The Letter

Cecelia S. Burnett*

*Iowa State University

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Abstract

OK, lady. You’ve put it off long enough. Now sit down and start writing. Damn it, Conway. Sometimes you’re a real bitch. She was annoyed, but she know Conway was right this time...
OK, lady. You've put it off long enough. Now sit down and start writing.

Damn it, Conway. Sometimes you're a real bitch. She was annoyed, but she know Conway was right this time. Michael was at work, and Jay was in bed sleeping; she was alone. She would have preferred to reread some more of *The Women's Room*, but responsibility and duty won over personal pleasure. She dragged out her off-white stationery embossed with KCS, which stood for Katy Conway Simpson, shoved everything on the table into the upper left-hand corner, wrapped the fuzzy, green afghan around her shoulders, sat down, and began to write.

*October 14, 1978*

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I decided I'd better write to you; you sounded pretty upset in your last letter because I hadn't written to you for a while. I'm sorry, but I really have been busy . . .*

Oh, sure. Real busy. Who are you trying to kid? Conway could be sarcastic at times.

Well, how can I tell them what I've really been doing? How can I tell them that I spend hours, days, rummaging through my boxes of memorabilia, sifting through my past, hoping to make some sense of my present? How can I sit down and write to them and tell them, rationally and calmly, that I'm falling apart? Once again, she was filled with the fear, the panic, the frustration.

You're getting emotional again. Conway tried to soothe her.
I know, I know. I'm always getting emotional. That's just one of my many problems, right? Jesus, Conway, I need you, of all people, to be on my side.

I am on your side, you know that. I'm trying to help. Now continue writing to your parents, and tell them just what they want to hear. Forget all that stuff about the old love letters.

The old love letters . . . Michael was at work; she had settled Jay down to watch Electric Company. She had purposely dragged out the dusty cardboard box full of Michael's personal artifacts which he considered too important to throw away. She plowed through the Boy Scout merit badges, the track medals, the plaque from the Future Scientists of America Foundation, until she found them stuffed in a big manilla envelope held together by a fat, red rubber band. They were still in somewhat of a chronological order. She had written him notes almost every night before she went to sleep to hand to him in the hall between first and second periods. It was embarrassing to read them. The amazing thing was that he had saved any of them at all. She wondered why.

September 12, 1967

Well, I've been waiting all night for you to call, but I guess you aren't going to. And, if you must know, that doesn't help my already-depressed mood. I don't know what's the matter with me; I've felt so hateful and uncaring for about a week. Maybe it's school and homework and everything, but, mostly, I think it's you. It's just that I miss you, and it's stupid to miss you, because it hasn't been that long. My mother just came in and asked me if you called. She started telling me about all the reasons you couldn't call. I can't see the paper anymore because I'm crying. I'm sorry. Are you mad at me? Please don't. Well, I didn't study for the English test . . . I guess I'd better go now. I just had to tell someone my problems, and you're the only person I can tell lately. I get the feeling that you really care about me and all my stupid problems and thoughts and dreams and feelings and stuff. I hope you do. I'd like to think you care. Katy.

October 19, 1967

All alone again. Great. Turned up the radio loud . . . did homework . . . noticed time . . . got ready for
bed so I'd be all ready to get in bed after talking to you on the phone. Except things didn't happen the way I planned them. Maybe it's my fault for assuming that you'd call, getting myself all ready, and then having everything fall through. I don't know, Michael. I'm so stupid and ugly and so damned assuming. I take everything in a way to suit me, no matter how it is with the other guy. It's so ugly and I disgust myself. I've no right at all to make demands on you. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to anyone else. It's me, damn it, me! I'm sick to death of every crappy thing in this house, of every crappy thing crappy people do. I'm going to go crazy if something doesn't happen soon. I wish I had some place to go where I had someone I could trust and be helped and help and takes me for what I am, without wanting to change me. I have a someone like that, you know (or think I do), except you didn't call tonight and that hurts and that's why I'm crying and writing this. But there's one thing I want you to know. If this in any way makes you feel obligated to talk to me or call me, I don't want you to talk to me or call me, because then it's not you. It's not something you wanted to do. If you didn't call tonight, it's because you've been thinking about things and decided things aren't right with us. Please tell me. I'll probably be better tomorrow; I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I'm sorry. Katy.

She had sent him seven Valentine's Day cards in 1968, signing them variously "Someday," "the future Mrs. Michael J. Simpson," "me," and "always."

It was three days before she found herself alone and with enough time to pull out the manilla envelope with the fat, red rubber band around it. She sat on the floor of her bedroom, alternately twisting a strand of her hair with her fingers and chewing on her fingernails. She read the letters which she had written so long ago; it seemed like ages to Katy. There was the summer of 1968 when she went to a journalism conference in Ohio.

