The experience of 'not having':
Failure to connect in Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* and other novels

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Letty Crowe "had always been an unashamed reader of novels," wrote Barbara Pym in her 1977 book, *Quartet in Autumn*. "But if she hoped to find one which reflected her own sort of life she had come to realise that the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction." This appeared as true to Pym as it did to Letty, and she wrote twelve novels in part to fulfill this desire to see her "own sort of life" reflected in the fiction of her time.

Her novels revolved around women who, like her, had neither spouse nor children and structured their lives around work and friends. And like Pym, their heroines are best remembered for their humor, wit, and dignified acceptance of disappointments great and small. Not much happens in these books. Middle-aged and elderly protagonists prepare and eat meals, take walks, and interact with others—sparingly, in the case of *Quartet in Autumn.* Sometimes they dwell wistfully on the past. This is what makes her decision to build entire novels around characters like Letty and Marcia a radical act. It's funny to think of Pym as a radical; she was hardly a firebrand. Yet it's bold to rely on such quiet characters to command a reader's attention. It's not action or plot but Pym's keen eye for the tragicomic details of social intercourse that enliven and propel her tales of uneventful lives.

In characterizing her work as radical I should note that she's considered by many to be anything but. In an admiring 2008 essay in *The Guardian*, the author Alexander McCall Smith described Pym's novels as being "about as far away as possible from engagement with the great political and social issues." Her work was widely considered capable and entertaining if lacking in scope and gravitas. But the human struggle to communicate and connect strikes her readers as an eminently worthy subject.

Published just three years before Pym died, *Quartet in Autumn* features a cast of classic Pym characters: four elderly officer workers—Letty, Marcia, Edwin, and Norman—all of whom are still working at the book's beginning. By its end, two have retired and one has died. All are without partners; only one was ever married. Each has failed to connect on one or multiple levels with other human beings, and each leads a solitary life. The reasons for their failure to connect differ from character to character. Some of the novel's funniest and most poignant moments come from Letty's often painful self-awareness. There is a striking seamlessness between her inner world and the impression she makes on others.

How she is seen shapes who she is. Even in private, Letty always behaves appropriately: she doesn't own a television set, drink sherry in the middle of the day, or read novels in the morning. After snooping in Letty's bedroom, her elderly landlady, Mrs. Pope, grudgingly deems her "the ideal lodger." Letty's coworkers consider her "boringly straightforward…a typical English spinster about to retire to a cottage in the country, where she would…engage in church activities, [attend] meetings of the Women's Institute, and [do] gardening and needlework."

Her friend Marjorie—who, like Letty, is in her 60s, and, unlike Letty, possesses an "ample shape"—manages, briefly, to snag a younger suitor. On meeting the clothing-conscious and comparatively slender Letty,

Marjorie's suitor dismisses her friend as "Miss Something, a not very interesting person whose name he hadn't caught." For her part, Letty "knew that she was not a very interesting person," and takes pains at her own retirement party "not [to] go into too much boring detail with the young people who enquired graciously about her future plans." She is a "Christian lady" who struggles to explain to her disconcerting new landlord, a "vital, ebullient" Nigerian, "her own blend of Christianity—a grey, formal, respectable thing of measured observances and mild general undemanding kindness to all."

The brilliance of Pym's novel lies in the fact that what others see when they look at Letty is at once accurate and limited. She is indeed all of these things—a boring, respectable, timid spinster; an ideal lodger—but she is also more. She is alone but not friendless, nor entirely asocial. When she fails to connect with others, it is frequently a conscious choice. Part of Letty's failure to connect can be attributed to others' limited perception of her. Despite having vastly different characters and temperaments, Letty and her coworker Marcia are often lumped together in the larger world and in the minds of their male officemates.

The organization for which the women work regard it as a duty to provide a retirement party for them, yet their "status as ageing unskilled women did not entitle them to an evening party…it was felt that a lunchtime gathering" at which "only medium Cyprus sherry need be provided" would be "entirely appropriate." If the women feared that their retirement "might give some clue to their ages," Pym wrote, "it was not an occasion for embarrassment because nobody else had been in the least interested, both of them having long ago reached ages beyond any kind of speculation."

