

From the Back Verandah

Much has been written on solitude — by philosophers, theologians, archbishops, poets, novelists, essayists, feminists, psychologists and new-age inspirationalists: Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Jane Austen, Francis Bacon, Pearl Buck, Lord Byron, Joseph Conrad, Stephanie Dowrick, George Eliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Aldous Huxley, John Keats, Edgar Allan Poe, Alexander Pope, the Vatican Pope, Henry David Thoreau, Paul Tillich, Leo Tolstoy, Virginia Woolf, William Wordsworth . . .

Few of them, if any, knew their subject from intimate experience as well as today's subject. In his own time he was as notorious for his "leave-me-to-myself" personal behaviour as his ideas have been widespread and enduring since.

"I think, therefore I am". Thus spake philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650). Of course, he put it more succinctly — in Latin. Incidentally, according to Harlish Goop it must've been someone as well acquainted with the risks of contemplation as with its benefits who devised this anagram of *cogito ergo sum*: "outcome is grog".

Having spent most of his childhood in solitude, as an adult our René readily came to prefer his own company, and regularly hid from his few friends in order to work. If asked, his furious mates might well have commented, "Good company he ain't". Serious and sustained reflection was René's thing, not social conversation, and he usually meditated in bed till midday. If the weather was very cold he used to get inside the stove so he could ruminate there.

In his thirties he even moved to the Netherlands, taking great pains to conceal his whereabouts (he moved 24 times while there), and did not return to France for sixteen years. He wrote, "I have been able to live as solitary and withdrawn as I would in the most remote of deserts."

I wonder, though, if were he living today whether he'd appreciate this extract from an Italian hotel brochure:

This hotel is renowned for its peace and solitude. In fact, crowds from all over the world flock here to enjoy its solitude.

— Fizzgig

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Taking Refuge

No, it wasn't clever scheduling. On the contrary.

Mere chance was the cause of there being two contributions in this issue that relate to solitude — one, a poem by Bet Briggs, the other, a piece rushed in at the last moment by Fizzgig. There's even a mention of loneliness in our Web Line column, and in Diane Dees' short story.

As I recall, the only other occasion that such a confluence of related topics occurred — that time fiendishly deliberate — was gargantuan Issue 10, November 1998. If that doesn't mean anything to newer subscribers, take a look at it at our Web site.

So, where do you stand on "serene aloneness" yourself?

I should imagine that Bikwilians, being avid readers, keen music lovers and perceptive thinkers, might well exhibit solitudinarian tendencies. After all, the social whirl does have its limitations.

As John Barrymore once said (and I trust he wasn't being misogynic),

In Genesis it says that it is not good for a man to be alone, but sometimes it is a great relief.

Oh, oh, I can feel a suggestion coming on.

If you have some thoughts on the joys of secluded tranquillity, get them down on paper (or in bytes) and share them with us — empathic people who'll quietly welcome them.

An archaeologist is the best husband any woman can have: the older she gets, the more interested he is in her.

Agatha Christie

He uses language like a drunken man uses a lamp-post — for support, rather than illumination.

Andrew Lang

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

I have a prodigious quantity of mind; it takes me as much as a week to make it up.

Mark Twain

I refuse to have a battle of wits with an unarmed person.

Anonymous

Into the face of the young man who sat on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes there had crept a look of furtive shame, the shifty, hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French.

P.G. Wodehouse

Colophon

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Back Issues Are Still Available

A foggy day in London Town
Had me low and had me down
I viewed the morning with alarm
The British Museum had lost its
charm.

And then, at *Aspects of E. M. Forster*, there's reproduced the text of a plaque at the front of the old circular Reading Room, which shows authors with some connection to the B.M. As well as Forster these include Max Beerbohm, Sir Arthur Conan

Doyle, George Gissing, David Lodge (who set a large part of his funny novel *The British Museum is Falling Down* in the Reading Room) and Karl Marx.

So much for quietly enthusiastic librarians, then. You never know: one of these days I may do something similar on other professions/occupations.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.ku.edu/~sfcenter/library.htm>

<http://www.bibliomysteries.com/>

<http://ils.pjkinfoc.co.uk/CMLIS/>

<http://www.gslis.mcgill.ca/marginal/mar7-3/Librarians%20As%20Characters%20In%20Fiction.htm>

<http://emp.byui.edu/RAISHM/films/introduction.html>

<http://www.blisspix.net/library/songs.html>

<http://www.ifla.org/I/humour/humour.htm>

<http://pw1.netcom.com/~dplourde/cartoons/index.html>

<http://www.ibiblio.org/librariesfaq/comstrp/comstrp.htm>

<http://www.newcolonist.com/cs-london.html>

http://emforster.de/hypertext/template.php3?t=picview&pic=reading_room_inside

Corrigenda

Here are some corrections to published errors that have been pointed out to me recently.

