

Open Letters.

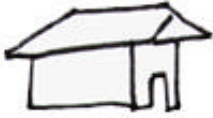
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August 6, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 7)

This week,
Open Letters features the collected letters of:
Michael Welch,
Aliza Pollack,
Kevin Patterson,
Ethan Watters,
and Jorge Colombo.

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Open up.



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Dear Readers,

This week, after a couple of themed weeks, *Open Letters* returns to its old, themeless self. And yet, even within themelessness, connections cannot help but emerge: by accident, not design, many of this week's letters happen to deal with illnesses, both temporary and chronic.

This issue's first letter deals with an illness of the temporary kind. The author is Michael Welch, an editorial assistant at the *St. Petersburg Times*, in Florida, where he writes occasionally about entertainment.

Michael is also the proprietor of his own web site, where he writes about life as a young man on the Gulf Coast. It's an interesting and very readable experiment in literary honesty; as Michael explains in one entry, "I want to write about the parts of myself that people might find distasteful."

I don't know much more about Michael than what I've read on his site, and in today's letter; his letter came to me over the electronic transom. But given the way that he writes, I feel that I know him pretty well already.

The Anxiety Train

A letter from Michael Welch, on a bad trip.

Tampa, Florida • July 31, 2000

Al,

Thank you for the birthday card. I received it several days ago, but kept it sealed until yesterday, my birthday proper, and opened it at the end of that horrible day. Your card made me stop crying.

My friends threw me a party two nights ago, a midnight cookout in the courtyard of my house. It was hot as shit outside despite the late hour, per usual for Florida. It was a total sausage party: no women, just dudes.

Damon got me a nice glass marijuana pipe. Aaron gave me an expensive bottle of rum. My sister bought me a quarter of brown, Mexican dirt weed. Jack gave me a joint. Crispin gave me a joint. Cameron gave me a joint. Sean bought me a six-pack of gourmet, imported beer and Lance gave me a hit of Ecstasy. Do you see the pattern here? Me too.

So instead of enjoying the party, I spent it feeling very silly about my image at the age of twenty-six. Do none of my friends (besides you) notice that I read and paint and listen to music?

But my dismay over the telling gifts didn't come close to the despair that marked my birthday itself. The morning after my party, Angela called and said she wanted to take me to lunch. Her offer was a show of civility, a rarity in the three weeks since we broke up. So I couldn't decline, even though I was pissed that she skipped my birthday party the night before to hang out with that eighteen-year-old boy whom she's been fucking for five weeks now (you do the math).

If I had declined her offer, it would have been my first birthday we had spent apart in

five years. I knew the day would end in a fight (as it has the past five years), but I guess that not spending my birthday with her was an act of letting go that I wasn't yet ready for.

But I am now, fuckin-A! Listen to this:

I ate Lance's birthday Ecstasy before she picked me up, thinking it would improve the situation. The couple times I've done X have not been lovey-dovey hyper-idealism at all. It's never made me love the people of Earth any more than usual; it simply makes me feel less guilty for not loving them. Everything is lucid and my idealism dissipates. So, I figured, taking Ecstasy before lunch with Angela meant that I'd calmly smile my way through the inevitable fighting and see clearly and unsentimentally that we do not belong together. And I need that.

I could already feel the chemicals rumbling in my twitching extremities when she hugged me at my front door. I noticed that she smelled differently. I assumed it was the smell of young boy, but chose to ignore it and wait for the X to choke out my anxieties.

I didn't tell her I'd eaten drugs, but I did ask her to drive. I didn't want to swerve off the road and kill us both if I saw God or something.

My body tensed up terribly as the chemicals overtook it, but that always happens at first. No matter how good I feel later on in any drug experience, I'm always engorged with nervous energy in the beginning, like I'm not accomplishing something that really needs to get done.

Angela's madness began when she asked me where I wanted to go to eat and I told her I didn't really care. Many of our fights revolved around my inability to suppress my opinions, so it always infuriates her when I say I don't have an opinion. And since she flounders in the face of decision-making, she grew more and more angered by my apathy as we wandered for miles in her Nissan through residential neighborhoods where there obviously weren't any restaurants. She

rolled along really slowly, as if a restaurant might suddenly appear out of nowhere. In the meantime she asked me again and again, more and more aggressively each time, where I wanted to eat.

