



endings

open|letters

This week's issue features the collected letters of

BRIAN DUNN

B.

SCOTT

SHARON O'CONNOR

and X.



*“I sit here like you sit there and I watch the tower
and time the spotlight and I think about making
a break for it. We all go tomorrow. Pass it on.”*

– Brian Dunn, “Clearing The Wall,” p. 8

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DEAR READERS,

This week, we ring in this auspicious and suspicious new year with a special week of open letters about beginnings and endings. It may not be the cheeriest issue we've ever published, what with all the death and divorce and bankruptcy, but it's certainly one of the more dramatic. Plus, a bonus: it includes new letters from two of our most-clamored-for correspondents: Sharon O'Connor, in Cabot, Vermont, and Winnipeg's mysterious X., both of whom have maintained a Salingeresque silence in these pages since August, when their last letters appeared.

This week's theme has additional resonance for me as editor, as this is the final issue of *Open Letters*, in its current incarnation, anyway. I'll go into the details in a minute, but first: this week's issue.

Our first letter comes from Brian Dunn, a Brooklyn resident who has worked for the phone company in New York for the past twelve years. I like the idea that he is part of the long tradition of clerk-authors – insurance-clerk Franz Kafka, post-office-clerk Charles Bukowski, hospital-file-clerk Harvey Pekar – but I'm not sure if my literary fantasy is entirely accurate: I sent Brian an email asking him to describe his job, and he wrote back to say that he sets up “trunks” and “T-1 lines,” and then it got complicated. So for all I know, he may be the CEO of Verizon.

His letter is about an accident, but more than that, too: it's about escape, and starting over, and staying put for too long.

Our second letter is also about deciding when to stay put, and when to leave. It comes from B., an *Open Letters* reader, also from Brooklyn, who has chosen to remain anonymous. Her letter, to her friend L., is about marriage and divorce.

Our third letter comes from Scott, a semi-anonymous CEO of a struggling dot-com. I say “semi” because Scott is his real first name. Scott first wrote me back in October, with what I thought was a pretty interesting suggestion. Here's what his email said:

i have a letter i am about to write to the staff of my five person start up, on the verge of its collapse. we were all extremely good friends going into the experience, and it is a very sad experience to watch it fail, during this time of terrible tech market action, and because of my own inexperience as a ceo. i was wondering if such a thing would be of interest to you. i have found it very easy to be cynical about the “dot com” craze, but we were a small, tireless group who probably deserved better. at any rate, it would qualify as extremely personal, but i would share it with your readers if only to illuminate the very human side of the collapse of the tech markets and the hopes of ppl who thought they could pull off something exciting and unique in the midst of a sea of mediocrity.

I wrote him back and said I liked the idea of publishing his valedictory letter. Then, o cursed fate, a little money came through to keep his company afloat, so we put off the letter, and kept in touch. A month or so went by, and I began to wonder whether a letter by Scott to someone outside the company, from the midst of his struggle, might be more interesting than his final address to the troops. I asked him what he thought of that idea, and he sent me the letter that appears on p. 11.

I haven't heard from Scott in a couple of weeks, so I don't know what's been going on with his company since he wrote. His letter represents the state of things in mid-December –

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but maybe fortune smiled on Scott's company at the end of Q4, and things are rosy again. I hope so.

Our fourth letter comes from Sharon O'Connor, who wrote an open letter last August about her five-year-old daughter, Mazie. In my editor's letter in that issue, I explained how I first encountered Sharon's writing five years ago in her zine, *Ajax Maple*, and how Lisa Carver helped me track her down last spring to contribute something to *Open Letters*.

Sharon's first letter remains a favorite of mine, and of many other readers; back in October, when I was soliciting nominees for our rerun week on the web site, everyone was all, "Mazie. Mazie. Mazie." Like Sharon's first letter, her new one is about being a mother; like all the letters in this issue, it's also about an ending.

