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4000 words

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Letters Without Reply

#413, The Caledonia

450 W 17th Street

New York, NY 10011

Sept 5, 2022

My lovely Bella,

It's been barely a week since we parted, but every morning my heart sings for you, every afternoon my mind misses you, and every night my ... ok, that might be too much for a

letter! But seriously, I do feel lonely without you, and I wanted to send you something that packages up all my feelings in a physical page.

How are you? You've sent me some updates over text, but I want your full feelings. Your rants about how many new people you must talk to, your wishes that the fancy catering was some wings and fries instead, your gripes about your Orientation (and in a sense, your whole Masters program) being sponsored by evil megacorporations like Disney.

And hearing all that, I would console you, advise you to at least try to get to know the people. C'mon, they can't be all bad if they're trying to design roller coasters for a living! Some of the people you meet now might be your companions for years to come.

Speaking of companions, I've managed to settle in well enough with Dave. His apartment is really nice, in case my pictures haven't done it enough justice. The guest bedroom suite (yes I get a whole kitchen and lounge to go with the room) is larger than any apartment I'd been in before! Imagine having a mom who can even rent such an apartment, much less own it. The bastard doesn't even have to worry about damages.

When I first walked into his room, he told me to look up, only for me to see "Gullible"

sharped on the ceiling! What has late stage capitalism come to, if trust fund babies are the only ones with the right to alter their living space?

The prick's in a pickle tho, with the torn leg. I don't think he's left the house all week I've been here. It makes me feel much less guilty about mooching off him while I hunt down a place. I just hope my company is enough to stop him from going stir crazy. I mean, yesterday he was whining about how he was so bored with YouTube that sleeping was the best way to spend his time! It's concerning, seeing such an upbeat man brought so low.

Talk to you soon,

Your Manny.

~*~

Isabelle winced as she dropped her mail on the beat up gray picnic table she was using as her desk. Apartments were much cheaper to rent in Pittsburgh than in Boston, but much harder to furnish. You couldn't just pick up two and a half bedrooms of stuff off

the curb during Allston Christmas. You actually had to rent a uHaul and take it to Ikea, and until you did you were forced to sleep on your sheets and use your dad's garden scraps as countertop, coffee table and work desk.

Maybe she could've gone for the slightly pricier but well furnished university housing...

Isabelle ignored that thought by rifling through her letters. Tax document for Yichen Wang. Insurance card for Yichen Wang. Mail forwarding confirmation for Yichen Wang, thank god. Letter from her to Immanuel Garcia-Sanchez?

Manny had never learned the US style for addressing, no matter how many times she showed it to him.

Isabelle smiled as she read. Manny's words were sweeter than any of her past boyfriends, which was surprising given how recently their friendship had turned into romance. Maybe it was the charm of good friendship, since he knew how to make her laugh and take a stab at capitalism in the same sentence! The letter was over too soon, and she wished it would talk more about Manny than less about Dave.

She would write back soon, once she was settled in more and done with the busy schedule of orientation. For now, she was too tired to even reply to his texts...

~*~

#413, The Caledonia

450 W 17th Street

New York, NY 10011

Sept 9, 2022

My Baby Bella (can you imagine that's what they call creminis around here?),

You won't believe what happened to me tonight. I finally made my way to Times Square, to tick off my NYC tourist boxes. It was a lot. The square was lit as bright as day by the billboards, and there were more people in sight than I'd maybe gotten to know in the rest of my life so far. I tried getting away to a corner, away from the hubbub, when I got

asked by Elmo to take a picture with him! I wasn't tripping, it's just a giant

Elmo suit. My inner child leapt up in joy, cause of course Elmo was here to calm me

down. So I take a selfie, and then he starts asking for \$50!!! And, can you imagine, when

I refused he punched me in the stomach before running away.

Yes, yes, I'm fine. I'm making the story more dramatic than it needs to be. I got up and

managed to get back to Chelsea just fine. I didn't even tell Dave, cause I didn't want his

pretentious new yorker advice column about How To Not Be A Dumb Tourist. I don't

need that from someone who hasn't had to ride the subway once in his life!

I am a little concerned about the dude. He's keeping to his room more than I'd expected,

and I get pretty bad vibes whenever I've tried talking to him. One time when I tried

asking him how his day was, he mentioned how he "used to be a joker, but is now the

joker." The painkillers might be getting to him, haha. It's the age old story: frat

president breaks leg in championship game, doesn't want to admit college was when he

peaked. Well, he's my president, and I'm gonna be there for him!

