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## Letters to Home

Kate Jordhamo  
*SUNY Geneseo*

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# Letters To Home

I stood in the middle of the street in Albany, wondering why I drove an hour and a half on a Sunday morning just to stare at a house. Theoretically, I was there because he was going to have to give me money, but really I was there because I was afraid.

I shifted my weight onto my heels and sighed. I wondered if he was home, if he could see me standing outside of his house and thought I was crazy. I'd told him I was going to come, but I wasn't sure if he had taken me seriously, or even remembered.

It had been two and a half weeks since I had last seen him in person, and exactly two weeks since he had, without warning or explanation, moved from Poughkeepsie to Albany. I was sure the two events were not entirely unrelated. The only times we had been talking since his move was when he called me at some insane hour of the morning, obviously intoxicated and inevitably falling asleep mid-conversation.

My pride and my sensibility had told me not to answer, but Zack knew me better than anybody else in the world. He was aware of everything, from the fact that I had to sleep on the side of the bed furthest away from the door to my unhealthy obsession with *Survivor*. More importantly, he knew that even if I didn't want to talk to someone, if they called me while I was asleep I would, in my delirium, answer my phone anyway.

I could feel fear bubbling in my stomach as I crossed the street. Or maybe I was just nauseous – they always felt the same to me. Each step up his porch felt like I was marching myself to an execution block. By the time I got to the door, I was convincing myself to forget it and go home. It wasn't a good idea, my being there.

Before I could change my mind, the door flew open. Zack stood in the doorway holding his chocolate lab, Marley, on a leash. Marley immediately be-

gan barking and jumping on me, trying to claw my shirt off. I was never a dog person, but I scratched behind her ears and let her slobber all over my hands anyway, thinking at least someone had missed me.

If Zack was surprised to see me, he didn't show it at all. He simply leaned against the doorframe, folded his hands against his bare chest, and watched Marley attack me.

Seeing him sent a trail of goose bumps up my spine, making me wonder if it really had only been eighteen days. I was surprised that my memory of him matched the boy standing in front of me, as if restricting our communication to the telephone should have distorted his image in my mind. But no, his face was so ingrained in my memory that I suspected I'd remember him perfectly even if I suffered an amnesia-inducing head injury.

"Hey," he said, moving past me and pulling Marley down the porch stairs into the yard. His nonchalance startled me; I didn't respond, just turned and watched him lead the dog around the grass. When she finally found a spot that satisfied her, he turned and looked at me.

I had always thought brown eyes were boring before Zack. I never knew that if you looked close enough, brown eyes could be gold and green and amber all at the same time. Looking down at him from his front porch, I avoided the eye contact he was trying to achieve. I didn't want to see what colors had developed since I last looked. Instead, I let my eyes follow the veins of his neck down through his arms, past the soft curve of his elbow to his fingertips.

I found myself aching to hold him again. I loved his body in an uncomplicated and unbiased way in which I couldn't seem to love my own. I found every piece of him beautiful, from the jagged scar just above his right hip, to his round cheeks, to the way his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck.

How he could possibly be so unaffected, so the same, was a complete mystery to me. It didn't seem right to me that he could change his mind, change his heart, and still retain the same charm in his mannerism. Every second he stood there, watching me watch him and Marley, I felt the wall he built between us grow, crumbling the foundation I had centered so much of my life around.

Zack and I had been so entwined in each other's lives the past six years it was hard to define where our relationship began or finished. Since I had met him my freshman year of high school, we quickly blurred the boundaries of friendship, talking on the phone every night and learning the intimate details of each other's life. It wasn't that we were kindred spirits; our stark contrasts kept us intrigued. His over-inflated self-esteem was a perfect target for my usually hostile sarcasm, which seemed to delight him even more than it did me.

Zack and I, mismatched as we appeared to be, couldn't seem to loosen our grasps on each other. We spent most of our weekends huddled in the grungy punk rock clubs of Poughkeepsie, asserting that *we* had discovered whichever shitty indie band was playing that night, the respective boys and girls we dated

grudgingly asking why we had to be around each other so much. Nobody, not even my best friends or family, could understand our closeness. I guess I really didn't either.

