



A LETTER TO MARY FRANCES DUNHAM
6/9/1964

BY PAT HILL

K. Hill

Dacca
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Chère chère Mary F.,

Your letter came yesterday, and I have fingered it and thumbed it and re-read it and carried it about with me like a comfort blanket. I miss you dreadfully. In some obscure way I feel happier having evidence that you really are there, eating all those astonishing things and seeing all those quaint landscapes and attending authentic indigeneous functions. And will come back home after all.

But what else could you do? You can't go on forever, biting your tongue at "In Pakistan----" and swallowing your native Bengali all unspoken. In the last few months I have wondered, briefly but fairly often, just how awful I will be when I'm back in the old country. I'm not at all confident that I can be rehabilitated at all. One can physically restrain oneself from wearing funny clothes or pouring Tabasco sauce in all the food; but how to keep quiet about *Our Trip To The Village*, or *The Loved Ones*, or the *Pakistan Observer*. I think of all the people we've read about who went to Asia and just sort of stayed on; or, much worse, the retired Indian Army lohk who went back to the old country and spent their autumn years sitting around in dismal clubs reminiscing with each other. At least they had each other --- who, in our villages, will ever talk Bengali with us?

It's two weeks since you started your letter to me, which means that this week or next should bring your incubation period to a dramatic conclusion. Oh how I do wish I could be there with you. I would be an ayah. It's hard to evaluate those Long Island ayahs from here; if you find one with good chits, you might put her on duty for a few days till you find out if the bacha is night-blooming variety. If he/she is a sleeper, you can probably manage nicely yourself, reading Spock and drinking milkshakes while the little one rests. If he/she tends to insomnia and conversation, Ayah will spell you, isn't it?

It is very important to have Dhobi and Bottle-washer, however.

By the time you are ready to bring the new one back where he/she belongs, you will have a fair idea of whether you want an ayah, and if so, whether you want a strong, knowledgeable ayah, or a meek uncertain little ayah who can stay with the baby when you go out but not get in your way otherwise. Let me know. Meanwhile, in your father's bari, grip your Baby and Child Care firmly and direct away.

I remember forsythia -- yes, and daffodils -- yellow tulips even. You might bring a picture postcard of the cherry blossoms. I have been trying to find out why all malis plant endless purple flowers. I have counted five kinds of purple flowers in my bagan. I don't know if they love the color -- it looks so teek in an orange vase -- or if these are just hardy flowers that can flourish without diligent care. I'm going to have the little fuschia pom-pom things torn out by the roots and burned with ceremony.

Which reminds me that I must tell you of the changes in our bari.

You know that pre-monsoon is the season when bubbling discontent boils up into crisis. You either weather it and go back to discontent, or take advantage of the atmospheric pressures to put an end to it. After months of dissatisfaction followed by two weeks of acute discontent, I let Taijuddin go. Between Louis XIV in my kitchen and my two helpers, I had no one to really run the bari. It came to me that I needed a real Bearer. I won't go into the agonies I suffered trying to decide, trying to steel myself. Then one day, while I was reading Christopher's report card, the Barua remarked gently that Tusheet was here. (Really, another holiday? how nice.) Yes. Tusheet going to village, see his grandmother. Month holiday this time. (Oh she will be pleased.) And then, across my son's report card, I began to get familiar wave lengths. (I hope we have somebody to take Tusheet to his grandmother because we aren't going to our village again, are we?) No-o. Not taking. Other Barua take Tusheet home. (Pause, till my sigh of relief is over.) "Only I going to village end of month to bring Tusheet back to school."

When last seen I was flying the length of the house, howling and blubbering that he had promised not to go to the village for eight months, that he spent his life in the village and only worked for us in odd spare moments, that he had no loyalty, that I had forbidden him ever to go to his village, that he would have to move his family to Dacca if he was going to be forever running home..... while Louis followed me with a moderately concerned expression and tried to explain that he would only take a week of the twelve days due him (twelve days!!!!), that Tusheet wouldn't be able to go home again till January, that he can't travel that far alone...

Having exhausted myself, I tried to summon my reason and brooded a bit and called him in to explain that we don't really begrudge him his rightful time off (but how does it add up so fast?) and that it isn't proper for Madame to have a tantrum every time he leaves the compound, but that it was his own damn fault for urging me to keep my staff intact on previous occasions, and that I would not be left alone with only two little boys, faithful helpers though they are, and that I must have a Bearer. And then, brave girl that I am, I sent him to tell Taijuddin.

