of my spectacular bad judgment. The profoundly sad part of it was I never saw the bad side of him so I couldn't use it to hate him. All I could do was sit down beside the mountain of delusion in my kitchen and watch the FBI set up a recording machine that would chronicle my idiocy on a kelly-green record for posterity.

The perspiring FBI man said in a befuddled tone, "All these letters are about books or poems or details of voters' registration. Did you have any idea what these guys were up to?" The FBI sidekick had a good line that pretty well summed up my life to date: "You can either see the best in everyone or else you can miss the elephant in the room." I hoped for the former but suspected it was the latter.

When I told Leora, my best friend since junior high school, that the FBI had just turned up on my doorstep, she suggested that I get out of town, pointing out that when there are murders and drugs there are trials. I wouldn't be leaving much behind: I was an English major along with thousands of the other hapless hayseeds planted at Ohio University and longing to be harvested. I had no idea how I'd become marooned in the breadbasket of America surrounded by people who had the linguistic parlance of Gomer Pyle. Leora reminded me that in my political zeal, or more likely my years of attachment to the wrong male, I had turned down a great opportunity. The previous year I had been offered a spot at Oxford. I wonder how many women turn down stellar offers for a man? Probably more than there are hayseeds in Ohio.

This Oxford opportunity was, appropriately for the '60s, drug related. I had too many essays to write in too short a time, so I did something I'd never done before — I bought a green pill for five dollars from a girl in my dormitory who had majored in fashion merchandising. She, in turn, had bought the pills from a clerk who worked in accessories at May Department Store in Cleveland. The pill, a shimmering accessory, was guaranteed to keep me awake to write a paper on Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

After ingesting this kick-ass army-green pellet of inspiration, I locked myself in my room for two days. During that time I began to believe that I was the serpent in *Paradise Lost* and that I had been unfairly demonized for merely delivering a message from God to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. (I got my five dollars' worth on that one.) Instead of writing the paper, in a fit of hallucinatory self-righteousness I wrote a lengthy poem that answered God in the same rhyme that Milton used in his twelve books of *Paradise Lost*. I called it "Book Thirteen." Once the pill wore off, I shed my serpentine skin, realizing it had been a psycho-pharmaceutically induced delusion. However, I handed in the paper anyway since I was going home for spring break.

Ohio had buckets of football money and could afford to pluck big-name academics from the top schools, and my professor was a famous poetry critic who was on leave from Oxford. He was beguiled by "Book Thirteen," the only poem I'd ever written before or since, and sponsored me to go to Oxford as a "promising poetry student." I had declined his offer at the time, thinking that I was involved with the love of my life and in changing the world, both of which were far more delusional than believing I was a snake in the Garden of Eden.

The FBI visit forced me to hoist my sails, and Leora set my direction. I was hoping to catch the trade winds for England. It was time to leave the country quickly and I needed to revisit the Oxford offer. This time I'd grab the apple, call the professor and tell him I'd changed my mind.

CHAPTER 2

special delivery

'Twas Mulga Bill, from Eaglehawk, that caught the cycling craze;
He turned away the good old horse that served him many days;
He dressed himself in cycling clothes, resplendent to be seen;
He hurried off to town and bought a shining new machine;
And as he wheeled it through the door, with air of lordly pride,
The grinning shop assistant said, "Excuse me, can you ride?"

— Banjo Paterson, "Mulga Bill's Bicycle"

The following January, as my London-bound plane prepared to taxi out of one of the Buffalo airport's two icy runways, I caught a last glimpse of my parents standing at the fence, waving to their only child as she was about to leave them. My father waved his denuded head and his purple, I.V.-ravaged hand in my direction. When

I watched him more carefully, I realized he was waving to all the planes, wishing all the departures a good flight. Even as his brain was eaten away by cancer and he slowly lost his mind, he never lost his cheerfulness, his cordiality or his egalitarianism.

