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ALL I KNOW ABOUT LOVE IS IN THIS BOOK

A learning tale / A yearning tale

Translation: Tess Lewis

Book I: A learning tale

(Pages 9 – 13)

So then, the beginning. I'll recount it and naturally it will be different from any other, different from yours and from yours, too. Every beginning is different and that, in fact, is its charm—that it's different every time. And that it can be recounted. In full detail. With the fabulous rapture that can make you jealous, the rapture that you remember or long for and that, depending on your state of mind and level of generosity, will make you fall silent or feel depressed or genuinely wishing all the best. (Or it may make you alert. And alarmed. But more on this later.) It can stir doubts or a faint anxiety (for the fortunate one) or may bring your own story to mind and prompt you to tell it. Because everyone knows how the story will go, how it will hopefully or hopefully not go on.

But have you all ever asked yourselves why beginnings are easy to recount even though the details vary so much and the happy ones recounting their beginnings are unwilling to leave out a single detail; everything has to be told, very precisely; and then he said, and then I said, and then he, and then I, like on a seesaw, or maybe in effect it's more like sitting on one of those playground structures, those circular benches on a pedestal, on which you can spin and have everything around you blur, not as harshly as at an amusement park, more gently. You spin together and contours grow fuzzy, creating an image that blurs and remains in constant motion. You may feel this way when you're hearing one of these accounts; that the contours are no longer distinct or that you'll forget the details as soon as you hear them.

They're usually quite banal after all; and it's not very important whether it was in this park or another, whether it was early afternoon or later in the day or whether the first kiss was on a bench or under a beechtree – .

Such an insane number of details. That must be precisely recounted. That are impossible to sort through, that you wouldn't even want to sort through if the topic were different. If your friend, for example, were telling you about visiting her mother in the nursing home: and then I walked down the street, along the sidewalk, you know, where the gorse bush grows that smells kind of funny, like a dog peed on it, but on this day it had a completely different scent; I'd never noticed it before, it was like a... At this point, you'd have already bailed and might even have said; yes, and how was your visit with your mother?

But that's not how it is here. In this case, you do want every detail, you might even ask for more. Because you know from your own experience: everything said has meaning. And everything that isn't said, that will be said later, that will be dredged up and held to the light: oh, I forgot, it wasn't the afternoon, it was early evening... and so on.

And if you ask yourselves why it is like that, not on first hearing maybe, but later when you're back at home or have hung up the phone, then I say: that's the key. These details are important and naturally they're not. They're what we need to feed our little desiring-machines, our inner honeypumps. We feed them these details and they run like clockwork. They need the details, that's the material, and what results from it is completely autonomous. Actually, these stories should be confusing with too many irrelevant trivialities, and they'd be dismissed in any other case, in your own thoughts or by asking, during the endless recounting, with faint impatience and the onset of boredom: And then? But you don't ask. Out of respect for your friend telling her story in the way she has to tell it. There are good reasons: politeness, attachment, wanting to be a good listener. But that's not what it's about.

You listen this way and can sort through the details because you know the main script. Because you know exactly what it's about. Because, as you're listening, you're already writing your own story, rewriting it, because you remember or hope for something, because you're there, in the middle of it all even if you're just listening. That's why you can immediately keep the story straight.*

Of course, you all can see, as I'm speaking, that I'm in a manic state. I can see it too. A manic state that no one wants to give up. In which the entire world, with all its details, brims with enormous meaning. Some become wittier in this state, more bubbly, they become especially cheerful company; they may even be interested. In an improbable act of generosity, they may turn the spotlight back on you and ask: so, how are things with you (and x, and y)? Illuminated by their friendly intensity, you'll feel like a celebrity; blessed with and basking in a level of interest that you haven't experienced in a long time. Something has been turned towards you, a giant lamp with its cone of light shining on you and, standing in that light, you can say what you want; in this beam of attention, everything is interesting, even what was previously, until just now, trivial and gray.

*I'm speaking here of heterosexual, cisgender couples: not in order to make any claim or exclude anyone, but because I don't feel qualified or have enough experience to speak of anything else. Everybody welcome here!

