



Letters home

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Letters Home

Meredith M. Brown

Summer vacation, and I'm reading through the hundreds of letters my parents wrote to each other more than fifty years ago. I'm meeting my parents as they were before I was conceived, when they were over ten years younger than I am now.

I found the letters last winter, cleaning out my parents' apartment, after I had taken my mother to a nursing home. Dad had died more than twenty years earlier. The letters were written in an age when people wrote, and my father, John Mason Brown, made his living by writing and lecturing.

It was an age when first-class postage for a letter was three cents, although Dad's tendency was to splurge—six cents for air mail, ten cents more for special delivery. For years after their marriage in February 1933, whenever Dad was on the lecture circuit, my parents wrote each other at least once every day. Dad's letters—letters from a cultural traveling salesman—are on hotel stationery from across the country: The Stevens in Chicago (“World’s Largest Hotel”), The Broadview Hotel in Emporia (“Offices—Chamber of Commerce”; “all outside rooms with bath”), The Texas in Fort Worth, The Hotel Olds in Lansing (“Opposite the State Capitol”), The Hotel Cornhusker in Lincoln, the U. S. Grant in San Diego (“Absolutely Fire-Proof”), the Southern Hotel in Denton, Texas (“New and Fireproof for Safety, Comfort and Service”), the Hotel Onesto in Canton (“When in Canton sleep in a Fireproof Hotel”—were there really that many hotel fires in those days?).

LECTURING

Dad was a drama critic (*Theatre Arts*, *The New York Post*, *The World-Telegram*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*), but much of such money as he made came from lecturing—usually one long swing a year for all of February, crisscrossing the country by train and an occasional flight (Los Angeles to New York was sixteen hours by air), speaking of the theater, most often to women's clubs or to colleges. The rest of America hungered for news of the New York theater, and Dad helped to satisfy that hunger. Brooks Atkinson called Dad “America’s Cultural Ambassador to the United States.”

There was a grinding pattern to the trips to each city—the greeting by the representatives of the local sponsoring organization (“The telephone has just rung, announcing the arrival of the Junior League Guard of Honor which awaits below, so I must run”); the lunch (Fort Worth, February 1938: “a luncheon given at a tea-shoppe place by some professional women who obviously had been forced by

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nature into the world's younger professions"; Chicago, Feb. 15, 1940: "Then lunch [how I hate this part of the trip business] with about 200 of the gals. I escaped before dessert, pleading laryngitis, dysentery, venereal complaints, etc."); the lecture; the questions, predictable ("What do you think of John Barrymore?") and unpredictable ("What is Carmen Miranda's telephone number?"); the reception afterwards ("the after-birth," Dad called it); perhaps an interview with the local paper (Charleston, West Virginia: ". . . was interviewed by two nitwits from a High School paper—'Mr. Brown, what ought a young Thespian do?"). Then another lecture, a dinner, and on to the next town—often with multiple train changes and blizzard delays.

Chicago, Feb. 4, 1936: "I often wonder if melancholia isn't the sure end of lecturers, in as much as they have to keep on going to their own lectures."

Chicago, Feb. 12, 1936: "I've unpacked, hung up my clothes, sent out ye olde lecture to be pressed for tomorrow's passage of wind. . . ."

Indianapolis, Oct. 18, 1938: "A fine letter from you here! . . . Nothing else matters. The dull routine of lecturing can go its way. I am even able to face the prospect of hearing Brown's lecture again. Believe me I get sick of that guy. Yet there seems to be no way of hushing him up. On, and on, and on, he goes, bringing up the same tripe over and over again, until I almost scream. I don't know whether to despise him or to pity him."

Tulsa, Feb. 12, 1940, 9:20 a.m.: "A strange business, this lecturing, my sweet. A strange, strange business. A lot of fun for the speaker while he's talking, even when he's repeating himself shamelessly and doing his darnedest to pretend he isn't."

