

## Letters

By Christina Murphy

I have been writing letters to myself to lessen the boredom. Doing my job, returning to my apartment every night for two Scotches and takeout Chinese or Mexican food is just not cutting it.

I dislike my job, tracking sales figure on software products. Numbers and numbers bouncing around on my computer screen and landing on graphs, charts, spreadsheets, or anything else I can conjure to show how well or how poorly sales are going. I'm encouraged by my boss to tweak the numbers on occasion and *put the best foot forward*, as he likes to say. *It's not lying*, he says, *just knowing what to say and what not to*. I can't argue with that, so I do it.

I've been at this company for three years and have no friends here. I go to lunch with Bill every now and then. He's a chubby guy who likes to eat big lunches, and his favorite spot is a burger joint with an assembly line of what Bill calls *goodies* for making your own burgers.

He can really pile those concoctions on. Most of them make me queasy to look at. Today he has anchovies on guacamole positioned over four slices of pepper jack cheese, jalapenos, and a big wad of mayonnaise.

"How can you put anchovies and guacamole together?" I ask him.

"Dunno," he says. "I just like it."

Which is the perfect answer, I guess, for everything from burger toppings to being a serial killer.

I never feel good after I eat lunch with Bill, and tonight is especially bad. Not even a third Scotch helps cut the grumblings in my stomach and the acidic taste in my mouth. I've got the TV on, and I'm thinking about a Netflix, but nothing appeals to me. Except writing my letters.

*Dear John*, I begin, and then I have to laugh because it sounds like I am breaking up with myself. But that is my name. My parents must have spent a lot of time coming up with that name, the most common of all.

I've got my pen poised now over the paper, and I can't think of much to say except that I am truly, deeply bored. *And I feel guilty about that*, I write. *I know there are thousands of people out there paralyzed or dying of some awful disease who would give anything to be in my shoes—able to walk, drink Scotch, even write this letter. I know that's all true, and I feel bad about it, but it doesn't change anything. Fact is I can't change places with those people. I can't even change places with me.*

I write for a long time, switching on the lights when the room goes dim with twilight, thinking about how I got to this place in my life and what I could have done differently. Maybe I should change jobs. A great idea but not feasible. First, it takes energy I don't have to make a change, and second, I have no guarantee that another job would be any better than this one. *Are you sure?* I write. *As sure as I can be,* I answer. Which is true. How sure can you be of anything?

I've dozed off, and when I wake up, the news is on TV, so I know it is around 11:00. I drag myself to the bathroom, brush my teeth, feel my stomach still grumbling, and swear that I will never eat lunch with Bill again. When I fall asleep, I'm still troubled by how pointless it all seems, how unendingly similar and meaningless. I'm thinking about that just as my stomach convulses and a puddle of acid makes its way into my throat.

In the morning, I find my letter. I fold it up and put it in an envelope. I address the envelope to me, but I don't put a stamp on it. What's the point? Save the money. I put the envelope neatly into a manila folder and leave for work.

"It's going to be a good day," I tell myself. "And tonight I will write another letter."

The day drags, just drags. I can't believe that time can pass this slowly. Don, with the weird laugh, is really amused with himself today as his laugh—his shriek, actually—is piercing the air at various intervals unrelated to anything I can see going on. It's the kind of laugh that just cuts right through me, and I resent his presence and his annoying sense that everything is funny. If he wasn't such a jerk, I'd like to slug him, but he would probably think that was funny, too.

When I get home, I have the usual mail of advertisements and bills and one letter addressed to me. I look closely, and it is my handwriting. *What?* I'm thinking.

I open the envelope. Inside is the letter I wrote, with this notation on the bottom: "*Dear John, I have read your letter, and I sympathize with you. Life is difficult to bear, and even more so if you know what's going on. So of course you're depressed. It's only natural.*"

The word *natural* is underlined, and I stare at that. *Difficult to bear* and *Natural to be depressed*. This is the first hint of understanding I have had in years, and I read the note again, taking it all in.

Then I want to know where this letter came from. I did not mail it. I know that. Yet here it is—my letter and addressed to me in my handwriting.

*God,* I'm thinking. *Maybe I was so hung over and sleepy I didn't realize I mailed this letter.*

"That can't be," I say out loud. "I didn't put a stamp on it."

