

Excerpts from
LOVE LETTERS
of a
Swiss doctor & English poet

with fascinating vignettes
of people and places in
Greece, London, Bristol
a Cornish village
Edinburgh, Bern, Vienna
Rome and Paris

MARTIN PROBERT & VERONIKA BENTZ

EXCERPTS
from the Paperback Version of

Love Letters
of a
Swiss Doctor and English Poet

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Love Letters of a Swiss Doctor and English Poet

Martin Probert and Veronika Bentz

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The Road to Mycenae, 29 September 1967

A young Englishman, walking to Mycenae in Greece, comes to where four lanes meet. There, at a table outside an otherwise deserted cafe, sit two Swiss girls. He joins them and, for half an hour or more, they talk of cabbages and kings. Leaving his rucksack with the girls for safe keeping, the young man continues to Mycenae, stays overlong, and hurries back to find the girls fastening a note to his rucksack.

Dear Englishman, We left at 4 o'clock and we hope that you will find your rucksack all right. We wish you many further beautiful days. Yours Ursula and Veronika.

If you should once come to Switzerland, there are two very cheap hostels:

*Veronika Bentz, Sustenweg 62, Bern
Ursula, Bern*

Letters between London (Holland Park) and Bern

Bern, 18 December 1967

Dear Martin

While I was sorting out my papers today, I found your address, and I remembered the evening we spent together in Nafplion. Do you remember the candles we lit in the church?

I hope you had afterwards beautiful holidays and that you have seen many beautiful things. Ursula and I went to Athens, and then we spent one week on the island Hydra. Oh, it was so beautiful the sea and the landscape there. Every day we could walk and walk, and we only met some donkeys or some sheep.

Now we have both to work for our studies, and sometimes it is difficult for me to believe that I have been there, Greece and the whole journey is like a beautiful dream.

I think in your country it is now as cold as it is in ours. We have snow and I like to walk through the white wood. Yes Martin, when you come once to Switzerland, then we shall show you our mountains, our woods and also our towns and our churches.

Now, I wish you beautiful Christmas and a good New Year in which you will see many wonderful new things.

Many, many greetings, also from Ursula.

Yours Veronika

I hope you understand my English because Ursula, who knows English better than I, is now in the mountains for skiing and I cannot ask her.

[Enclosed: postcard showing an angel from one of the choir chairs in the Bernese Munster.]

This little angel wishes you a beautiful Christmas and a wonderful new year. He is a Bernese angel and he would be very proud to show you once his cathedral.

London, one fragile winter's morning

9 Holland Park, London W11

Dear Veronika

Well I remember the magic of that night. I have often wished to be sitting once more with you beneath the tree, eating melon. And fitting into my adventure with you comes another adventure.

As I approached the Lion Gate at Mycenae, two boys were lingering near it. They seemed to be speaking English. But I remembered the story of Agamemnon returning home to Mycenae after the war of Troy, and of his murder by Clytemnestra, so I waited for the boys to leave so that I could approach the gate in solitude. As I did so the oppressive shadow of the Cyclopean walls fell suddenly upon me, a memory of Agamemnon's doom.

I just looked up my notes about Nafplion. "Black sea. The town afloat. Drifting lights. Fallen stars. The Milky Way." Looking at the distant stars and lights, it had

seemed as if some of the stars had fallen and piled up upon the horizon. “We light the candles in the church.”

The next morning at Nafplion, there being no shaving mirror in the youth hostel, some boy lent me his. Now this was one of the boys I had seen the day before who seemed to be speaking English. I knew this but I did not consciously let myself realise it. What I consciously did was to assume he was Greek. So I spoke to him using my half dozen words of Greek. Unknown to me he was making a similar assumption and in speaking to me was using his half dozen words of Greek!

Next, you remember in the breakfast restaurant there were two girls sitting to the right of the door speaking German. Well, a couple of short car rides after I had left you – (the man at Tiryns tried once more to give me a meal, a bed, and to push money into my hand to catch a bus. A car luckily stopped at the most embarrassing moment) – the two boys, who had just been joined by the two girls, passed and waved as I was filching grapes from a field. Then five minutes later they came back and squashed me into their tiny car, and off we went to Mystra, my destination and theirs.

About then I drastically changed my plans and hitched to Olympia, Delphi, Meteora, Kastoria, Thessaloniki, Mount Athos, then back via Thessaloniki to Athens.

At Mystra: “A dead scorpion. A snake rushing beneath a rock. A tortoise out on an ivy-clad ledge. An outlandish 2cm thick caterpillar thrashing to and fro, trapped on a thorn. The facets of all the buildings repeating the same patterns of the sun.” The high spot in Mystra was a

ruined palace, no roof but one of the floors still intact, so that beneath the high sun there was light emerging from the upper windows alone, the lower windows in darkness, a castle of the Day and of the Night. It reminded me of Magritte, his paintings.

