

1975 DIARY

To Tony from Elaine, with love

1 January

Yes, Elaine gave me another diary for Christmas. Wasn't that a big surprise? This one's bound in leather with gold-leaf lettering on the spine, and it can be locked shut with a little silver key. Very cute, but I wanted an electric shaver.

I'm writing this down at Dad's place, which is where I put last year's diary when I stopped keeping it. It's been here all this time, in the secret hidey-hole of my youth - the place where I kept illicit sweets and purloined chocolate biscuits until they went mouldy. Over the years my hidey-hole has concealed a book of dirty pictures I found on the pavement at a bus stop; love notes from Gillian MacKanners, a prepubescent blonde who worshipped me from the house across the road; the five-pound note I stole from Mr Jackson the history teacher and never spent (I felt so guilty about it that in the end I put the money in a collecting-tin on Poppy Day); a packet of Durex I bought at the barber's when I was fifteen and had no hope on earth of any opportunity to use them; some blasphemous occult books I read, with a great sense of wickedness, during my black magic phase; and, in later years, the odd copy of Playboy or Knave for lonely nights.

Now, however, it contains my 1974 diary, kept for a mere four months which may turn out to have been the most important four months of my life. Reading through it I wince at my blindness, my clumsiness, and my many faux naifs. In some ways, very little has changed - Barry, Joe, Sonja and Elaine are still in my life - but my attitudes have altered a lot.

I think I look different, too. Nothing dramatic, maybe. There's no grey in my hair, but I have it cut shorter. The face is much the same: flat nose, sallow cheeks that have to be shaved twice a day, small ears, big grin, stop looking in the mirror, it's vain. I dress better, though I have to be careful not to look flash in the office. For work I wear good suits, well cut but plain and sober. The velvet jackets and silk shirts are for weekends. And I've stopped wearing those high-heeled shoes with platform soles: five foot six inches is a perfectly decent height and I no longer want to be higher.

Yes, Barry is still in my life. About once a month I bring home something for

all the him: research results, maps and plans of ~~various~~ research stations, pen-portraits of various senior civil servants, anything that comes my way about nuclear submarines and other weaponry. The payments vary from £300 to about £1,000. We rarely meet, and our dead letter box - which used to be the toilet at the Lamb and Flag - has changed half a dozen times. He's dropped the pretence of working for an international mining consortium as a management consultant. There's no doubt he's working for the Russians, though he's never actually said so.

Nothing ever came of the M.I.5 scare, and I'm now quite sure it was a routine check. We never heard any more about the unsightly Mr Jakes. I don't think I really needed to kick the diary habit. I'm going to start again.

3 January

Back home in Kenton. Of course, the other thing that happened during 1974 was that Nixon resigned, thereby bringing to an end American television's longest-running and most boring soap opera.

I've decided I need a secret identity. For a while I spent all the cash I got from Barry, but it's surprisingly hard to get through an average £500 a month when you have to spend it all on disposables, like clothes and entertainment. I mean, if it was legit I could buy a flat or a big car, but I have to conceal my wealth.

Anyway, the tenners have been piling up in my underwear drawer, and tonight I counted the money and it came to £2,830. I don't know how long the bonanza will last. It could dry up any time. But I can't keep this much money around. Hence the secret identity. I'm going to open a bank account in another name. Let's see: I think I'll be ... Norman Selly.

Selly can use my home address, and if anybody asks he's a former tenant who moved out. Jeremy left us in August, and Pete and Steve are looking for somewhere closer to town, so quite soon there'll be no-one to doubt the story. I'll simply pick up Selly's mail for redirecting to his new address, which only I will know.

So the only problem is a reference for the bank. Who will be Norman Selly's

employer?

I could ask Barry, but he's never given me an adress and I'm sure he won't want to. Elaine doesn't know anything about my clandestine life, and I don't plan to tell her yet, if ever. I'd rather not involve innocent parties like Joe Jenkins or Sonja.

I know. Selly can be a freelance commercial artist, and give his landlord as a reference. His landlord, of course, is Tony Pitman.

I think that's rather clever.

7 January

I've pulled quite a good stroke in the office.

It all started with old Porboys, who has become my implacable enemy. It was his internal phone book I gave to Barry back in April. I took it out of his desk one evening when he went home early. I had to tear out the first page, which had written on it "J.C. Porboys, Rm. 803A". Anyway, the old boy noticed its absence first thing the next morning. "Where's my internal phone book?" he snapped.

I ignored him and Tom said: "Dunno."

"I put it in my desk last night, I distinctly remember."

"Perhaps you dropped it in the waste-paper basket by mistake," I said helpfully.

