

## Twelve Days

Dearest G—

What a wonderful gift to come home to. Thank you so much. I wasn't expecting anything, seeing as how you are buried so deep in the countryside. But what a lovely tree. I like to think of you stealing it from a neighbouring orchard and paying through the nose for some passing tinker to deliver it all this way, today of all days. Don't tell me it was ordered online and couriered here. I don't want to know. My version is much more charming.

I wasn't sure what to make of the bird to begin with, but Annie (who took the delivery while I was out having an early constitutional and obviously gave it a thorough examination) tells me that this is a classic combination, like surf and turf, although I have always found that a strange coupling, probably concocted just because it rhymes. Perhaps in this case, though, it is more of a strange pairing. Or should I write 'pairing' to make that work? I think it's the sort of pun that should only be spoken, never written. Alas, not having the phone number of your retreat, we will have to make do as we can, so please laugh politely at my somewhat kyboshed attempt at word play.

Anyway, there I was, wondering what to busy myself with this afternoon, and then suddenly the difficult decision of whether to pickle some walnuts or lag the pipes was made for me. I shall do neither. I shall plant your tree instead. So not only have you given me a lifetime supply of pears, you have also given me the wonderful gift of further and legitimate procrastination. I wonder how long it could survive without its roots in soil? However long, I shan't test it. It looks barbaric as it is, like a torso ripped open, so I shall bury it and restore the natural order and wholeness of things.

Tell me: how is it going that end? It's a shame that we can't spend the holidays together, but I understand entirely. I hope you're working like mad, and that before too long you will come to miss my 'constant interruptions', as you call them. That's an impossible description though, may I point out. Not even I can constantly interrupt something, because if the interruptions were constant there wouldn't be anything left to interrupt. I know, I know, I cannot leave your idioms alone. I can't leave any words alone these days. They really are annoying things – so liable to squirm out of one's grip.

I hope you got my parcel alright and that you enjoyed opening it this morning. At least, I hope it was this morning that you opened it. This year I actually miss your childish impatience, which you pretend is adult pragmatism. All those messy presents getting in the way of your important work. But anyway, it's nothing much. Not a patch on your gift, but homemade at least. Not that I mean the tree is disappointing for not being homemade. That would be a long and difficult job. Would you carve it from a bigger tree, I wonder, or cobble it together from bits? But really, I love my tree, and the bird. What I really mean is please forgive the overly long thumb on the left-hand glove. Think of me fondly every time it gets shut in a door or trails in your coffee.

Well, I shall sign off for now,

W Xx

Dear G—

What a surprise: another surprise! Another pair of surprises, in fact. I know I wrote in my last letter that I wasn't sure about the first bird, but I didn't mean to sound dissatisfied. It wasn't that sort of 'not sure'. What I wasn't sure about was whether it came with the tree in the shop, or if it had smuggled its way in en route. A stowaway in a gift – it wouldn't be the first time. But these two birds are certainly prettier than the first rather stout one, and the romantic symbolism is not lost on me either. You are a big softie around that brittle core really, aren't you? I just hope these two will get on with the first bird and that they will all fit in the tree together. I wouldn't know how to read the symbolism if they didn't.

Excuse my brevity. I'm about to rush out the door to buy a spade in the sales – yesterday's attempt to plant the tree was somewhat abortive on that count. I hope the opera is coming along.

Speak soon

W Xx

Dear G—

You must stop sending me birds! As I write the chickens are making a racket, the doves have been making their purring sound for what feels like forever and the first bird has

gone missing, probably poached. I am trying to pluck up the courage to ask Annie about it, but you know how fierce she can be.

Anyway, thank you, it's really sweet of you, but you should concentrate on the job in hand. Don't worry about me. I'm not going anywhere. Certainly not with all this avian husbandry to perform now.

Take care

W xx

Dear G—

Are you trying to tell me something? Do we need to have a talk? Four call girls – what is the meaning of that? I think my sense of humour may be starting to fail me. Perhaps you could ring to assure me you're not losing your marbles over this damn opera. How is it going, by the way? I haven't heard from you properly for ages, crazy gifts notwithstanding. Please do drop me a line soon to let me know how you are, how the composing is coming along, how all those characters are coming to life as you slap them on their bottoms with your music.

W x

Dear G—

Thank you for the gold rings. Perhaps you intended there to be one each for me and the call girls, but I'm wearing them all myself, so there.

I had already fed two of the three chickens to the girls yesterday before the third one laid an egg (the third bird, not the third girl) and I realised they were egg hens, not meat chickens. But how was I to know? And with unexpected guests I had to think quickly. They eat like horses, these girls.

Annie assures me the rings are real gold. She bit into one and nearly swallowed it. I'm not entirely sure it was an accident. She looked really put out when I slapped her hard on the back, and when it landed on the path between us I'm sure she was making ready to dive for it.

Now, don't take this the wrong way, but did you select these girls personally, or did you summon them blind out of the phonebook? They're so discreet, I can't get a word of sense out of them. Is there a night class where they learn all their techniques?

It's really very clever how they talk around a direct question in a huge curve. But anyway, when I happen to pass the door to the spare room, where I've parked them on all the airbeds I could beg, steal and borrow, they seem to be talking about trombones a lot, which is what makes me ask if they met you. Are there trombones in the opera? I didn't think so, but maybe you've had a change of orchestration since we last spoke.

I wonder what else has happened since then? Are you eating alright? Is Old Mother Numpkin fuelling that genius brain of yours to your stomach's satisfaction?

Call soon

W x

Dear G—

Thank you for the geese, and their eggs. There are so many eggs in the house and around the garden now. I take it that the geese are to replace the hens that I fed to the call girls? I am so sorry about that.

