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I Hope You Read This and Feel Awful

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I Hope You Read This and Feel Awful

Clara Anderson-Cameron

To: *racheljohnson@gmail.com*

Subject: *feeling lonely*

It's cold today, Mom. I found a tree on my walk, and I wanted to climb it, even though that's something that kids do. I remember using your knee as a stepping stool to reach the first branches on that huge cedar in the backyard. This tree was not nearly as good of a climbing tree as that one, but I was still tempted. I walked up to it and felt how sturdy the lowest branches were. I could have done it; it was a solid tree. Then some people came up behind me on the sidewalk and I had to act like I wasn't just feeling up a tree. It was awkward, in order to flee I just walked further into the woods, which must have looked creepy. I laughed out loud once they had gone by. I was laughing by myself, and it was nice until I felt really lonely.

It hits me suddenly like that. Whenever I'm feeling okay, I get this wave of realization that this is just my destiny. That I will always laugh alone and smile alone and love alone. I think that loneliness was my birthright, Mom. You carried it like a tumor inside of you and I absorbed some of it in the womb. You probably think you're happy where you are but I'll bet you can still feel all that loneliness, can't you? I hope that you realize what you've done. I hope that you get a headache when you think about me. Does that make me a bad person? No worse than you, mom.

Emilia sent an email at the same time each day. Then she shut her laptop, put some water on for tea, and thought about what to have for dinner. Lately, her messages had been getting more and more bitter,

until they stopped feeling therapeutic and the stomach aches came back. Her Tums supply was waning, and she was seriously considering stopping the emails altogether. Clearly that train of thought hadn't arrived at the station, because there she was, sautéing onions over the stove while her hate mail raced through the internet at breakneck speed en route to some middle-aged woman in Oregon. (At least that's the last place Emilia knew she had been).

In true Emilia fashion, she kept a careful eye on her dinner, bringing the heat down just a hair when her veggies took on a bit of a smoky odor, and cranking it up again to boil water for pasta. The macaroni box sat perched on the very edge of the counter, ready to be dumped into the pot once the stove did its job. Unfortunately, Emilia was too deep in thought to stop her own arm from swinging wide in search of the saltshaker and sending elbow macaroni flying all over her kitchen floor.

On any other day, this would have been fine—a minor inconvenience at worst. Today, however, was not a good day for the pasta to go flying. Instead of finding her broom or taking a few deep calming breaths, Emilia crumpled like a rag doll and started crying, messily, there on top of her mess. A double mess.

Someone looking in on Emilia's life might guess today's horrible meeting with her unfeeling and insultingly young supervisor was the cause of her meltdown. Or maybe the way that yesterday her doctors had nothing for her but pitying side eyes and expensive prescriptions. Or even the shitty third date last Friday where Emilia discovered, all too late, that the woman she'd been going out with was very much married—to a man, with whom she had three kids. No, none of this quite explained why she was sobbing on the kitchen floor after all.

Emilia was crying mostly because today was the fifth anniversary of her father's death. In a small cemetery across the state, her father was buried beneath a flowering crab tree. On the day of the burial, she'd driven herself there, following the dust cloud trailing behind the gravediggers' pickup-turned-hearse. She'd helped lower her father into the ground and tossed dirt over the last person who really knew her. Yes,

it was a hard day for Emilia, and she didn't feel like cleaning up her mess yet, so she cried over it instead.

Emilia typically avoided messes like this, but she'd been shown again and again just how unavoidable some things are in life. Hell, from birth she'd known that some things were unavoidable. Like genetics, and fathers dying, and loneliness, and messes on the kitchen floor.

What she hadn't realized, in all of this mess, was that the email address she'd been sending these letters to for years didn't actually belong to her estranged mother, but rather a sweet older woman with graying hair and deep smile lines.

*

Deborah Lancaster lived alone in an old cottage that needed repairs. She was a widow, and she knew no one in the village who could fix the clogged sink in her bathroom, or the saggy patch of ceiling just above her loveseat. The loveseat still had a dent in it from where her Henry used to sit to watch the news. She often ran a fond hand over the divot, imagining she could still feel him next to her.

Deborah read lots of books. She frequented the local library, where she occasionally logged on to one of their clunky computers to search the web (with the reluctant assistance of a young worker with a *million* better things to do).

It was March of four years ago when she discovered that she had an email account. Her eldest daughter had been visiting and griping about the inconvenience of long telephone calls, begging her to just answer the emails she'd been sending instead of roping her into an hour-long conversation at the end of the day.