My first week of work was fine. The Search team is much larger than I'd imagined, and I'm only working with the small subteam focusing on particular pieces of the UX. It's the piece that makes the most money though! Better bonuses to donate for the environment, y'know? There's only one other young-ish engineer though. Ben. He's funny enough, though a little too into rock and guitar sometimes.

I'm sorry I'm sending you these letters so frequently. I certainly don't expect you to be able to reply to them when you've had maybe one or two days since the letter was delivered. But I feel like the letters let me talk fully freely to you, y'know? The way we used to back in your room. And I think you might also find that you can talk freely in a reply, when you're not limited to the text input field on a messaging app.

Yours,

Manny.

~*~

Isabelle was lost in thought as she walked through the glass foyer of the CMU Entertainment Technology Center. She had read Manny's letter on the bus, and her brows were furrowed. He'd always been a bit airheaded, but getting scammed in Times Square was a new low. How did he expect to survive in a city if he couldn't stand up for himself?

She stopped. Wasn't today the day they started their build? That would mean class was on the lawn... oh shit she was so late!

And why was Manny so attached to Dave? She remembered how he'd tried to talk her up at the junior year Frat Formal, bragging about how he was the president-elect. She'd been too polite to end the conversation, and had ended up having to talk to him till 2am. And since she didn't go to bed with him, he'd been cold all of senior year, especially when she showed up to the formal as Manny's partner rather than friend.

Isabelle ducked under the caution tape into the area earmarked for building the rollercoaster, hiding from the professor behind a pile of two-by-fours. Her build partner, Amber, was nearby, tying up her pink-fading-to-fire-red-tips hair to fit under a hard hat.

Isabelle would wager her drill set that Amber dyed her own hair, and she would have to ask her for help fixing up her own hair later. Maybe once they'd gotten to know each other a bit better, at the end of the semester.

Manny was being very weird with the letters. They'd had their weekly call last night, and he hadn't mentioned any of these deep thoughts he seemed to be having. Maybe he was just being considerate.

She rotated the dial to tighten the hard hat onto her head, then shook her head to make sure it wouldn't fall off. As she looked up, she noticed Amber flashing her a smile. Her green eyes seemed to shine as the sunlight lit up her sunrise hair under the hat. Isabelle noticed for the first time that Amber had a beauty spot right above her lip. Has she always looked this pretty?

~*~

#413, The Caledonia

450 W 17th Street

New York, NY 10011

Sept 15, 2022

My Beautiful Belle,

Dave's gone off his rocker. Or whatever the expression is. Yesterday he went off on a whole rant about how pronouns were ruining society. I told him that was an extreme take, and tried to talk through the sociology with him. We had a very calm rational discussion. But I don't think we've gotten anywhere. He was still testy at the end.

Have you talked to him recently? Maybe a strong female role model like you could remind him that he's spouting bullshit. Don't let him know what I've told you though, about him being all redpilled.

Man, I wish I could talk to you face to face rather than having Dave be my only companion. I miss you!! I miss cuddling up on your couch, I miss chatting with you about how our day has gone, I miss just getting to exist in the same room as you!!! I

know it's the start of the semester and things are hectic, but write back, ok? I just can't feel like we're together through the "hi, how's it going" texts. You can tell me all about your classes, about your roommate drama, about that girl you're doing the build project with.

TTYD ;)

Manny

~*~

hi

how's it going? :p

haha

I see you're finally in a joking mood :D

well I have some bad news

I can't call tomorrow night

gotta catch up on homework

ugh

hope it's fun homework ig

is this for the build project?

no that's not really something I can do on a Sunday night!

tho it is taking up a lot of daylight hours

Amber and I joke about how we're basically married at this point

huh ok

to the coaster that is

you still there?

yep!

Sorry about the stuff with Dave. That sucks, glad you're trying with him

yeah maybe

have you texted him lately? might help

maybe

got any weekend plans?

I'm too busy doing work haha

house chores :/

actually looks like my roommates want to have a followup from our morning discussion :/

ciao!

bye!!