Tripolis: “In the early morning, innumerable black-dressed ladies riding in on donkeys. The mountains adrift on a sea of shifting mist.”

Olympia: The West Pediment was one of the reasons I hitch-hiked from England, others being the Acropolis at Athens, and the Sistine Chapel at Rome. You might like *Travels in Greece* by Nikos Kazantzakis, a wonderful book – not a travel guide, but a spiritual account of his own country.

Suddenly, in the midst of the mountains north of Delphi, I came across an old man walking along the roadside with a huge brown bear. Some of the most beautiful scenery I saw in Greece was this stretch from Delphi to just north of Meteora.

Anybody would love Meteora, a landscape of fantasy. Twenty-four massive pillars of rock and at the top of each, perched on high, virtually inaccessible, a monastery.

I never visited an island, nor, as I had intended, the Mana.

Mount Athos: a peninsula, the only monastic state in Europe (see the chapter entitled ‘Mount Athos’ in *Report to Greco*, the autobiography of Nikos Kazantzakis). No woman, no female animals, no gas, no roads, 25 miles by 4 miles, just vast rambling C11 &

C12 monasteries, each once filled with 1500 monks, now each with only 4, 13, 8, 24 monks, though one with 70. So weird, these vast fantastical buildings, empty but for half a dozen withered old monks. The whole peninsula is mountain down to the sea and to get from one monastery to the next, a long difficult journey of many hours across the mountains, following and stumbling on half-worn paths which often disappear into the undergrowth, time and time again one becomes lost. And then after many weary hours the next monastery is spied beneath and one descends to it, the monks give a plate of broth and perhaps something else to eat and offer a bed for the night; usually the hospitality is given generously, always everything is free. But it is a hard time and perhaps because of that all the more wonderful. Certainly the most incredible place I have yet visited on earth. The only access to the peninsula was by a small boat, and from that point on for five days, not a woman or female animal was to be seen.

Now I am in London and have an excellent flat adjacent to the park of Holland Park (with live peacocks!).

Your English is delightful and I would be charmed for your Bernese angel to show me 'once his cathedral'. Don't ever have another English lesson, you will spoil something very precious that you have. At the moment there are four possibilities for next summer – either I will stay in England, or return to Rome, or go to Switzerland and Germany, or do something altogether different. It will depend on where my philosophy of life leads me in the next few months.

I dislike having to give so much of my life in order to live. To have to give the larger part of each day away so that one may have the smaller to oneself. My greatest wish is for time. So many poems, books to read, music to listen to, paintings and life and nature to look at, words to write, music to play, paintings to paint.

Dark silhouettes of the branches against the white building opposite, a delicate tracery in the brittle winter's air; tall thin Giacomettis in the Tate Gallery; icicles in the still morning air; Balanchine's Pas de deux to Stravinsky's Agon; the crystalline quality of a Bartok Quartet – all variations of the same aesthetic sensation. I feel I could only really communicate this through poetry; as yet I have not enough technique, perhaps in a few years? Maybe it would be possible to paint what I am trying to say. I had not thought of this before.

Yes, I should very much like to see you again, much love to you and Ursula.

Martin

Bern, 19 Jan 1968

Dear Martin

I have really a great joy to read what you have all seen and where you have been in Greece. I looked up on the map the places, and I also read what Kazantzakis says about the Mount Athos. I can good imagine that this must be one of the strangest places in the world.

I took out two books by Kazantzakis from the library. I like them very much and I want to buy them so that I shall have always the possibility to read them.

I enjoyed your impressions which you have written about Nafplion, Mystra and Tripolis.

I am quite sure that you will be able one day to express your feelings in any way (poetry, painting or perhaps music?). You can believe me, I wouldn't say that if I didn't believe it myself.

I agree with you that we should have more time for ourselves. From somewhere we have to take the energy so that we can bear all the troubles we meet every day.

In the moment we have snow and rain together so it is nearly impossible to walk in the streets. I am sure that now all the big parks in London are white, and that you can build snow-men.

I looked up on my map of London where the Holland Park is, and I can good imagine where you live. I looked at the postcards which I bought in the British Museum, oh, there are so many beautiful things. Have you already seen the Egyptian reliefs, vases and so on? And all the letters and manuscripts by the musicians and poets? Sometimes I wish the British Museum would stand here in Bern, what do you say to that idea?

In the moment I work a lot for a between-examination. I want to do it in spring. When I don't pass it in spring I have to do it once again in summer, and I think that would not be so beautiful. But I can only in the evening work for that examination because I am the whole day

in the university. That's bad. The nights should be much longer.

Now Martin, I thank you very much for your beautiful letter, I had a great pleasure. When you come perhaps to Switzerland, or when I shall go once to London (in case that Queen Elizabeth doesn't allow that the British Museum moves to Bern), then we shall buy a big melon and sit under a tree either in Hyde Park or somewhere in Switzerland (we have many trees in our country!).