I check to be sure there is a stamp on it, and there is. "And how did it get here so fast, huh?"

I don't know who I'm talking to, but I know that even if I mailed this letter this morning, it would not have gotten here by this afternoon.

I'm confused now and angry. I pour a Scotch and sit down to write another letter. That's all I know to do.

*Dear John, Is it natural to be depressed when life is not all you had hoped it would be? You know, we are supposed to make lemonade from lemons, or put on a happy face and be grateful for what we have. You know that, don't you?*

And then I stop. I've said all I want to, especially as I don't know who I'm writing to.

I'm drinking my Scotch and thinking.

*Maybe someone broke in here and found my letter.*

*That makes no sense. Nothing is missing, and nothing has been disturbed. Who would break into your apartment and spend time looking for a letter? Who? And who would put a stamp on it and mail it to you?*

*I don't know. But somebody must have. I didn't do it.*

*Are you sure?*

*Of course I am.*

*But aren't you the one who says you can't be sure of anything in life?*

*Yes, but this is different.*

*Sure it is. Only because you want to make it that way.*

I can't figure this out, but I do know I am not going to put this letter I wrote in my folder. I'm going to take it with me to work, and it is never going to leave my sight.

*What a great plan.*

*Yes. A great plan.*

I sip my Scotch and toast myself. I have two containers of takeout food on the counter—teriyaki chicken and fried rice. Just the thought of eating makes me sick, so I put everything in the garbage disposal and pour myself another drink.

I wake up in front of the TV again, only this time it is later in the night as an old black and white movie is on. I am almost woozy with fatigue. I look at the clock and it's just after 6:00. I'm stunned as I have less than forty minutes to get ready for work. I'm racing around, then out the door, when I remember the letter. I go back to my apartment, grab the letter, and put it in my pocket.

At my desk, I double check that the letter is still there, and smile to myself when I find it safely tucked away. *No one can take this from me now*, I say to myself.

The day is as tedious as they come. There's Bill wanting to go to lunch, and Don laughing, and all the blur of numbers I am trying to make sense of on my computer screen. And time dragging on in the piercing fluorescent light that gives a false sense of daylight to this office.

I'm in agony when 5:00 finally comes. I feel like someone drowning, going under. I know that feeling well. It happened to me once in a swimming pool when I was a child. A big kid jumped off the diving board and landed on me just as I was coming up for air, and his weight dragged me down. I was fighting, struggling, clawing to get free, and feeling the ache in my lungs as I was running out of air. I could see the surface but I couldn't get there until finally I kicked free of him and burst out of the water, gasping, sucking in air, and crying. It's not like anyone cared or gave much a damn. No one came over to help me, and the big kid just got out of the pool and on the diving board again. But I knew I had almost died, almost blacked out on the bottom of the pool and drowned. And I hated that big kid and everyone there who didn't give a damn if I died.

I'm pretty nervous about opening my mail box when I get home, but I do, and there's nothing there except a catalogue.

I am relieved. No letter addressed to me.

I put my briefcase on the table, and there it is. A letter.

I check my pocket and my letter is gone. "This can't be!" I'm shouting.

I rip the letter open. *Dear Jon*, it begins.

"Jon?" I say. "I don't spell my name like that!"

*Dear Jon, This is not a time to think of the past. You are cutting your nose off, and three things happen when you cut your nose off. One, nobody cares. Two, it hurts. And three, it doesn't grow back. Think about it. I know what I'm talking about.*

I am goddamned mad by now. I begin writing: *What is this with Jon? If you know so much, you know my name is John. And where did you put my letter from last night? I had it in my pocket. Where is it now, and how did you get it?*

*What do I do now?* I'm thinking. *I have no safe place to put this letter.*

I think and think, and then I decide to just leave it here. Right on the table. Whoever finds it is welcome to it. Let that bastard who thinks I'm Jon have it. I'm ready for him."

It's a satisfying night. I eat cheese enchiladas and watch my Netflix movie. I don't write a letter, and I go to bed early. I have odd dreams of riding horses in the desert, but I wake up rested and determined to win this game.

All through work, I'm rather light-hearted. I did not write a letter, so there is no letter to respond to. As simple as that. Maybe that will put an end to everything.

It doesn't take long for my mood to change. There it is when I get home. Another letter. My handwriting.

