



The
Letters

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The Letters

by zaji

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The attic housed a mountain of dust and cobwebs. In corners, on cedar trunks, under the mahogany desk, strung from hat racks to bookshelves--cobwebs. Some were old and deserted, hanging broken, as the breeze from the open door rushed in to sway them like tattered sails on a sea worn ship. Others were fresh and new, inhabited by species of insects indigenous to the little city of Long Pond. Stray beams of light peeked through the stained glass windows on either end of the vast room. Five years of dust gave a gray hue to the dimly lit space with splashes of red, blue and green. The paintings hung tilted and dark, covered with time. An old piano stood on three legs, defeated by loneliness and silence. Boxes of tattered games lay atop its grand frame, sharing in the mood of its unexpected life—five revolutions around the sun it has stood.

Edward had been dead for all those years. His books, writings and letters had long been placed amongst other long forgotten items and distant memories, some forgotten by intention, others through the suppression of pain—all now a mishmash of events in time. The large black trunk sat under his desk. It was ominous, almost expecting—waiting. It sat diligently, patient, as Edward would.

He would slouch, his head bent, writing for hours on end under the soft light of his banker's lamp. The green hue shown on his face as he punched away on the keys of his Underwood No. 5, an old piece he discovered at a remote auction house on the other side of town. His shadow climbed the walls, hastily mimicking his every move.

“Marie, would you please bring me a cup of coffee,” he chimed many times without lifting his head. “I just have one more page to complete and I’ll join you.” The keys resounded through the thickly decorated room, bouncing across tapestry, over stray papers and books spread eagle. Tap tap tap, tap tap, they pounded dull and swiftly.

Edward enjoyed writing romance novels. He said it helped him get in touch with his sensitive side. He was sentimental—a romantic at heart.

Half a decade of dust rose into the air as Marie opened the black cave that housed his memory. The smell of time met her nose in a flurry of musty worn cotton—many years in the dark. Books, bookmarks, manuscripts and letters lay unkempt throughout the deep and taunting time capsule. Ernest Hemingway, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Edgar Allen Poe, Walter Mosley, Ralph Ellison mingled with his unfinished works. Near the right corner, beneath his old compass, was a stack of letters. Tied around them was a red satin ribbon. Each one was stamped and sealed, but never mailed. They were addressed to Marie.

She felt light as she held the large stack in her hand. A cardinal flew by one window, then decided to perch on the other. It stood regal, gazing about the horizon as though watching over the earth—and their tiny home. Its deep red body accented the clear sky. The cool of the hard cherry wood floor snapped her from her daze. She didn't

remember when she fell to her knees, but the wood creaked as she shifted her weight to relieve the pressure. Why hadn't he mailed these letters or simply given them to her? As she leaned further back to sit, she continued to flip through them and realized they were written during the first year of their marriage.

The first was dated January 1, 1985. As she gently opened it, the seal lifted easily, revealing years of wear and virtually no glue left to keep them sealed. As she read the salutation, *Dear Marie*, droplets of water ushered onto the envelope, jolting her once again back to the present—reminding her not to ruin the treasured correspondences. She read on.

Dear Marie,

To tell you how much I love you would never help you to understand to what lengths I would go to give you the life you deserve. So I will profess my love in these letters. One day, I know you will find them. You may not understand why I could not mail them. But the truth of the matter is, my love for you cannot be uttered in the way I would like. It is like the belief by some religious sects that the name of God should not be spoken or written, for fear of desecrating the essence of our creator. But my dear Marie, I must at the very least write it; even if I cannot tell you beyond simply, I love you. The day I married you, I thought myself undeserving of such a woman. But I learned to accept that you are my gift from the universe, a treasure to be revered and respected for as long as you live. I can only hope you will love me with the same depth and passion. Until I write again.

*With abiding love,
Edward*

Like the frames in a picture show, scenes and things from their life together flashed before her. The attic walls morphed into a sea blue. Paintings adorned each wall with images of mountains, grassy knolls, a mother bathing a child and melting clocks. The melting clocks always intrigued her. The painting was called, *The Persistence of Memory*. It was one of Edward's favorite pieces. He would sit and stare at it for hours. It was hauntingly true to the idea of memory—how persistent it can be—almost unrelenting.

