

so I'm Not to Worry About It (as if, in my condition, I would) and it was a great relief when Jennifer finally got her flight sorted out and I could tell them not to bother as my daughter would be here every day. (I have hazy memories of Geoffrey visiting, in the early days, but now he knows I'm not going to die he has confined his sympathies to letters.) Jennifer arrived a week ago, and apart from the pleasure of seeing her it has meant that I have at last got my personal possessions at the hospital, such as, thank goodness, my night-dress and towels, and of course this notebook. (Regarding this, and in passing only, I should say that both the police and my own doctor have apparently read it, though Jennifer, I think mercifully, has not.)

Really there is little else to say. I'm already strong enough to write, and now Jennifer is here they're talking about discharging me within a fortnight. I think, even with the catheter removed, I will still be dubious about Nurse Frinton's 'miracle' (it seems somehow entirely the wrong word) but I believe I know enough about misfortune to recognize when I have indeed been lucky, and the folly of pushing it.

Cautiously, I would say only that the questions I asked in the previous entry have in my own mind been answered; and on that note of restraint I therefore close this diary.

THE SECRET

I'd had another row with Gerald at breakfast. About my work, of course, it's become almost a ritual. He said that if they were only filming for three days then I could come back every night, and I snapped no I couldn't, what did he think they were paying for, certainly not to shoot some motorway-jaded hag, and the argument went downhill from there. At one point he called me a pea-brained harlot (even his vocabulary is prehistoric) and at another I told him he had all the initiative and charisma of a telephone answering machine. Eventually he roared off to work half an hour late in the Audi, leaving me to take my rage out on the housework.

And that's when it happened. I had just got as far as the mantelpiece over my beautiful brass fireplace when suddenly I rose, effortlessly, into the air. 'It's the updraught!' was all that went through my mind, in the brief second before my head brushed the ceiling. I would have been alarmed, I'm sure, if the sensation hadn't been so exquisite. To describe it I can think of only one other as acutely pleasurable, and in a way this was better, because I was still capable of full and rational thought.

I didn't actually do much up there at first. I was still holding the duster, and I suppose I should have taken the opportunity to clear a few cobwebs, or dust the picture rail (sorry, I'm being facetious, it's the mood I'm in) but the fact is that I was so astonished, and then so

delighted, that I did little more than swivel to regard the room – most odd from this aspect, almost like a cut-away film set – and relish the experience. Especially when I noticed the strips of old floral wallpaper that Gerald had missed when he painted the room last year, sprouting upwards like lurid fungal growth from the curtain pelmets. He's always so insufferably superior about my DIY efforts.

I floated around the room a while, not very elegantly – finding my wings, you could say, though in practice it was more like swimming, except less strenuous, air being so much lighter – and eventually managed a swoop through the doorway into the kitchen. The cat was sleeping next to the fruit bowl on the table, where she knows she's not allowed, so I dropped the duster on her from a great height, which made her look upwards in terror, and then shoot like a thing demented out through the cat flap; I'm afraid I laughed, feeling very childish and over-excited.

I was still drifting around the kitchen when I began to worry about getting down. Only for a moment however, because no sooner had the anxiety crystallized in my mind, than I sank, gently, to the floor. As if the thought had constituted a physical weight, making me just too heavy for flight. So I stopped worrying about it and rose again, this time to embark on an aerial inspection of the house. What struck me most, during this, was the profound effect of perspective: the furniture looked not only smaller, viewed from above, but in a strangely comforting way, much less significant. My dressing-table, his desk, our bed; all, suddenly, mere objects. I stayed aloft until afflicted by an attack of remorse, on hearing the rattle of the cat flap downstairs. You cruel woman, I thought, and dropped to the floor so fast I almost ended up in the linen basket. I ran down and found the poor animal still distinctly twitchy, but told her I was sorry and made a great fuss of her to prove it, and at least she isn't one to bear tedious grudges.

