

[Letter from London: Almshouses, Amis and Assange](#)

BY [PETER BACH](#)



Old book shop along the Wye River. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

I was thinking generally about shelter and more specifically about the safe house for battered women in New York's Lower East Side that I wrote about in 1986. This was a small contribution for a book edited by Roland Hagenberg and Judy Cantor. Just being able to speak to the women required a high degree of trust on their part, and it was heartbreaking to see some expressing gratitude for refuge granted to them for something that shouldn't have happened in the first place, and to see one person burst into tears was painful indeed. I remember feeling utterly inadequate, thoroughly out of place, not just as a man. This was despite the fact I had said I had five sisters, which for some reason had gone down well. But who among us can honestly say they will never need shelter in their lives? Just as safe harbours cannot conceal the greater wounds of society, a roof over one's head can mean everything to someone. The charity Shelter tells us that in London last year as many as 1 in 58 people were homeless.

In this light, I have just discovered that people residing in almshouses actually live longer than wealthier people elsewhere. That all the wealth in the world cannot buy what a simple act of collective human kindness can is heavy and illuminating. In the States, 'poor houses' were traditionally where the epileptic, mentally ill, blind, deaf, dumb, tuberculous, were dumped. From abandoned children to petty criminals, they were tough places. I don't know their equivalents today but over here it seems the almshouses, at least, are packed to the gunwales, straining to cope, but doing well with it. Even today's more formal vetting processes continue to see these charitably founded institutions, offering long-term food and lodgings for people of low economic status, doing well. Incredible to think the first ones were established here as long ago as the 10th century. That is over 1000 years ago. This latest information on living longer comes from data gathered over a period of 100 years. Living in an almshouse, according to the Almshouse Longevity Study by the City University of London, may add as much as two and a half years to one's life. While I have been an admirer of London's for over thirty years, I have never quite grasped how successful these often lovingly built buildings with quaint sometimes ornamental architecture were. I knew residents in one group of almshouses on the south bank of the River Thames pretty well once, very close to where I am now, in fact, whose antics with fireworks I have reported here before. Their place was set up in 1613 and offers to this day free specialist palliative and end of life care — sometimes for decades 'in advance'. The particular residents I knew, all men, are gone now, sadly, but this place which they all proudly called

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home — beneath the shadow of a tall power station and not so far from a famous old naval college — is burgeoning still. There are also a number of matching almshouses for single women over 60 years old in the area — women in financial and social need but able to live independently. One of the best performing almshouses in the entire country — this takes men and women, sometimes couples, and was established in 1695 — is only a few blocks away. I remember it being deliberately insulated during the pandemic. A third such place in the area has the words 'LIVE AND LET LIVE' quoted both affirmatively and Bond-like above its main arched doorway. And just north of the river, no distance at all, is the freshly revived tradition by the Richard Smith charity for Bread of donating bread to almshouse residents in their area. And still in the face of a public housing crisis there are nowhere near enough of such places.

On the other end of the age spectrum, the young remain alive and kicking in the capital. Not just the teenager famously known as Mizzy who entered a family home without asking on May 15 in order to fulfil a social media prank. This was in breach of a court order from the day before. The residents of the property were very frightened, and he was arrested again, less than 48 hours after being fined for breaching the court order, for posting images of himself riding the roof of a single-decker bus, and gliding through a supermarket on an electric bike. He has now been accused of endangering safety after stepping into a train driver's cab and playing with the controls and safety equipment. It can be safely said Mizzy is having one hell of a ride. Less contentiously, meanwhile, my New Yorker friend's six year old here in London has just given his father notice that he fully intends to start travelling by the age of fifteen and wanted to reassure him of visits home again for five weeks each year. As it happens, a number of children continue leave London with their families anyway. Some London schools as a result are straining to keep open as pupil numbers continue to dip, rents and house prices continue to rise, along with a crippling cost of living, all of which conspire to push young families out. I was thinking about all this sitting on a wooden public bench whose white and purple tulips either side a woman had just watered, saying this was her mother's bench. With the sun beating down, I said I hoped she didn't mind me using the bench. 'No, she'd like that,' she said. 'She liked everybody.' After the daughter left, I looked for a small inscription, or something, and found one: 'Remember I'm a part of you, and you're a part of me,' it said.