I'll take them chronologically.

My *No More Separation Anxieties, Please* in Issue 27 (September 2001) contained this passage:

[*Six Degrees of Separation*] . . . directed by Fred Schepisi and starring Will Black, Donald Sutherland, Stockard Channing and Ian McKellen, it tells of a young man who turns up one night at the home of a swanky New York couple and cons them . . .

As most of you already know, it should've said "starring Will Smith".

On to the next error.

In Bet Briggs' poem *After Rain* (Issue 43, May 2004) I mistyped a word, not once, but twice. The word in question was *stain*, wrongly given as *strain*.

So, in the first stanza it should read:

. . . small precious gems
on thirsting stems
restore
the vital stain
that floods through vein
of stem and leaf . . .

Likewise, the last few lines of the poem should read:

. . . and heart regain
its vital stain
once more.

Again in Bet Briggs' work (*For Joan*, Issue 44, July 2004), the word *hear* should, of course, be *here*:

. . . your words will be here for us
to hold and cherish for their truth

Finally, in the same issue (No. 44) there is an attribution missing from Eileen Marshall's piece *I Can't Find Rhymes for My Couplets — and Other Catastrophes*:

[This has previously appeared in *Newswrite*, the newsletter of the NSW Writers Centre.]

Apologies and thanks.

— TR

The Back Room

All my life in back rooms,
all my life looking out
in wonder through the glass
on the world and them in light,
unaware of me they pass.
Thankful, I am able to retreat.

With or without a view
a back room is a world
for me of eccentricities,
what truant dreams and thought
spring unhindered there
walled space cannot hold,
they seek and reach for light,
unwilling ever to be held.

No question, I like my back room's
comfort of anonymity,
and better with a view:
a garden and trees to look upon,
in the sanctuary of walled space
I can bring them right in to me,
imbibe the therapy of the green
and open to its inner light.

— Bet Briggs

following topics are covered: Children's Picture Books, Intermediate Readers, Young Adult Books, Adult Fiction (General), Adult Mystery, Adult Romance. Poetry, too, is addressed.

Librarians in the Movies, An Annotated Filmography has in excess of 550 films listed. Regularly maintained, this site provides, among other features, a title index of the films, a list of actors and actresses who have portrayed librarians, plus a short bibliography of articles about librarians in the movies.

And now we come to *Blisspix*.

Despite the often incorrect rep of libraries being quiet places, there are dozens of songs written about them. Some are great, some are just terrible.

Make that "extremely appalling", please, though the examples from The Beatles, Jimmy Buffett, Tom Chapin and Elvis Costello aren't too bad. Devoted to lyrics only, the site is laid out in two categories: songs about libraries/librarians, and songs about books/reading.

So, how many librarians does it take to change a light bulb? As you'll see at *IFLANET Library Humour* (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), it depends on what sort of librarians they are: reference librarians, cataloguers . . .

A couple of other library humour sites are *Library Cartoons: An Annotated Bibliography* and *Librarians in Comics*. Note: in the latter there are no cartoons shown, but enough description for each cartoon to make the joke clear. For instance, it lists a strip or cartoon called *Librarian New Year's Celebrations* which shows a female librarian in glasses blowing into a party noisemaker that makes a "shhh" sound.

One particular library, the British Museum, deserves its own mention here. As *Citysongs* reminds us,

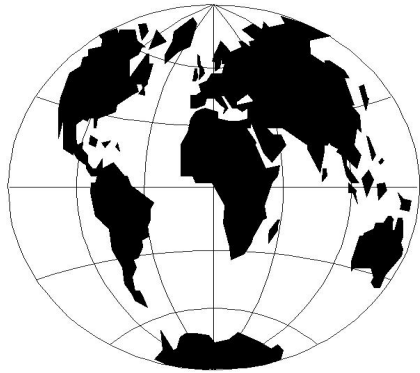
London is famous for its weather, so much so that George Gershwin's *A Foggy Day* has been recorded by artists ranging from Fred Astaire to David Bowie. In the song, London's well-known fog becomes a metaphor for loneliness:

Web

It's always heartening to discover a new species of "magnificent obsession" on the Net. Even better if you share something of that interest.

