

# “Here’s to Us, Then”: The Difficulties and Rewards of “Making Contact” in *Quartet in Autumn*

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A colleague, wanting to encourage volunteer social worker Janice Brabner after her discouraging initial visit to Marcia Ivory’s home, tells her: “Make contact, by force, if necessary. Believe me, it can be most rewarding.” The statement is not only amusing in a distinctly Pymian way with its startling suggestion that force might be necessary, but also perplexing for the questions that it raises: What does she mean by “contact”? What sort of force does she have in mind? And for whom is the contact rewarding—the social worker or the person being contacted, or both? Nevertheless, the advice represents one of the novel’s major themes: making contact with others can be difficult, but it can also be enriching. While there are various kinds of contact, in this novel, the words “make contact” denote, broadly, the act of connecting or establishing a bond with another human being. There is a complexity to this kind of contact: What role does conscience or doing one’s duty play, for instance? Is the attempt to make contact sincere or merely a gesture, and if a gesture, does it not count for anything? Who benefits from making contact and what form does the reward take? As the novel demonstrates, almost everyone who tries to make contact with others, for whatever reasons, benefits to a certain degree, whether the attempt succeeds or fails. But ultimately the novel is most interested in the kind of heartfelt and genuine interrelationship that we see developing among its central characters and especially what that connection means to Letty and Norman, the least satisfied with their lives and the most in need of something to look forward to. Marcia, whose resistance to all overtures results in her permanent disassociation, is a study in the failure to connect; while Letty, Norman, and Edwin move from a relatively superficial interaction to a stronger, more personal and decidedly beneficial connection with one another.

Barbara Pym wrote *Quartet in Autumn* in the mid-1970s when she herself was the same age as its central characters and experiencing a great deal of change in her own life. Then in her sixties, she saw favorite restaurants being closed and lovely old buildings being replaced by ugly modern structures. Worse, she was still being rejected as a writer with little hope of ever again seeing the kind of success that she had enjoyed in the 1950s, and she was in failing health. In 1971, she had a mastectomy, and in 1974 she suffered a stroke and had temporary aphasia or a kind of dyslexia during which she could not remember things, including how to spell. Her doctor advised her to retire from the International African Institute in London, where she had worked for seventeen years, and so she did, moving from London to Barn Cottage in the village of Finstock to live with her sister. Over this period of several years, she conceived and developed the idea of a novel about four aging characters facing retirement who work in an office together, each by circumstance living alone; and in the first couple of years of her own retirement, she wrote *Quartet in Autumn*.

The subject of the novel is one of Pym’s darkest: individual isolation in combination with the difficult issue of adjusting to retirement after a lifetime of occupation and activity. It focuses on the lives of four people doing work that apparently has such low value that when the men retire, the entire department will be eliminated. Like churches and other buildings damaged by the Second World War or deteriorated over time that no longer exist, there will be no trace of the four in the context of that office. But despite its dark subject, the novel has familiar Pymian features: her gentle humor, her subtly ironic voice, her keen insight into human nature, and her spare yet

revealing language. Pym once wrote, It was “the comedy and irony of the situation of the four people in *Quartet in Autumn* that I had in mind when I was writing the book” (MS Pym 164, fol. 167), and of course her ability to write comic irony is one of her most distinctive traits.