August 20, 1968

... I have this problem, Michael; I'm lonely as hell, and you aren't here to make me feel better. I never really felt the lack of your presence like I do now ... I can't wait for you to call tomorrow. My new friends can't wait either. Don't
be mad because I told them; I'm just so proud of you . . . Don't forget to come to the station with my parents to pick me up; I'll cry if you don't. Love, Katy.

She reread the letters she had written after graduation when she had gone to the beach with some friends for a week. Katy had trouble believing that it was actually she who had written all those silly words.

June 11-17, 1969

. . . We drove into town and walked around. You were right about the boys, and I never wanted you so much to just walk beside me. All the girls walked around, waiting to be picked up, and the boys walked around, checking out the girls. But don't worry, any advances were put down. Just remember that nobody's going to take your place in one week, because I love you too much . . . Here I am again, being, as Anne puts it, loyal and dedicated . . . I was just wondering if you read these letters and, if you do read them, if they're boring. I was wondering if this is what you want to hear from me. If it isn't, you can tell me when I call you tomorrow. I'll probably cry when I talk to you. Remember that I love you, and I'm sure you love me . . . I wish so bad that you could be here with me. I'd even be happy to have you write me a letter. I love you so much and miss you even more. I miss not having you here to squeeze my hand and kiss my forehead and hug me to make me feel happy. Honey, the only thing that keeps me happy is to know that you're all right and happy . . . I'm going to bed and lie down and cry so I'll feel better later. Don't worry about me. I'll be OK for you when I call. Remember I love you more than anybody else, so be happy more than anybody else. Be good, honey. Love always, Katy.

Did you really write to him like that all the time? Conway asked softly. Yeah, I guess so. A long time ago . . . She felt sad and tired. Conway reminded her gently that she hadn't finished writing to her parents.

. . . Jay is doing really good in school. I had a conference with his teacher last week, and she was pleased with his progress, especially in reading and math. She advanced him a
group in math, and he's in the second highest reading group. He drew a picture of himself as an astronaut . . .

Jay's box of memories was a tomato carton stuffed with congratulations cards from family and friends, half of the plaster cast from his leg which he broke when he was three, the shreds of his favorite baby blanket, his first attempts at drawing a picture of himself, the tiny shirt which had "I love Daddy" embroidered across the front, the bracelet from the hospital when he had his tonsils removed. Jay had been born seven months after they got married two years after they graduated from high school. She chuckled as she imagined nosy old Mrs. Mosher and Aunt Ruth counting the months and rolling their eyes in disgust. She remembered the sheer joy and excitement in preparation of the baby. They would have a dozen children, or more. They had nicknamed the unseen baby Barney, and they had bought each other Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day cards when she was six and seven months pregnant. After he was born, it was "Little's Monkey" signed on the bottom of cards. They were happy years, as she could tell from reading the cards stacked in her box. They were signed "Love always," "From your best friend and lover," "Love you and need you." There were Valentine's Day cards, Easter, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, birthday, anniversary, Christmas, Thanksgiving, just-for-the-hell-of-it cards.

Why do you save them all? Conway wanted to know.

I don't know. A deep, involuntary sigh escaped her. I really don't know. She walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of ice water, opened the cupboard door, looked at the jar of Oreo cookies, shook her head, and shut the cupboard door. She sat back down at the table.

. . . Michael seems to be enjoying his new job. His parents are still pretty upset because he quit school, but it was his decision. I've tried to talk to him about it, but he just keeps telling me he doesn't want to talk about it. So what am I supposed to do? It's his career; as long as he's doing something he enjoys, I guess it's OK. He said that . . .

She remembered the night they had the argument about going to the concert; he didn't and she did. She was furious but had to go to a meeting, so she wrote him a letter ex-
plaining the way she felt. Reading that letter again made Katy aware that this was the true beginning of what she called the Reawakening of Katy Conway Simpson, or the Bad Times.

... It seems that after all these years, I still cannot talk to you about important things without you dominating me. I am afraid of you still. That's wrong. In a really good, honest marriage, there shouldn't be any fear ... Well, I think lately I'm learning to be more sure of myself and learning to be less dependent on you. Even if it's opening a jar by myself. I'm just trying to act the way I want and to take care of myself a little more and to be more aware of myself ... Please understand, Michael; I do love you and want to be with you and want to be happy together, but I have to be happy with myself first. Katy

Katy, please try to concentrate on your letter to your parents. Try not to think about any of it. Sometimes Conway could be very sympathetic.

She got up and went to the refrigerator to pour herself some more ice water. Pulling the afghan tightly around herself, she sat down and continued the letter.

... As usual, I've been keeping myself busy. Not counting the laundry, the groceries, the housecleaning, the errands, etc., etc., there's the library group and the nursery school. We're planning a food fair for the nursery school. Guess who's in charge of that? And working and going to school ...

