

First Impressions

Early Days with Anne

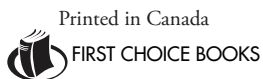
Don Gutteridge

Copyright ©2023
Don Gutteridge

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, and recording or otherwise – without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief passages quoted by a reviewer in a newspaper or magazine. To perform any of the above is an infringement of copyright law.

Note for Librarians: A cataloguing record for this book is available from Library
and Archives Canada at www.collectionscanada.ca/amicus/index-e.html

ISBN – 978-0-2285-0727-7



Printed in Canada

www.firstchoicebooks.ca

Victoria, BC

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Anne,
who made love her gift to the world,
in fond memory*

A Seldom Case

Thankfully, first impressions
are seldom the last or fail
to tell the tale, so that
when I arrived, scrubbed
and tidied, bookbag
and lesson-plans aboard,
at Elmira District High
in the fateful Fall of 'sixty,'
and was introduced around,
my gaze alighted on a young
woman, whose freckles met you
first, with a stook of cinnamon
hair upright in a bun,
like the halo of a lesser saint,
but when her blue eyes
leapt alive, I knew,
truth to tell, that this
was not a seldom case.

Pounce

*Elmira District High School
September, 1960*

It never occurred to me
that the handsome young woman
with the flaming acre of hair,
serving tea and cookies
to the staff was anything other
than a colleague who taught our girls
to boil an egg or make
their Singers sing, but when
she paused outside my open
classroom door one
day, to appraise perhaps
my pedagogical pounce,
something in her neighbourly
nod and dispassionate glance
bespoke romance – an odd
thought, I thought, but there's
no logic to love or its cause,
and it's the occurring that counts

Old School

Elmira: October 1960

When we get comfortable
enough to confide, you mention,
with regrettable reticence,
that our principal, a taskmaster
of the old school, has banned you
from attending the graduate's dinner
because, last Autumn,
at the same repast, you whipped
out your 'cigs,' lit up
and took a compensatory puff
before the Queen was toasted,
and when I suggest to His Nibs
that the punishment doesn't fit
the crime, there is no death-
bed repentance, no stoking
of that righteous fire,
so I join the boycott of one,
and watch you smoke.

Country Visit

October 1960

On our way home from school,
you take a detour that brings us
to an old-order Mennonite
farmstead, where nothing
as lively as a hydro wire
pollutes the property, and an ancient
auto (a neighbour's perhaps)
slumps in the drive with its head-
lamps blackened and staring
ahead like a pair of blinded
eyes, ashamed of the sun,
and we watch the farmer
plodding along behind
his horse-drawn plough
like Piers in a far century,
and inside the simple clapboard
house, suffused with the aroma
of still-rising bread
in the wood-stoked oven
and the late-day darkness
intermittently lamp-lit,
we thank our smiling host,
upholstered in half-an-acre
of colourless cotton, for the loaves
and the eggs, still warm –
and on the way back,

you break the silence: “Without
mirrors of any kind, how
can you be sure who you are?”
and I reply: “The god they honour
with their daily labour takes care
of that.”

Some October

Elmira: October 1960

For Anne in fond memory

Mister Huschka, who taught
History down the hall,
discerning that you and I
were more than commuting buddies,
invites us to his home to meet
his wife, and sample the seething
syrup he calls his wine,
potent enough to stun
a buffalo, hoping perhaps
his hooch might loosen our juices,
and as the evening begins
to blur and Mister's lascivious
look becomes a leer,
we say our groggy goodbyes,
and you more sober than I –
walleyed and fuddle-tongued,
consent to drive, and as the
darkness deepens into night,
you remark, "It's been some
October."

More Than the Ride

November 1960

When I arranged for my senior
class to take a field trip
to Toronto to see the play
we were studying, the thought
of a single chaperone
on a bus with three dozen
hormone-oozing students
was daunting to say the least,
but, then, you volunteered
to sit shotgun for ballast
and gender-balance, but sometime
on the long road home
thru the moonless, star-abiding
dark, while the big boys
in back sipped their contraband
booze and the girls pretended
to be shocked, I surmised
you'd come along for more
than the ride.

