

Posted Dec. 9

Darling, all those majors capering home for Xmas - surely some of them by car, and could give Mr Ghali a lift? That's what I've been thinking, but it would be pointless now if you know that everyone else is going to be out of London as well as me. Publication, or around then, would be much better.

I'm rather suspicious when you say that your job is killing your valuable sense of despair and insecurity (It dies easy, I must say! One doesn't have to take a very long view to think that a perch in the pay office of the British Army in Germany is not likely to represent the end of your odyssey). The doubtful feeling I get is about the nature of the sense of despair - is it a real thing to depend on? It sounds to me like something one comes to use like a drug, like I used being hurt (without realizing it) for so long, which is neurotic, and does more harm than good. Banged on the head often enough one begins to feel that anything which doesn't give one the sensation of being banged on the head is unreal and not worth being concerned with. This is probably one of the main traps hidden in the situation of being unhappy, and the reason why suffering doesn't usually make people better. On the contrary, unless they are extraordinarily tough and lucky, it usually makes them worse, having caused some sort of deformity of this kind.

Your relentless seconds ticking by are different from mine. I've had the failure ones, and I've had the loneliness ones - for years and years I had them. So in the end I reached the point of accepting them, absolutely - everyone is alone, at bottom, and always will be, and that's that. And then life said 'That's a good girl, you've learnt your lesson, so now you can have a surprise holiday'; and since then it hasn't been the loneliness which has preoccupied me, but the extraordinary way in which, quite often, it is overcome. Now, on my sad mornings, the trouble is that I love it all so terribly. The very very smallest things, like the threads in the pillowcase, or the shape of my fingernail, or the sound of footsteps going by in the park - I want time to stop so that they can be there for ever, because they're so marvellous. The way it takes one must depend on the stage of life one has reached. You are still going up towards the top of the hill, so the tormenting things are still the things which might be possible. I guess I'm over the top now, and beginning the (I hope!) long, slow downward side, so am beginning actually to feel (what has always puzzled me before) why old people resent dying: the feeling that one ought to be allowed more of it all - that it's perfectly outrageous that one isn't! Even knowing how appalling most of it is.

I always think of that poor lunatic girl Marion, who came to stay with me, when I think of the loneliness. She was just at the most frightful moment of a love unhappiness - that first stage, when what is happening is IMPOSSIBLE. She was ying (my typing has gone worse than ever today) lying on the bed in the room you stayed in, and suddenly sat up, all dishevelled and tearstained, and said 'Diana, how long did it take?' - 'Did what take?' - 'Getting over it. You went through this, and you got over it. How long did it take?' God, I thought, I'd better not tell her, she's only twenty-six so it would kill her to think of all that time, so I'll just say how long the worst part took... she'll be able to envisage the end of that. 'About two years,' I said. 'OH GOD!' she wailed, and threw herself face-down on the bed. Nothing, nothing one could do - the gap between one person and another almost like a visible chasm between us. Only the nice-cup-of-tea and hot-water bottle level workable. The absolute impossibility of substituting what I'd learnt in two years for what she had got to find out for herself. Oh dear.

(How harrowing it must be when it's one's children one has to see going off into this loneliness.)

Really, letters  
are not satis-  
factory. I want  
to say things  
about what you  
said about  
Russia, and  
all kinds of  
other things,  
but with all  
these pages  
done already  
... it's far  
too long as it is.  
Only I must  
say where are  
those short  
writings you  
spoke about?  
I want to see  
them. Ah!  
More hurrahs  
about the long  
writing you  
are back at.  
Hurry up with  
it - I want to  
see that even  
more. Forget  
about letters (except  
just sometimes)  
while that's  
going on.

On Monday Anthony had fourteen people in to watch a film of one of his ballooning exploits (crossing the alps). On the Sunday Barbara cooked four chickens into a marvellous dish, to be put in the oven and finished off on Monday. When she took them to put in the oven she found they'd gone bad - and there was the ball ringing and people coming. It was sad. Situation saved by food brought in from a Chinese restaurant, but poor Barbara, who is already having sort of vague preliminary pains, and who would have liked to go to bed early but couldn't, because fourteen people went on having a party in the sittingroom where she is having to sleep, until two o'clock, didn't much enjoy the evening. It's an odd feeling when a baby is as near as this - it sort of looms, even when the woman pretends that nothing is happening, as B does (she was going to her office till last week).

My little lodger is doing a great cooking tonight - she is entertaining her boy friend, with whom she is much in love. The first thing she did when she arrived was to put saffron, garlic and some bayleaves on her shelf - an ominous sign from the landlady's point of view, because who wants a keen cook sharing her kitchen. But she has turned out to be a perfect example of what I have always held: that cooking, if not eating, is primarily a social activity and perhaps a sexual one, no fun unless done for other people, and most fun if done for a man. She never does more than boil an egg when she's by herself; rises to spaghetti or sausages or mackerel for the odd girl-friend, and only really goes into action for Clive. It's not a question of trying to woo the man by feeding him well, I've decided, because the cooking impulse comes into action (even in unserious cooks like me) for any man. It's just a very primitive built-in device for the continuation of the species, which functions regardless, and which probably gives more satisfaction to the one who cooks than to the one who is cooked for.