Next to him stood my pretty mother, holding his hand as if he were a child who might run onto the icy tarmac at any second. As always, she dressed for the airport as though she were travelling or being met by foreign dignitaries when she disembarked. In fact, she was being met by no one. She had to return to her dreary Buffalo bungalow, with a man who would die soon, leaving her a penniless widow. (His six years of illness had devoured their savings faster than the cancer had ravaged his brain.) She had to manage a six-foot-tall man who had lost his mind but not his ability to walk and talk. He forgot everything that was said to him within seconds of it being uttered. Once the cancer had chewed up his short-term memory, it started on his long-term. When I left for England, he knew who I was; but when I returned home, he thought I was a nurse. He did retain a memory that he'd had a daughter at one time and he told me about her when I went to see him. He said, "You never met Cathy? She was a real pip." *A real pip*. His mind was now stuck in the '50s, our family's heyday, the Eisenhower years when he owned the drugstore in Niagara Falls.

The plane took off, and I turned my attention to Professor Clifford Beech's note on white stationery with royal blue lettering that said *Trinity College, Oxford*:

Dear Miss McClure,

I would find it most rewarding to act as your tutor and would be gratified if you would join me at high table the

night of your arrival. You may have some difficulty locating me upon the dais. I could tell you that I am desiccated and doddering; however, I fear that would not distinguish me from the other members of our humble establishment. Please inform the Barson, our earthy gatekeeper, who hopefully has not barred our paradise with flaming swords, to ring me when you've arrived. Although we are far from a classless society, I fear the Barson may have trouble detecting the accent of a Sauropsida. However, I am sure he will have no trouble with your forked tongue and undulating gait.

The Son of Morn in weary Night's decline,
Clifford Beech

Leora thought it was hilarious that I could transfer to Oxford based on a one-paragraph letter. We figured when a guy was famous and he took you on, no one would say boo. Of course, little did Professor Beech know that I would never again write one more word of poetry in my life — not even a couplet. I lost my poetic licence when my green pill wore off.

Hours later, as the plane flew over England, I began to feel lighter. I hadn't realized how much I'd been shouldering. Out of the plane's small window, I saw the orderly fields with their straight furrows. I longed for the stability that their tidy rows promised. The countryside lay like a quilt made of myriad shades of taupe in different fabrics and textures. Occasionally there was a row of evergreens standing like soldiers on the march guarding their furrowed fields. I was soothed by the order and I felt the nascent anglophile that lived within me kicking to get out.

While we circled for a landing at Heathrow, it was slowly

sinking in that I no longer had to endure the stigma of having an interracial relationship, which would have been hard enough in New York City but was even more ostracizing on the border of West Virginia in Ohio, where I'd been marooned for two years. I wouldn't be shunned anymore, nor would I have to live with the constant fear of reprisal. I was no longer in charge of political change. I no longer had to worry about the grinding details of the American civil rights fight; I no longer had to organize the voter lists, nor canvass to get new signatures while still getting my schoolwork done and maintaining an A average. I could take my first break from the harried home front, where I'd been in charge of my father's illness from my early teenage years. It was no longer my job to make sure my father did not drive or try to withdraw funds from an already empty bank account. I didn't have to wrestle the car keys away from him; I could take a breather. When family, relationship and sanity crumble, you need to hold onto something even if it's the image of straight rows of evergreens.

Now all I had to worry about was that Oxford thought they were getting an inspired poet. They were really getting a rather ordinary, uninspired tall blond from Buffalo who'd taken a pill from the clerk at May's accessory counter and been creative for a day.

On my way to Oxford, the train porter shook his head and told me to prepare for cold weather and a big snow when I got there. I didn't find it cold, snowy or windy by Buffalo standards; in fact it was downright balmy. In terms of snow, there was only a slight dusting of what looked like icing sugar on some of the roofs.

The beauty of the town bowled me over. I immediately fell in love with not only the spires of the university but the small town

that was packed with Dickensian characters, old bookshops and tobacconists. It reminded me of simpler times in historic Lewiston. There were the High and the Broad Streets and a few other narrow, winding roads and that was it. I had never seen a bookstore before other than one for university textbooks, but England was full of new and used bookshops with real lit fireplaces and stationery shops with rows of fountain pens where I could poke around for hours.

