

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Home Thoughts

Tim Parks

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About the Book

Julia has left home. She has gone to Italy. She has left her lover, her job, her flat, the closely-knit group of friends who meant so much to her. Why? And the motley group of ex-pats she finds in Verona, the Oxbridge brigade, the revolutionary Scot, the cool Canadian, the feminist Flossy – why do they find it so impossible to return home, as if their very identities depend somehow on this thousand-mile displacement? Centred around a love story full of twists, turns and revelations, *Home Thoughts* explores a world of lost directions, wavering commitments and misplaced ambitions as Julia's adventurous departure confronts her more mercilessly than ever with the problem of what on earth she is to do with her life.

About the Author

Tim Park's novels include *Tongues of Flame*, which won the Somerset Maugham and Betty Trask Awards, *Loving Roger*, which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, *Cara Massimina* and *Mimi's Ghost*. His non-fiction work includes the bestselling *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education* and *Adultery & Other Diversions*. His ninth novel *Europa* was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize. His most recent novel is the acclaimed, *Destiny*. Tim Parks lives in Italy.

ALSO BY TIM PARKS

Fiction

Loving Roger
Family Planning
Goodness
Shear
Cara Massimina
Tongues of Flame
Mimi's Ghost
Europa
Destiny

Non-Fiction

Italian Neighbours
An Italian Education
Adultery & Other Diversions

FOR ALL THE BRITISH VERONESE
AND, OF COURSE, FOR RITA

Home Thoughts

Tim Parks



*'Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees . . .'*

*Home Thoughts from
Abroad
Robert Browning (1845)*

'Why didn't he go home then?'

*'O' level student of English
Lit. (1971)*

What follows is entirely fictional: no reference to any living person is intended or should be inferred.

Part One

OLD ACQUAINTANCE AND NEW

IF SANDRO WASN'T married, as he had let her know, casually (too casually perhaps? or rather, promisingly casually), then Julia might quite like to marry him. Amongst others. On a mellow October morning she wrote this letter to her ex-flatmate in London.

Dear Diana,

I'm in my room here. It's awful. The furniture looks like it's been carved out of used coffins. The bed is like sleeping in the bottom of a boat, crosswise. Would you believe the street is called Via Disciplina! It's narrow and the buildings are high, so that the sun only manages to slip through my window for a few minutes every day. It slides in like a bright knife and stabs a drab madonna on the wall.

(Julia felt self-conscious writing this first letter to her close friend Diana who worked in the East European Department of the World Service of the BBC and had translated a book of Czech poetry. The sun did not slide in like a blade. It was a great wedge of dust-swirled white light which never quite reached the grim madonna with baby Jesus raising one plump hand in precocious blessing.)

Still, I was determined to find a place in the centre. You go out to the suburbs here and you may as well be in Hemel Hempstead. Really.

So, what's cooking on the social side? Well, there's a rather sexy-looking Italo-Canadian I met at the assistants' get-together party. Name of Sandro. My age, more or less, big soft brown eyes and a really cool transatlantic voice. So he'll be candidate number one. Who knows, I may make motherhood yet before the great axe falls. Keep you posted.

I wonder if I'm going to miss London life. I suppose it's inevitable. So many things are. I do hope it's not all going to be a silly mistake, or that I'll just mope and be lonely. I didn't realize how adventurous I was being till I actually got here and sat down in my room.

Don't forget to make me pay my part of the last phone and electricity bills. My mum can draw a cheque for you on my account.

More soon. Big hug.

JULIA.

PS. See, I didn't mention you-know-who. . . .

Dear Lenny, (she wrote then to you-know-who)

I miss you so much, I really do. If you knew. Can't you change your mind? I've been thinking of you all the time. It's terrifying how clearly I see you. Your carrotty hair, your freckled nose. The way you close one eye in the sunshine. The smell of that ancient tweed jacket. How will I ever forget?

Lenny, it would be so easy if you came out here, a fait accompli. I know I promised not to hark on about it, but couldn't you? Couldn't you just this once take a big plunge, Lenny?

I love you always. You know I do.

Your own JULIA.

Dear Mum, (she wrote in tiny print on a postcard)

I've found a nice little room here and am very cosily settled in. The teaching starts Monday, but for the moment I'm enjoying just soaking it all up. Diana'll probably be asking you for a cheque for some bills. Don't worry I'll pay you back. Give my love to Mike when you see him. Love. JULIA. PS. Am wearing the sweater. Thanks a mil. J.