Many many greetings

Yours Veronika

London, March (comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb)

Dear Veronika

The sun at last finds England through the clouds. In the park abutting onto my back garden the peacocks are spreading their fans. But still it's cold. Yesterday I wrapped up and sat against a twisted long-dead oak in the park, reading Browning's 'Sordello'. Some wonderfully lucid passages, as lucid as I have found anywhere, but getting sparser and sparser as the poem develops.

The other Sunday a melancholy busker in a square hat passed slowly down the road, playing mournfully on a side-pipe. Such precious notes in the cool still air, I almost melted away. Coins dropped from the upper windows of the rich white Georgian houses. With a side pipe at my lips and poetry in my soul I could wander

the world – is that not life? Well, for the moment I tussle with sounds, assonance, alliteration, and a search for the cantabile quality of a musical line.

Where will you be this summer? I should love to go to Switzerland, to have the Bernese angel show me his cathedral, to see Germany, and return to Rome for a week or two, and perhaps to Sicily. Nothing at all fixed as yet. Only two weeks paid holiday, but will take six.

By the end of the year I hope to have left my present work. By that time I should have saved enough money to support myself for four years. I read, write, analyse poetry in tubes, on buses, in the street. It is good to put this down. In a way it commits me. Somewhere Sordello becomes disgusted with himself, for he, a troubadour, has begun to fall in love with the prizes of song, and no longer with song itself.

I should love to hear of your beautiful Bern, and of spring in Switzerland.

To you, and to Ursula.

Martin

In a month my aunt comes from Tallinn in Estonia to visit England for a few weeks; then, sadly, she must return.

Pages 17-68 not included

Bern, 29 April 1969

Dear Martin

I'm so happy that I must not write to the main post office, you cannot imagine how glad I am.

I am in a party mood, if you would be here then sure we would go somewhere to a party (I hope of course that you too would be in a party mood). But as you are not here, I stay at home and enjoy to watch the most famous bridge in the world on the postcard you sent, and when I watch very long, then I see two people standing in the middle of the bridge.

I ate the first fresh strawberries this year, you know, then you are allowed to wish something, but you are not allowed to tell what you have wished, so I don't tell it. Roman whispered very, very low into my ear what he wished. Can you imagine what it was? ('A car'.)

How are your violin and singing lessons?

How deep were the caves where you have been? Did you take a rope with you so you could find the way back easier? Were the caves like those in Huckleberry Finn? How long have you walked in these caves and how long didn't you see daylight?

We have been in Steffi's room, there is not a new man in the other room but a new woman. Of course, we are very disappointed.

In the hospital I changed from the 'newborn babies' to the 'boy's room'. My patients are now between 5 and 14 years old. 11 boys.

1 leucaemie
3 malign cancer
3 renal insufficiency
2 congenital heart failure
1 haemophily
1 malign muscle dystrophy.

Today the cause of death in infancy is in 50% malign cancer. I didn't realise that before. Before they found the penicillin, the cause of death in 90% were the infectious illnesses.

This morning I watched an 11 years old girl who did her homework. She has written in her exercise book, 'What a King's word is not able to do, that can do love'. This girl has a very malign cancer, she has nearly no more hair on her head, perhaps she will live 2 or 3 months, but anyway she learns for the school because she wants to be good. The big difference between the Children Hospital and a hospital for adults is, that the children never ask why they have to be ill. They play in their beds and tell you what they want to become one day.

Veronika

Bristol, 30 April 1969

O Veronika my love, I have just bought the most beautiful violin. It is an old handmade one, a little more expensive than the cheapest but not too much more. I bought it from the old violin shop on Christmas Steps, and talked to the old man in the shop for several hours. That was on Monday after my first lesson. Although I

had not touched a violin before this lesson, I managed to surprise the teacher with how well I got on. Now it's Wednesday morning and I have been practising again. On Tuesday I went back to the violin shop and talked to the old man for another two hours. How he talks.

"I remember when the police charged with sabres down Prince Rupert Street. On horseback. That was in 1926.

"I remember Clifton before any flats were there. All grand houses with horse and carriage outside each door. And if anybody untidy was seen walking there, unless he was a grocer boy on an errand, the police would send him away. That was about 1906.

"And at that time I wouldn't have walked across Queen Square on a winter's day. The Scandinavian ships used to come to the docks then. Footpads would wait in the square and hit you across the head with a sandbag."

Queen Square is the rather innocuous square seen from my kitchen window, which we crossed on the way to St Mary Redcliffe.

That Nicholas lives with me here gives much joy. This Friday we are hitching to Swansea to see a different Richard, one you haven't met, who knows much about modern drama. Together we shall see a production of *Next Time I'll Sing to You* by James Saunders.