Women accustomed to being dismissed by others may perhaps be forgiven for failing to connect with them. Letty's and Marcia's colleagues assume that their needs in retirement "could not be all that great." Elderly women, after all, "did not need much to eat…" Reading the speech a reluctant deputy assistant director is tasked with delivering at their retirement party—hardly a festive occasion—one is filled with pity, bitter amusement, and mild indignation on the women's behalf:

> The point about Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory, whom we are met together to honour today, is that nobody knows exactly, or has ever known exactly, what it is that they do…. They have been—they are—the kind of people who work quietly and secretly, doing good by stealth…. Good, do I hear you ask? Yes, good, I repeat, and good I mean. In these days of industrial unrest it is people like Miss Ivory and Miss Crowe—[the names seemed to have got reversed, but presumably it didn't matter]—who are an example to us all. We shall miss them very much, so much so that nobody has been found to replace them….

The deputy assistant director, who needs a swig of sherry to get through this uninspiring oration, not only has no idea what the women do; he is unsure who is whom. They are irreplaceable only in the sense that it would be pointless to replace them; they do a mysterious type of women's work, "something to do with records or filing…the kind of thing that could easily be replaced by a computer." They are not even relics to him; they are people who never achieved any worldly significance at all. But it's because they're so easy to dismiss that Pym chose Letty and Marcia as heroines. She knew firsthand that what people see when they look at women of a certain age, if they look at them at all, is superficial and dismissive. It may not matter to the assistant deputy director whether he mixes up Letty and Marcia, but it mattered to Pym.

It wasn't always easy to ensure that it mattered to readers as well. Although her novels were well-received and regularly published from 1950 to 1963, and though she continued to produce high-quality work at a steady pace between 1963 and 1977, Pym was devastated by her inability to publish at all throughout the latter period.

Her friends, family, and former publisher assured her that her work was rejected during this time not because its quality had declined, but because its subject matter was out of step with the preoccupations of the time. The world of her novels was far removed from sex, drugs, and social revolution. “I get moments of gloom and pessimism when it seems as if nobody could ever like my kind of writing again,” she wrote in 1970.

Pym certainly did not fit the profile of a radical of that era. But in foregrounding the stories of women—and in the case of *Quartet in Autumn*, men, too—whose lives were generally considered of little importance, she was staging her own quiet rebellion.

In a sexist, youth-obsessed society, women like Marcia and Letty—and, to a lesser extent, men like Norman and Edwin—are routinely consigned to loneliness and obscurity. And it’s the habit of women like Letty to consider their loneliness the natural result of personal failings. Following her newly engaged friend Marjorie out of a restaurant, Letty wonders “where in all these years she, Letty, had failed.” When her new landlord, Mr. Olatunde, moves in, Letty feels like a drowning man, “with the events of her past life unrolling before her”:

> How had it come about that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1914 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians? It must surely be because she had not married. No man had taken her away and immured her in some comfortable suburb where hymn-singing was confined to Sundays and nobody was fired with enthusiasm. Why had this not happened? Because she had thought that love was a necessary ingredient for marriage?… All those years wasted, looking for love!

Did Letty err in never marrying, or merely in assuming that love was a necessary precondition of marriage? Had she confused the convenience and security of marriage—of having, as her former landlady Miss Embrey had in that lady’s brother, a man “to arrange things”—with the elusive mystery of romantic love?

Earlier in the novel, Letty describes her failure to marry as a character flaw: “Love was a mystery she had never experienced. As a young woman she had wanted to love, had felt that she ought to, but it had not come about. This lack in her was something she had grown used to and no longer thought about…” In fact, it’s something to which her thoughts turn again and again. In the very beginning of the novel we see Letty eating a solitary lunch in a restaurant near her office and rebuffing another woman’s tacit social advances: “For all her apparent indifference [Letty] was not unaware of the situation. Somebody had reached out towards her. They could have spoken and a link might have been forged between two solitary people…. Once again Letty had failed to make contact.”

