

WISH HER SAFE AT HOME

STEPHEN BENATAR

Introduction by

JOHN CAREY

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

WISH HER SAFE AT HOME

I

MY GREAT-AUNT in middle age became practically a recluse and when she died I remembered very little of her, because the last time I'd visited that stuffy basement flat in St. John's Wood had been thirty-seven years earlier, in 1944, when I was only ten. So perhaps my most vivid recollection was of hearing her tell us, my mother and me, on at least half a dozen occasions, like a favourite fairy tale, the full unchanging story of a play called *Bitter Sweet*. Looking back I couldn't rationally believe it was the only show which she had ever enjoyed but she nearly made it sound like that: still spoke of it—some fifteen years after she had seen it—as though she had been present just the previous night. And then unfailingly she entertained us with the same two songs. She would stand up, this rather dumpy woman, and either with hands touching her bosom or else with arms thrown wide, her eyes intense and misted, her full voice slightly husky, would render these ballads so throbbingly that my mother and I had to gaze into our laps and I would drive my nails into my palms—surely providing, for both of us, a rare moment of togetherness. And almost forty years later I could still hear, very clearly, my Aunt Alicia as she sang, "Although when shadows fall I think if only..." There'd be a brief and sacramental hush:

... somebody splendid really needed me,
Someone affectionate and dear,
Cares would be ended if I knew that he
Wanted to have me near...

Unremarkably those few lines stayed with me without my making any effort and one afternoon, during break, I surprised all the other girls in the playground by suddenly bursting forth. The most popular songs of the period were “Swinging on a Star” and “Don’t Fence Me In” and morale-boosting, lump-in-the-throat things like “The White Cliffs of Dover,” but this one became an instant hit, a curiosity, and I was frequently asked for it: “Rachel’s party piece.” It seemed to bring me both acceptance and renown and I used to do some wicked take-offs of the old lady (fifty-seven, when I last saw her), my exaggerations growing ever more exaggerated. Often, of course, I’d feel guilty; vowed I would put an end to it. Back in the light of day, though, I’d tell myself it didn’t do my great-aunt any harm and it certainly did *me* a fair amount of good, of a kind. I could uneasily reconcile it with the knowledge I had even then: that I very much hoped, one day, to find my place in heaven.

Each time my mother and I came away from Neville Court my mother would say something like, “Poor Alicia. One can only humour her.”

“Is she mad?” I once asked.

“Good heavens, no. Or at least . . .”

I waited.

“Well, if she is,” she went on, “she’s perfectly happy. There are many who’d even envy her that type of madness.”

To myself Aunt Alicia didn’t seem a template for perfect happiness: stout, downy-cheeked, heavily dusted with powder; wearing dresses which, as my mother said, must have hung in her wardrobe forever and had probably been unsuitable even when new; a woman, as it appeared to me later, who was always searching for something unattainable in the dark corners of that lush and overheated room, possibly for somebody splendid, affectionate and dear. No, when I was ten years old I didn’t regard her as being in any way enviable. Nor, indeed, when I was twenty years old. Or thirty . . . or whatever.

And then my mother said:

“Actually your father did once mention a strain of insanity in his family.” Pause. “So all *naughty* little girls had better watch out, hadn’t they?”

She laughed, so I knew this last bit was a joke. In any case I wasn’t particularly naughty. By and large I was a quiet child who didn’t seek attention. I’d have been appalled—and terrified—to think of what was shortly going to emanate in the school playground.

Aunt Alicia was looked after by a large and blustering Irish-woman called Bridget, who may once have saved my life by crying out as I was about to turn the kitchen light on with wet and soapy hands; and when my great-aunt moved away from St. John’s Wood without informing anyone of where she was going, or of why she was going, Bridget went with her. Even the porter hadn’t been left a forwarding address; nor could he bring to mind the name of the removal firm. We received no Christmas or birthday cards and gradually I forgot all about Neville Court and the weird, reclusive life being led there. Both that snatch of song and the impersonations—if that’s what they could ever have been called—became things of the past.

And even when my mother died I heard nothing. I vaguely supposed Alicia too was dead.

But she wasn’t. At that time she’d have had about a dozen more years to go.

Later I learned that she and Bridget had repaired to Bristol; and that there, when Bridget had committed suicide at the age of eighty-four, Aunt Alicia, ten years her senior, had gone on living in the same house with Bridget’s body: a state of affairs which had come to light only after two weeks—two weeks of sleet and snow and freezing temperatures. Bridget had then been removed to the mortuary at St. Lawrence’s, and Alicia to a geriatric ward in the same hospital.