I am learning the first 25 lines of the Seafarer in the original Anglo-Saxon. Stella in Clifton is helping me with the pronunciation and rhythm.

Maeg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan
I of myself can a true tale relate

I've also been taking Shakespeare's sonnets apart piece by piece, as if from a jigsaw, and seeing how each piece retains its strength when it is put back into the whole.

Having had a small cut which hasn't healed up for a week and a half, and not wanting that you should have a patient for a husband, I have started to eat sensibly. So instead of my old meal of boiled rice with boiled onions and boiled sprouts, time of preparation 20-30 minutes, today I had one sandwich with watercress & lettuce & cheese, one eggnog, and one orange, time of preparation about 2 minutes.

I keep getting up to play the violin. The instrument has such a personality.

Each night for two weeks now, when I've gone to bed, I listen to the Bach violin concertos. And then perhaps, while they are playing, I think of Shakespeare too, and the tragic sense of life is never so poignant. Man lives and dies. And then I am brought to a point somewhere where tears and joy exist together.

And then always, when the music has finished, my thoughts become only of you, and I think of our life to be together, and how, in the knowledge of 'life', we shall experience such joy together.

How I long for the flowering of our love.

Your thoughts are with me in England. Mine are with you in Switzerland. And where our thoughts cross, somewhere out there over the ocean, there is a place of magic surely. An airy place, of silver-blue light and fresh winds, where the seabirds send their cries across the water.

I live these days in a world of sound – music, song, and poetry – and in a world of light, rejoicing in the splendour of the day, and the faint forms of night. And in all where I see beauty, there lies my love for you.

The pages are red now with the last glow of the setting sun.

Martin

Bern, 6 May 1969

Dear Martin

I see you always together with your old violin from the Christmas Steps shop. How I enjoy to read about your first violin lesson and how you bought this beautiful instrument.

In the hospital I met a girl, we went to school together and haven't seen each other since our last school day. One of the first things she asked me was, Do you still play the flute? And I replied, And what about your piano? So she said, I have a cembalo too now. Every Tuesday over midday we exercise now the flute sonatas by Bach.

Last Sunday one of my cousins was here, he plays the violin too, and his brother sings in the theatre choir in Basle, so we want to give on a warm summer evening a summer concert in their garden.

Switzerland and England are now full of spring flowers, winter is definitely finished, under my window there is a whole blackbird family, the two young birds are already swinging their wings but they are not yet able to

fly out of their nest. Perhaps tomorrow? It is beautiful to see how father and mother blackbird feed their children by turns.

I sowed the Chinese lanterns, they didn't come up yet, I hope they will. Christmas cactus has now three new leaves, they look like small hands.

I am reading *My Childhood* by Maxim Gorky. The grandmother, Martin, perhaps you know that book, how she could accept life.

My dear Martin, my thoughts are with you and with your violin.

Veronika

Bristol, 13 May 1969

I've been feverish all day, neck hot & head pounding. It is at such moments one notices that there is no one near to care. I remember, as a child at the orphanage, how a kind and caring family used once a year to invite a group of us into their own home and give us a party. And I think of the many people that have never anyone to care for them. And yet, in spite of that thought, my unhappiness at being apart from you is lessened not at all.

I spent the morning reading the last nine books of the *Odyssey* with tears in my eyes. This is not a tale of fantasy, of strange voyages in strange lands. This is a tale of people, a story of love and loneliness.

I bought some spring greens from the greengrocers, wrapped in a newspaper on which I see details of a TV

Pages 75-102 not included

Letters between Boscastle and Bern

Boscastle, 12 Oct 1969

Here I am, night, with the wave-wash and the last notes of the violin in my ears.

I came by dark, the coach making its last week of runs before it stops coming for the winter. So you see, this little village with its few people will be really cut off. Last winter even the roads were cut off by snow for several days. There was only a little lady & myself at the front of a coach with the driver. I had my seven parcels, including the paraffin fire and violin. Coming along narrow roads where two cars could barely pass, winding among hedgerows, I could see in the black night the great fog banked up out at sea. The coach dropped me outside the cottage of Mrs Edwards, and drove off. No one about. This little old lady & her husband gave me the keys, and some milk and eggs to cook. Past the harbour cottages, along the hillside to the very last cottage of all.

All alone. I unpacked my books, violin, ate a little. Then took my torch and made my way towards the cliff head. Just past the house a narrow track rose steeply, past some wild blackcurrant, zigzagged, and reached a slightly wider yet still narrow track. I picked out the track with the torch, watching the ground. The sea-roar grew. At length, startled by the volcanic intensity of the sea-sound, I turned off the torch and looked away to my

right. Two vast black cliffs, everything monochrome, greys, white-greys, black-greys, the fog piled out at sea. Suddenly a whistling sound followed by a colossal deep explosion and a vast spreading white mass at the base of one of the cliffs. More white flickered, running along and spreading out over the unseen water. All the time deep rumbling and more explosions.