Later, when she confronts her Nigerian landlord about his noisy worship, she imagines how her officemates might have reacted to being invited, as she is, to join her landlord and his compatriots for hymn-singing and supper: “While she could imagine Edwin entering into the religious aspect of the evening and even taking part in the service, it might well be that Norman and Marcia, usually so set in their isolation, would in some surprising way have been drawn into the friendly group. Only Letty remained outside.”

Because Letty has the most comprehensive inner life of *Quartet in Autumn*’s major characters, it is Letty who readers know best by the novel’s end. Why is it also Letty, arguably the best-adjusted of the book’s odd quartet, who feels most keenly like a failure? Why is it Letty who wonders where she went wrong?

Even married women wind up alone. Letty’s friend Marjorie, who does marry, and is therefore seen as more socially successful, begins and ends the novel alone, first as a widow and finally as the jilted fiancée of a feckless younger man. But Letty sees the fact that Marjorie enjoyed male companionship for most of her adult life

as proof that Marjorie is not only capable of love, but worthy of it. As for Letty and Marcia, "In the past both…might have loved and been loved, but now the feeling that should have been directed towards husband, lover, child or even grandchild, had no natural outlet; no cat, dog, no bird, even, shared their lives and neither Edwin nor Norman had inspired love."

Is this passage wistful? Mournful? A touch self-pitying or, more likely, self-mocking? Marital love is as mysterious to Letty as it was to Pym: it must be inspired; it can't be found merely by looking; it is the only thing that can protect a gentlewoman of limited means from the indignity of sharing a house throughout adulthood and eventually dying alone in a rented room.

As a homeowner with a house of her own inherited from her late parents, Marcia presents an alternative vision of the unmarried woman's fate. But Marcia is mentally ill, someone who would now be labeled a hoarder, and she seems to derive no more pleasure or comfort from having an entire house to herself than Letty does from her rented rooms. Marcia, too, has failed to connect, and not just with potential suitors. Once both women are officially retired, Marcia rebuffs even Letty's half-hearted, obligatory suggestion that the two meet. Marcia has failed to connect because it's more essential to her well-being to keep her odd little world inviolate than it is to forge intimate relationships with other human beings. (This is a feeling not wholly unfamiliar to those of us who spend our days alone and trying to write.) Unlike Letty, Marcia does not blame herself for her friendlessness and lack of a romantic life, in part because it wouldn't occur to her to view these as failures. Marcia has what she seemingly always wanted: freedom from personal obligations and the time and solitude necessary to indulge her hoarding.

The solitude of the novel's male characters is a bit more mysterious. Edwin is the only one of the four main characters who was, at one point, married, but his wife died long ago and his memories of her are fading. By the time the novel takes place, he has "all the freedom that loneliness brings—he could go to church as often as he liked, attend meetings that went on all evening, store stuff for jumble sales in the back room…He could go to the pub or the vicarage and stay there till all hours." The list of activities in which Edwin is free to indulge now that his wife is gone is both comic and touching: what else besides going to church and grabbing the occasional pint is there for a respectable widower like Edwin to do with his time? Aside from his officemates, who aren't exactly friends, his only companion appears to be Father G., a local clergyman of whose congregation Edwin is a faithful member. He has a grown daughter and two grandchildren whom he sees regularly but infrequently. He spends most of his time at work or at church; the rest of it, alone.

In the sense that he has failed to make or maintain any close friendships, Edwin, too, has failed to connect—and yet, like Marcia, he does not seem especially unhappy about it. His friendlessness is not, for him, a source of worry—nor, having once been married, is his lack of a romantic partner. To some extent, his equanimity is unsurprising; he's a man, he was once married, and he exists in a time and place when 60-something was not considered young. He had a perfectly pleasant life, and now it's drawing to a close.