My memories of high school are essentially devoted to Zack and I constantly debating the hypothetical merits and disadvantages of actually dating. As sure as he was that we would be perfect, I was convinced he would break my heart, since he seemed intent on dating his way through our entire high school. As he jumped from relationship to relationship, he always reminded me that if I wanted him to break up with any of his girlfriends, all I had to do was ask. Stubbornly, I maintained that if he truly wanted to be with me he wouldn't be with any other girl in the first place. And so, we remained merely friends, albeit the kind of friends who always seemed on the brink of crossing the line.

That day in Albany, I was having trouble establishing where our new lines had been drawn.

Unconsciously, I folded my hands over my stomach as I tried not to watch him stare at me standing on his porch. His gaze had an unyielding ability to put me at ease, which I was beginning to find more annoying than reassuring.

"Don't stand with your hands like that," he called across the yard.

I glanced down and let my hands fall to my sides. "Why?" I asked.

"It's creepy," he shook his head. Marley, finished with her business, began scampering back towards me.

He reluctantly let her pull him up the porch stairs until he was directly in front of me. "It makes you look..."

"Pregnant?" I finished his sentence.

Zack frowned at me. "No, it makes you look like you're happy to be pregnant."

I pressed my hands back on my stomach, wondering if my posture had revealed something my emotions had been missing, if maybe I could finally feel something. I'd read countless stories about women feeling the change in their bodies, knowing there was life inside of them. But all I felt was myself disconnecting from the entire world, void from any emotion but pain. I wondered if I would even be able to keep another heart beating when mine was running on autopilot.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked, even though I could tell he hated *this* and not me. I thought about how I had been a coward; how I had sent him a letter after my sixth positive test because I couldn't make myself say it out loud. I thought about how he hadn't said anything about it when I saw him the next week, even though I was sure he had gotten it. I thought about how he hadn't talked to me or returned any of my phone calls for eight days straight after that, until he finally called me at 3:47 in the morning to tell me he'd relocated to a different city.

"I don't know how this happened," he said, ushering Marley back into the

house and closing the door behind her.

“Well, I didn’t do it to myself.” I tried to smile as he walked back towards me, but the effort seemed too much. I wanted him to laugh the way he always did when I joked in inappropriate situations, but he just shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean.” He reached his hand out a little, as if to touch me, but it didn’t make it that far.

I studied his face, the way his cheekbones connected to his jaw line, the dark circles under his eyes, and the stubble on his chin. I could tell he was hung over. I wondered how often he had been drinking – pretty consistently, if his phone calls were any indication.

As much as I craved his voice, I would have preferred the most horrifying nightmares to those phone calls. I did nothing but cry while I listened to him try to defend his actions. No matter how many times he called himself an ass, or said he hated himself for how he was treating the “best girl in his world,” I was still alone. It didn’t matter how convincingly he told me I’d never be able to comprehend how much he really loved me – hearing his voice did nothing but enhance my pain. The hole he left in my life expanded as every word he said really meant he didn’t love me anymore – that he was gone.

Standing in front of him on his porch, I wanted to kick him in the shin. I wanted to find a way to make him feel every ounce of pain I was trying so hard to hide. I wanted to tell him how much I hated him and didn’t miss him and was doing fine without him. “Don’t you miss me?” I asked instead.

It was unfathomable to me that he could *not* miss me. Zack had permanently missed me, always. Every time I left his house, or we got off the phone, or he walked me to my car after school, he always parted with the same line: *I miss you.*

Sometimes it meant he was sorry we couldn’t hang out that day, other times that his girlfriend at the moment was annoying him, and other times still it meant he would be at my house in ten minutes. Usually, it just meant he felt weird saying *I love you* to someone he wasn’t dating.

But no matter the sub context, it always meant that he would be there, that we would never really be separated from each other.

Then, graduation came, and we suddenly realized that I was leaving and he was staying, and we would have to deal with the sort of distance that usually made people miss each other. At the time, the three and a half hours to Boston seemed insurmountable, so we did the only thing we could to make it easier: we fought.

We fought as I packed up my stuff, fought as my parents drove me to college, fought as I set up my new room, fought as I started classes. We fought all the way through my midterms and finals, fought when I came home for breaks, fought when I went back to Boston. We fought until there was nothing left to say, until we were left with bitter silence. The fights had distracted me from my

transition into college, sheltered me from the fact that it wasn't at all what I expected. Without him, I had nobody to fight with but myself, and I was forced to admit that I wasn't where I needed to be.