Not every lecture went flawlessly, quite apart from the abiding worries about the inherent financial insecurity in the work and the risk of a laryngitis that could wipe out a tour and a year's budget. Tulsa, Feb. 12, 1940, 6:10 p.m. [later in the same day on which Dad told my mother that lecturing was "fun" for the speaker]: "The loudspeaker in the huge hotel ballroom in which I was speaking this morning went on the bum the minute I began. Strange mutterings! Verbal backfirings! Wagnerian kettle-drum work! I finally persuaded them to turn it off, and then had to yell like hell for the next 70 minutes to make myself heard. But no damage done. . . . Billy Sunday and Wm Jennings Bryan must have been Fuller Brush men in Kentucky the year before I was born. I'll have to ask mother."

Oklahoma City, Feb. 13, 1937: "Apparently the woman who runs the Town Hall series here is a questionable organizer. . . . [H]er lecture series flop like dung from a cow. At the lecture there were 100 people! The few who were present were responsive enough, but it is twice the work talking to a small audience that it is talking to a large one. It is all White Rock and no Scotch—and a great deal of ice in the empty seats."

The introductions could be challenging. Tulsa, Feb. 11, 1937: "The Men's Dinner Club has met and gone. . . . The President introduced me to the 300 guests, assembled in a huge, rectangular, smoke-filled dining-room, by saying that Isaac F. Marcasson had failed them, that after that they had thought of getting a famous orchid-hunter, that when he had proved inaccessible they had debated having someone from Wichita talk on 'The History of Syphilis,' and that finally, they were fortunate in finding a dramatic critic available, etc.

"With all these hurdles placed in my way, I began. I apologized for not being an orchid hunter. I regretted that I could neither give nor illustrate the history of

syphilis. I assured them that as far as syphilis was concerned, I was only a 'scab.' And then with 'Once when Alexander Wolcott,' etc.,—I went straight into my talk."

Solitary breakfasts in hotel restaurants were not good for the soul. Dayton, Ohio, Jan. 28, '41, 8 a.m.: "Darling—'The Coffee Shop'—the first one on the tour. Very grey-looking men sitting around silently at separate tables, deep in newspapers, their faces resembling nothing so much as sheets in a hamper. Waitresses in pink, who should (out of respect for their age) be dressed in violet."

And when there were people to talk to, it was obligatory to be polite, since the people were the club officers, the university administrators, responsible for next year's lecture bookings. Chicago, Feb. 21, 1939: "My jowls are pendant icebergs from a whole month of occupational politeness. Lord God, but how I'm aching to insult! . . . But wait until the first dull play comes along!! Shotguns? Hell, no. Howitzers, baby, a whole nest of them."

The weeks on the road were lonely. Lansing, Feb. 11, 1936—my parents' fourth anniversary: "From the room next door come the amorous moans of a man and a woman celebrating our anniversary for us. I'm profoundly hungry for you. And lonely. And in love." Two years later, to the day, from Fort Worth: "It's a shame, isn't it, that Fate (in the person of Economic Necessity) conspires to keep us apart each anniversary, that a lecture tour forces us to be continent; that this day of days should have to be passed away from one another!"

Evansville, Feb. 25, 1940: "In many ways this has been the loneliest day of all. There's not much to be done in a town of this size—after you have walked its esplanade and its Main Street. That is unless you know someone. And that is apparently the last thing the Evansvillains want you to do. They treat lecturers like lepers."