Share? Well, one or two readers might recall that in Issue 5 (January 1998) this former librarian wrote about online library catalogues, and today's the day I'm going to unveil some sites that reflect a special aspect of things bibliothecarian. Welcome to Internet Coverage of Libraries and Librarians in Literature, Movies and Song. It's more extensive than you might have expected.

Let's start with *Libraries in Science Fiction*. This is a 4,000-word article by James Gunn, himself a writer of science fiction. Authors represented include Isaac Asimov, Jorge Luis Borges, Robert A. Heinlein, David H. Keller, H. P. Lovecraft, Walter Miller, Jr., Eric Frank



Line

Russell and George R. Stewart.

For detective story readers there's *Bibliomysteries*. In addition to browsing alphabetically, you can look under categories such as Short Stories, Juvenile Books, Media, References, Detectives and Series, Authors in Bibliomysteries and Weapons. Links are also provided.

The Image of the Librarian in Fiction and News Reports is in the form of a presentation and reproductions of slides are included.

In this presentation we will look at the image of the librarian throughout history, from the Middle Ages, right through to the present day . . . and beyond.

Film depictions of librarians are also covered.

A fascinating bibliography is to be found at *Librarians As Characters In Fiction*. The

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Though I've tried hard in this column, it hasn't been easy to resist the temptation.

I mean to say, how does a logophile go on ignoring particular trends in modern English usage? A few infractions, I suppose, are not so difficult to overlook, but all one can do when confronting the other abominations is, as I said in Issue 43 (May 2004), "partly clothe my complaint in humour".

Take the word *mnemonic* and its derivatives, for example. You may recall that it's come up before in our mag, in one of Fizzgig's "Kwizzes" (Issue 31, May 2002) and in Issue 5, January 1998, where this column treated you to *Bikwil's* very own "self-referential definition (all rights reserved), henceforth to be taught worldwide as the only true and useful meaning of *acronym*".

Derived from the Greek for "remember", this lovely word *mnemonic* has been with us from at least the 18th century, which interestingly puts it in English 100 years before the semantically similar *aide-memoire*.

And now for the bad news: in the 21st century it's being written in certain quarters — wait for it —

as *pneumonic* (= "pertaining to the lungs").

I kid you not. In fact, when I first began noticing it (on the Internet, naturally), I too thought that its usage had to be jocular. Not so sure now, and to my knowledge it hasn't yet appeared in print. Give it time.

Many Internet examples have a medical flavour, so it must be an in-joke among med students, as this chest x-ray site shows:

I make liberal use of mnemonics (which I call 'pneumonics').

The ones that really enthrall me are those written by teachers for students. (All the following are utterly genuine examples.)

For instance, this Study Guide for Grades 3 - 8 perpetrates the following picturesque piece of plausible pedagogy:

A Lukasa or memory board is a way for the Luba people to remember their history and tradition. The different colored beads and the way they are arranged are pneumonic devices to help people remember. Can you think of pneumonic devices we use in our life today? For example, remembering the notes on the piano by using initials like Every Good Boy Deserves Fun. Use pneumonics to remember something you are trying to learn.

Here's another earnest one, for Year 11:

Chances are you've probably used pneumonics to help you remember something in the past, but didn't know that it was called a pneumonic! A pneumonic is a word or phrase that is made up from the first letters of a sequence which you're trying to remember. For example, if you're trying to remember the order of the planets, take the first letter of each planet and [make] a phrase . . . My Very Easy Method Just Speeds Up Naming Planets.

A third example for children has this:

What pneumonics did you write to help you remember the order of the Ten Commandments?

And law students aren't neglected, either:

[Harry Lorraine's] Pneumonics is a system whereby one is able to associate particular objects with a picture in the mind's eye, with the picture being associated with a particular number.

Need I go on?

Well, I've scoured the Internet and all my reference books, but so far I've been unable to find anything vaguely resembling a linguistic discussion of the phenomenon. It doesn't take much, however, to understand how might this have come about.

For starters, *mnemonic* sounds not too dissimilar to *pneumonic*, so we can deduce that those

erroneously using the latter word instead of the former have never seen *mnemonic* written — or, as sometimes happens, didn't take any notice when they did see it. And secondly, foreign borrowings are quite susceptible to this off-hand treatment these days, when fewer and fewer English speakers learn a second language. I've even seen *And, walla!* for *And, voilà!*, though that one just might have been humorously intended.