Emails? Deborah had exclaimed. *That's news to me!*

The next morning Deb made her way to the library with a small piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, with Margaret's detailed instructions on how to check her Gmail using the library's old computers. Forty-five minutes and a very haggard-looking attendant later, Deborah Lancaster opened her inbox to find hundreds of unread emails. Only a few from her daughter. The rest, from someone with the email address of *emreinheart@umi.edu*. Baffled, Deb had toggled to the very bottom

of the page, reading subject lines such as “are you even getting these?” and “i hope you read this and feel awful,” and, simply, “dear bitch; sincerely, your daughter.”

Now, Deborah was no detective, but she quickly caught on to the simple fact that this “daughter” was not one of hers, and so she must not be the “bitch” who was the intended recipient.

Here one might note the fact that Deborah was a big fan of mystery novels. She had a tendency to flip a few pages ahead to solve the crime before the main character could. Some would call it ruining the plot, but Deb could only stand being kept in the dark for so many chapters. This inbox was turning into her next mystery novel, something to be unraveled. She felt rather unscrupulous as she located the very first email from “emreinheart.” With a quick glance to each side to make sure no one was nearby, she deemed it safe enough to open the email with the subject “august third” and watched as a few paragraphs of text filled her screen. Deborah readjusted her bifocals and began to read.

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: august third

Mom, I'm so angry with you right now I can't breathe. I knew you were mercurial, but I didn't imagine you'd just walk away like this. Dad is barely cold in the ground, and you left me with nothing but a note. Who does that??! I suppose you do that, or else we wouldn't be having this "conversation." It has been a few hours since I found your note. I wanted to yell at you, scream in your face. I wanted to make you cry and lose your hearing from all the screaming, but you discontinued your phone number. I discovered that as soon as I tried to call you and make you listen, but there was no ringing on your end, just a dial tone. How horribly final it sounded in my ear.

I googled your name and found this email. God, I hope it's really yours. Your name is pretty common, but I swear this is the only email that popped up, so I am throwing caution to the wind and using it. I need you to hear me, I need to get my piece out into the world somehow, otherwise I'll just feel suffocated, stifled. Otherwise, I'll drown

in all of the things I didn't get the chance to say. I need you to know that I hate you. And not for the reason you might think. I hate you because you could have stayed. You could have stayed and been horrible and draining and cruel, but you would have been here. I would have hated your guts but still held your hand when you died. Now who will hold your hand? I don't think anyone will get close enough to touch you again. If they did it would be to haul you onto a gurney.

Was that over the line? I sure as hell hope so. My whole existence has been dancing me closer and closer to the line and now I'm stomping all over it, Mom. If I could just know that this was reaching you, that you were reading this (wherever you are) I'd be able to go to sleep with a smile on my face. I'll pretend that you are, how about that? I'll go to bed now and dream that you're hearing me, and that you can't look away even though you really want to stop reading. If I'm a train wreck, mom, you're the conductor.

Goodnight. (Actually, badnight)

*

Emilia woke up to the same alarm every day. She'd set it the day she got her new phone, and it had been dutifully going off each morning with the same cheery *b-b-b-bring* as the first few hundred times. Instead of being cheery, it'd become faintly nauseating, and her main objective was to make it stop. Today, it was particularly cold outside of her covers and she loathed to leave their refuge and start her day. She had a bad feeling about today. She didn't exactly wake up with a pep in her step and a twinkle in her eye most other mornings, but today, something felt off.

Even with her shoes on and her keys in hand she hadn't shaken the feeling that she'd be better off crawling back into bed. Unfortunately, bills had to be paid. So, she tugged on her jacket and was just stuffing her phone into her tote bag when her inbox chimed brightly. Something told her to check it right away. It had no subject, and it came from an unknown sender. This person was not in Emilia's contacts. Setting her keys back down on the counter she slid herself onto a stool and toggled to the Gmail app. Upon opening the message, Emilia could see the

address.

There on her screen, clear as day, was a response to her most recent outgoing email. The one she'd sent just last night, before spilling the pasta and sobbing until her teeth hurt. Heart beating out of her chest, Emilia scrolled to read the message, which could only be from one person.

Her mother.

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

As I begin to draft this electronic mail, I realize that I don't actually know your name, which is funny, because I feel as though I know you most intimately. I should call you something though, otherwise I'll just feel foolish, tapping away on this keyboard to no one. From this moment on I'll address you as Em, seeing as it is a part of your email address.