In a publicity blurb that Pym herself composed for Macmillan, she described the novel as “a study of isolation told with humour and detachment,” asserting that “it is by no means a depressing book” (MS Pym 165, fol. 101). The novel is not the first in which Pym explores the subject of an individual’s isolation or disconnectedness from others. Well before *Quartet in Autumn*, she created characters who experience a sense of personal displacement or a feeling of being lost. Characters in other novels live solitary lives in a post-war world that seems to be losing its vitality, populated by ineffectual and vapid men who feign world-weariness and women who are often marginalized and valued only for the trivial tasks they perform. Pym’s central character women have moments when they feel devalued, trapped, even panicky. One thinks of Mildred Lathbury in the scene in *Excellent Women* (1952) when, upset at Allegra Gray’s suggestion that she share her room with the vicar’s sister, she feels “that [she] must escape” and blindly follows a crowd into a large department store, as “bewildered and aimless” as many women in the crowd; or Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels* (1955), who, coming from the airport where Tom had embraced Deirdre with the same degree of emotion as he had her, wanders into a large restaurant whose foyer is filled with a crowd of “bewildered, rudderless” people just like herself. All around are disturbing signs of change in post-war England which reinforce a feeling of isolation. The church in which Mildred worships, for instance, has been badly bombed and only half is usable. Things do not get much better, and by the time of *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) the London landscape is defaced by filth, obscenities, and madness, and in *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), village life as it once was has been eradicated. Pym’s fullest exploration of the void that results when one fails to connect with other humans on an emotional level was written before *Quartet* but published after it, *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978). In it, Pym explores in detail the chilling nature of isolation in the character of the icily remote, disdainful Leonora Eyre.

In *Quartet*, though, four characters share central stage. Pym establishes on the very first pages their isolation from one another, a point that she continues to build on for much of the novel. The early chapters provide snapshots of each of them on one particular day—“that day,” according to the first words of the novel. “That day” is representative of all of their days, with vignettes of their lunchtime pursuits, their interactions in the office, and their evening activities. The second sentence of the novel reveals not only that they are the kinds of people others do not notice but that, were they noticed, they are clearly “people who belonged together in some way,” but that is the point, of course—they are not “together.” In the office the four engage in conversation on topics of general interest such as dying of hypothermia, starving to death, and other perils awaiting the aged, as one does to pass a lunch hour or break, but without prying into each other’s private lives. They acknowledge a shared worry about the terrible fates that might befall the elderly, and this identity as a group of people with similar and very real concerns is linked to their “aloneness” and vulnerability. They know each other’s personality from their close proximity in the workplace, but their office relationship does not carry over into the outside world: except for Edwin and his church crawls, they seldom interact with anyone outside of the office.

The isolation of the four people is intensified by their feeling of being out of place in the new culture of the 1970s. The world is changing and they are too old to adapt easily to it. All around them are signs of the changed social scene and reminders of their age: the vibrancy of the young woman in their office and the vitality and ebullience of the Nigerian family who buy the house that Letty lives in; the “psychedelic” plastic carriers that Norman’s groceries are in, with their vividly patterned colors that contrast so sharply with his personality and

annoy him no end, as if they add insult to the injury of the rise in food prices; the garish changes in Edwin's favorite tea shop, now decorated in a trendy orange and green with its monotonous and insidious background music; and possibly most distressing of all, the "stages toward death," as Letty calls them, that fifty years have brought about. The woman in the Underground shouting an obscenity and the vicious message scrawled on the platform wall are disturbing reminders of the potential for violence and dissolution in their once familiar world. These alarming and unsettling changes leave them with an uneasy feeling of simply not belonging any more.

It is quite possible that Norman's brooding anger might well be a symptom of his unacknowledged distress—what the narrator calls his "dissatisfaction with life"—over changes over which he has no control, and for some reason, he has chosen the automobile as the object of his wrath. Though he feels "pleasantly virtuous" in visiting his brother-in-law in the hospital, the visit is about as awkward as it can get, both of them uneasy and finding little or nothing to talk about. It is a lovely bit of irony that the brother-in-law teaches driving while Norman loathes cars and often kicks them out of frustration. And because of Norman's extreme dislike of the motor car, Ken cannot share his dream of owning a driving school. Norman is unreasonably disturbed by the sight of a urinal and vomit pan only partially concealed and vents his anger at these grim reminders of his mortality and the entire hospital visit by raging against automobiles on his way home.