Others become strangely quiet. Inwardly, they simmer quietly like small, bubbling pots of happiness, from which tiny bubbles—some even as big as a child's fist—rise continuously. They disperse in the air like the soap bubbles that are created when breath is puffed or rather blown, very carefully sighed almost through thin, thumb-sized plastic rings. These bubbles then rise, effervescent, silent, delicate, and gleam in the air until they pop without a sound, but more bubbles are already floating after them; a little pipe of soap bubble solution will create a whole lot of them. So, they sit there, the ones who are manic in this way, newly in love and completely unaware that we can see the shimmering, multicolored orbs (funfair colors: pale blue and violet, pink and a light, synthetic green) rising like thought bubbles in a comic strip. Some talk endlessly only of themselves but it's clear that theirs is a necessary egocentrism and so excusable; it has nothing to do with a person's character, they are warm-hearted and interested and not at all so self-centered, but now, at this very moment, there's no other way. And in any case, see above, it's terribly interesting.

I can't think of any other type. There are, I believe, only these three variations: the spotlights, the simmering pots, the endless talkers. Except for a rare fourth type. A friend was saying just yesterday that she belonged to this scarce type which I'd been unaware of until now. She said that she has no idea what all the talk is about. That she knows nothing about the silent frenzy, the gentle rending, without pause, the manic feeling of being alive which makes the world look freshly washed and every mailman and every jackass who blocks the street while trying to park his fat car deserving of a smile. The feeling in which everything that usually weighs on your spirits and makes life difficult and bleak or full of despair is suddenly brushed away; a distant, dusty realm. Tax returns, bad news about climate change, the homeless woman right around the corner to whom you haven't dared speak even though she has become something like a neighbor. War. Because there's always a war being fought somewhere with fathers, mothers, grandparents dying and leaving traumatized children behind. Many letters are loaded up with the large eyes of children, yes, downright loaded with them and these letters pile up in mailboxes in the pre-Christmas season because it's known that they cut through everything and reach most people. But those in love, they may well be an exception.

So then, she has no idea what all the talk is about. I don't watch romantic films, she said, and I don't read romance novels; I feel like an anthropologist but without the slightest interest in this foreign tribe. I've never experienced the feeling.

This surprised me. She was, I believe, the first person of this species in my life, but who knows, maybe there are several more who simply don't admit it out loud and unprompted because they have the feeling that there's something missing in them, some kind of organ with which most people live, and by which they let themselves be lived, now and then anyway, with the greatest willingness. Because there's the script. Because they're familiar with it from childhood on, because they're prepared for it even before they experience it for the first time. When she confessed this—because for her it was like a confession, like acknowledging a flaw, an invisible defect, with which she had managed to muddle through until now and which she never mentioned so as not to seem peculiar—I couldn't help but be intrigued.

(Pages 56 – 59)

On 29 December, the late morning sun shines so unexpectedly and with such abandon—accompanied by a brisker and more erratic wind—that I spontaneously text the word ‘walk?’ Two hours later, when we meet, December has turned into April: with an umbrella one could almost float away. Soon the rain can’t be ignored. (And the nervous smoothing of collapsing hair, the discreet handkerchief gesture, reveal it plainly: two shame-animals colliding, two aesthetically delicate natures.) Forced refuge in a café that no big city snobs would choose to set foot in, circumstances which likely snap me briefly out of my trance: a setting that represents a test for two impatient and pampered people, from the tablecloths to the background music, and without critiquing remarks since it’s obvious, if not expected, that the other has also registered the setting and both deem it completely irrelevant? * An admittedly highly elaborate indicator. But when someone sits with clammy hands in a rather strong cloud of toilet cleanser, drinking lousy coffee and yet is obviously happy, what assumptions can be made about this person?

I give him a unicorn glance the very moment I snap out of the trance. A kind of caution, an order from the future: take a close look. This is the man; is this the man you want to entrust yourself to?

Completely misleading in retrospect, this cautionary thought: what bothers you, in this brief present moment—nagging experience was saying—will irritate you no less in three months or three years. Right now, there’s still a chance to back out. (Completely misleading in retrospect, because it was no longer a question of what I was noticing internally, like some fine print on an insurance policy, a possible provision, a stepladder into a future without this man. None of it was important afterwards.) And the instant he met my look, the moment had passed. But he had registered it and referred to it in his next email: as a special kind of attentiveness, “as if you were taking note of something.”