Coming home after a year away was like entering a foreign country – somehow I had morphed into a person that didn't fit where I felt I should have belonged. I floated around Poughkeepsie, taking classes at local colleges, aimlessly trying to gain some sort of direction.

I saw Zack randomly, at a party, as people with mutual friends often do. It could have been a Wednesday, or maybe a Saturday, the days never mattered much when it started getting warmer. All that mattered was we had somehow ended up in the same dingy kitchen, our shoes sticking to the beer-coated tiles on opposite sides of the room.

I don't think either one of us could explain how it happened, but I was pulled across the room to him, as if we'd never left each other's sides. The second we were next to each other, it was clear no apologies would be necessary. He scooped me into his arms, and all the anger melted as I realized how much I had missed *him*. The year of fighting aside, he still knew me better than I had allowed anyone else to; I did not feel like myself again until he hugged me.

We fell back into each other seamlessly, and when he called me the next morning asking me to come over I felt my feet reconnect with the ground. Lying on the grass next to his driveway while he changed the oil in his car, I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

"Hand me that tray," Zack called from under his car.

I pushed the aluminum tray towards the car with my foot. I loved watching how expertly his hands moved around the rusty metal, and wondered how he could tell what went where – it all looked the same to me.

"So," he said, sliding out from under the car. "You came home for me."

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and watched the oil steadily drain into the tray, splattering onto the driveway every now and again. "I've been home since December." I flicked the head of a dandelion at him. "If I came home for you, I would have found you way before March."

He smiled at me, slowly, walked over to where I was sprawled out in the grass, and knelt down next to me. He placed his hands on the ground on either side of me, so he was looming right in front of me.

My fingers dug into the ground so hard I was sure the dirt would be impossible to remove from under my fingernails, but I wasn't concerned with that. It seemed strange to me that Zack and I had never even kissed before; that I could have the shape of his lips memorized but not know what they felt like. I closed my eyes and tried to inhale his breath that was hitting my cheek. Zack and I had certainly been close to each other before, but it had never felt like this.

I waited for a few moments, my fingers plowing even further into the ground, before opening my eyes. He was still directly in front of me, immobile,

staring at me.

His mouth spread into a small smirk, and he cocked his head a little to the right. He leaned a little closer, pressed his lips against the side of my forehead, then leaned back and stood up before I even realized what happened.

“Come inside for a minute,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

Slightly suspicious, I grabbed the hand he offered me and let him pull me to my feet. I brushed off the grass that stuck to my legs as I followed him up the uneven stone path to the front door. He held the door open for me and I stepped inside, crossed the living room, nudged his bedroom door open and flopped onto his bed, my feet moving without any direction from my brain. I glanced around and noticed nothing had changed in his room, save for a few more concert tickets that had been tacked on the wall above his closet.

“Pretty much the same, huh?” Zack said as he closed the door behind him.

“I guess it is.” I kicked one of my flip-flops off at him and smiled when he caught it. “What do you have to show me?”

He threw my shoe back towards me and walked over to his dresser. Kneeling, he opened the bottom drawer and began rummaging around. I sat up straighter on the bed and tried to see around his body.

“What is it?” I asked again, bouncing up and down. Patience was not one of my virtues.

“Hang on,” he said, scrunching his face up at me over his shoulder. He moved a couple more things around, and then finally turned back to me with what looked like a stack of folded notebook paper in his hand. “Here.” He held the pile out to me, clearly a little embarrassed.

I took the sheets of paper from him and slowly unfolded the top one, immediately recognizing the handwriting that covered the page.

“Zack.” I looked up at him, unable to hide my shock. My hands tightened around the pile. I didn’t need to read any of it; I already knew what it all said. I had written it.

At some point in our sophomore year, I had made a fleeting mention of how I missed snail mail, and so Zack had mailed me a letter. Naturally, I wrote back, and it became a cyclical habit of ours. The letters had started out frivolous, silly, and full of jokes, but as time went on we began to use them as a medium to say the things we could never seem to get out in person.

I let my gaze drop back to the pile and quickly tried to count how many had accumulated over our years of faithful letter writing. “You kept them,” I said, not even bothering to try and hide how much it meant to me.

“Of course I kept them,” he said, as if I should have known.

“But, why?” I asked, running my hands over the worn paper. I had kept every letter he sent me, but I was a compulsive pack rat, unable to throw *anything* away. Zack had never been like that.

