

ON THE DIFFICULTY OF THROWING AWAY OLD LOVE LETTERS

The garbage truck just hauled away nearly one hundred old love letters. Rattled off into the snow. Nearly 80 of them were from my high-school girlfriend – let’s call her Stacy – and they’ve been in my uneasy possession for the past 45 years.

They’ve been lying in a large manila envelope upon which I wrote, years ago: *Private. Please respect.* For whom exactly did I write that declaration? Was I imagining that when they discovered my body collapsed on the bottom of the staircase, in my plaid pajamas, laundry basket in hand, classical musical still playing somewhere in the house, the first thing they were going to say was, “Great! Now we can go through his old letters!”? The truth is that I knew that the letters would end in the landfill – along with my plaid pajamas. The seagulls of Staten Island would be their final readers.

In today’s technical world the entirety of an ex-friend’s correspondence can be deleted with a single key-stroke. But not with real letters. I’ve been unable to throw these out for four decades. I’m not quite sure why. I don’t read them. They feel too fragile (emotionally fragile) to be reread. But I like the weight of that manila envelope. I like all those variously colored individual envelopes inside, with their 11-cent airmail stamps picturing the silhouette of a white jet airplane pointed northward against a red sky. Those were the days when you needed to specify that a domestic letter travel by plane – and you paid a few extra pennies for it. That’s her blue ballpoint handwriting on every envelope, emphatically instructing *airmail* –

underlining the word twice. Sometimes, in a playful mood, she writes *par avion*.

Stacey's family had moved to Oregon the summer after we'd graduated from our New Jersey high school, and for about a year she was a vociferous correspondent – sometimes writing two letters a day. Does such single-mindedness ever come again? The ferocious focus of being 18? She often didn't sign the letters; instead she drew the fox from *The Little Prince* – sometimes captioning the drawing with the fox's famous dictum: "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." She always put both commas around *forever* – and in that tiny pause on either side of the word, you heard what felt like a cry from her heart. *I expect you to love me forever, Bobby*.

I saved from the prying eyes of the Staten Island seagulls just one document of hers – it's not a letter but a three-page "philosophy of life" essay she wrote for a Comparative Religions elective in high school. It's typed on a manual typewriter, with a bad ribbon, on paper that's watermarked Millers Falls EZEraser. It is heavily corrected with her black pen, and it may be the world's only philosophy of life essay with the word "Jeepers" in it. That's one of the reasons I saved it. My heart opens in the presence of guilelessness.

It begins: "I've tried to write this thing a million times, using good grammar and paragraph structure and things like that and it always turns out stilted and unclear and sounding like a lot of BS. So I'm going to try to write this the way I talk – it'll probably be a lot easier to express."

It goes on to argue an appealingly non-preachy spiritual point of view that seemed to me, even back then, considerably wise beyond its years.

“Heaven’s living in love, and hell is living without it. I’m not sure there’s an afterlife (I doubt it) but God certainly doesn’t put anyone in a hot place for a lot of sins that somebody made up that have nothing to do with God.”

My own dubious spirituality at that time consisted of me inscribing on the first page of my Union Prayer Book: *Bob – Best of luck in the future (as if I didn’t know!) – God.*

A few paragraphs later she defines love as “really caring about the other person’s welfare over your own – which may sound like a narrow definition, but to me it’s a lot harder to do than it first appears.” She’s drawn an arrow into the margin here and added by hand: “The love which I feel for you transcends this. I can’t even define it.”

O Stacey forsaken/Forgive your boyfriend! I have not communicated with you in 40 years. Others have taken your place in my life. My Internet sleuthing (in dark glasses and a ski hat) has revealed you have been married twice. You live somewhere in the wilds of Oregon; you still work faithfully for the State government. I apologize for retiring your old love letters to the landfill, Stacey. They deserved better, but I had to let them go. The truth, I suppose, is that love letters really only exist in the passionate present. That’s their quickly perishing beauty. And so I allow your teenage voice the last words:

“This is the only go-round man gets with life, so he should make it good.
The surest way I’ve found to make it good is to love – that’s the greatest joy
anyone can experience.