

Potato Peelings and Hawaiian Fire

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What a delightful character Mildred Lathbury is! With her characteristic richness of detail, Barbara Pym draws Mildred so that we feel we know her. Perhaps we identify with her. But what can we say about a novel whose action is framed by its heroine's preoccupation with toilet paper? The intimacy of the details in *Excellent Women* is unusual even in a Pym novel and reveals Mildred's character with economy and clarity. In this novel we meet Mildred by the dustbin, duck under her clothesline, peer into her market basket, and even follow her into the bathroom, and in the process we discover the conflicting currents of her personality.

Excellent Women is, of course, a post-war novel, first published in 1952, when rationing was still in effect in Britain. Barbara Pym wrote to Henry Harvey in November 1945, "...as one's nerves are a bit frazzled after six years of war life is difficult anywhere. You know, one is bad tempered and irritable, could nearly cry because a bus doesn't stop when it's too full, would rather go without things than queue for them, and now that the war is over one doesn't seem able to put up with things so easily." (AVPE, 178) In a note to Henry Harvey in February 1946, Pym notes that she and Hilary entertain with "mostly foreign dishes such as moussaka and ravioli, owing to the scarcity of meat!" (AVPE, 179) Such items as toilet paper, lipstick, new underwear, and meat were hard to get during the war years and immediately afterward, so the use of these images in the novel sites it firmly in its historical period, bringing us vividly into that time. Nevertheless, these artifacts of daily life transcend mere local color. They highlight the conflicts that mar the predictable course of Mildred's life and draw us inevitably into Mildred's inner life and her humanity.

One of the potent fascinations of the novel is the contrast between Mildred's outward appearance, conventional and somewhat drab, and her vivid inner life. This is a woman who gets praised for watching paint dry, while inwardly she is maintaining "an inexplicable distrust of widows." How can we not love a heroine who exclaims over a bottle of Nuits St. Georges, "How exciting that sounds! It conjures up the most wonderful pictures, armour and white horses and dragons, flames too, perhaps a great procession by torchlight." This fiery and romantic inner self is balanced by an inner voice of common sense that is reminding Mildred over and over of how she "ought" to be viewing her life. Not only is she genuinely practical, but like most of us, she gets the "shoulds". In fact, the "shoulds" often rule her life. We get introduced to this inner divide at an early stage in the novel as Mildred contemplates the beaded cover on her milk jug which is a legacy of her time rooming with Dora. Yes, she recognizes that it does keep out flies and dust, as Dora has insisted. She admits, "It was only my perverseness that made me sometimes want to fling it away with a grand gesture." That grand gesture! Can she, will she, ever make it?

As the smooth tenor of Mildred's life is interrupted by new people, new fascinations, new experiences, each intrusion is marked by the homeliest of details. Thus in Ch. 1, when Mildred meets Helena Napier, the emancipated "new woman" whose husband and colleague will cause longings and insecurities to break through into consciousness, it is by the dustbin. She relates,

I bent low over the bin and scabbled a few tea leaves and potato peelings out of the bottom of my bucket. I was embarrassed that we should meet like this. I had meant to ask Mrs.

Napier to coffee one evening. It was to have been a gracious, civilized occasion, with my best coffee cups and biscuits on little silver dishes. And now here I was standing awkwardly in my oldest clothes, carrying a bucket and a waste-paper-basket.

So right from the beginning, Mildred's idea of the ease of a solitary life where she is finally "old enough to become fussy and spinsterish" is in conflict with the reality of the new neighbors. She is not able to keep them at arms' length, to maintain an air of detachment.

The need to share a bathroom with these exotic people, one of them a man, underlines this intrusion. Mildred resolves to handle it by purchasing a new dressing gown, only the first of the new garments she will buy as she becomes more aware of wanting to project her femininity. The new dressing gown seems like a kind of protection, but before it can be purchased or even thought of, more intimate revelations intrude. Helena calls up the stairs that she has been using Mildred's toilet paper. The replacement roll when it appears turns out to be inferior, and the bathtub is improperly cleaned, emblematic not only of Helena's disinterest in domesticity but of the lack of comfort and privacy Mildred is about to undergo.

Where are we most private but in the bathroom? Where do we make ourselves comfortable without needing to reflect on it, but in the bathroom? Where can we be ourselves for a few moments, but in the bathroom? When Mildred is shown to the rest room at the Learned Society, the word *convenience* used for the rest room is mere irony. Naturally Helena Napier is looking for prestige and fulfillment at an institution where the comfort station is filled with old junk and has no soap or towels. On the other hand, Helena sees restrooms as "places of real drama" where "scenes are enacted", all presumably having to do with love affairs. This enjoyment of drama contrasts with Helena's more public presentation of herself as a scientist and intellectual. By contrast, at the home of Everard Bone's mother, Mildred inexplicably feels at ease for a few moments, alone in the gothic bathroom with her copy of the biography of Cardinal Newman. The clergyman's daughter from a good family, the devout Anglo-Catholic, the excellent woman who helps others has met her match in Everard Bone and has a moment of unconscious comfort as her mind wanders. And yes, it's pretty darn funny too.