I closed my eyes and faced out the window, and in the blackness I pictured the calming effects of the drugs racing against her growing anger, like two noisy, silver trains on parallel tracks. I rooted for the drug train, but, surprisingly, the anxiety train was winning: I felt worse and worse as the X welled up in me.

I suggested that she drive downtown, where there were restaurants, and I'm sure it seemed to her that I was just being dramatic by staring out the window and not looking at her when I talked. But whenever I opened my eyes, the scenery stuttered like a defective VCR tape, and so I hid my eyes from her in case they were doing drug-induced back-flips.

By the time we got downtown, I knew the Ecstasy was bad: I was sweating, my face was flushed, my soul felt rotten. The veins in my arms looked darker than normal and I wondered if there wasn't dirt in my blood. My stomach was cramped, the world was skipping, I couldn't see; and when she yelled at me for being too quiet, I was too miserable to hide it anymore.

"Listen, man," I said as I turned around, "I know you're gonna be even more mad, but I took some Ecstasy that Lance gave me for my birthday, and I don't know what the fuck is going on, it must be dirty or something, 'cause I'm freaking out."

The word "dirty" reverberated in me as she yelled and pointed in my face, her other hand on the steering wheel. "This is YOUR fault and I'm NOT going to stop. You fuckin' deserve this, you stupid druggie!"

She'd taken enough acid to know what kinds of dark shores your mind can run aground on when you're tripping, and she was ready to take me there, happily, despite my pleading. Her relentless yelling made me feel like a cartoon character being

pounded into the ground like a railroad spike by a giant hammer.

"Please please PLEASE, don't yell at me, I'm suffering enough. I feel like I want to die already without you yelling at me!"

I was holding onto the car's door handle the way prostitutes do: ready to roll out at any second if their john gets weird or violent.

Angela was merciless, man. My view was totally pixilated and I was SO disoriented that I must have told her I was sorry a hundred times. She got louder and uglier, until I was begging her for mercy. I told her, "It's all my fault. Everything. Just please stop. I'm so sorry, trust me, I'm sorry. You're making me want to die. Just please stop. Save it for later, after I come down from this. I will stand still and quiet for three days straight and let you yell in my face like a drill sergeant if you promise not to make this any worse right now."

"Really?" she stopped and asked, smiling, it seemed, with morbid curiosity. "You will?"

"Yes," I told her.

"You'll let me yell at you as much as I want for three days and you won't fight back at all?" she asked, still smiling, calming considerably.

"Yes," I assured her, ready to do anything to make her stop.

"I don't believe you! I don't trust you!" she yelled, and continued to rail.

At a stoplight, just as I was sure I was about to cry dirty, black tears, I looked over and saw a policeman a hundred yards away on horseback, watching us wig out in the car. I made eye contact with his horse and wished I'd opted for a birthday pony ride rather than

an Ecstasy trip. I thought I saw the cop stretching his arms out to me as if offering to hold me and comfort me. I was drawn to him, and my hand moved independent of me, like that movie "Evil Dead," and suddenly the car door was open and I was stepping out and walking toward the cop, planning to ask him for a ride home on his horse.

But somehow I realized through my delirium that if I ran to him for salvation, I would have to admit that I took drugs, and he would arrest me. Angela screamed at me to get back in the car, so, with the policeman and his horse both watching me, I got back in, lapsed into a puddle of tears and asked her to drive me home. Lunchless.

I stared back out the window at the skipping scenery made more abstract when refracted through my tears, and I fell deeper and deeper into sooty despair as she continued to yell at me all the way home.

We pulled up in front of my house and I opened the car door before the car stopped moving. She actually sped up when I stepped out. I ran toward the house and she backed the car up and stopped, screaming at the back of my head, "Get back here and shut the fucking car door!"

I slammed my front door and locked it, ran inside and lay in bed and smoked one of the birthday joints and calmed down. But I didn't stop crying until I remembered my unopened birthday card from you lying in the kitchen by the bottle of rum Aaron bought me.

