

15 July 1978

Dear Lil:

Thank you for your beautiful letter about Jenifer.

Your perception of her essence is the more remarkable for having taken place without direct acquaintance. I regret that circumstances prevented your asking the questions you needed to know about, and if you still have them I shall be glad to answer them.

Because of the subtle and relentless discrimination which hung over her childhood and youth she was unusually quiet, thoughtful and reserved -- until she got to know anyone well, when she usually made profound impact. Of all the people who knew her well, none yet can speak of her except as still here, any more than I can. She could appear at any moment; I wouldn't be the least bit surprised.

She doesn't need to manifest herself, and hasn't, except that I'm conscious of her in everything I see and do. In a way, the fact that she hasn't given me any overt sign is a little surprising. She had unusual power that way. He had one cat, a most intelligent animal, whom she could call to her for years, until he became senile, merely by thinking about him. Repeatedly in two different aquaria with two different species of dolphins, I have seen her summon them as they swam away from her. They would wheel in unison and eagerly pick her out of a crowd and nuzzle the glass in front of her face. All she did, she said, was think warm and loving thoughts about them. Still more remarkable was the way she reached me across a thousand miles of the South China Sea early in World War II when she was stranded in Manila and I was stuck in Shanghai, unable to find out what had happened to her. All I knew was that her ship had reached Manila where it was requisitioned by the U.S. Navy. When Manila was captured I didn't know whether she had been interned with Allied nationals or whether she was caught in a strange occupied city with funds that couldn't last long. She handled it just as you'd expect. I had forgotten what day it was, and awoke on the morning of our eighth anniversary with an overwhelming, reassuring sense of her presence. She filled the room and the world around me. I knew she was safe. Several times during that dismal winter, before the Japanese flew her back to Shanghai for repatriation, it happened again and again -- always early in the morning because she got up before anyone else and went out to the chow line to eat her cracked wheat breakfast by herself and be with me.

Your remark about her having helped make the world a better place is supported by many things other people have said and written about her. One of our oldest friends, a much younger woman who is a uniquely beautiful person in her own right, put it this way: "Knowing her changed my life. Always, I have heard of marriages made in heaven, but the one she made with you is the only one I've seen."

Certainly no one who know her at all well shows any sign of losing the vividness of her memory. Perhaps I've been able to extend that a bit by persuading the Wisconsin people to label the material just shipped to them the Jenifer White Collection. She'd make a modest disclaimer, I know, but I know too that it never could have been done as it was without her iron resolve to do what she felt was right. Elaine Wrono seems deeply pleased that it will bear her name, and so am I. Just as I am pleased to use her card-indexed recipes and produce food that still tastes like North China, and to keep the house very much as she left it, even ironing the sheets which she always insisted upon doing. As you well understand, she's still here.