

Chapter 16

A Difficult Voyage Home

My mother's plan was well in action before she informed my father. She was so angry writing this letter she dispensed with the usual, "Dear John".

15 June

By the time you get this note I will be on the sea. You can shove your filthy money up your jumper. I would rather go on the streets than live with any man for a meal ticket. You talk of pride, my pride has grown out of all proportion over this last week and if you think I feel any shame you are greatly mistaken. I have asked many times for a divorce and it seems now that it suits you to be rid of me, I am granted this pleasure. I take it this is my reward for my seven and a half years of little else but sheer bloody, good bloody constant devotion to our child. I have worked very hard at being a mother and have spent tremendous energy and time to make some human being free of spirit and full of love. A magnificent child is the result.

It seems it is more important to you that I suffer my body to be cut and tortured by a filthy abortion, than to face the world of stupid women whose values I personally despise. You own Rose Cottage. O.K. But it is my personality that created it, my scraping and saving and doing without, almost to the point of malnutrition, that paid for it. All you really own is your conscience and God help you deal with that, as because you have made it impossible for the

woman who married you in good faith to be able to live with you, you intend to hound her into poverty at a time where it is desperate that she has some security. You always kick me when I am down.

I am a good woman who has paid a big price for marrying a man incapable of anything else but demand. You were welcomed in London with warmth but because I say I will not sleep with you any longer, I am to be cast into a tragic life. I will sleep with no man anymore, I am through with men. If I do not love my London John, then what right have I to drag him twelve thousand miles because he loves me. So that I have a meal ticket and you are not faced with any social embarrassment. I have to spend my life somewhere by myself with two children. I work hard for one and it is the only thing in my life that has been worthwhile, so why should I not work hard for two children.

Five years ago, I asked you to give me emotional freedom. Had you been big enough to grant me that, we would still all be under the same roof. Because my body is the only part of me you love, you couldn't bear to help me now by giving me a home because I made it clear I wouldn't sleep with you. You freeze my guts until I despise life. All this would not be so bitter in my addled brain, had you simply been clear of your reaction from the start. But to wait until I told Jane and bought a ticket and packed my trunks. I have no flat now. I am living with the O'Shaughnessys. I have no money. All I have in the world is a beautiful daughter and a ticket to Australia. If I stay here I will kill myself as I am very cheesed off with life. My courage is strained. Your masculine pride which is immense and stupid, I am sure, is responsible for dealing me such a blow.

I am sure, had I suggested that as your housekeeper and Jane's Mother I adopted a child, you would have been only too willing. You, who have denied me the right of motherhood, as I intended always to have a large family, you have the audacity to tell me not to come home unless I have an abortion. I despise the stinking corrupt society, I despise suburbia, why should I allow it to rule my life. I cannot live away from Australia any longer. How strange,

I would not have credited you with letting me down in quite this sort of way. You, who have always known how embarrassing I find money. However it seems you have justified your behaviour in your own eyes. Good luck to you. I wish I could do the same.

Thank God I have many good friends and they don't treat me like a shopgirl. However I am at peace with myself even though I am extremely worried about practicalities. After all, you and I both know that you made life Hell for me when I was pregnant with Jane, your own child. What have you ever done but ill-treat me? You have kept me for some time now but after all, I have worked 12 hours a days at being a mother, or do you think I have been having a high life? After I have paid rent for nearly all the time in London I have had to keep house and clothe Jane on four pounds a week. If you think this is easy in a freezing London winter, you must try it sometime. I assure you I have had a hell of a bloody time. Lonely, poor and sad with my only little treasure kept blissfully unaware of the strain.

My attempts to gain some happiness have been unsatisfactory, but nothing would make me continue them once I have got to grips with reality. It is a pity my trip home will be no more fun than staring at the blank sea wondering what would become of me and mine. I am not a young woman and my body has been through too much to find it easy to cope with the strain it is under now. I advise you to be very careful with Jane as she loves me very dearly, and seeing me cry my heart out when we had both innocently been waiting for your telephone call with excitement for days, has made her very protective towards me. I will not say anymore. I care little what the world does to me now. I am tired of life. I have had enough. Do not delude yourself too much. It is evident to me that you are quite happy in your new role. It is a new tragedy for you to thrive on. You have never had any desire at all to be happy. You have paid me back for what your mother and father did to you. Enough is enough.