I really really appreciate it, man. Thanks.

Seriously.

Your Friend,

Michael

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Aliza Pollack, a marketing consultant who lives in Los Angeles.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote in an editor's letter that I was pleased that *Open Letters* seemed to be developing an episodic strain (as in the letters of X. and Chana Shvonne Williford), and I invited readers to write me if they found themselves "in the middle of an episode."

A couple of days later, I got an email from Aliza, with the subject line "Have I got an 'episode' for you." Her email began,

I am twenty-nine years old (just, just) and for the last six months have been going through chemotherapy and now radiation for Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma....Cancer, I have learned, is its own world. If you are not involved with it in some way, it has no bearing on your life. And why should it? Invincibility and all. However, if you've got the C key, you're in.

I wrote back, and she and I began corresponding about what kind of open letter she might be able to write from her new world of cancer. It wasn't immediately clear how we should proceed – Aliza was nearing the end of her treatments, and so proposed writing about that, but I was interested in the story from the beginning. Aliza came up with a solution: she'd been writing letters – emails, actually – throughout the process, to a friend from school named Miriam, who was living in Europe. Aliza sent me those letters, and they seemed to me a far truer and more compelling version of the progress of her chemotherapy than anything she could possibly write retroactively; her first letter to Miriam, written six months ago, is today's letter.

Two more letters from that collection will follow over the next few weeks, until we catch up with Aliza's current situation. Then she'll take over in the present tense, and recount her episode in *Open Letters* as it continues.

A Different Quality of Pain

A letter from Aliza Pollack, on her first treatment.

Los Angeles, California • August 2, 2000

Dear Miriam,

Yup. *Interesting* has been the key word lately. Under the circumstances, I'm okay. This has been a whirlwind week in which I have gone from prospective bronchitis sufferer to cancer patient. I got the final diagnosis last Tuesday: non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I am most certainly numb. *This* is the result of the four-month-old "muscle spasm" in my chest and the sporadic numbness throughout my left arm. Despite all the many tests and acupuncture appointments, it took me

coughing up some blood for the doctors to get their acts together.

On the one hand, I'm relieved that I finally know what is going on with me. I'm tired of lugging myself to countless doctors and having to "prove" that, indeed, something is not right with my body. I had started to write my symptoms down so I wouldn't forget a thing when I was at an appointment, in order to maximize the opportunity. But, Christ. I

ruled out cancer four *months* ago when one of the lame-ass doctors told me that my "discomfort" could be eradicated by physical therapy. I had envisioned playing with big, red plastic balls and hanging from uneven bars. Fast forward to the present as I contemplate chemotherapy (six treatments, one every twenty-one days, for around four or five months), which has one crappy rap. I don't know many people who have said: "I loved it! I give it a thumbs-up."

My doctor gave me the option of starting Wednesday (the day after the final diagnosis) or Monday. I chose Monday. I couldn't face it on Wednesday – that would have been only a week since the blood-coughing incident, and I hadn't really integrated the news. I kind of wanted to hold it off for as long as possible in the hopes that it might just go away. But I coughed up some more blood on Friday and experienced a different quality of pain in the chest and my doctor said come on in for your first treatment. All I remember was trying to hold in the tears while talking to the scheduler at the doctor's office. I didn't do such a hot job. I couldn't make the appointment. My mum had to make it for me. It was almost farcical when she asked me when was a good time for me to come in. As if I had any sense of time. As if there is ever a "good time" for chemotherapy.

The chemo (note the insider's slang – not chemotherapy but "chemo") took place in the doctor's office, where there is a whole annex of recliners, TV's, magazines, and people. I was struck by how different we all were. I shared a space of four recliners with a forty-five-year-old blue-collar-looking black man, who left halfway through my treatment and was replaced by a fifty-ish Latina woman, flanked by her nervous and protective English-speaking kids; a forty-year-old white woman who had "fuck you" written all over her but applied her lipstick nonchalantly throughout, as if she was expecting company; and a jubilant though possibly senile seventy-year-old woman, white-haired, soft-cheeked, upper-middle-class, sipping a chocolate Ensure held for her by her Filipina caretaker.

