

## **Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Pain of Idleness under Cover of Sleek Wealth**

**Kristin G. Kelly**

At some point, life must be about more than tea and shopping. Most of us are forced into this realization sooner rather than later, but Wilmet Forsyth, at the dawn of her thirty-third year (Jesus' age at crucifixion), is just beginning to feel the pain of a life without any real obligations. *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym's 1958 novel, and Philip Larkin's favorite, traces protagonist Wilmet Forsyth's quest for purpose in life as she wearies of luxury and idleness.

At this point, I should mention that the first part of my title, "Don't Get Too Comfortable," co-opts that of a favorite book by author David Rakoff. His title is infinitely more specific and ambitious: *Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, the Torment of Low Thread Count, the Never-Ending Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems*.<sup>1</sup> As you may have guessed, the essays in the volume by Rakoff characterize Americans as a nation of Wilmetts, only much worse. He is highly critical of the excesses to which Americans have become accustomed, and though Wilmet Forsyth would eschew the gaudy American excess Rakoff decries, she does maintain a level of material comfort that may be neither mentally healthy nor ultimately sustainable.

Wilmet is sheltered by class, certainly, and the infantilization with which most of her friends and family collude. When she begins to question her own idleness and expresses feelings of worthlessness, those close to her, even the notoriously plainspoken Sybil, soothe her ruminations with observations such as "You seem to fill your days quite happily." If she wanders aimlessly through an expensive grocery filling her basket with "any expensive delicacy that happened to catch my eye," Sybil simply calls these "Wilmet's wanderings." Wilmet wanders throughout London's tonier shops and throughout much of her young life, looking for any experience that does not ask too much of her and provides mild stimulation, for after her involvement with the WRNS in Italy, Wilmet has had very few red letter dates.

Thus, she is often bored (there is almost always too much time before tea with Miss Prideaux or Mr. Bason) but usually unwilling to paint herself as such, fearing censure from those who will not make excuses for her. In the back of her mind may be the sentiment John Berryman expresses so well: "Ever to confess you're bored/means you have no/Inner Resources."<sup>2</sup> She lacks adult experiences—she has been married, yes, but has had no lovers before her marriage, has borne no children, has suffered no career crises, and has endured no major conflict except the burgeoning sense of uneasiness she now feels at her lack of experience. Wilmet openly chastises herself for being naïve as well. For example, when Mr. Coleman comes to speak to her about Mr. Bason's theft of Father Thames' Faberge egg (on the same evening, we later find out, when Rodney sits with Miss Bates on a Regency sofa), Wilmet feels particularly useless, marking time until Sybil and Rodney return home so that she can share her news with them and ask for their qualified opinions on the theft (or borrowing, however one sees it):

Now I could only wait rather impatiently for Sybil or Rodney to come home. They, with their greater experience of what is known as the seamy side of life, would no doubt be able to decide what was the best course of action to follow. Sybil's work at the Settlement, and Rodney's at the Ministry and with his men in the Army, had equipped them better than my sheltered years at home and my brief spell of gaiety serving my country in the Wrens. I began to be ashamed of my lack of experience—I had not had a lover before I married, I had no children, I wasn't even asked to clean the brasses or arrange the flowers in church.

She seeks to expand her experience by becoming acquainted with Piers' theoretically sad and seamy existence, and she yearns to be Piers' savior and object of his adoration. Much to her chagrin, Piers does not allow her to play either role. In fact, Piers serves another purpose, according to Robert Emmet Long:

Piers's name seems inspired by William Langland's medieval poem *Piers Plowman*, which deals with the difficulties involved in achieving personal salvation, particularly as they take the form of distractions of the materialistic life. Piers Longridge could not be called a religious figure, but he does have a quasi-religious function in the novel in drawing Wilmet away from her proprietary and limiting understanding of existence toward a more 'reverent' one in which pride is abnegated.<sup>3</sup>



One May afternoon, she is to meet Piers in the park. She rolls all her romantic giddiness up into a ball and exclaims about the lupins: "How I should love to get right in among them and smell their warm peppery smell!" To her warm weather exclamations, Piers retorts, "You're talking like one of the cheaper women's magazines." Instead of a romantic assignation in the balmy air, she meets Keith, Piers' lover. Keith is most certainly *not* "a colleague from the press;" Piers reminds her that she is the one who first created this fiction. Meeting Keith is a turning point for Wilmet, who can no longer imagine herself a flawless, sleek goddess. When she expresses shock that Piers might actually associate with a magazine model such as Keith, Piers further berates her and pricks her solipsistic bubble. Truly exasperated now, he explains that *someone* must pose for knitting patterns and women's magazines. Wilmet assents but adds that it should not be "people one actually *knows*." Wilmet's classist ideals shake as Piers explains:

'Not people *you* know, you mean, but there *are* others in the world—in fact quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world.'

