

Chapter 3

# Indecision

1936



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Peter and I travelled back to London by coach together that Easter. His first book of poems had just come out, published by Laurence and Wishart, and he had been invited to have his photograph taken by a West End photographer (free) in case he later became famous. I went with him to give him moral support. The slight smile on his lips is the result of their just having powdered his nose to reduce the shine.

On March 31st, his 22nd birthday, we went together to a Labour Party meeting at Ladywell Baths, Lewisham, and, as he couldn't get home afterwards, he was to sleep on our very large sofa. Everyone else went to bed and we sat up talking. Eventually we made love, briefly. I guessed that he was feeling disloyal to Peggy, even though she still couldn't decide if she wanted him.

Probably one of the reasons I fell in love with Peter, as well as his being tall, dark and handsome, and having a wonderful voice, was that he had spent several months in getting to know me without trying to get me into bed. Most young men, then as now, seemed to have nothing but sex on their minds.

Of course, when we got back to Oxford, our relationship had changed. I took to leaving St Hughs very early in time to cycle to The House to wake up Peter at 8 am before his scout (a personal male servant who looked after the undergraduates on one staircase) brought our breakfasts under silver covers, having already lit the coal fire and cleaned the room. Peter was chronically short of sleep as he was engaged in political work for most of each day, from the daily Executive Committee meeting of the Party at 9 am in his rooms until maybe a public meeting in the evening – his record was 37 meetings in one week. When his college gates finally shut at 12.20 he and Phillip Toynbee generally played a fast and furious game of table tennis – then wallowed in adjacent deep hot baths in the dungeons. Only then would they sit down to write their essays, already overdue.

Although I probably saw quite a lot of Phillip Toynbee all the two years I was at Oxford as he was a Communist Party member and a great friend of Peter's, besides being in the same college, I didn't like him.

One of my St Hugh's friends, Joyce, a lovely gentle girl, and very beautiful, fell in love with Phillip and he soon became aware of this. He made an appointment to meet her in Peter's rooms in Peck Quad; she could hardly believe her luck and was overjoyed. When she got there the door was open but the room was empty. On the table, *open*, was Phillip's diary, in which he jeered at Joyce and sneered at her affection for him – left there on purpose for her to read. She was devastated and humiliated. I don't think she ever recovered while she was at Oxford. I was very happy to hear several years later that, soon after she got her degree, she married a Church of England clergyman and had five children. She must have made a wonderful clergyman's wife and mother.

Although I don't think I ever exchanged a word with Phillip until long after the war, we met almost daily and I think he knew I didn't think much of him, and he probably didn't like me.

Communist students in those days were very serious. "A Communist student must be a good student!" was our slogan. No-one must sleep around in an irresponsible manner. Each of us, if we found a mate, must be faithful, and no-one must get pregnant.

Not long before there had been a celebrated case of a fifteen-year-old girl who had been raped by half a dozen soldiers and made pregnant. Two wonderful women doctors had persuaded a surgeon to perform an abortion for her in hospital. Up to that moment it had been a crime to abort except in the case when the pregnant woman would die if the pregnancy continued. They were trying to change the law to make it possible also where the victim would suffer serious psychological harm if she was forced to give birth. This seemed to them a valuable test case. The surgeon performed the abortion in hospital, backed up by the women doctors. He was put on trial – acquitted – and this changed the law.

These two women doctors were special also. At that time it was impossible to get birth control advice unless you were married and probably unless you already had numerous children. But these doctors would see young female students, fit them up with a cap and ointment – then the safest method – and give them good advice.

So as soon as a couple got together that term, starting with ourselves, the female half would be sent up to Harley Street to be "fitted up". We knew that if anything went wrong, which was unlikely, we could go back for help.

Peter and I were now making love whenever we could. Luckily the authorities seemed to be under the impression that couple could only copulate late in the evening and in a bed, so no-one bothered about protecting us from ourselves in the morning, or in a punt, or on cushions on a floor.

Peter was now in his last term at Oxford. In those days students reading English had to take Responsions, a fairly easy examination, at the end of their first term, and then nothing more until the final examinations at the end of their three years. The result was that for about two years they lived a carefree life, reading a bit, and writing a weekly essay to read aloud to their tutor. No-one seemed to mind if they didn't work; indeed many of the richer and more aristocratic students didn't bother to take a degree at all. They had been sent to Oxford or Cambridge with plenty of money to get to know the right people so they could take their destined place in governing the country and the Empire.

But for Peter, finals now loomed. It came to him as a nasty shock that he had to sit one whole three-hour paper in Middle English, of which hardly any written examples remained, and that he hadn't even bought the large and expensive text book on which he was to be examined.

Now the time had come to go to the book shop and have the neglected tome put on his bill. So we did just that and took it on the river in a college punt – punted down the river until we came to a secluded spot under a willow tree – and both settled down to read.

After a couple of hours Peter shut the book. “I have left it too late,” he exclaimed. “There is no way I can master this in the fortnight before the exam!”

So we took it back and exchanged it for a copy of M.R.James’ *Collected Ghost Stories*, which he read to me on the river, and which became our favourite companion for the next fifty years.

In those days I didn’t talk much, which left a lot of time for thought – and I began to think of the future. As far as I knew, Peter would be leaving Oxford in June and I would probably never see him again. I surprised him by opening the subject of *our* future. Was he still in love with Peggy? If so, it was hardly fair on me to continue our relationship. Several other students were interested in me and if our loving togetherness was to stop and he was going back to Peggy that summer, I should perhaps know.

So he rang Peggy and demanded that she should finally make up her mind between him and Arthur, explaining about me and how unfair it was to keep me dangling.

“Don’t leave me, Peter. I love you! I am coming straight to Oxford!” she cried. So, on Friday she arrived. Oxford students were supposed to go away from the university for the weekend before their final exams started, to rest. We all three went out to tea.

Peggy was tall, confident, and very impressive. Her wonderful red hair was piled high on her head and made her look even taller. Four years older than me, with a private income of £7 a week, equivalent to £200 in 1998, as well as a job, she was elegantly dressed and assumed that Peter was her property. She patted me on the head, told me I would get over it all – and swept Peter off to London. All seemed lost.

“Well, I tried,” I thought. The next day a group of us were having tea in Lyons, because one of us, Mike, son of the Principal of Goldsmith’s College, being an inverted snob, insisted on wearing a flat cap and eating individual fruit pies while drinking raspberryade in Lyons. Suddenly, there was Peter!!

The nearer he had got to London with Peggy and the further from Oxford and me, the more he had thought that he was making a mistake. So when they arrived, he bravely told Peggy so. They spent a miserable night with Peter’s family, Peggy weeping on Joan’s shoulder most of it, and after tearful farewells Peggy went back to Yorkshire and soon to Arthur, and Peter came back to me.