A simple Persian area rug dressed the room, with well-polished floors peeking out at the edges. Images from a starry night sky adorned the low slanted ceilings. Their ebony baby grand Steinway stood like a sentry in the center of the room—Marie played it daily. Small dressers and tables sat in corners with games of every kind piled recklessly all around.

“Edward, stop! You're cheating.”

“I would never cheat,” he smirked.

“Edward, don’t you dare lie to me. I turn my back for one second and your pawn is in another place. Put it back.”

The radio sang on as Sarah Vaughan’s *Tenderly* filled the room, blending in with their cadences of playfulness and love. Their laughter danced on air, echoing through the open window, down the attic stairs, into their back yard—filling their weeping willows with tears of joy. Their uncontrollable laughter melded into dark sadness and gloom as Edward clutched his chest and tumbled to the floor gasping for air.

“Edward,” she screamed, grabbing him and pulling him to her lap. “Baby, what’s wrong? Help! Somebody help!”

The unforgiving attic did not respond; in that moment, it did not echo. She was forced to leave her love alone while she called the paramedics. Time crawled along, moving through a second in what felt like a year. The attic stairs were too many, the phone’s ringing too long, the dispatcher too slow to take down her information, the paramedics took too long to arrive. The attic stairs they climbed became double the amount that were there before, they moved too slowly. Everything moved as if in slow motion.

Even her screams as they pronounced him dead came out like a slow droning endless ripple. The frantic pitch of her voice pierced the afternoon sun as the news pierced her heart. Then all fell silent. He was dead. Her lover and friend was gone, and everything continued to drag. Nothing and no one wanted to hurry anymore. Without Edward, her world stood still. She stood still. She couldn’t remember the funeral, only long hours of sitting still. She never wanted to move again, but knew that wasn’t an option.

The memory threatened to overwhelm her again. The letter drifted across the floor, gathering dust as it floated across the room. She didn’t realize she had let it fall. The room went from the bright sea blue of the past, instantly back to the dark dreary gray of the present. The letters now littered the attic floor as though tossed. She gathered each one up and hastily retreated down the attic stairs to the comfort of their bedroom. Sad sleep enveloped her as she stared at the steady, hypnotizing spin of the ceiling fan.

“Marie, Marie! Wake up honey, I want to hear your beautiful voice.”

She jolted awake, searching the room desperately. The sound of a siren in the distance could not dull the beating of her heart. The din of each beat filled her ears, making them throb.

“Edward?” she hoped. The air was suddenly tepid and silent.

The letters lay all around her like friends come to visit and comfort her. She could almost hear them whispering for her to read them, read them now before they too died. It was eleven. Night had fallen as quickly as her resurrected sadness. She continued to read. Edward had chronicled much of their first year together. He wrote about the puppy he bought her, Casper, a beautiful white Siberian Husky.

“Close your eyes,” he chuckled.

“What is it, Edward? What have you got?”

“Now if I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now would it?”

“Come on, hurry up. I wanna see.”

“Patience my dear. And no peeking.”

She remembered shaking uncontrollably, nervous that he would be up to one of his tricks again. Within minutes, she heard him shuffle out the door, and shuffle back in with something that sounded like it was moving. She squealed, not sure if she should be scared, as he was always playing around and doing something outrageous.

“Okay. Calm down. Stop shaking silly!” he laughed.

“I can’t stand it anymore! What is it?”

“Okay. Open your eyes.”

The tiny white ball of fur wriggled and sniffed, licking aimlessly at anything he could reach. A muffled bark was all it took for her to break down in tears. Edward almost tumbled over as she jumped on him, kissing him all over his face. Casper became their baby; he could do no wrong. Edward’s P.S. read, “Remember that black silk top you couldn’t find? Casper took it off to his doghouse and used it as a blanket. I didn’t have the heart to tell you.”