Though the hospital that Norman's brother-in-law is in is full of patients, the church that Edwin goes to that same evening is practically empty. While the church is a real comfort for Edwin—the other three envy him for the stability it provides—he is troubled by the changes it has undergone. He is uncomfortable with the "Kiss of Peace" ceremony, while young priests with long hair and wearing jeans raise visions of his being "trampled down by a horde of boys and girls brandishing guitars." Churches that once stayed open around the clock now have to lock their doors to keep vandals out. He remembers fondly the old days when crowds of workers filled churches for lunchtime services and thinks with regret of once-splendid churches that are now redundant or even demolished. Though he is a member of Father Gellibrand's church and attends many services there, "not even Father G had his undivided allegiance." Edwin spends his leisure time scanning church bulletin boards in his quest for the most promising services that retain some of the familiar old rituals now missing in so many of them.

Meanwhile, Marcia is lost somewhere in the past connected to the exigencies of the war, stockpiling milk bottles and canned goods. She is described as "confused...dazed and bewildered" in a shop "full of loud music, merchandise from foreign parts...crude pottery...garish flimsy blouses" but, just as when Norman perks up at the sight of a wrecked car being towed, she is cheered by the sight of a man collapsed on the sidewalk and even more by the arrival of an ambulance, which brings fond memories of her stay in hospital.

Even Letty, who the narrator tells us is the only one living in the present and who remembers the post-war years only in terms of changing fashions, dreams of people and a time in her life now long gone, the Silver Jubilee of King George V in 1935: "All gone, that time, those people....Letty woke up and lay for some time meditating on the strangeness of life, slipping away like this." The dream makes clear that at least on a subconscious level, she is quite aware of the irrevocability of passing time and the changes it has brought. While Letty has accepted her impending retirement courageously, she is shaken by a series of changes when first, Marjorie tells her that Letty can no longer live with her and then when Miss Embrey sells her house to Jacob Olatunde. These developments distress Letty: "The whole of her life seemed to unroll before her like that of a drowning man... is said to do, she thought, for of course her experience did not extend to drowning." Her new living arrangements in Mrs. Pope's house are not much better, being the opposite extreme from the noise of the boisterous religious celebrations of the Olutundes in its silence and not doing much to alleviate her uneasy feeling of not belonging.

The theme of connecting or making contact is made central early in the novel, when a woman sitting at Letty's table at lunch on "that day" that opens the novel appeared about to speak, but did not, "discouraged by Letty's lack of response" and "apparent indifference." Letty muses: "Somebody had reached out towards her. They could have spoken and a link might have been forged between two solitary people.... [But] it was too late for any kind of gesture. Once again Letty had failed to make contact." That phrase "once again" is telling: It is Letty's habit to do nothing, to maintain her reserve and distance, a reluctance to connect that we see in not only Letty, but also Norman, Marcia, and even Edwin, the most sociable of the four.

Like Letty, Norman has had opportunities when he might have connected but did not follow through, not just with his brother-in-law but also with Marcia. Both he and Marcia are linked in the minds of Edwin and Letty and, indeed, Marcia was mildly interested in him when she first started working in the office, following him to the British Museum one lunch hour. As we later learn, Norman knew that she was following him and purposely took refuge with a group of school children in the mummified animals section rather than strike up a conversation with her. Any possibility of a personal connection between the two was gone, though:

[Marcia] hardly considered Norman at all, except as a rather silly little man, so his fussing with his shopping and his reading out the things he had bought only irritated her. She did not want to know what he was going to eat—it was of no interest whatsoever.

The chance for anything to develop between them had passed.

Marcia is disconnected not only from her fellow office workers but from everyone except her physician, but she is not troubled by that isolation. She has her own pleasures: her obsession with Dr. Strong is her greatest joy, the check-up at the clinic is a "treat," an occasion for which she wears "new pink underwear," the "vigil" in the waiting room is "sacred." Other than her fascination with her physician, she has no patience with nor interest in any other relationship. Whereas she resents Janice Brabner's intrusions, refuses to consider going on a church outing, and is affronted by her neighbors' offers to help, she is "not offended or irritated" when physicians tell her to eat more, and she feels "quietly triumphant" when she is given another check-up appointment. If anyone even attempts to speak to her, she maintains a sober silence, as for example with the stranger in the doctor's waiting room or the chatty driver of the bus that takes her to look at Dr. Strong's home.

