I'll Go to Bed at Noon

Gerard Woodward

I

28 Polperro Gardens
Wood Green
London
N.22

March 30th 1974
Wednesday

Dear Janus

I am very sorry that I have not been able to see you, or even write to you before this. I have been rather ill – since Sunday afternoon, in fact. I've had a very bad cold combined with asthma and have hardly been able to breathe. After a visit to the doctor's on Tuesday morning I was given a great variety of pills etc and am now a little better. (Lobo is crawling over me.) (I'll have to stop for a moment as she now wants to go out.) Of course, not being at work, I am imprisoned here in this box impersonating a room (I hope I'm going to get paid from work as I'm skint). Still, I am hoping that I shall be able to come and see you on Friday. If I don't, I hope that you will write to me as soon after you receive this letter as possible. I shall look forward to it!

Of course, what with so many demons flying around forcing gentlemen such as us to take too many drinks and whoop too loud and too often and even more strange and ludicrous actions! And even the changing of names as the mad women of Tierrapaulita do (to change themselves) does not one bit of good – and the changing of Billbaorosta or Januscjeckarama to: violas one day or violets the next or even after a while cirfrusias, cifrernas, tirrenas, mabrofordotas, frabicias, fabiolas, quitanias, pasquinas, shoposas, zozimas, zangoras and that's the end of the alphabet! (apart from the missing tenaquilas and pogaliras). So think not of changing, my friend, (name or anything) and be damned to devils! For happy are those who whoopeth too loud and delirious are those who ludicrous are!

Now I have heard it said that the natives in the Northern part of Windhover Hill (so far unexplored) speak of a most monstrous Red Lion, that lives in those parts, and its roars can be heard echoing about the eucalyptus and Banyan trees in the valley of the source of the Limpopo. To my mind it is in the national interest that an expedition to discover the Red Lion must be mounted but that it should be properly funded. Many pleas to the Royal Geographical society have been fruitless so far and others snatch away the mountains of the Shangri-las but to the valley of the Red Lion a path must soon be made, and it is we that shall make it.

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I hope very much so that dear Scipplecat is well and happy and I hope that you will convey my best regards to the aforesaid furry creature. Lobo also sends her best wishes.

Now look after yourself JJ and take care till I see you again. I'm afraid coughing and spluttering I must bring this letter to its terrible and inevitable end.

Try not to drink too much till I see you.

You must save some money so that we can go a-boozing. (Lobo is sitting on my head, my nose is full of whiskers)

[I think the drink is getting the better of this letter]

PAX Vobiscum

Lobo says goodbye for now

also adios from myself

Bill

Janus didn't usually leave his letters from Bill lying around, but this one had been left on the kitchen table, out of its envelope, half-unfolded, beside the glass cider tankard that held a posy of wilting daffodils, in a way that suggested, to Colette at least, that she was being invited, along with anyone else in the house, to read it.

And so she had read it, alone in the kitchen, waiting for Aldous to return after a morning at school to get ready for the funeral that afternoon. It was written in a painstakingly rendered Gothic script using a broad, italic nib and illustrated with exquisite marginal drawings. It was like a drunkard's version of the Book of Kells. The 'D' of 'Dear Janus' had been drawn as a D-shaped pub, with a little chimney, creeping ivy and an inn-sign hanging (she even recognised the decapitated Elizabethan on the sign as The Quiet Woman). The remainder of the word had been supplemented by a punning human ear, painted in such pure, Renaissance detail it could have been lifted from a Botticelli portrait. All around the margins of the letter were pen and ink drawings of almost-empty bottles and glasses, some tipped over and spilling the last of their contents, but again drawn beautifully. By the end of the letter the calligraphy, so crisp and rigid at the beginning, had broken down into a scruffy, barely legible scrawl, though Bill's signature was accompanied by what looked like a woodcut, in blood-red ink, of a clenched fist.

