‘Life in 1977. Concorde, costing I don’t know how many millions, flies over our heads, clearly visible from our cottage window, while the road outside is full of potholes as in the 16th-century.’ Barbara Pym recorded this incongruity between the old and the very new in a winter letter to her long-time friend and confidant Robert Smith, who had left England in 1959 to teach history in a Nigerian university. Perhaps she herself was feeling like a relic from the past in a modern world, for sixteen frustrating years had elapsed since publishers had last accepted her fiction. She had written six successful novels between 1950 and 1961, but since then she had amassed a large file of rejection letters from publishers, who seemed to find her books too ‘old-fashioned’ for current literary taste.

Barbara was sixty-four years old now, unmarried, retired from her London office job, and living with her only sister, Hilary, in a country village much like the ones that form the setting for several of her novels. Finstock, twelve miles north-west of Oxford and just on the edge of the Cotswolds, is not the quaint sort of village that attracts tourists. Barbara described it as ‘an interesting mixture of carefully restored cottages and bright new bungalows with broken dry-stone walls, corrugated iron and nettles, and even the occasional deserted or ruined homestead’. Several years earlier, she and Hilary had settled into their small, book-lined

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seventeenth-century cottage, with its roof of locally quarried Stonesfield slate. In this rural setting Barbara tried to content herself with growing vegetables in the cottage garden, making jam, doing patchwork, walking the countryside, attending church up the hill, taking tea with friends – in short, leading the ‘uneventful’ kind of life her heroines led. ‘Who could ask for more?’ sing the Beatles in ‘When I’m Sixty-Four’. Well, Barbara Pym, for one, if she had been candid enough to say so. She fought a constant battle with despair over the failure of her writing-career, doing her best, with her sister’s encouragement, to remain cheerful and useful. She could not have foreseen that after this sixteen-year lapse in publication she would suddenly become fashionable again – that she would be ‘rediscovered’ in this age of the Concorde.

Barbara had dabbled with writing as a child and had even written a respectable though adolescent novel, *Young Men in Fancy Dress*, at the age of sixteen. She composed her first mature novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, in her early twenties when she returned to her family home in Shropshire in 1934, after completing her degree in English language and literature at St Hilda’s College, Oxford. She modelled the two main characters, the unwittingly comical spinsters Belinda and Harriet Bede, on herself and her sister Hilary, but she projected them into middle age and set them in a country village. Their lives revolved around the local Anglican church, headed by the peevish, over-literary Archdeacon Hoccleve, whose personality she patterned on that of Henry Harvey, a beau from her Oxford days.

Ironically, the novel foresaw in many ways the course Barbara’s own life was to take. As young women, both she and Hilary had expected to marry, and Barbara entertained occasional thoughts of marriage to Henry Harvey. Hilary did marry Alexander Walton during the Second World War, but they were divorced several years later. Henry disappointed Barbara by marrying a young Finnish woman, Elsie Godenhjelm. And, though a string of suitors throughout her life indicates that Barbara remained single by choice, the nature of that choice remains ambiguous. From her girlhood on, she tended to fall in love ‘safely’: she usually fixed her romantic longings on men she didn’t know, on men she loved unbeknownst to them, or on ‘unsuitable’ men who were unstable, much younger, bisexual or homosexual. At the age of twenty-five, in a letter to Henry, she was already referring to herself