After a long time I turned on the torch and walked a little further. Looking out to sea, I was astounded to see that the end of one cliff had detached itself, forming a vast steep-sided rock island out at sea.

Days have past and I'm settling in, beginning to get well into my work. I think of you so often these days and long to hear from you again, it must be over two months since I was last delighted at the morning post. My fault of course for having been on the move so long. I have so much to say, so much that I cannot begin to say it, not little phrases which could easily be written down, but whole long paragraphs of thought.

The hills here (everything is hills, rivers, cliffs, sea and woods) are covered in blackberries, so I've been making blackberry jam, I didn't know jam making was so easy, pots and pots of it for the winter. I wish you could taste my blackberry jam. One could never eat shop jam afterwards.

There is only one shop here and it sells everything (except what I want). Cheap bacon, 6d a pound weight, but no fresh fish, and vegetables are a bit limited. The fishing boats moored beneath the cottage that go out each morning just catch a few lobsters for their own

use, and a fish van comes from the outside world twice a week. A library van calls once a fortnight. There is a house which opens as a bank for two hours every Tuesday.

But the sun and the tempest, those are always here, always the one, or the other, or both together as now. This morning, getting up at sunrise, I was almost swept from the cliff top. The grass was flapping horizontally and I braced my chest against a rock as I watched the spray being whipped up from the dark sea, with white 'seahorses' charging over the surface.

The cliffs are precipitous, the sea pounding the vertical face of the rock. Do you know the passage in the 5th book of the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus has left the island of Calypso, shipwrecked, alone in the sea, his companions all perished, struggling to reach Phaiacia. 'When he came near enough for a man's voice to carry, he could hear the dull sound of the sea breaking against the rocks.' And then how there was no way to get out of the water, 'a smooth cliff running up straight with deep water along the shore'. And how the sea-swell dashed him up against the rocks. Well, it's like that.

And those passages remind me too of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, I.ii, where Prospero describes how he & Miranda were set adrift, abandoned in an unrigged boat, 'to cry to the sea that roared to us'.

I told you in my Swansea letter, didn't I, how I dreamed of a room with a window facing south. This cottage, built on the hill slope, has only north windows, and will get colder and colder as the winter progresses. As soon

as I got down here I put your nice warm jumper on, so you can think of me now all this winter with your knitting keeping me warm. It is so good I have this jumper, thank you so much.

The sun is shining all over the hillside opposite my window but never shines in here. Some mornings this week, when there was sun and little wind, I took my books outside and lay on the hillside.

It is so wonderful, late in the night when my eyes are perhaps tired, to be able to play my violin, a thing I could never do in Bristol because of the noise and other people.

The wind is rattling the windows and the gull-cry comes from nowhere.

The first morning, when I woke and lifted my head from the bed, a mouse scampered silently across the floor. Often now, while I'm working, he comes in under one door and goes out under the other. I wonder where he comes from or goes to.

And yesterday, clambering down the cliffs a hundred yards from my cottage, I saw a seal among the pounding waves, slowly diving, then rising a minute later, so graceful.

The crowds are all gone back to the big cities. Mist drifts in from the sea and the cold winter presses against the windows. The 'blowhole' that I heard the first night is a hole right through the cliff at sea level which, with the rise and fall of the waves, sucks in the air with a whistling sound, then explodes bubbling and foaming with a deep sudden resonance.

I heard recently a record of Vivaldi, Concerto en la mineur, for flute, J. P. Rampal. The middle movement!

I go out to post this letter now. For a moment the sun is shining. Perhaps at the same moment you too will be casting shadows on the ground.

Veronika, my love! Martin

Bern, 19 October 1969

My dear Martin,

You gave me so much these last two months. When I had to go to Chur two months ago Steffi brought me halfway with her car. So we stopped somewhere for dinner. If somebody would have seen us, he would have seen a little later two girls lying in the grass, putting on and putting off the most beautiful home-made earrings in the world, a small mirror at the foot of a tree. For dessert we had the best cakes we ever ate.

In Chur I stayed only two and not as I had in mind three months. These two months weren't easy, nobody to speak with really, no time to read, and in my free time no room in which I could feel cosy. And then came the photo with you in your King Street kitchen. You were so near Martin. Your dragon, the earrings, the cakes, and you on the photo helped me, I don't know how it would have been without you. It is difficult to explain. You see, all the doctors I met there, as doctors, as surgeons, they were all good, but as human beings, not all, but most of them were nothing. It was not so important to me to know exactly where you are, but to know that somebody like you exist in the world, to

know that it is really possible that somebody like you exist, was important.

Most of my time in Chur, sometimes day and night, I spent in the operation rooms (do you know that the operation rooms in your language are called theatres?). Always when I was standing there, I thought, now you are standing somewhere on the streets. As the letter came back that I had written to the address you gave me, I stopped to write.