It was all pretty amazing and inspiring, because for the past ten days I have been the only person in my "community" with cancer, which has been a bit of a pressure in an odd way. I don't know how to act, they don't know how to act (yet), and here were all sorts of people who had it. They were walking in and out, going to the bathroom, having conversations. Smiling, even. The mean, lipsticked woman would try to sleep, turning from side to side as her IV dripped. The black man was reading the *L.A. Times*, which, in my opinion, is no great distraction. (A little insight into my mental state – I packed a bag for a mini-beach vacation: one thick magazine, two books, four CD's, and one empty diary. I was going in for two hours.) Overall, it felt like a typical party situation, where no one knows each other but we all have something in common: the host. In our case, cancer, the greatest host of all. No one talked, but there were lots of empathetic looks floating around. We were sharing something so personal and intimate, so exclusive. We were at our most vulnerable, and no one on the street would even know. They didn't know about this room in some innocuous building in L.A. I knew there were stories in that room. I just didn't know how to start the conversations.

Chemotherapy was actually okay. It was. In any case, it could not have been worse than the anxiety I had been harboring over it. Strangely, it provided me with some moments of peace. For the first time in many intense days, I actually had time to myself, a little control over my life. I was alone in my recliner, facing the sun, with an expansive view of the hills. I turned on my music to drown out any medical-speak, closed my eyes and tried to remove myself from the reality of that place.

Not that it was all a bed of roses, mind you. I had three drugs administered intravenously, over the course of two hours. My first drug was an anti-nausea drug which, if administered too quickly (which it was) makes you super-dizzy (which it did). It was a little nerve-wracking trying to focus on my magazine when the words were jumping all over

the page. Next time, they say, they will give it to me slower.

That, however, was a cakewalk compared to the second drug, which was, by far, the most un-ignorable part of the whole chemo process. First of all, it has to be administered by a nurse; if it doesn't keep flowing through the veins properly, it can do some serious damage. Then there is the drug itself: it is a cheap and ugly shade of red, a bit like cherry Kool-aid. Very synthetic-looking. And it is cold. As in, *brrrrr*. I mean, really. If this shit has to be coursing through my veins, I want it at room temperature, at the very least. I want subtlety, and room for escape. But instead my eyes were open, and I could feel it traveling – first, its trail felt cold, then itchy, under my skin. Like I said, thoroughly un-ignorable.

I was so freaked out by the second drug that I can't even remember the third. I do remember the nurse leaving and finally lying back down in my recliner. I remember looking at

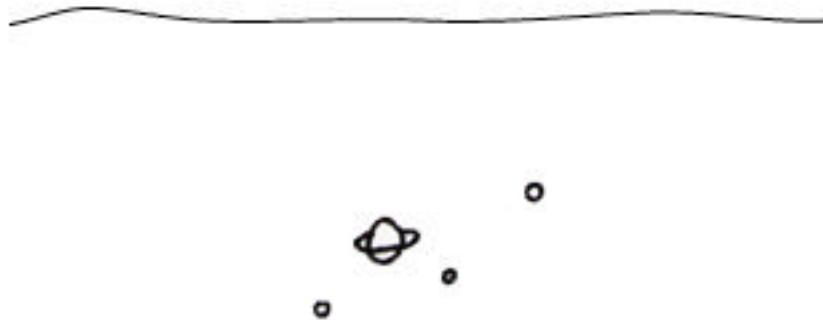
the bag of saline (a cleansing solution) that was dripping into my arm and praying that it would clean me up, just freshen up my veins and clean me up.

When I was finally finished, I was pretty elated and energetic: I actually went out to eat. Over the weekend I had very little nausea and for that, I took some drugs (whatever the hell they want to ply me with).

Twenty hours after the treatment, my left chest, where the tumor was, felt significantly better. It no longer felt like I had a corset pulling my chest in. I could breathe deeply. My arm was free of any pain, tingling or numbness. It was crazy. Like magic. While it was reassuring to discover that the treatment was working, it was also totally frightening. I had to admit that they were right. I have cancer.

Much love,

Aliza



Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Kevin Patterson, a medical resident at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he is studying and practicing internal medicine.