But long before she reaches this point, Rockingham Napier bursts on the scene, bringing an air of strong sexuality and casual charm. Coming as he does just after dinner, he makes Mildred inevitably think of her solitary half can of baked beans. That it is a *half* tin is a telling detail as she is confronted with a handsome and charming man. "No doubt I should be seeing that again tomorrow," she reflects ruefully.

In a parallel development, Allegra Gray comes to lodge at the Vicarage, bringing sexual attractiveness and a rapacious self-centeredness that has her setting Winifred and Mildred to hemming drapes for her around the hearth rug donated by the already captive Julian Malory. The cooption of her friends by Mrs. Gray's surface glamour leads on directly to Mildred's contemplation of her own underwear. What is more connected to a woman's private view of herself as a sexual being than her intimate garments? Mildred's verdict is not a happy one: "Just the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear, I thought dejectedly, so there is no need to describe them." One cannot help contrasting this with the young Barbara Pym's mischievous diary entry for 8 January, 1934: "At Marks and Spencer's I bought a peach coloured vest and trolleys to match with insertions of lace. Disgraceful I know but I can't help choosing my underwear with a view to it being seen!" (*AVPE*, 33)

A visit from Mildred's long-time friend Dora brings quiet enjoyment, petty misunderstandings, and the mutual pretense that they have no interest in marriage. Emblematic of this, Dora also brings her fawn locknit underwear, and hangs it to drip-dry in the kitchen. This is of course an intrusion, and the rudeness

of it is funny, but it also reveals that under the surface the two women are intimately connected by virtue of their shared spinsterhood. It is with a sense of resignation that Mildred says of Dora's underwear, "It was even drearier than mine." At this feminine nadir, Rocky comes strolling into the kitchen in his casual way, threading "his way through the lines of dripping garments," as Pym says, and causing consternation to Mildred. She is embarrassed to seem so unsexy in the presence of Rocky, to have the secret of intimate garments so crassly exposed. Rocky has no interest in these grim garments, however. His attention is all on the awkward single woman Dora, a target of opportunity who must be charmed as he has charmed Mildred before her, and the Wrens before Mildred.

Returning by train from an outing, Mildred and Dora actually encounter one of Rocky's Wrens. This shakes Mildred, and upon alighting from the train, in a scene that is both exquisitely funny and poignant, she waxes sentimental over the idea that it is better to have loved and lost, and goes so far as to begin quoting poetry to the prosaic Dora. Astonished and unable to respond in any meaningful way, Dora cuts her off by announcing that she needs to go to the Ladies' Room. Mildred, finding as she so often does that her inner life is out of step with the expectations of those around her, takes the opportunity to look in the mirror. "A glance at my face in the dusty ill-lit mirror was enough to discourage anybody's romantic thoughts," she sadly concludes.

Mirrors are mentioned throughout the book, bringing the theme of surface appearance versus the inner woman to the fore repeatedly. At the Learned Society Mildred tidies her hair, but the more glamorous Helena "began doing something to her eyelashes with a little brush." There is an implication that Helena is more sexually adventurous, which is borne out as she begins to sound Mildred on her feelings for Everard and Rocky.

Whether Mildred is looking into a mirror or watching other women at the mirror, there is always a sense of inadequacy or depression, or even alarm, as when Helena approaches the issue of Mildred's feelings for Rocky.

While we never find out whether Mildred buys herself some sexier undergarments, we know that she makes some efforts to improve her outward appearance. Among other things, she starts taking more care with her makeup, a quintessentially feminine way to increase sexual attractiveness. When Mildred is faced with the revelation of Julian Malory's engagement to Mrs. Gray, the crisis is intensified by Mrs. Gray's demand that Mildred take Winifred Malory into her own home. Mildred makes a definite refusal, but in her initial shock, she is riveted on Mrs. Gray's face, seeing her clearly as a two-faced woman. Mrs. Gray's "penetrating eyes" and "pointed" teeth promise attack, while her "smooth, apricot" skin, so perfectly made up, shows surface perfection and beauty. Mildred's shaken reaction to this encounter is familiar to most women. She heads for a department store and starts frantically looking at makeup. "I did not feel that I could ever acquire a smooth apricot complexion," she says, "but I could at least buy a new lipstick." She may not want to marry Julian Malory, but neither does she want to look less attractive than the woman who snared him.

