

The Letters

LETTER 01

AN INSTRUMENT OF JOY

Margaret Mead to Elizabeth Mead

11 January 1926

*Margaret Mead was widely regarded as the leading anthropologist in the western world for many years, thanks largely to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a groundbreaking and controversial book she wrote after a research trip in 1925. In the book, she sought to shine a light on the previously alien lives and relaxed sexual attitudes of adolescent Samoan girls. Although since contested, Mead's findings were a revelation at the time and in fact have been credited with influencing the sexual revolution of the 1960s. In 1926, a year after setting foot on the Samoan island of Ta'ū, Mead learnt of a sexual awakening much closer to home: that of her younger sister, Elizabeth. This letter of advice was her response.*

THE LETTER

Elizabeth dear, I've a good mind to punish you by writing back in pencil. You're a wretch to write in pencil on pink paper just when you're writing something very important that you particularly want me to read. Don't do it again.

I am glad you told me about the moonlight party, dear. It's the sort of thing that had to happen sometime and it might have been a great deal worse. As it was, it was a nice boy whom you like, and nothing that need worry you. There are two things I'd like to have you remember—or in fact several. The thrills you get from touching the body of another person are just as good and legitimate thrills as those you get at the opera. Only the ones which [you] get at the opera are all mixed up with your ideas of beauty and music and Life—and so they seem to you good and holy things. In the same way the best can only be had from the joys which life offers to our sense of touch (for sex is mostly a matter of the sense of touch) when we associate those joys with love and respect and understanding.

All the real tragedies of sex come from disassociation—either of the old maid who sternly refuses to think about sex at all until finally she can

think about nothing else—and goes crazy—or of the man who goes from one wanton's arms to another seeking only the immediate sensation of the moment and never linking it up with other parts of his life. It is by the way in which sex—and under this I include warm demonstrative friendships with both sexes as well as love affairs proper with men—is linked with all the other parts of our lives, with our appreciation of music and our tenderness for little children, and most of all with our love for someone and the additional nearness to them which expression of love gives us, that sex itself is given meaning.

You must realize that your body has been given you as an instrument of joy—and tho you should choose most rigorously whose touch may make that instrument thrill and sing a thousand beautiful songs—you must never think it wrong of it to sing. For your body was made to sing to another's touch and the flesh itself is not wise to choose. It is the spirit within the body which must be stern and say—"No, you can not play on this my precious instrument. True it would sing for you. Your fingers are very clever at playing on such instruments—but I do not love you, nor respect you—and I will not have my body singing a tune which my soul cannot sing also." If you remember this, you will

never be filled with disgust of any sort. Any touch may set the delicate chords humming—but it is your right to choose who shall really play a tune—and be very very sure of your choices first. To have given a kiss where only a handshake was justified by the love behind it—that is likely to leave a bad taste in your mouth.

And for the other part—about being boy crazy. Try to think of boys as people, some nice, some indifferent—not as a class. You are[n't] girl crazy are you? Then why should you be boy crazy? If a boy is [an] interesting person, why, like him. If he isn't, don't. Think of him as an individual first and as a boy second. What kind of a person he is is a great deal more important than that he belongs to the other sex—after all so do some hundred million other individuals.

I am very proud of the way you are able to think thru the problems which life brings you—and of the way you meet them. And I consider it a great privilege to have you tell me about them. I'm so glad you are happy dear.

Very lovingly,

Margaret

LETTER 02

WHAT GLOOMY TIDINGS ABOUT THE CRABS

Patrick Leigh Fermor to Enrica Huston

11 August 1961

*Patrick Leigh Fermor was a dashing English war hero and journalist who produced some of the most celebrated travel writing of modern times, not least in *A Time of Gifts*, a compelling account of a year-long trek from Rotterdam to the ancient city of Constantinople. The journey took place in 1934, forty-three years before the book's eventual publication. Fermor's charms and propensity to party were well known, resulting in affairs with various women in numerous countries over the years, including, in the 1960s, ballerina Enrica 'Ricki' Huston, who happened to be married to Hollywood filmmaker John Huston. It was to her that Fermor wrote in August of 1961, in relation to a mutual infestation they were both itching to get to the bottom of.*

THE LETTER

The Mill House
Dumbleton

My darling Ricki,

1,000 thanks for your Paris letter, and apologies for delay. Barbara and Niko came for the weekend, and I had to go to London when they left, with the result that now – Tuesday evening! – just back, I can only get this off express to Paris tomorrow morning. Damn, damn, damn.

Triple damn indeed, and sixfold & 100-fold because alas! I've committed myself, only yesterday too, to devoting myself to my *mama* in the country this weekend, and I'm such a neglectful and intermittent son that I can't put it off now. [. . .] I am longing to see you and hate the thought of your vanishing out of reach for what seems such an age, all unembraced! Bugger (cubed).

I say, what gloomy tidings about the CRABS! Could it be me? I'll tell you why this odd doubt exists: [. . .] just after arriving back in London from Athens, I was suddenly alerted by what felt like the beginnings of troop-movements in the fork, but on scrutiny, expecting an aerial view of general mobilisation, there was nothing to be seen,

not even a scout, a spy, or a despatch rider. Puzzled, I watched and waited and soon even the preliminary tramlings died away, so I assumed, as the happy summer days of peace followed each other, that the incident, or the delusive shudder through the chancelleries, was over. While this faint scare was on, knowing that, thanks to lunar tyranny, it couldn't be from you, I assumed (and please spare my blushes here!) that the handover bid must have occurred by dint of a meeting with an old pal in Paris, which, I'm sorry to announce, ended in brief carnal knowledge, more for *auld lang syne* than any more pressing reason. On getting your letter, I made a dash for privacy and thrashed through the undergrowth, but found everything almost eerily calm: fragrant and silent glades that might never have known the invader's tread. The whole thing makes me scratch my head, if I may so put it. But I bet your trouble *does* come from me, because the crabs of the world seem to fly to me, like the children of Israel to Abraham's bosom, a sort of ambulant Canaan. I've been a real martyr to them. What must have happened is this. A tiny, picked, cunning, and well-camouflaged commando must have landed while I was in Paris and then *lain* up, seeing me merely as a stepping stone or a springboard to better things, and, when you came within

striking distance, knowing the highest when they saw it, they struck (as who wouldn't?) and then deployed in force, leaving their first beachhead empty. Or so I think! (Security will be tightened up. They may have left an agent with a radio who is playing a waiting game . . .)

I wonder whether I have reconstructed the facts all right. I do hope so; I couldn't bear it to be anyone but me. But at the same time, if it is me, v. v. many apologies. There's some wonderful Italian powder you can get in France called MOM — another indication of a matriarchal society — which is worth its weight in gold dust. It is rather sad to think that their revels now are ended, that the happy woods (where I would fain be, wandering in pensive mood) where they held high holiday will soon be a silent grove. Where are all their quips and quiddities? The pattering of tiny feet will be stilled. Bare, ruin'd choirs. Don't tell anyone about this private fauna. Mom's the word, gentle reader. [. . .]

No more now, my darling Ricki, as I must leap into my faithful Standard Companion and dash to the post with this, hoping and praying it gets you in time. No need to say how much I'm going to miss you; you know I will. Not only the moon's a rival now, but the sun and Greece as well, and I

know what potent allies they are. But no moping!
We'll make some glowing plan when you get back,
and see what magic the mysterious north can offer.
Anyway, bless you a billion times, my dearest
darling Ricki, and lots of love hugs and kisses
from Paddy