Colette tried to imagine the time it must have taken to produce a letter like this, picturing her son-in-law sitting at the little writing desk she'd seen in his and Juliette's bedroom, that was a small forest of pens and brushes, bottles of ink, little wrinkled tubes of watercolour, boxes of nibs. It must have taken him several evenings. An act of devotion. Colette found the sheer effort Bill had put into this letter to her son rather touching. At least someone in the world loved him.

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By the time Aldous had come home, fresh and fluffy from cycling, Colette had long finished reading the letter, but she pretended to be reading it for the first time as he came in, to make it easier for her to show it to him.

But Aldous only gave the letter a cursory glance, reading the first few lines, and admiring Bill's graphic skills, giving a half-hearted, rather hopeless laugh at the D-shaped pub, before handing the letter back to his wife.

'What a load of rubbish,' he sighed, strolling towards the sink to fill a small saucepan with water. Colette felt briefly annoyed by her husband's indifference. He might not like the way his son had been behaving recently, the drunken tantrums, the wanton neglect of his talents as a pianist, but he could at least be interested in him. For the sake of the funeral they were to attend that day, however, she decided to be on his side.

'At least he won't be around to spoil things today,' she said, folding the letter, wondering if she should replace it on the table as though it had never been touched, then realising her son could hardly expect her to have ignored it for a whole day, 'thank Christ he went to work.'

'I wouldn't put it past him to turn up out of the blue,' said Aldous, lighting a ring beneath the pan he'd just filled, 'you know how he gets if he thinks there's a chance of free drink.'

They both recalled Christine's wedding, a couple of years before – the trampled-on wedding cake, the shattered bouquets, the drenched, sobbing bridesmaids.

'He won't,' said Colette, 'he doesn't even know the funeral's today.'

Aldous gave his wife a withering look, meaning to say you could never be sure what Janus knew and what he didn't.

'So it will be just you and me representing the Jones family,' Colette said,'I hope there aren't lots of our nephews and nieces there, it'll make our children look so mean . . .'

The funeral of Mary, the wife of Colette's favourite brother, Janus Brian, was not thought worthy of James breaking his second term as an anthropology student at the University of Lincoln, nor of Juliette losing a day's pay at Eve St John's Toy Emporium, nor even of Julian, their youngest, missing out on double geography and P.E. at St Francis Xavier's. Of all their children Janus would have been the one most likely to have taken a day off work, had he known about it.

Aldous took a small package of newspaper from his jacket pocket, untwisted it, and tipped the contents into a mug. He hadn't had a chance to use it at school, the instant coffee powder he always packed at the last minute before leaving the house for work, tearing off a corner of the Telegraph and spooning on some Maxwell House, folding the paper over in a neat, airtight package, the clever origami of which always delighted his wife when she saw it. He emptied the bubbling saucepan into the mug.

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They hadn't had a kettle for years. The little, lidless, gaudily enamelled pots that came to a boil with a gradually strengthening wail of despair, always seemed to boil dry, thus melting the cheap alloys of their bases. So they only used pans now.

'Do you think I should wear a black tie?' said Aldous, sipping cautiously the black, sugarless coffee.

Colette sat down in her chair by the old cast iron boiler and opened a bottle of Gold Label barley wine with the bottleopening end of a tin opener.

'Have you got a black tie?'

'No.'

'Then the question was academic, was it?'

'I suppose I could buy one on the way. You know what Janus Brian's like. How fussy he is about formalities like that . . .'

That their eldest son, and Colette's closest brother shared the same name, had never once been a source of confusion in their lives. At least, not once they'd started using her brother's middle name in addition to his first, to help distinguish him. Now he was always referred to by these two names – Janus Brian – even when there was no doubt about to whom the name Janus referred, even, sometimes, to his face – Hello Janus Brian, how are you? And Janus Brian didn't seem to mind. It was, after all, a permanent reminder of the compliment his sister had paid him in naming her first-born after him.

'I don't think he'd mind about a thing like that,' said Colette, 'I'm not wearing any black.'

'Women can get away with it,' said Aldous,'men are different. They read things into ties, especially men like Janus Brian.'