The result is wonderfully revealing: Hawaiian Fire! The salesgirl may look doubtful, but Mildred is determined to have the volcanic color. What visions of flames erupting! Fiery soul, fiery anger, fiery lips! "Hawaiian Fire indeed!" Mildred chides herself. "Nothing more unsuitable could possibly be imagined." But then, "I began to smile and only just stopped myself from laughing out loud..." In that moment, we see Mildred's spirit triumphant over the one who would try to keep an excellent woman down.

Of course this mood can't last for long. Mildred has to go to the bathroom. Yes, it happens to all of us. As we follow her into the Ladies' Room, we are confronted by a hellacious scene of women desperately trying to hold onto their youth and sex appeal as they do battle with their faces in the mirror. They seem to Mildred to be stabbing at themselves. Against these are set the women who have already given up the fight, slumped over in fatigue and resignation. They remind one of the frail elderly in nursing homes, slumped over in their chairs. This is a scene of privacy, but it is no scene of comfort or restoration. In this inner sanctum, the inner desperation of these women is revealed. Mildred recalls lines from the Old Testament, reminding her of the impermanence of human life as against the eternal truth of God: "All flesh is but as grass." Indeed. And thus steadied, she is ready for her next encounter.

When on her way home she meets Julian and has to endure his heavy-handed sentimentality and fatuousness, a peek into her market basket reveals her Hawaiian Fire now jostling her respectable English gentlewoman's groceries, cod, peas, wholemeal bread, and soap powder. Now the erotic fire has to be balanced and even overcome by sturdy common sense. The Christian virtues of forbearance and prudence have to come to the fore as Mildred trails into the church to avoid giving offense or causing gossip.

This peek into Mildred's market basket gives us a key to one of the big questions of the book, perhaps *the* big question. What happens to Mildred's Hawaiian Fire? We don't hear of her wearing it, and it disappears from view. *But she has it*, she has that erotic fire. I am using *erotic* here in its largest sense, to refer to life force, the inner creative fire, passion, connectivity. How does it get expressed? Through flames, a great procession by torchlight? Through Anglo-Catholic incense? Through the fascination of going over to Rome? Through fascinating a handsome charmer?

It is easy to miss this question because Barbara Pym makes the story so funny for us. In addition, she uses three stock female characters, upon which she has built Mildred, Helena, and Allegra, to bring forward this question: a spinster, so drab, too sad; a rapacious widow; and a brassy career gal, out in the world being exposed to men who are not her husband.

It is easy to see how female eroticism gets deformed by the self-serving agendas of Allegra Gray and Helena Napier, but where does that leave Mildred? Must it be a life of unflinching service to others with nothing coming back for herself? We see how well that has worked out for Winifred Malory. Her inner fire is expressed through immature emotionalism and vague girlish romanticism. Where is Mildred's Hawaiian Fire? Can it express itself through domesticity, or through the traditional feminine accoutrements of new hats, silver plates, and suede-bound books of Christina Rossetti's poetry? Through worship? Can it have a valid place alongside these things, as it does in the market basket? How does that work out in daily life? This is a conundrum, and Mildred is trying to solve it.

In the very next chapter, we see Mildred's marketing again when Everard Bone takes her for a drink, asks her to intervene with Helena, and then invites her to dine with his mother. There is no Hawaiian Fire in these scenes. Instead, Mildred is "hatless and stockingless in an old cotton dress and cardigan." Her marketing is in a string bag, to which Mildred as narrator keeps referring. Why the string bag? Why the repeated references to it (six in all)? Is it to underline the limpness of Mildred's appearance? Is it so unutterably dreary to have a loaf of bread in a string bag? Or is it that the string bag reveals what is inside of it? The inner revealed: the humble loaf is sharing space with a doorstep of a religious biography. It's not just any biography either, but the life of a man who "went over to Rome." She tries to invoke Omar Khayyam, but this ersatz date (like her appearance) is not romantic, and in fact demands are going to be placed on her that will perplex her and strain her nerves. Nevertheless, in this scene where

Mildred's legs, loaf, and reading are alike laid bare, she and Everard make progress in their relationship. It starts to become a living thing, in contrast to her friendship with Julian Malory, which has deteriorated into misunderstanding and cliché.

In the action that surrounds the breakup of the Napiers' marriage, Rocky finally does see Mildred's underwear. He is once more in her kitchen, as Mildred is insisting on feeding him some lunch, and he begins to take her dry laundry off the line, joking about the garments. Mildred is impervious to embarrassment at this point, her common sense coming to her rescue. Rocky *must* act childish in his distress, and she just lets it go as she concentrates on preparing the meal. For the moment, he is the man-child, and she must take care of him. There seems to be no erotic charge in his handling of her clothing, and she won't allow herself to feel belittled either. At times when Rocky is not turning the full force of his charm on her, Mildred does manage to see him temporarily in a different light.

