

Cooking in a Bedsitter

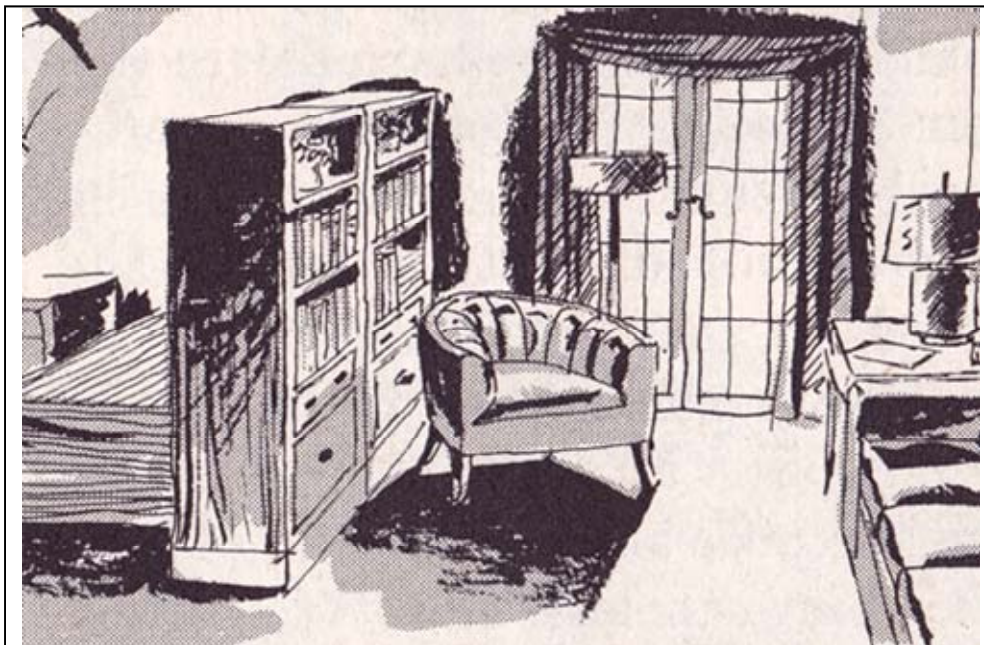
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Living alone means autonomy. That's one reason Laurel, once she moves into Dulcie's spare room, is so keen, so quickly, to move on again, this time to share a house with her fashionable friend Marian and a number of other people:

She longed for the impersonality of the hall as one came into the house, the utter privacy of Marian's room, with its concealed washbasin and the little electric cooker in a cupboard where she really cooked meals.

Freedom is what Laurel wants, independence, and of course a little taste of that is unsatisfying. Small won-



In the business girls' apartment, 'Late entertainment is out for your roommate unless you use the "half and half" technique. Seclude your beds behind a pair of tall chests.' Illustration by Robert Curry from *New Creative Home Decorating* by Hazel and Julius Rockow. New York: H.S. Stuttman, 1946, 1954

der that she wants to move on from having Aunt Dulcie comment, with politely hidden dismay, on Laurel's unmade bed. So she moves to Quince Square, where she behaves like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, bounding out of bed and throwing open the curtains 'as if she were flinging open the shutters on to a prospect of the Bay of Naples or some soaring mountain peak in Switzerland instead of just the dripping February trees of Quince Square.'

This is way better than staying with Dulcie. She finds life 'intoxicating,' from this moment of waking, through all the stages of getting up and making her own breakfast on the little concealed cooker, to the final rush to the bus stop.'

That little cooker! What a pull it exerts! Everything tucked away and hidden, like the galley kitchen on a jet, with all sorts of cunning little tools and special implements! She might whip up omelets, cold salmon, a chocolate soufflé! She will be able to entertain!

