

KNOWING

BY SHEILA LEVIN

There are moments in time which are remembered with scrupulous precision. The millions of homemakers who were washing dishes when they heard the bulletin that President Kennedy was shot can tell you the dish they were holding. Drivers remember vividly what spot they were stopped at or passing. It is not a voluntary act, this kind of recall.

Some few events in a lifetime have an intrinsic power. Everything is captured in the moment. Whatever follows, grief or joy, the first emotion, the one fixed in time, is shock. It is that, the utter incomprehensibility of the news that delivers the first blow. More follows, of course, the details. By then, the body is either ready to receive the rest, or to succumb to grief. Barely ready, still reeling from the first blow, resisting, denying, praying it is not true; it is a title wave that can not be stopped.

On Monday, February 11 at 9:45, Susan Bennett was throwing out the Sunday "Times. Neil read the "Times" all over the house. The sports section was in the bathroom, the financial section in the living room, the magazine he saved for more careful reading during the week. She was wearing a yellow print housedress that zipped up the front. zipped it to her chest, just below her breasts, for comfort. Her Monday routine rarely varied. The first task was to pick up the papers. WQXR was playing Vivaldi's "La Notte", one of her favorite pieces of music.

She was in the bedroom when she found Laura's letter. She was bending from the knees, as she had been advised to do by her doctor, sorting through the newspaper and some typed papers Neil had left on the floor on his side of the bed. The papers looked to her like early drafts of an article he was writing, and she wondered if she should save them. She was holding them in her right hand when she noticed a page of thick yellow vellum mixed in with the rest.

She read the salutation, "Darling", written in a bold script. She straightened up, dropping all the papers but the letter, which she continued to hold in her right hand.

She folded the letter and took it into the kitchen. She put it down on the table and boiled some water for tea. She sugared the tea, two teaspoons, and used a china cup, not her mug. She stared at the letter, sipping her steaming tea. The tip of her tongue was very slightly burned from its initial immersion. She rolled it over her lip for comfort. She found her mind wandering, back to her housecleaning chores. She had planned to drop in at the Metropolitan Museum on her way to work. She had been looking forward to today. It was to have been a pleasant day. "Damn him", she said aloud. How did it get there, she wondered. He must have been reading it when the phone rang, he forgot and dropped it. Something like that, he would never do it deliberately.

When she was first married, she and three newly married friends talked about what they would do if they discovered their husbands had been unfaithful. In those early days, it was so improbable, so ludicrous; it was almost fun to try to imagine it. As these four brides evaluated their own husbands, they secretly evaluated the husbands of their friends. As it turned out, all these husbands were unfaithful, although one was just a one-night stand in Atlanta for which he paid dearly, believing he had contracted a venereal disease. When it was Susan's turn to answer, two others had gone before (one said she would understand if he promised never to see the girl again, the other simply said she would kill him), Susan said, "I'd leave him on the spot."

Years later, when other friends would speculate on why Susan Bennett did not leave her philandering husband, they agreed it was, at least in part, because she was afraid she would not find anyone else. By that time, she had gained the cursed weight, which would follow her around the rest of her life, no matter how much she starved, no matter how many pills she took.

After all, Neil had married her. No, it was not fear of being alone, not then, or self-doubt about her charm. It was Neil. She loved Neil. By the time she first realized he had been unfaithful she knew she would never leave him.

That first time she found no letter. She thought she detected something remote in his attitude. He seemed to have trouble hearing her. He was not all there. So she asked him one day, just boldly, "Are you having an affair?" He denied it, was indignant at her suspicion. Something in his denial confirmed it for her. His disavowal was altogether too emphatic.

Their sex life was spare.