Alan explained that he had invited one of the new lettori to dinner. Or rather a lettrice. 'She seemed very lonely.'

Elaine rolled blue eyes. Was it possible that with both the kids, not to mention HER, Alan was still inviting people to dinner?

'I'll cook,' Alan said, and apparently it was.

Alan had a big, square, patriarchal face with magnificently thick eyebrows and hair that bristled up in a stiff virile brush. His wife was small and slim.

Julia came and talked too loudly and too long all evening. She heard herself talking too long and too loudly. She made mental notes and criticized herself, but she didn't stop. She had come to Italy, she was saying, because she had been with a man who liked being with her, yes, but was too obsessed with his adolescent fantasies of nymphets and vamps to guarantee her any happiness or security, though he was of course now begging her to come back; because men always wanted to have their cake and gobble up every last crumb of it too.

'Good for you,' said Flossy, who was likewise well-built. She spoke through a thick cold and had tissues

tucked under her sleeve.

Elaine, whose body, despite two pregnancies, conformed exactly to the unhappy Lenny's supposed fantasies, smiled slyly at Alan over the bald head of a baby she was holding.

Alan said: 'Couldn't you just leave him and stay on in London?'

To which Julia came back sharply that Alan obviously didn't understand women in love.

Elaine's smile, framed in hennaed curls, took on a told-you-so schoolgirl's dimpling. Julia didn't know that in his time Alan had written three plays for the radio, two of which had been broadcast, and all of them about women in love and based on his ex-girlfriend who had tried to kill him when he left her.

'That may be' - Alan had the competitor's weakness of picking up any glove of challenge that landed at his feet (even if perhaps it had been dropped there by accident) - 'but London is a big place, I mean. . . .'

'Right, but you try finding a place to live. Leave your flat in London and you may as well go to Timbuktu. You know they've started advertising houses in Scotland in the *Standard* right next to the local flats-to-let section. The desperation factor. Bungalow in Renfrewshire, same price as a year's rent in Kensington.

'Not to mention finding a reasonable job,' Julia went on (had she taken a breath? It seemed not). Alan and Elaine, who owned a one-bedroom flat in Hampstead which they rented out through an agency on company let, couldn't have got a word in edgeways

had they wanted to. And all three listeners now had the impression that Julia had been living and perhaps even working with her man of the adolescent fantasies, and had thus had to give up everything to get away and punish him. But this was not the case: because Lenny lived with his wife and two children in a three-bedroom so-called luxury flat the Fortis Green side of East Finchley High Road.

‘A woman’ – who but Julia? – ‘okay university degree’ – two-one from Bristol – ‘two languages, dynamic as any man, eager, efficient, etc; what happens? You go to the interview, if they’re interviewing women at all, and the first thing they ask is when you plan to have children. You say you’re not planning them, the last thing you want is kids, you’re not even married, and they don’t believe you, they. . . .’

Rightly so, thought Alan.

Rightly so, part of Julia was admitting as she got up steam.

Elaine was complacently tracing out the line of tiny Margaret’s sticky-out ears.

Only Flossy was in wholehearted agreement and would have told her own lifestory here had Julia allowed herself to be interrupted, had she herself not been stifling another sneeze.

‘They even make snide remarks about not having to be married to be pregnant, Christ, there should be some drug to bring on menopause early and a certificate to go with it: “We hereby guarantee that Julia Helen Delaforce, although capable of giving men pleasure in all the normal and many abnormal ways,

is henceforth to be considered one hundred percent infertile, in that. . . .”

They sat round a painted wooden table in the kitchen chaos the Bexleys always lived in. Alan accepted the now broader told-you-so smile on his wife’s face, though it was rather annoying how she radiated this silly, happy girl’s complacency, as if everything that happened and got said was a trick she’d won at his expense. His own opinions on feminism, which had to do with its being a false consciousness and a wilful determination to feel aggrieved (though he wouldn’t deny that life could be pretty unfair to the fairer sex) were too complicated to bear dinner-time explanation to two such fiery souls as Julia and his younger sister Flossy. He mixed wine and Ferrarelle.

Towards eleven-thirty Julia said, as if at last throwing the conversation open to all:

‘So what becomes of the long-term ex-pat?’

One hand balancing Margaret to burp on his shoulder, Alan was at that moment twiddling urgently through the short-wave dial of an ancient Grundig on the window sill; until, amidst science-fiction whistles and bursts of static, a voice broke into this untidy Italian kitchen and with a curious sing-song formality announced: ‘Oldham nil, Crystal Palace (pause) nil.’