First of all, I want to apologize. I learned early on that you would much rather these messages reach someone else. I will let you down right this moment: I am not your mother. I'm not sure who she is, (although I must admit I don't much like the sound of her!). I did some sleuthing when I first discovered your predicament, and found that my daughter Margaret, bless her, wanted to keep me safe on the internet, so when she created my "email account" she used a name from some television show of hers. I'll say I am not sure what kind of no-good people would endeavor to infiltrate an old woman's internet identity, but I suppose my Margaret only does what she thinks is best. All this to say, I have, by the hand of God, ended up with the address linked to your mother's legal name. I want to apologize again, and I do hope that you aren't too heartbroken by this response.

Secondly, I would like to confess something horrible. I have not been a saint. I have not turned a blind eye like any decent person would. I found these emails from you four years ago, and I must admit that I've read every one since. The folks at the library must think I'm addicted to some computer game, when really, I am sticking my nose

in your private affairs again and again. I dislike myself very much for this reason, but I can't stop reading what you send. I suppose today I've reached my breaking point, as I am finally sending something back.

Thirdly, I have a question about your most recent message. Or perhaps it is more of a piece of my mind than a question. You say that you think loneliness is your destiny. Let me ask you this, would fate have connected us like this if you were really supposed to be all alone? I think that another reason for my responding to you is to let you know that you haven't really been as alone as you think. All these years, I have been hearing you. And I know that I am not your mother, but I want you to know that it is not the void you've been shouting into. This void has a name, and that name is Deborah.

Stay strong, Em.

*

Across the Atlantic Ocean from Emilia and her phone screen, Deborah sat parked in front of the boxy monitor and waited. She had been there for two hours straight, staring at the top of her inbox, hitting refresh as often as she remembered.

Therese, the manager of the library, had become something of a friend since Deb had begun visiting more regularly. They played bridge together on Thursday nights, and Therese's very capable husband had graciously agreed to redo Deb's roof over the coming summer. Now, Therese was keeping an eye on the older woman. She was worried about her, seeing as she had hardly moved since she'd arrived.

"Debbie, love, can I help you sort anything out, there?"

"No, no, no," Deborah sang back "I'm just waiting for everything to load on this piece of rubbish, you know how it is!"

A surreptitious glance at the screen revealed nothing out of the ordinary to sweet, caring Therese, just an empty inbox. Retreating, the younger woman set about placing returned books back onto their respective shelves.

Deb let loose a breath she'd been holding. She didn't quite know why she refused to tell anyone about her secret pen pal of sorts. Maybe she just wanted to keep Em to herself. Maybe it was a comfort to read

the heavy, prose-like lines of each new email that rolled in. She would have told Henry, at least—she knew that. No secrets between them, ever. But he was gone, and she was alone, so she held this secret even closer to her heart as if it might somehow reach him.

Deborah refreshed her page and promptly got back to waiting.

*

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Deborah, I don't even know what to say. I am so sorry that you have been receiving these awful messages. I hope you weren't too disturbed. I will stop sending them immediately.

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Em, I never said that I was disturbed. I don't know how to explain it, but you have been a breath of fresh air in this life of mine. I thought that perhaps I had reached the epilogue of my story already, but you've pulled me right back into the thick of it. Please, don't stop on my account.

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Deborah, you're a good sport, but I know how dramatic and vulgar I can get in these. Sorry again.

P.S. I don't know how old you are, but you keep making yourself out to be elderly. I hope you know how envious I am of you. Growing old was one of my birthday wishes as a child, however morbid that sounds. Anyways, I am officially cutting you loose. No need to respond, you are free.

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Em, you think you know dramatic and vulgar? Try being elderly, as you have rightfully guessed me to be. I worked with all kinds of vulgarity

in my career, no need to censor yourself now. Also, I wonder what kind of girl wishes to grow old, when all I do is ache to be young again.

To: *racheljohnson@gmail.com*

Subject: *RE: feeling lonely*

Deborah, have you ever heard of Huntington's disease? I have it.

*

Emilia regretted sending that last email. It never ends well when she tells people about her genetic misfortune. Since middle school, she's been an expert at driving people away. Kids thought it was contagious, and then as they all got older, it just made whoever she told depressed. They looked at her as if she were already withering away. They started talking to her slowly and in a quieter tone, with the reverence that one reserves for a funeral home or a chapel. That was why she never told her one- or two-night stands about this beast crouched in her DNA, waiting to strike.