Kevin is also the author of *The Water in Between*, a book about his travels through the south seas in a small sailboat; it's a great book, both a sublime example of what travel writing can be when it's at its best, and an intelligent critique of that entire genre.

The book, I'm happy to report, is doing quite well – it made the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, and got a pretty glowing review there – and Kevin says he's planning to write two or three more, both fiction and non-fiction, over the next few years. But he is also, and will remain, a full-time doctor, which gives him a unique perspective on the publishing industry, on writing, and on life. Those latter two are the subjects of today's letter.

Complicated Creatures

A letter from Kevin Patterson, on the nervous system.

Halifax, Nova Scotia • August 3, 2000

Dear Paul:

These days I'm working on the neurology service, as a part of my internal medicine residency. (One year to go, almost exactly. Sometimes it goes as slowly as a summer afternoon in the heat: Breathe in. Breathe out. Good God, how could it still only be August?)

Neurology is two things: strokes, first, and then everything else – miscellaneous dysfunctions of nerve, brain and muscle, whose defects exist at diverse and molecular levels, rather than as a clot sitting in a vessel like a crude clog in a bit of plumbing.

The received wisdom is that strokes are dull and familiar and usually not treatable, and manifested by a depressingly monotonous array of facial drooping, dead limbs and inarticulate speech, and that the interesting part

of neurology lies in the oddities of Azorean myoclonus and Familial Periodic Paralysis – strange and obscure disease entities whose near-infinite variety testifies to the literally incomprehensible (to me, anyway) complexity of the mammalian nervous system.

But recently I'm finding myself altogether more interested in strokes. It is true that they are dully oppressive events, not much treatable, at least in the curing sort of way, and so treating them is bereft of the easy sense of gratification that treating a large heart attack can carry, for instance. There, you get the drugs into someone fast enough and you can watch the effects of the clot melt away on the ECG. The blood pressure climbs and the water in the lungs dissipates – it is really the most privileged situation to find oneself in. The irony is that we use the same drug to try

to dissolve clots in the brain, too – it simply works far better on the heart. This is because you can injure the heart and it can still cope; it isn't that complicated and it has a certain amount of built-in redundancy. You shoot a bullet into a car and it might keep on going – try the same thing with your Palm Pilot and it's another story. This is exactly what I find so compelling and so awful about strokes. Because they take out just one discrete bit of the brain at a time they reveal in demonstrable, obvious ways the importance of milligram-sized pieces of brain, and thus the extraordinary complexity of our wiring. Of the way we think. Of us.

Not long ago I cared for a man who had had a stroke; he could see reasonably well, and could write complicated and lucid sentences, yet he could no longer read. "Alexia without agraphia," said the neurologist. When I looked puzzled, he said, "a common thing with left occipital infarcts." The man's visual-association cortex could not work, or at least that portion of it that is responsible for recognizing words.

The idea that writing and reading could be fundamentally distinct capabilities at the level of our hardware astonishes me maybe even more than it should. As the neurologist put it, shrugging, "you can write with your eyes closed, after all."

I've been thinking about that ever since.

It *feels* otherwise. It feels like the only way to write is to read as you do so and to taste the words and recall and reflect upon them. Reading is the back swing and writing the fore: each step inextricably dependent on the other. This is true in several frames of reference – in the most immediate, how do you know if what you've written is even legible, let alone coherent, if you cannot read it? And in the longer view, everything we ever write is a recapitulation of something else that we've read. We form our ideas about how to write a letter from the

letters we've read, and it is the same with novels and reports and pitches. Hand someone a harmonica who's never heard music and they will sound even worse than harmonica players usually do, I imagine. But then, I'd have imagined you'd have to be able to read to be able to write.

But there are luthiers I've read of who only play a few notes themselves, and vintners who abstain. I've met men who have sold pot for a living for years who themselves never smoke. There are, I expect, legless shoemakers, apartment-dwelling gardeners, vegetarian butchers, colour-blind painters; and I think that sex-trade workers who are numb to the pleasures of the flesh may be the rule, rather than the exception.

The obviousness of the statement strikes me even as I write it: there is nothing about creating a thing that mandates understanding it.