Norman, on the other hand, while not exactly yearning for more human contact, is periodically bitter about his circumstances. Outside of work, his only social outlet is getting together with a brother-in-law he doesn't much care for, and who doesn't much care for him. Although they do not enjoy each other's company, the two men are bound by a sense of duty; Norman feels "pleasantly virtuous" for going to visit Ken at the hospital, because, after all, poor Ken "has no one"—Norman's sister, who was Ken's wife, is dead, and their only child has emigrated to New Zealand. Ken, who is revealed at the beginning of the novel to have a girlfriend Norman hasn't

met yet, pities Norman for the same reason: that he has no one. Ken's is the more accurate impression; Norman never married and has no children, friends, or girlfriend. As a driving instructor, Ken has "a sort of pitying contempt" for the "unmanly," non-driving Norman. Yet the two men visit each other and spend holidays together.

As much mutual irritation and resentment as there is between the brothers-in-law, Norman appears to draw some small comfort from this family bond, however tenuous the connection. After all, having even a disliked brother-in-law means having someplace to go for Christmas. Norman returns to his solitary bed-sitting room "quite well satisfied with his lot" after sharing a Christmas meal with Ken and his girlfriend. (Having heard the lovebirds laughing in the kitchen while cleaning up after the meal, Norman isn't really envious, "his attitude being, 'sooner him than me.'") Norman is distrustful of women and skeptical of romantic entanglement. Though he is an inveterate complainer, he is more or less resigned to his solitary status. Because he does not seem to crave more social contact than he has, he cannot quite be said to have failed to connect; rather, he has chosen not to.

In the world of the novel, Norman and Marcia are, in some ways, considered a pair, as are Edwin and Letty. Norman and Marcia are both outwardly unhappy and frequently unpleasant people. Regardless of their inner thoughts and feelings, Edwin and Letty take more care to put others at ease.

The men, too, form a kind of pair; although they are alone and to some extent objects of concern, they are not considered, by themselves or others, nearly as pitiable as the women. When they are thought of by others, the men are assumed to be more or less fine, if lonely; when the women are thought of, it is with guilt and alarm.

One of the novel's sly points is that those most concerned with the women's plights—for example, Janice Brabner, the young woman whose visits to Marcia are always unwelcome—are also the quickest to rationalize away their guilt. When Marcia's neighbors, a young couple, invite her out of pity to join their family's Christmas celebration, none of them enjoy her company, and Marcia hardly enjoys being there. They are "all relieved when she suddenly got up and said she must go." When Marcia says that she will entertain herself on Boxing Day, her neighbors are "thankful that they need not do anything more about her Christmas."

Each of the novel's characters is thought of at some point as a person about whom something must be done. Marcia is the most problematic of the four, and the only one whose lonely death is described and not just foreshadowed. All the concern various characters express about Marcia and all their attempts to intervene, including the officious intrusions of Janice Brabner, turn out to be perfectly reasonable in the end. But is concern for the others justified? Or is it merely self-indulgent, a way for the characters with families to feel as pleasantly virtuous as Norman feels visiting Ken in the hospital? Despite worrying about her various social failures, the most prominent of which is her failure to marry, Letty is more or less content with her lot: "It was a comfortable enough life, if a little sterile, perhaps even deprived. But deprivation implied once having had something to be deprived of…and Letty had never really had anything much." Furthermore, she wonders, "might not the experience of 'not having' be regarded as something with its own validity?"

Pym's life, too, was an exercise in "not having"—or at least in not having what was considered for a woman of that period "a full life." She was comfortable, but not wealthy, and worked in an office to support her writing career. Unlike Letty, however, Pym enjoyed the constant companionship of a cherished younger sister with whom she shared a household for most of her life.