“Tragic,” said Mrs. Pimm, the almoner, when I finally took it into my head to make enquiries. “Tragic,” she said, her round face shining with health, and now, all this time later, even with

enjoyment, with a storyteller's relish. "The old lady only lasted for a month or two. And to end up like that: too awful to be thought about, much less spoken of! And when you consider her background! Well, it was obviously well-to-do, middle-class, solidly Victorian. A nanny. Little bottom lovingly powdered with talc . . . A pretty child I'd think; and probably made much of . . ."

Mrs. Pimm pursed her lips and shook her head and there was silence: an unconvincing moment of requiem. Her small office, white and functional for the most part, contained a framed photo of her family on the desk; and two large watercolours on the wall, both depicting gardens. "Like the woman with the cats," she said.

"Cats?"

"Oh, yes, didn't you read about that? Nine of them. Pets. But when she died—and she, too, was a ripe old age—poor things, they couldn't get any food, so they started eating *her* . . . and, afterwards, one another. Well, that's nature, I suppose, but as the youngest of my kiddies said to me, "Mum, what if they didn't *wait*?" Well, I soon shut her up, of course, but just the same I couldn't stop imagining."

I shuddered.

"And I often think of *her* little bottom being dusted as well, her rosy little lips being kissed by scores of doting relatives—the flesh, you see, had all been torn away around the mouth." She closed her eyes and gave a series of solemn nods.

"Horrible."

"I'm sure she never thought she'd come to that."

Her laugh in some way wasn't callous. It was aimed against the irony of life itself, rather than at the poor woman with her nine sharp-clawed cats.

"Linda Darnell—such a beautiful actress—dying in a fire," she said. "C B Cochran slowly scalding to death in his bath. Up till then, you know, nearly anybody would have envied them . . . the glamorous, successful lives they'd both enjoyed."

She clearly had a catalogue of such disasters. And yes, too, there *was* almost a relish: a compensatory garment to wrap about

herself to make up for the lack of beauty or glamour or success she felt existed in her own life.

The office had grown increasingly claustrophobic: walls closing in on you, ceiling moving down. You couldn't like her. She told me of a man who had jumped from a window in New York. Oh, yes, he had certainly meant to kill himself and he'd succeeded. Poor fellow. He had also killed the gentleman he'd fallen on top of. "He must have thought that nothing could get any worse. But he should have listened to William Shakespeare, shouldn't he? Things can *always* get worse."

No, you couldn't like her.

And yet I sat there, and yet I listened. Why? Eventually I drew her back to the subject of my great-aunt.

"Naturally," she said, "you realize she was gaga? The mystery is . . . how she and that Irish woman ever managed to survive; survive for thirty-seven days, never mind thirty-seven years! Sometimes, according to the neighbours, they could be sweet as pie; but sometimes you would hear them scream and it was just like they were doing each other in! Like Bedlam, said the neighbours—well, only thank heaven for such good thick solid walls! There were endless complaints to the council."

I asked what had become of these complaints but Mrs. Pimm may not have heard me.

She said: "You'd expect to have a bit of peace, wouldn't you, when you've nearly completed your voyage? The start of a golden age. The rays of the evening sun reflected on the water. And the filth," she added, "the squalor. The mountain of rubbish in one of those nice big airy rooms . . ."

But I had already heard about that; *and* witnessed the effects of it.

She saw me out—insisted on escorting me to the main door.

"Still, there you are," she repeated. "I suppose none of us can say what lies around the corner."

I think that, somehow, she intended this to be reassuring. While she went back to her coloured photograph of a similarly

apple-cheeked husband and three gormlessly grinning daughters, went back to her summer gardens filled with roses, I reflectively made my way to the bus stop and remembered Bridget letting me run my finger round the mixing bowl as she transferred the cake tin to the oven. I remembered her telling me of the pictures she'd seen on her days off, and about her two strapping nephews in Donegal who were both waiting to marry me.

Naturally, I remembered my great-aunt, as well. Heard again her account of swirling ball dresses—all of them in different shades of pastel—and of Lady Shayne, the erstwhile Sarah Millick, flouter of convention and runner-off to happiness (and tragedy, too, yet would she then have sacrificed the one in order to avoid the other?), now white-haired and seventy but retaining her youthful figure and dressed in an exquisite gown.

During the final moments of the play, due to the self-absorption of all those who had earlier been surrounding her, she is left alone on stage.

Slowly, she moves across it to the centre. At first she stands quite still. Then she begins to laugh. A strange, cracked, contemptuous laugh. Suddenly she flings wide both her arms—

“Though my world has gone awry,
 Though the end is drawing nigh,
 I shall love you till I die,
 Goodbye!”

And I thought of this as I waited patiently for the bus to move off: the one matchless evening in my Aunt Alicia's long but disappointing life: an evening of empathy, transcendence, exhilaration; and almost surely—at forty-two or forty-three—of hopes of a romance.