

# IN DELIRIUM'S CIRCLE (SAMPLE)

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First Published by Egeus Press, MMXII  
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www.egeuspress.com

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ISBN 978-0-957160613



# I CURIUSER

Chance guided my fingers that day to an envelope hidden in the pages of a second hand book. I'd lost count of how many times I read that letter. Each time I became more convinced that it was a kind of invitation.

I could not say at first what it was that convinced me to steal the letter. Thankfully it was one of Edinburgh's lesser bookshops, so I knew I wasn't likely to return. I stood a while in the shop reading it, hidden behind the covers of an open book, my eyes darting through the words, my pulse quickening. I thought the proprietor must have suspected something, yet against all expectations he'd moved away as though in complicity, turning up his wireless, not wanting to play any part in my indiscretion, or so it seemed. He left me to savour the words written in a stranger's hand.

Having no money to spare on luxuries such as books I slid the letter into my overcoat and after returning the volume to the shelf I slipped from the shop into the crowd of passers-by. I had never stolen anything before in my life and I recall how my hands trembled as I pushed them into my pockets, shaken at the thought of my petty transgression.

I took my prize to a drab little café off the Lawnmarket and secreted myself in the tobacco smog of one of its corners to examine its contents fully. The address on the head of the letter was somewhere in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, a city I had never visited nor particularly wanted to. While the scribble at the top of the page told me I'd found the letter precisely two years to the day it had been dated, I dismissed the possibility as some kind of hoax or miscalculation on my part and read on.

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> September 1946.

Dear Miss Norfoot,

Forgive me for reminding you again of the time the rest of us spent in that strange town in Czechoslovakia. For you it must seem particularly unreal, having not been there to see it with your own eyes. Yet you have shown us great kindness and imagination in believing the impossible story we told you. You have seen proof of our findings so many times now that you must remember why you cannot abandon us here. Only you know why we must keep hiding. Only you understand. So I must leave this message as you refuse to answer your door.

You must know the story well by now, recounted again and again by each of us. What would we have done without your patience? You know that without that night there would be no circle. Indeed it inspired your own invaluable research. When we returned you made sense of our ravings. Even though you did not need to, you have kept our secret, indeed helped to bear our burden, shared in its wonder and so suffered its madness too. You didn't leave us, as so many others would have done. I am sure you will keep our confidence until the end. You should know our love for you binds this circle still. You must trust us. You must return

to us. We fear for you when you are apart from us. We are lost without you. The dead will not speak to us without you here.

If it wasn't for you and Mr Cutler what would we have done? Where would we have gone, Yarrow, Mowbray, Malone and I?

Those events haunt me still and shape words that I must continually entrust in another: as if repeating an incantation, so that we never forget, I'm compelled to repeat this story, this dream of our secret history.

So on the day that others came to know as VE Day we'd been ordered to keep watch in the Litoměřice District. Our reconnaissance had confirmed that in the neighbouring area the Soviets were advancing to liberate the prison camp at Terezín.

We were ordered to keep our distance and set up base on the periphery of a town, thereby putting a forest between the Russian troops and ourselves. We were to avoid treading on their toes if possible and let them get on with the liberation uninterrupted. Perhaps our superiors thought to keep us from discovering the horrors of the camp, who can say? For us the war just seemed to fizzle out in that small idyllic town. There was no single definitive announcement. A rumour of the war's end had seemed to stir amongst the locals after an English-speaking stranger arrived. When we asked for him to come forward for questioning they denied all knowledge of his whereabouts, telling us some wild story about him being a Master of Ceremonies in a travelling theatre. It was such an unlikely story and as there'd been a consensus that the locals were no more than inbred yokels, it was dismissed by our commanding officers.

Further word of surrender began to reach us in dribs and drabs, from far and wide, when troops from other scattered companies converged. No one could accept it. Yet when it was finally corroborated by radio I'd never seen revelry like it. It was as though men lost their minds right

then and there. While we watched most men descend on the locals' cellars in search of drink, intending to spend the night inebriated, a few of us stood apart. After the initial euphoria dissatisfaction took hold at how the war had ended for us. Had we expected some epiphany or dramatic standoff? As Yarrow put in his usual droll way, "Well that's the end of that." Although he was fighting back tears as he said it.

