



EVIDENCE OF AFFECTION

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OF ALL THE THINGS I MISS FROM MY YOUTH AND ONWARD through my twenties—that era before Internet, smart phones, email, and social media—the art of letter-writing makes the top three. I miss everything inherent in the practice: the seeking out of beautiful stationery, finding just the right card or paper design, to say nothing of intriguing stamps from all parts of the world. I miss the varicolored pens I used—peacock, orchid, emerald, burgundy—as well as the colors that distinguished different friends (T. always wrote in purple ink, for instance). Most of all, I miss the time—both for the crafting of words and the waiting for a response—that writing letters required. I do not belong in this age of speed.

I grew up in the days when we wrote letters on some kind of stationery—even if, as in the case of my dad, it was on yellow legal-sized paper—as that

was the most practical way to communicate. Long-distance phone calls cost too much, there was no such thing as email or texting, and telegrams had long gone out of fashion. All those years living in Colombia, I wrote letters to my friends back in Sudbury, to my grandparents in Brookline and West Roxbury, to my cousins in northern California. After I left South America to return to the U.S. for university, I wrote letters to my Nana R. who had by then moved to Jerusalem, to my high school friends who'd scattered to various states for their college education, and to my parents, still living in Bogotá, who wrote me while working at the international school I'd attended, my father in his illegible scrawl, my mother with her distinctive looped letters.

The upside/downside (double-edge?) of letters written on stationery was that you could keep them. You could hold them, reopen the envelope, and unfold the pages that held the touch of a loved-one's hand—proof of love, of caring, that might in the interim have faded or vanished altogether. I have kept some of those, preferring to retain the evidence of affection, even though it still hurts to know it's gone. I have a few cards and letters from lovers and friends who have slipped out of my life the way stationery has disappeared from most people's existence these days. Stationery stores themselves may soon become extinct, I fear.

Sometimes I believe I want to bring back stationery as much as I wish to bring back the love that infused those handwritten words. My mourning is for a time of greater patience and care, not only for the crafting of words and the choosing of paper and beautiful cards, but also for those vivid souls who once peopled my life—the people whom I loved and who loved me back, at various times, with equal or even greater passion. They are nearly all gone, as irrevocably, it feels, as the typewriter, fountain pen, cream-laid paper, and matching envelopes, vanished with the days of licking an envelope and pressing it closed, choosing a stamp, finding a mailbox, opening the door and letting your words drop down.

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I'm thinking of my Nana R. and the letters she wrote on pale-blue airmail stationery. She had distinctive handwriting, but didn't everyone back in the days before email? You could tell who the letter was from by the look of the handwriting; you didn't even need to glance at the return address. Getting a letter was a thrill. Think about how long you had to wait for it.

I remember how carefully I'd consider what news to share with my Nana and what to hold back. She'd often write, "How proud your dear grandpa would have been." Then she'd add the Hebrew letters after his name, the letters you put after the name of a deceased loved one. When she died, my first thought was that I won't be able to write letters to her now. There was no one else who cared the way she did, and as our relationship at that point was exclusively based on letters, losing her meant losing a correspondence, a connection, a vital presence with whom to share a particular part of my existence.

Yes, you can save emails. You can go back and reread them. It's not the same. With letters handwritten on paper, you can go back and unfold them, tenderly touch and perhaps even smell the paper, and know that someone's hands touched the same page, folded it along the prescribed edges, wrote out your name and address, and in the case of my Nana, walked down ten flights of stone steps to the sun-baked pavement below and found her way to a postbox to send your letter on its way across the ocean. There is nothing in today's electronic communication that even approaches the care, patience, and love that went into centuries of letter-writing. It simply does not carry the same emotional resonance—at least not for me.

I'm trying to come to terms with it, the vanishing of a world I cherished. Sometimes I think that is my purpose now, more than anything—to write an elegy for the parts of my world that are fast disappearing, if not already gone: stationery, telephones attached to walls, typewriters, phonographs, chalk. Find a moment or two to consider what we love, what we've lost, and what we want to remember, going forward. ♪



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