* A comment could have been made about the surroundings, actually a good opportunity to ‘get to know each other better.’ The two did not seize the opportunity, sidestepping a situation in which the contours of each could have been revealed to the other. This sidestepping contained an important element of being in love: the blissful-unquestioning merging of selves. Whether or not both people experience it in this way can only be determined after it has been suspended, when one of them has asked and thus become an individual again. It must remain in the balance to exist: what is not said is part of agreeing to it and is essential because it remains hidden. And it’s not clarified (never will be clarified) whether what was unsaid and so never answered, is actually heard and disregarded. Both the one who is silent and the one who disregards can feel themselves bound in knowing and without wanting to learn if they are actually side by side in their symbiotic amniotic fluid. Intimacy, according to Niklas Luhmann in his legendary standard work on Love as Passion, “can thus be damaged by explicit communication, by discreet questions and answers because such openness would indicate that something had not been understood as a matter of course.”

A further indication of our hyper-alert state, of the load of data passing back and forth, as if our brains had been enhanced and provided with a new energy supply. Which, in terms of chemical production, was the case. *

And we set off again. The rain had stopped; I carried the book he had brought me through the park now beaded with water. I'd been very relieved when he gave it to me and I saw that he hadn't written it (some of his writings, he'd mentioned, definitely had been published). In this phase I wanted to comprehend him unconditionally, to remain in the magical present. No taking measurements, no marveling at any product. The past would still come. Would lead to explanations that over decades of living as an adult you've kept ready to hand in daily life: I suspected it might turn out this way and it did, then the following happened... Sheer stories with which you construct an image of yourself that you can bear to look at in the mirror. The arrangements you've made for yourself, the dangling string of pearls—men, places, photographs, family stories. Everything that was already finished and thus had an anecdotal character and reactions that could be expected, all this remained self-evidently 'external', outside the cocoon. As do the friends and acquaintances that one could have met but didn't: no third party either real or merely mentioned, as if we were Adam & Eve in a Cranach painting, although wearing winter clothing (and with no serpent in sight). Alone in a world with an Edenic character: until the new year this setting was always the same—that 'always' is a gross exaggeration of a total of three walks and five coffees in three cafes, but because of the open-umbrellad raw nights and the escapism of that uneventful, unstructured week, it felt like an 'always'.

We set off again, hardly looking at each other as we walked. Just teenager-like furtive, sidelong glances with the appropriate level of nervousness: You don't want to be caught looking but you do want to be caught. Making a track while the snow falls. **

*A reference to the romantic script: this moment of decision can be considered the last one before the onset of love, which from then on would follow its own laws and the moment to which the self-evident, not-enamored autonomy is then consigned. H. still felt like a woman peeking into a circus tent through a gap in the curtain: should I enter or not? The price of the ticket: sound judgement, normalcy, reasonableness. The prospect: an enormous spectacle. – Were the glance, the considerations actually part of profane reality or already part of the romantic script: a conclusive answer would only be possible if she didn't enter the tent.

** A game that owes its charm to incipience. A couple that has already become a couple is not going to play it because the question of whether the other is as needy, as unsure as oneself, has been answered in practice. It goes smoothly when you're aware of it and when you're not; transparency is not detrimental, it heightens the appeal. Also in this respect: part of the great romantic script, even if you're uplifted by the feeling in the moment that you've invented the game.

And then they stand there, in half-light, in an upper room of the world. A streetlamp threads its dim white through the ochre (now: golden) linden crowns, into the bay window, onto the small square of parquet where they face each other: naked, a Cranach pair.

She had seen to it that they would both stand here now, in a move that his shyness had empowered her to make. But neither is relevant in this moment that is without shyness, without triumph and without embarrassment, stripped of everything, even of desire.

Everything stands still.

It's difficult to say what's there instead, enveloping them both. Wordless dialogue, back and forth. Feeling, touch: aah, there it is! Smooth skin, an elbow, a nipple hardening.

Muscles, soft tissue. An ear, almost unfathomable, hair. Islands on which one pauses.

Bones, ribs, the movements of breath, a rapidly beating heart. Calming of sensation until the next touch comes and rips away the calm. Soft sounds, no sounds, new sounds. No identifiable curve, no dramaturgy. No script.

This is perhaps most peculiar for these two head-footed creatures, who are lying next to each other and have abandoned all thought. Instead, breath from the crown of their heads to the tips of their toes; erratic but unsurprising, an inner surge that leads it. And along with the actual touching, a celestial vibration along their contours, as if they'd grown fur with every hair standing on end; not in shock, but in an expanding movement. Invitation to another, as yet unknown sense. (One year later, she will think of this when passing a house that is covered from the basement to the eaves with ivy resembling a coat of fur, trembling and swelling in the dry winter wind.)