So in the early evening a handful of us, unable to shake our doubts and drunk on the locals' ale, started to wonder about that mysterious messenger, the travelling actor, and it was while searching for this man, demanding that the townsfolk present him to us, that we became aware of their own festivities.

In the centre of the town there was a ruin, well I say ruin, the place barely deserved that name, consisting of little more than a few walls against which the remains of dismantled and rusted machinery lay strewn about. It was clear from the layers of vegetation that veined the stonework that the place had been in that condition for many decades prior to the war.

While searching for a local to question we witnessed a gathering amongst the rubble and thickets. A number of them cradled bundles of rags in their arms. There was Frankincense in the air, the heady scent of which made us evermore intoxicated and breathless as we approached. As if swallowed, we witnessed the people descend into a hole in the ground. Down in the candlelit cellar people exchanged masks in the shadows. Yet you know this tale so well. I want to look into your eyes and remind you of what we found there and why we cannot, why we must not let go of it now. You know the rest.

Yet what did we find there, is it possible to say? Unlike Mr Cutler you believe it freed us. Perhaps we should have left well alone. Yet the other soldiers were taking their share elsewhere, looting and carousing, so after so much hardship and loss we felt we were owed something too. How

were we to know they weren't just celebrating the end of the war but invoking something else? And remember they gave us gifts, the townsfolk; they wanted to show us their appreciation, insisting that we participate in their strange games. Their children were wearing animal masks. Were they children? How patient they seemed.

We kept our secret from the other soldiers, suspecting that we'd be viewed with suspicion if we talked about our experiences. While most of the troops moved on within a week, some no doubt eager to take the opportunity to loot as they went, we desired to stay on there for another month before reluctantly answering the call for demobilisation. We had formed an inexplicable bond with the people there. The time passed as though in a dream. Time seemed to stand still not due to the place's beauty you understand but because none of the rules we'd known counted there. It was overwhelming, even frightening. It demanded sacrifices. So if I must speak of beauty then that was its beauty; a boundless intimacy. You know that we must find that ecstasy again at all costs.

So please do not fear us now. Do not run away from us. We are like children without you.

We will be waiting as we always do. All you have to do is say the word and we will come.

Yours, Mr Eyles



Remembering when I'd first read that letter I still feel a shiver of the exhilaration I'd felt that day in the second hand bookshop. Although I couldn't have known it then, it was the beginning of my initiation into their secret circle. Nor could

I have known it would eventually lead to a betrayal, although the details, the circumstances of my supposed disloyalty still elude me now. I'm left in the few hours that remain before I'm hunted down, to examine when and how it all turned against me; how my life became a nightmare. Even in understanding that, I still know I had no choice but to answer their call.

In the excitement of stealing the letter I'd forgotten about the book. I could only vaguely recall its subject: an exposé on the theatricality and subterfuge of spiritualism and the séance. Did it matter? And yet I'd always been heedful of such details; was I losing my touch? Presumably that book must have once belonged to the woman in question, Miss Norfoot. I didn't want to risk returning to ask at the shop but instead opted to write to the address on the letter, hoping that somehow there would still be some connection there.

Was it because I'd always longed to find such things that they were somehow attracted to me in turn? I had made a life out of becoming entangled in such phenomena. If it could be said that many of my clients claimed my forte was to reveal wonders in the most unlikely places and circumstances then it must also be admitted that just as many, if not more, insisted I was nothing but a charlatan, a lunatic without hope of a cure. Such was my reputation, meagre as it was.

After the war, as after all wars, mourners flocked to those they believed could speak with the dead. I admit I had made such claims from time to time when necessity demanded it; they were hard times after all, yet I had grown tired of others' misapprehensions. I sickened of the compromises of necessity. They had always kept me from another path I knew I would regret not taking. While my clientele were always a closed set of regulars with a sophisticated understanding of my work I found myself turning down many requests for séances. Despite my

reputation I simply didn't hold them, not in the conventional sense. My methods were founded on experimentation and exploration. For me the Other Side is a metaphor for the sleeping unconscious mind; its lost paths and voices. So I had no interest in rousing faith or duping the vulnerable. I still leave that to Parliament and the Church. Automatism is the key. Automatic drawing and writing and their interpretation used as auguries. One could say that I navigate by them.