“Kate.” He grabbed my wrists and pulled me to my feet, not seeming to

care that I let all those letters fall from my hands into a pile at our feet. “Are you serious?” he asked, cupping my face in his hands.

Standing there, in that room I knew so well with the boy I knew so well, I thought that maybe we had both grown up and were the silly fights that separated us. I thought that maybe we were finally at a point in our lives where we knew ourselves as well as we knew each other. I thought that maybe this moment was what we were holding out for in high school.

He, finally, pressed his mouth against mine, and I thought that maybe, at last, I was home.

I wished I had thought to bring all those letters with me to Albany now. I wanted to remind him of that day. I wanted to wedge myself so close to him that it seemed we were breathing from the same lungs. I wanted to know that I was not the only one who was lost.

“Of course I miss you.” Zack ran his hand through his hair like he was trying to pull it out. The words sounded so distant and forced, not at all the way they had used to roll off his tongue so convincingly.

“You deserve so much better than what I’m doing to you,” he added, sounding like he might cry. “You’re handling this a lot better than I am.”

“How would you know how I’m handling it? You only call me at four in the morning to tell me how much you love me but can’t be with me,” I said, unable to keep the resentment from my voice.

“Because I know you.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

I hated that it was true. I hated that he knew every single one of my nuances, could name every single one of my quirks.

“I know you’re doing better with this than I am because you’re here,” he continued. “I’m so terrified that I’ve just been pretending it’s not happening.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, wondering what it would be like to pretend, to remove myself from the situation so entirely I would cease to acknowledge its existence. The prospect was intriguing, enticing, and completely impossible. “You don’t think I’m scared?” I said, unable to raise my voice above a whisper.

He looked in my eyes with such a void of any emotion that I knew, no matter what he said, I was completely on my own. “What are you going to do?” he asked, his eyes focused on my stomach.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop my tears from falling. It was such a simple question, but I had no way of knowing how to answer it. I had never felt so unloved than in that moment when I realized he could no longer see me – he only saw what had happened.

I imagined being connected to Zack for the rest of my life, having an unbreakable bond that we would always have to share. I considered learning to love something that had created such an insurmountable distance between me and the person I had held above all others. I wondered if it was possible for this thing that was ripping us apart to eventually bring us back together.

I could do it, if I wanted, that I was sure of. I could do it and be great and still accomplish everything I wanted. But at what cost? None of my choices seemed to be the right one, leaving guilt or sacrifice as my only options. I thought about being able to forgive myself, and wondered if my heart would ever allow me to forgive Zack for leaving me to deal with this alone. No matter what I chose, I would have to bear the weight of the consequences, not him.

I considered Zack's selfish reasons for wanting me to let it go. I thought about every word he had said or wrote to me over the years, every promise he made to always be there, and how they had morphed into lies. I considered this person who had claimed to love me above all others, and how he had bailed on me. I was going down with the ship while he, content on dry land, was holding on to the life vest for himself.

I tried to understand that he could meet another girl. He could find someone else – someone uncomplicated, located in Albany, and free from the responsibility I represented. I tried to imagine us both moving on, being happy without the other person. It seemed an impossible feat, for me at least.

I wanted to make the right decision, but more than that, I wanted to never again feel how I felt now, standing on his porch with him staring over my head.

"You'll have to give me half the money, then," I finally said. I wrapped my arms around my torso, satisfied to feel nothing but a dull hollow.

I focused my gaze past Zack to the trees in his yard. It was mid-September, and the first leaves were beginning to turn. It didn't seem fair to me that the seasons changed, that we could fall into a comfortable pattern only to be disrupted by cold fronts and seasonal allergies. I found my eyes spilling over with tears at the thought that the trees had to lose their leaves. No matter how beautifully the leaves turned, they still fell. They still *died*. They still left the trees bare, empty, and naked to the bitter air.

Zack reached out and pulled me to him, wrapped his arms around me, and pressed his entire body against mine. "It's going to be okay," he whispered into my hair as my tears leaked onto his chest.

His voice permeated my skin, digging roots in my muscles and circulating through my bloodstream in time with my heart. I could feel the words turning to dead weight, resting heavy on my lungs. I imagined them sprouting out of my neck, dying with my breath, and falling motionless to my feet.

No, it wasn't going to be okay, but I let him lie to me one last time.