*Dear Jo,*

I'm so angry I can barely see. "Jo! What the hell is this? You're taking everything away from me!"

*Dear Jo, Why don't we meet? I'd like to see you. A letter can only say so much. What do you think? Do you like the idea? Love, John.*

This is more than I can stand. I rip the letter up and collapse into my chair. I'm breathing hard, trying to calm down, but it's only getting worse. Now I have a raging headache, and I'm aware my fists are clenched, even though there is no one to fight with.

Gradually I calm down enough to write. *All right. You win. Let's meet.*

I put the letter in an envelope, stamp it, address it to myself, and take it to the mailbox on the corner.

"Come and get me, you bastard," I say as I drop the letter in the slot.

*This is war, I'm thinking to myself all day at work. War. Plain and simple.*

I leave the office faster than I ever have and walk home from the subway at a furious pace.

"Ah ha!" No letter in my mailbox. I check all over my apartment. No letter.

"Well, that's that," I say. "I win."

There's a knock on the door. I open it cautiously. It's my neighbor from two doors down.

"I found this in the hallway," he says, handing me a letter.

It's addressed to me, in my handwriting, and across the left corner it's stamped *Return to Sender*.

"Thank you," I say to my neighbor as I shut the door.

I open the letter. It's the one I mailed this morning. Beneath what I wrote are the words: *Dear Jon, I'm at the bar two streets over—Duffy's. You'll recognize me. I'll be wearing a green dress and white hat. Love, Jo.*

My hands are shaking. "I'm not Jon, and I don't know who the hell you are, Jo!"

I'm out the door in a matter of seconds and headed to Duffy's. I walk in, look around, spot someone in a corner booth. I see a white hat, a flash of green, and then a large cloud of cigarette smoke. I'm trying to focus in, figure out who this is, but the smoke obscures everything. Then the smoke clears a bit, and I can see a face and someone waving at me. I walk over.

"There's a letter in your pocket," she says. "It's for me."

"I don't have a letter."

"Look in your pocket."

I reach inside my coat pocket and I find it. It has *For J.* written on the envelope. I'm stunned.

"I'm not giving it to you until you tell me who you are."

"Give it to me!" she says.

"Who are you? What the hell is this all about?"

She takes a pen from her purse and writes on a cocktail napkin. *Give me the letter. You don't know who you're dealing with.*

"I'm not giving you the letter!" I shout.

She stares at me so intensely that it is almost blinding. "All right," she says. "I did warn you, J."

She takes the cocktail napkin and begins ripping it apart.

At first, the sensation moves slowly through my body, much like a warm buzz beginning after a second or third beer. But then the feeling is uncomfortable, and quickly I feel like I can't breathe. She tears another strip of the napkin, and I see my hand disintegrate. It explodes into a powder that lands on the table. I look at the space where my hand once was, and there is only a black hole. I lift my arm and look into the hole. It's empty—no blood, no tissue, no nothing. Just a pure empty space that looks like it goes on forever.

"You shouldn't have written to me," she says. "Wasn't it obvious? You were losing this battle, *John, Jon, Jo, J.* Fading away, losing ground, and now you are gone."

She tears the final strip of the napkin, and my other hand explodes.

"*Stop. Stop it!*" I scream.

"You won't be writing any more letters now, will you? Not without any hands."

She stands up and begins to walk away. I try to follow her, but I can't move.

"Come back!" I scream. "Don't leave me like this!"

She walks toward me. "There is one more thing I forgot," she says. She puts a letter in my pocket.

"Read this when you get a chance. Then you'll know."

She kisses me on the cheek. "Poor fellow," she says. "That will never happen, will it?"

She holds the pieces of the cocktail napkin in her hand and throws them in my face.

I feel the pain instantly, as if my face is on fire. Then my eyes explode.

"Good luck reading that letter I gave you," she says. "Too bad, it was my best one."

I can hear her laughing as I am screaming. I am lost in darkness with only the sound of her horrible, shrill laughter. And I am terribly cold, so cold that I am shivering, my whole body shaking.

“Goodbye, *John*,” she says. “I know you’ll never forget me. My face will always be in your mind as the last thing you saw, at least in this life. After that, who knows? But I’ll be seeing you again. You can count on it. You never know what the mail will bring.”

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