Responding to the crisis of Rocky's and Helena's separation, Mildred spends hours on chores, both in her kitchen and the Napiers'. Not only are there mountains of dishes to be washed, with the men dirtying them again as soon as they are put away, but there are tea towels to be boiled and a plate rack to be scrubbed. In her tension and desire to be doing something to make things better, Mildred loses track of the routine of her life, in which Mrs. Morris will reliably appear on the morrow, expecting to clean the usual mess the Napiers leave. Of course it takes a lot of work to clean up this mess, and perhaps it never is as neat and tidy as we like our kitchens and our endings to be.

The untidiness of the separation continues with back-and-forth about whose furniture is whose, resulting in a letter from Rocky to Mildred, which she broods over for a bit. The most striking thing about the letter, however, seems to be its revelation that Everard Bone broke Rocky's blue casserole dish. Mildred says, "I could not imagine Everard Bone breaking a casserole! It was a silly trivial thing, but every time I thought of it I smiled, sometimes when I was by myself in a street or in a bus." Here we see the first clear indication of Mildred's interest in Everard as more than a casual acquaintance, and her thoughts revolve around the mystery of the casserole. In fact, despite his aloof manner, Everard is frequently associated in Mildred's mind with the domestic imagery of cooking. For example, early in Mildred's acquaintance with him, she is thinking about him as she washes her dishes. She says, "I began to laugh, bending over the frying-pan. There was certainly nothing romantic about *him*, but was he perhaps just a little splendid?"

(This is also one of many instances when Everard provokes a smile or secret chuckle from Mildred. Despite his handsome exterior, he is rather conventional and even prim, and this seems to tickle the outwardly plain but inwardly fanciful Mildred. Opposites attract, or at least drift into each other's orbit and feel comfortable there!)

As Mildred lunches with Everard Bone after the Napiers' separation, he begins to talk about marrying. The domestic imagery recurs as Mildred objects that he should "not set out to look for somebody to marry as if you were going to buy a saucepan or a casserole." Again she tries to imagine how Everard came to break Rocky's casserole. It seems he tried to pick up the hot dish without an oven cloth. This ordinary event seems to humanize the rather "splendid" Everard in Mildred's mind, and despite feeling put down as the type of woman who always has an oven cloth handy (not that Everard puts her down, this is purely Mildred's anxiety speaking), she is able to ask about the Not Impossible She that Everard would contemplate marrying. Although he is without charm of manner and never pays the slightest attention to what Mildred is wearing (or to her string bag), Everard nevertheless makes it discretely clear that he (like

the more flamboyant Rocky) is aware of women as sexual beings. This is a pivotal point in their relationship, as he reveals that he might like to marry an excellent woman.

As the conflicts in Mildred's life begin to resolve, the imagery related to her private life reflects this. When near the end of the novel the new neighbors arrive, they turn out to be *suitable* rather than disturbing, and their suitability and dullness is underlined by their separate roll of toilet paper and their rota for cleaning the bath. They are nice, friendly women. Their relationship with each other seems the epitome of stability. At this point it hardly matters, however. Mildred is going to be moving on into a new and nominally fuller life.

Her relationship with Everard has now progressed through a refusal to cook his meat, to another luncheon, and finally to dinner at his apartment. Her nervous and somewhat defiant preparations mark it as a momentous occasion in her mind, yet she reverts to the casserole dish and oven cloth to break the ice. Despite her gentle teasing, Mildred really has some ambivalence about these items in relation to Everard. Although she is concerned not to look like someone who could make an index, she notes that, "No woman is at her best when taking something out of the oven." When Everard's proposal that Mildred do his proofs and indexing stands in for a marriage proposal, Mildred is finally able to see herself as a bride, not however floating down the aisle in a fashionable gown and with apricot-tinted skin, but bending over his sink, peeling his potatoes. This scene with Everard forms a stark contrast to the farewell scene with the Napiers, with its Italian inscription romantically etched into glass with Helena's engagement diamond. Farewell to romance!

So we reach the end of the novel, having seen Mildred through heartache, boredom, devotion, stress, annoyance, and amusement. Oh, and Hawaiian Fire. The issues of the shared bathroom and the divided heart have now been resolved with the advent of the new neighbors, and our initial view of Mildred by the dustbin with her potato peelings is balanced at the end by a look forward to future potato peelings in a new home. And where is Mildred's Hawaiian Fire? The only answer we get from Barbara Pym is this: for Mildred, all is changed, and all continues on in its usual pattern.

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