Wilmet grows quiet and upset as Piers partly apologizes but adds that Wilmet is indeed rather *less* than human sometimes:

‘I’m sorry,’ he said more gently. ‘Perhaps I’ve gone too far. After all I didn’t really mean to imply that you’re to blame for what you are. Some people are less capable of loving their fellow human beings than others,’ he went on in an almost academic way, ‘it isn’t necessarily their fault.’

Wilmet is forced to acknowledge the more unsavory aspects of her character.

## II.

Wilmet’s great friend Rowena, Piers’ sister, is much more forgiving and accepting of Wilmet’s vision, although she does ask her pointedly if she minds not having children (children being the most certain deflector of inquiry about a woman’s purpose in life). Wilmet responds candidly saying that she minds the lack of children a little: “It makes one feel rather useless. Still, there’s plenty to occupy my time.” Wilmet does not say that she yearns for a child to love, teach, and nurture, but she does mind the awkwardness that not having a child occasions—so much breath expended to explain how one’s existence as a woman is still valid. Rowena responds with energy and assurance: “Oh, surely. You would never be idle, you’re so much more intelligent than I am, anyway.”

What intelligence has to do with propensity to idleness is not immediately clear, although what Wilmet laments the lack of has less to do with seeking a houseful of children or meaningful academic stimulation (she cares little about her Portuguese lessons beyond studying Piers for clues to his private life) and more with feeling useful in some lasting way that might ease the guilty emptiness that seems to grow each year, like a tumor.

Her feelings of inadequacy are heightened, and flashes of anger (at herself, I believe) appear as Wilmet and Rowena are preparing for a cocktail party that Rowena promises will be no treat, just “the same old people we owe drinks to.” As the two women dress, Rowena remarks that she should probably do something about her rough-looking hands. Wilmet’s reaction contains a touch of violence:

I hate coloured nail varnish myself, though I could not but agree that Rowena’s hands did need something. Even though she had a reasonable amount of domestic help they looked stained and rough, the nails uncared for, hardly even clean. But suddenly, from studying them with critical detachment, I found myself remembering her hands as they had been when we were young and gay Wren officers in Italy. The hand that Rocky Napier had once held on the balcony of the admiral’s villa had been soft and smooth, delicately pink-tipped, like those in Laurence Hope’s *Indian Love Lyrics*... My eyes filled with tears, both at the memory of the song and of Rowena’s hands as they used to be. Perhaps it was the contrast of the rough little hands with the elegant black dress that so moved me, and the feeling that they had done so many more worthwhile things than my own which were still as soft and smooth as they had ever been.

Wilmet stands in harsh judgment of the time she has spent since her Italian adventure, the days that have left her hands perfectly soft and supple, as elegant as the mole-colored velvet

dress and Victorian garnet necklace and earrings that she will wear to the cocktail party. Her hands tell too much of the stasis of her life, nothing worn down or abraded, nothing shaped or learned.

### III.

Once, considering extreme measures to combat idleness, Wilmet even imagines herself taking tea in regular intervals in a cozy office, though these office fantasies are ephemeral, and the ever-realistic Sybil reminds her that perhaps one of the reasons her son (“Noddy”) does not want her to take a job is the fear that she might become one of those formidable women who mysteriously manages both family and important work at the Ministry. Sybil goes on to relate one of the most vivid (to my mind) cautionary tales about working women:

I read in the paper the other day of a woman civil servant who was discovered preparing Brussels sprouts behind a filing cabinet—poor thing, I suppose she felt it would save a precious ten minutes when she got home.

Mundane office work is of course not an option, but Wilmet is not enamored of charity work either, and she is rather bored by the ritual goodness exemplified by Mary Beamish and others at the Settlement. In fact, Mary provides the most uncomfortable contrast to Wilmet’s life of material luxury; she is a perfect foil. In no scene is the contrast between characters clearer than the one in the dress shop. Wilmet has come along, at Mary’s request, to help her pick out a new dress, “a sort of wool dress suitable for parish evening occasions.” Wilmet is abundantly aware of the contrast Mary provides, for she is sharply critical of herself:

And I bought as many clothes as I wanted in all the most becoming styles and colours, gave a little money to the church and none at all to charitable organizations. The contrast was an uncomfortable one and I did not wish to dwell on it.