Cooking in a Bedsitter was a cookbook written by British journalist Katharine Whitehorn in 1959. It was enormously popular and remained in print for more than 40 years, and it has recently been reissued. It's a treasure trove of recipes that you just aren't as likely to see now, like Spam fritters, or kidneys and corn. The book also makes abundantly clear what nearly insurmountable challenges cooking in a bedsitter entailed. For example, Whitehorn writes early on in her book about what she calls 'the water problem':

No one who cooks in a real kitchen can imagine the unbelievable inconvenience of having no tap near the cooking. Nothing can be washed, swabbed, diluted, strained, or extinguished without first making that trip to the water-hole down the corridor.¹

Author David Kynaston also writes about the myriad difficulties of homemaking in post-war London, in his book *Austerity Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007). He quotes Barbara Pym on the difficulties of finding a place, any place, to live in London: "Hilary and I have taken a flat – in Pimlico, not a very good district, but perhaps we shall raise the tone. It is on the corner of Warwick Square and really quite nice. Anyway we are so lucky to get anywhere at all, as it is practically impossible to get flats and you really can't choose at all," she wrote in November 1945.'

Kynaston also mentions Pym's writing in one of her notebooks four years later, again in November – and it must have been a dreary one: 'Excellent women enjoying discomfort – one bar of a small electric fire, huddled in coats.' Yet people found ways to manage.

David Kynaston writes later in his book about Barbara Pym after *Some Tame Gazelle* was published. In a story I'm sure many of you are familiar with, but which I had not read before, he describes how *Some Tame Gazelle's* acceptance came a few months after the disappointing rejection of two stories she submitted to the magazine *Women and Beauty*. *Women and Beauty's* fiction editor, Anita Christopherson, wrote to Pym, 'We like your writing very much and you handle the situations most delicately, but in both cases they are only "situations" – not plots. When we choose our fiction we are rather thinking about pleasing our readers as well as ourselves, and many of them are young romantics, anxious to be caught up in the life of the stories. I think therefore that you are just a shade too objective, too watchful.'

I agree with her characterization of Pym's writing and think she has described her style with succinct elegance.

That Pym was trying to write at all for a woman's magazine that published romantic fiction makes me think, of course, of Catherine from *Less Than Angels*. Catherine writes such stories, as well as articles on topics like how to keep your elbows smooth.



KIDNEYS AND CORN

2 kidneys

1 small tin sweetcorn

Divide kidneys into four pieces; fry gently 10 minutes. Heat sweetcorn; pour off some of the liquid; re-heat kidneys by sitting them on sweetcorn over almost extinct flame.

15 minutes.

– *Cooking in a Bedsitter*

Digby was laying the table in the sitting-room, pausing to read the sheet in Catherine's typewriter. 'Oh, my darling love,' she sighed, laying her head on his shoulder, 'it's been so long.'

'I know – dear as remembered kisses after death,' he said gently. Did people really say things like that to each other? Digby wondered.

Catherine's sturdy good sense, her impulsiveness, and her down-to-earth fortitude have always given me the impression that she's a lot like Pym herself. When she stays two weeks with the Swan family after Tom's death, Catherine finds that 'after a while she began to feel restless.' Though the Swans have been kind to her, 'she began to long for her flat and her typewriter and her odd solitary life.'

Like Laurel, Catherine yearns to be on her own, to make decisions and have privacy and operate independently. She goes home again, cleans and tidies the place, and cooks herself 'an oily dish full of garlic.'

After she looks in the window of the Cypriot restaurant, Catherine rushes home, realizing immediately what this crisis means. But what to do?

I'm not one of those excellent women, who can just go home and eat a boiled egg and be very splendid, she thought, but how useful it would be if I were! She thought wistfully of herself like this. But surely there was, or ought to be, some cosy woman friend, some old school contemporary to whom she could run? Somebody who lived in a bed-sitting-room, who would bustle about making scrambled eggs and coffee on the gas-ring and then sit ready to receive confidences? Catherine thought regretfully of all the people she had meant to keep in touch with, and rather shamefacedly of others whom she had rejected as being dull. Somehow the women she met in connection with her work weren't the cosy, coffee on the gas-ring type, and they were nearly all married anyway.