I didn't tell Gerald I could fly when he came home. Actually I didn't

feel inclined to tell anyone, but particularly not him. Though fleetingly I entertained a delicious picture of myself lurking above the sitting-room doorway, perhaps repeating my performance with the cat, or making snidely authoritative remarks about his bald spot. But somehow I sensed it would be most unwise, and possibly, owing to the heaviness of spirit his presence invokes, even impossible. This was proved right; I tried a brief lift-off in the bathroom before I went to bed, and nothing happened. I put it down to the proximity of his soggy footprints on the bathmat, where he had stepped from the tub without bothering to dry any part of himself first. Sort of essence of Gerald, combining one of his most irritating habits with traces of his body fluids, enough to ground anyone. Paradoxically, the fact that I couldn't fly then tempted me to announce I could, just to see his reaction; somehow knowing I couldn't prove it made me feel safe. But by the time I entered the bedroom he was deep in his computing magazine, a choice of bedtime reading I find almost as offensive as if he were reading *Men Only*. (He sells office computers but won't have one in the house because he's terrified I'll crack it, and he'll have one less thing to sneer at me about.) So I was damned if I was going to say anything to him, despite knowing he does it deliberately to provoke this response. It's when he doesn't want sex, of course; that way he can blame me for it, rather than his own unreliable libido.

Funnily enough I didn't worry that I'd lost the ability to fly for good. Nor, which seems astonishing now, did I imagine that I might have dreamt it, or been temporarily insane. Somehow I knew it had been real, and would come back, when Gerald had gone. And it did; I watched his car pull out of the drive the next morning – yesterday – and simultaneously rose, as my spirits soared. I swooped up the stairwell, over the first-floor banister, and reckless with joy, dived head first down again, executing a satisfying twist at the bottom to avoid the hall dresser, and landing neatly on my feet in the middle of the carpet. I'm

afraid no housework got done at all. Usually when I'm between jobs I virtually spring-clean the house, so the build-up of dirt doesn't offend Gerald too much on the days I'm working; but then usually I haven't got anything much better to do.

Carol rang me in the afternoon, to invite me over for lunch the next day. Today, that is. She'd just got back from Ibiza, where she's been modelling summer dresses for the Littlewoods catalogue. 'I can fly!' I wanted to shriek down the phone to her, but didn't. However I told her I'd got the part for the Marmite advert, which she whooped about, though really it's a bit of a come-down from the glamorous jet-setting types I used to land. But Carol's such a positive person, and always on the look out for silver linings you may not have spotted yourself. We can't go on being dazzling pouters for ever, she said, the sooner we move in on the family markets the better. Look at the OXO ladies, she reminded me, they roll in the bucks for years; and of course she's right.

Gerald was grouchy all yesterday evening, after I'd told him I was going to see Carol. He doesn't like her because she and Harry are divorced, and she's not as unhappy as Harry is about it. He thinks Harry got a raw deal, but since it was Harry's compulsive infidelity that caused the break-up, the logic is hard to follow. It has something to do with his belief that Carol was to blame for Harry's restlessness in the first place, and therefore should have been more understanding about the results; however I note the same arguments didn't apply when Carol started having affairs, even though hers were manifestly a desperate reaction to his. Despite the sour atmosphere, Gerald wanted sex when we went to bed, and I didn't have the energy to argue about it. He always wants to do it when he knows I'm going to be out visiting 'my' friends. I think he sees it as a stamp of ownership. While it was going on I decided I definitely didn't love him anymore, and infinitely preferred flying.

I left the Escort in the garage this morning, and took a taxi to Carol's; I knew we'd be drinking.

'My, you look wonderful!' she exclaimed, as she opened the door to me. Carol is very honest, insensitively so at times, so I took this as a genuine compliment. Truthfully I did feel rather wonderful. I take a lot of care with my appearance, because of my work, but I have noticed that over the last couple of days I've been able to take a lot less, and still be gratified by the results. I told Carol she looked wonderful too; though actually that's the wrong word. Now she's stopped starving herself down to a size ten, and accepted that natural tawny is much more attractive than bleached blonde, 'magnificent' describes her better.

We drank far too much Spanish brandy before lunch. (Not that it seemed too much at the time, but I can feel now it must have been.) Carol told me she had slept with a Moroccan guitarist from a beach café, and that his body was so dark and beautiful she'd never sleep with an Englishman again. (I doubt this, knowing Carol, but I'm sure she believes it now.) I told her things weren't any better between Gerald and myself, but perhaps without my usual note of bitterness, because she narrowed her eyes and accused me of being 'up to something'. 'You don't look at all miserable,' she said. 'In fact I'd say you look happy. Don't tell me you're not. What's going on?'

So I told her. I hadn't meant to, and I daresay the brandy helped, but I don't think it was just that. It suddenly seemed, well, all right.

Her reaction was odd. Not disbelieving, more wary. Perhaps she thinks I'm mad, I thought, it did sound mad. She asked me how I'd discovered I could fly, and when I could do it, and when I couldn't. All the right questions. And she asked me who else I had told.