Trinity College, or "Trins" as even I would come to call it, was surrounded by a high stone wall, and an immense iron gate that had a guardhouse manned by a white-haired man. He had red spidery veins on his plump face and, as they say in England, "high colour." I had no idea, and still don't know, if all men who manned the guardhouses of all the thirty-eight colleges were called "Barsons" or if this particular man's name was Barson. If the latter was true, then I never understood why he was called *the* Barson in the letter from Professor Beech. I was never called *the* McClure. When I said I was looking for the Barson, he took his pipe out of his mouth and I noticed his teeth, which were the yellow-orange of a Tibetan monk's robe. They had become moulded around his pipe, leaving a pipe-gap when he took it out to speak. Looking over the top of his half spectacles, he said, "I am he."

I explained that I needed a key. He looked at me as though I were asking for keys to the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London and said whatever gentleman I was visiting could be called to the gate, "presuming we had a prior arrangement." I said I wasn't visiting anyone. Before I could explain myself, he said with the same tone you would use to inquire if I was carrying the bubonic plague, "So, you are a tourist?"

"No. I am going to be a student here."

"We have only men's rooms here at the moment, my dear."

"A professor has left a key for me and I believe you should have a letter about my room assignment. I was told you would escort me to my new room."

"Rooms," he corrected me. "*I* would escort you? My dear, my dear, what a plethora of misinformation."

"Okay," I said, "*rooms* and *keys*. How's that?"

"A key left by whom?" He asked "by whom" with the intonation of the caterpillar who blew smoke rings in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

"Professor Beech."

"Oh. I see," he said, as if I'd mentioned God.

"My name is Catherine McClure."

He began bustling around until he found an envelope. "Ah, C. McClure," he said, and then he called someone and told them to come and help with the trunk I'd left on the sidewalk. He immediately changed his tune and said, "Yes, yes, Miss McClure. I'm afraid we thought you were Mr. McClure, an error I would not have made in person."

"No problem, my dear," I said.

"Your scout will be with you momentarily."

My scout? How far away was this place? Did I need a scout to get there? I mean, wasn't Deerslayer or Davy Crockett a scout? It didn't look all that perilous on the Trinity green to me. Maybe they were giving me a cabin in the woods or something. Maybe all Americans got paired with scouts and the English got footmen.

A tall, gaunt man with a Hapsburg chin who was about my age appeared in a white starched linen coat, black trousers and plastic

pointed shoes. Looking flustered as he rushed into the little gatehouse, he said, "Yes, Barson?"

"Reggie, this young lady is to have the rooms of the recently departed Mr. Hampshire. I presume you have prepared them for her."

"Ye' sir," he said through teeth that were green and black along the edges. "Only I thought that she was . . ."

"You needn't share your every thought with us, Reggie."

The flushed scout said, "Well? What about the —"

"Reggie, surely you have seen a young lady before. The details will fall into place. So without further ado . . ." He flicked his wrist twice toward the door.

There was very little point in asking Reggie anything because I couldn't understand a word he said.

I was led to a beautiful courtyard surrounded by ancient stone buildings. On the east wing of the quadrangle was my staircase. Everyone lived off a staircase — I mean literally. There was a winding staircase with doors that opened right off the edge of a riser. The stairs were painted a dull green and each step was concave in the middle. You could see how many thousands of scholars over centuries had trod those stairs and shared those rooms. The stairs sagged with the weight of history and the greater weight of the expectations of all who had sent them there. The droop was less pronounced at the top of my staircase where I was housed, as it was a dead end.

My rooms were baronial. I entered a large wood-panelled sitting room, which contained a monumental Ben Franklin desk, a divan and two large sitting chairs. A blood-red oriental carpet was laid in the middle of the wide plank floor. There were two huge

and the temperature in my room. I'd need "my woolies" just to sit at my desk. In all the time I was there, I never figured out what was with the English and the heat. They just didn't get that there was supposed to be a temperature difference between the outside and the inside. (They *never* got it. In 2013, 31,000 people froze to death in England.) My most vivid memory of England is of being cold and not being able to warm up.

Reggie looked at my foldout map and showed me how to get to my classes. He advised me to rent a bike to get to Magdalen College as it was a bit of a hike. He said he'd ring the bike rental and tell them I would be coming. I couldn't help but note that Reggie was taking special attention to orient me. "Wow, you've been a great help. It's awfully kind of you."

He looked embarrassed and confused as he stammered, "I'm just doing me job."