Our last letter comes from X., our anonymous correspondent in Winnipeg. It's the sixth and final chapter in her series of letters to her former boyfriend Mike, about their thirteen-year-old son. (Her first five letters appeared in volume one of *Open Letters*.)

X. became somewhat less anonymous to *Open Letters* readers back in October, when I revealed her (with her permission) to be Miriam Toews, a novelist and journalist and mom, and the author, most recently, of *Swing Low: A Life*, a remarkable memoir about her father and his mental illness and his life in Mennonite Manitoba.

Though the X. letters ended in August, there was one last dispatch, a postscript of sorts, that Miriam wrote in September. And when I decided that things were going to shut down here at *Open Letters*, I asked Miriam if I could use it as our final letter, and she said yes.

You've probably noticed that there's something different about this week's issue: it looks good. The credit for its new beauty goes to Dean Allen, a celebrated book designer in Vancouver, B.C., who volunteered to redesign the weekly a few weeks ago, and finished just in time for us to use his design for our final issue.

Dean is the author of an open letter about his mother's wedding, which we published back in November; he's also the creator of a great web site of personal journalism, cultural commentary, and humour, which can be found at www.cardigan.com.

Our new font is called Sabon. A note on the type, from Dean:

Jan Tschichold, the designer of Sabon, was himself an inveterate letter-writer, as well as the person responsible for the look of the Penguin paperback, as well as a firebrand who, in 1928, published a book calling for a new, brutalist approach to design, which scandalized the publishing world for seven years, whereupon he wrote another book that completely reversed his opinion. Tschichold could in theory be called the force behind two diametric design schools of the 20th century: controlled chaos and chaos-free control. When he designed Sabon, in the early 1960s, it was like he made the perfect, career-capping gesture: producing a book typeface that, arguably, renders all the others irrelevant.

ON MONDAY, I announced on the *Open Letters* web site that we would cease publication this weekend. But I had a hard time offering much of a coherent explanation for the news – provoking a reader named Victoria Golden to write and say,

This feels like a great love affair that ends with a Sunday morning phone call. "Hello, darling. You are the most wonderful person in the world to me and because it's going so well, because we are everything to each other that either of us could ever want, I think we should see other people for a while."

I tried, in subsequent daily editor's letters, to explain myself, but I'm not sure I ever managed to get it right. This is my last chance, I realize. So here goes.

I think one of the highest (and most fun) responsibilities of an editor is to keep surprising

his or her readers, to keep things from getting too stable, to keep readers from knowing what to expect when they turn the page (or click the link). And beginning a couple of months ago, I began to feel that I was running out of surprises for *Open Letters*, or more precisely, that the only surprises I could think of would cost money that we didn't have. I'd like the magazine to be more interactive; I'd like it to draw on a broader and more diverse talent pool; I'd like to be able to offer more and different subscription options; I'd like to be able to try to apply the letter format to the province of journalism: to have someone cover an election campaign, say, or a war, for *Open Letters* – but each of those improvements would cost money that we don't have.

That I'm allowing money to be a factor is a difficult admission for me to have to make. All of the artistic endeavors that I admire the most (with the exception of the fountains outside the Bellagio in Las Vegas) have been created cheaply, and usually under difficult circumstances.

I'm very proud of the twenty-four issues of *Open Letters*. The seventy-two writers who contributed to our pages managed to do things with this form that I had never dreamed of, and in the process, they created what I consider to be a great work of collaborative art. But if we were to keep on publishing the way we are now, I don't think the next twenty-four issues would break new ground to the same degree. So I think the time has come for *Open Letters* to change, and I decided, last month, that I need to conclude this chapter of *Open Letters* in order to figure out what the next chapter will be.

I love open letters, and *Open Letters*, and I would be very happy if I, or we, or you, were able to come up with a way for it to return, or to morph into something new and improved. But I can't be certain that will happen, which is why I'm calling this an end, rather than a hiatus. Whatever else happens, *Open Letters* will continue to exist on the world-wide web as a permanent archive for our 106 daily letters (and 6

conversations) and our 24 weekly issues. (You can visit the web site at www.openletters.net.)