No compass in the oceanic. They sink, it's palpable, but not in such a way that there's no longer any light shimmering through the surface. There's still a filter in the impenetrability, a fan that moves of its own accord; nothing is suffocating or all too deep to prevent breathing. Instead, it's a kind of gliding without control or responsibility or fear.

That's how it could have been, they may have thought had they been capable of thought in the amniotic fluid. Complete aimlessness. A path without purpose, goal, or plan. Time on the one hand extremely present, on the other without experience. It's like being on those trips, when you couldn't tell without looking at your watch whether the minute that had just passed wasn't, in fact, an hour. Now and again, she hears his voice, her voice; no words, just sighs, hollow expressions in which excitement and release merge. What she briefly registers without really thinking: this doesn't feel like sex as she knows it. No heightening of energy in one spot, from which something predictable would follow. A journey that will make no difference, as if they were preparing each other for an experience, becoming the same in the dissolution and union, and that means everything, like those Platonic halves that create a sphere, so then a body without preference, a complete whole. An experience that still lies in the future, of which they both have only a presentiment; not with the mind, but in the feeling of expansion and vibration, as if the surface of their bodies extended endlessly like the inside of perception. Still there is a moment she will remember later that was different. But memory is weak. As weak, as vague as his attempt at a kind of orthodoxy. And "it doesn't work," as sex therapists would say; they've slid so far that there

are no borders that would make it possible: me here, you there, and now there's intercourse. They're next to it, past it, or not yet ready for it, and so the moment slips by without comment; it doesn't even make a perceptible tear in this nocturnal tissue, they pass over it. So the moment slid by, leaving no tear in the fabric of night, no remark. If she thought at all, she thought this: that when they parted, whenever it was (for neither looked at a clock), it was without reflection, without comment. It was enough. More than enough, she would have said, had she said anything at all, there was never more enough.

BOOK II: A yearning tale

(from Pages 149 – 150)

January 11, 5 p.m.

Midday today in the gallery: the marrow suddenly drawn from my bones. A flash. I hear through cotton wool and see objects as if on a faulty television screen. Stagger home. It takes me twenty minutes instead of the usual five to reach the streetcar. A raw dependency, the fantasy: I have to be with him. I rush to his door, he opens, we sink, it's all good... such longing, such crude force. Then I thought of Marina. The only person I know who is trained in Reiki – like him. And of course she picks up, listens, and says: It could, I want you to know, also be accidental. If not, then it's truly reprehensible. The first thing you learn in training: it's for the good of all people, and for that alone. – Now she's having something to eat, afterwards she'll treat me, telepathically. And then we'll see. Yesterday, on the phone with Gretchen I noticed: my guard is melting. I'm normal again. Googled him, watched an old video of him and thought: clever and alert. Didn't understand the connection (his thesis) between the octave and the West, but he caught people's attention. He was a bit prominent, maybe. Perhaps it hurt him that I clearly knew nothing about him. – But he himself said: you wouldn't have given me your number. I was a rather agitated man.

The mania is over, the rejection's power is fading. My shell has become more porous. I notice, and I regret it, the other state was stronger, clearer, more alive. I even laughed in those days, with Andira at the movies, etc.

January 12, 4 a.m.

What are my resources?

Aside from work: friendship. Aside from friendship: work.

How peculiar that it was Christmas of all occasions that conjured the Letters of Julie de Lespinasse onto my night table.

Three kinds of people are entitled to the pity and consideration of the reasonable, the sensitive, and the benevolent: the insane, the sick, and the unhappy. Relying on these three titles, I ask you to return to me through the carrier of this letter and in this portfolio all the letters that you received from me before or during your journey.

Mme de Lespinasse to M. de Guibert, Wednesday, one hour after midnight; January 1775

(from Pages 232 – 236)

June 6

Swallow a vitamin now and then, slink through the days. Hold monologues with him. Don't know what to make of his silence, I'm out of ideas.

7 p.m.

"You actually know nothing about him, about the way he usually behaves," Fedora says in all her lucidity. "You only know him in an infatuated state, he only knows you in an infatuated state. Maybe stick to the facts?" (The facts are: he does not get in touch.)