Well, he spent most of the day looking for it. He emptied all his drawers, looked in the filing cabinets, insisted on examining Tom's and my directories to make sure they were ours, and found excuses to visit every other room on our floor to see if he could spot it. He couldn't get another copy from Supplies because the thing is out of print - they're preparing a new edition. He fussed about it for days, and hated having to borrow mine every time he needed a number. I told him he was getting absent-minded in his old age, and of course that was the last straw. He accused me of stealing the book just to infuriate him, and I think he really believes it.

He got his revenge when I was on holiday, by complaining to old Harwood that

my work was in such a mess he couldn't look after it while I was away. Harwood never mentioned it to me, but Tom did. After that I lost any compassion I might have had for the small, weak human being concealed inside the pedantic, self-important Porboys packaging.

About a month before Christmas Harwood called me in and gave me a special job. Each department, he said, had to prepare a forecast of its manpower requirements over the next five years; and he wanted me to do our bit of the forecast. "What extra staff will we need, and when?" was the way he put it. What I did was to show that we needed fewer staff, not more, at least for the next two years. Some of our ^{is} work/~~was~~ quite mechanical and could be done by a part-time bookkeeper. The point is that everyone knows it's Porboys's work which could be done by a bookkeeper, by and large.

If you're going to do this kind of thing in the civil service you have to do it carefully. Harwood was not a bit pleased with me for suggesting that his empire could be reduced. However, I saw that coming and sent a copy of my memo to the department chief, Watkinson, who is Harwood's boss; thereby ensuring that Harwood could not either suppress my findings or pass them off as his own.

So now the obvious thing for them to do is to promote me or Tom, give the extra work to Porboys, and give the vacant desk to a bookkeeper.

I'm marginally senior to Tom, and it so happens that I'm due for a promotion-review about now.

Watkinson spoke to me in the corridor today. "Thankyou for your note, Mr Pitman," he said, referring to my copy memo. "Most interesting. Well done."

My next promotion takes me into a grade with a higher security rating - and access to the black files.

9 January

At lunchtime I went into a busy West End branch of Barclay's Bank and opened an current account in the name of Norman Selly. I said I was a freelance commercial artist with an annual income of £6,000, and I wanted the bank account for my surplus

Oash.

"Now, then, sir, how about a reference? People generally give their employer."

"Ah, but I'm self-employed. Will my landlord do?"

"Certainly."

"Anthony Pitman, civil servant, 121 Oakgrove Road, Kenton, Harrow, Middlesex."

For the specimen signature I wrote Selly's name in a beautiful copperplate handwriting I haven't used since the third form.

11 January

When Jeremy moved out last year, we had the choice of getting someone else or paying a little extra each for more space. I left the decision to Pete and Steve, and they opted to pay more. So we've been three for a while.

Pete and Steve moved out today. We rent this place furnished, but you wouldn't think so judging by the amount of stuff they took with them. They hired a Transit van and had to make two trips. They've rented half a house in Clerkenwell.

And left me on my own. Since I hold the lease to this place, I have to pay the full rent whether I have sub-tenants or not. As it happens, I'm in no hurry.

There was chaos all day, then a very dead feeling when they finally left. Elaine came in this evening to keep me company, bless her. I got some beer out of the fridge. She asked me if I'd done anything about replacing Pete and Steve.

"No. They only gave notice a week ago, and I haven't had time. Their rent is paid up for a month, anyway."

"What are you going to do?" she said.

I wiped a trace of beer-froth off her lip with my finger. "Put an advertisement in the paper, I suppose."

"I used the Harrow Observer." Elaine is the leaseholder of the other house, and one of her sub-tenants, Margaret, moved out at the same time as Jeremy - in fact they got married.

That chain of thought led me to say: "Do you hear from Margaret?"

"She's having a baby."

"Poor girl."

That was a dumb thing to say.

Elaine rounded on me. "What do you mean?" she said crossly.

I backpedalled. "I'm told it hurts."

"She's happily married, with a good home and enough money - it's natural to have children."

"Natural? I didn't think the modern woman believed that Nature placed that obligation upon her."

"How would you know?"

"I read Cosmopolitan."

"There you are, then."

She seemed to think that was conclusive, and I wasn't looking for ways to prolong the discussion. I said: "I'll put an ad in the paper, then."

"I wondered if you'd keep the place to yourself, or something."

"What on earth makes you think I could afford it?" (But it was that "or something" I was puzzling over.)

"You seem to have money enough lately."

Bloody observant, these women.

cash. They asked for a reference, I said how about my landlord, they said fine, so I gave them the name and address of Anthony Pitman, civil servant. They gave me a cheque book and a deposit book, both of which I brought home and burned. I can get a cheque or a deposit slip at the counter any time. I shall also burn the statements they send. I signed my name (or rather, Selly's) in a beautiful copperplate handwriting I haven't used since the third form. I deposited £2,500 in cash.

I can't think of any way Norman Selly can now be tied in with Tony Pitman.

Reference letter arrives.
Confirmation, cheq bk & dep slips.
Dep & burns.

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