

Chapter Two

Halcyon: September 1937

Mary Louise Stenquist was emotionally very high in the days and weeks following those three magical days in early September that brought about her engagement to be married to a sailor.

She is writing her first letter to Herb while sitting in Halcyon's *Hiawatha Lodge*, where her mother, Ebba, a gifted pianist who played for silent movies, was giving piano lessons. Louise writes that she is practicing singing with two others: her good friend Jean Tedford, six years younger than Louise and daughter of a Halcyon resident and Temple member, and a mutual friend Bob Crozier, "a boy of 17" (*September 8*). One of the songs this vocal trio practiced that evening was "Harbor Lights." She tells Herb that Jean and Bob teased her about it, because the lyrics were especially fitting for Louise's situation.

*I saw the harbor lights; They only told me we were parting
The same old harbor lights, That once brought you to me.*

I watched the harbor lights; How could I help it? Tears were starting.

Good-bye to golden nights; Beside the silvery seas.

I long to hold you dear, And kiss you just once more.

But you were on the ship, And I was on the shore.

Now I know lonely nights; For all the while my heart keeps praying.

That someday harbor lights, Will bring you back to me.

"Harbor Lights" by Frances Langford (1937)

The reaction among the Halcyon residents to the news of Louise's engagement was generally positive. Louise's mother liked the special message Herb left for her, which accompanied his note to Louise just before he departed early Tuesday morning. "Oh gee Herb, but I love you so much it hurts" (*September 8*).

She tells Herb that Halcyon people are happy for their engagement, except for Herman, who had a crush on her for years, and that some gave her gifts for her hope chest on hearing the news. (*September 11*). She also writes that Dr. Dower wondered if Herb knew about her health (*September 8*).

Herb's high school ring, now on Louise's finger, helped her to feel connected to him. She writes "If it hadn't been for your ring it would have all seemed like a dream. It still does. I have somewhat calmed down today, but I still think of you every second." Louise and Flamore (Dr. Dower's daughter), Louise's mother Ebba, and Lottie, a friend of the family, had driven up to San Luis Obispo, to a jewelry store. There she had the ring resized and the setting fixed.¹ After their visit to the jeweler, they went to get ice cream sodas. (*September 11*).

A few days later another significant person in her life would leave her. Her brother Bob was going away to attend college in San Jose. On Bob's last night in town there was a supper at the Lodge, and afterward Bob took Louise and her friend Patty Altamirano, a pretty, young adolescent, to a show in Santa Maria. Louise tells Herb that her brother Bob was happy about their news as well. "Bob actually kissed me goodbye last night! Can you believe that?" (*September 13*).

Louise writes about how lonely she is now, because both her boyfriend and her brother had gone away. She complains that she doesn't have enough to do; that she just sits and thinks of Herb when she's not visiting or working at the Dowers' (*September 13*).



Everybody is calming down now about us. And I'm beginning to want to keep things more to myself now too. I think our love belongs only to ourselves, don't you?

Every once in a while, Bernard tells me interesting things about you. You see, I have to learn about you by proxy instead of directly from you.

*We didn't have time to find out much did we? Pearl asks me quite often if you like this or that and all I can say is "I don't know" (*September 13*).*

At left is Bernard Lentz in Halcyon, 1936. He was the caretaker of the Halcyon Guest House, where he also lived.

¹ Louise had to get the setting fixed because it broke when Herb had punched someone, sometime after he had left home, back in 1935. This story is one of the first that reveals that he has a temper.

But it wasn't long before she got his first letters, including a few pictures. "Well – what a wonderful day today! I received two letters! And gee honey I was so glad to get those pictures. It sure was nice to see you again" (September 14).

In this letter she writes a few phrases from the song she sang to him their last night together. "There's a part in the middle of it which goes like this: 'One melody will always fill my heart; one kiss will cheer me when we're far apart.' That melody darling is 'The First Time I Met You.' Every time I hear that I think of you" (September 14).

Louise expresses concern for Herb being in Asian waters, due to Japan's aggression toward China, and the possibility of United States involvement.

The only way I worry about you is this. Supposing Japan should, very accidentally, step on Uncle Sam's big toe? He would immediately get his pride all up in arms, and you, in the Navy, would all be the first ones to have to fight. It just makes me so mad. And as for my preference in the matter of your staying in the Navy. I don't really know yet. Except for the fact of war. Oh, how I hate the thought of your ever having to go. (September 14)

Louise writes about taking a driving test to get her driver's license.

A funny thing happened today. I went up to San Luis to get a driver's license and the examiner happened to be a nice-looking young man. When I was out driving with him, I forgot to put my hand out for a left turn at a boulevard stop. So consequently, I have to go up in a couple of weeks to drive with him again to put my hand out. Also, he said he'd teach me how to park between two cars (which I can't do) and as he works until 5, it would have to be after 5, and then he said that my mother wouldn't have to wait, he'd take me home. 'Aint' that sumpin?' I got my license anyway. (September 15).

In the same letter she writes about one of the pictures she has of him.

I have one of your pictures – the full-length view – tacked up on the wall right beside my bed. And the other one – the torn one – why did you tear it? – is in a swell frame that I used to keep one of those little pictures of myself. (September 15).

In another letter she responds to his many flattering messages about how wonderful she is and how much he loves her.

Here's something for you to remember. Please don't put me on a pedestal darling because you might be disappointed when you get back. You know I really have some faults and if you don't understand that, I'm afraid I'll have a hard fall – if I ever fall from it in your opinion. Oh, darling I'm trying so hard to be as good as you think I am; its something to accomplish in these two years. (September 18).