But G—, I am concerned by this latest gift. It seems to me a rather aggressive gesture. They are so big and they honk so loudly. Our bijou garden is entirely overrun and there is goose shit everywhere. The girls keep complaining that they can't concentrate. They sit around on the airbeds all day talking about trombones and practising accountancy. They've done my end-of-year accounts and are starting on Annie's too. I'll give it a thorough check over myself, but I think they've done a good job. They go out in the evening, of course, and come back at dawn, so I'm managing to get a bit of time to myself in the house. But I do wish you would hurry up and finish the opera so that we can get back to normal.

Mx

Dear G—

Ok, I give in. Whatever it is that you want, you can have it. If it's my silence, then I shall stop writing these letters. I didn't intend to write to you every day, but I have, as you know, been very well brought up, and so will write to thank you every time you send me a gift as naturally as the worms rise to the surface after rain.

Having said that, I do find myself struggling for the appropriate pleasantries when a vanload of swans turns up. One of them almost broke the arm of the man with

the van. He says he's going to charge you extra for cleaning too. I tried to bung him a few notes, but he could see that I was no more pleased about the deluge of fowl than he was. Anyway, just so you know to expect a bill.

Other news: the girls are eating the geese and hen's eggs as quickly as they are being laid. I have never seen anyone ingest so much protein. Still, they put it to good use with all their hair and nails and mental arithmetic. My tax return was impeccable, so it will go off in the same post as this. Nice and early this year. I can ask them to do yours too if you like – just send the word, and instructions on where to find your receipts and so on. I was going to get them to do it as a surprise for your return, but I realise don't even know where you keep your paperwork.

I shall sign off now, for the last time. I send you the usual sounds of encouragement regarding the opera. I have decided that your silence on the matter bodes very well indeed. Here, the doves are still cooing monotonously, in contrast to the sudden bursts of goose honks and call girl squabbles, but I tell myself this is a method of sympathetic magic – the more awful noises here, the more great sounds in the opera. And thus I do my bit.

Until soon I hope

W x

G—

Wet nurses? Eight of them? The prostitutes I accepted in good humour, but the lactating au pairs I cannot take in with good grace. You are rubbing my nose in my own decision, which you said you supported at the time. Is this your way of telling me you now think I – we – made the wrong choice? Well, it's too late. Way too late. All my ticks have already tocked.

As chance would have it, Annie's daughter finally gave birth yesterday, and after all that medical intervention it was an octuplet birth. The media have been out in the street since they got wind, trying to interview the grandmother. I didn't tell you about it earlier because I thought it would upset you (the media, I mean, not the births, although now I'm not so sure), but I'm telling you now precisely because I think it will upset you. I just hope I don't accidentally let slip where you are and what you are up to. There's not much news around at this time of year, and a sniff of a new opera by G— would fill a few column inches.

But perhaps, just maybe, there is a rational explanation for the wet nurses. Is there? Please let me know. It is so uncomfortable not knowing what is going through your head – your fabulous head, which I have held so many time in my hands and marvelled at. Now I am feeling more inclined to punch it. Please don't let me go on feeling like this. You can turn it around with a word...

Yours (just about),

W x

G—

Thank you for the chorus line. I snapped their thongs and burned their feather boas. You can expect ten angry women on your doorstep any minute, if they haven't already been round to give you an earful. Yes, I told them where you are. And unless I hear from you by teatime, I'm going to tell the press too. They're outside right now. Annie's daughter has gone into hiding – someone with her past really shouldn't stand in the glare of publicity – and she has dumped all fourteen kids on Annie. Between them the wet nurses can manage the babies, but the older children are out of control. They have been tying tin cans to the swans and upsetting the call girls with filthy name-calling. Funny, you'd have thought the girls would have heard it all before...

In short, things are hellish here. Call me.

Over and out.

W x

G—

The landlord and his sons came round – all ten of them. (More over-breeding. We're going to hell in a pram.) They were extremely energetic and leapt all over the place looking for whatever damage they could pin on us so that they can chuck us out. All they found were the holes in the skirting boards that the slugs come through, and quite why they think we would thoughtlessly or maliciously make the holes I don't know. But the upshot is they've served us noticed. The real reason, I discovered from Annie, is that none of the sons want to carry on the family business and so landlord senior is liquidating his assets to make them easier to share round. The neighbours complaining about the noise and mess lately has precipitated the inevitable, it seems. So I'm trying to

tell myself that while it appears to be your fault, it isn't, not really. Although the timing is bloody rotten, and that I lay at your feet.

In case you start wondering – or, heaven forefend, worrying – I shall be at my mother's. I catch the boat on Tuesday. I don't know, or care, what will happen to the tree, the doves, the hen, the whores, the geese or the swans. I have given the landlord your contact details so you can settle your share of things. You have one month.

Mx

G—

Thank you for the bagpipers. Please find enclosed a goose-shit sandwich.

M

G—

So now you are literally drumming me out of your life. After twelve hours of ceaseless cacophony, the residents called the police, who served an asbo on the drummers, and I, apparently, can expect an abatement notice from the council. Once Annie told them who else lived here, the press went to town writing their words and taking their pictures, which you will by now have seen in full colour in all the best tabloids. In my infinite and idiotic loyalty to you I told them it was research for your new opera, so you'll be well advised to drop in a number to corroborate that. Having had no word from you to the contrary, your next masterpiece may well be about pear trees and hens and whores, and so all will be well for you in the long run, I'm sure.

I leave tomorrow. You will be able to find me if you try. If you don't try I shall know to take it personally. But I still look (perhaps vainly) forward to a letter of explanation awaiting me at mother's.

All my love, packed up in a kitbag ready to sail, so you'd better come up with the goods...

W x