Edwin, like the others, has not followed through on the possibility of making contact with any of his coworkers outside of the workplace. It is not just a matter of not wanting to spend time socially with people one spends every working weekday with. As he tells Father Gellibrand: "The curious intimacy of the office is very definitely not repeated outside it—one would not presume." Living on the other side of the common from Marcia after her retirement, he once found himself at the end of the road that she lived on, and

...he walked on quickly. It would be embarrassing to meet her, even to walk past her house, he felt. They were both, in a sense, lonely people but neither would have expected to meet the other outside office hours. Any kind of encounter would fill her with a dismay equal to his.

Even though he knows well the parable of the Good Samaritan and feels guilty as a result, Edwin still does not follow through on the impulse to do what he feels should be his Christian duty and check on Marcia, until it is too late.

Despite feeling uneasy about any suggestion that they meet outside of working hours, the four coworkers do seem to care about one another. When the women are still working in the office, Letty offers to make tea for a tired-looking Marcia, "a small gesture of solicitude," not unlike "the pigeons on the roof [that] were picking at each other, presumably removing insects." Marcia "wonders about Norman's domestic arrangements," shares

Family Size tins of coffee with him, and recognizes the kindness of Letty's offer to make tea. Edwin negotiates the room in Mrs. Pope's house for Letty, and the morning after she moves in, the others eagerly await news of how her first night went. Later, at the appalling retirement party in a scene that is classic Pym comedy with the (acting) assistant director's astonishingly insulting speech that essentially negates both Marcia and Letty, the four coworkers take comfort in one another. Even Marcia feels "glad to be with people she knew." And though Norman failed to acknowledge Marcia's presence in the British Museum, he seems to have a genuine, albeit deeply suppressed, need to connect with others which rises to the surface on occasion. An irascible little man who complains about almost everything, he does not know what to do with himself when he is not working, returning to the office early from his summer holiday and "look[ing] forward to getting back to the office" and "hearing how the others got on" after Christmas. Indeed, after the long holiday over Christmas and New Year's, all four "were glad to be back to work."

Letty, too, is quite aware of her aloneness or isolation, an awareness that intensifies after retirement when she walks past her old office building during her first day of that retirement on her way to the library, and she experiences "a feeling that she and Marcia had been swept away as if they had never been." Later, when she visits her old office, again she has a "feeling of nothingness," as if Marcia and she had been swept aside, "as if they had never existed." Despite all this, she continues to take care of herself, having her hair done regularly, dressing in her best clothes when she goes out, eating well, and embarking on a reading program with an unfortunate outcome, social science being dead boring, baffling, and simply incomprehensible. Although she tells herself at lunch with the others that "she must never give the slightest hint of loneliness or boredom, that sense of time hanging heavy," she clearly is having difficulty adjusting to retirement.

The lunch at the Rendezvous seems to mark a slight turning point in the relationship among Letty, Edwin, and Norman: it establishes a precedent; it is not as awkward as Norman had feared; and it gives them an experience to reflect back on when they come together again for a much more serious reason. It begins the transition from their being people who once worked together to being people with a meaningful connection with one another. The foundation was laid in their daily interaction in the workplace. What they have in common—the thing that identifies them as people who do belong together—is their shared history in that office. It is not important that we do not know what they do nor that the very office they work in will be phased out when the two men retire. What matters is that something deeper than any of them recognizes has developed during their association there. As Lettie tells Mrs. Pope, although they worked together only for several years, "it was an important stage in [their] lives." What matters is their mutual experience: they were a small group of four within the larger group of workers in their building and the overwhelmingly larger world outside. Just how valuable that connection had been becomes apparent as events unfold.