She began writing her first published novel, *Some Tame Gazelle,* very shortly after taking a degree in English literature at Oxford, and finished it in 1935, when she was only twenty-two years old. The book, which is eerily prescient, features two fifty-something unmarried sisters, Harriet and Belinda Bede, who share a cottage in

a small town in the English countryside. "It was never our particular intention," wrote Pym's sister Hilary, several years after Barbara's death, "in spite of the prophetic circumstances of *Some Tame Gazelle*…to live together, but it somehow turned out that from about 1938 right up until the time of her death in 1980 we were never apart for more than a year or so at a time."

As John Updike wrote in a 1979 edition of *The New Yorker,* "Miss Pym has been compared to Jane Austen, yet there is a virile country health in the Austen novels, and some vivid marital prospects for her blooming heroines." Austen is famous for concluding novels by marrying off their heroines; Pym preferred to end without nuptials, on a note of bittersweet wistfulness. Though Pym sometimes allowed her protagonists a rather tentative optimism ("it seemed as if I might be going to have what Helena called 'a full life' after all," thinks Mildred Lathbury at the end of *Excellent Women*), none of her characters can be described as living happily ever after.

Yet live they do, more or less contentedly, if not ecstatically. In her 1955 novel, *Less Than Angels,* another pair of sisters, Mabel and Rhoda—one widowed, one never married—share a house and a satisfactory life, devoid of sex but enriched by the easy companionship and minor irritations common to most long-term marriages. The same novel features another pair of women, the Misses Clovis and Lydgate, who live together but are not related; they are academics, the sort of mannish, pragmatic women who don't mind living untidily and eating most of their meals "out of tins." (One senses authorial judgment in the description of their shared flat, or perhaps merely bafflement at the idea that two women could bear, let alone thrive in, such circumstances; Pym herself was a fastidious housekeeper and an accomplished cook.)

Less Than Angels' Rhoda is another Pym creation whose life, like Letty's, is considered less full than other women's. She worries about her sister Mabel's inefficiency in the kitchen, insists that they wash up immediately after dinner and lay the table for the next morning's breakfast before bed, and sneaks downstairs after Mabel retires for the evening to correct her sister's placement of the silverware. Her harmlessly neurotic presence provides comic relief. Yet even Rhoda is granted a dignity so often lacking in contemporary portrayals of unmarried, middle-aged women: she is allowed feelings, including desire, and tiny moments of pathos that transcend her touchingly scrupulous attention to domestic matters. Pym is careful to show that Rhoda—while occasionally, in some cosmic way, disappointed—is far from unhappy in her everyday life. On coming to live with Mabel after the death of Mabel's husband, Gregory, we learn that:

> It was a very satisfactory arrangement and Rhoda was not in the least envious of her sister's fuller life, for now that they were both in their fifties there seemed to be very little difference between them. She would perhaps have liked what she called 'the experience of marriage,' a vague phrase which seemed to cover all those aspects which one didn't talk about, but she would not have liked to have had it with poor Gregory Swan.

Pym's letters and diaries reveal a woman whose overall happiness was complicated by periods of intense romantic longing and ordinary human loneliness. Of herself and a female friend, Pym wrote quite cheerfully in 1943, "Of course we're both pretty splendid. We both want the same kind of things. And fancy people not getting married and having children…if all else fails we can always start a teashop." A month later, her tone darkened: "When I got out of the train at Paddington in the twilight full of dim hurrying figures I felt about the most lonely person there. Oh, to be cherished and comforted at a journey's end." Yet at supper on the same evening of her lonely arrival in Paddington, Pym met a young Canadian officer who offered her a cigarette: "We got talking and he finished by paying for my meal."

Her unhappiest moments, nearly always brought on by loneliness or rejection, were often assuaged or

wholly reversed a week, a day, or even an hour later. As well as painful romantic disappointments, she experienced thrills, pleasure, and "heavenly" joy in the company of men. Her life was neither pitiable nor sexless, despite her sororal living arrangement. She embarked on several love affairs while a student at Oxford, including a tortured attachment to a man named Henry Harvey, the love of her life and the model for *Some Tame Gazelle*'s Henry Hoccleve. Nor was Pym as proper as her characters; in her diary she wrote of Henry's roommate catching her and Henry in bed, "reading 'Samson Agonistes'…with nothing on." As the then 21-year-old Barbara jauntily noted, it was "Really rather funny. I stayed to supper."