A well-intentioned and unhumorous example I encountered in my working life was the phrase *on mass*, for *en masse*. What took the cake there was the fact that it was written by a consultant in technical writing.

Could it be that this Mnemonic Plague is really just an outbreak of SGLS (Silent Greek Letter Syndrome)? No, *pneumonic* also starts with an unsounded consonant.

All of which brings to mind a maths teacher I had in high school. A stickler for accuracy in all things, he was very keen for us to pronounce the name *Ptolemy* correctly:

Just remember that the 'p' in 'Ptolemy' is silent like the 'f' in 'banana'.

— Harlish Goop

too, Mary. We will join you presently. In the meantime, the two of you may be practising."

George and I at once jumped up and sped off before anything further could be said. The music room was still empty of guests, and in the ecstatic relief of having made our escape, we chased each other down the rows of chairs with George calling out in a fine imitation of Sir William: "Might I remind everyone that there are children present!" He had then sat down at the grand pianoforte and played thunderous chords while I took my place at the second instrument and began playing *Whirligig*.

After the upsets of the dining parlour, it was delightful — it was comforting — to be by ourselves and behave foolishly, knowing that it would almost certainly be the last such time. For beneath the display of childish exuberance, George must have been as fearful of the future as myself. The prospect of London in the company of his mother and brother and Mr Purvis did not bear thinking on.

I regretted then that there had ever been a secret between us — I refer of course to *Renata* and everything relating to that

wretched *roman a clef* — for the secret of Elizabeth and Mr Coates, the shock of its discovery and the quarrel that followed, had only succeeded in drawing us closer together. But there was no time left for confidences. The room was beginning to fill — the servants were taking their seats in the back row — and we had both to be on our best behaviour.

When at last we began to practise a key passage from the sonata, the room was near full — although the eleven gilt chairs reserved for the family and the dinner guests in the front row were still empty, and they continued to stand empty until just before the concert was set to begin. Only then did the entire party file in (looking more like a funeral party, for there was not one cheerful face amongst them and Mrs Allardyce had unaccountably changed her gold gown for one of black).

As they positioned themselves, I saw that Elizabeth chose to sit between Papa and Aunt Gardiner and quite away from Mr Coates.

— Jennifer Paynter

“Dear Mrs Rossi!” Mr Purvis touched Nonna’s hand. “I am sure that you could never do anything stupid.”

Nonna moved her hand away and continued to look at Mr Coates: “A month after he die, I do like Hamlet’s mother —”

And here my own mother burst forth: “Oh Mrs Rossi! I know what you are about to say, I can guess. I know I should lose my mind if Mr Bennet were to die—I am sure I should go distracted. And not merely because of the entail —”

Papa had closed his eyes. “Let me understand you, Mrs Bennet. If I were to die, you would marry again, would you? Within a month?”

“I should do no such thing. What an unfeeling monster you must think me, upon my word.” Turning back to Nonna who was now smiling strangely and sipping her champagne. “My husband likes to joke, Mrs Rossi. But I am very sure I should lose my wits if he died, and well he knows it.”

Nonna set down her glass. “I do not lose my wits, Mrs Bennet. I am unfeeling monster, and I marry again. A month after Jasper’s papa die, I marry Rossi.”

There was a shocked silence during which Sir William Lucas cleared his throat and addressed the table in his best mayoral manner: “Might I remind everyone that there are children present?”

“I marry Rossi and I am very unhappy. And then I meet Jasper.” (Smiling down the length of the table at Mr Coates.) “I am Senora Rossi and very unhappy, and Jasper — he does not know I am his papa’s widow.”

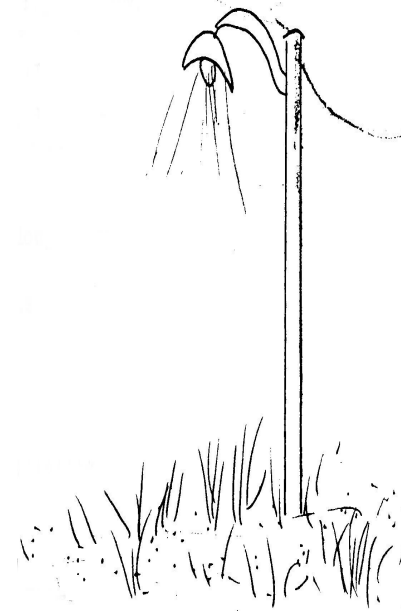
I looked at Mr Coates then. He was sitting back in his chair staring at Nonna and I saw that he was extremely angry.

