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Opening Extract from...

Dearest Jane

Written by
Roger Mortimer and Jane Torday

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Introduction

My Dear Child,

Please temper your hilarity with a modicum of decorum.

Roger Mortimer

My father, Roger Mortimer, was a compulsive correspondent. He wrote to me often – 450 letters plus postcards and notes, yet I was only one of the many recipients of letters from a journalist and writer fully occupied in making a living. In 2008, I advanced on the job of archiving this great store of letters – secreted away for years in drawers, boxes and bags, they surfaced in no particular order. As I reread them for the first time since I had received them back in the last century, I speculated on how I could compile them into an entertaining book for others. I crept gently along with my project, in fits and starts, never losing sight of it but not having it in full view, either.

As readers, our responses to any story will change in the way that we ourselves do, as the years roll by. My reactions to my father's letters as they arrived when I was a girl, young woman and then approaching middle age, were entirely different to the overview I have now, from rereading them through the filter of being a parent and grandmother – and step-parent/grandmother. To this must be added the powerful

impact of digesting the letters in such a concentrated form, en masse. I found myself forming a new relationship, a different understanding, with my late father – on paper.

In the background was my brother Lupin, champing at the bit to tell his own story of my father. We had already agreed to disagree on how we would present our letters from this great comic figure who happened to be our father. We were, however, unanimous in our belief that our father's extraordinary letters to his children deserved to be shared with a wider readership. I did not plan to reproduce my personal letters hook, line and stinker. In common with my father, biography and history fascinate me so it was a more rounded memoir that I had in mind, based on some sterling extracts from his letters.

Time was not on my side. Although I have been writing, one small way or another, all my life, I needed help to get me going in this case. I found it on a week's Creative Non Fiction course with the Arvon Foundation in Devon.

I was happily knuckling down to my task when, suddenly, a streak of greased lightening whizzed past – it was my brother Lupin. His book, entitled *Dear Lupin . . . Letters to a Wayward Son*, was already on the stocks with this noble publisher. Holding on to the pillion behind him was sister Lumpy with her folio of letters, *Dear Lumpy . . . Letters to a Disobedient Daughter*. It was definitely time to oil my own skates.

The result is a book which by its very nature led me back into the past, compelling me to consider the best and the worst of my family life. While I have been working away in my little study at home, I have frequently laughed out loud at my father's irresistible humour. At other times, I have felt anger and sadness – and sympathy. Roger's letters glide seamlessly through an astonishing diversity of topics, reflecting his many moods from brightest to gloomiest,

always with his characteristic sense of comedy – and wisdom. Honesty, courage, loyalty and a strong work ethic were qualities which informed all my father's actions. In print, his sagacity was embedded in the originality and wicked wit of his observations on members of his cast – from our cat to the prime minister – tempered by his affection for recipients of his vintage epistles.

My father's written material is sufficiently rich and varied for me to be able to identify and serve up, with confidence, some of the most tempting dishes from his long menu. If you have already enjoyed my father's comic voice through his letters, and become curious to know more about him, his wife Nidnod and their children, Lupin, Lumpy and their bossy elder sister, this book is for you. Should it be your first meeting with the Mortimer family, I wish you a most merry ride.

Jane Torday

1

Invading the Study

There is something v. nice about pigs. ‘As snug as a pig in pease-straw’, ‘pigs in clover’, ‘lucky little sucking pig’, ‘on the pigs back’, ‘a regular porky boy’, ‘Little Pigs sleep in the sweetest of straw’ etc., etc. I think I’ll buy one of those mobile homes called ‘Porky’s cabin’.

RM

The old roll-top desk at which my father worked was never shut. Its wooden slatted top was firmly wedged back in its casing. It was a man’s desk and beware the woman with the temerity to polish it. On this account my father had few worries as far as my mother was concerned; I can’t recall seeing her with a duster in her hand. For our daily helps, the desk was forbidden territory.

But my father had reckoned without his elder daughter. Full of insatiable curiosity, like Rudyard Kipling’s Elephant’s Child, time sometimes hung heavy on my hands as a little girl. ‘Use your initiative!’ was a frequent suggestion. So I did – tidying, cleaning, polishing and rearranging rooms, sheds,

stables, lofts and outbuildings where these activities were apparently neglected. Part of the pleasure was unearthing treasures and secrets. These were not the diversions my elders and betters had in mind. Like the Elephant's Child I was sometimes spanked for my pains.

Should I appear in the study on some pretext when my father was working, I was dispatched with 'Make a noise like a bee and buzz off' or 'Make a noise like a hoop and roll away'. The study, always an upstairs room, was his sanctuary – though not a silent one. The landing echoed to the repetitious clatter of typewriter keys as my father vigorously tapped out his thoughts for books, articles and letters. His typewriter was perched, somehow securely, on an unstable leather inlaid panel with a hinge missing at the centre of the roll-top desk.

My father and his typewriter were so inseparable a team that it sometimes seemed as if this machine might be one of his limbs, like an arm or a leg. Black, metallic, inky and cumbersome, his first typewriter was, I think, a Remington. I was still of tender age when he discarded this magic monster and handed it over to me as he settled down with his new model, an Olivetti. I was overjoyed with the sudden power this machine bestowed upon me. By tapping one small finger over those lettered keys I could produce PRINTED words on paper.

