

ELIZABETH PERKINS

WITH A WELL-SHARPENED PENCIL

The sun lost power and Wiedenfeld yet walked. The power of the sun departed but the glory remained. Now a monarch dethroned from the sky, the sun at horizon height was yet honoured by Wiedenfeld. Who had risen before the day, and received warmth and vigour from the sun in its strength. This security, this power lost, Wiedenfeld went on, as a loyalist carrying still the virtues of the ancient regime. The sun, red-gold and earth-bound comforted the traveller whom it could no longer protect from the cold powers of the night. Wiedenfeld humbly kept his eyes on the beautiful falling sun, and loved. But already darkness gathered at his back and anarchic things moved behind him.

Richard Thames counted the words and wrote 1006 in the left margin. And, as this was the work allotted to the morning, he pushed back his chair, stood up, stretched, and swept his wife's cat from the window-seat with his broad hand. The classic cat lines of the dozing cat had become necessary to him while he worked, as though the shapely fluency of the cat set an irresistible pattern for his imaginative prose. But when a work period was over Richard could not let the animal lie, but switched it off, as it were, as he switched off the headlights of his car when stationary so that the battery would not be drained. Aware or not of contributing to the output and income of the household, the cat stretched, yawned, and stalked as cats do through the door which Richard opened as he went to collect the mail his wife had left on the hall table.

Richard Thames relished his incoming mail as much as he disliked sending out-going mail, a disposition he also had towards money. Similarly, he enjoyed food and was often constipated. Still, there's no point in continuing to refer to him in the past tense, he is very much alive, and steadily producing two books each eighteen months.

Undoubtedly you will have read one or two yourself. Or rather you will either have read one only and pushed it away with a snort or whatever noise you make to indicate contempt, or you will have become an avid reader of these delicate fables whose graceful lines convey potent messages for the present and penetrating insights to the human condition.

Metaphysical they are, as you can see from the short extract above (which would have been corrected and re-corrected and polished before it appeared in print). They are also mystical and are read chiefly by people aged seventeen to twenty-three and fifty-two to sixty-eight: which are the ages between which people buy for themselves and as gifts for others books of the Richard Thames type. You may doubt these statistics, and there is no reasonable proof of their accuracy, but they were given by Richard's son who is seventeen and who removed the rough draft of the text from his father's typewriter.

The Thames household is still a harmonious family as many households are in the current environment of nuclear family instability. Richard, his wife Davida, Lewis the elder son and Anthony who is sickly and thirteen. There had been another child who died at birth from the organic malfunction that plagued his brother. Richard Thames, sensitive but congenitally healthy, tolerated his younger son's infirmity and did his best to counter its morbid psychological effects on the boy by exhorting him to activities through which he could forget his ill-health. It was the size only and frequent recurrence of the bills for complicated medical treatments that fully convinced him that no childish malingering was involved. That is the position at present. Fortunately Davida has such energy and tact that she can spend much time nursing the youngest without depriving the other members of the family of their necessary share of care and attention. Friendship, helpful and not too intense, and uncomplicated family identity hold the four together, and if knowing people are inclined to suspect outward harmony is achieved at the expense of repressions and subliminal anarchy it can only be asserted that a long-lived fly on the wall would have been able to provide no evidence of repressed anarchy over some eighteen or nineteen years. Naturally, the knowledgeable one replies, for the proof of complete repression is that there is no outward evidence.

This leads back to Richard Thames collecting his mail on a particular Tuesday morning and it is suggested that you pay some attention to the wording of this narrative as it could give a clue as to what it is about. (The style is not so important. Close and recent contact with Richard Thames's work has had its effect, just as children who have been given transistors sometimes sound like the local disc jockey).