As always, your comments and suggestions and ideas are most welcome; you can continue to contact me and the writers and the staff of *Open Letters* at editor@openletters.net.

Additionally, this week we set up a mechanism on our web site to allow readers to make donations to the authors, using a Visa or Mastercard, via a technology called PayPal. Whatever money we collect this week will be divided equally among our writers. The donations page is on our web site, at www.openletters.net/donate.html.

I know that many readers would rather pay for the future than for the past. One reader of the web letters, named Lisa Miya-Jervis, wrote this week to say, "I am curious about your request for donations – why not ask for support to continue, rather than to retroactively pay people who I would bet were not expecting money from this writing at all? I would happily fork over some cash to help OL continue, but it feels futile to do so otherwise."

Here's my answer: From day one, the main financial model that we've had in our heads was at some point to ask subscribers and regular readers to donate money to cover our costs. The public-radio model, basically. I still believe that that's the best way to fund a magazine like *Open Letters*, and the chorus of opinion I heard yesterday from readers made it clear that that's a model that makes sense to a lot of you, as well.

But all along, I felt strongly that I didn't want to ask for subscription fees without being sure that I could deliver a subscription. If I asked readers for, say, twenty dollars for the next year of *Open Letters*, and then had to call it quits after three months, you'd feel ripped off. (Please see Scott's letter for a glimpse at how that would make me feel.)

It's still one option, and probably the best one, for the future: to become secure enough, financially and editorially, to be able to guaran-

tee publication, and then request subscription funds from readers.

But our PayPal set-up isn't about that. The model there isn't the public-radio pledge drive – it's the way the bartender at the Continental Club in Austin passes the ten-gallon cowboy hat around after the Hot Club of Cowtown plays happy hour: if you like what you just heard, you can give a couple of dollars to the artists.

I'm well aware that the writers didn't write their letters in the hope of financial return (as a reader named Andrew Knight wrote this week, "I imagine that having your letter published in *Open Letters* is like having one published in *Penthouse Forum*: it's a matter of honor, not income"), but I still feel that the work our correspondents have contributed to *Open Letters* is valuable, and not just in a metaphorical sense: they deserve to be paid well for writing so well. Also: The writers and I are certainly grateful for your donations, but please don't feel compelled to donate, or guilt-tripped, or anything. We're just as grateful for the kind notes and quiet attention the letters themselves have provoked.

Open Letters has from its inception been a true collaboration, like nothing else I've ever worked on. It involved dozens of people in three countries, some of whom I've never met, all working either for free or for cheap, giving deeply of themselves simply because they cared about what we were doing. The magazine would never have existed without them.

Ian Brown dreamed up many of the original

ideas behind *Open Letters*, and helped make those ideas a reality. Craig Taylor created the web site's design and its architecture. Susan Burton invented new distribution networks for the magazine, and worked behind the scenes on its design, technical underpinnings, and editorial direction. Stacy Abramson, Abby Bridge, Ian Brown, Deirdre Dolan, Jonathan Goldstein, Joel Lovell, Sam Sifton, Cheryl Wagner, and Emily White worked as editors, bringing in countless new writers and ideas; their work, especially, gave the magazine its breadth and its depth. And Nicole Avril, Liz Clayton, Carmen Dunjko, Jack Hitt, John Hodgman, Andy Jenkins, Ochen Kaylen, Kevin Kelly, Todd Lappin, Elizabeth Meister, Stephen Osborne, Scott Ritcher, Leanne Shapton, Steve Sherrill, Miriam Toews, Sarah Varney, and Ethan Waters offered much-needed advice and support along the way.

Just to say that I'm grateful to them, though, feels wrong, because that sounds like I'm saying that this was my project and they pitched in, and that's not at all what it felt like. What *Open Letters* felt like was something that evolved on its own, a living thing, created not only by its editors and writers, but by its readers as well.