In the early years of their marriage, this disturbed Susan. She was curiously more interested in the frequency than the quality. Susan had rigid ideas about what fell within the normal range. She had it fixed in her mind that the average couple, after two years of marriage, had intercourse three times a week. Of course, average means sometimes more, sometimes less. She and Neil were less. Much less. Susan had a lively, but not lusty, sexual appetite, frequently initiating sex. Neil was compliant, when he was not too tired or preoccupied. He gave an appearance of gusto, in his work, in his political quarrels. He was an animated conversationalist, a galvanizing lecturer. It was odd, therefore, that he was so passive in bed. Something was missing for Neil in sex. She tried to talk to him about it. He refused, it was all deeply embarrassing. He did not seem to like sex. She even wondered once if he might be a latent homosexual. For years, she went through stages where she alternatively blamed herself, then him. Once during a terrible argument, when she had again accused him of having an affair, she screamed at him, "Living with you is an indictment of me as a woman. You never want me, you never touch me, and you're a cold man, Neil, a cold man."

"It's not you", he said, "It's something in me. Call it neurosis, repression, whatever, it's too late to fix it. Sweetheart, it's not you, I promise. I'll be better, I will."

Susan had an uncomfortable but not abnormal pregnancy with their first child, Adam. Neil watched her being wheeled into the delivery room, bent down to kiss her. She was in some discomfort from labor pains, but smiling.

Hours passed, still nobody was alarmed. First babies, they said, took time. There were many birth stories in that waiting room. The stories of both Susan's and Neil's births were told by

their respective mothers. Susan was in labor for over 24 hours. Neil watched her squirm in pain, beg for water, curse all men.

Neil regarded himself as a clear thinker, a rational man. He had touched this beautiful Susan, injecting his sperm into her like some lethal venom. For three months, she threw up, then she lost her figure, and then she bled, until she was thin again from blood loss and weak from pain.

Despite the difficulties of Adam's birth, Susan wanted more children. Two years after Adam, Missy was born and then two years later, Judy. The children were proof of success of her marriage. Neil surprised her by paying attention to the children. She had expected him to be a drop-in father; she was prepared to excuse his truancy. Neil, however, kept up his end. He was proud of the children and relieved that they kept Susan preoccupied. No time for her to ruminate on what he was doing, on their marital relations. The children were his barrier against suspicion. No wonder he was so fond of them. They protected him from scrutiny; they were a get-out-of-jail free card. With his children in his life, he could range freely over the sexual landscape of quick affairs, broken promises. Hurrah for the children, he often thought. For nearly two decades, Neil hitched up his chaps, put on his boots and his ten-gallon hat. Alone and unobserved, he sat tall on his ride rounding up the strays. Hurrah for the children. Once the children were in place, Susan's role as wife-mother was secure. No quarrels for this fine couple, no need for impassioned arguments about neglect and desertion. With the children in their lives, no time to worry about occasional abandonment.

Neil sometimes held her in the night, and if she moved in a certain way, or guided his hand, he touched her, loved her with his hands, and relieved her momentary urge. She would do the same for him, touch him, suckling him until he too turned hard, for just a moment, and came. She thought he had some classic problems, wife into mother, that sort of thing. Or perhaps he had been traumatized by Adam's birth. She surreptitiously read books and articles; she knew the correct names and diagnosis of a dozen types of sexual dysfunction. Eventually, she stopped blaming herself.

Neil was in every way a good husband, her best friend. For her, what they had was enough. She wished, from time to time, that it were different. That he would take her with a brutal passion. That, she knew, was the stuff of romance novels, of movies, of fantasy. A good marriage was something else. It was just this, more or less. Best friends, and in the night, learned tricks, sexual sleight of hand. She had relied on the intimacy, nourished by their secret, the poignancy of his failure. They shared a love of books, although he read philosophy and she liked mysteries. Often, he would call and say "How about Chinese tonight?" just as she was thinking of an egg roll. He told her of his female colleagues who flirted, who left him notes and invited his attention.

Susan was aware of her faults and flaws. She was overweight and generally fearful of trying new things. She was agoraphobic. A therapist would have a field day with her. About how she shielded herself from sex with fat.