Deborah was the first person who couldn't treat her differently to her face. However, Deb could easily stop responding. Emilia wished that didn't make her as sad to think about as it did.

After getting over the idea that her years of attempting to reach her mother had been for nothing, she felt a sort of release. Like she'd still been tethered to Rachel Johnson in some innate, unconscious way. The first response from Deborah snipped right through that tether, and—aside from a hollow voice in the back of her mind telling her that she'd probably never see her mom alive again—Emilia felt remarkably free.

So, when Deborah kept responding, Emilia gave her every out before giving in to the odd relationship. And now she had forked over her biggest secret to this stranger who already knew her disturbingly well thanks to her gut-spilling sequence of emails.

A few days went by without any response from Deborah. Emilia went to the office and ate three meals a day, but it felt an awful lot like her life was on pause. Without word from her new correspondent, she was just idling in neutral. *Oh well*, she thought to herself. She supposed

she'd better get used to it.

*

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

I am sorry for being out of touch. I had a few appointments in the city and was away from the computer. It gave me some time to think about your last email. I did some research, and I have to say, you're an awfully brave girl. The books have nothing good to say about Huntington's, nor does the internet. You must have been tested, because from what I can tell it is not a sure thing to inherit the disease. If so, I hate the way your body has decided to betray you. I know all too well how unfair chronic disease can be. My late husband fought Parkinson's until the end. He would have liked reading about the fire in your heart. On the bad days he always looked at me and told me that he was already dead. I believed it, too.

My dear, ask yourself if you have that same mentality—buried or on the surface. If you find it within you, snuff it out. You are young, let yourself be young. I promise you, it is that simple.

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Am I young? According to the doctors I'm nearing my final decade. I was middle aged at 18. Do you know what that does to a girl, Deborah? I hope you don't. You might be wondering if I resent my mother for giving birth to me despite the risk. Well, she didn't know she had it until I was almost grown up. She got me tested immediately, and here I am. She could have still been a great mother, but I think she was in the casket before the tremors even started, like your husband. It starts with tremors for some. Then the stumbling, the mood swings. That's all I saw of it before she left me. You're a mother, do you think she left for my own good? Or did she do it selfishly?

I hope your appointments went well, by the way.

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

You are young. No more debate on that, please, not good for my blood pressure. ☺ Margaret taught me how to leave emoticons, so there is a wee smile for you. As a mother, I would have stayed. I assure you, I would have faced it all by your side. That being said, I don't know the full story. I just don't know, Em. If it helps, you did nothing wrong. I'm sure you know that already, but I wanted to remind you of the fact.

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

Thank you for your words, Deborah. I'm not religious, but I think you must be my guardian angel. My father would have found this situation of ours hilarious. He always liked serendipitous things. What do you think about me going out and being young? I could do it if I tried. I'd be rusty but maybe it's worth it. Let me know.

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

I think that's a winner, Em. I don't know what young means in this day and age, but you should seek it out. You will never regret trying, will you? Only not trying. I'm sure your father would have liked to see you live. I don't mean just breathing, but living. So go do him proud! Go prove your body wrong, my dear.

To: racheljohnson@gmail.com

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

I will. I'm signing off for now, will you be here if I message you some other day?

To: emreinheart@umi.edu

Subject: RE: feeling lonely

I will be here.

Emilia was surprised to find herself crying. She was seated at her

desk, glistening face lit by the light of her computer screen, rereading those four words over and over again, with the same thrill each time. Her heart felt ten pounds lighter, her head clearer. It was that simple, just as Deborah said. She was the youngest she'd ever be, and the oldest she'd ever be, both in this very moment. What was that but a gift? To now have the most wisdom she'd ever have, the most life.

Emilia heard a quiet tapping against the window and looked up to see Hallmark-esque flakes of snow twirling to the ground. The sky was full of white. On a whim, she stood, wrenched her apartment door open and sprinted the three flights of stairs to the exit. She stumbled over the steps and tumbled to the damp ground. On her back now, she felt cold flakes kiss her cheeks and melt away, mingling with the salty tears pouring from her eyes. She lost herself in the flurry. Even surrounded by icy wind and frozen earth, she didn't feel cold.

Only alive.

Clara Anderson-Cameron is a sophomore undergraduate student at UND. An English major and French minor, she reads and writes as much as possible. Words have always been her happy place.