Yet however uncomfortable Mary Beamish makes Wilmet feel, Wilmet will not consider becoming Mary Beamish. As Francis-Noël Thomas puts it so memorably, Wilmet “cannot bear to participate in the wholesome hideousness that seems to be the hallmark of ‘good works.’”<sup>4</sup> She must find another outlet for self-expression other than blood-letting and serving fish to old people.

Her mother-in-law, Sybil, likewise provides a foil to Wilmet’s indecision and lack of passion:

[Sybil] had been in youth, and still was, passionately interested in archaeology, and the big table in the basement kitchen was often covered in pie-dishes full of pottery fragments waiting to be labeled and classified.

Thus Sybil, poor at flower arranging and not invested in other domestic arts, has a subject of passionate study in archaeology, and a companion, Professor Root, with whom to share this lifelong love. Wilmet is able to arrange flowers with a much more natural touch, but she remains listless and uncertain in most other endeavors, still not having found any real source of satisfaction in life. Her listlessness and uncertainty awaken in some readers a profound empathy,

for who has not at some point in life sought comfort in idleness or shopping? Isa Kapp even makes the argument that

In *A Glass of Blessings*, we are nearly at the end of the book before the full realization comes over us that Wilmet is more than a little vain as well as unbelievably blind. This heroine-narrator pampers herself with an infatuation for a moody fellow who likes her well enough but is more patently enamored of the effeminate youth he lives with. She persuades herself that her husband is stodgy and dull, when he is in fact balanced, humorous, and affectionate. Barbara Pym arranges for us to see Wilmet's egocentricity and not like her less, but more, because we are privy to her weakness; and she arranges for her heroine to acknowledge it without becoming dismal.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that the full weight of Wilmet's complete absorption with herself comes much sooner than "nearly at the end of the book," but I agree that Pym creates Wilmet with such deftness that we as readers allow her to glide through her cushioned, narcissistic world without thought of revolting against her routine material indulgences and her plans for a winter program of aggressive flirting. In fact, we are rather looking forward to following her success in this program.

With Harry's infatuation and the promise of other afternoon walks in the park by the furniture depository with Piers (in which Wilmet is by turns fascinated and obsessed with fine furniture which might have decayed, as intelligence and character might), Wilmet's new year seems suddenly promising, although stating her new objectives bluntly proves awkward: 1) bask in the adulation of your best friend's husband and 2) continue



promising entanglements with that same friend's brother, Piers. It is a problematic agenda but provides cheer all the same. Coupled with new promises to Mary to give blood, Wilmet sees herself coming alive again:

I had the pleased and comfortable feeling I used to have after parties in Italy when I had been admired and cherished. But now, of course, it was rather different. Still, there could be no harm in having lunch with Harry or walking with Piers in the park. I could show Harry what a good wife Rowena was; and as for Piers, drifting and rootless, perhaps often drunk, it might be that my friendship could be beneficial to him. It seemed an excellent winter programme. Then, for no apparent reason, I remembered my promise to Mary Beamish to join the panel of blood donors. I saw myself lying on a table, blood pouring from a vein in my arm into a bottle which, as soon as it was full, would be snatched away and rushed

to the hospital to save someone's life. There seemed at that moment no limit to what I could do.

The idea of providing blood, red and life-giving, placates Wilmet for a brief time, although when she wakes at Rowena's the next morning after her euphoric selfless imaginings, anticlimax inevitable follows.

#### IV.

Church is her temporary antidote to ennui and misgiving. With numerous services, many of them accommodating even late risers, St Luke's provides a sense of connection and a taste of the everlasting for Wilmet. At one point, as Wilmet is contemplating how she will add a sense of purpose to her life, her mind drifts:

For a moment I even toyed with the idea that I might go and live in the clergy house and look after the priests. Then, of course, I remembered that I was married and could hardly leave Rodney even if I did nothing very much in the way of housekeeping for him.