So that's what I'm grateful for: for the chance to have been a part of it. Thanks to them, and to you, for that opportunity.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough



clearing the wall

a letter from BRIAN DUNN, on an accident

Brooklyn, New York · January 1, 2001

DEREK,

open letters

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My morning begins normally enough. I'm running late (no surprise), because Aidan got up early and decided to run around the apartment with an industrial-kitchen-sized pepper container. I wrestle it away and offer to show him a video of "Frosty the Snowman" that his grandfather checked out of the library for him – this to keep him busy while the wife and baby sleep – and I slip out the door. Out in the hallway, I hear a woman frantically talking on the phone in the doorman's cubicle. As I head to the entranceway, I pick up various pieces of information: Charles Dunn (no relation), a guy in his fifties or sixties, has collapsed outside. The woman, a neighbor whose name I don't know, recounts this as she moves about. "He's still breathing," she tells me.

I step outside and there he is: face down on the street, dressed in a dark suit, arms at his side, a black wheeled travel bag on his right. He had just stepped off the curb, his body a straight line and pointed toward the open trunk of a silver limousine. On the curb are two more bags: an overstuffed leather bag and a carry-on. A guy in a gray suit holding a briefcase is nearby, appraising the situation. 911 Lady runs out and says "Don't touch him! The paramedics are on the way!" Nobody moves to touch him and he just lies there. 911 Lady knows him a hell of a lot better than I do: he had a pacemaker installed last year, she says, and he had triple bypass surgery a few months ago. "Somebody's got to tell his wife," she says, and looks at me. I'm not sure where his apartment is, though I know he smiled at my kid

when he refused to put on his papier-mâché crocodile mask on Halloween and gave him candy anyway. "It's on the second floor, near the stairs," she says and she's off again. With visions of giving every old lady on the second floor a stroke, I head for the stairs.

Charles Dunn: a stocky, affable guy, old New York, with a nice-guy smile that doesn't come too easily. Half the time, especially when the doorman helps with the sorting, I get his mail. A painter who rented out a storefront in transition down the block for a month to sell his watercolors – landscapes. More than a little talented, but not my style. Felt a tad guilty not buying one at the time. Always saw him walking with his wife, but, oddly, not often next to her.

I knock on 2-C. The woman at the door is wearing a long T-shirt for a nightgown. She looks older than her husband, gaunt, with a first-cigarette-of-the-morning pallor. "You're Charles Dunn's wife" – suddenly I'm a cop – "You need to come quickly. He's collapsed in front of the building." I say this like she's got all the time in the world. She puts a hand to her mouth, then, "I knew it, I knew something was wrong." I head down the stairs, with the wife (Mary, I think) in tow. We emerge onto the street and Mary declares: "He's dead," in a flat-toned voice, the slight quiver of her face and right hand the only tell-tale sign of fear. 911 Lady is trying to comfort her. The briefcased bystander and two other men – one another suit-and-tie guy, the other a white guy in a multi-colored Rasta-style skullcap – are around

the still face-down Charles and look like they know what they're doing. I don't. I consider leaving, but then 911 Lady, whose medical expertise I'm beginning to doubt, declares that someone should get a blanket and I beat her back into the building. I fill in the wife and move quickly past Aidan, happily watching Frosty and his new friends march down the street. "Thumpity thump-thump, thumpity thump-thump...."

Outside again, the guy with the Rasta skullcap has taken charge. The suits are at his head and shoulders; Rasta Skullcap is at his feet. "We need another person at his torso to help flip him over." I put the blanket down on the trunk of a car (the limo is gone; never saw the driver) and get down by the torso. "We'll flip him over on three," says Skullcap guy, "One, two," and we turn him, slowly. A woman behind us gasps at the sight of him: he's broken his nose on impact; from the way his arms were positioned, whatever knocked him unconscious cold-cocked him with no warning, and his face took the brunt of the pavement. The nose is shoved in and over to the right. It is bulbed W.C. Fields-style, and absurdly I realize I've never seen a nose right after it has been broken before. Dried blood is Rorschached over his face; one eye is half-open; the lid is no longer a smooth curve but looks jagged. The dark pupil is nickel-sized and stares at nothing. I move for my blanket, but one suit throws his jacket over Charles' chest; the other covers the rest of him with a tan trench coat. A fire truck turns down Lincoln, followed by an EMS ambulance. The firemen hop out and take over.