‘Oh shit,’ said Flossy, sneezing into her handkerchief, ‘we’ve missed the first division.’

Elaine asked Julia if she could cook, because next weekend they were going to have an apple-crumble competition. Another friend had brought some all-spice back from England. Alan was an ace apple-

crumble man. Elaine rather liked Julia, though she couldn't have said why, perhaps because she was the only other person she had met in Italy who smoked roll-ups.

Julia said truthfully she couldn't cook to save her life. Walking home along the narrow Via Disciplina it occurred to her that she hadn't remembered to ask about Sandro. Because she was fed up to the back teeth with married men, and somehow precisely the way he'd told her like that had had her suspecting the contrary.

Every time Julia left company she always experienced a vague sense of shame, which was stronger or weaker in relation to the amount of alcohol she had drunk. And this was another thing she was fed up with. Unless, it came to her, finding herself mirrored a moment in the bright black panes of her bedroom, unless what she was really fed up with deep down, beneath all the other failures and disappointments, was simply herself. It was not, to be precise, her body that distressed her, though God knows she'd been short-changed there. No, she was quite simply sick to death with the feeling, the consciousness, the every waking day moment of Julia Helen Delaforce.

So of course it was herself she had wanted to leave in leaving England.

In which case she'd got off to a bad start spending the whole evening griping. (Lenny was a Palace man. Diana cooked apple crumbles when she invited her BBC friends.)

Elaine and Alan had two beautiful young children.

At 3 a.m., having calmed down Robert after one of his nightly squalls, Alan stopped a moment in the sitting-room to scribble:

'If Bishop Tutu is a prisoner of hope, then I am a prisoner of happiness.

Life lacks intensity. Groans under the routine.

Yet this is domestic bliss, is it not? The happy home.

I have suffered the misfortune of being given everything on a plate.

Love, family, job. A padded cell.

What on earth to do?

I feel like someone in a Tchekov story, dreaming impossible Moscows.'

Not feeling especially sleepy, he picked up *Corriere della Sera* and re-read the Juventus-Verona day-before coverage. Was nobody going to catch Juventus? If only Verona had kept Fanna. Reading, chewing a knuckle, he felt vaguely guilty and returned to his notebook. He stood over it. He put pencil against paper and waited. But the truth was that Alan Bexley felt oddly incapable of writing these days. Perhaps because it was seven years since his ex-girlfriend had tried to kill him.



Sandro was ten minutes late for a lesson he would leave five minutes early. Fifty students faced him. He climbed onto the dais and grinned.

'Right then,' he said, 'gerund uses with prepositions,' and he gave out a page number in Thomson and Martinet. (There was no other word but

gorgeous for the girl in the third row. Let's hope she's one of the eager, questions-after-lessons kind.)

Before lunch he knocked discreetly at the notorious Professoressa Bertelli's door. The professoressa was an ill-kept paranoid woman in her late fifties.

Sandro, whose face was usually grins and radiant self-satisfaction, found a worried, diligent tone to ask if she had any ideas how he might improve his techniques and rapport with the students. He felt he wasn't getting the best out of them, nor they from him.

A few minutes later Professoressa Bertelli invited Sandro to lunch and over tortellini followed by veal chops (because they stayed, as residents will, with the tourist menu) she told him in a hushed voice about the conspiracy there was against her in the department and this disturbing business of them putting powder in her eyes. If he knew of a faith-healer. . . . But the mafia always got there first. The church that is.

Sandro, who had been forewarned, was understanding, his conversation banal and soothing. He said that having to work with others at this kind of intellectual level could prove very trying. There were pressures and responsibilities and questions of personal integrity which naturally created areas of conflict.

'The Vatican,' Professoressa Bertelli said belligerently, and then she said that Professor Errico was a mean, corrupt bastard, if he would excuse her language, and a slacker into the bargain.

Accepting a splash of grappa and feeling his way more carefully than ever, Sandro remarked that the only shame was that the job wasn't offered on a permanent contract, because then one could give just that little bit more. There would be that feeling of total commitment.

And he said he was happy though that they had got to know each other. The thing was to nip misunderstandings in the bud.

Professoressa Bertelli was a big old woman with a heavily lined grim face where watery eyes swam suspiciously at the bottom of deep sockets. When she smiled, though – and this was rare – she would have a perfectly wholesome, even maternal expression, despite the decades of spinsterhood and deepening paranoia. She smiled now.