Nice new neighbours have just been in for a drink. A smart young television director (it turns out that he had a part in Barry's first play) and his pretty wife. But she, not long ago, was so ill that she nearly died and this is still her Big Experience, so I had the whole history of her operation, blow by blow. I thought I was sitting there being bored, but found to my surprise that I wasn't bored, really. Nearly dying is a big thing, so full details about it, if you try to imagine what they felt like, turn out to be interesting, and I think people are unfair, on the whole, in classing operation-recounters as traditional bores. You must tell me about your hospital time one day.

I'll make a bet about Christmas: that no one in the family mentions my book once. No - that's extreme, perhaps. My mother may say, when she's alone with me, that she's glad about the Book Club, and my brother, when we go over to his house for the day, will probably say 'How's the book going?'; but that will be all, and things will almost certainly be so managed that my uncle and I will not meet, since he (if he has taken in the fact of it at all) might be cross enough to say something like 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself', and they'll want to avoid anything like that. The object will be to make it seem as though Nothing Had Happened. It is possible, I think, that my mother may accept my brother's invitation for her and me to spend a couple of nights in his house over Christmas itself. If, by so doing, she sacrifices going to church on Xmas day in our own church, and having Xmas lunch in the traditional way with my dear aunt, it will be because my uncle will be doing these same things and she wants me out of the way. It will involve a great deal of intense discomfort. My brother has at present installed his family in a cottage built of grey flints on the most exposed part of the coast of north Norfolk, over which the winds from the Arctic zone sweep

unhindered by any obstacle. The spare rooms, so called, are barely furnished attics. The rest of the cottage looks permanently as though invading huns have just swept through it, his sons being aged 2, 5, 6 and 7, and his wife having No Help. The hot water supply is meagre, the kitchen primitive, and washing-up seems to go on from one meal's end to the next meal's beginning. All the children but the eldest are gun-mad, and spend twelve hours a day crashing from room to room yelling 'Bang bang, you're dead'. My mother will get irritable, because the children's noise is too much for her and even when she has them for a mere afternoon she begins to crack. There will be nice things about it - lots to eat and drink and the children having fun, and Andrew and Mary managing to be quite gay and cosy in the intervals of yelling 'Stop that!' to their offspring. But it is also pretty certain to be perishing cold, and quite certain to be exhausting. No, darling, you can't tell me that I'd rather be there than enjoying nuts and whisky chez moi. It's just not true!

I must have expressed myself badly about J.B. Priestley. It wasn't he himself who turned up, only a fan letter from him (timely because he is a writer my mother has heard of, so that she was impressed). I've never met him and don't want to, and would just as soon that he wasn't a fan. I told you, didn't I, that an anonymous one had sent me a poem signed Pan? Well, now he's sent me sixteen poems, 'For Diana, from Pan'. He's the first nut I've collected, and I believe I've guessed who he is. Eight years ago a brother-officer of Andrew's was our lodger for a bit, when Barbara and I were sharing a flat. He was studying for an interpreter's certificate in Persian. He was small, dry and very fair - used to wear dark glasses and a green hat which he tipped so far forward that the brim rested on the top of the glasses, and a very short British warm, <sup>and always carried an extra big umbrella.</sup> Every morning he used to take Lickee out for a walk in the park, carrying a paper bag of crusts with which to feed the ducks. The spectacle was extraordinary, and made the more so because Michael thought he was conventional to the marrow of his bones and had no idea what an eccentric figure he cut. Every night he used to put his brief case in exactly the same place on the foot of his bed, otherwise he couldn't go to sleep (he told me this in a very matter of fact way, as one might say 'coffee keeps me awake'). He was all but an alcoholic... couldn't take one drink without going on till he was stewed. When stewed, was quiet, with a gentle smile, and would say that in the end he would go into a monastery, that was what he really wanted. No, he was not religious - though he thought religion was a good thing because it kept the lower classes in order, so one ought to go to church as an example - it was just that he wanted to be in a monastery. At some stage (imperceptible) the gentle smile would begin to register lust rather than mysticism. He didn't do anything about this when the change happened, so it was a surprise at first when, after a stewed evening, either my bedroom door or Barbara's would open and Michael would come in and, still smiling, begin to climb into bed. 'Go away,' one would say. 'No' he would answer, sitting on the edge of the bed, still smiling. And once you had shoved him out you had to prop a chair under the door handle or something, else he'd be back. He never seemed to pass out, and nothing was ever said about these occasions next day. Once, more stewed than he was, I let him climb into the bed by accident - a peculiarly unreal experience, and nothing was ever said about that, either. He got very agitated one day about the War Office bugging him about, and came home pale and trembling, saying 'I was in such a rage - I've never been in such a rage.' I asked him what he'd done about it. 'I went to the Rag,' he said (the Rag is the Army and Navy Club, his membership of which he doted on) 'I went to the Rag and I ate TWO CREAM PUFFS for tea.' He got his