I carry my blanket back inside my apartment. "What's going on?" Aidan asks from the couch.

"A man fell down outside and daddy was helping him until the firemen came to help him."

"What's going on?"

"Oh. Um, Sally is really cold, so Frosty is telling Hocus Pocus to tell the other animals to build a fire so she can get warm." I grab my bag and my book and I'm out the door again.

I get halfway through the lobby, where Mary is being comforted by 911 Lady and an elderly gent. He's in a dark suit that he bought twenty pounds ago but he still looks rather dapper. The fire truck and EMS ambulance are both still outside. Mary's clutching a pack of unfiltered Pall Malls and a Bic lighter. "He told me he was leaving me today," she says, and I stop. "I was in the shower and he told me he was leaving me. I had no idea. He said he was going back to Arkansas. He said he had a ticket. A 10:30 flight." She's locked herself out of the apartment.

They bring in his jacket, a top-coat-length red down coat that he wasn't wearing when he collapsed. It must've been over by the curb with the rest of the luggage. She checks the pockets: no keys. Maybe they're in the suit. Maybe he didn't bother taking them. The old gent volunteers to take the luggage to his apartment. He looks about ten years older than Charles and the black suitcase and its leather companion look stuffed to the gills so I volunteer to help. They're worse than they look. The wheels don't work on the travel bag, and the poor son of a bitch must've stuffed fifty years of clothes and memories into both of them.

In the elevator the old gent hits six and tells me, "In '86, one morning, I was playing ball – you familiar with the neighborhood? Down at the playground on Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue. No? Well, my wife was hit by a bicycle. Right in front of the building. Lucky it wasn't a motorcycle. Never the same. Anyway, Charlie ran all the way down to tell me. And you know how big Charlie is." We're off the elevator. "He's my best friend, Charlie. Saw him in church yesterday. Seemed fine." It's the conversational tone that gets me about the whole thing, as if old Charlie'd pulled this before and it was no big deal. I struggle to haul the luggage deep into his apartment. It looks like it hasn't been renovated since the old guy moved in. On a table is a blood pressure gauge. I stuff the luggage in a corner so he won't be tempted to move them and we're off again. "He wrote a

book on watercolor technique last year. Terrific book. He taught painting in Arkansas. Maybe he had a girlfriend there.” We get downstairs and Mary is gone. The fire truck and the EMS truck are both still outside. I grab my bag and book and head out the entranceway. 911 Lady is standing there. I pat her on the shoulder and tell her she did a fine job. “You too,” she says, and I’m off.

Later the wife calls with the bad news. I’m not surprised. I wasn’t placing any money on old Charlie Dunn because of the condition his condition was in and the nasty dramatic closure of it all. I barely knew the guy or his wife (she of course of the present tense) and everything is conjecture, but... You’re Charles Dunn, two heart operations over the last year and a half under your belt, a pacemaker and a zipper on your chest to remind you of your dance with the reaper in the mirror every morning when you shave, wondering how much more you’ve got left. You taught painting, which you love, down in Arkansas. Maybe there’s a woman in the airport in Little Rock waiting, maybe not. Maybe it’s just the idea of doing what you love and being with people who respect you for it that’s got you shoving your socks in a suitcase. You’ve got to do it this way; either you keep

moving or you lose the nerve. You don’t want to discuss a done deal. The wife’s either the anchor or the chain and whatever reason you had for staying has long since melted away. So you tell her and you’re out the door down the elevator and through the lobby. You wait in front of the building for the limo to pull up. It stops and the trunk opens up automatically, that big old abyss you’re not supposed to look into, and you step off the curb. Maybe you think of landscapes and Little Rock. Maybe it’s just the luggage and where the hell is that driver, but bang, you’re dead, shot by a guard in the tower just as you were clearing the wall. Two steps from the old life to the new but you don’t make it. Wotan lifts a finger and you stop and you fall like an unhinged door, kissing pavement and the world goodbye with lips you stopped feeling a second after you stepped off the curb.