I wonder what the future holds for this man. I wonder if his interest and ability in writing will fade with its utility. Grocery lists, phone numbers, To Do lists – none of these will work for him anymore. He will live instead in the world of spoken words and insist on calls rather than letters. It will not be that much poorer an existence, I suspect.

In his hospital room his children and grandchildren crowded to the walls and struggled not to mouth the answers to him when I asked him to read simple words. I asked them not to, and they looked ashamed, like eighth graders caught passing notes in a quiz. In a few minutes I moved on and went to learn about a man whose stroke had left him blind but entirely unaware of having suffered any ill effects of any sort. Notwithstanding the bruises on his nose and the scrapes on his shins.

We are strange and complicated creatures. Even leaving our souls entirely aside.

Kevin

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Ethan Watters, a freelance writer in San Francisco. Ethan and I are old friends; we met when we were interns together at *Harper's Magazine*, twelve years ago.

When I moved from Toronto to San Francisco last spring, to begin work on *Open Letters*, I lived in Ethan's house in the Mission for a couple of months. We soon developed a weekly ritual: every Monday, we'd get in his Volkswagen and drive eleven miles south to Colma, to a tiny casino called Lucky Chances, where we'd play Texas Hold 'Em for a few hours. Ethan's right; it's a great game, very addictive.

What Ethan understood instinctively, and I

learned slowly, is that Texas Hold 'Em is essentially a game of psychology – you win not by having the best cards at the table, but by being able to see into the hearts of the other players. Ethan constantly amazed me with his ability to know, often precisely, what cards everyone else at the table was holding. He was able to do this simply by watching them, studying their patterns, learning their tells. I was lucky if I managed not to bid out of turn.

It was clear to me, too, that Ethan was not just an aficionado: he was compelled to play cards, in a way that I will never be. So I asked him if he would write me an open letter about Lucky Chances, to explain what it is that draws him there. Today's letter is the result.

The Turn of a Card

A letter from Ethan Watters, on why he gambles.

San Francisco, California • August 4, 2000

Dear Paul,

Richard-the-shrink came with me to Lucky Chances last night, but he wouldn't gamble. He just sat behind me at the table and whispered that the air in the place was so filled with despair that he couldn't imagine why I would come.

Why would I *come*? I looked around at the room full of poker tables, hundreds of serious men sitting behind stacks of gray, red, blue and black chips. Why would I *leave*?

You played enough when you were up here in the spring to know part of the reason I play poker. You've felt the injection of adren-

aline when you're sitting on a sledgehammer hand (let's say kings over queens full) with \$250 in the pot, and you're trying to look bored while your muscles twitch and the guy down the table, who clearly made his flush on the river card, considers whether to bet into you. That is poker's most obvious thrill – it's the coke high of the game. I can't imagine anyone not liking that.

But given that you were able to walk away from the table after an hour, down only a hundred, it's clear that you aren't as devoted as I am. (Richard has used another, more clinical term - but to hell with him.)

Maybe there are things I see in the place that others don't. I like the food (especially that Filipino Chicken Adobo) and being able to eat dinner while I play cards. I like the flat, no-shadow lighting. I like the affectless faces of the dealers and the fact that you can sit down at a table of eight men and go a whole night without saying a word. I like the little mirrored bubbles on the ceiling that hide the cameras, and the notion that a team of sharp-eyed men – men who have seen it all – are watching over me. I even like the physical location of the casino, surrounded by cemeteries on all sides, out on the edge of the city. If you stood in the parking lot of Lucky Chances and spun an ace of spades out into the darkness in any direction, it might land on a gravestone (with a little luck). How cool is that?

Last night, with Richard-the-shrink moping behind me, I found myself at a great table. There were two excellent players, who I thought I could learn from. A couple guys were at my intermediate level. There was an middle-aged man with such bad vision he couldn't make out the cards laid out on the table two feet in front of him. He kept calling his hands wrong. To my right, there was a guy who was so tired from gambling twenty or thirty hours straight that he had to be poked in the arm each time it was his turn to bet. (I kid you not; I did the poking.) There was also an elderly man clearly suffering from a debilitating Alzheimer-like disorder. At the end of each hand he would roll his cards over and wait expectantly for the dealer to tell him whether there was any pattern.