Love you <3

~*~

#413, The Caledonia

450 W 17th Street

New York, NY 10011

Oct 1, 2022

My Adoring Isabelle,

I went up to the Bronx today. That's all the way up on 185th street or so, where Dave's house is on 17th street. Takes just 40 minutes on the metro! It's much less flashy than Manhattan. Feels more like the grimy New York they warn you about, you know? I was up at the New York Botanical Garden. The first thing they told me at the ticketing station was how I could spend just a few extra dollars to get a pass for the full year! I

tried taking the cheaper option that they have for NYC residents, but the man insisted that it wouldn't let me see all the exhibits. So sure, I coughed up the \$35 dollars for the full entry fee. And do you know what I got to see? A park! It was just a large park, with trees and flowers as nice as you'd see in any other park! At one point I tried climbing one of the rocks, and a police officer came to scold me about ruining the sanctity of the gardens. At least in a park you can stand on the rocks! And then, near the end I finally found a good exhibit, in their greenhouse area. As soon as I entered, a sassy guard said "The gardens close in 10 minutes. Please follow me out". She was targeting just me, y'know, maybe cause I hurriedly said "mmhm" to her. There were so many other guests who she ignored while she escorted me out! And this was the exhibit I paid \$20 extra to get to see. Yeah well, you know I didn't get the membership after that fiasco.

It's all a mess, you know. Work keeps piling up. I think my subteam thinks I'm happy to do whatever work they give to me, and so they keep sending all their bug fixes and documentation tasks to me. I'd get some advice from Ben, but he's only joined six months before I did. And I don't necessarily want to get too into his schemes for using Dalle to get NFTs. But it does mean I don't have any time to enjoy the neighborhood. I thought I'd be walking on the highline every evening, visiting the Whitney every week. I

even got the damn membership for the museum! You'd think living 5 minutes from the office would give me enough time to enjoy the city. But that doesn't work when you enter the office at 9am and leave at 9pm!

Oh, Dave's injury is much better. He's ambling around the apartment now, talking shit to me at every opportunity he gets. How I'm sucking him dry, how I'm like a parasitic wasp who can't find his own hive, lots of mixed metaphors. It's honestly better than having him talk about the rest of the world. I swear if I have to listen one more time to his theories of trans women going undercover on the dating apps to "make honest Americans gay"...

I'm sorry. This is a lot. I didn't mean for this letter to be so negative. I don't mean to be mean, I just need to know that I can talk to someone and have them understand me.

Like, I get it that you're too busy to respond. You've told me that you got the letters and you're happy to read them. So there's no issue in actually posting them. But would it be too much to ask for you to get back, just once? Have you share your own sorrows, so I can know that it's not just me who's suffering from the distance? Or do you just not feel like we can talk like that anymore??

I miss you,

Immanuel

~*~

Isabelle had grown used to the gray picnic table desk. It was larger than most desks she might buy, and the old scuffs covering it meant she didn't worry about new exacto knife scratches.

Or the scratches on paper as she discarded words from her reply.

~~I'm sorry about the botanical gardens. I swear, it's much nicer in the fall. But they were way too rude to you. So I see why you didn't want to go back.~~

Too apologetic. She felt bad for him, but still did not see why he had to write her a whole letter about it. Deal with it yourself, man!

~~*I just wish you would stand up for yourself a bit more. With the botanical garden guard, with your coworkers, with Dave. I know you can make them listen to you!*~~

No, he wouldn't listen to advice like this. If it was going to stick, she needed to be less direct. And, was that all she wanted to say?

Look, I care about you a lot. But we're so far away, and it's not going to be just like us hanging out in my room, ok? You need to

A sharp noise from her phone distracted her. It was a noise her phone made only for Telegram noises, the app Amber had introduced to her. And sure enough, it was a picture from Amber, showing rows upon rows of colorful costumes.

Thinking of being a mermaid at the ETC party! ;-)

Isabelle looked at words she'd written, and decided that she'd sleep on it. This was a hard letter to write. She collapsed onto her bed, quickly typing out a reply to Amber's texts.

~*~

Apt #2

305 1/2 Second St,

Jersey City, NJ 07302

Oct 24, 2022

My Darling Bella,

Davey and I are through. Doneso. No bueno.

He can complain all he wants about the world. He can call me a pussy to my face. I've suffered through all that. But I couldn't stand him bringing you into our fights. He kept piping about how your instagram stories all have this pink-haired girl. About how I was so inept that I'd made you swear off men for good. That bastard even offered to be my wingman, saying that I needed to show you what men are really capable of.

I wish I'd just charged at him and torn his leg anew. Yeah I wish. But then my address would be in a jail somewhere, y'know? So I just left. Without saying anything. Ben had a friend with a free room. Said Jersey City was a good place to avoid the New York taxes. Well there's a fucking silver lining, huh?

But yeah, that's my new address, up at the top. Don't go replying to Dave's address, cause I won't be able to pick up from there. Y'know, if you ever decide to write back.