Now I am back in Bern and instead of the 3rd month in Chur I work here one month in the ear, nose and throat hospital. Then I go back to university.

Last Sunday I was together with Roman in a concert in the cathedral. It was the first concert for Roman. I wasn't quite sure if he could sit quiet for such a long time. But then it was so beautiful to see how he could listen to the music, how he told me afterwards, "They sang beautiful". Now he wants to know when we go the next time together.

Just came Roman and we went together for a walk. We threw stones into the Aare, were sitting on a see-saw, made run races in the wood (always to the biggest trees we could see) and had a look at a new cathedral church which was finished about four weeks ago. Now he disappeared with his new scooter, it goes really well, it has also a clock and a flag.

Yesterday I was in the library and I found on a map Boscastle. So I saw a railway line from Exeter down to Penzance. I think the next railway station from Boscastle will be Launceston. Martin, how long does it

take to walk from there to Boscastle? And could you find out how often is there a train from London to there and back, during winter per week?

The problem for me wouldn't be to find you, the problem would be that I would have to be back at a fixed point of time in London. I wouldn't come as long as last year, only a few days. I would walk through the winter of Cornwall, I would find the cliffs of the Odyssey, and then I would knock on the door of your cottage. Perhaps reality puts too many difficulties in my way, and then it would be only a beautiful dream, but perhaps . . . How do you see the problems?

How high are the Cornish heights which are between Boscastle and Launceston? Perhaps that is even not the nearest station. I wait your answer Martin.

In the ear, nose and throat hospital I have to work with a mirror on my head, so last week a patient said to me, "You must excuse me, but when I look at you I have to laugh and then I am not able to open my mouth". (You can believe me, I didn't make my silly face.)

Your flowers smell of the wind and rocks and cliffs of Cornwall. I feel so happy that I can write to you again.

All my greetings, yours Veronika

Boscastle, 25 Oct 1969

O Veronika

Would you really come this Christmas? I had never thought for a second that you might think of coming. It would be so wonderful. Already I begin to see

everywhere as places we might walk, just as I was doing before you came last year. I think I have seen you walk up the track towards this cottage a hundred times already. Of course, I don't hope too much, because I don't know what the difficulties might be in Switzerland. Or here.

Yes, I think you could walk from Launceston to here in about 5 hours. Of course, if you had a case, it might take a little longer. A less exciting alternative, perhaps, is to catch the bus which stops about 200 yards from the cottage. I've just been down the hill to look at the local bus timetable and the times are very peculiar, different on different days of the week. All we have is one shop here, and I can't find out how to get to Boscastle from London in mid winter. I'll catch a bus into Camelford next week and see if they have any information. And buy a few things I need at the same time, such as iron-trouser patches and hair-cutting scissors.

I've just been looking down at my jumper. Did you really do all those stitches?

In English 'marry' rhymes with 'tarry', so of course we have poems about marrying and tarrying. In the comic song 'The Owl and the Pussycat' there is a verse,

Pussy said to the owl, you elegance fowl,
How wonderfully sweet you sing!
O let us be married! too long we have tarried;
But what shall we do for a ring?

And the 17th century Robert Herrick, writing 'To the Virgins, to make much of Time', concludes with this little gem of melody,

Then be not coy, but use your time;
And while ye may, goe marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

You know how cats sound when they cry at night, a slow wailing, rising and falling? Well, at the moment I'm trying to learn vibrato on the violin . . .

I'd noticed a telephone somewhere in this cottage. It made a noise when I picked it up, so I assumed it worked. And just now it rang. Nick (the sculptor who lived downstairs at 20 King Street, and who ate fondu with us, and whose parents own this cottage) just phoned me up. He said he will phone or write to his parents to see if they might want the cottage at Christmas, they never have before, but if they do then I suppose I will have to leave before then. He also said that after Christmas, before the bad cold, they usually turn the water off to prevent the water turning to ice and the pipes bursting, so perhaps I may have to leave after Christmas. I can see it's going to be very difficult to be a poet. Anyway, when I know all these things, I will write again.

My studies are going well but every little development takes so long to come about, it will be years before I can write well. It took Shakespeare about 15 years to develop a really good workable language.

It's very strange and very wonderful, being without records etc. One has to make one's own music. Often I will just start to sing, not anything I know, just singing. This morning the sound was more of a sad Russian

peasant lullaby than anything else. It's quite natural just to sing, or hum, it comes out of you by itself. Now I can't sing, no more than I can play a musical instrument, and yet with both my voice and my violin, I become quite ecstatic. Of course I practice my singing and my violin too, but just now I mean when I let them play themselves, just notes, not trying, just listening.