Colette poured the Gold Label into a glass, where it fizzed half-heartedly, her second of the day. Colette had taken to this tipple recently, initially as a sedative, to reinforce the ever-weakening effect of her sleeping pills. She would drink two or three glasses in the evening, then take four or five Nembutals (the recommended dose was two), which would despatch her to a deep, dreamless sleep for eight hours. The problem was that awakening was a long, slow painful struggle. She woke as if from a pit of glue, always with a pounding headache and sensations of nausea, the only cure for which, she soon found, was a morning glass of barley wine. One of those and she was near instantly awake and fresh. A sedative in the evening, a pickme- up in the morning. Barley wine was her wonder-drink.

Aldous looked at himself in the little mirror that was fixed to the wall by the back door. His tie was pale blue. His shirt a dark grey, fraying at the collar. A jacket of light tweed. His teaching clothes. He hadn't thought about it before, but it now struck him that he couldn't possibly go to a funeral in his teaching clothes. Standards

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of dress among the pupils at the school Aldous had taught at for nearly three decades had declined rapidly in the last few years, a wave of slightly bashful permissiveness had allowed hair to creep over collars, ties to be worn loosely, top buttons to be left undone, and shoes of the ridiculously elevated kind to be worn, the effect being to give Aldous a distorted sense of his own sartorial smartness. Against the haystack slovenliness of his pupils he had appeared dapperly elegant, but here, in the mirror, he could see how inappropriate his clothes would be for a funeral. He needed a decent tie, at least.

'I think I will get a new tie,' he said to Colette, who was dressed in the pink pullover with white trimmings she had knitted years ago for Juliette, to which she'd pinned one of her mother's old fake ruby brooches. She had dark blue trousers, green sandals, 'I'll call at Houseman's on the way.'

Houseman's was a gentleman's outfitters on the Parade. In the days when Aldous and Colette had had some money Aldous had bought all his clothes from there, though as money had become increasingly scarce, his visits had become less frequent, until he only ever went there now for underwear, making do with jackets, shirts and trousers from the Oxfam shop that had recently opened near The Red Lion.

'If you must,' said Colette, 'though it'll be a waste of time and money.'

Though secretly she was glad of the distraction and delay a detour to Houseman's would take, since she was dreading the funeral. Or at least, she was dreading the actual interment, the lowering of the coffin into the grave. Janus Brian had chosen a spot for his wife in Ladore Lane Cemetery just across the path from where their mother and their sister Meg were buried. Colette found visiting these graves a painful experience at the best of times, that their deaths, both from natural causes (old age and a heart attack), had come so close together (Nana first, then Meg) had been a source of anguish in Colette's life. To be there for another funeral, to witness the lowering of a coffin when it had troubled her so much before (so deep, so dreadfully deep) might, she feared, prove too much for her to bear. On the other hand, she was looking forward to the little gathering that was to take place at Janus Brian's house afterwards, a meeting of sisters and brothers, brothers and sons, wives and daughters. It was so rare for them all to be gathered in a single place, especially with Janus Brian, who had become very reclusive in recent years. Though he lived only a mile away from Colette, visits to his house in Leicester Avenue, a cul-de-sac of pebbledashed semis,were often coldly received, and rarely reciprocated. In fact, he only ever visited Colette to announce one thing – the imminence of his own death.

'Nothing funny about it dear. This is it,' he said once when Colette opened the front door to see him standing on the step in his work clothes (a dark suit with a narrow black tie), 'my number's up.Will you get off the floor?' Colette had got down on her knees in mock worship at her brother's feet.

It had happened several times, usually as a result of reading some health article or other, that Janus Brian would discover symptoms in himself of a fatal disease. Now she couldn't even remember what it had been. An innocent pimple, wart, or

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pedunculated polyp. A benign confusion of cells. A temporary thinning of the blood. As with most hypochondriacs, however, Janus Brian remained annoyingly free of real illness.