interpretorship and has several times been to Persia, once for the Army, and after that very hush hush and secret for the Foreign Office. Once since then we dined together and he got stewed as usual, but dropped mysticism ~~for~~ in favour of telling me, which he should not have done, about being a spy in Persia. He said he was given cyanide capsules and flushed them down the lavatory, and that you were told things like 'Go down the second alley on the left and the first on the right, and past the corner of the grave yard where a man will cough twice and you must scratch your left ear' etc. but he didn't get drunk enough to tell me what the spying was about. Anyway, months ago Andrew gave a guffaw and said 'By the way, watch out. You'll be getting a manuscript from old Michael soon.' 'From Michael?' I said. 'Yes, you'd never believe it, but I saw him the other day and he got stinking and told me he's writing poems.' Suddenly, as I read 'Pan's' poems, this floated into my mind, and then I read them again, carefully, and I thought 'That's it!' No wonder that the British Secret Service is the laughing stock of the world. In a quiet, miniature way that man is really in the Scobie class. The poems are mostly about Nature, and the need for Someone to Understand. Poor Michael, it was impossible ever to find out what had been done to him to make him so odd, because when sober he would have found any intimate personal conversation quite impossible, and when drunk that old monastery always intervened, or, at the lustful stage, impenetrable silence.... very creepy. God bless my soul, what extraordinary things one has done in one's time.

And just look at the length of this letter! You see what's happening? Having once written a book called Instead of a Letter, now I'm writing letters instead of a book. I can't think how you wade through them. I'll write at the top of this one that there's nothing important in it, so you needn't feel you must.

Love & love.

I shall write to Kelly for Xmas. Yes, I do think it's a waste, Samir being ecstatic about living with that girl. But I suppose the ecstasy is the point rather than the girl. Oh dear, she will end up sad.

PPS Very boring job in our accounts department, at £9 a week, just fallen vacant. Have written to the Aliens Dept., just for the hell of it, politely & formally asking whether there is any hope of our getting a permit for a passportless wage living in Germany whom we know to be qualified for the post & to whom we wish to offer it.

Oh, by the way, such a pity: that absurd 'Pan' does not fit into my theory about Michael. He has started telephoning now - 'This is Pan speaking' at 8 in the morning!!! And the last lot of poems had a letter with them, giving an address, tho' still not his name. He is a Canadian. 'When I pick up the phone to call you I am tremulous like a fifteen year old over his first date'. I don't quite understand why this sort of nut inspires me with feelings of such intense impatience, even disgust - why the one thing I can't forgive is this kind of self-deception. One ought to be sorry for someone who feels like a poet but isn't - whose feelings, which to him must be very powerful and important, come out as just trite and silly. And one ought to be sorry for someone who is so lonely that he more or less falls in love with a book. On the surface I am sorry enough to restrain myself from being actually rude when the silly creature telephones, and to say 'Yes, if you want to' when he says may he go on sending poems, tho' in an embarrassed voice (telling myself as I say it 'after all, I don't have to read them'), but really I am angry with him, and get angrier because his persistence (or my feebleness) edges me into such dishonesty. The truth is, I think, that this kind of person is not only stupid but is also, in a twisted kind of way, terribly vain and insensitive, which would be all right if they didn't see themselves as humble and sensitive. The kind of person who writes to a newspaper after it has published a story about some delinquent girl (there are always two or three such people every time) saying 'Give me her address because I want to marry her, and save her by my devotion'. They have a delicious wallow in the feeling of how kind, generous and noble they are being, quite regardless of the frightful mess which would in fact instantly result if their idea was carried out. Poor old 'Pan', in his own way, is obviously having just that kind of delicious wallow, inventing a situation in which his sensitive and rare spirit can at last come into its own; and if he goes on with it, which I suppose he may now that I have been silly enough to say I don't mind getting his poems, I shall end by being brutal to him. Much better to have started by being merely rude.

When you said your oriental streak made you baffled by Barbara and Anthony, because if you got married it would be to share your life, I thought how odd it is, the misconceptions people have about other people (people in the sense of Nations). The sort of vague, general idea among occidentals about the oriental conception of marriage is that it is much less romantic than ours: often 'arranged' and not often 'shared', the woman having her place and the man his, much larger and freer. 'Oriental' means such a huge part of the world to us - the Moslem pattern, the Japanese pattern, the lot, so the idea is necessarily vague and inaccurate. But you are vague, too, in seeing the Barbara-Anthony pattern as deliberate. When couples live together 'going their own way' it's hardly ever, perhaps never, because they married in order to do that. It's because they made a mistake in marrying each other, and it's gone wrong. In this case, certainly, they both think of marriage as a sharing of life, and have gone so against each other because it hasn't worked. At the same time they don't do the obviously sensible thing, and split up, because the idea that they ought to be sharing, and the remaining longing to share, is so strong. I bet the majority of unromantic marriages are the result of the follies caused by romanticism. The truth is that although there are thousands and thousands of people in the world with whom one could fall in love, there aren't so