Otherwise

In the four fraught years
at Western U, I managed
a sum total of two
dates, only one of which
was consummated with a kiss,
and I was compelled to entertain
the thought that I was un-
attractive to the female portion
of the population, or the victim
of some misogynist plot,
and so, when I first glimpsed you
there at Elmira High
with all that upswept
cinnamon hair and frenzied
freckles and beguiling blue
eyes, I took no second
look, certain that any interest
in me must be moot
or minimum, but something
in the dimpled impetus of your smile
convinced me otherwise

Boots

September 1960

Whenever I dreamt erotic,
the object of my quixotic
desire was almost always
a doctored blonde with bold
blue eyes the size of the
Elgin marbles, dimpled
cheeks unblemished
by anything artful or alien,
a figure that'd make an hour-
glass blush, and a smile
for me: fiery or MonaLisian,
so when I saw you first
with half-a-bushel of carotene
hair, a peck of freckles,
eyes whose blue was blurred
by the light that lit them
and a figure more motherly
than not, I never thought
that you'd be the one to find
the seam in my dreams, step in
and put the boots to blondie.

The Morning I Fell in Love

On our first date, if one
could call it that (you didn't)
you rolled up to the curb
in your silver, folksy Volks,
where I stood, breathless
and beaming like a hitchhiking
apprentice, and you stepped out
like Cleopatra onto a barge,
and let the autumn sunshine
marinate your lemon-fringed
frock, your hair, ever
Rapunzel-lush, swept up
like a queen's coif, red
and radiant, and the smile you granted me
with the cornflower blue
of your eyes, stirred in me
something about to be born.

Chance

It was never love at first
sight: I'd had the thrill
of that electric lick
once before and felt
its disenchanted aftermath,
followed soon by a single-
season romance, consummated
with a kiss, and so it was
you came into my ken
not as a girl to be ogled
and bagged or a lissome lass
to keep my summer humming,
but as someone who might've gone
unnoticed, until you let
a smile unfuzzy your freckles
and set your eyes alight,
and love, as it does, left
nothing to chance

Tailored

Autumn 1960

You were the city sophisticate
with your tailored togs and elegant
upswept locks, at home
in gallery or salon, with two
years more than I in knowing
the world's whatever or why,
but the smalltown girl
with the country cachet was the one
who waylaid my bumpkin heart,
took me walking in the tawny
Autumn till the penny dropped,
and taught me that love may come
whether we wish it were,
or not.

A Pleasure

You took me dancing at Leisure
Lodge, that castellated
jive-palace a stone's
throw from home, under
the beguiling aegis of the stars
and a harvest moon, hungry
for lovers, and I did my best
not to trod on your open-
toed pumps more
than once (my nerve-restorer
tucked under the table),
and I'd just mustered enough
gumption to buss your brow
with mine when the first fleet
of mosquitoes made town,
scattering the Terpsichorean
fox-trotters like doxies
from the Man – before you'd had
a chance to say, "Thanks
for the dance" and I to reply,
"It's been a pleasure, ma'am."

God's Loss

We never talk of God
or whether Jesus was His only
begotten son, even
though it was a seldom
Sunday when we weren't singing
hymns to Him or letting
His love alight or dropping
our nickel in the parson's pot,
certain our Lord has seen
the sparrow's tumble and caught it
in His all-seeing hand,
but singalong hymns and hope
of Heaven were not enough
to keep us Christian or soul-
sufficient or bring us
to the conjugal altar, but love
like ours, sacred or profane,
will out, and God's loss
is a heathen's gain

Turpttude

Waterloo County: Autumn 1960

When Missus Harris tossed
my turpitudinous body,
bag and baggage, into the street,
and her grandson spread the noxious
news of our curbside cuddling
abaft and abroad, you came
to the rescue like Boadicea
braving the waves – tucking me
up in Guelph like a lost
cause worth the worry,
and O what an autumn that was!
me: riding shotgun
in your silver Volks as it hummed us
through the wistful mists
and sun-steeped fallows
of the county; you: beside me,
caring not that tongues
were wagging, eyes on the road
to come, seeing something
in me, perhaps, I'd yet
to prize

I Spoke with Roses

I spoke my love with roses,
as golden the gilded apples
of the Hesperides: a long-
stemmed flourish of flowers
to let you know how much
that flawless autumn of country
walks and city-side
saunters meant to me –
because my bard's tongue,
stunned by love, hemmed
and hawed in wordless dis-
array, and could find no
abling epithet worthy
of what leapt aloud
 between us, and chose to stay

Merely

We began merely as companions,
comfortable in the other's company,
me: a kind of country
bumpkin from a backwater town;
you: big-city wise,
sophisticate of opera
and art and all things
chic and durably urban,
each seeking something
we hadn't yet quite found,
content to travel a while
in parallel beguiling grooves,
in the nipping grip of the here
and now, until, at last,
love flooded them,
and there was no more 'merely.'