She had saved every letter or note that everyone had written to her since they had moved away from home. To read through them all had taken her more than a week. She reread the letter her mother had written to her after her mother and father had flown out to visit.

August 27, 1974

... It was so good to see you and Michael and Jay, but mostly you and Jay. He's gotten so big, and he's such a good boy. I've really missed watching him grow up. But you've done a fine job of raising him, Katy. Your father and I also want to let you know how proud of you we are. It set my mind to ease to see that you've grown up to become a woman who takes good care of her home and family and herself. Your father and I are so very, very proud of you, Katy. It was so good to see
you. I know now that we don't have to worry about you anymore. Love, Mother.

For some obscure reason, she had started a diary when the Reawakening of Katy Conway Simpson became the Agony of Katy Conway Simpson, when the Bad Times became the Worst Times.

April 29, 1978

... I know it's true, just like Aunt Rita always said, that I've led a blessed life, that nothing, no one has ever crossed me. I feel as though I drift through life, not really affected by anything except that which relates to me. Do I really think only in terms of myself? ... We've changed a lot, a hell of a lot, since we met. I've become ever so much more independent, but I've got so far a way to go. I always thought we were growing together, but maybe I was kidding myself because I didn't want to face the truth; that is, whatever was supposed to be there, wasn't, and that maybe had never been there ... Will we continue as we have been; have a bad spell, talk about it, forget about it, plod onward until another bad spell comes along, and start the whole damned thing again? ... Have we both changed and grown enough to move on to something else? Wasn't it good for awhile anyway? It was and still is at times. Is it really over? After so many years? Maybe that's it; I don't want to waste all those years invested in it. What's that saying? "Nothing is wasted which makes a memory." I've got memories, lots of them. Does he? Oh God, what the hell is going to happen to us?

May 9, 1978

... I'm depressed again tonight, and lonely, too. Damn, sometimes I'm scared; sometimes I'm mad; but most of the time, I'm confused and lonely and depressed. I don't feel like writing letters to anyone back home or even talking to anyone around here. God, I hurt; I'm scared; I'm lonely. Doesn't he see I hurt? Oh God. I've got to talk to him. I'm going crazy. I've got to know ... God, sometimes I hate him. But I've read that you can only hate people you love, that you can only be hurt by people you care about. I don't really know why I want him to come home so badly. Is it really just to have somebody to lie next to in bed? It's got to be more than that. It's got to. Oh God, help me.
Jay and she had flown back home for five weeks during the summer. She needed, they both needed, the breathing room, the time and space to be alone for awhile. She had written one letter to Michael.

July 17, 1978

... I hadn't planned on writing to you, but I woke up at 4:00 a.m. and couldn't get "things" out of my mind ... It bothers me that we (or was it just me?) shut each other out so much that I didn't see what was really happening. I convinced myself that I could be totally independent from everybody, that I could make it on my own, without you, and that I would enjoy it that way. But deep down inside I was scared shitless. Could I really make it on my own? Did I really want to? And why did I do that? I admit it; I shut you out. And God, it hurt. But I wouldn't show it. I wouldn't let you see what you were doing to me, that I was all torn up inside, that I cried, no sobbed, myself to sleep night after night. I hurt so bad I got pains in my chest and stomach from the crying and the hurt. But God, I wouldn't let anybody, especially you, know how I hurt. I had to show everybody, I had to show you, that I could make it on my own, that I didn't need anybody, that I was OK. Oh Lord, what a lie ... I'm so tired, tired of thinking and talking and crying and writing. I'm so tired. I want some peace and quiet for my mind. Does that sound corny? But it's true. If I could have anything, it would be peace of mind with no pain or indecision ... I care, Michael. Please believe me. Please. Is it possible to put all this behind us and say we learned something from it and start over? Is it possible? Oh God, I wish I knew.
Take care of yourself. Katy.

Well, lady, I don't know about you, but I'm getting pretty tired. Conway was never so soft, so gentle. Let's get this letter over with and go to bed, OK? Come on. She gently, quietly, pushed.

... Well, it's getting late and I've run out of news to tell you. As you can tell, not much is happening out here, but I still manage to keep busy. I promise I'll write more often, OK? Take care of yourselves, and don't worry about me; I'm OK.
Love always,

Katy
Katy carefully folded the letter into thirds, slid it into the addressed, matching off-white envelope, licked the edges of the envelope, and sealed it shut. She dug a stamp out of the drawer, stuck it in the corner of the envelope, and placed the letter in the middle of the table so that she would remember to mail it in the morning. She folded the afghan and hung it over the back of the rocking chair, put the glass of warm water in the sink, and snapped off the kitchen light. Katy slowly climbed the stairs in the darkness and the silence.

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