I remember in the last month before I left King Street, Mike took my old battered banjo, Nicholas his new recorder, I my violin, and we just played, listening to the total sound. Once we started we just went on and on, ecstatically happy. And here, with my violin and D, E, F, G, A on one string, I can get quite lost in the sound. To someone else it would be nothing of course. I could never have made all that noise this late at night at King Street. There's a very bright full moon.

A letter was sent back? How terrible. It's strange, I went so many times to see if letters had come from you – the ones from my parents arrived.

It must be so nice to have Roman to go out with. I miss Kevin and Julia, my half brother and sister, about 9 years & 6 years, very much. Nicholas' wife & child are back in England now, I haven't seen them yet. I think it would be wonderful if Nicholas, Mulika & Hannif (his wife and child), Mike, Linda, you & I, could all be together here this Christmas – but it depends on so many things. If you come, perhaps we could eat fondue again . . . but I will write when things are more known.

When Kevin was about four, mummy once said to him, That was before you were born. (Kevin had asked when

Pages 113-172 not included

Bern, 23 Feb 1970

My dear Martin

Your letter was like heaven coppering the earth with snow-like small paper-bits. It wouldn't stop to snow, and I was kneeling on the floor to gather them up.

You ask me about the Chinese lanterns. Martin, the plants were growing well, full of leaf. When I returned from Chur they were still healthy but without fruits. My mother said, Perhaps they will have fruits next year. I can't really believe it, perhaps it's the wrong earth here but then I don't understand why the green leaves could become so big. In Chur I saw them in one garden so beautiful. As I wasn't happy in Chur I got homesick when I passed this garden, they reminded me of your package. But then back in Bern I met only green leaves, perhaps my mother is right. It was so beautiful to see how they became big. I remembered that we learnt at school the difference between monocotyledons and dicotyledons, the Chinese lanterns belong to the dicotyledons. Did you learn this expression too, it comes from Greek and means they have two germ-leaves. Now they sleep under the snow, perhaps they will get strong and have fruits next year.

Your Christmas cactus has now a lot of new leaves, I wonder if it will blossom again.

Last week I had a patient in psychiatry, about 50 years old, he was an alcoholic drinker and I had to find out the reasons why he is drinking. So I asked him about his youth and his way of living. Then he said, As I

couldn't see any sense in life I started to drink. So I asked him if he had never had a girlfriend and if he never wanted to have a family. Oh, he said, I had once a girlfriend but it was so expensive, every Sunday to go out with her. Martin, I felt so guilty and so expensive.

In summer my courses stop on about 15 July. As you can stay till June in Edinburgh, I think we shall see us once in July.

What sort of flute did you receive? I couldn't get it clear from your picture. Your lips are between the fingers. I don't know flutes where fingers and lips are so much mixed together. Perhaps you find in Edinburgh a bagpipe, I always wanted to try once to play on such an instrument.

They tell on the radio that a plane of the Swissair is exploded. It is now the second time that this happens in our country. So much hate in the world.

I just read the first page of your letter – the birds in St James's Park – there is so much inside you, you can give to people – when I started to study medicine I thought only as a doctor I can give something (what is perhaps true for me) – but you can give even to doctors.

Now an aria in the radio, a woman singing – from an opera – I don't know what it is – it was out of Don Giovanni by Mozart.

Oh yes, I remember the Matisse in the Tate Gallery – when we saw it together you couldn't yet accept it really – there are other painters where I am sure it will happen as it happened with Matisse – I never can say (as you know) why I like something – there are only my

feelings and those feelings say yes or no but not why, so I just wait and when one day you write as you have written about Matisse, then I know my feeling was right.

I read again how you think about philosophy, I think you could become our professor for philosophy! Shall I go and tell them that I know a philosopher? Wouldn't that be a good job? Our philosopher we had was already very old, and when he spoke one word, then his mouth wouldn't stop, and he repeated the same word always three or four times, I I I spoke spoke spoke spoke the the the last last last last time time time time... He died about 3 years ago, and since then they couldn't find a new philosopher.

Oh, Martin, I am so with you, but here beside me are a lot of books which should be read. I take you in my arms, I kiss you – you are right, it is not good to worry about the future.

Yours Veronika

A lot of greetings to Mike

London, 7 March 1970

Dear Veronika

I've just come home and I feel so much like writing to you. What I'd really like just now, and how often this longing comes to me these days, is to feel you in my arms and have your kisses on my lips. And now, today for the first time in the park, I saw a pigeon dancing to his sweetheart. The trees there are tall and leafless, cold

and apart, like in the park at Bath where we walked together. Do you remember our little conversation there? You had been watching me come up the rise towards you, and then we went on together and along by the iron palings . . .

And how do you like our England?

It is very beautiful. It is good that at least one of us is here.

And one day two perhaps?

That wouldn't be too many?