Louise writes about her family, and reveals something that had a major impact on her life. In fact, changed it forever.

My father after 12 years of married life ran off with another girl. You won't do that, will you? I don't know where he is now, or if he's living or what. I was about ten when he left, and I really loved him. (September 18).

On Sunday night, she went to the show with her mother, Fred, Jean and Flamore. They saw "The Singing Marine." She writes "Now all I can sing is 'It may be Shanghai, farewell and goodbye.' – And that's all I can remember. Remember when we went to the show and you bought some popcorn? And you wouldn't even hold my hand?" (September 20).



**The photo above shows Louise's mother, Ebba,
and her step father, Fred, with Louise on the steps of the temple.**

Very early in their correspondence Louise and Herb began to define their relationship, including setting some important social boundaries.

Do you realize dear that we've never danced together? I guess you won't have much opportunity for dancing out there, will you? You know, I don't care if you do go out, only – be sure and think of me whenever you go. It really is awfully sweet of you to tell me to go out if someone asks me to, but I won't. (September 20).

Along with her letter of September 22 she sent two recently taken photos. She writes “In the one of me alone the smile was exclusively for you. And that dress is green – a very pretty green, too.”² (*September 22*).

In the second photo, in addition to Louise in her new dress, we see Flamore, who was born with a severe mental disability, from Dr. Dower’s previous marriage; and Jean, one of Louise’s good friends, who is the daughter of a Halcyon resident and Temple member.



Above: Louise, Flamore and Jean. September, 1937.

In this letter Louise reaffirmed her love for Herb rather indirectly, by revealing other potential suitors. She begins with a cute story. “Did I ever tell you what Mary Anne, Herb Holman’s little girl said?” Herb and Virginia Holman were a young couple who lived not far from Louise and her family, and for whom Louise often provided babysitting services when they went out to a movie. “She’s only five. Sometime last week she asked me if I was a woman. I said yes. So she asked me why I didn’t get married. I told her I was going to. Then she asked me why I didn’t marry Tom. (He is a young man of about 25 and a good friend of theirs.) I told her I was going to marry you, but she said she liked Tom better.” Louise continues:

*I only met him last week sometime. And I didn’t think much of him. Herb and Virginia have tried twice to make a match between me and another man. Sometime last summer, they had me over to dinner to meet a man named Gil. Well – I was very bored with him, and I don’t doubt he was bored with me. Another time they had another man down – I’ve forgotten his name even. And then you came, and in a minute almost I fell in love with you” (*September 22*).*

Louise writes more about her life in Halcyon. “Halcyon is a nice place darling, but you have to have a good sense of humor to live in it. You can’t even think of doing something without somebody coming up and saying ‘I hear you’re going to do this or that.’ But just the same I love it” (*September 24*).

² The photo of Louise in the green dress is located in the Introduction.

Last night, Bernard and I went over to Otto's and played Five Hundred. And what do you think? I won! Which is remarkable, I scarcely ever win at cards. Anyway, Bernard doesn't know much about cards, and I think Otto let me win. I'm not sure. We played about five hands when Otto got tired and went to bed, and Bernard lay down on the couch so I played solitaire. And never won. My mother came after us about 9:15. (September 24).

Otto lived in the Sanatorium³, and telling Herb about playing cards there reminded Louise of another time she visited Otto there. It was located only a half block from the Dower's personal residence, in Oceano, where Louise often worked for Pearl.

I went up to Otto's tonight to take a paper up. Have you ever been in the Sanatorium? I'm telling you it's the spookiest place at night. I had to go up the back stairs all alone in the dark and hoping and praying that no rats or owls would jump at me and also that no boards in the floor would suddenly give way. Anyway, I got two glasses of cider for my trouble. Otto says I have to help him drink it so it won't turn to vinegar. In case you don't know Otto, he is about 75 or something like that. (September 24)

On Saturday, Louise, her mother and Flamore went to visit Yoshiko, Louise's good friend from high school, and who was now living in Santa Maria, about a half hour drive south of Halcyon. She explained in her letter how she and Yoshiko went to Los Angeles to work, after graduating from high school in 1936. That summer they did housework and babysitting, trying to save money to attend business college. She writes that Yoshiko, at 18 years of age, was in trouble. She worked at a Japanese store there, and she had fallen in love with an older man, a Filipino. Yoshiko was afraid to tell her mother, because he was ten years older than she, and they fight, because he has a temper. (September 25).

A few days later Louise writes about what her doctor prescribed to improve her health, but she didn't reveal why, or what the problem was.

I went to see Dr. King today and he grinned when I told him I was engaged. He's young, about 32, and has been married about five years. But he's very annoying. He says I have to go to bed at nine o'clock every night in the week except two, and then I have to go to bed at ten. Also to lie down every afternoon for an hour and a half. I hate to lie down and I don't like to go to bed so early. I'm alright though, and I'm getting along fine, and I don't have to see him until the first part of December. (September 27)

³ The Halcyon Hotel and Sanatorium, which opened in 1904, was housed in a Victorian mansion built around 1885. When the organization, The Temple of the People, relocated from Syracuse, New York to Halcyon, California, the Temple purchased the mansion, a barn, several outbuildings, a windmill, a 10,000-gallon water tank, and 30 acres of land, which included a soft water spring. The mansion had 20 rooms and had running water, which was uncommon in the area at that time. At the time of our story the mansion was no longer used for its original purposes. Dr. Dower had retired from his medical practice several years ago. Now the building was used to house individuals who were members of the Temple and in need of housing.