But for all its miseries, there was much in the tours he enjoyed—the prairie, the mountains, the desert, the Mississippi, the Texas oilfields, the California orange groves, seen from the trains; the hosts he came to know as friends from annual trips to the same towns; the other theater people (Cornelia Otis Skinner, Lillian Gish, Maurice Evans, Louis Calhern, Katherine Cornell, for example) he would meet unexpectedly as they mined the same hinterland gold; the newspapermen with whom to have a drink and "talk ink-stained talk" while waiting to catch a train; the uninterrupted eclectic reading (examples: Plato, Kenneth Roberts, Dostoevsky, Van Wyck Brooks, Tolstoy, *Gone With the Wind*) on the trains; the local sights to be seen (the training abattoir at the State University of Iowa in Ames; the "wretched little shack in which Jesse James was shot down" in St. Joseph, Missouri); the autographing and promotion of whichever of his twenty books was then in the local bookstore; the annual pilgrimage and triumphal lectures in his hometown of Louisville; the unquenchable excitement of thawing the most icebound of audiences. And decades of lecturing—his first out-of-town lecture was in 1925, two years after he graduated from Harvard—couldn't dull Dad's delight in reading and sending home a good write-up of one of his lectures from the local paper.

THE WAR

Within weeks of Pearl Harbor, Dad — forty-one years old, father of two small boys (one four years old, one aged three months), unrich — applied to the Navy. Hotel Panlind, Grand Rapids, Jan. 29, 1942: "I went down to the navy . . . , not for the Roxy usher's desire to wear a uniform, but because I can't see this war won with a 'business as usual' policy; because I think, hard though it is, every one has to

sacrifice something; because I was hoping to be able to do some dull, if useful, work that would free younger men for duty; because it all seems so far-spread that no one can escape it.

“I went down because (if I can prove helpful, which is debatable,) I thought realistically I ought to look ahead—and, regardless of what is lost in the next two or three years, think in terms of what would be lost for all of us, if the war were lost. (Not that I think *I* can win it alone. But if every one said let some one else do it, where would we be?)”

Dad may well have had other motives—the desire to be part of the big adventure; the desire for a break from the endless cycle of daily dramatic criticism and long weeks on the lecture circuit; a family tradition of military service (one grandfather from Kentucky was a Union colonel; the other grandfather, also from Kentucky, was a Confederate major general; Dad’s favorite uncle was a general in World War I). But there was an irreducible core of a patriotic desire to do his part.

So Dad went to war. He had to undergo a hernia operation to be able to pass his physical, but he finally got his commission in October 1942. He became, as he liked to say, the oldest lieutenant (j.g.) in the U.S. Navy. He served on the staff of Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, taking part in the invasions of Africa, Sicily and Normandy, broadcasting daily reports to the thousands of men belowdecks. The reports were ultimately transmuted into two of the best books Dad wrote. (“John’s was a two-book war,” said McGeorge Bundy, Dad’s cabinmate on the flagship going into Normandy.) Mom minded the Home Front, taking a job to make ends meet, letting the cook go (a savings of \$80 a month), trying to learn to cook herself. (“So many dopes are good cooks I can’t believe I couldn’t learn,” she wrote, with what proved to be unwarranted optimism.)

There were dark days. Mom wrote Dad when he was away on the annual February lecture tour in 1942, saying that she felt as if life were over and that there was no future. Dad’s reply was his creed—“Forgive this encyclical,” Dad said at its conclusion. Houston, Feb. 19, 1942: “Life over? Not at all. It’s just reaching for you and me its glorious noon-day. A long noon-day, too, years off from the wonders, and serenities, the new pleasures and different interests, of the twilight. I love life passionately; love it because of you; because of what we have had, what we have and what we will have more abundantly. I love it for the memories that are; the memories in the making; the memories that are to come. I love it for the sheer joys of *being*; for what my senses wigwag to my mind and heart and curiosities as signals. I love it for the sights, sounds, reactions of every blessed day—the tiring discouraging ones no less than the roseate laughing ones, because they are a vital part of *awareness*. I love it for its challenges no less than because of its pleasures. I love it lustily and joyfully because of my friends, my interests, my work, my family, my home, my city, my country, my boys and my wife. . . .

“Bad years? Of course, I know we are having them just now, such years of the plague and the locust as man has not known before. But, though I realize with Roark Bradford’s de Lawd that ‘being de Lawd ain’t no bed of roses,’ and see too that being just a human being ain’t no bed of roses, either, I have complete faith—a faith which, though unchurchly, is as full-blown and unchallengeable as your Dr. Donegan’s.” (Dr. Donegan was the rector of the Episcopal church my mother attended.)