'Of course, we do very occasionally give someone a permanent research post,' she said, telling Sandro what he already knew, 'if all three professors are convinced that we have an exceptional candidate on our hands.'

With the meal finished, her mouth chewed slackly on nothing. She picked up a toothpick.

'Someone who can make a real contribution to the department.'

While she spoke, Sandro gave her the flattery of his soft brown eyes. Which obliged him to watch her. She powdered heavily and wore expensive frames. Her nose was a trifle shapeless, puffy, the mouth wide, even a little gross now as she stretched the lips to stab at a molar. But her shoulders were broad and well made and the breasts surprisingly high on her

chest. What would it be like to go to bed with someone so old? Perverse, but interesting. The few times he'd seen older women naked in films, he had always been intrigued by the startling youthfulness of their bodies against the wrinkling age of faces and hands. Unless it was just the actresses they used of course, or they were playing around with the photography.

'I'll pay,' he said.

'No, no, God forbid,' she smiled.

'Really, I've been taking up so much of your time, Professoressa Bertelli.'

'Call me Roberta.'

'I think I really ought to. . . .'

'No, I insist.'

'But I insist.'

Later and no poorer he stood on the Roman Bridge in dazzling autumn sunshine. The air was clear glass. The surrounding scene would have been a 3D postcard but for the traffic: cream and ochre palazzi climbing above the Roman Theatre to Castel San Pietro on his left, the bell-towers and fancy battlements of the city to his right, with the river taking a great sweep over white shingle between. One problem, Sandro thought, assessing his new job, would be how to spend one's free time. Seeing as there was so much of it. And he decided to attend an evening course he had seen advertised at the university which introduced you to the world's greatest philosophers.

Nov 10

Beeb, Shepherd's Bush

Dear Julia,

Thank heaven there's the BBC address so at least we can write. I miss you too. I was over at Diana's with the production crew on Sunday and everybody was asking after you. Needless to say we all think you've been a bit crazy going off so suddenly, leaving a good job, not to mention the nice situation with Diana - and in Kensington too. I know I must seem rather a blind alley in emotional terms, but maybe the problem is the way you think relationships should have so much direction and finality about them. You're so dramatic. You never want to swim with the tide. It always has to be Shangri-la rather than Shepherd's Bush. I mean, I don't want to sound mercenary, but you do realize that coming over to Italy for me would mean turning down £20,000 a year (another well-deserved raise last week) not to mention abandoning a wife, two children and five years of mortgage payments. Whereas if you came back we could see each other as often as you like, within the limits of the decent and reasonable (which you must admit aren't too awfully limiting). In fact, at Diana's we all agreed to write you letters asking you to come back, so you'll be getting a lot of post soon. Everybody loves you, even if you always insisted on thinking otherwise, and the school'd be bound to find a way to take you on again, with your experience. So think it over.

What else? Diana's got yet another new boyfriend. Stuart. Doubtless she told you. She does seem to have something of a fixation for these banking/insurance types (the dreaded Ronnie!), which is odd considering her background and that avantgarde guff she translates. Awfully argumentative bloke. He took us all on (me, Sally, Rob, Barry and Kat), saying the media should be run on

market principles and from what he'd heard from Diana the Beeb could reduce its labour costs by 30% without the public ever noticing. Can you imagine translating Czech poetry on market principles? But everybody was too kind to say it. Anyway, he's the first bloke I ever met who not only admitted to voting Thatcher last time, but said he would next too. What hope the nation!

Diana lapped it up with that big, ever-hopeful ever-happy beam she always has; sometimes I think she finds these guys just to annoy us. But then the food is always so scrumptious and she must be the only person in London on less than fifty grand who has a rooftop terrace. (It was warm enough to have at least our aperitivos (!) outside and Barry said if he had a terrace like that he'd never dream of going to Italy – yes, Barry and Kat are together again – take note.)

Well, it's 11 and I guess I'd better be getting a move-on. We've got a tough schedule today. The old pre-Christmas interview-the-tramps crap. We're supposed to follow a couple of old winos around for a month and see how mean everybody is to them. Probably turn into a pub crawl. Look, give me your phone number as soon as you've got one and I'll give you a bell. Licensing fees are up so a couple of calls isn't going to break the bank. And do come back Julia. You're such a London person, I can't really imagine you surviving anywhere else. I know you think I'm a casual bastard, and I am. But life'll show you I'm right in the end. Plunge-taking is not what it's about. Getting by more like.