Sometime just before or after leaving London I contracted rubella. In this next letter my mother wrote as if my father knew of my illness, so there may be a letter of hers missing. It's one of life's little ironies that my mother, with her tendency to catastrophise about her health, was unaware of the very real and serious danger this posed to her unborn child.

Dear John,

I am not making overtures to you by writing a second letter so soon, I am writing only as Jane's mother as there is, I feel, a certain need. Things are not too good with us on board and I feel it's all very hard for a child to cope with. Jane is to be two more days in bed as the doctor seems to think her pulse is a bit fast and she doesn't look herself at all. Her spots have practically vanished but she is bored to tears. It is very hot now and we are about to enter the Mediterranean Sea. In fact she's having a terrible time so far. She is tremendously good and so I feel she should be rewarded. I want so much to buy her something very special but have only enough to buy rubbish in Spain tomorrow. The only thing I could do was tell her I'd write to you suggesting you bought her a special present for her when we reached Melbourne.

Sorry to bully you but I didn't think you would mind. Yesterday was a tragedy. We arrived at Magic Lisbon which looks so beautiful I was delighted from the port. The stewardess and Jane insisted I go ashore. I promised to find Jane a treasure. The Queensland couple and young doctor insisted I go with them in a taxi. How I hated it because all this woman talked about was how dirty everything was and the clothes in the shops. The doctor is terribly youthful and a Scot from Aberdeen, and although he is a good lad he is no companion for me.

I hated the taxi ride and was planning my escape to wander on my own, when the woman developed an attack of asthma. She was bad so the doctor got a taxi and back we all went to the ship at some speed as they were a bit concerned at her difficulty. Half

way back she suddenly died. Christ, it was terrible. We ordered the taxi to turn back to a hospital and the doctor tried to resuscitate breath to breath from the front seat. The taxi then with his hand on the horn went at a tremendous speed in and out of the traffic like a maniac. Mostly the traffic parted for us like magic but we went at such a speed I thought none of us would get there alive, the streets are mad and very narrow and winding.

Lisbon is built on seven small hills and is very old and tightly built. A nightmare ride if ever I had one with the poor doctor nearly bursting himself to get a breath from the woman. The hospital was unbelievable, terrible, as no one in Portugal speaks a word of English. The police are the big bosses and poverty is rife. The hospital was the most sordid place I have ever seen. The woman was dead, it was all over, they couldn't save her, she was dead when we got there. She died in the taxi, her heart gave out, according to the doctor, and she was a little over fifty. The poor old husband, a self-made rich sugar farmer from Tully was taken from us by the horrid Portuguese police. They were impossible and no one spoke a word of English. It was like a nut house, not a hospital.

I felt as if I would die with shock myself, it was all so mad, so quick and so very horrible. The natives crowded around us, as if we were all monkeys. The doctor and I were both half crying half shaking and the taxi driver was crying. It was awful. Finally the doctor and I went back to the ship. The police wouldn't let the old boy go with us. We got the Captain and the British Consul who took over. The sugar farmer left the ship to fly home, we left him trying to make up his mind what to do with the body. It was horrible for him.

The hardest part for me was to tell Jane what had happened to the woman who Jane thought was marvellous. I didn't beat around the bush but it was hard for her to comprehend the reality. She could only think of the woman in the posh hat that had said goodbye cheerfully a couple of hours beforehand. It was a terrible ship last night. The Captain, the doctor and I sat down to a

miserable dinner. Now there are only two and a half passengers.

All this has added to my concern for Jane. This woman had a sixteen-year-old daughter at boarding school and Jane knew all about her. Jane was very concerned about the daughter, the practicalities of the body, and very much worried about, could that ever happen to me, her mummy? I told her I was a very strong mummy and that she was a very strong child and that you were a strong man and that we were lucky and didn't have to worry.