The creed is pure Dad. It has unabashed corn. It relies on a then-recognizable literary allusion (yes, I remember Roark Bradford, and *The Green Pastures*, too) to

involve the audience. It isn't susceptible of schematization. But it's infectious, and it comes from the heart.

FAMILY

The sheer daily torrent of letters from the road bespeaks Dad's love for his wife, but the words are there, too, from the salutation ("Darlingest," "Belovedest," "My ownest," "Sweetestheart," "Most Radiant") to the equally glowing close ("My love — complete, ever-lasting, ever-growing and deepening"; "You're the world's most wonderful and seductive woman"; "I love you; adore you; hunger for you — My best to my family; My heart's blood to you"; "You are at once my Mme de Stael and my Cleopatra, my Dorothy Parker and my Myrna Loy, my dream and my reality, my wife and my life"). And the intervening paragraphs could be ardent, too — enough to embarrass me, a son of that union, reading the yellowing pages a half-century later.

Here's one written on another wedding anniversary, again miles from home. Hotel Muehlebach, Kansas City, Mo., Feb. 11, 1942: "Nine years! And such years, due all to you, to your gay wisdom, your glorious sanity, your *femme fatale* fascinations; your tact, discretion, and loveliness; your capabilities which are endless and your charm which is all-conquering; and the sheer inexhaustible delights of you — vertical or horizontal."

Or this, on hearing that Mom was carrying her second child (me, in the event). Chicago, Feb. 18, 1940: "Three hundred billion cheers!!! Your letter, pregnant in its overtones, warming in its news, history-making in its possibilities, house-filling in its actualities, and glorious from any point of view, has just been devoured. So we hit the jack-pot, did we? . . . We have been Robert Bruce-like in our efforts, yet, believe me, at least we have had a helluva lot more fun out of them than ever Brucie did out of watching a spider or beating the English."

And they used, as married couples will, a sexual code of childlike transparency: his was Joe, hers Emma (or Emma Ovary). Example, from a letter from Dad on a 1939 lecture trip that was to end on March 1: "P.S. Will Emma be home on March 1st? Joe has just gotten up to enquire?" Or a close from a 1937 letter to my mother, then staying at her mother's in Harrisburg, Pa.: "Goodnight, goodnight. Joey has been trying to get in touch with Emma but cannot quite reach her. All love."

There are also letters to my older brother and to me, filled with wonderful nutty drawings of the family, of trains; during the war, of guns and bombers and battleships.

And there's family news and gossip, too, in the letters in both directions. A cousin is killed in an accident; children misbehave or tentatively learn to write; friends are indiscreet at dinner parties (Mom tells Dad of one woman who gets all the women in the ladies' room after dinner and announces that she has just had another abortion — her thirteenth. "Such a sense of privacy!" Mom wrote Dad).

It's come to an end, now. The hundreds of letters and yellowing clippings have been read and filed. The budgetary crises ("I started paying bills last night," my mother wrote, "but stopped for the most basic of reasons"), so alive at the time — at least to my mother; my father tended to have a "The tradesmen can wait" attitude, and a feeling that a fee from a lecture in New Orleans should be applied to buy an antique on Royale Street, not to pay a utility bill — have receded into the past. Relatives long dead and never known to me, having briefly been reborn in

the reading of the letters (for the first time, I met the unhappily married Vi and Uncle Will from St. Louis: “Vi is in bed with neuritis,” Dad reported; “As usual, she is in bed with anything except Uncle Will”), have been decently reinterred.

What is left from this reading of six years of parental love letters, most written before I was born? Dusty hands, to be sure. But also a replenishment. I can remember my father, seeing a nascent cynicism in me as an adolescent, admonishing me: “Don’t ever lose your sense of wonder!” I think of the yards of letters—of the energy, laughter, curiosity, passion with which they are charged—and I am filled with wonder.