The happy circumstance of being able to suggest Mr. Bason (unsuited for the Ministry) as domestic help for the clergy house provides relief to Wilmet. Although Rodney feels that Bason might not be "just the thing" at any job, he allows that Wilmet might be right in at least suggesting him to the priests. Wilmet is overwhelmingly hopeful that she might provide the solution to the priests' vexing housekeeping problem. She imagines the glories that will follow:

'How wonderful if it were the answer to all our prayers,' I said. 'Father Thames might announce it from the pulpit one Sunday morning. How proud I should feel—as if there were some justification for my life after all!'

Wilmet makes this pronouncement aloud to an audience of both Rodney and Sybil in the very last sentence of the chapter. To Wilmet's hopeful exclamation that she might find meaning in her life through recommending domestic help, there is the silence of the end of the chapter.

To be honest, the clergy, whether provided with excellent domestic help or not, are probably not the answer to Wilmet's existential crisis. St. Luke's, though comfortably high, is led by clergymen who don't seem particularly theologically engaged, but in church-going Wilmet sets herself apart from "the respectable indifference of her husband, from the 'bleakly courageous agnosticism' of her formidable mother-in-law, and from the culture and habits of almost all of the people she knows."<sup>4</sup> Wilmet's adamant church-going serves as a sign of her quest for individuality and meaning.

The fact that she has chosen St. Luke's, home to clergy who "have a sense of urgency only about such things as finding a new housekeeper or finding lodging for a new assistant"<sup>4</sup> may be significant. Here, Wilmet is not pushed into any spiritually demanding territory; in fact, we have little knowledge of Wilmet's inner spiritual quest, her Dark Night of the Soul, if in fact there is such a journey and such a night. At the end of the book, Wilmet has traveled just slightly closer to the clergy house, but the fact that she has her own home now, and at least must make

the effort to decide on furnishings and drapery may be a strong indication that she is stepping out to begin her revitalized New Life.



The clues we have to Wilmet's desire for the New Life come in her musings about Holy Week and the New Fire of Easter. She mentions a swelling of hope coming after the hard months of February and March, Lenten months which are supposed to try the spirit and deepen the belief:

It was not until Holy Saturday, when the flame from Bill Coleman's cigarette lighter efficiently kindled the New Fire of Easter in the dark church, that any feeling of hope rose in me. The lights revealed a bough of golden forsythia decorating the font, and life seemed to stretch out before me new and exciting.

Thus we see that Wilmet responds to the New Fire with hope and some optimism for the days ahead. Glowing with new light also are the golden forsythias, full of hope, that appear in Wilmet's surname. We learn more about her need for hope:

April was balmy and delicious, and cruel in the way the poet did mean, mingling memory and desire. The memory was of other springs, the desire unformulated, unrecognized almost, pushed away because there seemed to be no place for it in the life I had chosen for myself.

## V.

Perhaps Wilmet might have come to these musings about meaning and desire earlier if she had not been so entirely sheltered. But Rodney inhabits the nursery with her. Besides his solid work at the Ministry, Rodney has little responsibility. He and Wilmet live as children in Sybil's house. Sybil still calls her son "Noddy," and Noddy and Wilmet must only make it home for supper and summarize their days. This is not an altogether unpleasant existence, but Sybil soon pushes them out of the nest when she surprisingly, at what Wilmet considers an advanced age (69 years old), decides to marry Professor Root. Then Sybil's children will have to find their own house, a fact about which they feel querulous at first:

Later that evening, when we were alone, Rodney began to talk in a rather gloomy way about Wembley, Ealing, Walton-on-Thames, Beckenham, and other outlying parts of London. He dwelt in turn upon the horrors of the Central Line, the impossibility of getting to Waterloo or Charing Cross in the rush hour, the inaccessibility of London Bridge or Cannon Street from the Ministry.

Rodney and Wilmet get over their shock in time, and they purchase a home "a stone's throw from Sybil's house and a good hundred yards nearer the clergy house." Theirs is not a complete independence, but Pym implies the possibility of marital renewal. But first Wilmet must weather another shock.

Wilmet is stunned late in the novel when Rodney confesses he had taken a certain Miss Bates (Prudence Bates of *Jane and Prudence*) to dinner and had sat with her on her uncomfortable Regency sofa. Wilmet and Rodney share a great laugh about this, Wilmet managing to slip in the lunches with Harry and Piers she had likewise forgotten to mention, but then Wilmet's melancholy reappears:

But after I had stopped laughing I began to think that perhaps it wasn't so funny after all. I had always regarded Rodney as the kind of man who would never look at another woman. The fact that he could—and had indeed done so—ought to teach me something about myself, even if I was not quite sure what it was.

