

CHAPTER 1

'I have taken Auden to bed with me'

4000
Wednesday.

Dear David,

My necksack was missing this morning and so I have asked Hetty to lend you theirs. It is superior to mine, anyway.

About Friday ~ I will have to work until 7. at least, and so, could you book from 8-9.?

I woke up this morning thinking about you. Last night had some lovely moments to add to the pattern you are making for me. I shall remember you with the melodramatic cigarette, and an uncertain expression always, when more tangible moments are forgotten.

I love you very much. I am going to love you much more. It's wonderful, but it scares me, because I am frightened of you sometimes. You're such a superior swine.

On this loving note I leave you.

Till Friday, as thou.

May

Please write me a note before Friday (P.T.O)

The letters divide into the several distinct periods of David and Mary's relationship, dominated ultimately by the war. Some are typed, some handwritten in a more leisurely fashion, others are dashed off hurriedly in pencil. Despite their number, they are not complete and there are gaps in which some imagination is needed to follow their story.

They begin in the late spring of 1938 after the first fateful meeting at Angel House. Mary was living with her parents in Elgin Crescent, Notting Hill Gate, and was leading a busy life as an independent young working woman in the capital.

The first letter opens with a debate about the loan of a rucksack and a reference to a close friend, Hetty Goodman, at whose party they met and who, with her husband, Dick, a writer, was to feature strongly in their lives.

The relationship flourishes with a refreshing and often amusing candour after the initial *coup de foudre*. 'I have written your name seven times on the blotting paper this morning. This is becoming serious!' writes Mary. And again, when David has gone off alone on a pre-planned holiday to Normandy, she teases him about 'landlord's daughters' and tartly reprimands him for always 'writing of double beds . . . Seeing you are not available, I have taken Auden to bed with me, T. S. Eliot is on the floor . . .

luxury vehicles at 27 Pall Mall, which supplied Daimlers to King George V and where butlers served champagne to clients at a given time each morning. This was obviously not much to her taste. The agony doesn't last long. In the autumn she lands a clerical job at the Passport Control Office in Whitehall.

Not so many of David's letters from this period have survived. Those that have show an amused admiration for his volatile companion.

★

1938

Wednesday. [15 June 1938]

Dear David,

My rucksack was missing this morning and so I have asked Hetty to lend you theirs. It is superior to mine, anyway.

About Friday – I will have to work until 7 at least, and so, could you book from 8–9?

I woke up this morning thinking about you. Last night had some lovely moments to add to the pattern you are making for me. I shall remember you with the melodramatic cigarette, and an uncertain expression always, when more tangible moments are forgotten.

I love you very much. I am going to love you much more. It's wonderful, but it scares me, because I am frightened of you sometimes. You're such a superior swine.

On this loving note I leave you.

Till Friday, ashore*

Mary

Please write me a note before Friday.

* Irish for 'loved one'. 'Remember, ashore, you are not just from Ireland but from Connaught,' her grandmother would tell her – and she did.

Wednesday [22 June 1938, the day after Midsummer's Eve]

Dear David,

I won't be able to come tonight as I have to go home and do a million odd jobs that I have been neglecting – and then see Tich* and find out if his job has materialised, and when he goes, etc. I shall miss you very much – it's almost a physical ache – and please see me again soon. I can come to see you on Friday, about seven, and stay until you go to sell your late Daily's†; if this is O.K. leave me a note with Hetty or ring me up, but let me have some message as Friday seems an unconscionably long way off.

I have written your name seven times on the blotting paper this morning. This is becoming serious!

Mary

Wednesday evening [22 June 1938]

Darling,

I missed you too, but the ache was not qualified by an 'almost'! Yes, do come on Friday; I'll redouble my efforts at the Branch meeting to get sufficient sellers without me.

The bus whisked you away so quickly yesterday that before I had time to say goodbye, you were gone. Thank you for contributing so much to a well-nigh perfect evening – perfect even without the so ardently desired consummation. A lovely evening, Mary, in which even the Midsummer fantasy seemed in the world of reality – or were we in the world of dreams? Maybe.

* A friend.

† David sold the *Daily Worker* at the Angel Tube station on Fridays.

Beware, lest I am accused of counter revolutionary activities by depleting the D.W. stationery supply!

Yes Friday seems an unconscionable time-a-coming. I want to see you again so much – now more than ever – if that were possible.

G'night, Dave

72 Elgin Crescent, W11
Thursday night (in bed) [14 July 1938]

Dearest David,

By return as ordered. Received your kind letter tonight after two on Tuesday. Lovely letters, almost as good as being with you, but why, oh why do you have to keep writing of double beds? I miss you enough as it is.

Thank you for thinking of me so constantly. I wanted you to have a lovely time so much, but was afraid that the incomparable freedom of rain and river, hills, trees, old castles and landlord's daughters, my lad, might dim the memory of Mary. But it seems my ghost stalks Normandy, and that is quite as it should be.