"Do you get a lot of Americans here?"

"No. We get the occasional scholar." He didn't volunteer any information but later, when I asked him about his role as scout, he told me he brought in the morning tea, the mail and then a high tea in the afternoon. He tidied the room and made the bed. In between those times, he worked as a waiter in the dining hall at all three meals. He said, "The entire southeast stairway is mine. I'm a third-generation scout. Me brother and father both work at Balliol."

I was surprised that Reggie was so proud of maintaining a family position that was actually quite menial. In America, it would be strange for someone to say they had the same job as their father unless they had somehow risen up the ladder. He took a great deal of pride in his work and was quite discreet since he brought my

tea and mail to me in the morning when I was in bed. Once I began to understand his dialect, I engaged him in conversation to get the lay of the land. One of the things I learned was that Brits tell you very little. They are quite perfunctory. I noticed when Reggie began to explain certain things, the Barson shut him up, saying it was unnecessary. Chat was "too familiar." Yet the scout really knew everything that went on. Reggie, like almost everyone else I met at the college, described people in some way through their social rank. When I asked who lived in my staircase, he said, "Your closest neighbour to the south off the stairway is Mr. Aaronson."

"What's he like?" I asked, as Reggie unlocked my cupboards for me.

"Scholarship student. Jew from Birmingham." I was shocked to hear someone's religion described in their introduction. "Actually he's quite a taciturn chap — always reading about some lugubrious topic if you ask me." Reggie's vocabulary, like that of other working class people in England that I encountered, was far above that of most Ph.D.'s in America.

"So tell me about everyone in my stairwell. I need the scoop, being the new girl on the block." As he walked about throwing open the curtains and laying the day's paper on my desk he said, "There is Mr. Hunter-Parsons. He's most agreeable. Got a first in sixteenth century, I believe. Most well liked by everyone and very commanding in his speech. He is sixth generation in the same rooms at Trinity."

"You're kidding."

"No. His family has bequeathed most of the furnishings for the southeast quadrangle over time. They donated a pew to the chapel in the 1600s."

"God. What does his father do, own a furniture store?"

"Oh, I have no idea. I've never thought to ask," he said as though I'd asked about his sex life. That was the second lesson I was to learn. Never ask what anyone does. You can ask who they *are* but never what they *do*. It is terribly bad form and so dreadfully American. (I was shocked to learn that the term *bad form* and *American* could be synonyms in certain circles.)

If you are upper class, it is assumed you don't have to do too much. To even ask the question is nosy, terribly middle class and, most importantly, just not done. Yet these details dribble out over time, because when I left I knew the family histories of everyone. I learned them through the English method of osmosis. Accent reveals everything and I was initially unable to detect the differences. I assumed the dialects were regional, but they were far more than that to the trained British ear. The way someone said "how do you do" told anyone present his station in life and whether he was from old or new wealth and, as an adjunct, where he was from. After the Englishman says "hello," he knows all he needs to peg you in the elaborate social hierarchy.

"Then there is Margaret-Ann Mitchell, our other American." After much inquiry on my part he continued. "She is a true scholar. She rarely ventures out and studies so much the pro-vice-chancellor had to tell her she must go to meals."

"She is going to be my only female company. What is she like?"

"Oh she is very lady-like, isn't she? Keeps to herself — never a spectacle or any kind of trouble."

I guessed that was what lady-like meant.

"Then there is Mr. Andover. He went to Eton with Mr. Hunter-Parsons. They've been mates since grammar." As he took the

curtains that reeked of cigar smoke down to clean them, he asked me, "Have you ever heard of the singer Donovan?"

"Mellow yellow," I sang off-tune.

"Yes. He was here a few weeks ago playing his guitar in Mr. Hunter-Parsons' room with some friends. We have quite the block," he added proudly.

"It's rather common for the staircase to dine together at one long table. I understand you're to meet Professor Beech this evening at high table."

"Right."

"Have you anything in need of immediate pressing for the occasion?"

"I only brought one dress. Am I supposed to wear it?"

"I believe he is getting an award and you are his student. People wear their gowns to class and to meals; however, high table usually requires a wee bit more."

A gown like the kind you wear for the senior prom? Did he mean wear an evening gown — to class? "I didn't bring any gowns," I said. "Is there a formal dress shop in town?"