An Academic Question, which was published after her death, represents a rare attempt on Pym's part to assume the perspective of a woman whose circumstances were markedly different from her own. The novel's narrator, Caroline Grimstone, is not only married but a mother as well. In Chapter 15, two women who had just retired from jobs in London serve as Caroline's foil:

> They were rather nice, spinster sisters, one in her late fifties and the other just sixty. Their lives were busy in an admirable way, full of interest and the pleasure of having time to do the things they had always wanted to do. I regarded them with envy as they described alterations they were making to their garden and the motoring holiday in Shropshire they had planned for later in the year. They were still good-looking and one of them, I felt sure, had once been beautiful. They must have loved in their time, perhaps loved and lost and come through it unscathed.

This is a neat summary of Pym's apparent ambivalence about the married life she could only imagine. As lonely and wistful as her single characters occasionally are, married Caroline hardly fares better: her husband is dull, fussy, and unfaithful; her life as a professor's wife is tedious, stultifying, and intellectually barren. She loves her daughter but feels unfulfilled by motherhood. She envies the unmarried women's freedom and their apparently happy and productive lives. At the same time, she recognizes the social advantages of being married.

Dolly, another character in *An Academic Question*, is an older woman living alone who is more to be envied than pitied: she is beholden to no one, her needs and desires are primary, and she has far more freedom to indulge her eccentricities than the married women around her. Here is another Pym character who, despite never marrying or having children, is not loveless. As Caroline narrates, "Dolly had remained single, though she had always given me to understand that her life had not been without love. But now, in her sixties, she had grown away from human beings and only kept in touch with her former lovers for practical and material advantages; she was more moved by the sight of a hedgehog's little leg…than by any memory of a past love."

Though she was hardly insensible of its drawbacks, the joy of solitary living is a theme that recurs throughout Pym's work. *Less Than Angels'* Catherine joins Letty, Dolly, Rhoda, and the Bede sisters in not having had what was then termed "a full life"—and, in Catherine's case at least, enjoying the pleasures of a free and independent one. Pym seemed to view her own life in similar terms: "Pleasure and pain in an agreeable mixture. That's what I feel when I think of Oxford and my days at St. Hilda's," she wrote in her diary in 1935. The sentiment held sway throughout the rest of her life as well.

Like most writers, Pym coped with her emotions by recording them. Like her character Letty, she was self-aware to an often painful degree; she also drew comfort from self-mockery. When her beloved Henry Harvey married a Finnish woman named Elsie, Barbara was, in the words of her friend and biographer Hazel Holt, "badly hurt." But rather than ending her longstanding correspondence with Henry, she began sending the couple long, satirical letters—occasionally going so far as to send separate letters to the new Mrs. Harvey, whom she addressed as "My darling sister Elsie." In these letters she often adopted the persona of a lovelorn spinster.

While she sometimes felt like a lovelorn spinster, Pym was also conscious of exaggerating these feelings for comic and dramatic effect. “What a depressing letter I write to my dear sister!” she declared in a 1938 letter to Elsie. “She will say, ‘Oh, this Barbara, she is always weeping and ill-treated and suffering, *nicht wahr?*’ Whereas in reality, she is smoking, eating, drinking, using much lipstick, making new clothes, writing letters to dear friends, thinking out a new novel, reading nice poems…making plans for visiting a foreign country, and dreaming at night of somebody she loves very much.”

Pym’s real and fictional worlds were populated by women with the emotional resilience and resourcefulness required to live alone, or to care for themselves while sharing space with others. When their worlds are upended—for example, when Catherine’s live-in lover abandons her for a 19-year-old graduate student—they do not fall apart. Instead, they fix a strong cup of tea and pull themselves together. They are either “excellent women” (“excellent” being shorthand for proper, well-behaved, and virtuous) or trying very hard to be. They are full of the virtue John Updike praised in *The New Yorker* in 1979: “*Excellent Women*, arriving on these shores in a heyday of sexual hype, is a startling reminder that solitude may be chosen, and that a lively, full novel can be constructed entirely within the precincts of that regressive virtue, feminine patience.”