Had I found an affinity with the author of the letter? He'd written of the need to remain hidden, seemingly out of a fear of what others would undoubtedly misunderstand. I too had lived half my life in a kind of hiding, at times called upon by those who knew of the gift I was supposed to possess. After all, I hardly understood what I was capable of myself, so how could I be expected to explain it to others or rely upon a gift I often doubted or struggled to define. Assuming of course that it was indeed the gift it seemed, as it had led to as much confusion as illumination. It had made me an exile in my own land, a sentiment I guessed Mr Eyles and the others in his circle might share.

To inspire trust in Miss Norfoot I intended to return her letter, even though it did occur to me that she might have wilfully lost it and hoped never to see it again. That was a risk I had to take. Yet how was I to approach this woman whom I had never met? Should I claim to have encountered many curious phenomena in my time yet assure her that I remained quite sane and vigilant against superstition? How could I justify contacting her on such a whim? What were my qualifications? I had none, even at my advanced age. Others would say I was uneducated; I prefer the term autodidact. Yet that often sounded spurious to my ear. And should I admit that I had experience as a medium, some say a seer, an interpreter of dreams, a collector and at times a curator? Some have said that I belong to another era. Should I admit that I was at the twilight of a long career, jaded and in need

of one last adventure? Or was it better to say very little and simply enclose her property? I couldn't sleep, returning to the letter I mouthed its words like an incantation under my breath while watching the city at night from my window. As I read the black sky over the rooftops bared its stars to me. Everything seemed to slowly converge in that instant, in an epiphany.

Dear Miss Norfoot,

I apologise for this intrusion and assure you that your privacy will be kept with respect. I am returning the enclosed property to you.

The letter from Mr Eyles inspired in me an immediate loyalty. I hope by bringing these words back to you I have returned what you thought was lost for good: a touchstone from another time. I must admit that I have copied the letter out for myself, as I hope you understand that I wanted a keepsake. Without it I might doubt its existence, as if I'd dreamt the whole thing. Perhaps it is reckless to admit this and I hope you can forgive me, yet I want to explain without hesitation that the letter and the circumstances of its discovery compels me to know more and to be as open with you as it is possible to be.

How should I introduce myself and offer further assurances? I cannot provide references as my line of work demands an unusual degree of discretion. I hope that it suffices to say that I have been in my time a broker of rare books and artefacts, my financial circumstances having taken a turn for the worse of late are now modest and I have not been in a position lately to acquire such things for myself. It is enough that these things should pass through my hands. And that in a way is how I came by the letter addressed to you.

I apologise if my letter comes as an imposition. I

hope I have not reminded you of a time you would prefer to forget. Yet it seems that you had left a door open to strangers.

Yours, William Fetch



After finishing the letter and sealing it, I walked to the end of my road to post it in the box strangely convinced that I would receive a reply. It seemed that I completed the act without volition and although I was tantalised by the promise of such an encounter I also felt the need to be rid of it, as some part of me suspected it might undermine the seclusion I had worked so carefully to obtain all these years.

I passed the following days looking for buyers, I was selling off the modest private book collection I'd amassed those last few years as way of deferring an eviction that would undoubtedly come. I just needed to stall them, to acquire breathing space, the opportunity to manoeuvre. Yet I'd feared for some time that my days there were over. The life of the city was changing and many of my patrons had been scattered; the war had changed the priorities of so many folk. The few obsessive types that did remain numbered so few that they could not keep me in the life I had known, modest as it was. Suddenly the climate was wrong, people had had a bellyful of nightmares and dreams; they didn't want someone like me to delve into their secret fears and hopes. And what good could it have done them anyway? What good had it ever done? I was incapable of giving any assurances. Perhaps I was becoming the charlatan my critics always claimed I'd been.



Dear Mr Fetch,

The receipt of your letter was not without some disturbance to me, and so because of this, I felt especially compelled to reply. After all you must understand that this decision is not entirely my own. I have my duties, certain responsibilities or loyalties that will not allow me to simply ignore your message. So understand that it is not for my sake that I write to you. There is more to one's curiosity than its simple satisfaction, I am sure you will appreciate.