She picked up the letter, as if to judge its weight, to see how many stamps it needed to send it on his way. Out of here, out of her kitchen, her life. It was very slight; it hardly weighed an ounce, nothing at all really. "I can just not read it," she thought. Why should I read it, a letter addressed to Neil as "Darling". It's pointless to read it, some lovesick student, at worst a brief flirtation. Throw it away; he will worry so about where it is that will be enough punishment.

She wished the phone would ring. She considered another cup of tea, the first was cold. Her tongue was still a little raw, and she felt some pain in her toe, the one in which she frequently got an ingrown toenail.

And if it's more, she thought. Suppose it's more. Just suppose he's having a real affair, a full-fledged affair, a midlife crisis affair in spades. And she remembered her own voice, so sure, so cool all those years ago. She almost laughed aloud, "Leave him flat--my God, I was young".

The very idea of leaving Neil flat was so silly, so theatrical, she did not give it another thought. It was entirely possible that she and Neil would laugh over tonight, her bad moment when she saw the word "Darling", her foolish suspicions rather flattering to an aging man. The issue, should the letter be bad, was not separation, it was confrontation. For that, she needed to know what it said. Her hands did not tremble when she unfolded the letter, she did not have tachycardia or a seizure when she read it. She did not even cry.

Darling,

Thank God for Mondays. Even one day without you is too much. I thought a lot about what you said on Saturday. You said I was "insensitive", but really I'm not. I know how hard it is for you to leave Susan. "A little more time", you said, but it's been so long already. Don't we, don't you, deserve some happiness too? Sweetheart, I love you, I know you love me, and in an odd way, I know we'll be together before too long. I do have faith in that, I do trust you. So take a little longer, if you must. Protect her as long as you can. Only know that I'm waiting, and that, in the end, it's your choice to make.

I love you, Laura

Susan was sick with humiliation that Laura would write of her this way. She did not mind so much about the sex. It happens, monogamy is foolish anyway. But this, that Laura should write so condescendingly of her. That Neil and Laura discussed her, that she was laid bare before this stranger by her best friend.

She sat there at her kitchen table for a long time that morning. The phone never rang; she did not make another cup of tea. She knew she should call somebody, a friend, a psychiatrist, a lawyer. Someone who would give her advice, comfort, counsel. But most important, she knew she mustn't panic.

On the kitchen table, the magazine section of the New York Times was open to the crossword puzzle. She and Neil had a system. He would begin it, putting in anything that was obvious to him, not reaching for any words. Then she took over, and did her best to fill it in. Sometimes he finished it, most often, she would get it back with a few holes.

In their dresser drawer were their tickets to the opera. They had the same subscription for twenty years. They subscribed as well to a couple of off Broadway theaters. Each September, Susan and Neil would have a culture conference and select together what they wanted to see for the coming season. In the desk were their savings books. Each entry was a cause of celebration. Each withdrawal denoted some setback, an illness, or the long weeks of her convalescence after gall bladder surgery.

Laura had no crossword puzzles, no tickets or savings books. She had his sex. So what, sex had not been the point of their marriage anyway. It wasn't so important before, why should it be so important now? Laura had gotten his attention, caught his eye for a minute. She wondered if he was hard for her. Maybe, maybe.

However, Laura didn't know that for more than 25 years both of them took off the first day of spring and drove to the country for lunch. It was, Neil said, a time for renewal, and neither of them had ever missed a year. Did Laura know that when she fell asleep reading, as she often did, Neil would gently remove her glasses, fold them, and put them in the drawer next to her side of the bed? She looked around her kitchen. Neil's vitamins were lined up on the counter. He took twelve different vitamins each morning, and bran mixed with orange juice. Did Laura know that? The evidence of her marriage, the documents, the certificates, the memories, the sheer

weight of their shared years, the children, the secrets, were all hers. Laura had no part of that.

Susan loved Neil Bennett; she wanted to keep him as husband. What he wanted would have to matter less. What Laura wanted, not at all. She knew she must not panic, and she knew, too, that no one must ever know she had found the letter. She could bear anything, as long as no one knew. She was astonished at her ferocity. This letter stirred a passion for her husband long dormant.