Some Tame Gazelle’s Belinda is a paragon of such virtue. Contrary to stereotype, she is neither pathetic nor repressed. She is witty, funny, well-dressed, and well-read; she leads a happy, full, and comfortable life. Like many of Pym’s middle-aged female characters she is not above or beyond romance, but she engages in other pursuits as well, including reading, cooking, discussing literature, and volunteering at her local church. Belinda’s heroism comes from her quiet acceptance of life’s indignities and her willingness to spare her family and friends the pain and embarrassment that acting on her emotions, such as her love of a married man, might bring. We wish the best for her precisely because she does not scheme, manipulate, or even advocate on her own behalf; we feel protective of a woman whose disappointments are so keenly felt and whose desires, so touchingly modest in scope, are nevertheless destined to remain unfulfilled. Like Letty, Belinda has, in her own way and for her own set of reasons, failed to connect, at least when it comes to romantic love. But she is not herself a failure.

The tenderness with which Pym treats characters like Belinda is laced with gentle mockery. Because she wrote her characters with herself and her loved ones in mind, her compassion is profound, yet she is unflinching and exact when it comes to honing in on their flaws. Her humor is incisive without being unkind; she knows just where to slip in the knife and how to do it without leaving a scar.

When *Quartet in Autumn*’s Janice Brabner first appears on Marcia’s doorstep, Janice’s opening gambit is,”Some of us at the Centre have been worrying about the lonely ones.” The next lines are classic Pym, simultaneously critical and forgiving of Janice’s tactlessness, while insisting on dignity even for the slightly mad Marcia: “Could she really have prepared that sentence, for this was what came out. Marcia gave her no encouragement.” Despite being the sane, high-functioning one in this encounter, it is Janice who has failed to connect. As is so often the case with Pym’s characters, she reaches out and misses by a mile.

Pym herself may have missed out on marriage, but she did not fail to connect with others. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1971, went into remission, then suffered a minor stroke resulting in a form of dyslexia that caused her to misspell most of her words while writing. The cancer returned several years after she retired and it was clear that this time, she was dying. She entered Sobell House, an Oxfordshire hospice, just after Christmas 1979 and died there on the morning of January 11, 1980.

“Throughout her [final] illness she had maintained a cheerful stoicism, very down-to-earth and practical,

never self-pitying," wrote her biographer Hazel Holt. "She was sustained, certainly, by her strong faith and still able, as she had been throughout her life, to draw comfort from small pleasures and ironies…this is, perhaps, the greatest gift she has bequeathed to all who read her." She was not just stoic, but sanguine. She fought against dullness in life and resisted death. In the end, she accepted her fate without being resigned to it.

Pym made the lives of socially marginal women like herself matter, in spite and even because of their mundanity. She imbued their lives with meaning, relevance, and a quiet sort of heroism. For a woman whose most enduring characters are solitary misfits, and one who could easily have felt like a failure by the standards of her time, Pym was determined to persevere. She kept writing despite 14 years of rejection; she flirted and fell in love, despite never marrying; and she kept up her spirits—or at least a stiff upper lip—while dying of cancer. "Still struggling on—perhaps a little better!" she wrote in a 1979 Christmas card to Philip Larkin, several weeks before her death.

If Pym's characters failed to connect, they succeeded in defining themselves by what they had, rather than what they did not. Her novels remind us that "having it all" is fleeting—and that one needn't marry nor have children to count. It is the small, everyday experiences that lend most lives their meaning. On the last page of *Quartet in Autumn,* Pym wrote that "life still held infinite possibilities for change." These words sum up their author's unflagging optimism. Even when faced with obscurity, illness, and death, Pym was able to marvel at life's potential—and refuse to be embittered by the thought of what she never had.

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