Getting married was a very important goal. Living alone – or sharing a flat with a friend, as with the Curzon Street girls – is an indicator of freedom and adventurousness for young women, but it's trouble for women who aren't young.

Even a person's own view of what it means to live alone is affected by enduring a rejection: 'One of the things James had taken from Leonora was the pleasure of being alone which she had enjoyed before she met him,' we read in the final few pages of *The Sweet Dove Died*.

And it's not just being with someone – having 'someone to love,' as it's so memorably expressed in *Some Tame Gazelle*; or, as Meg advises Leonora in *The Sweet Dove Died*, 'Everyone needs to love. One should just let one's love come flowing out. . . not bottle it up or be ashamed of it.' Or you will remember the list from early in *Quartet in Autumn*: no 'husband, lover, child or even grandchild. . . no cat, dog, no bird, even.'

I consider Mildred the most reliable of Pym's main characters. Her personality and voice have a lot to do with that. Unlike so many other characters, she can be trusted. So what does she say about marriage? Well, you know.

Going back in the train Dora and I were both in an elegiac mood and started reminiscing. We no longer belittled our successful contemporaries or rejoiced over our unsuccessful ones. For after all, what had we done? We had not made particularly brilliant careers for ourselves, and, most important of all, we had neither of us married. That was really it. It was the ring on the left hand that people at the Old Girls' Reunion looked for. Often, in fact nearly always, it was an uninteresting ring, sometimes no more than the plain gold band or the very smallest and dimmest of diamonds.

Pym, of course, is always, always herself, and so the rest of the paragraph continues:

Perhaps the husband was also of this variety, but as he was not seen at this female gathering he could only be imagined, and somehow I do not think we ever imagined the husbands to be quite so

uninteresting as they probably were.

Philip Larkin called *Excellent Women* ‘a study of the pain of being single.’ (And I always think of Mildred as single; her marriage is kind of hard for me to picture.)

Getting married, then, is the crux of the matter; it doesn’t even much matter who the husband is. It’s wonderful that Pym could be so precise about the unique and powerful appeal that marriage has for so many of us, and also, at the same time – in this case, in the very same paragraph – be such a realist in acknowledging the long-term sense of letdown that, she could clearly see, so often accompanies marriage. ‘We’re just like an old married couple, Catherine thought, a little depressed, for she meant it in the worst sense, where dullness rather than cosiness seemed to be the keynote of the relationship.’

Yet over and over we read, from a range of characters, references to the joys of satisfactions of solitude and the pleasures of living alone. Here’s Mildred, near the start of *Excellent Women*: ‘Now that Dora had gone I looked forward to being alone once more, to living a civilised life with a bedroom and a sitting-room and a spare room for friends.’

Laurel isn’t the only person in *No Fond Return of Love* who’s enchanted by the idea of a bedsitter; her mother, Charlotte, turns out to be susceptible, too. Charlotte ‘revealed an unexpected and presumably long suppressed desire to live a “bachelor girl’s” life in London; the idea of a bed-sitting-room with a little cooker hidden away in a cupboard, a concealed wash basin and a divan bed piled with cushions was to her as romantic as an elopement to the South of France with a lover might have seemed to one of a different temperament.’

If Mildred concurs with the position generally held by the wider culture, that marriage is the be-all and end-all – and I think she does: ‘That was the thing,’ she mused about the ring on the left hand – then she also, simultaneously, is undercutting that. Pym makes it clear in many passages, in different books, that marriage is ‘the thing.’ It’s at the heart of what you’re to strive for, what you’re expected to achieve. And yet she also says – even while affirming how important marriage is – that its centrality is wrong. Moreover, I think she’s saying not just that it’s wrong, but that it’s an outright lie.