For Marcia, the office may well have been the thing that helped her keep a grip on reality. When she was working, she ate a small lunch, engaged in some of the office banter, took some care in personal grooming, shopped for canned goods in a familiar nearby grocery store, had the library close at hand as a suitable place to discard unwanted rubbish, and "sometimes passed the time of day" with her neighbors. Once she retires, she stops looking after her appearance, stops making small talk, does not reply to Letty's note suggesting that they meet for lunch, rejects anyone who approaches her, busies herself with her bottles, bags, and string as well as her stockpile of carefully organized tins, and forgets to eat. She becomes increasingly irritated by any thought of her former coworkers and goes to lunch with them only because she wants to return the milk bottle that Letty has burdened her with. That milk bottle, in fact, is very like Marcia herself: it is starkly different from the others and an irritant

that needs to be dealt with. And as Marcia does with the bottle, everyone, even the physician who sent Marcia to Dr. Strong in the first place, wonders “what on earth to do with her.”

The degree to which Marcia has disconnected herself from the other three is dramatically illustrated in the scene in which Norman, feeling profoundly restless, boards a bus, finds himself near Marcia’s road, and stands across the street from her house, gazing “in stunned fascination, very much as he had gazed at the mummified animals in the British Museum.” The moment when their eyes lock and neither moves is brilliant. It creates a vivid image that perfectly encapsulates their relationship: Norman feeling drawn to Marcia but paralyzed into inaction when she suddenly appears; and Marcia, catching sight of him and so annoyed that she dismisses him to Janice Brabner as “somebody I used to work with. I don’t want anybody like that coming to see me.” Marcia’s disavowing of any social connection with Norman is evidence of just how far she has withdrawn into her self-imposed exile.

After Norman’s experience of standing across the street from Marcia’s home, Edwin volunteers to go see if there’s anything he can do for her. The narrator tells us: “But of course Edwin was not at all sure what there would be, if anything. The idea of being able to ‘do’ something for Marcia was so improbable that he had only said it to ease his conscience a little.” But because they worked together, “it would no doubt seem to an outsider that they might be just the people to be in a position to help her or at least to offer help, to show willing, as Norman might say.” As often happens when the two men discuss Letty and Marcia, that particular conversation ends with the men breaking into laughter, and the narrator notes: “So that what had started out as a serious attempt to deal with a social problem turned into a kind of joke.” Despite deflecting a serious conversation on how they might find a real solution, Edwin does attempt to help, although it comes too late.

One of the many admirable aspects of this novel is Pym’s skill in moving people toward Marcia at the moment that Marcia is at her weakest: Edwin, Father Gellibrand, and Janice all converge as she fades in and out of consciousness at her kitchen table. Office mate, representative of the church, social worker, and neighbor have all shown some degree of willingness to reach out to Marcia, have all made an effort to “make contact” or “keep an eye on” her. This is an example of that wonderful Pym irony, which she never means to be bitter or sarcastic, but rather bemused, looking with detachment at the way that representatives of all of the usual support systems that have failed to help a person like Marcia come together at the end of her life. All feel that they have done their duty by Marcia, but their efforts to “keep an eye on her” are as useless as cheerful good wishes for a speedy recovery to a dying woman. Janice Brabner’s conscience is quite clear about Marcia: her death “in no way reflected on the social services and there could be no implication of neglect on Janice’s part.” Indeed, Marcia’s death is “something that could be quoted in years to come as an example of the kind of difficulties encountered by the voluntary social worker. It was impossible to help some people.” So Janice has benefitted from her experience in dealing with a troublesome “lonely one.” Marcia’s neighbors, Priscilla and Nigel, also make an effort to connect with her, offering to cut her grass and inviting her to share Christmas dinner with them, doing what they see as their “social duty.” After all, as Janice had warned Priscilla, “These people weren’t necessarily rewarding, one just had to plod on.” Sending flowers to Marcia in the hospital and attending the funeral service at the crematorium, Janice and Priscilla have done all that can be expected of them, and they feel rather good about it. And Father Gellibrand, who at first had been reluctant to go with Edwin on the evening that they discover Marcia at her kitchen table, acknowledges his responsibility to everyone, not just those within his parish boundaries. As he tells Edwin, “Who is my neighbour? ... Surely one has preached often enough on that text? Perhaps that’s where we go wrong—obviously it is—when my reaction to your suggestion is that the person in question isn’t in my

parish.” So he, too, feels that he has done more than might have been expected of him. The involvement of all of these people in trying to keep Marcia from “falling through the net” has not worked, but they all congratulate themselves in various ways for having made the effort.