Wilmet's realization about Rodney is a further catalyst for self-knowledge. Wilmet will be pushed into the knowledge that she knows, in fact, very little: she must see that she willed herself into believing that Piers lived with a colleague from the press and not a handsome young man who fusses about him. She did not prophesy the impending marriage of Mary Beamish and Marius Ransome, and she certainly never imagined her husband sitting on Regency furniture with another quite young woman. Her flirting and wandering left her unprepared to imagine these happenings because they took place completely outside her purview. She had no control over them although she wished for this control. Mary Beamish senses Wilmet's diminishment:

'Well, you seem different since I came out of the convent.' She hesitated. 'As if—well—you'd been disappointed in some way about something, perhaps lost confidence in yourself a bit. And yet I don't see how that could be.'

Wilmet provides a bleak assessment:

No, she would not see, and I could hardly tell her. It was funny to remember that Harry had once said something rather like it when we had been having lunch together, but he had seen my air of sadness as something appealing. To have Mary notice it made me feel dreary and depressed.

Then Wilmet cuts closer to the bone: "Life isn't all it's cracked up to be," I said rather frivolously. 'And then sometimes you discover that you aren't as nice as you thought you were—that you're in fact rather a horrid person, and that's humiliating somehow.' Suddenly, the reader notices that the novel has replicated in one life what happens in so many others: endless years of thinking well of oneself and one's charms, and then a painful thawing and realization that one is not the center of the universe. It is possible to come back from these painful awakenings, as Wilmet will, but the journey will only begin with the New Fire and a certain gratitude for blessings once discounted or completely ignored. Skeptical readers should remember that it is Wilmet who identifies the George Herbert quotation to which Mary alludes at Marius Ransome's induction. Mary is radiant: 'Oh Wilmet, life is perfect now! I've everything I could possibly want. I keep thinking that it's like a glass of blessings—life, I mean.'

Wilmet knows that her life is potentially just as full. George Herbert's "The Pulley" is the overarching text of her life:

So strength first made a way;



Then beautie flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure:  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure  
Rest in the bottome lay.<sup>6</sup>

Wilmet has been offered a glass of blessings overflowing with beauty and pleasure, but God has wisely withheld the rest. She has gradually, drawn as if by a pulley, come closer to authentic human experience not cushioned by indulgence and luxury. She, due to her restlessness and misplaced desires, has suffered humiliation and recognition in the sense of the Greek playwrights. She has managed to face her disappointments and has turned to her husband, not all that dull, and moved even 100 yards nearer her church. There will soon be a new priest at St. Luke's, and Wilmet may enter a new season, strengthened by the New Fire and living out new convictions. The restlessness occasioned by idleness and luxury has had purpose in her life because she did not ultimately deny her waywardness and concomitant misery. God has drawn her closer to the possibility of a fruitful life as she has drawn closer to Him.

In "The Pulley" God also says  
Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:  
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,  
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse  
May tesse him to my breast.<sup>6</sup>

*A Glass of Blessings* is full of Wilmet's richness and weariness, but the novel ends with Wilmet's hope as she looks ahead to the days to come.

*Dr. Kristin Kelly teaches English at Gainesville State College in Oakwood, Georgia. She has been an obsessive Pym reader for at least a dozen years after discovering Pym while writing her dissertation on T.S. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Her current research interest is particularly un-Pymish: the combat experience in literature.*

### Works Cited

- <sup>1</sup>Rakoff, David (2005) *Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, the Torment of Low Thread Count, the Never-Ending Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems*. New York: Doubleday.
- <sup>2</sup>Berryman, John (1969) "Dream Song 14." In: *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- <sup>3</sup>Long, Robert Emmet (1987) *Barbara Pym*. New York: Ungar
- <sup>4</sup>Thomas, Francis-Noël (2006) Philip Larkin, Barbara Pym, and the Accident of Literary Fame. *New England Review* 27(2):8-26
- <sup>5</sup>Kapp, Isa (1983) Out of the Swim with Barbara Pym. *The American Scholar* 52(2):237-242.
- <sup>6</sup>Herbert, George (1633) "The Pulley." In: *The Temple. Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Cambridge: Thos. Buck and Roger Daniel, printers to the Universitie.