Next moment, there came a crash of china: Mrs Allardye had contrived to knock over a sweetmeat dish from the raised display. And while the two footmen moved quickly to pick up the pieces, Mr Coates took out his watch and spoke without lifting his eyes from the dial. “I see that our concert commences in just half an hour —”

“No, Jasper,” said Nonna. “Your watch, it is much too fast. And I have still some things I wish to say.”

Mr Coates continued as if she had not spoken: “You may go to the music room, George. You

Rain



Rain softly falling, high and low,
Softly touching the skin, each
Drop, a passing thing.
With the lights behind, like a
Million stars, sparkling,
To the ground.
Forming trickles along the grass and
Concrete, picks up,
Among its metal bits

Shining wetness,
Shimmering tips.

— Lavinia Godfrey

In the Pink

The orange-pink sun cast neonesque rays through rose-streaked clouds, illuminating the already pink ridges of rhodonite on Vancouver Island. At times, the entire landscape appeared pink. Those who worked in the quarry, who gathered pink for all the world to see, occasionally had the good fortune to experience this display. The tourists who wore the stone around their necks or later admired the tiny pink bears and eagles on their bookshelves were less likely to experience the rosy spectacle.

It was during one of these pink evenings in Lake Cowichan, right before dusk, when Peter had the accident. He was at the quarry, gathering his tools and his personal belongings and leaving for the day. He had stayed late in order to clean and polish his picks and shovels, and as he walked toward his truck, he tripped over a pick half-buried in the ground. Peter fell over, tumbled down the hill, and rolled into a ditch. When he tried to get out, he felt

pain, then knew he had sprained or maybe broken his foot.

Peter's cell phone was in his pack, but he had dropped it somewhere between the quarry entrance and the ditch. He lay in the ditch and waited for the swelling in his foot to subside. It didn't. Pinkness was fading fast, and the last birds of daylight had already flown to their roosts. He tried to hoist himself out of the ditch. If he could do that, then he could crawl to his pack and use his cell phone. But he couldn't move his arms. Fearing the worst, he began to breathe harder, and tried to focus on getting free. Perhaps he could roll down the length of the ditch until he found a shallower area, and then hoist himself up. If he weren't paralyzed.

About this time, without forethought, Peter lifted his hand to swipe at a bug hovering near his face. Relief coursed through him as he realized he had been in shock. Now able to use his arms, he hoisted himself out of the ditch, then fell to the ground in pain. He rolled,

Florence, and in Florence he is always at home. But when I go with him to London — only once I go — he is in White's Club the whole time." And here she called down the table to Mr Coates: "Jasper! I am telling Mr Bennet about your naughty papa."

Mr Coates appeared not to have heard her — he was deep in conversation with Elizabeth — but Aunt Gardiner had been following the talk at Nonna's end of the table. "I had no idea, ma'm," said she to Nonna "that you were married to Mr Coates' father."

"*Scusi?*" Nonna had not been attending — she had been looking at Elizabeth and Mr Coates — and Aunt was obliged to repeat the question, whereupon Nonna started to laugh. "Oh my God — *scusi!* Pardon. But I am not —" (pretending to whisper to Aunt) "I am not supposed to talk about it. But there are too many things I am not to talk about — and now Christina will be cross."

Mrs Allardyce made a mouth of impatience. "Say what you like, Mama. It makes no odds."

"You hear that, Mrs Gardiner? My daughter, she is telling me

now to say what I like. *Bene.* I say then that yes, we are married, Jasper's papa and me, and I love him dearly though he is much much older person. We are married for one year only, and then he die. Very sad, si?"

I saw Aunt and Papa exchange glances at this. I was becoming alarmed: Nonna's history was beginning to sound dangerously like the plot of *Renata*. And perhaps Mrs Allardyce belatedly realised this, for she leaned across Mr Purvis to speak to her mother in Italian, telling her that she had had more than enough to drink and that it was high time the ladies withdrew.

Nonna's response was to once more hold up her glass to be refilled. And even though she continued to address my aunt, her eyes were now fixed on Mr Coates. "After he die, Mrs Gardiner, I do a very stupid thing."

A hush had now fallen upon the table. By some mysterious alchemy, those seated at Mr Coates's end had been alerted to the possibility of high drama. I had a confused impression of heads turned towards Nonna — of my mother's look of avid curiosity and poor George's red-faced embarrassment.