Then, only last week, he'd called at the house in his dark suit and Colette had poured ironic gratitude on his presence, unrolling an invisible red carpet, forming a solo guard of honour, kissing him on both cheeks like a Russian at a superpower summit, before she noticed how Janus Brian's countenance had fallen. His face was a game of Kerplunk and someone had just extracted the crucial straw sending all the marbles tumbling. Colette thought that perhaps death really was coming for him now, after a dozen false alarms. But it was not his own death that Janus Brian had come to announce – it was that of his wife.

Colette had always felt responsible, in some way, for the marriage of Janus Brian and Mary Moore. The Waugh children – Lesley, Agatha, Meg and Colette – had all married within a few years of each other, in a post-war nuptial frenzy. Colette didn't want to see her favourite brother left out, sensing that he desired husbandhood while feigning indifference to women. She fixed him up with numerous blind dates, always keeping an ear to the ground for marriage-hungry spinsters, inviting Janus along for evenings in the pub with eager single women. Janus was not spectacularly good looking; tall, bespectacled, balding, thinlipped and with too much chin, in some people's eyes he was rather plain, if not ugly. But there was an air of dishevelled elegance about him, a look of casual distinction that some women found attractive.Over the years Colette had rooted out plenty of females willing to wed her brother, but for a man she supposed mostly uninterested in women, he proved surprisingly fussy in his preferences.

'She was a charming young girl, dear,' he would say the following morning, 'really charming, but, you know, I felt that she had rather a tall forehead, and it seemed to come forward slightly, and then go in again,' he described the shape with his hand,'do you know what I mean?''No. I thought she was beautiful.' 'She was, in her way. It was just that her forehead was the wrong shape.' Another time, she recalled, it was the eyes that put Janus off.'They were grave eyes,' he said, selecting the adjective carefully and with much thought. 'What do you mean?' 'I don't know how else to put it. She just had . . . grave eyes.' Then there was a girl he described as having a 'wet mouth'. 'It's when someone makes slippery, sticky noises with their mouth while they talk. It drives you mad. I could never marry a girl with a wet mouth.'

How many would-be wives had Colette procured over the years? Ten? A dozen? And then he goes and picks the most unlikeliest of mates from under her nose; Mary Moore, sister of Reg Moore, Janus Brian's oldest friend, and one time admirer of Colette.

'Janus never wanted that sort of wife,' Aldous had said, many years later, 'He always wanted a glamour-puss for a wife. A dolly-bird. A long-legged, high-bosomed blonde.' It had not occurred to Colette that her brother was much of a connoisseur of female beauty – pernickety over minor anatomical details like the height of the

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forehead, yes, but not the sort of man to be drawn to the brazen sirens that filled his sizeable archive of Silver Screen and Movie Goer.

'How do you know?' said Colette, indignant that Aldous should claim to know her brother better than her.

'Can't you see how he fancies himself ? He thinks he's some sort of suave film star. A Cary Grant . . .' Colette burst into a sniggering laugh at the idea, '. . . or an Errol Flynn. He's always been like that. A narcissist.'

Mary was not a beautiful woman. She was small and stout with dark, curly hair always cut at a sensible, practical length. Her eyes were those of a mouse – small, black and attentive while her little mouth was crowded with what looked like milk teeth, only just showing above the gums, too much of which were exposed when she laughed.

Then there was the oddness of her movements, the way she would suddenly clench her nose, as though stifling a sneeze, or a laugh. The strange, wine-taster's lip-poutings she gave, or the whole-face grimaces, produced for no reason, that came from nowhere.

Also, she was sterile.

Colette often wondered what sort of father her brother would have been, what sort of sons he would have had, what daughters. She liked to think he would have been a good father to his own children, because he was very awkward with his nephews and nieces. She remembered allowing him to hold his namesake Janus when he was a few days old, and Janus Brian had held the baby away from him, as though it might be covered in sharp spines, or that it might explode.