It is the collapse and death of Marcia that provides the catalyst that strengthens the ties of the other three to one another and leads to a kind of bonding that previously had been missing. The people who really benefit by “making contact” are Norman and Letty, but even Edwin seems to recognize that they share something that has transcended their earlier relationship. Their isolation from one another at the beginning of the novel is now replaced by their identity as friends rather than just people who worked together. Letty articulates the significance of that connection when she tells Mrs. Pope, “Two women working together in an office...even if they didn’t become close friends, would have a special kind of tie linking them.” Edwin telephones Letty for the first time ever to tell her of Marcia’s collapse, volunteers to take the flowers that Norman tells him to say “are from all of us” to the hospital, and volunteers to be listed as Marcia’s “next of kin.” Marcia’s funeral causes Edwin to invite Norman and Letty to his house for the first time, marking a new level of interaction among them, as noted by Edwin’s comment, “Well, here we are all together today, just like we used to be.” It is not quite the same, with Marcia gone, but the emphasis here is on their togetherness, in contrast to the beginning of the novel when they were not together but looked as if they should be. Now, as the narrator observes, “Marcia’s death [has]...brought them closer together, for they were remembering past association.” But then the narrator observes with that detached eye and appreciation of the ironic that the “most important thing was that they were seeing Edwin’s house for the first time,” an irony that is softened by Letty’s thinking, “Death had done this,” as she looks around at the furnishings. Norman seems to feel real emotion at Marcia’s death, remarking that he “always thinks of her at coffee time” and appearing quite moved during her cremation and at the meal afterward. Indeed, both Norman and Letty are sobered by the funeral service, Norman trying not to cry and Letty “overcome by a sense of desolation,” as if by Marcia’s death, she is now absolutely alone. But Letty is not alone, and soon it becomes evident that she has friends in Edwin and Norman. Some time after the funeral, in fact, on the day that Norman makes his visit to Marcia’s house, Edwin, “prompted by a gesture of friendliness” toward what he rightly assumes is Letty’s loneliness, rings her but finds the line engaged. To telephone Letty just to chat and see how she is doing would never have occurred to him before Marcia’s death, and then both Edwin and Norman discuss with interest the story that Mrs. Pope has told Edwin about Letty’s friend Marjorie when Norman tries again to reach Letty the next day.

Marcia’s stunning gift of her house to Norman comes as a complete shock and has a profound effect on him. The flippant, often caustic Norman, who makes sarcastic comments whenever any conversation approaches sensitive or personal subjects, has been immensely gratified by her generous gift. Inheriting the house gives him a feeling of well-being and even importance as he considers the options now open to him. Whether he lives in the house or sells it, his decision will have an effect on Priscilla and Nigel and possibly the entire neighborhood:

The fact that the decision rested with him, that he had the power to influence the lives of people like Priscilla and her husband, gave him a quite new hitherto unexperienced sensation—a feeling like a dog with two tails, as people sometimes put it—and he walked to the bus stop with his head held high.

And because he now owns the house, all three of them gather there to go through Marcia’s things in a lovely, quite moving scene that ends the novel. They work together like old chums, going through her clothes and other upstairs items and then moving to the kitchen, where they find that lovely bottle of “Queen of Sheba” sherry that they decide to open, this being an “exceptional” day that “wasn’t quite like every day,” a day that is strikingly

different from “that day” that opens the novel. You will recall that very early in the novel, Edwin had summarized the four of them in this way: “Four people on the verge of retirement, each one of us living alone, and without any close relative near—that’s us.” This grim assessment of their common lot stressed their individual isolation, but now, inspired by his newfound strength and increased self-respect, Norman makes an exuberant toast: “Here’s to us, then.” This toast emphasizes their connection, not their separation. It captures the feeling that Letty, Edwin and he all seem to share now and is rich with the knowledge that they have become friends or are well on their way toward friendship. It holds the promise of a happier future than they might have imagined before.