Your last letter sounds rather tipsy in parts. But still, you should be rather intoxicated at the moment – la belle France, jeunesse and BRANDY.

I am so sorry you haven't got the *Daily Worker* following you all over the place because on Wednesday I figured quite prominently on the book page. Did a review of the new batch of Penguins and it was branded 'by Mary Moss' in the centre of the page. Fame, success, cut . . .

Have just been to the flicks and seen the four Marx Brothers in 'Monkey Business' and the divine Hopkins in 'Trouble in

Paradise'.* Shades of Friday night, but no sequel . . . Deserted . . . jilted for la belle France and the landlord's lovely daughter.

This bed is about the same size as yours, but that is apropos of the conversation.

Eddie is terrifying me with stories of friends in Paris, and especially someone called Caroline who surpasses me as the sun does the glowworm and who is the sole justification for her sex. But I refuse to be outwardly impressed.

I am now going to [be] dramatic. David, forget the old days in Petrograd, have your fling, sow your wild oats, but remember, remember the fifth of November . . . etc . . . etc

Seeing you are not available, I have taken Auden to bed with me, T. S. Eliot is on the floor and Yeats is propping up Mrs Scribble. So I am not alone.

If you can read this you're a better man than I am Gunga Din. My hair keeps getting in my eyes. I think I'll shave it all off. I think I'll become a nun. Yes; on second thoughts, NO.

I can't rival 7 or 8 pages. You got me beat, pal, unless you would like a travelogue on London. But WAIT till I get to Ireland!

In three weeks' time we go hiking. And then, enfin seuls, I may be able to convey to you how much I love you; and how much, under this mundane and sometimes (often) crass exterior there beats a heart.

Goodnight my beloved David, and come back soon.

Mary

P.S. I hope I dream of you.

P.P.S. My second name is 'on the contrary'.

P.P.P.S. I love you inexhaustibly.

* A 1932 film by Ernst Lubitsch starring Miriam Hopkins and Herbert Marshall.

Thursday [21 July 1938]

Dear David,

I am writing to you today because there is not much more time left to write to you for no reason at all, except to establish a sort of makeshift contact.

I have had a change of heart about Sunday; of course I should love to come on a ramble, organised or otherwise as long as you go. I was in a most objectionable snooty mood last night. I even exaggerated my opinion of the Garden of Allah* (though it was a lousy film). You know though, the sort of mood in which the very word 'ramble' is a cue for affectionate contempt. Today I am not so cock-a-hoop, and should like very much to come with you if it is not too late to change my mind.

This sort of thing is why it would be so marvellous to be together, just so that when one (or both) of us is unbearable, the other needn't bear him (or her) just because it is Wednesday, and no more meetings until Saturday. And again, when that strange passion for each other comes over us, we need only reach out for the other, instead of biting the pillow case and being bad tempered (my symptoms). For instance, last night the bus tore me away from you, just when, for me anyway, it began to be terribly important to be with you. The feeling lasted, and this morning I am languid with desire for you, but no David until tomorrow lunch for a crowded, hungry hour, and then, maybe, Saturday.

Still nitchevo,† tomorrow we eat. Until 1.15, outside the Charing X.

Yours, very much yours,

Mary

* A David Selznick film from 1936 starring Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer.

† A Russian term with the approximate meaning 'it's too bad'.

[Kensington]

August 8

Dear David,

Am feeling miserable, so committing the unpardonable sin of piling it onto you.* Nothing has developed yet, and I hate NOTHING. On an impulse this afternoon I asked Jeff if there was anything in Paris and he said he would see what he can do, BUT I DON'T WANT TO GO TO PARIS. Please don't let me go to Paris. Use everything you have to stop me, if the chance comes, which it won't, I hope.

Hetty has lent her flat to Phil and Kate for the fortnight she is away, so I can't borrow it. That makes things difficult because I think it might be hellishly inconvenient for you to have me there such a long time. WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBOURS SAY! Apart from that, seriously I am worried about the next fortnight. Debating about whether to tell them at home or become one of Helen's lodgers for the time. Is this possible? Will Eddie be away? Oh don't bother to read this letter. It is all so much tripe. Stop being sorry for yourself, you spineless beetle (that's myself I'm talking to, not you).

With lots of love anyway,

Mary

* Mary has lost her job.

[Notting Hill]
Tuesday evening [9 August 1938]

Darling David,

Just a hurried note to thank you for your dear letter. I will use it as a weapon to poke old man depression right in the eye.

Anyway, why should I be depressed? You are in the world, so it must be a lovely and sweet place.

I will call tomorrow about 8 and tell you a lurid tale of sabotage in high places, of party discipline and other developments.

Dorothy, dear woman, has also got the sack but doesn't know it yet, *mon frere*,* *mon semblable*.

I am listening in to the Haydn–Mozart concert, and the cat has got his tail on this letter.

Highly irrelevant to main subject, but typical of what?

Oh shut up.