Once, when James was a little boy, Colette was washing his feet, which she did, as she'd always done, by sitting her son in a chair and kneeling down with a plastic washing up bowl full of soapy water. Janus Brian was in the house and witnessed the scene – mother kneeling before her son, washing his feet.

'What are you doing, worshipping that kid?' he muttered with a half laugh.

Children never came to Janus Brian and Mary. Somehow, it seemed to Colette, childlessness shaped their lives, gave it its character, its distinctiveness. How could they bear it, she wondered, to know that that was it? That their marriage was just that – two people – and would never be anything else, robbed of the phases growing children give to a family. How could they contemplate old age, tottering together along a lonely path into darkness, with no one to leave their house to but strangers?

When they finally abandoned, after years of tentative efforts, any idea of having children, Janus and Mary somehow raised a drawbridge against their possibility. Janus settled into his career as a draughtsman, producing blueprints for power stations. The concern with precision and accuracy that this job entailed seemed to spill over into his domestic life. Their house became a domain of meticulous order

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with always freshly hoovered floors, unstained upholstery, dusted ornaments that never moved, intricate and expensive crystalware that could sit safely at the edge of a table. Nothing in Janus Brian's house was ever broken. Their crockery was of complete and unchipped sets that were changed only when the pattern began to fade.

And then there was his garden, a steeply sloping series of terraces rising from a lush patio, passing through alpines, colourfully laden gazebos, little scalloped lawns, eventually flattening out to a kitchen garden where vegetables grew in straight lines. He and Mary had put everything into their garden. It was not a garden designed with children in mind. Janus and Mary's house and garden seemed to Colette to have become a celebration of childlessness.

She had only ever had the briefest glimpses of the interior of their marriage, and it always felt chilly to her.

Often when she visited, Janus and Mary would be in their sitting room watching the television with a neutral, bland complacency in their postures as they slumped in reclining armchairs and leather sofas.

Is that all you ever do, she sometimes felt like saying, sit there and watch TV?

But instead she said 'You've got a colour television. I didn't know you had one of those. Why didn't you tell me?'

Her brother turned to her, drawing his face away from the screen with difficulty, before saying 'Dear, when you buy a colour television, you don't go running down the street shouting "I've got a colour television! I've got a colour television".'

Mary giggled and said 'Why not?' underlining her remark with a facial tic from her considerable repertoire. This was the nose-draw, where she stretched the philtrum of her upper lip, as if to loosen a dried bogey in her nostril.

Colette was fond of Mary, however. She found her witty and friendly. Unpretentious. Unsnobbish. These things set her apart from the other inhabitants of that well-to-do cul-de-sac, along with the fact that she was membership secretary for her local branch of the Labour Party, which didn't seem to prevent her from being a popular participant in many coffee mornings. She was good at getting along with people. So Colette was upset when Janus Brian told her of her death.

'She was watching the telly,' he said, trying so hard to speak calmly in the hall at Fernlight Avenue. He seemed, as always, reluctant to penetrate further into Colette's house than its hallway. 'Sat in the armchair with a mug of coffee and a saucer of digestives. Then she said "Oh dear", and put her head on her shoulder and closed her eyes and that was it. I thought she was just dozing off, not something she usually does, but then she let the coffee go, scalding hot all over her lap, and when she didn't flinch I realized she'd gone. I wondered how I could ever have thought she was just asleep. There's a special face we save for when we're dead, Dear, and that's the face she had . . .'

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So Aldous and Colette drove to Houseman's for a black tie, and Colette took the opportunity of stocking up on cigarettes at Hudson's, the tobacco-reeking newsagents two shops down. Then a straightforward drive along Green Lanes to St Nicola's church, where there was already a sizeable crowd gathering. In his haste, Aldous had forgotten to actually don his tie, and so spent an awkward few moments crouched down in the depths of the Hillman's footwells knotting the black silk around his neck, and then at the service found he was the only person so dressed. Even Lesley, Colette's other brother and Aldous's oldest friend, had not thought it necessary to wear any black. In fact, he was wearing the sort of teaching clothes (the lifelong occupation from which he'd now retired) that Aldous had felt so uncomfortable in earlier. His wife, Madeleine, was dressed in a bottle-green two piece with a matching hat and veil.