They, Neil and Laura, had their secrets. She had hers. She knew him well; he might betray her, but he would never let her down. Of that, much she was sure. Then, at last, she cried. She was bitterly disappointed in Neil, and shamed to her core. She fought a sense of total waste, of the years all having been a sham. But most of all she cried because she knew nothing would ever be the same between them. She cried for all the years to come that would now be contaminated because she knew.

A few weeks later Neil came home with fists clenched in a fighter's stance.

"Neil, is something wrong?" Susan asks him after dinner.

"What do you mean wrong?" Neil replies.

"Wrong, not right, bad. Something's bothering you."

"You know how I am."

"Yes, I know, but lately you seem more remote, more depressed than usual."

"Sorry".

They sit for a moment, as they have for so many years, on matching Hepplewhite chairs with a glass table between them. The glass rests on a tree stump they bought in Maine on their honeymoon. Susan brought it home and finished the top, rubbed it with oil. It seemed to Neil that he had spent his life in that chair, talking to Susan. Years too of silence. Years of him watching the ball game, Susan doing the crossword. Years of trays of dinner, glasses of wine. Falling asleep in that chair, Susan would gently nudge him. Years of talk about his moods, about his coldness, his not being home enough. And why didn't they entertain more, why couldn't he make some effort to put up with her friends.

Now Neil felt the weight of those years, the waste of all that talk. What did it matter now, all those conversations? He hadn't changed, hadn't given her

what she wanted. She had been cheated out of the life she wanted. It would have been simple enough, but he could not do it. He

felt so cheated himself, so strangled by his life, he could not do much for Susan. They had the children and now the children were gone.

Still, it worked. Their marriage worked, or had worked until Laura.

"Susan, why do you stay with me?" he asked her.

"That's a strange question, now, after thirty years."

"Well, I'm asking it. Why? I haven't given you much, I'm miserable to live with."

"Why?" "It's too late to ask that, now, Neil. You haven't given me enough and you are, sometimes, miserable to live with. However, I'll be god damned if I'm going to start analyzing it now, at this point. Maybe years ago I should have. Maybe, if I had been stronger, smarter, I would have left. But I wasn't, and I'm here and I love you. Besides", she smiles, "you always told me I was your best friend. That's not so bad, you know, being best friends." "That's true", Neil, said, "You have been my good friend, my dear friend".

"Have been?" Susan says.

Neil is silent. He is right there, right at the edge of the precipice. One more step, arms outstretched, a little bounce and he will dive free. Now, now, he has to do it. So what if there is no net, if it is dangerous and frightening. So what if he crashes against the rocks, so what if a sudden gust of wind pushes him off course. Is he such a coward, so timorous a man, so cautious he will let this moment pass? Sit there, in his chair, inert, immobile, lacking the will, the guts to spring out of the tedium, away from this custodial marriage.

He has been here before, on this edge. However, never so acutely, so clearly in danger of making a move.

He is sweating, he has a headache, and his stomach is cramped. He puts his hands to his head, pressing them against his skull trying to still his head pains. He closes his eyes, rubbing his temples on both sides.

"Headache?" Susan asks.

"Yes, bad headache."

"I'll get you some aspirin."

"No, it'll pass."

"For God's sake, take an aspirin," she yells.

"I don't want an aspirin."

"What do you want? What's the matter with you?"

"Susan. Susan, I'm unhappy."

"I know, that's why we're talking. I see that, I see how unhappy you are. I want to help." "You can't help."

Now she is frightened. Something is different, something has changed. She has always

been able to pull him back, away from the edge. Usually it wasn't so hard, only once or twice before did she know that a great effort would be required. She cannot lose, she feels excited, animated, almost glad it is happening again. He looks pitiful to her, sitting there holding his head, refusing an aspirin, afraid to tell her, paralyzed by his doubts.