In each of our family homes, my father's study was arranged identically: the desk positioned alongside a window framed by curtains invariably featuring the colour maroon. Extending from a wall would be a single bed, for his study also served as his bedroom. When weary, he had no hesitation in lying down with a book and drifting off into 'a good zizz'. He might announce, 'I'm off to my zimmer for a bit of Egyptian PT on my bracket [bed]', or sigh as he mounted the stairs, 'I'm off to let demon doss embrace me in his hairy arms.'

‘The Miller’s House
[1980s]

My bed here is only just preferable to a Bengali fakir’s bed of nails and I intend to jump on it to alter the contours. Because of the lumps and chasms, I have been a bit short of Egyptian PT. It’s odd how elderly individuals, who cannot be all that far off death, fuss about insomnia. After all they are going to get plenty of the other thing before long.’

His study shelves were packed with bloodstock catalogues and racing reference books. A bedside table would support a radio and lamp, around which novels, biographies and works in progress would be piled at random, nearly concealing ring marks from uncountable sticky coffee mugs which had rested on its surface. Sporting and military prints hung on the walls and among the framed black-and-white photographs was one of Roger on horseback, soaring over a fence at a 1930s point-to-point. We could never believe it was him.

Animal mascots being a big thing in our family, a special position was reserved in the study for the most successful present I ever chose for my father. I had purchased it in the early 1960s with my pocket money francs in Mortain, a little provincial town in France. ‘Droopy’ was a small, squidgy rubber dog with a lugubrious expression.

‘The Miller’s House
1 June 1990

Life has not been all crumpets and honey but I look back on some happy days at the seaside, particularly when we

shared out the loot on the final day. Shopping at Mortain and St Lo!

Best Love

xx D'

My father and my mother, Cynthia, shared a personal emblem in the shape of a pig – should my parents have been honoured with a coat of arms, two prancing pigs, arm in arm, would have fitted the bill.

A gingham fabric pig hung behind my father's bed, an easier expression of his love for my mother than her conjugal presence. Their silver wedding in 1972 was celebrated by a little pair of silver pigs who sat on the sitting-room mantelpiece. Marriages have been based on stranger pleasures. One birthday, my father was given a huge notepad of pink pig-shaped paper – he slid its pages into the typewriter to bang out letters to his children, economically using both sides. Letters on his porcine paper did not necessarily grunt with good cheer: the growls of a grizzly bear were as likely.

At the beginning of each school holidays, the study assumed a dark, Dickensian demeanour, when we were summoned there individually to apply our attention to paternal admonishments. Gravely, school report in hand, the catalogue of criticisms would be recited. Our father reminded us, rightly, of the 'hard-earned cash' with which he parted for our benefit. Soberly, we left the room promising to do better, our heads bowed. The holidays would pass and, all too often, good resolutions would pass with them.

Over time, a writer's room can emanate a very particular atmosphere, reflecting the essence of its occupant. Orderly and meticulous with his paperwork, my father made regular clearances of documents and memorabilia, and discarded incoming correspondence – including all his children's letters.

He was proud of his claim that all letters from the breakfast delivery would be answered by the midday postal collection.

‘Budds Farm
[1973]

I have been going through old family papers, destroying much. Would you like this cutting from *The Times*? The next time I get a mention in that publication will be when I appear in the ‘Death’ column. Unless I forget myself one day and you see a paragraph headed “Well-known journalist faces serious charge. Alleged incident in Reading Cinema.”

A decade later, he wrote, ‘As you are the keeper of the family archives and mementoes, I enclose some odds and ends. I have been tearing up and burning things all morning.’ Fortunately, his folder of wartime letters was not destined for the incinerator. He entrusted it to me five years prior to his death. ‘You can do what you like with these after I’ve gone,’ he instructed.

When my father’s final hour came, his roll-top desk was found nearly empty bar the odd paper clip in a dusty cubby hole. But his typewriter – by then electric – still held a few paragraphs of a half completed racing article between its rollers. He was eighty-two years old.

There is no record of what his correspondents had to say to him – their letters were long ago crumpled into wastepaper baskets – but we know a good deal of how he responded. How astonished he would be now to know that the litany of thoughts, gossip, jokes, chastisements, advice and love that he had dispensed to his children in the last century would have a second life in the twenty-first century.

Less surprisingly, the real, living presence of such a characterful, entertaining father etched as many memories on the heart as he endowed on paper. My father's impromptu performance of the dying swan from *Swan Lake*, as he twirled his fifty-year-old self lightly but with tragic demeanour around the drawing room of our childhood home, was an unforgettable tour de force. I ended up as a heap of uncontrollable laughter on the floor whereas my father, throughout his silent, solo dance, retained his decorum, making it all the funnier.

Earnestness was anathema to my father, but instinctive though his humorous response was to any circumstance, there was a real depth of feeling and sensitivity at the core of his nature. There were emotions to be dealt with, values to be adhered to and a code of conduct to be respected, as his letters – never heavy no matter what the content – increasingly revealed as both he and I grew older.

As an impressionable child, there was one occasion which shines out for me as the seminal moment when first I became aware of the profounder aspects of my father and how history had shaped the man he had become – as you will discover.