Mary

P.S. Forgot to mention above, but I love you (oh so much)

72 Elgin Crescent, W.11.
[16 August 1938]

My darling beloved David,

Just received your wire and rung up Queenie. She's not effusive, but hopeful.

* *frere*: properly 'frère', but readers will notice throughout that both Mary and David tend to omit accents from foreign phrases.

Anyway, this cancelled my first letter to you. Decided under no circumstances to go to Paris. Something is sure to break for me in London, and I know now, by the relief I felt in getting the wire that I don't want to go. I feel it is too hole in the corner, rushed and not worth all that I would have to leave behind (meaning you). So I will try Unity* tomorrow, and if that fails, something else will turn up.

See you tomorrow at the Honey Dew and I will tell you all.

With love from Mary

P.S. Just in the thick of a violent row with my father and I think I will go out and post this letter to get out of it.

(Stratstone, Daimler agents
27 Pall Mall, SW1)
[22 August 1938]

Dearest David,

This day is nearly over, and thank god, thank god.† This afternoon I have been delivering Daimlers (by letter) and I feel like a gargantuan midwife, or something. It is still pretty bloody. The toothy female gets under my skin, and she is all I have to look at, or to talk to, and when she talks it is refined cockney, s'help me, so I don't talk much.

Thank god for you, and again I say amen.

* The Unity Theatre, a left-wing theatre club founded in 1936, based in King's Cross and aiming to bring social and political issues to the working classes using satire and agitprop theatrical techniques to highlight unemployment, hunger marches, and the perceived rise of fascism in Britain and Nazism in Germany.

† Mary has got a temporary typing job with Stratstone, a luxury car specialist in Pall Mall, and is hating it and her new workmates.

See you tomorrow at the Honeydew, appropriate name.

Darling, darling David, I love you very much, despatch case and all.

Mary

P.S. I have written to Jeff to say I am coming. Oh Christ!

[Thursday, autumn, 1938]

Dear David,

I must write to you this morning. I dreamt about primroses last night and when I woke up it was autumn. Bah. I am feeling very Celtic today, fey and foreboding and nostalgic for something or somebody. Sehnsucht or love, or maybe both. Perhaps I am hearing my cosmos call. Anyway I started knitting last night, so that's a bad sign.

I received a letter from Guinness enclosing a further form to be filled and saying that they would interview me early next week. Concentration-campish form threatening a medical exam, but I suppose I better send it in.

There is a wraithish mist hanging around the trees at the back of Pall Mall like a shroud. I have just been interrupted to type two purchase agreements and five letters, the spell is broken, the dream perished.

Anyway, as Mr Baldwin nearly said in 1936, 'The world is in a state of chassis'. I wish I were a Daimler, beautiful and expensive and respected. I wish I were a peasant in Connemara, living on seaweed and potatoes in a deep dank bog. I wish you were here looking at me with those disconcerting dappled eyes. Dear odd-eyes, cod eyes. No, sorry.

I wish sometimes that I might receive a letter in that so

distinguished handwriting, but that is beyond the dreams of avarice I suppose.

I love you very very much and am counting the minutes until I see you on Friday.

Till then dear David, goodbye.

Mary

52 Angel House, N.1

Monday evening [12 September 1938]

Mary darling,

Have you still got a voice after the Sunday night 'croon' session! Such a lovely day. Let's have days like that often – I've got the tickets for the Empress Stadium* on Sunday and Donald has consented to come, even though I did raise him from his bed this evening! I think he's quite eager to meet you after my lengthy descriptions and eulogies.

Tomorrow I'll go along to the Phoenix and getta da seats for the 'White Guard'.† Let's meet for lunch on Wednesday or Thursday at Tottenham Court Road 1.15? Saturday seems far far away, so do try to drag your wintered bones to the environs of St Giles Circus – I'm free after lunch on Saturday, so if you're not otherwise engaged, we could go for a walk somewhere.

Today I was paid – today I'm nearly broke! However, here's thirty shillings, which will buy you 2 and $\frac{2}{5}$ bottles of whisky or

* The Empress Stadium at Earls Court was the venue for a rally in support of the 15th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain on 18 September 1938. The Congress itself was held in Birmingham.

† A play from 1926 by Mikhail Bulgakov about a group of ill-fated Tsarist sympathisers caught up in the Russian Civil War in Kiev in 1918. Produced at the Phoenix Theatre, Charing Cross Road, in the autumn of 1938.

that new hat you cast envious eyes on when you last passed Lafayette!* Thanks a lot.

Suddenly, without a word of warning, 11.55 so I must rush and catch the post, so that you can receive this inadequate missive in the morning, when you will be awakened by the dulcet tones of your brother's voice rising above the plaintive trill of a father-in-the-bath, which implies that you are scarcely the epitome of energy, and anyway, the legitimacy of your birth is severely to be questioned. Quick I must run –

Goodnight, dear Mary
please write
with all my love
David

* The French department store Galeries Lafayette had a branch in Regent Street. It closed in the 1970s.