While I was miserable anyway, I decided to fire the mali who hadn't been around for a week. (Taijuddin works hard but is not loveable; Ganesh is loveable but the yard is wretched.) When he finally appeared, he announced that he was going to India. Not, I gather, out of fear, but because all his cousins and brothers and uncles have gone and it's getting lonely. I know the feeling. We sent him off with all blessings. I don't know if he ever knew he was fired.

So that while in the old days -- like two weeks ago--we had a nice communal balance, with one of everything, we have now become a Buddhist fraternity house. We have added a Buddhist bearer and mali -- and I must say they are pleasant to have about. Of course Stephen still floats around with broom and rosary, and Kripa holds the Baptist fort, and I still don't know how many Pathans live in our garage. If I could find a place for the nice Hindu dhobi.....

We're quite running out of Hindus. Except the dhobi. The Owens'-Hendrys malis were finally dispatched. It was a very bleak compound after Pat left. We have been resettling her servants, and a gloomier lot I hope never to face at close range.

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Dacca, in fact, begins to resemble a boarding school during summer vacation. Or a gutted ship? Fran, and Dan, and Ted (I think) are leaving in July. Rosemary left a few weeks ago. The Hendrys will leave in August. We will be wandering fearfully around empty, echoing halls -- shouting for Mr. Murphy.

It's muggy hot. We've had a few rains, and I'm beginning to think wistfully about country boating. I haven't had the heart -- or the time, in all the confusion -- to go to the village, but I'm very ready for it.

I have tried to check your husband. We miss him too, and I drove over this afternoon again, but he is either asleep or out -- if one could just know the precise moment he could be caught over morning coffee. I did see him a few times soon after you left. He was truly gallant about the rickshaw artist, and guided us to the little bohemian studio one morning in a wild rainstorm, swimming and splashing down the alley. The weeks Hugh and Fran were in the west wing were awfully dreary for him on Siddeshwari. When you write, tell him we'd love to see him.

I went to Dakeswari this morning, and ordered eight of the Cross design -- I hope. I wasn't sure you wanted them all alike. They quoted Rs.21 -- have I got the right thing, do you suppose? 45 x 45. White on white. They'll be ready next week and I'll go nag your husband about shipping them to you. And you must know how positively delighted I am to have the little errand to do for you.

I could never bring myself to put transistors on your list. But Louis XIV does need a decent Sheaffer fountain pen. And Kripa would very like a handbag, app. 10"x 11" or so. (That's the size she's got) Plain inside -- no compartments. A flap-over sort of top -- she mistrusts zippers and things that break. A soft rounded base, and a handle, and a nice discreet color, like black or gray or blue. No lahl. She approves the picture attached -- but she can't see how many clasps and snaps it must have. She very admires the overflap top.

The hours have drifted on again. We have found the okra all snipped in the bagan (though we hadn't eaten any) and complained that they might share a little of it with us, and the Barua served us right by serving it plain and boiled. It was unexpectedly good and I ate two helpings which ought to teach him a lesson but won't. The children have swarmed over our desk and beds and psyches. I've read your letter again and you sound so beautiful and healthy and I already love your village -- pure fairy-tale. Dogwood, Mary Frances? Ted stopped by, having had a letter from Pat; she's going to open the house in Bethesda next month, as it will take six weeks or so for the doctors at Children's to get through Tony's tests. (We've been to Radshajhi (S?) and Calcutta, by the way, and we'll talk about those villages later.) I'm truly rather relieved to hear that the cultural shock was not so bad -- but I don't know -- I love the country, but the gadgets always intimidated me. (A bullock-cart knocked off my tail light the other day, but it doesn't seem as dangerous as a motor gari, somehow.) Most of us feel that Nehru's death set the Kashmir affair back, but how far nobody can tell yet. I've met Pakistanis who have cancelled trips to Calcutta, waiting to see what may take fire under the new government. The Sahib has survived a little amoeba and kidney infection, and is well except dragging a bit from the heat. Christopher is still in school, playing cricket again, growing alarmingly. I wish we had more theater for him -- I took him to the play-reading last night and he was so thrilled. (Our own drama group fell apart when Pat left, due to a scattered and disconsolate cast. Maybe we can regroup under new management when you come home?) Anthony is blonde and bouncing. I will surely have more lists for you before you come, when I've had time to dwell pleasurably upon it. Please let me know what I can do for you here. And write again if you've time. We'll be waiting for you with garlands, very scent.

Love,

Patricia