June 8

Still waiting. Still wondering every ten minutes, where are you, what are you thinking, can it really be true that you don't think of me anymore. But if you were to say it outright, it would contradict itself; an "I don't think about you" simply can't be said in earnest, so you don't say it.

I've dug myself a pit and I'm sitting in it. It's dark in here.

June 11

Mail from Svoda, my former professor, as if she had sensed it. An apocryphal bundle, the painstaking handwriting transcribed.

"I thought you might be interested. Letters or notes—perhaps both—from a young lady named Caroline Scheffel, whom I stumbled on in a family archive in Nürnberg. There's nothing more than what's here: someone tied a blue silk ribbon around the sheets and gave them a title that speaks to the advanced 19th century (Notes of a Lost Woman). C. S. was a merchant's daughter whose life story can barely be researched; there's nothing beyond an entry in the Hamburg birth registry. A remarkable boldness of thought combined with a complete stasis in her outer life. (Still-life as Feminist Commentary, wasn't that one of your essay topics? Pardon my memory, which is showing embarrassing blank spots in old age.)"

It won't only be age. I can picture her before me, how the night and alcohol transmitted her messages, which she would edit into sobriety the next day. Yet the intuition remains, her oceanic sense, fathom-deep, which makes me little afraid of this small parcel.

Caroline Scheffel, undated:

I am keenly aware of the foolishness that a mere speck of matter—like a wart on your nose, a blackened tooth, a blur in your eye—would have spared me immeasurable suffering but also cost me happiness. All the noble feelings I harbour for you, all the moral struggles, the great purifying of character which my love for you has demanded of me—all this would not have happened had you been created only slightly differently (in extent, not in effect) than you precisely are.

And yet – can such a thought corrupt, even in the smallest degree, what I feel for you? No. This insight of the mind does not blend with the insight and experience of the heart: these truths lay upon life's table like a small, bare silver knife and a walnut in a still life, useless to each other.

December 23

Dream: I'm walking with someone else (whose contours are vague, as if this were my double-self) through a bare, hilly landscape, and we suddenly realize: we're being followed. One part of myself can flee, the other stays behind. And is stopped and overpowered by two men, themselves indistinguishable, who throw me down into a Christ-like pose, arms outstretched, and one of the two (with an Alain Delon face, fine-featured and clear cut, bearing the expression of a sociopath) puts his right knee on my chest and it's clear: he will, as he often does—he's notorious for this technique—put his knee exactly between my breasts, crush my ribcage, and kill me. I look at him, I say, "Please don't," and before he reaches a decision (maybe he will still relent?) I wake up.

In two words I can still describe my physical and moral state: I suffer; I love. For some time now, this is the order.

Mme de Lespinasse; Wednesday, midnight.

December 24

It is quite possible, dear friend, that I will soon be in need of solace. And that the only one who might grant it is 'not available', as they humorously say here, because 'available' can also apply to bread or cake. For that entangled case in which the source of the elementary need is the very one who might soothe it, little provision is made in the profane realm, should the source vanish.

The grief of the irretrievable—for which there are words like 'mourn' and 'doom', surely not by chance heavy with dark vowels and the weight of an m – this is not a pain that opens the mouth, it closes it. It is not a sorrow that makes us cry out, not even lament; it is a sorrow no longer to be joined with any action, any appeal. It is a mourning before which all resourcefulness fails, not only one's own but also that of the well-meaning who would cheer us with their oft-invoked experience (which every adult possesses), that 'all

things pass'. For there is a grief, dear friend, to which that does not apply. It concerns a loss in which what is lost is greater than it ever was when present.

You may say that such a thing is not possible, that it's a summa which contradicts all logic? But surely it is possible, my friend. I speak of a hole in the soul whose reach surpasses what it once contained of happiness and bright expectation. I wanted to show it to you. But you're not here and if you were, the grief would be gone. Thus you will, one way or another, never know it.

Caroline Scheffel, undated

December 26

Yes, my heart leaps when I see there's a message,
And it sinks again because it's not from him, of course, it's not from him. The obtuseness of emotions.

4:30 p.m.

A year ago today, I think, he must have checked his mail now & again to see if I'd answered his softly knocking inquiry.

It came the next morning but then straightforwardly: shall we go for a walk, maybe right now?

And at the end of that walk, a year ago tomorrow, around four in the afternoon, I was caught.

And still I am.