There were many letters, with a succulent look about them, plump, handwritten in diverse hands, a good proportion of air-mail envelopes including, most palatable of all, one from an Indian fan of Richard's whose correspondence from the University of Goa over eight years had become quite a love affair. Intellectually and emotionally satisfying, the soul-friendship of the writer and reader, and of course the correspondence meant that they alternated the roles, was uncomplicated by grosser carnal undertones. This was all to the good, for Richard imagined Baldev R. Seti to be as slim, warmly coloured and ascetic in feature as was the written outpouring of his soul. And Baldev imagined Richard to be as stern, romantic and graceful in his Teutonic purity as the figures who stride symbolically through his allegorical landscapes. As anyone would know who has read this far, the Indian from Goa was fat and pasty, and Richard is swarthy and squat and has a flattened nose and irregular teeth.

Richard normally kept the richest portion of his festschriftwecksel for last reading, and he did so now, simply smiling with tenderness at Baldev's handwriting, and, quite unconsciously, pressing the well-filled envelope to his left breast. That is, his right hand conveyed the letter to the left side of his pullover and his left hand came up and gave the letter several pats. The rest of the mail lay in a spilled heap on the table. Richard picked one at random, leaning against the table to read like a hungry man eating at the door of the refrigerator. He did not know the sender whom the letterhead announced as Joan K. Macmillan from an address in California. Two-thirds of his fan mail was from America and most of that from women in California: Lewis offered these statistics also, from his position as unofficial and diligent archivist for his father's literary correspondence. Neither father nor son offered any comment on the significance of these facts. Dear Richard Thames, wrote Joan K. Macmillan in strong legible script.

I frequently baby-sit for my sister-in-law who owns all the novels you have published in the United States. I understand there are three titles that have not been released here. I do not want to read them but want to give them to my sister-in-law and would appreciate if your secretary could send me details of titles and publisher and, if possible, the name of a bookseller I could get to send them. I suppose you are aware that the only female figures in your stories are ragged crones, fat peasant women with sly eyes, and wraiths drifting like mist between tree trunks?

Yours faithfully,
Joan K. Macmillan

The hand holding the letter dropped to the table. It was as if a stock of celery he was preparing to bite had turned into a female centipede. It was not the coldness of the insult, although that hurt him for he was a mild man, but the shock he felt in realizing, at a sudden blow, that Joan K. Macmillan was quite right about the crones, peasants and wraiths. His mind made swift survey of his seventeen books. They were filled with women, surely? While writing he was always conscious of the pressing power of the female presence. In the last paragraph he had typed this morning, for example . . . He went fearfully back to the typewriter like a murderer driven back to the mysterious recurrent stain of his victim's blood. No! there were no women and he had been sure he was writing about something to do with women. It was sexually obscene to suggest that he had considered the sun to be female.

But yes! there were women there. Those anarchic things gathering behind his hero were soon to become sly, soft-padding fox women and — yes, and willys beckoning from the enclosing forest. He shook Ms Macmillan's letter in the direction of California and then realized that he was not at all vindicated. Vindicated! By god, he certainly was. Pushing the typewriter along the desk, he sat down and wrote by hand his answer.

Dear Ms Macmillan,

Thank you for your interest in my books. The titles not at present available in the U.S.A. are:

Red light in the west (1956)

The teeth of wisdom (1961)

Moonchild (1970)

These are available from the publisher, John Humphries and Son, Russell Square, London. However I have asked my secretary to despatch copies of these to your address with my compliments.

The female figures in my novels will continue to be as you have so perceptively observed them. My publisher informs me that ninety per cent of my readers are, like your sister-in-law, women. I believe the other ten per cent of the books are sold in college campus bookshops. As sales are steadily increasing the stories appear to give satisfaction and meet a need in their readers.

Yours sincerely,
Richard Thames.

(On Wednesday morning he dictated the letter to the girl who came three days a week to handle correspondence and type up his scripts. He removed the reference to sales and substituted "I believe my stories give pleasure to and fulfil a need in their readers").