Richard asked me how much time I'd spent at Lucky Chances, total, but given that I have no sensation of time passing when I'm playing, it's hard to tell. I know I've played enough hands to have hit two royal flushes, one in diamonds and one – my favorite – in hearts. The odds of turning a single royal flush are 60,000 to 1. So estimating three minutes a hand, that means I've spent 3,000 hours playing poker – or, put another way, a year's worth of working days. I honestly don't think it's been that much time – I think I'm just lucky – but I don't know for sure. Some people will never hold a royal flush. I feel like I could turn another one tomorrow.

Why do I go? Here's a notion: I think a man should know how to gamble. And I don't mean know the rules or even the strategies to win. To truly know how to gamble is to know how to lose more money than you intended to and not flinch. Poker is to your finances what boxing is to your flesh. You have to learn not to let the other guy know that you are hurt, which, in our day, is an under-appreciated and seldom-taught skill.

Or maybe it's because the trance I enter playing cards blocks out every other thought in my head – and those thoughts have not been so welcome recently. Richard-the-shrink thinks it's no coincidence that I started playing regularly two years ago, right after my father got sick. Although you know that I am loath to accept such psychodynamic explanations for behavior, he's probably right. The trance I enter, like a narcotic haze, cheats even the anxiety of loss and death. This is why they can build the place literally surrounded by monuments to grief. Can you imagine doing that with a restaurant, or even a bar?

Also, with my father gone I am freer now to do ill-advised things with my life. Not because my father would have disapproved – I could never do anything to disappoint that man – but because he would have worried for me, and now he can't.

I've just thought of another reason, one that suggests the opposite possibility: My father never gambled, never took substantial chances with his life, but this was as much out of timidness as adherence to any moral code. He was thrilled that I was less frightened by the world than he was, and so maybe I gamble because on some level I know that he would have gotten a kick out of it.

Of course, like a drug, playing poker blocks out not only the bad thoughts but the good ones as well. Like a man treading water at the edge of a monster whirlpool, I can see the rest of the ride down. You gamble to block anxiety, but the gambling also keeps you from accomplishing other things in your life, like keeping your career and relationships intact – things that might naturally bring you

back to even. At the narrow bottom of the whirlpool, you keep playing because you need to avoid the anxiety that you are gambling too much. Then you go under, into a darker, colder world.

Last night Richard and I were supposed to meet friends for drinks, but it was such a good table that I kept angling for one more round. I swear they were giving money away, and I was hitting flushes and straights like the deck had never known a shuffle. By the time we got back to the city, our friends were nowhere to be found, and Richard was clearly unhappy with me. I gave up trying to explain to him why I love the game. You'd

think with all his therapy training he would understand that gambling is the essence of hope and hope is the essence of man. What could be more compelling than the turn of a card? If he had ever seen, as I have, a ten of hearts turn over to anchor a royal flush, and felt his brain as it stumbles to process the shapes and colors of the card (red, 10! hearts!), he would understand that this random world can yield beauty and perfection. How much time and money do people waste in therapy and walk out never knowing that?

Your friend and partner in crime,

Ethan



Rocketship, by Andy Jenkins. Felt-tip pen on Post-it, scanned and emailed.

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Jorge Colombo, an illustrator and graphic designer who lives in the East Village, in Manhattan. I first heard about Jorge from Elizabeth Meister, who creates and maintains the *This American Life* web site and is a part-time editorial adviser to *Open Letters*. She told me to check out Jorge's web site, and especially a project of his called "the Dailies."

The Dailies, in which Jorge draws a single portrait each day, of a stranger he sees on the street, struck a chord with me right away. They seemed to me like the graphic equivalent of *Open Letters*; at the very least, they're inspired by the same idea – to create and dis-

tribute an immediate, first-person portrait of what's happening around us.

I asked Jorge if he'd turn this week's Dailies into an open letter, and provide some written accompaniment to his visual project (on his web site, the Dailies stand alone.) The result is today's letter, our first illustrated effort.