"I have taken the liberty of stocking some for you." Gowns were bad enough, but if I had to wear them I sure as hell didn't want Reggie picking them. He opened the wormwood closet and there hung a row of black robes. It looked like a church vestry on funeral day. I pulled one out. It was floor length with huge wing-like sleeves — the kind of thing Scrooge McDuck would wear to bed. As I slid the hangers back and forth, I noticed one gown had a phone number written on the inner sleeve while another had a whole set of tiny mathematical equations written on the inside of the hem in a pale grey ink.

I also had to wear a strange little flat hat with a tassel. I eventually found that the tassel came in different colours to denote your college, year and whether you got a first or something so degrading that you would never want to wear on your hat. I'd rather wear Hester Prynne's scarlet A than that thing. Believe it or not, the side on which you wore your tassel gave some vital information about where you stood in the labyrinthine pecking order of English society. Leave it to the English to fit all that social stratification on a cap.

"Don't you just wear this kind of thing for graduation?" I asked, holding up the gown.

He pointed out the window and I saw men trooping across the quad in flowing, floor-length black robes with pleated drop sleeves. I was reminded of one of my favourite fairytales, *The Twelve Brothers*. The only sister in the family picks a flower and the brothers turn into ravens. Of course, it was the sister's fault for picking the flower. (The authors weren't called Grimm for nothing.) There was one illustration that always fascinated me, where the brothers were transforming from men into ravens. Although they had developed large ebony wings and back feathers, they still had human heads and feet. These men below in the quadrangle looked ominously mid-raven to me, especially when their capes and sleeves billowed in the wind. This was my first hint of how frightening these men could become.

That evening as I got ready for my first social outing in England, I wondered what a high table dinner was — a table on stilts? I wore my only dress, a tie-dyed orange, red and turquoise mini with a halter top that tied at the back of my neck. It wasn't right

for January at Oxford (or actually anytime at Oxford) but how was I supposed to know how cold it was *inside*? I figured it was no big deal to wear a dress that left me overexposed since I had to wear the black gown on top anyway. I also wore red patent-leather shoes with red, white and blue-checkered laces. They looked like old-fashioned tap shoes from *42nd Street* except they had enormous platform heels.

Teetering in my heels, I clomped down the narrow winding stairs in my mini-dress and much-too-large robe that dragged on the ground like a wedding train in mourning. Because the stairwell was more like an educational silo than a normal staircase, the sound of my slapping shoes was magnified by the echo.

I walked down the stairs and doors swung open as I passed them. The first guy to pop his head out was Marcus Aaronson. He was short, slight and had brown curly hair that fell in unruly corkscrews on either side of his centre part. He wore a maroon sweater and a Trinity tie. He scowled, saying, "Oh I thought I heard a blacksmith's hammer," and then abruptly closed his door.

As I wound down to another floor, a guy confidently strolled out of his rooms into the narrow staircase. He looked quite dapper, in a calculatedly casual sort of way, in a crumpled wool sports jacket and Oxford cloth white shirt, baggy black khakis, and black leather boots. I later learned this was the consciously dishevelled look that so many English graduate students affect while still technically following the dress code called *subfusc*. (*Subfusc* is Latin for dark/dusky colour. I had to go out and buy all black skirts and black tights. With my yellow hair, I looked like a pencil in mourning.) He was slightly built but tall and had fashionably shaggy blond wavy hair, royal blue eyes and an aquiline nose. He

looked a bit like Virginia Woolf on steroids, but then again so did many of the men I'd seen from my window. He screamed landed-gentry-with-edge. I was sure that he was the man called Clive Hunter-Parsons who Reggie said was so universally admired.

"Hark," he said, cupping his hand to his mouth and addressing the man who lived on the floor, "time's horses gallop down the lessening hill." I was indeed clomping along, and as the shoes flipped off my narrow heel when I walked, they made a second echoing bang.

The guy from one flight down yelled up to where we stood, "I feared it was a herd of wild Trojan horses, but fortunately we are not at war."