Like Norman, Letty also now has a feeling of power over her own life, and her decision about her future will affect others, too: she can choose to stay with Mrs. Pope, live with Marjorie in the country, live with her cousin, or do something entirely different. Having all of her life been governed by an internalized set of rules about what one does or does not do, like “drink sherry before the evening, just as one did not read a novel in the morning, the last being a left-over dictum of a headmistress of forty years ago,” she has been accustomed to behaving as others expect her to. Earlier in the novel, after the retirement party, she had “dutifully assume[d] the suggested attitude towards retirement that life was still full of possibilities,” but she clearly did not believe that. Now, though, sitting in Marcia’s kitchen and encouraged by Norman and Edwin to do what she likes about moving in with Marjorie, she is emboldened by the genuine connection she feels with them, and a whole new outlook has opened for her. Having relayed Marjorie’s invitation for the three of them to spend a day in the country with her, Letty smiles. This is only the third time that she has smiled in the novel: once she tried to smile at Marcia but stopped short, and twice she smiled in the office “as she was meant to” in response to something that Norman and Edwin had said. [Marcia, surprisingly, smiles eight times<sup>1</sup> including as she dies.] Now, though, with that smile on Letty’s face, the novel ends with the life-affirming thought:

Any new interest that might take Marjorie’s mind off her disappointment was to be encouraged, Letty felt, though it was difficult to think of Edwin and Norman as objects of romantic speculation, and two less country-loving people could hardly be imagined. But at least it made one realize that life still held infinite possibilities for change.

That life has numerous possibilities for unexpected change was certainly demonstrated in Barbara Pym’s own life. Having written *Quartet in Autumn* with no real prospect of its ever being published, she saw her life turned around suddenly and dramatically in January 1977, giving her in her last three years the kind of acclaim that she had never had before. When Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil named her one of the century’s most underrated writers, a story that all of you are no doubt familiar with, Macmillan immediately accepted *Quartet in Autumn* for publication and reissued *Excellent Women* simultaneously. She was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *Quartet*, was reviewed by people like John Updike in *The New Yorker*, saw the publication of the many-times-rejected *The Sweet Dove Died*, and wrote *A Few Green Leaves* for a public awaiting a new Pym novel.

In *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym views the lives of these four ordinary people with an unflinchingly detached yet compassionate eye. She does not judge her characters nor offer any solution to the very real social problem of the elderly in need. Rather, she writes of the four with that familiar undercurrent of gentle understanding, what Philip Larkin calls her “level good-humoured tender irony” (AVPE). The novel is carefully crafted and at times chilling in effect, but with enough comic relief to keep it from being too heavy. Marcia’s death is inevitable, yet the conclusion is optimistic. Pym herself meant it to be, as she told James Wright at Macmillan: “The story, like life, ends inconclusively, though with hope for the future” (MS PYM 165, fol. 101). The novel is poignant, real, and revealing but far from tragic. Letty anticipates a pleasant future different from her past. She does not know exactly what changes might occur, just that they surely will and that they are likely to be good. The conclusion suggests



that hope and the feeling of well-being experienced by Norman, Letty, and Edwin come from their having made meaningful connections with one another, and that is why Letty believes in the infinite possibility for change, and why Norman toasts the three of them with such confidence: “Here’s to us, then.”

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<sup>1</sup>**Endnote:** Marcia smiles to herself, feeling smug that she has collected a pamphlet on extra heating allowance for the elderly; smiles with Letty when Edwin says he plans to cook his specialty—beans on toast with egg on top—as they are “meant to do”; smiles when Priscilla invites her to Christmas dinner; gives a “tight-lipped smile” after the retirement party and smiles at Norman’s comment on her store of canned foods in her desk; smiles faintly when slumped at her table at Janice’s fussing about packing a bag for her; smiles when the nurse reads the card that came with the flowers from Norman, Edwin, and Letty; and dies with a smile as Dr. Strong looks down at her in her hospital bed.

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