I love you too, Julia. I really do. Green eyes.

LENNY.

PS. I forgot to mention the best bit: Sally and this Stuart had a really (but really) wild argument at the Grenadier when he said he couldn't give a damn if Sadler's Wells closed (you must have heard about that).

She started shouting at him and walked out and Barry and Kat had to run and get her back. You see what you're missing! Love again. L.



November 30th

Via Disciplina

Dear Diana,

Everybody's written telling me to come back but you! (Even Barry! I didn't know he could write!). Yet funnily enough you're the only person I can feel bothered to write to myself. Anyway, as far as coming back's concerned - no way! The truth is, I think I've finally found the good life here. The job is outrageously easy. 8 hours straightforward language teaching and 4 hours 'ricevimento' when you're supposed to deal with your students' problems, only they hardly ever turn up, so you just end up chatting to whoever's around. For which I get the magnificent sum of one million, two hundred thousand lire a month (I'm a millionaire as of yesterday!). If your maths aren't up to it, it all works out about a hundred quid plus a week, which is really okay here, so long as you don't have expensive tastes - and when did I have time to develop those at Christ Church?

The university situation is so classically 'Italian' you wouldn't believe it. There are three professors in the faculty: one's just plain mad - a woman around sixtyish who's convinced everybody's stealing her books and putting powder in her eyes and beaming ultrasonic whatevers at her desk (honestly!). She should be certified, not teaching. Then there's Scudellotti, an effeminate ditherer, fiftyish, who just goes on and on and on in a sing-song appalling English that creases you up if you make the mistake of thinking about it; his line is that it's impossible to get anything done because the other

professor, Errico, will never agree with him and is only in the job for the money and doesn't love literature like he does, etc. etc. Errico's a gnome of a man who commutes from Milan and is always asking you to do translations for some agency he has; a bit of a shark, very Latin, and with a roving eye too, but not unpleasant. So the upshot is, Errico and Scudellotti are always trying to enlist Bertelli's, that's the woman's, help so as to get a majority decision over the other, only she's so out of her mind she thinks they're really conspiring against her. I could go on but it would take forever to tell everything. Makes Christ Church politics seem pretty tame anyway. Only somehow it meant more there. This feels more like a soap opera, as if you could never really be a part of it. As if it wasn't really happening even. Perhaps because it's not my country. (I do hope there are advantages to not being able to take things seriously. Everybody was always saying I took things too much to heart.)

Apart from which I've found a couple of friends. There's a girl called Flossy, younger than me, who teaches a few hours at the Oxford School and is quite a character. She used to be a member of Militant Tendency and spent almost a year with the Greenham women before coming out here. She's living with her brother and his wife and kids at the moment, only it seems the brother doesn't appreciate her that much (he's a really pompous arsehole, the 'you-just-need-a-man-(like me)' type, thinks he's a writer apparently - yawn - a normal ex-pat delusion). Anyway, we agreed we'd live together as soon as we can find a place big enough. My only worry is that she may be a bit too anti-men and turn them off coming to visit and so on, which is rather throwing out the baby with the bathwater, if you see what I mean (though who would deny that the bathwater is usually tepid and scummy and generally fit to be thrown out?).

So what do I do with all this time on my hands? Well, I spend a lot of mornings just mooching around the streets here. There are thousands of tiny cobbled back-alleys and always something new to look at, some shop tucked away somewhere, some curious piece of architecture. Would you believe there's a hunchback goes round sharpening knives on a moped with a kind of rickety counter attached and a revolving whetstone geared up to the motor? Good for a horror film. Then I got myself a canary for company, everybody has them, and hung him in a cage by the window. I called him Napoleon because of the way he puffs out his chest. Maybe it was a mistake though because his whistling's driving me bananas, and of course I'll have to find somebody to look after him if I go away. I suppose, to be honest, I do feel a bit spare sometimes, but it's bound to take a while to settle in. At least it's a clean start, which was the intention. And no tube!!!

Oh, my tennis racket. Will you check if it's still behind the sideboard, and if it is, can you see if there's some safe way of posting it. I'll need exercise in spring to prepare for the beaches! And one thing, Diana, for when you do write. Even if he does come over, please don't mention L. I really want to make it a clean break. I don't want to hear of him or from him ever again. (I'm working on this Sandro.)

Love - J.

PS. There seems no point in making you envy my weather every time I write. Take it as given.



December 4th

Kilburn

Dear Sissy,