You must also understand from the outset that I did not leave the letter in that book. I have no idea how it came to be there. Of late, many of my possessions have gone missing. I trust that you would spare me from discussing the letter's subject, as it draws upon a private and continuing discussion in our circle that remains, at this time at least, unresolved.

This leads me to the further fact that, as of this winter, our circle has been suspended for quite some time. While I understand that some of the others regularly meet or at least correspond, I must admit that I withdrew for reasons I cannot disclose here. And yet, it seems your letter could not have come at a more fortuitous time when, only days ago, the others had requested to resume our meetings. This too is not entirely in my hands.

It remains for me to remark on the hopeful tone I seem to discern in your letter. I must warn you against assuming that you could find in us any kind of sanctuary or affiliation. If you must write again then be sure that we in the circle have expended much energy in undermining in ourselves all hope of redemption or escape from this world or any other. We are not in the habit of saving souls or of converting others to a cause. My manner may seem severe yet

we have in our time found it necessary to repel unwanted attention. I am however quite prepared to answer any questions you have about the activities of our circle.

And one last request; if you do write, please refrain from using your forename. Mr Fetch will suffice. It is one of the customs we uphold.

Yours, Miss Norfoot



Dear Miss Norfoot,

I could not allow myself to expect a reply. In the days following my letter I doubted whether I'd been in my right mind to approach you in that way. Part of me had wanted the letter to be lost in transit so that I could forget the whole thing as one would a discomfoting dream.

The arrival of your reply threw me and I have spent these last few nights trying to comprehend it. Please understand me that I did not wish to pry in making reference to "the circle". I fear from your tone that I am unwelcome, that I have trespassed on your life and offended you. If this is so then I regret it more than I can say here. How might I explain my reasons for approaching you? In a manner of speaking, something in the letter struck a chord with me.

Given the contents of that letter I hope that I can afford to speak quite openly without fear of being misunderstood or dismissed. If vulnerability is the virtue I believe it to be then I will put my trust in it. You see, it is difficult for me to find the words in which to describe my talents without sounding, to most people, like a fraud or a lunatic.

Yet it is a question of sensibility, although I use that

term with caution, as it is hardly a quality that is understood in these times. However it is that very quality I believe that has drawn certain people to me. Oneiromancy was a name one of my wealthier clients liked to give to my work. Yet even at my age and experience, and even with my own tastes and tendencies, I balk at the thought of reducing it to such a grandiose definition. People used to tell me their dreams, and I'd scribble something down in a compulsive response, as though someone else were guiding my hand. Then I'd draw upon the insight accumulated over these long years to interpret the lines of my drawings. I am not a draughtsman, nor an academician. Some have taken me for an artist, yet I am none of those things. Even now, in the twilight of my years, as they say, I still feel that I am pulling the wool over peoples' eyes and one day I'll be found out. By its very nature it has always been an insular occupation, a one that has persuaded me to retreat from the shared, workaday world.

Somehow I doubt that admission would encourage anyone to write again.

Yours, Mr Fetch



Dear Mr Fetch,

You have my address, now find a corresponding map enclosed.

I live in a house the older locals call the Rookery. It may look forbidding to most but I am sure you will welcome its decrepit air.

Leave a note through the letterbox, knock then wait. I will answer.

It is just my way. Come to me when you are ready.  
Your reputation precedes you.

Yours, Miss Norfoot



All day I had been preoccupied with Miss Norfoot's reply. Did I recognise a disconcerting change in tone, a sudden welcoming manner or familiarity that almost smacked of ... what exactly, if not mockery then playfulness perhaps? Am I reading too much into what is only a sparse missive? I admit she made me uneasy. It is possible that they have taken an interest in my work, yet that does not guarantee approval or affinity.

That night I was obliged to stay again at a patron's private library off Queen Street. In a perverse way I welcomed that work since it kept me from dwelling on my predicament. There's something about an old library that seeps into you at that hour and brings a kind of peace.

