

I. RACHEL

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I am so sorry to be the one to tell you this, but you will never be happy.

I don't mean to hurt you by saying that. I say it because I think it is only fair that I be honest with you before we begin. I hope you appreciate this because no one will be fair or honest with you from here on out. So again, I'm telling you right now: You will never be happy. I've put it in writing for you, and you're very welcome.

I want you to go outside on the sunniest, sweatiest day of the year and quietly say it aloud. "I will never be happy." Even in the heat, you should be able to see your own cold, smoky breath acknowledge the statement. The only way to avoid seeing your breath is to say it proudly like a wise man. "I will never be happy!" Try it sometime.

When I think of you, I think of a cartoon cloud hovering over your head, a private torrential downpour. I see you soaking wet, your entire being drooping, and you're always sick because you can't stay dry. Depressed by the bad weather, you cry yourself a little river, but the tears evaporate and form into another cloud that rains on you even more. You can't win.

It will be sad. You will never get the girl. You will not save the world. You will never find true love. You will not find a trustworthy friend. You will never be satisfied. You will never have enough. The grass could always be greener. The grass will always need mowing. Your days will be long and contain no fun. Your nights will be lonely and not much else. You will always be waiting for better days that will never arrive. And you will most definitely never have peace of mind.

There will be days when you will collapse to your knees and screamingly plead your case to whatever might be listening. But The Thing Called

God can't help you, and It won't. I think of heaven as being a radiant crystalline metropolis, and in the tallest sparkling skyscraper, The Mayor stays busy making deals behind a door with no knob. He's forever inaccessible, not taking calls at this time. And then I envision all the perfect blond angels, devoid of genitalia and feet, congregating and pointing and laughing at all of us down here, saying "Those poor little things!" in between giggles. They will get a kick out of you.

We are more likely to answer or not answer your prayers than they. We will control your destiny and watch over you. Not gods or angels. Not the dead. Us. Men and women. Adults with tangled webs and hidden agendas. Former children.

We will allow you your needs but deny you your wants. We will see to it that any requirements for long-term happiness are kept just out of reach. If by some mistake you experience a sensation that resembles happiness, then by all means, embrace it for all it is worth. Make the most of it because we will not let it last.

Again, I'm sorry. It's true what they say. Life's not fair, especially for you. The only consolation I can offer is that the things you will be making amid all the loneliness and suffering will by far outlast your despair and our cruelty. Our torture is temporary, your work is forever. With this in mind, we all win in the long run.

So on behalf of everyone that you will ever meet, I apologize in advance for every heartache we will cause. You're in for a rough time, kid. Consider yourself warned.

Nevertheless,

Harlan

— *A letter I wrote to Vincent when he was seven*

I had to be awfully drunk to write a letter that sobering. It was some sorry time like 2:30 a.m., and writing it was the last thing I did before going to sleep. It was something I had to get out while I was feeling it, so I sat

down and violently purged it all onto hotel stationery.

This letter foreshadowed for Vincent the fifteen years he and I would work together. In those fifteen years, Vincent suffered from unrequited love, illness, and depression, among other afflictions, most of which I was directly or indirectly responsible for. An innovative entertainment company called New Renaissance hired me to cause this suffering so that Vincent would always have inspiration to create quality works of art.

The day after I wrote that letter, I made Vincent read it aloud to me. It was just him and me and the puppy I would later kill sitting in the living room of the home I would later burn down. Despite being only seven, he was able to read the letter perfectly, pronouncing every word correctly, including “genitalia.” He was slowed only by the illegibility of my drunken penmanship.

I was not supposed to write a letter like that. If Mr. Lipowitz had known, I would have been fired, or probably worse. But because of that letter, I can always say that I let Vincent know the score from the beginning. Most children don’t receive such honesty from adults. I wish someone had written me a letter like that when I was a kid.