"Ah," the blond boy added, "we can rest at ease. It is only the descent of the fair sex, so to speak." I grabbed the railing as the spiral turned and I teetered against the wall, silencing my astonishingly loud foot clatter. I did manage to remember a line from Milton and, leaning against the wall to steady myself, said, "No war or battle's sound, / was heard the world around."

The blond gave me the next line: "Nothing but a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won."

Well, I was out of Ohio now. That was for sure.

I finally made it to the first floor and out crawled the only double X chromosome I'd yet to see, presumably the New Englander, Margaret-Ann Mitchell. She wore one of those Laura Ashley sackcloth dresses, drawn in by a a thick black hand-knit sweater and flat boots that looked like they were made by some local New England hippie turned leather worker. Her long, straight strawberry-blond hair was parted in the middle and drooped around her freckled face. Her black gown was also dragging on the ground. She made

eye contact with me in the stairwell and blushed to the point that her face matched her hair. "Excuse me," she mumbled and ran off toward the dining room, avoiding any further eye contact.

While I stood leaning against the curved wall of the staircase, trying to get my bearings and to remember where the dining hall was located, the blond guy passed me, accompanied by a dark-haired guy who had also exited his rooms in search of the heifer who was plodding down his stairwell. The blond, whose waves bounced when he moved, carefully pushed open the door for me and said, "Welcome to stairwell number seven. I am Clive Hunter-Parsons and this less-esteemed colleague is Peter Andover."

"I am Helen of Troy," I said, teetering on my shiny red toes.

"Then you won't mind our Spartan conditions," said Peter, the plainer guy who lived below the handsome guy named Clive. Peter could have been considered handsome as well if he had not been standing next to the imposingly tall, willowy Clive. While Clive looked relaxed and perpetually amused, Peter looked earnest, like the men who have their pictures in *The Economist*.

"Reggie led me to believe we might eat together — as a stairwell," I said lamely, hoping they would invite me.

"Not tonight, Helen. We understand you are placed at the high table," Peter said.

"Launching a thousand forks," I added.

Clive, Peter and I walked into the magnificent dining hall with coffered ceilings and walls covered with dour portraits of famous alumni. I always sat under Sir John Willes, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, 1737. All the long, dark tables were lined up in solemn rows with benches. The room actually resembled the one on TV that Robin Hood used to swing through when he'd

surprised the Sheriff of Nottingham at mealtime. One huge table at the far end of the room was perpendicular to the rest and was placed on a separate dais a few steps up from the others. You didn't have to be Queen Elizabeth to figure it was the high table. It was filled with white-haired men, some of whom looked older than any professor I'd ever seen, including all those who had crawled up to emeritus status.

Clive tapped my shoulder, saying, "You don't wear gowns at high table."

Uh-oh. I'd counted on this robe to cover my halter-top mini. Remembering the Mary Kay Cosmetic School saying, "Fake it till you make it," I threw the black gown on the chair by the door, strode up to the high table and asked, "Is one of you Professor Beech?"

"I beg your pardon?" one old codger said.

Another smiled and said, "May I offer you a seat." This guy was at least ninety and could have been a portrait on the wall. He could barely stand up to shake my hand. His shirt looked like it had been thrown in the wash with black socks, taken out while wet and then had wrinkles ironed into it. He had cut himself shaving and had a little piece of ragged cloth covering the bloody nick on his scrawny gullet.

We were interrupted by the approach of a fat man with strange lower teeth that actually poked out of his mouth and rested on his upper lip when his mouth was closed. "Good evening. Miss McClure, I presume."

"Professor Beech?"

"Ah, welcome to the adamantine island chained to the shifting bank of the Channel. I see you met our esteemed poet and guest

of honour this evening? You've been placed next to him for mutual dining pleasure."

While I nodded assent, the esteemed poet said, "Ye—es." I had never heard the word *yes* spoken in two syllables. Professor Beech scuttled (as fast as a man whose silhouette matched that of Alfred Hitchcock could scuttle) back to his end of the table, saying we would meet in "his rooms" tomorrow afternoon. That sounded kind of creepy to me.

As I sat down next to the esteemed poet, I blathered, "Sorry I'm late. That stairwell is a challenge in these shoes."

"Winding ancient stair; Set your entire mind upon the steep ascent," the esteemed poet said. By this point I was too embarrassed to ask his name. Everyone else seemed to know him.