"Neil, what is it? Do you want to leave, is that it?"

She will help him over this first hurdle; give him a foothold, happy to help this poor soul, her husband, her best friend. This man who is her life. She'll cup her hands; let him step into them, as if to hoist him up and over; a classic feint.

Her body is alive now, poised for the weight of what may come. Her mind alert and resolute.

"Go on," she says softly, "say it, tell me. I'm not afraid anymore."

"Susan, I don't know. I don't know what to do. God, my head hurts. Maybe we should separate for a little while, think things over."

"What things?"

"Things. Why I'm so unhappy."

"You've always been unhappy."

"Not like this. This isn't going away."

"It'll go away, Neil. It always goes away. I don't think we should separate now. I know you're unhappy, so am I sometimes. But we've been through this before; it does go away."

"I don't think this will," he says, looking at her.

Susan stands up, takes a few steps towards him, and stands above him.

"Then make it go away. Do you hear me? Make it go away. I've spent my life in you. You, always you first, years of you, living through all the small and large humiliations, the thousands of days of your depressions, the thousands of nights of your coldness, and now, now after all these years, you're unhappy and you don't think it will go away. I am telling you, Neil, let it go. You're a fool if you don't. What do we have? We have each other, which is just as it should be. We are each other's connections, each other's history; we are nothing without each other. You think because we don't sleep together that that changes anything. So what. Oh, I'm not saying it didn't hurt me, all those years ago, when you just stopped. Just stopped wanting me. Don't turn away, don't shut me up. You were there, you remember. God, I remember how I tried. I did try, I lost weight. Was that it, I was too heavy? I read books, I bought sexy underwear. I would have done anything you wanted. But you knew that, you knew it all. And you still couldn't touch me. You never gave me a chance. Then, then you should have left, if there was to be any leaving. Then, maybe, while I still had a chance for a life. But now, now when I have no chance for anything, oh no, Neil, not now."

"Susan", Neil stands up. He can feel her body start its sob before he hears the first cry, "Susan, I'm so sorry. I never meant...."

"No," she says crying, "No, you never meant to hurt me. But you did, Neil, you hurt me."

"Baby, baby", he says moving to hold her. An awkward, unfamiliar gesture, he encircles her with his arms and presses her head to his shoulder. "Don't cry"

Her tears were like warm rain on his cheek, damping down the embers of that small fire inside him. A little fire, ignited by Laura, stoked and kindled until it burned hot and bright for a few minutes, fueling his fantasy, casting its firelight along the dark road, so that he thought he could see where he was going.

He patted her shoulder, and raised her head so he could look into her eyes. However, it was not her tears that stopped him. He saw then that he would have to trust one of them. Either Susan or Laura had the right idea about life, about love. He loved both of these weeping women. He was never more afraid in his life. He knew that he would survive whatever he did.

Suddenly, for the first time, he knew he could leave Susan. He had been wrong about that, about her. She would not hold him against his will. He was quite free to choose. He must do just that, choose, and try to live with it. Either way there would be great difficulty and heartbreak. He wasn't too old, it wasn't too late.

"Neil," Susan said "don't you see that the ending changes everything. Can you really afford for all these years to have gone for nothing? For that is what it will mean, for you as well as for me."

"Things change," he said softly", people change"

"Yes, they do. We've changed. Once I could not imagine accepting living through your affairs. It made it difficult to love you, sometimes I hated you. Our marriage has always been flawed, I knew that. But we had a commitment, I had a commitment. I saw even at the beginning it wasn't going to be easy. I wished it would be easy, but then, well, anybody can do well in an easy marriage. But we survived, until now we survived. We can survive this; we should survive this, although God, I hope it is the last. Make it the last, please."

"Susan, it's so hard, you don't know" "Yes I do, I know. You love her",
"Don't," Neil says quietly,

"Why not? If I knew it yesterday, a month ago, why not today? All that is changed is that we are speaking of it, for once bringing it out. Did you think it hurt less because it lay between us, unspoken? I will say it again, you love her. Love her. Love her."