Martin Amis was living in Brooklyn when he left us for that great publishing house in the sky but many believe his best characters were from London. It was also strange he wrote on most things yet no one heard a peep on his illness. Perhaps he had written enough in 'Inside Story' after peering for so long into the hospitalised eyes of close friend Christopher Hitchens, who also died of oesophageal cancer. ('I don't have a body, I am a body,' wrote Hitchens in 'Mortality'.) Despite the grim ending, Amis was what happens when a restless force of nature is given water. For most of his life, he was talented and spoiled in equal measure, also incredibly funny. ('The humourless as a bunch don't just not know what's funny, they don't know what's serious,' he once wrote.) I held no literary aspirations reading him but did want to know what it was like having a father who enjoyed alcohol and conversation and didn't die on you. I wanted to know what it was like watching all those gifted writers and publishers traipse up and down the garden paths of your childhood, some reportedly throwing up in the bushes. I wanted to know what it was like having a stepmother slip you a copy of Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' and point you in the direction of a Brighton crammer and Oxford. Martin Amis was ten years older than me and I also wanted to know what it was like being ten years older than me. I wanted to know what it meant having Montreal-born Chicago-raised Saul Bellow as your friend and mentor. I wanted to know what he thought of 9/11, and though I didn't always agree with him on this, just as his portrayal of women can struggle now with the times at times, I never believed you had to be of exactly the same mind as someone to enjoy their work. After a preview screening of a film I once made, I wrote to a senior figure in the publishing world — I had spotted her in the audience — wanting her advice on making a film about someone writing a novel. I have mentioned this before but only now do I realise it was Martin Amis I wanted to film. (I never heard back.)

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Talking of Amis and film, the brand new adaptation of his novel 'The Zone of Interest' directed by Jonathan Glazer has just been awarded the Grand Prix at Cannes and has already sold into lots of major international territories, though one slightly painful footnote is that our local bookshop here did not have a single copy of his work, and that was not because his books had all sold out.

The artist has been away for a few days, visiting her parents in the English countryside, where my father-in-law was singing in a concert. On the phone her conversation was suffused with nature. I was telling her I had been listening out of curiosity to 81-year-old Paul Simon's new album and how he had said he was living in Texas because he liked the sound of silence. (I didn't mention my old friend the late poet Jock Scott who famously went up to Simon in London once and said, 'Hello darkness, my old friend.') Though the album consists of seven so-called self-written psalms, Simon is too smart to proselytise. 'It seems to me/We're all walking down the same road/To wherever it ends/The pity is/The damage that's done/Leaves so little time for amends,' he sings. My father-in-law's concert included French composer Charles Gounod's first major work 'The St. Cecilia Mass' — by coincidence, Gounod in 1870 lived only a few blocks away from here. Ever since I have known my father-in-law, he has been in an orchestra, choir, quartet, quintet, a larger wind group of about fifteen — either singing or playing his beloved bassoon. I like to think we have a good relationship. As a constitutional monarchist he was disappointed with my recent piece on the new king but remained measured and gracious in his criticism. When the artist returned to London from what she said was an incredible concert, our son had just returned from a gig in Sheffield. He was presently recording upstairs with our daughter. More recently, his band has just completed an open-air festival in London and they travel to Scotland next week. Music, you could say, underpinned much of the week — music and those inevitable requests for payment that hit us all.

Finally, I watched 'Ithaka', the new documentary by Australian filmmaker Ben Lawrence about fellow Australian Julian Assange. It is a pretty sobering account of the indefatigable efforts made by Assange's deeply philosophical and genuinely disarming father John Shipton and Assange's extraordinarily committed wife/lawyer Stella Assange. It should go without saying that Assange is unwell. He needs watering, like those white and purple tulips. His continued presence in a prison only a mile or so away leaves many people feeling uncomfortable. Throughout the film, Assange's family try so hard to ensure he is not extradited to the United States, that he is freed altogether. All is not lost, however, whatever people think. Assange's Australian supporters have claimed in the past few days for example that they are on the 'cusp of success', in part due to the fresh effort being made by Australian PM Anthony Albanese. 'I've made it very clear to the US administration and also to the UK administration of the Australian government's view, and I appreciate the fact that that is now a bipartisan view — that enough is enough,' said Albanese. Turnarounds do happen. Nigel Farage has just admitted Brexit has failed. Mercenary Yevgen Prigozhin of the Wagner Group says the same about Russia's campaign in Ukraine: 'The special military operation was done for the purpose of denazification but we ended up legitimising Ukraine. We've made Ukraine into a nation known all over the world. As for demilitarisation, fuck knows how, but we've militarised Ukraine!' he said last week — to a since fired pro-war Telega Online journalist called Konstantin Dolgov. Still thinking about Assange, I watched a tiny jet trail cross the sky in the direction of the prison. I was listening to 'Life During Wartime' by Talking Heads:

'Burned all my notebooks, what good are notebooks?

The won't help me survive

My chest is aching, burns like a furnace

The burning keeps me alive'.

Peter Bach lives in London.