"*Hey* Yeats." Thank God I'd recognized him. "I love that guy."

"As do I."

"You know him too?" I asked.

"I knew him quite well."

"Me too."

"He gave me much help in dark times," said the esteemed poet.

"Oh. You knew him as in knew the *man* not just the *poetry*."

"If one ever knows another."

"Wow!" Wanting to keep the conversation going, I added my own brush with celebrity. "I knew Marilyn Monroe."

He turned and looked at me with true interest for the first time. "Do tell."

I can spin a yarn for hours, so I told him the full version of when Roy and I delivered Nembutal to Marilyn Monroe while she was filming *Niagara* in the 1950s. I told how she answered the door in a slip and bra and had chipped nail polish.

"I *say*," he said. "Do please press on."

Neither of us noticed that the room was quiet and when we finally looked up we met hundreds of eyes looking expectantly at us. The esteemed poet had been introduced to say grace but neither of us had heard.

He stood up really slowly, favouring one leg, and said by way of apology, "The peril of discussing Yeats is that all else recedes."

He was great on his feet, never used a note and spoke in a definitive, yet warm voice for five or ten minutes. He said grace in Latin and in English and then said that tonight might be a perfect night to quote Yeats. He said you can be assured of a poet's genius when he always has a line or two that expresses exactly your sentiments at the present moment. He turned to me and said,

> God be praised for woman
> That gives up all her mind,
> A man may find in no man
> A friendship of her kind
> That covers all he has brought
> As with her flesh and bone . . .

He recited the whole poem and smiled at me as he sat down.

When dinner was over, I helped the doddering poet down the stairs, and while patting my hand, he again quoted Yeats: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born."

To this day I don't know his name.

I shake my head now thinking of what the Barson called "my plethora of errors" upon arrival. The seat next to the guest

I couldn't understand what he was saying. I cycled over the top of the bridge and waved gaily to the old Glaswegian troll under it. He just shook his head as he wiped some oil off on his pants, shiny with layers of accumulated toil.

I loved physical activity and bike riding was the best since it combined exercise with transportation. In Oxford, almost everyone rode a bike no matter if you were twenty or eighty. The university was made up of different colleges that were spread around the town and some were quite far apart. Although you were housed at a certain college, you could have courses at other colleges so everyone had to cycle. Little old women in thick Marks and Spencer flesh-coloured tights rode a bike to the shops. Men with cigarettes perched on their lower lips drove along in dress trousers and tweed jackets and Dubliner wool hats.

There is nothing more gorgeous than an English morning. The sunlight sparkled off the icy gauze of early morning dew on the crunchy greens. Everything was fresh and clear and the colours seemed supersaturated. A bracing English morning could wash away all sins, no matter how mortal, from the night before. The colleges all had manicured lawns and the shops looked Victorian, with many small rooms lined in wood — just as I had imagined. I sped along the road, going faster and faster. I decided to go to the post office, which I had seen right across from the Trinity College gate, and send my parents a postcard to let them know I'd arrived safely. Actually my mother had never asked me to do this, but I continued the form as though we were a normal family instead of one where my addled father thought J. Edgar Hoover was a vacuum and that President Johnson said no Irish Catholics could drive until the war in Vietnam was over.

At the age of twenty, I still loved the rush of speed. I was now going at full tilt, not slowing down for the one-room post office. I was speeding up, planning my stunning dismount, when at the last second I pressed back on my pedals with all my might. But the bike didn't stop. It didn't even slow down. There were no brakes, so the pedals just spun backwards. Oh my God, the bike mechanic had said something about English brakes. Where the hell were they?

I hit the post-office window at full velocity and flew right through it, shattering the glass. I went airborne past the stamp line-up and, with a loud thud, came to an abrupt landing against the old mahogany counter. I was bleeding, but I did manage to stand. The postal employee looked at me dripping in blood and said, "Special delivery?" The postmaster came out from the mail-room and quipped, "Americans always want air mail, I'm afraid."

One old woman whispered to another in the line-up. "American, I'll wager, cutting in line."

The other replied, "They're taught that at home."