Breaking the Ice

Guelph, October 1960

You introduce me to your sister
and your Italian brother-in-law,
whose dark Latinate look
grazes my mange-cake
face long enough to ferret out
any flaws in my façade,
as if, at twenty-three
and callow to the core, I might be
some lusting lothario
with designs on your virtue, but I must've
passed the acid test
because Louis smiles from there
to here, pats my back
and offers me a beer.

Do Me Too

Waterloo County: October, 1960

As we stroll the Doon Pinnacle,
that rocky outcrop some
wayward glacier forgot,
I watch your gaze take in
the Waterloo drumlins to the west,
those hummocked, would-be
mountains above the rolling
green countryside – and I know
that this is your home-ground,
where your bones abide, and coming,
as I do, from a county as flat
as a pancake's meander, I note
the love that sets your eyes
alight, and decide that this one
will do me too

Your Father's Farm

October 1960

You take me walking on your father's
farm, when the maples' leaves
are leaning from green to gold
or brimming crimson along
the lane that keeps us coupled
between the wimple-white
of Queen Anne's lace
and fields still fallowed
or freshly stubbled or breathing
winter wheat, sifted
silken in the wind's wobble,
and where the last pasture
subsides, what's left of a barn
when no-one there resides
and the weather weaves a nip
in its withers, and just beyond,
the skinned skull and blanched
bones of a Belgian dray
who must've dropped from exhaustion
beside the plough that plagued
his days, and bid the centuries
go on, and as we walk back
the meandering way we came,
marvelling at all we'd seen
and believed, you take my hand
in your tender grip, letting me
know that we both belong.

Passions

Autumn 1960

When you get to know me
well enough to share
your private passions, you carry me
off to Nicholson's Inn
in suburban Blair, where the best
beer comes bottled
and the clientele's self-
'selectric', and, besotted
with you beside me, I feel
as if we might be sipping
suds in Soho or dry
martinis in Harrod's or brown
stout in a blind pig
or bootlegged booze in the Bronx,
but I'm content just to be
anywhere near you,
slumming, or not.

Smokey Golds

November 1960

You show me the water colours
you've just painted: the duns
and smokey golds and dimmed
crimsons of Autumn along
the Grand and its lush bottom-
land: your graded washes,
wet-on-wets and 'blooming'
blends, softened by the breath
of your brush, and when I express
amazement a such harmonious
hues and the verisimilitude
they exude, your smile is a shy
surprise in lieu of a blush,
and I love you now the way
Van Gogh must've loved the star-
jarred sky above
the Rhone in Arles.

Mugs

Guelph, Ontario: November 1960

The waiters at the Wellington,
juggling mugs of draught
with froth that foamed and threatened
to fizz, wave us to our table,
where we set about throttling
our thirst, and our gliding garçon
is careful to let the last
gulp of his first serving
elide before suggesting
a second, and whisking the empties
away like Blackstone his bunnies,
and when the throbbing bottle
of pickled eggs comes round,
the vim of its vinegar is a nice
companion to Molson's Blue
or Ex, and much better
than the sex I'm unlikely to get.

Prized

You bring me home like a
prized pet to meet
your parents: your mother who avers
that teachers are one cut
above the candlestick maker,
and your father, who'd rather be
out-of-doors, running
his hounds, a world away
from worrywart wives and fraught
daughters, and when the conversation
stutters before it lags and dies,
I let it ease towards books
and such, till I catch you
giving me the eye, and hook,
afraid, no doubt, I might lapse
towards chatter about pedagogues
and poetry, and our secret would then
be out: you'd fallen for a stone-
broke, would-be Browning,

Lupine

I bring you home to meet
my mother, and when she smiles
across the room at you,
I can see she's sizing up
her rival's size, your 'matronly'
shape and the mutinous bob
of your un necessarily lustrous
locks and trying to decide
whose cradle was being
robbed, and whether the smile
blooming lupine in your eyes
is blameless, or bridal.