All told, it's put a great heaviness on us, and the only thing I could think of was to promise her you would buy her something very special, when the doctor said two more days in bed. She is so bored and yet so very good-natured. It's all terribly depressing. She had set her heart on seeing Spain. She has a great romantic notion about Spanish ladies. Tomorrow is our only day in Spain in Malaga, and I couldn't possibly risk taking Jane ashore as she doesn't look well. She cried deeply and sadly, like an adult, about the Spanish port. Poor little pet, I would do anything for her. She is so romantic, yesterday when she was in bed, she asked me to hang her party dress where she could gaze at it. So you see, I beg of you, do what you like to me, but don't hurt Jane, pay me back separately, spare Jane.

She is worried about me, that is bad, she is worried about Rose Cottage, she is too young to have these problems. She is very affected by life's happenings. Death is hard to understand. She was terribly upset about her puppy being run over as she talked about it all the time to her friends and ladies in shops etc. When I told her he was dead, it was like telling her fairies weren't true. A great dream shattered. I would think another puppy an ideal present but as we don't know where we will be living it would be foolish.

Even though you will hate me for saying so, she will love a baby. She doesn't know yet in case I lose it at three months which is a bad time for older women. If the tragedy of yesterday didn't make me miscarry, well who knows. But until I am past this time I see no point in Jane being informed. Yet she has been asking me for years

to have a baby. Her girlfriend at school had one and Jane asked me every day after school, could we get one somehow. She will find it better than a puppy.

I do not know what to suggest, not a book, she is not a book child. She has a doll, she loved the doll's dress by the way, I brought the doll's pram home. She has it in the cabin with her. She has a new swimming costume and new sandals. Prettiness is her great love. I would suggest a dress but she is already 4ft 2 and a half inches, and it will be winter in Melb. I beg of you find her a treasure as she deserves it. Ballet shoes would be good. She takes Size 1. She has seen a ballet, and wants to be a ballet dancer. Maybe a book of ballet dancers if there are lots of beautiful pictures. Won't be able to afford to write again.

Please love Jane.

Jean

I try to imagine how my father felt when he read those three words, "Please love Jane". Even reading them so many decades later makes me want to scream with frustration. How could she write those words after all the anguish he had expressed? Did she not feel the pain of him missing me that he describes in so many letters? Maybe his anger was rapidly crushed under the weight of a bone-wearying feeling of defeat, futility and despair. Or did her crude attempt at manipulation elicit nothing more than a long, slow sigh of resignation.



Posted in Aden and included was a drawing of mine with "FROM Jane to DADDY" written by me at the top:

Somewhere in the Red Sea.

Dear John,

It seems now a reality that Jane and I are on our way to Melbourne. It's unbearably hot. Seems this is the worst time to travel the Red Sea. Poor little Jane is perspiring and red and finding it rather hard to cope. We have a swimming pool made of plastic

which saves us from suffering heat all day long. The nights are fearful and we expect to get out of this heat zone in about four days' time when we hit the Indian Ocean.

Jane has recovered from the measles. At last she looks all right. Life is very tedious for us both. Strangely, in this heat all red and puffy she looks just like Patricia. She is thin after her little illness. As for me, it will be another week before I am clear of the measles. The more I think of it, the more certain I am that I have had them.

My reason for writing again, is Jane. She is undergoing tremendous anxiety about our return. She cries about Rose Cottage and about you and I not loving each other, every other night we have a session now. The measles and boredom have weakened her cheerfulness about life. I still haven't told her you are divorcing me but she has a thousand questions that I find impossible to answer. Then hot impossible nights without sleep, I toss and turn physically and mentally, as to what I am to do with life.

Strangely with both of us, as we get further and further away from England our memories are returning to life in Australia. In England Jane's memory of life before was scarcely existing. Everyone except Nana seemed to be gone from her mind. Now she is brimming with memories of everyone and everything that ever happened. Rose Cottage is for both of us home and it is hard enough for me to bear the thought but I cannot make Jane understand why we cannot return to it. She is violent about it all and begs me to write to you. Her last question was, "Will Daddy meet us?"

It made me cry as crying comes easily to me at the moment. What is so hard for her is that I never mentioned returning to Australia until your first telegram arrived, and when I told her what was happening, we hugged each other and danced with joy, and of course all we could talk about was Rose Cottage and the beach and the cats and home. How is she to understand why it is suddenly closed down? She asked me yesterday, "Who owns the cats? Daddy or us?"