Consider the ability of various unmarried characters to take pleasure in solitude – Mildred, or Catherine, who both reflected on how they were looking forward to being alone once again. Think of Norman from *Quartet in Autumn*. He spends Christmas with his cousin Ken and Ken’s girlfriend, Joy, but they don’t really enjoy one another’s company and spend the day together out of a vague sense of obligation rather than a wish to be together. ‘When Ken had deposited him on his doorstep... Norman returned to his bed-sitting room – quite well satisfied with his lot.’ No one could call Norman the happiest guy; he’s angry and crabby and inclined to have petulant outbursts. But, whatever other problems he has, he is okay with living alone.

Dulcie, of course, isn’t much looking forward to Laurel’s arrival at the beginning of *No Fond Return of Love*; she feels obligated to offer Laurel a room, but she doesn’t want to. Dulcie has been enjoying her time alone.

Single life also sounds pretty good when you consider Dolly Arborfield, Caroline’s friend in *An Academic Question*. Dolly is in her sixties, has never married (though she has made it clear to Caroline ‘that her life had not been without love’), and lives exactly the way she wants to. Talk about the pleasure of arranging your life to suit yourself! On rainy days Dolly doesn’t get up until midmorning, ‘sitting up in bed counting her cigarette coupons and arranging them in bundles of five hundred.’ As she informs Caroline, ‘I’m going to get a casserole on a stand, with a little night light burning underneath to keep things hot.’ On fine days she gets up at dawn to feed the

hedgehogs in her garden ('she was more moved by the sight of a hedgehog's little leg raised to scratch itself than by any memory of a past love').

Many of you will have seen the story in last weekend's Boston *Globe* about the emerging field of solitude studies. The *Globe* article cites lots of research on the many benefits of spending time alone. 'You need to be able to recharge on your own sometimes,' one researcher says. Studies confirm that 'spending time alone can be a crucially nourishing component of life.'

But there's another piece of evidence that being married isn't life's central achievement; and this one is even more compelling than the ability to take pleasure in being alone or living alone. This is the importance Pym gives to the inner lives of many of her passed-over characters.

A number of her unmarried characters seem unattached, overlooked, nearly invisible. Letty, for instance, is a person who seems not to be at the center of anyone else's plans. Yet over and over Pym shows a glimpse of their private worlds and reveals rich interior lives – a whole mental landscape that's undetectable from the outside. Invisible people matter as much as anyone else, she says. There's no shame in being solitary. We're all equally human.

In a 1978 review of *Excellent Women*, Karl Miller suggested that a casual onlooker might see only 'a lack' when assessing Mildred's life. But as those of us who love Mildred know very well, while there is something lacking in her life, that lack is not what defines her.

In Pym's books, the way you appear in the world has little or no bearing on your worth or on the richness and validity of your interior life.

Senhor MacBride-Pereira is one of my favourite minor characters in all of literature. 'The things I see!' he tells himself. In life you get these moments – you see something unexpected, something funny, something odd – and that's enough. These moments aren't enough to erase or negate despair or desolation; I think of Letty imagining she might 'lie down in the wood under the beech leaves and bracken and wait quietly for death.' No glimpse of something interesting seen in passing can make up for all we go through; but those moments can still make life worth it.

In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Senhor MacBride-Pereira is the only person who notices, in the coffee shop, that Phoebe gets the cake Leonora had wanted, with its 'delicate worms of chestnut puree and cream on the lightest of foundations.' Leonora gets into a snit. 'Only a retired Brazilian diplomat, the type of man who could spare the time for afternoon tea, sitting at a table midway between the protagonists, noticed the little drama, if such it was. Now what have I seen? he asked himself. Something or nothing?'

Seeing that exchange, catching that moment – noticing life – that is enough. We're here to notice, and appreciate. If that's all we do, it's enough.

Martha Wilson, an ardent Barbara Pym fan for over 20 years, recently discovered a new application for Pym's work: keeping a child entertained during a long, boring wait in the emergency room – definitive proof, if any was needed, that it's always worthwhile having a Pym book close at hand. (The scene that saved the day was the cactus incident at the beginning of Crampton Hodnet.) Martha is American but lives in Canada, where she handles communications projects for innovative entrepreneurial organizations. She has written for Real Simple and for a number of newspapers.