'No one,' I said. 'Only you.'

'Not Gerald?'

'I didn't think I should. I didn't want to, anyway.'

'No one else?'

'No. Actually I wasn't going to tell you, but somehow . . .'
I smiled.

She looked relieved. She didn't follow it up immediately, but refilled my glass and then curled up in the armchair opposite looking extraordinarily satisfied and amused. 'I think,' she said with a chuckle, 'that the old dragon in the public library can fly.'

'What!' I cried, 'Not the one with the steel-wool hair and murderous glasses?'

'That's the one.' She gave me a sidelong smile. 'I had what I thought was a brainstorm when Harry left, and asked her for a book on women flyers. She showed me a book on Amy Johnson and I said that wasn't quite what I meant. So she dug me out a couple of novels. One of them was about a woman who has wings and is part of a circus, and the other was an American book that didn't actually mention flying at all, except in the title, but was about people being afraid of it. You had to read what it was really about between the lines. They came as an enormous relief.'

'You're telling me you can fly too!' The shock was followed by an upsurge of joy, and then a pang of hurt, that she'd never told me.

She smiled down at the brandy glass cradled in her lap. 'My mother could fly,' she said reminiscently. 'I remember her telling me once, when I was quite small. Of course I didn't believe her. It was the sort of crazy thing she was always saying.' She sighed, and looked up at me. 'Actually I couldn't fly in Spain, but I think I was too excited about my Moroccan. My spirit wasn't free enough. I haven't tried since I've been back, but yes . . .' she nodded at me, ' . . . I can fly.'

'This is amazing,' I breathed weakly. 'But why on earth didn't you tell me?'

'You wouldn't have believed me, would you? Like I didn't believe my mother.'

'You could have shown me. I'd have had to believe it then.'

'Ah ha.' She tapped her nose. 'But I wouldn't have been able to. You can't fly in front of someone who doesn't believe you. Like you couldn't with Gerald. In fact I don't think you can fly if there's any risk of discovery at all. I thought I'd use it to paint the ceiling above the stairwell, but I couldn't until I'd bought the ladders. I didn't have to use them, but . . .'

'Hang on,' I interrupted. She was going too fast for me. 'Let me get this straight. What you're saying is that it's not just you and me . . . you're saying that lots of people can do it?'

'Well of course I don't know for sure . . .' she shrugged. 'But yes. In fact I think all women could. I mean that they're capable of it. In the right circumstances.'

'But not men?'

'My mother said they didn't need to. She said they could anyway, in a sense. I'm sure they can't do it literally. We'd all know about it, wouldn't we? You can't imagine them keeping it secret. They'd be boasting in the pub about how often they did it, or how high or fast they'd gone. And they'd have invented hundreds of rules to control it. And think of the warfare potential.'

'But . . . do they know women can do it? Some of them must. I mean . . . it seems incredible . . .'

'I sincerely hope not.' She laughed, then shook her head. 'I don't think so. My God, just imagine the anxiety, if they knew . . . we'd all live on tethers, or in cages.'

I digested this. At last I said seriously, 'But how is this possible? How can it be that women have the capacity for flight, and nobody except the women who have it know about it? That something so amazing could be kept secret, all this time?'

'Fairly easily, I'd have thought,' Carol said drily. 'From men, anyway. They haven't traditionally shown themselves riveted with interest in

what women are capable of, have they? And even if they were told, and were listening properly at the time, they'd want to see it proved, wouldn't they? They wouldn't take our word for it. Christ, Harry wouldn't even believe me when I said I was upset, or something as simple as that. He'd say "no you're not" as if things that came out of my mouth had no connection with my inner feelings, and were either whims of the moment, or calculated tactics to oppress him. I wouldn't have stood a chance with "I can fly". Anyway, it'd hardly be in our interests to tell them, would it?

'No,' I said. 'I suppose not.' I frowned. It was almost too much to absorb, on top of half a dozen brandies. A thought occurred to me. 'It's a shame it isn't more useful though,' I said slowly. 'I mean, if what you say is true, it's difficult to see how it could be used for anything except fun.'

'But that's just it!' cried Carol, 'Can't you see? That's its great virtue . . . it's ours, just for fun. Our glorious, unbelievable, female secret. What women have always needed. A totally frivolous self-serving talent. Marvellous.'