But I don’t think the cautions in my letter really had a chance to sink into Vincent’s adorable brain. As soon as he was done reading, he tossed it aside on the thrift-store couch and began goofily dancing around me. He was trying his hardest to make me laugh, because he could see that I was on the verge of tears after hearing a child read the grim words of a bitter old man. A bitter old man who at the time was twenty-eight.

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I suppose I wasn’t as callous as I had hoped to be if the little bastard almost had me in tears after knowing me just one day. But back then, one of my favorite things to dwell on was this: Which is sadder? The elderly, because of all the things they’ve seen, had, and lost? Or children, who are pitifully unaware of the things they’ll see, have, and lose? This was sadder than both: a child who had the depressing wisdom of an older person. That’s what got to me when Vincent read my letter. But I didn’t cry.

The last time I ever cried was when I was eighteen. Rachel Hanks did it to me. She was the first girl I thought I loved.

Her favorite band was the Cure, her favorite TV show was *Twin Peaks*, and her favorite movie was *Deliverance*.

We had been together for about six months when I bore witness to the devastating revelation that she had been siphoning other boys' penises. I confronted her about her clandestine fellating, which prompted her to declare the end of our relationship. I was prepared for this, however, as my first band, the Botchilisms, had just broken up, leaving her little reason to stand by my side.

But I was not ready to surrender to my old loneliness yet. I still wanted her. She was a liar and a cheater and wanted no part of me; she was more desirable than ever. So we sat in her darkened living room and engaged in exhausting conversation, my weak rebuttals chasing her calculated refusals around in oblong circles, until she finally said, "Fine, Harlan. If you really love me so much, then cry for me."

"What's that?"

"Cry for me. Show me how much I mean to you. Squeeze out just one tear for me, and I'll be yours forever."

She was serious. At that point I hadn't cried since I was a knee-scraped child. I hadn't even cried when my father died a few years before, and here she was demanding a drop of grief just for her as she twisted her hair around her index finger.

I looked across the couch at this cruel mammiferous creature and the creases of her crossed legs, and I found myself attempting to cry. I thought of life without her, but it didn't make me sad enough. Our breakup had not yet occurred. I needed experience, images, memories, the past I'd preferred to avoid.

So I thought of Christmas Day at a nursing home and babies born brain-dead. I thought of flags flying at half-mast and cheaply made roadside monuments. I thought of JFK Jr. saluting his father's casket. I thought of the last night of a childhood summer vacation. I thought of *Terms of Endearment*. I thought of an old man alone eating a meal of French fries at Dairy Queen. I thought of my father, young, vibrant, and telling jokes, then bedridden and slowly dying, then young again. I thought about a beer bottle three-fourths empty. I thought about my childhood, especially the good times. And with this parade of depressing images passing through my mind, sure enough, a tear fell out.

It rolled down my cheek, and that girl, my supposed first love, licked it.

“I love the way tears taste salty like that,” Rachel said, knowing she would dump me the following day.

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But I ended up not crying that day with Vincent. He wouldn't allow it. He had me laughing instead, yodeling like that little mountain climber from *The Price Is Right*, rubbing against my legs in imitation of a cat, anything he could do to make me happy. And he succeeded. I adjusted my countenance, stiffened my posture, and resumed my role.

My role was being Vincent's manager. He was supposed to perceive me as competent and professional, as an important adult always to be obeyed and trusted. I dressed the part, wearing my dad's old sports coats, the kind with patches on the elbows, a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the top, a plain, dark-colored tie that I always loosened around the collar, gray slacks, and seldom-polished black wingtips. I was supposed to exude an air of intelligence, sophistication, and professionalism despite the fact that this entire business was ludicrous.

Even at twenty-eight, I would have preferred to wear ripped blue jeans and a T-shirt. But for this job, I attempted to be suave, borderline debonair with a streetwise elegance. My rapidly maturing hairline was accentuated by my perfectly slicked-back brown hair with its widow's peak, the most essential part of my costume. My angular, Germanic face with its pronounced features was always clean-shaven. With my ears sticking out and my ridged nose, I was on the south side of George Clooney as far as looks go. Handsomely ugly at best, I compensated with something that some might call style.