Another librarian and I were selecting and cataloguing books that required repair, or if repair was beyond hope, designating them for sale. Aisle upon silent aisle of bookshelves stretched away into the darkness beyond the pool of light where we worked. The rain's hiss against the skylights and windows had a sound close to wireless interference as the librarian, who had been in service to my patron long enough to resemble the older extremities of their collection, occasionally whistled a half-hearted Satie melody when he wasn't mumbling to himself. That night, sadly, he refrained from entertaining me with his specialist interest; ghost stories peculiar to the city.

At those times I entered some form of trance, lulled

by the subdued rhythm of our work. My thoughts were able to play. The aroma of dust baking under the hot bulb stirred me into satisfying and disorientating considerations. With the librarian whispering somewhere off in the half-light my thoughts turned to the ghosts of the living. I noticed the absence of the library's most dedicated members, particularly the elderly genealogists who regularly frequented the place with an air of reverent patience: had the war seen them all off? I had taken to speculating on the motivations of these lonely, rootless hags and warlocks set adrift, their lives like waves breaking against the rocks of the present. And in a reverie I thought of myself standing on the same fogbound shoreline looking out to sea, on the verge of vanishing. I found that my mind summoned a faint image of the book in which Mr Eyles' letter had been hidden. I daydreamed of the possibility of ghost books; lost or destroyed books returning to their owners. I heard pages fluttering of their own accord like insect wings. Then the sound of the shower outside becoming a downpour roused me, returned me to the library's own pocket of reality. And I thought again, as I increasingly did, of leaving everything behind, of simply disappearing from my life there.

Afterwards, in a snug in The Eagle pub I watched the librarian, a virtual stranger get steadily drunk as I privately sank into my own thoughts about Norfoot. On my long walk home I resolved to visit her as something like infatuation fluttered in my stomach.



### *Mr Eyles Green Notebook*

All myths associated with pacts and bargains tend to suggest that those who have stumbled upon this unfortunate path,

the supposedly damned, cursed or afflicted, are the custodians of experience and knowledge beyond words. Indeed only those who are similarly afflicted can hope to have any affinity: the consolation of exiles. They become as walking wounds, restless, doubtful and open to contagion. More than most, they need to find communion with like-minded others to help bear the burden when the common world has cast them out. They become demons. In others' eyes they are no longer human. That is partly the purpose of our circle: a refuge. I am no expert in these matters. There is no such thing.

We must consolidate the customs that are peculiar to our circle, to banish the workaday world. The taboo on using the telephone must be upheld. We must remind ourselves why we agreed on using written correspondence: to establish and sustain our appreciation of silence and absence. It is vital that we accentuate longing and mystery in our lives. We must use poetic means to reclaim our lives. We must remember what we saw in that far off forest and town.

It is a matter of creating specific conditions in which change may occur in accordance with the imagination. We must integrate into our daily lives the signs that occur to us in our dreams and nightmares. Habitual bonds must be undone and remade according to the games and rituals we find in our dreams. These games must be potent enough to disturb, to penetrate collective as well as individual barriers. We must continually send tremors through the habits of behaviour. We must uproot society's conditioning. If need be we will live by night once again, abstain from all pleasures of the majority and extend our experiments with sleep deprivation. We will learn to live again in another way; a way that inherently defies established customs. I have been in hiding too long yet not without purpose. It is time to open the doors to ancient Night.

One must reach that point where all of the rules change. One must reach that point where one experiences

and understands as in a dream: the revelation of immanence. In a sense, it is not Truth we seek but the delirium one often experiences while searching for it. The point is to find the method whereby one can enter that state at will, to draw upon another kind of fluency or literacy, another way of understanding, to immerse oneself in the moment of interpretive delirium, to lose oneself in the gaze of the world, to live one's life at that point, in the maelstrom of dreaming, riven by unexpected encounters. The method I describe is directed at disturbing the habitual, utilitarian tendencies and expectations that inform how we experience and understand. In a Blakean sense, I must admit that it has always irritated me that so many assume that they are masters of their senses. Of course there is a basic familiarity yet one would not assume mastery over a musical instrument simply because one manages to produce a noise or play a nursery rhyme. No one can expect an effortless grasp of musical structure and performance. So, as far the senses go, an entire repertoire awaits, accessible through methods of delirium and disorientation.