Manny

~*~

Apt #2

305 1/2 Second St,

Jersey City, NJ 07302

Oct 28, 2022

Isabelle,

You know, I get it. You have midterms right now. I'm sure your build project has some deadline or the other coming up soon. I get it. You've never been good at writing out your thoughts. These letters must be hard for you.

But honestly, some meaningful words would be nice. Something more substantive than "I'm sorry this is happening to you." Something that showed you fucking gave a shit.

Yours for fucking ever,

Immanuel.

~*~

Isabelle stood at the edge of the dance floor, cradling her red solo cup with both hands. She'd been edging backwards for a while as more and more people joined the wild throng, celebrating the overlap of end of midterms with All Hallow's Eve. The dark red

liquid in her cup was disappearing at a rate faster than even the freest dancers, which was dangerous since it was equal parts diet coke and vodka.

Isabelle liked dancing, but she had too much on her mind. Like Manny's latest whinings.

How was she supposed to know what she would say if she had no idea how she felt?

Well, bad was the first thing she felt, but how do you translate that into "some meaningful words"?

She didn't like the songs they were playing anyways.

A black and a red power ranger stumbled towards her from the huge mass. They tried swaying towards her, forming a dance circle, except they kept stumbling and falling back. Eventually they got the hint from her brilliantly blue and yellow costume, and slipped away. She knew dressing up as Flounder would be a good strategy.

Isabelle was deep in thought about what it meant to be someone's for fucking ever when she got the notification. Three voice messages from Manny. 1:21, 0:38, 3:54. The waveforms suggested they got louder as the messages progressed.

I can't deal with this right now.

She looked up, and spotted Amber in the crowd. She was resplendent, touched up red hair resting perfectly on purple bralette and disco lights reflecting off her gossamer green trousers. Isabelle walked towards her, the alcohol providing her the moves needed to avoid the swaying crowd. Amber smiled as she approached, raising her hands and dancing with a new vigor. Isabelle put her hands on those arms, bringing them down as she drew her face close for a kiss.

~*~

Apt #2

305 1/2 Second St,

Jersey City, NJ 07302

Nov 9, 2022

My Lovely Bella,

Sorry about the last letter. I wasn't in a good place.

Sorry about those voice messages. It was late, I'd gotten drunk at the Halloween party, it had just felt like everyone was pitying me. It was not a good time to talk to you.

Sorry for being so bad at communicating. I wish I could've told you these things over text, had a real conversation, instead of bottling them up into explosive letters. I guess I just couldn't deal with the pattern of me sending five messages to get a one word reply from you.

But things are better now. Dave pulled through, the big man! His redemption arc is one for the books, but apparently he's found a girlfriend and her trans friends finally talked some sense into him! Between you and me, I know he still messes up the pronouns sometimes, but he's so apologetic about it.

What got me through was Ben's guitar. The guy can play, you know. And even better, he can teach. We're even talking about starting up an emo band. I guess New Jersey's a good place for that, even if we're 20 years too late.

It feels good to get this all off my chest, you know. I hope you read this before you leave for thanksgiving. We'll talk then, right?

TTY5 <3333

Manny

~*~

#413, The Caledonia

450 W 17th Street

New York, NY 10011

Nov 11, 2022

Hey Isabelle,

Guess we haven't talked in a while, huh? I know you've heard everything from Manny.

About the fight, and also the reconciliation. I'm sure he's told you way more than you need to know, so I won't bore you by playing the "catching up" game.

What are you doing, Isabelle? Manny really doesn't deserve all the shit you've given him.

Can't you see how you've taken a wonderful young man, and turned him into... into a self loathing monster!

Ok, I can't blame it all on you. But I think I should blame some of it on you, ok? Even Dora thinks so. She said you're being a manipulative bitch. Of course, in the nicest Dora words. I'm translating into terms you and I can appreciate.

I was wrong to hate you before. I hated you just because you were a woman. And I knew that was wrong. But I've managed to finally figure out what I hate about you. It's not the woman part. It's the dick part. It's the part that thinks it's ok to not text a partner for

weeks when he's going through some of the shittiest parts of life. It's the part that's ok with eyeing up the pretty girl on the build team while ignoring her boyfriend's letters.

I beg of you, don't ignore this letter like you did all of Manny's. I'm trying to make this a wakeup call for both of you. He's unhappy, and you don't like him any more than you like a vacuum cleaner. So just end it, won't you, when you see him for thanksgiving?

You might've convinced Manny that he understands you better than you do yourself. But he's too blind to read between the lines. He's too gullible to see that you like someone at CMU more than you've ever loved him. So please, end his suffering. I beg you.

Best,

David