Colette was surprised by the turnout, and by the number of people she didn't know. As far as she was aware, Janus Brian had only one friend, Reg Moore, but his wife must have been rather more sociable, because the church was teeming with women her age and who were, prior to the service, chatting to each other with the comfortable informality of long acquaintance.

Taking her place at the front of the church, alongside her brothers, and her sister Agatha, pleased to find herself standing next to Janus Brian, whose face was stiff with the effort of self-control, Colette caught her first glimpse of the coffin – four tall candles at each corner, a tasteful spray of lilies on its top, and though it contained a person who had only ever existed on the periphery of her life, Colette felt immediately the surge of unwanted tears behind her eyes. Memories of her mother's funeral, her sister's, which had taken place in the same church nearly ten years before, were made intensely real by the stench of varnish and incense, the hopelessness of flowers and prayers.

Colette had once been a regular churchgoer, the whole family spending Sunday morning among St Nicola's religious kitsch, it's half-hearted attempt to evoke the grandeur of the Gothic. Nowadays only Aldous continued this tradition, taking leisurely strolls there and back each Sunday morning, seeming to find in Holy Communion a much more ordered and comprehensible version of Sunday lunch than the one he usually experienced at home. Colette, however, now only visited St Nicola's for funerals, and her convent upbringing meant she could not escape a sense of guilt at her lapse, even more so when she flirted, as she sometimes did, with agnosticism, even outright atheism. Her sister Agatha had surprised her once by announcing, in the plain, casual tone so characteristic of her, that she was an agnostic. She seemed to find a satisfaction in the word, and smiled slyly, as if not expecting Colette to understand what it meant.

'So am I,' she had replied instantly, in a childish attempt to appear unshocked.

But entering a church was, for her, like walking into a theatre for a part she had been rehearsing all her life. The words came so easily, the Our Father, the Hail Mary. She knew them in Latin probably better than she knew them in English – Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus

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ventris tui, Iesus . . . The automatic genuflections, the bowing of the head, the whole choreography of the Catholic Mass was written into her memory so deeply she could never truly call herself an atheist without a fear of divine wrath, or the pursuit, at least, of the nuns who had terrorized her childhood.

So she, and her brothers and sister, stood, sat, knelt, sang and recited in unison throughout the service, and only at the De Profundis did she look up

Out of the depths I have cried unto thee, O Lord . . .

And felt the surge of tears again. The coffin now amid clouds wafted by respectful altar boys from their quietly rattling gilt censers, dripping with the holy water the priest had shaken over it with such vigour she had felt a few droplets reach her,

My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that
watch for the morning

She found herself mouthing the words along with the elderly, rather bumbling German priest, who had given her sister-inlaw a middle name she didn't possess, and could not, at that moment, have possibly declared herself an atheist. She stifled more tears, and heard behind her the wet noise of loose mucus being sniffed. She wanted to turn to see who else was crying. She sensed Janus Brian beside her, stoically firm, unyielding to emotion. He too, as far as she knew, liked to call himself an atheist. Far too scientifically and practically minded ever to be 'fooled' as he'd put it, by the mysteries of the faith.

Things got worse for Colette at the graveside. Still next to Janus Brian, their arms linked for mutual support, Colette didn't know where to focus her attention – the coffin in half-shadow beneath them? The greengrocer's fake grass draping the edge of the hole? The all-surrounding wall of mourners? In the end she had to close her eyes, and look at nothing but the afterimages of light that drifted behind her eyelids. She felt herself drifting with them, a dangerous thing to do at a graveside. The priest's words were mostly lost in the breezy air, as meaningless as the bickering sparrows nearby. She wondered if she was going to faint. She had never fainted in her life, and yet she was always expecting to. She drifted further, and became conscious of her brother's arm restraining her. She was being gently tugged back from a brink.

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