He was interrupted by Mrs Allardyce. “There is such a thing as disinterested charity, Mama.”

“The Bedford had a very superior class of patron, Mrs Rossi. Had I worked in any other coffee house, I should not have received such treatment.” He turned back to my father. “The ale-house we were speaking of earlier, sir. I think of making it over into such another coffee house — a meeting-place for Meryton’s finest minds — where good conversation and fine food may be had for a modest subscription. What think you of such a scheme?”

I saw from Papa’s expression that he did not think much of it, but he seemed to be struggling to be on his best behaviour. “Meryton’s finest minds, eh?” (An involuntary glance up the table at Sir William Lucas.) “I fear the number of subscribers would make such a scheme impractical, Mr Purvis. A little market town such as Meryton —”

“But my dear sir, there must be dozens of good fellows who would welcome such an establishment. I do not mean the townfolk merely —”

Nonna turned on Mr Purvis. “You listen to what Mr Bennet is

telling you. He is living here always and you know nothing about it.”

This was too much for Mrs Allardyce; she began to abuse her mother in Italian, much of which was unintelligible to me, but Nonna merely hunched her shoulder and addressed herself exclusively to my father: “It is very strange to me, Mr Bennet, how Englishmen want always to be by themselves together in the coffee-house or the club. Always they want to be without the women.”

“Ay, we’re an uncouth lot,” agreed Papa.

“My first two husbands, they were English, so I know. Christina’s papa, always he is in the coffee-house.”

There was laughter at this — although Mrs Allardyce did not look at all amused — and Nonna held up her glass to be refilled, saying: “Christina thinks I should not talk so about her papa. Always he is the perfect one and I am not to say bad things about him.”

“I couldn’t care less, Mama, I assure you.”

“My *second* English husband — we live together in

slowly, like a doodlebug, back toward the quarry entrance, but it was dark, and his pack was nowhere in sight.

Finally, exhausted, Peter rolled himself back into the quarry, instinctively finding the smooth path the workers’ feet had worn over the years. In the dark, he was aware of the smell of rhodonite. It was a pink smell, a smell so much a part of his life that he had forgotten about it. He placed his palms against the stone walls and felt the cold. Peter then maneuvered his aching foot against the stone, letting his swollen veins merge into the narrow, cool veins of the rhodonite.

Peter spoke.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!”

The sound reminded him of programs he remembered from listening to his crystal radio when he was a boy. Like they were coming from a tunnel, yet clear at the same time.

“Quoth the Raven, nevermore!”

“Here’s lookin’ at you, kid.”

Then he sang.

“It’s up . . . To . . . you . . . New York, New-oo York!”

“The phan-tom of the op-er-a is there inside . . . Your . . . mind!”

Following an extensive David Bowie medley, Peter fell asleep.

He woke up at dawn, startled to discover himself lying in the quarry; then, emerging from his alpha state, he remembered the accident. He tried to get up, but his foot, now swollen to a frightening degree, wouldn’t move. The pain was so bad, he had no idea how he had slept.

He rolled out of the quarry opening, lay on the ground and looked at the sky: an orpiment orange canvas streaked with pale pink. A bird — he didn’t know what type — flew over his head, then gently landed on the rock near him and spoke to him.

“Whit-wheet! Whit-wheet!”

“Whit-wheet!” Peter called back. “Whit-wheet!”

The bird cocked its head and flew off. An entire flock of

them flew over him, then quickly disappeared into the streaked sky. Peter looked to his left and saw a grove of birches, their bark tingling with pink-silver, their leaves bright against the orange-rose of the horizon. A gentian-striped lizard hurried past.

When the workers arrived at the quarry a couple of hours later, Peter was still lying on his back, softly humming a song from some early Joni Mitchell album. He had his hands crossed over his chest, and his breathing was strong and even.

“Hey, Peter!” someone yelled. “Peter.”

“Hey, look at his foot! He’s hurt!”

One of the workers picked up Peter’s pack, which was about ten feet from his head, and carried it to him, then called an ambulance.

Peter was taken to the hospital, where an emergency room doctor spoke the good news: the foot was sprained, not broken. She gave Peter a shot, and a couple of bandages later, he was released. He took a taxi to his house, where he limped to the bedroom and lay down. The

throbbing was still present, but the shot had taken the edge off the pain.

He fell asleep, and while he was dreaming of large birds flying out of carmine caves, the phone rang and woke him up.