No one suggested calling an ambulance or a doctor. They acted as though I'd decided to go through the window as opposed to using the door just to save time. The postmaster cleaned my arm off with an old cloth used for dampening stamps. Fortunately it was mostly my coat that was ripped to shreds. There was surprisingly little tissue damage other than a long brush burn on the side of my face. I had a gash on the top of my head, but my hair caught the blood from that. They gave me a "plaster" from a rusty first aid box and that was it. Later, when I went to the doctor in London, he looked at the scar on my head and said, "That could have used a stitch or two — but never mind."

A local bobby arrived with a legal-size sheaf of paper in his hand and said to me, "In a bit of rush, were we?"

"I didn't realize the brakes were on the handlebars."

"Who do you think is going to remunerate the offended party for the window, what with the emergency glass service required and all?"

"Send me the bill at Trinity College."

"You at the college, then?" he inquired, trying to hide his incredulity.

"Yes." My head was spinning and I was feeling nauseous from the bang on my skull.

The two women shook their heads. What was the world coming to if Oxford could let in not only girls, but *American* girls who drove through windows?

"Scholarship student?" asked the clerk who was now sweeping up the glass.

"Yes — well, sort of — partly. Is that pertinent information?" I asked, now seeing double and leaning on the counter.

"Going to be a pretty penny, I can tell you that."

By noon everyone had heard about my airmail delivery. Not one person said anything like, "Oh my God, you went through the post-office window on your first day at Oxford?" or "What an idiot," or "How amazing," or "How hilarious," or "Are you all right?" Everyone commented on it but only obliquely. At lunch Clive said, "You are aware that airmail requires a surcharge."

"I didn't go airmail but airborne, which is far more expensive," I retorted.

"Ah, but if you are airborne in a postal outlet, are you airmail?"

Marcus asked.

"A question for Wittgenstein," Peter added.

That afternoon, my tutorial included only one bruised American girl with Professor Beech in his luxurious study. When he saw me, he said absolutely nothing about my injuries. He ignored my shut eye, my bruising and my swollen face. He never alluded to my cranium, swollen to a point on the top, which made me resemble a recent forceps delivery. He proceeded to discuss Coleridge.

Several years later, when I went through my mother's belongings after she died, I found my letter to her describing the post-office caper. My mother loved that letter. She said she opened it in the brain tumour radiation waiting room and burst out laughing. To prevent herself from looking crazy, she read it to the waiting room and they howled too. It really made me feel good that so many people enjoyed the outing. My mother said that my father loved the story as well, and when she thought he might be feeling a bit down she would read him the letter. One of the great things about having no memory is something funny can amuse you again and again. My mother said no matter what the window cost it was worth it.

I did finally receive a bill that amounted to two hundred American dollars, which was a fair chunk of change in the 1960s. When I rode up to the post office to pay the bill, everyone stood back. I approached the postmaster, who said, "It's all taken care of, Miss."

"Who paid for it?" I asked.

"Compliments of the Queen in the year of the Prince's investiture."

"That was nice of her given how busy she must be," I said.

When I got back to dinner, the two-hundred-dollar cheque in my hand, Clive recited:

> This is the Night Mail crossing the Border,
> Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
> Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
> The shop at the corner, the girl next door.

Margaret-Ann uttered her first word at dinner. "Auden," she said, then spooned in her toad-in-the-hole.

"Oh, was it Auden? Sir Clive, you disappoint me. I thought it was original," Peter responded.

"Ah, Margaret-Ann, you have sniffed us out again. It must be that superior American education," Clive said.

She just looked at them in irritated bewilderment. Margaret-Ann, like me, had no idea how to stick-handle through the labyrinth of English high society. It took me a long time, but not as long as Margaret-Ann, to be able to interpret the subtext. Their tone never gave away their meaning. Once I broke the Etonian code, I realized they were saying that everyone knew Auden's work by heart and it was pedantic of Margaret-Ann to source it for the group. Peter, Marcus and Clive were saying that only an American would believe recognizing Auden should be considered an achievement. To top off such academic delusion, only an American would boast such paltry knowledge.

I had landed with a thud in a truly foreign land. The terrifying thing was they did speak English so you could have the false sense that you shared more than you actually did. George Bernard Shaw expressed my sentiments perfectly: "England and America are two countries separated by the same language."