It didn't matter what I looked like, though, because Vincent didn't care. He didn't care about the way he dressed, either. The poorly groomed, disheveled seven-year-old would never change.

“Vincent, do you understand what I'm saying in that letter?”

“Yes,” he answered as he settled back down on the couch and picked up his puppy, a tiny brown terrier that looked just like Toto from *The Wizard of Oz*.

“What am I saying?”

“You’re saying that everyone will be mean, and I’ll be sad.”

“Yeah. Now, I can help you become a great writer and get your stuff out to everybody, okay? But I’m telling you right now that it’s going to be hard on you. I can guarantee you that it won’t be easy.”

Vincent stared at me and nodded, rubbing his puppy’s belly all the while. One day he would write a song about this dog that would become a hit single everyone would assume was about a woman.

“So listen,” I continued. “If you want me to leave you alone, just say so. Just tell me to go away right now, and I will, and you can have a nice, simple life without me.”

He kept rubbing the terrier’s belly.

“So do you want me to leave you alone?” I asked after a long pause.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’re nice to me.”

“No, I’m not. You just read that letter. That was not a nice letter, was it?”

“But nobody ever gave me a letter before.”

“Well, nobody ever gives me letters, either. I’m the only person I know that actually still writes them.”

“Why?” Vincent asked.

“Because of e-mails and because no one cares enough.”

“I never got one of those e-mails either.”

“You’re not missing much. I hate e-mails. I refuse to use e-mail anymore.”

“Why?”

“Lots of reasons. What really got me fed up was when I’d have fifty unread messages and forty-nine of them were junk mail from companies, and most of those had really dirty things in them. But anyway, are you sure you don’t want me to leave you alone?”

Two pairs of puppy eyes stared at me. This was Vincent’s normal expression, sad and worried. For the rest of his life, people would be asking him, “Are you okay, Vincent?” just for him to answer, “Why do you ask?”

“Do you not like me?” he replied.

“Hell yeah, I like you. You’re my fucking—I mean you’re my frigging idol.”

Vincent laughed and covered his puppy's ears. I didn't realize how profane I could be until I was in the presence of a child, just like I didn't realize how often I talked about death until I had been at a funeral home.

"The thing is, Vincent, is that you're brilliant. And I want to make sure that you use every bit of your brilliance so you can help as many people as possible by entertaining them without making them dumber. That's what New Renaissance is all about. But to do that, to use your brilliance as much as we can, we're not going to have much fun. Especially you."

"But you do like me?"

"Yeah. I do like you. That's why I'm telling you all this and giving you a choice even though I shouldn't. So just tell me to leave you alone and I will."

"That's okay. I might end up happy."

"But you won't."

"Yes I will."

"I know for a fact that you won't."

"Yes I will."

"No you won't."

"I will!"

"Won't."

"Will."

This went on for a while before I gave up.

"All right, Vincent. You win."

I thought about saying, "You brought this on yourself," but decided against it. Instead I said, "Why don't you turn on that big ol' TV for us so we can watch how bad it is?"

As he turned and reached for the remote control, I snatched the letter I had given him and tucked it into my coat pocket.

My favorite band is the Dead Milkmen, my favorite TV show is *Saturday Night Live*, and my favorite movie is *Punch-Drunk Love*.

Vincent turned on the TV, and I reached out my hand for him to give me the remote control.

"And, hey, who knows?" I said. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you can prove me wrong and end up as happy as anyone."

That was the first time I lied to Vincent, and with that lie began my awkward career as a young creator's shady angel, the kindly cruel inter-

loper between his present and future. With this lie, I inoculated him with something that could prove to be as harmful as the poison I would later sneak into his drink. I allowed this fatherless, doomed person to maintain an illusion of hope, and I even made eye contact when I did it.