"Don't, stop it, don't hurt us this way"

"So what. So what if you love her. You love me too. Yes you do, you love me. More than you know. I don't give you everything, but then, think about it, does she? What about loyalty, for example, also a part of life. She got the best of you, I made do with less. What child's play an affair is, each of you coming in your Sunday best, showing off, so smart and self righteous. What's that?"

Neil was silent." Not much. Believe me, Neil, practically anybody can do that.

How does she know? he wonders, "Have you..." he starts to ask.

Susan hesitates." No, it happens I never did. But I know about it anyway, I can feel it

anyway, what its like. You lack imagination in some ways Neil, clever as you are. You should try to live a little more quietly, a little more inside yourself, with yourself. Stand still for a minute, these vexing questions about life that torment you may become clearer."

He saw then that one could repudiate love, but not a life. Not one's whole life, nullified, cancelled. At the end, when he would indeed be standing still, and quite alone, he must have something worthwhile to review, a life lived imperfectly, but not completely wasted. "You're a smart woman, Susan", he said, "I have not been kind."

"No," she agrees, "you have not been kind, but then again, Neil, neither have I."

They stood there, in front of Neil's chair, now apart again, not touching, that moment gone, but searching each other's faces to see if it was over. Susan, satisfied and reassured, began to smile. She sniffed; her nose was pink from crying. "I need a tissue; Neil," she says finally", and you need an aspirin".

For a while, they lived as before. Until Susan realized it was, in fact, too late. That furtive, secret way Neil had of undressing in the dark and crawling into bed. Never even needs to pee. Never brushes his teeth or turns on the light. Just slides into his side, holding his breath. She can feel the release of tension, his and hers, when he realizes he's home free. They lie there, Susan and Neil, in that queen bed, the old games gone, nothing left, not even a good night kiss, not a gentle holding, nothing left.

Long ago, she relinquished her claim. In the face of his coldness, his disinterest, she finally let it go. Buried it somewhere, deep inside. Smothered it with just enough cold, damp earth to dampen any last embers.

"Not your fault," he had said that last time so many years ago now. "Not your fault, baby, my baby", he held her and cried. He was soft, too soft and nothing she did could make him hard. No sucking or sweet kissing, no rubbing, or gentle tickling, nothing made him hard. "It's all right, darling," she had said. Soon, not long after that painful night, they let it go.

She could see the relief in his eyes; feel his gratitude in the gentle way he was with her. It wasn't such a big deal, she thought. This will bind us, she thought. She never mentioned doctors or therapy. Not to Neil, this husband whom she loved. Better to ignore it, shroud it, and deny its existence.

Soon, nothing was left of what she remembered as desire. Now, lying in this pristine bed, Susan knew it had all been for nothing. She was a long time falling asleep; a sense of loss pervaded her thoughts.

Neil and I are finished, Susan realizes. To be sure, there are still things to be said. More explanation, recrimination, melancholy talk about what might have been. But it's over, they're done for, she's lost.

It's time to recoup whatever she can, cut her losses while she still has some chips. She never meant to bankrupt herself, although she certainly seemed to be throwing it away with both hands. She has a little something in reserve, just a pittance she keeps hoarded under the mattress, and a little in an old sock. Enough, she hopes, to get her on her feet again. Let him have his Laura, she thinks, with relief. She is turning over a damaged man. Let this Laura change his bandages; apply a compress to his aching head. Poor woman, she thinks, winning this carcass of a man.

She wants to do this well, this ending with Neil. No more pleas or vows, it is too late for that. Just cut it, slice it clean through. Break off what brittle bones protrude, let it hemorrhage with no attempt to stanch the flow. She will take no anesthetic for this bloodletting; it is counter-indicated in this purifying protocol. She knows she can expect some moments of searing pain, and some, not quite so bad, of constant ache. In time, she thinks, in time, it will hurt much less, but only if she has the guts to be a conscientious cleaver.