She found herself laughing and crying all at once, each emotion equally infecting her spirit. She read through their early life together, eagerly devouring each day and month. With each letter, she could feel Edward fill the room. She could smell his cologne, hear his laughter, see his smile and feel his mischievousness. As she held the last five letters in her hand, she could sense that something was coming. His previous letter was heavy with a sadness that was perceptible, although not spoken. He talked about his visit to the doctor, and how he hadn’t been feeling well those last few days. She began reading the next letter.

Dear Marie,

The results came back from my blood work and scans. Without going into much detail my love, my heart is not working very well these days. The doctor has told me that I don't have much more time. I am going to die soon, and all I can think about is losing you—not living to love you more, and feel you loving me. You have given me a life that is greater than any I could ever imagine. When you finally read this, know that I am watching over you. I am sitting beside you as you read this, holding you, drying your tears, and telling you how much I love you. Never doubt for a minute that I am here. Close your eyes. I am sitting beside you.

*With eternal love,
Edward*

The clock read 3am. She could hear Casper scratching at the bedroom door. He was whining as he usually did when Edward came home from work and he wanted to play. She opened the door to let him in. He ran to the window which overlooked their backyard, jumped up on the chair and began to howl. Casper had never howled before, but tonight he howled long and laborious. He then lay on the chair and slept until the sun peeked over the horizon.

It was difficult for her to understand why Edward did not tell her he was ill. They had never kept secrets. Yet here it was. A secret. A secret within a secret—letters she knew nothing about. A part of her felt he was selfish for not telling her, but deep down she knew he was not malicious and didn't want to worry her. She wasn't sure what the last few letters would have in store for her, but she needed to find the strength to get through them. Her hands shook as she reached for one. She nervously began to read yet another of her dear husband's billets-doux. He was reminiscing about one of their many moments together. Marie remembered the conversation.

“Marie, do you know the meaning of the claddagh?”

“What is a claddagh?”

“It is a special ring. It began with an Irish love story. It symbolizes the great love a prince had for his wife. I purchased one for you and me. I want you to wear it always. Please remember these words each time you look at it: For love, we wear the heart. In friendship, we wear the hands. And in loyalty and lasting fidelity we wear the royal claddagh.”

“Edward, I---.”

“Marie, I place it on your left hand, crown facing you, to symbolize not only that you have found your love, but that I have requited.”

As she read, her eyes blurred. The watery haze faded into the memory of that day long ago. Casper jumped onto the bed and laid his head on her lap. She looked at her hand, twisting the claddagh from left to right.

“No matter where I am, always know that I am with you. Touch this claddagh I’ve given you and chant the Namaste that says: I honor that place in you in which the entire universe dwells. I honor the place in you which is of love, of truth, of light, and of peace. When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me; we are one.”

She cried the day he chanted those words. She cried until her eyes were red and puffy, but she was filled with happiness and content. She never took off the ring.

“Remember, Marie. When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me; we are one. And I am with you.”

Casper looked up sharply at the bedroom door. Marie glanced around the room. She felt a warm breeze suddenly dance around the bed, but no one was there. The curtains lifted and waved about the window frame, fanning a gentle good morning. All but one of the letters blew to the floor as the breeze whisked through and swished them away. As they fell, tossing about in the wind, she grabbed the single letter that did not make it to the floor.

It was the letter about the claddagh. The P.S. read, “If you keep none of the other letters, Marie, keep this one. It is my gift to you, forever.” The wind continued to blow, the cardinal perched on the windowsill and sang, and that empty place in her somehow became filled.

Finally, she said good-bye and whispered, “You are with me always.” The wind picked up and letters began to fly around the room. They flew past her like paper birds teasing her playfully. They flew everywhere, rising high into the air, near the ceiling--twirling. She tried to catch them, but they were like elusive children in a game of tag—they seemed to giggle. As she laughed, she could almost hear the laughter of another. It filled the room--the laughter, the smell of cologne, and the strength of love. Casper barked wildly.