I nodded. Put that way, I suddenly saw it was. 'And I've learnt to fly because I'm breaking up with Gerald?' I said. 'That's it, isn't it?'

'I think so,' said Carol. 'Or rather, because of the way you're breaking up.' She paused. 'I only know four women who can fly. Mummy, the library dragon, you and me. That's not counting the two writers. Mummy was always her own woman, years before her time. Everybody thought she was wonderful, but completely dotty. Stacks of men friends, but never a husband in sight. She always said, "Men are such fun, darling, but not worth losing your wings for". I didn't understand, of course. The library dragon's a Miss, so she probably never married either, and she's so rude to everyone it's obvious she doesn't give a toss what they think of her. And me . . . well, the first time I flew was the day I accused Harry of having yet another affair, and he was so angry he punched me in the shoulder, really hard, and slammed

out of the house. I felt so released, so completely free of him, that I simply soared up to the ceiling. I couldn't get down again till Elizabeth called round to weep over me about crashing her car. I felt dreadful, trying to be sympathetic and supportive, while my insides were practically wriggling out of my ears with excitement. She ended up asking me if I was all right, because I looked so pink and bothered.'

'But what about her?' I said eagerly. Elizabeth's a friend of ours. Widowed two years, the freest of us all. 'D'you think she can fly?'

'Oh no,' said Carol definitely. 'I'm sure she can't. She misses Hugh terribly. That's why she keeps crashing her car. And even when she gets over it . . . well . . . she had a good time with him, she'll want to do it again, don't you think? While you and I . . .' her lips twitched with amusement, 'well, quite frankly I prefer flying, don't you?'

'Even if you met someone like Hugh?'

She grinned. 'Well, I'm not saying I couldn't survive being grounded for a while. But permanently . . . no, not now I've experienced flying. It's too good to sacrifice for anyone.'

'It is good, isn't it,' I sighed.

'Wonderful,' agreed Carol.

I walked home. It's nearly two miles, and not the prettiest of city routes, but I was so elated, so brim-full of discovery, that I couldn't imagine cramming myself into a taxi.

And walking, I could look at the women. Near the main post office I saw one I was absolutely sure of, a beautiful woman in her forties, with eyes so alive and sparkling that I wanted to fling my arms around her, and a stride so bold and confident I guessed I'd end up in the gutter if I tried. I smiled at her as we passed, and after a flicker of surprise she grinned back. I expect she thought I was drunk; which I was of course, but I think I'd have smiled anyway. And I saw plenty of women who obviously couldn't, weighed down with shopping, and trailing children

and responsibilities. Their faces, even when they looked kind and friendly, wearing that veil of care and selflessness. Like mine used to, I suppose, though I never recognized it.

When I got home – just a hour or so ago – I floated up and down the stairwell a few times, to check I could still do it and clear my head – gracious, it does feel good for you – and then rang Hogg and Sons, to tell them to start divorce proceedings. I was put through to Hogg Junior, who sounded very cautious; it's possible I was still panting a little from the exertion of the flight, and my cheerfulness may have struck him as odd, in the circumstances. He insisted he couldn't take instructions like that over the telephone, and said I should write, or call round in person.

I couldn't face another outing, so I picked up my pen to draft him a letter. But I wasn't really in the mood, and somehow found myself writing this, instead.

SUMMER STORM

The chalet had gaslights. And shiny satin counterpanes on the beds, a brass barometer in the hallway outside the kitchen, and four wooden steps from the verandah down to the pebble beach.

After we'd explored it we all stood on the verandah, overlooking the sea. Below us were two steep banks of pebbles, and then the breaking waves. Far out the sea was dark blue, but closer in, paler and yellowy.

'We'll be shipwrecked sailors,' Mummy said, 'abandoned on our desert island. We'll fish for our food, and live off the sea.'

Marie didn't like Mummy saying this, her face became twisted and unhappy. She said it wasn't an island and we hadn't been abandoned, and Mummy was stupid to say things like that.

Davey asked what were we going to catch when we'd only got nets, and there were no rock pools or sand, just pebbles.

'You wait till low tide,' Mummy said. She put her arm round Marie and jiggled her shoulders. 'Come on sweetie,' she said. 'This is a holiday, cheer up.'

We went for a walk along the beach track before we had supper. There was a whole row of chalets like ours, the people in the one next door had a red speed boat, pulled up onto the pebbles just above the sea.

Mummy said the grassy bank alongside the track was the sea wall.