Tucked Lovely

The first time we kissed,
tucked lovely in your Beetle's
silver-coated cocoon,
parked perky on my landlady's
lawn, I was so busy
with the tingle of your touch, I failed
to note a certain curtain
being drawn slyly aside,
like a reluctant wink, and so,
thinking that I had settled
into sin, and brought a brassy
broad, and opprobrium, into
her neighbourhood, the mistress
of the manse read me
the Riot Act, but the only
insurrection that night
was the upstart thrust of my heart
and the mutinous joy that comes
when bliss gives way to love.

Nugget

You always maintained that a
diamond-studded ring
to let the world know
you'd consented to be wed
was more boastful than bridal,
a kind of plot to guarantee
the knot was tied, or a sign
that budding love was destined
to bloom matrimonial,
but nonetheless, you took me
with you to your jeweller's to help
you choose a band of chased
connubial gold and a slim
companion for the groom,
and for more than fifty years
you brandished that nuptial nugget,
not as a totem of wedded
wife or captured 'beauty,'
but the mark of a woman who loved
being loved.

Tall

The tallest building in my village
was Bradley Blake's abode,
two storeys up
and a widow's walk, looking out
at the Lake for marooned mariners
or the odd dawdling duck,
so that when you took me ambling
in Big Town, where the glass
towers tickled the blue
belly of the sky, my head
spun suns, and I wondered
where the city-kids
found a vacant lot to play
the day away, or whether
they roamed, in restless bevvies,
their lamplit night-
time streets, but you,
ever beside me, strode
those urbane boulevards with the pluck
and panache of a seasoned vet,
and O how lucky to be loved
by one who cared little
whether you came from a hamlet
for a baron's bailiwick

Legal

I always thought a budding
bard, who'd already plighted
his troth with a dozen golden
roses, should be able to make
a marriage proposal poetic,
and I'd rehearsed a hundred
unrhyming lines in my head
before that moon-numinous
night when we found ourselves
alone and love-lit
in the wombed cocoon of your silver
Volks under the brooding
brow of the Doon Pinnacle,
but the only words, in lieu of
a penitent's prosy plea,
were, "Love, I think we ought
to get married, don't you?"
and your nod was more than enough.

Breaking the News

We break the news gently
to my mother, who still thinks me
much too young to wish
for whiskers, lose my hair,
or marry, and when she tries
for a mother-in-law smile
to be, she's sabotaged by surprise
and the aftershock of what
might be lost, recovering just
in time to note the absence
of anything aglitter on your ring
finger, and something like hope
re-arises, but when you couple
your hand to mine with a teasing
squeeze and the room limns
your loveliness, I want to toss
my locks, and elope.

Tying the Knot

Your mother, whose own wedding
was somewhat rushed, chose
to un-attend those that weren't,
but even though we had
no aisle for me to walk you
down or preacher to pray
for a perfect union or sprightly
sprays of confetti to polkadot
the bride and set her maids
agog, and your father wished us
well from afar, we brushed
aside these inconvenient
blots on our bliss, and tied
the knot.

Riposte

My brother claimed I married you
for your vehicle: that silver, purring
People's Machine, so new
the leather seats still
smarter in the sun's lustre,
and my mother averred that I'd fallen
for a red-headed gold-
digger with eyes on the money
I might someday make,
and my father, long gone
from the family's future, would've
winked or whistled or both,
but the woman I wed was a
thoroughly modern miss
who drove her own auto,
eschewed lucre and the miseries
it bred, and would've offered
my Dad's saucy sally
a soft riposte.

Epithalamion

with a nod to Edmund Spenser

We were wed in the stately
grey edifice of the County
Court House in Guelph's
Market Square, before
a genial judge, who smiled
at us smiling back as he read
the simple civil ceremony,
then gave me his lucky dime
to tuck inside the groom's
shoe, and we walked into the
June-hued sunshine
as if there were no other
day but this and love itself
might last a hundred lush
summers, and whenever I gazed,
aglow, into the bride's bliss
of your eyes, Spenser's great
matrimonial poem
leapt aloud in me
and, like Edmund, I bid
my "Thames" to softly flow,