There now arose a crisis of conscience, but not one in which he was inexperienced. Should Ms Macmillan's letter and his reply be filed by the archivist for the eyes of posterity? Certainly, while her letter showed bitchiness, his showed generosity. He was accustomed to keep all letters even the critical and abusive — of which there were very few — and even they afforded a sense of moral integrity as he left them for filing. Still, the present crisis had arisen before, there was something about the Californian baby-minder's letter that could only have misled posterity in its search to discover the real Richard Thames. He tore up the disturbing letter and crushed the bits into the envelope before throwing the lot into his waste basket.

This was hardly done when Davida announced Dr MacDuigan. Dr MacDuigan was young and formidable, and Master in charge of Science at Wavell College. On one parental occasion Richard Thames had found himself hotly meeting the scientist's implied criticism of the arts and artists. Gripping a glass of college sherry Richard had declared in the face of polite disbelief that he was not a writer because he found in literature "a sort of cloistered refuge from the vulgarity of the real world". He knew he was not — although this he did not tell Dr MacDuigan — because he had argued this out with Baldev for eighteen exciting soul-seeking months. On that evening he asserted that he was a tradesman, a man whose trade was writing. And ever since he has maintained this role. Occasionally, in certain company, he will allow that he is a craftsman.

Dr MacDuigan's heart must have been very pure, for his moral strength, if this is measured by the force of personality, was surely in the ratio of one MacDuigan to ten Richard Thameses. It was unfortunate that he should appear just now holding a brown-paper wrapped packet of galley-proofs of the college journal, for Richard Thames felt less than usually lapped in proof of moral purity himself. Turning his back on the waste basket he faced the scientist squarely.

Dr MacDuigan was a pair of piercing blue eyes and the rest of the man gradually took shape around them. They talked politely of Richard's work which apparently had some connection with the galley-proofs.

"I read a work of fiction every night," said Dr MacDuigan.

Richard was impressed by this ecumenicity and wondered how the upright soul justified what appeared to be a regular nocturnal dependence on the degenerate products of decadent humanists. Perhaps he should reciprocate by confessing to a nodding acquaintance with the First, Second and Third Laws of Thermodynamics? He decided to be jocular.

"I always read something from the Bulletin of Suicidology myself."

The microscope-adept eyes found this only too probable.

"I have here the proofs of your article in *Science*," said Dr MacDuigan.

"Science?"

"We call it *Science*," said Dr MacDuigan simply, "because that covers everything."

"Quite."

"As you know, this next issue deals with some aspects of biological symbiosis."

Pause.

"Oh, yes, yes," said Richard.

"You are wondering how your article can be relevant," said Dr MacDuigan kindly. "We had to extend our area a little to include the humanities. Your article, or rather the article that you generously helped Lewis to write —"

Ah!

"— is included in the section on protective coloration."

Oh?

"Science Four A prepared a handy little piece on fungi and algae symbionts using local examples, and Lewis's article completes the section. I must say," said the ice-blue eyes, thawing according to a certain transference of emotional warmth to eye muscles, "few fathers would so frankly offer themselves as subjects of scrutiny."

Good god. Was he a fungus or an algae? or simply homo exhibens?

"I believe the title was your suggestion. It has given rise to some lively controversy in the staff-room."

"Er — which title did Lewis settle on?" said Richard, improvising desperately, "he considered several."

"Man has no Camouflage," said Dr MacDuigan.

Silence.

"Very controversial," said Richard coldly.

Silence. According to what law they balanced on the brink of cold hell neither scientist nor fable-writer could tell. The law of common-sense shoved them to safety.

"Yes, yes. The young are interested in such things for, shall we say, emotional reasons," said Richard, assuming a genial aged tolerance he did not feel. Young was what he was.

"Biologically," said Dr MacDuigan eagerly, "we may consider the sub-conscious as part of the survival apparatus —" he checked in mid-enthusiasm. "Now I won't waste more of your time. I came to leave you the proofs of the article in case you wanted to make any alterations before printing."

"Not at all," said Richard wildly, horror suppressing every curiosity he could have felt about what his son had written. "I'd leave it to Lewis. Must learn to complete his jobs himself." He smiled with false and ghastly parental wisdom.