“Calling to see if you’re okay.”

It was Johnston, the quarry supervisor.

“I’m okay. Fine. Didn’t break anything. Can’t walk, though.”

“I’ll send Doris over with some food.”

“No. It’s okay. I’m sleeping.”

Johnston hung up. His wife, Doris, was known for her cooking, and Peter wished he hadn’t told Johnston not to send her over. He fell asleep again, but a half hour later, the doorbell rang, then the door opened. He must have forgotten to lock it.

“Peter? May I come in?”

It was Doris. He called to her to come into his bedroom.

She walked slowly, stopping to take in the shelves of books and the imposing collection of

“You do not understand nothing, Christina.” Nonna had now entered the fray.

“On the contrary.” (In a quarrel, Papa was nothing if not fair-minded.) “I fear she understands me all too well.” Raising his glass to Mrs Allardyce — a tribute to her beauty as much as to her perceptiveness.

As always, Mr Purvis was conciliatory. “Since I was a lad, Mr Bennet, I have had to sing for my supper. When I was not much older than George I was put to work in an inn at Brighton — mucking out the stables.” He smiled across at Papa. “Fortunately the landlady was a cousin of my poor dear mother, and I was treated very well, considering.”

There was a silence during which Papa — as near to being discomfited as I had ever seen him — drained his wine glass and set it down.

Mr Purvis helped himself to an especially large serving of syllabub before continuing: “And then I came up to London. That was when my real education began. I was twelve years old and working in a coffee-house — the Bedford in Covent Garden — running errands and

setting out the newspapers. They said I had a talent for pleasing the patrons. And it was one of the patrons — my dear friend, Sir Stephen Rattray — who actually taught me to read.”

Papa was now eyeing Mr Purvis with a sort of sceptical wonder. “You had had no schooling until then?”

Mr Purvis shook his head, smiling. “Until Sir Stephen took me in hand, I could neither read nor write. My debt to that dear man is incalculable. And not merely to him. Several of the patrons made it their business to assist me. Mr Jonathon Monk M. P. bought me an entire new wardrobe — the first new clothes I had ever owned — new suit, shirts, smalls, shoes and stockings. And Mr Richard Riley made me a present of a gold timepiece which I possess to this day —”

“This I find extraordinary.” Nonna had been drinking steadily while Mr Purvis was speaking. “These dear kind men who help you and buy you everything — I cannot understand it. What do you do for them?”

Mr Purvis continued to smile. “I had the good fortune to meet a set of Christian gentlemen —”

Mary Bennet

17

I had been placed at Nonna's end of the table, and during the first two courses the conversation had been both polite and predictable. But after the cloth had been removed and the table relaid with dessert dishes, my father — who was sitting on Nonna's right directly opposite Mr Purvis on her left — began to look decidedly bored. (Not having a sweet tooth, Papa took no interest in the array of jellies and blancmanges.) In his most polite tone — always betokening danger — he started to question Mr Purvis about the latter's acquisition of property in and around Meryton.

Mr Purvis was never reluctant to talk about property — he had earlier been holding forth about his purchase of a certain Meryton ale-house — but he did so in a peculiarly sentimental, self-effacing way; praising his many dear friends, all infinitely more clever than himself, for so kindly putting him in the way of making money.

Papa, after remarking Mr Purvis's good fortune in possessing such a selfless set of friends, wondered whether he was not being over-modest. "You do not ascribe any part of your success to your own efforts then, sir?"

I saw that Papa had embarked on one of his cruel cross-examinations, intent on drawing Mr Purvis out and exposing him. Nonna, too, seemed keen to witness some blood sport — she had drunk several glasses of champagne and her dislike for Mr Purvis was becoming every moment more apparent. Elizabeth, unfortunately, was seated at Mr Coates' end of the table, too far off to divert Papa or protect Mr Purvis. But Papa had reckoned without the intervention of Mrs Allardyce.

"Frederick does not boast of his own exertions, Mr Bennet" said she. "Perhaps because he has had to work all his life — unlike yourself or Jasper." (A scornful glance up the table towards Mr Coates.)

sound equipment. She smiled as she stepped into Peter's room. She was wearing jeans, a white shirt, and a necklace of the local jade. On her ears were square rhodonite earrings. She was carrying a picnic basket, the type of basket Peter imagined a woman from the past carrying to the mines so that her starving husband would have a hot lunch.

"Are you okay? Does it hurt a lot?"