Venice came in my thoughts, and I remembered how you used to play the flute at the back of the water buses, and, after we had passed under one of the little bridges, how the bridge would fade in the mist as we left it behind. And I remember another time, when we were on one of those bridges, the view down a tiny canal of other bridges further along, and people crossing them – appearing at one side, rising and falling, disappearing.

Almost all my thoughts and daydreams are of you. The days are just passing until we can be together. And I think of Love, which has been growing in my soul (which lovers know lies in the heart) since the time we found each other where the four roads met. I should be happy if the god of sleep would befriend me and let me sleep till the summer comes. Summer days! and in my thoughts I am lying with you somewhere on the warm grass. It's almost too dark now to see the page, in a few minutes I shall close the shutters and put on the light.

Well, the evening and another day have passed and I'm back at the little table again, and the light is beginning

to fade once more. And during that evening I said to myself, 'It is good that I have started a letter, now certainly there will be a letter from Veronika tomorrow', and this morning it arrived, and I spent all day reading it, so that when I came home Mike said, 'You're amazing when you come fresh from Veronika. Yesterday when you came home you were so bad'. Today the work seemed to do itself – I was so much with you.

As the leaves of the tree rustle when the wind blows, so Love whispers within me when you come into my thoughts.

The Chinese lanterns, are they not annuals? I shall send some more seeds and we can try again. I wonder if I can find some Honesty – it leaves silver coins behind.

Friday. This morning two letters arrived from my mother. The business has folded up, and the family is arriving at London airport 8.10 a.m. Tuesday 10 March, without job, without house, without furniture. This is all very sudden. I expect my stepfather will find another freight job easily. My mother would like to live somewhere in the country. I'm looking forward to seeing Kevin & Julia again soon. Julia has just had her 8th birthday. Kevin is about 10 or 11. On 10 April I shall probably be living in Edinburgh.

While my mother was out in the Bahamas, worrying that I had no job, I didn't want to worry her still further, so she doesn't know about you yet. I will be so proud to show you to my mother. In the second letter, talking of many things, she said, 'Please make yourself happy and

enjoy life'. Now that she is coming back to England, I must tell her about you.

About 15 July I will arrive in Bern, by train this time, with my guitar, violin, mandolin, any other instruments I might have by then, and one or two cases.

I need some new clothes, and 'clothes' means clothes I can wear in Bern. The idea of going out to buy clothes horrifies me. Clothes have always been a pile of things in the corner, some with less holes than others. For me to suddenly go out & buy a set of good clothes is like buying a uniform. 'This set of clothes in the shop window is so right for me, is so me, that I shall go into the shop and buy them, and go on wearing them'.

There was a newspaper downstairs, in big letters it said 'Callas'. I picked it up, it was Maria Callas, she was saying in an interview, 'I do not want to talk about myself. I find me boring. It is what I do that interests me, not what I say'.

In this house where I'm living are three people who are going to psychotherapists. Late one evening one of them, Dave, was talking to me about his hang-ups. He sees a psychotherapist twice a week for which he pays £4 each session. Because he is paying so much money he feels the psychotherapist has something to give him. At the end of our long discussion he offered to pay me half the money he pays to the psychotherapist if he could talk with me instead. He suggested to another of the three, who came into the room shortly after, that she do the same (she sees a different psychotherapist). I told him I was free.

He has only spoken to be once since, I suppose he doesn't like talking to me for nothing.

Neurotic people think too much about themselves, they want to be helped, but because they have this habit of thinking about themselves, their looking-for-help is in fact looking for further ways of thinking about themselves.

Next day.

I've just had another late-night talk with Dave, and said that to him. He was glad I'd said it; he said a lot of his time recently had been preoccupied with 'getting rid of his hang-ups'. He is working as a carpenter in Soho, I got him to talk about it, he was very interesting. He wants to act, he has acted, he would be very good. But he has further hang-ups because he sees himself as being, socially, 'just the entertainer'.

Dave calls himself a Marxist Revolutionary, identifies himself with the Working Class, feels responsible about the Class Struggle, and feels he must do something about all this. He sees me and Mike as having in some sense 'dropped out' of Society, and disapproves. But he's not quite sure about us.

I'd like to be a kitchen gardener. I was once, in my teenage years, 12 to 17, in the back garden of the house where we lived in Twickenham.

Martin xxx

Speleological Richard turned up yesterday with X (the X who moved in at King St while I was with you in Venice). They were looking for someone who wasn't

here, so they've gone again. Richard I like so much, but his friends... Or rather, it's like this. Richard has no money, no possessions, no room of his own. Naturally he has several friends in similar situations. And when one of them has a little money – don't ask how they come by it – it becomes everybody's money. And they need somewhere to sleep. Now Richard, having no rooms or possessions himself, sees only the good side of them, and so can have a decent relationship with them. But to anyone else they are a problem. Richard on the other hand just likes to paint, and paints a lot, and likes the country, and caves, and tinkering on a guitar.

Pages 181-228 not included

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