"Of course," said Dr MacDuigan, "but Lewis is in camp for five weeks."

Of course he was.

"But if you do not wish to check it yourself, Mr Alltrim the English Subject-Master will do the proof-reading."

Mr Alltrim by all means. But never, never would he read what his archivist had recorded.

Dr MacDuigan left feeling a certain respect for the scientific detachment of a parent who feared so little to see himself under the microscope. Scientifically commendable, perhaps, but impractical, very impractical. And, considering the business of human politics, very unwise. Yet his own invocation of prudential behaviour did not exactly satisfy his sense of deeper morality. A better explanation for the slight — was it disgust? — he felt for the writer, somehow melded with the respect, occurred to him. "If a man knows what his job is, and does it well, he knows as much about himself as he needs to know. The world knows us by our actions" (he banged the galley-sheets into the palm of his left hand) "not by what we tell about ourselves."

Still he walked with less than his usual assurance. The virtue of discretion and justification through works, neither offered the highest grounds for disapproval of Richard Thames. These revealed themselves at last:

"In fact," said Dr MacDuigan, as he walked briskly back to the college, "there must be a lack of necessary spiritual tension in a man who cares so little for decent measures of concealment."

At lunch on Wednesday Richard complained of stomach cramps and was receiving concerned questions from Davida when the 'phone rang and she answered it. She held the receiver to her left breast and turned on him a tender smile.

"It's Charmian!" she said. "Something about an article on your work she's just come across." Charmian was a librarian whom Davida met in the second year of their marriage. For twenty years the two women have maintained a passionate and chaste friendship necessitating two or more telephone calls daily. He brooded over the 'phone calls as he massaged his stomach and listened to the chirps of Charmian's enthusiasm and his wife's replies; her voice as usual deepening several tones when she spoke to Charmian.

The call was brief, by their standards.

"It's in *Literary Conspectus*, the Spring issue," said Davida, "and Charmian will call in with it on her way home." He looked blank, still thinking of his stomach and things he could not pin down.

"The article about your work, Richard," said Davida with patient concern. "If these cramps are severe, dear, I'll run you up to the clinic for the afternoon consultations."

"Thank you, that's not necessary," said Richard, and added "yet". As reserving a seat for future sympathy. "What is this article about? Who wrote it?" He doubled over and the last question shot out.

"It seems to be part of someone's academic thesis on confessional novels," said Davida. "Charmian says it's complimentary and puts your work in with very famous writing in the confessional genre."

"A woman wrote it, I suppose," he grunted. From pangs rather than impoliteness.

"Yes! How did you know? What exactly is the confessional genre, dear?"

"I don't know. And I certainly don't belong in it. I suppose," he said, trying hard to concentrate on several subliminal problems and his stomach, "that the writer wasn't an American — Joan K. Macmillan?"

"No, that's not the name," said Davida, who was blessed with a saving and perpetual vagueness about anything except the home and family, "and I don't know that she's American. But Charmian will be here about six." She smiled with delight, some of it falling as tender comfort on her husband's head.

Richard Thames went disconsolately to his study. The pains subsided a little as he sat to the typewriter. It was likely his next novel would be set in the seventeenth century and on the far highlands of Scotland and peopled by the fabulous kelpies and feys of Celtic mythology. Meg Merrilies hunched on a wayside stone in the bleakest moors, and a solitary highland lass singing to entice The Chieftain into an endless field of waving corn. And a gibbet, from which swung a woman hanged for child-murder, and her lips retained their redness even in death.

The pains subsided completely as he rapidly made notes with a well-sharpened pencil, and then turned to the pleasanter task of writing to Professor Baldev R. Seti suggesting that he undertake the refutation of a certain article in the Spring issue of *Literary Conspicuous*.

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Joan K. Macmillan published the story you have just read in the journal *Circe*, October, 1975. I have filed it for my husband who is writing a report on The Prophylactic Efficacy of the Confessional Mode in Feminist Literature for the Spring issue of *International Psychiatry*.