"I have pills. They help."

Doris sat at the foot of the bed.

"I have tomato soup, baked chicken and rhubarb pie. Would you like to eat now, or should I put it in your refrigerator?"

Peter breathed deeply. Not since Susan's death had a woman been inside his house. He had spent the last two years alone with his books and music, and especially with Beethoven, who, like Peter, heard most clearly the sounds in his head.

"I'll eat now if you'll eat with me."

Doris smiled. She rose from the bed; the bedside lamp shone on the rhodonite on her ear, and Peter was startled by a desire to touch the earring, to feel the coolness of the stone on his fingertips.

"It's very kind of you to come here, Doris."

"We were worried about you. I'll be right back."

He heard her opening cupboards and gathering silverware, and though he tried to resist it, an image of Susan appeared. Susan in her fleece robe, making breakfast on Saturday morning. The sound of the toaster popping up, the smell of his favorite Brazilian coffee, Susan's dancing to the rock station on the radio while she spread butter on the toast.

"May I put on some music?"

Peter smiled a teary smile, then realized someone was talking to him.

"Sure. Anything you want."

Doris put on some Vivaldi, then appeared in the bedroom with two trays. She set them on his dresser, walked out, and reappeared with a chair. She

propped pillows up behind Peter so he could sit up and eat. She gave him a glass of water and a glass half filled with white wine.

“I didn’t know if you could drink the wine. I mean, with the pills.”

“It’s okay. I haven’t taken one in several hours.”

Peter realized he was starving. He tasted the soup and felt its sweet warmth course through his body. He suddenly remembered that he had taken his pants off before climbing into bed, and he tried to recall what color boxer briefs he was wearing. Susan used to tease him about his colorful underwear.

“This is delicious. I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Peter and Susan had once gone to a party at the Johnstons’ house. Doris had cooked enormous amounts of food, all presented elegantly, and what Peter remembered most vividly was Johnston’s failure to remark on his wife’s talent and hard work. He ate and drank, talked about the mines, and behaved as though his wife weren’t in the room.

“How are your children, Doris?”

“They’re doing well, Peter. Thank you for asking. Marty’s on the track team, and David is in a science honors program. They’re good kids. Sometimes I wish you had some kids, Peter, you know, so it wouldn’t be so hard.”

She hesitated. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said —”

“It’s okay, Doris. I think the same thing. We were going in that direction when the accident happened. She would have been a great mother.”

Peter ate everything on his plate, and Doris offered to get him some more. When he refused, she went into the kitchen to make some coffee. When she returned, Peter had put on his pants and was sitting at the foot of the bed. He asked to see one of Doris’s earrings, she took it off and handed it to him, and he held it up to the light.

“Not from our quarry. Not enough veins. Probably from somewhere farther north. Maybe not even on the island.”

“I’ve had them for years. Someone gave them to me for

my birthday. I don’t know where the stone was mined. Do you ever get tired of looking at it?”

“No. It’s funny. You’d think I would. But it isn’t just the stone, it’s the entire setting. I mean, the scene around the quarry. Listen, when I had this accident, it was like I saw it all with such . . . clarity. The sky, the tree bark, the light. Have you ever looked through a stereopticon? It was like that. Frozen, like a slide show up close, only I was in the show.”

Doris smiled at him.

“You think the pills are talking, don’t you?”

“No, Peter. No, I don’t.”

He handed her the earring. When she took it from him, their fingers touched for the briefest moment, and Peter felt the same melting comfort he had felt when he swallowed the creamy reddish soup. She put the earring on, gathered the trays and went back to the kitchen. He could hear her rinsing and loading his dishwasher. The lilt of Vivaldi had ceased.

Doris bade him goodnight and made him promise to call her or Johnston if he needed anything.

A week later, on a cloudy day, Peter returned to the quarry. There was no bright light to reflect the pink stone, no orange streaks splashing through the birch limbs. But without the sun, the dew had lingered, and the dampness itself caused the rhodonite to shimmer in counterpoint to the soft clouds — shiny pink below folds of white fleece.

Peter lifted his pick, still shiny from its last polishing, and entered the mine. He touched the wall, sliding his hand against the wet stone, and thought of Doris’s lightly veined earring. He was glad to be back, glad to be surrounded by the pink stone that enveloped him. Fortified with the permanence of its beauty, he unearthed a gem of truth within the cavern of his psyche: He was a lonely man, and it was time for him to emerge from the quarry.

— Diane Dees