Jorge was born in Portugal, and emigrated to the United States in 1989 (he moved to New York City in 1998). As a fellow immigrant, I like to think that there's a connection between his immigrant status and his inquisitive eye.

The Dailies

An illustrated letter by Jorge Colombo, on the people in his neighborhood

New York City • August 5, 2000

Every day I am a spy for two minutes – and every day I am after a different person. Our paths will never cross again. But that time is long enough for me to sketch the person's posture, clothing details, accessories, shoe style, bag brand. That's all I need to create my Daily.

I first noticed the Monday girl's reddish hair and affirmative shoes. Gradually I noticed how long she stayed in the same place, talking with visible delight to a guy with a buzz cut and a biker jacket. The fog crept over the East Village, she looked cold, but she didn't want the con-



versation to end. Crowds buzzed by, funnelling from the 6 and the N and R into St. Mark's. She seemed the happiest person on Astor Place. I took out my notepad. Then my friend Katherine materialized on her pink bicycle, almost blowing my cover: "I saw you sketching!"

"Ssshhh!" I said, hiding by the cube.

The Dailies are a project I've been working on, with occasional interruptions, since February 1999, a couple of months after I first arrived in New York. I was looking for a project, outside regular illus-

tration jobs, that would allow me to respond to the strong stimulations of the city and its people. So far, I've drawn dozens and dozens of passersby glimpsed on the street, one a day, in postcard-sized watercolors.

On some days, during lunchtime, the block outside the First Avenue Medinah is solid yellow with double-parked empty cabs, and the Islamic temple's lobby is flooded with pairs of shoes. But on Tuesday, this East Village believer was marching calmly on an empty sidewalk, the house key dangling behind his back. What caught my attention, other than the striking white beard, was his footgear, an improbable fusion of surfer technology and Muslim attire.

Drawing someone who won't stop for you is never easy, especially if you're trying not to be noticed. I'm not ready to address unknowns, explaining my project and asking for a pose they may refuse. But I'm sure taking notes on the shape of one's shoes hardly counts as an invasion of privacy. Pretending to look somewhere else, I sketch as quickly as I can, proportions as rudimentary as they



come, but with lots of notes on colors, brands, details. And I may find myself running for a block after my model, if I forgot to see what kind of collar his coat had. All this feigning to look at the traffic, or checking out my watch...a true burlesque I hope goes mostly unnoticed.

Not noticing it was him who I was drawing, this sentinel at Chelsea's Comme des Garçons (Wednesday) asked me: "Are you sketching, or just taking notes? Sketching is not allowed in the store." Comme des Garçons certainly knows a thing or two about pilferage, their store being a rip-off of Richard Serra sculptures. So I understood their effort to stop the chain of plagiarism. Feeling sorry for a gentleman forced to wear such an incomprehensible shirt, I said I was "taking notes." Then I proceeded to smilingly stare at him for several minutes, memorizing every detail, while he fiddled with his Nokia.

Since the Dailies is a project I do only for myself, I don't go out of my way searching



for specific characters. (I live in the East Village, so my collection reflects a downtown slant I'm aware of; I wish I had time for more expeditions beyond my turf.) Basically, though, it's normality that captures my attention. My instant models tend to be people I feel I've seen before. I go for archetypes, rather than standouts; and I try to skip obvious outsiders. Of course, exceptions occur all the time. In fact, I don't give it too much thought: more often than not, a mere glance is enough for me to know I've found my Daily.

On Thursday, Paul Donald and I went to see the Magnetic Fields at Battery Park. Ever heard them? "69 Love Songs" has been Amy's and my favorite record this



year. As pop bands go, they bring together a remarkable audience of sensitive, polite types, listening in absolute silence to every single word sung by Stephin or Claudia. The only interferences came from passing helicopters, or the ushers' walkie-talkies: that's how quiet and mesmerized we all were. Studying the crowd, I kept spotting types, such as the guy with a shirt, tie, and briefcase, his shoes and socks off, standing with his eyes closed. Or this girl, sporting all sorts of distinctive details: flowers tattooed down her spine, the "Free Mumia" button, the high-tech shoes, the cast. It entertained me for a while, trying to guess what happened to her arm.

Jorge