Anyway, that was my morning. I sit here like you sit there and I watch the tower and time the spotlight and I think about making a break for it. We all go tomorrow. Pass it on.

As always,

Brian



invisible

a letter from B., on marriage and divorce

Brooklyn, New York · January 2, 2001

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DEAR L.,

I keep thinking of you recently. You're the only one I know roughly my age who got married and divorced all within a pretty short period of time. I never thought I'd be thinking so much about divorce only a few months after I got married, but I am. At least I am from time to time, and when those times come around they come around big time.

I remember thinking, before G. and I got married, that if everything else leaked out of our relationship like so much air out of an air mattress at least what we'd have left is that we could talk. G. and I always talked and talked – I remember marveling at how good a communicator he was. I fell in love with him during our lengthy morning conversations, when we'd sit around the living room of my apartment by the floor-to-ceiling windows and long white muslin drapes drinking scalding mugs of black coffee and talk and talk and talk – about what? Everything, it felt like – until we were both miserably late to work and embarrassed by how late we were but thrilled, completely thrilled, to have found the one person to whom each of us could talk and talk and talk that way and never get bored.

What I never considered was, what if he stopped being interested in what I had to say? I was so busy reveling in how it felt to have someone so gripped by my stray insights that I never stopped to imagine that such intense concentration might waver – and certainly not after only a few months of marriage. Just the same way that it never occurred to me that G.

himself would ever stop sharing his thoughts and ideas with me, which he has.

So, though you and I have talked a lot about your divorce and why you felt like you had to leave, I'm wondering if it boiled down to the fact that you and E. just stopped talking the way you once did. And if you just couldn't stand how sad and invisible that made you feel. And if you made the decision to leave him, say, one night after eating dinner at a restaurant.

I wonder if when you were driving home you passed along a street you don't travel on much and it reminded you of an experience that still resonated for you. And I wonder if you started to tell him about that experience, if you started to set up the story and tell him why you had been on that street, and just at the point where you were about to get to the beautiful, poignant point of the story, E. cut you off, irritated that you were driving too slow or that the windshield washer light was on and you hadn't noticed it, and you realized at that moment, not only has he not heard a word I just said but he hasn't heard a word I've said in months. And I wonder if at that moment you just stopped talking, if you just closed your lips and turned on the radio and said to yourself, enough of this, I think I've had enough.

Is that how it happened? I really need to know.

xxox,

B.

it's over

a letter from SCOTT, on his dot-com failure

January 3, 2001

DEAR JACK,

open letters

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The writing has been on the wall for about six weeks now. In about two more weeks, the writing on the wall will come to an end. My company has about \$2,500 in the bank now, and unless some miracle happens in the next two weeks, that last \$2,500 will provide one more paycheck to our only remaining paid employee, one last check to the lawyers, and then we collapse in a heap. We will have probably \$20,000 to \$30,000 worth of unpaid bills staring us in the face at that point, give or take some insane amount. I wish I could say that it wasn't my fault, that I could believe in some "it's the market's fault!" excuse, but it ain't the market's fault. It's mine.

I have become coldly analytical about my mistakes, to the point where I don't particularly feel as though I did much of anything right, including starting the company in the first place. Mind you, self-pity is a loathsome endeavor; what I'm experiencing now is not self-pity at all. It's more like abject terror of what comes next. My financial life is a complete ruin, with three months worth of bills facing me and no idea when I'll be able to concentrate on getting a new job. Most of what I owe is in the form of an outrageous credit-card debt, which I rang up while trying to start the company in the first place. I don't yet know what the ramifications of my company's pending bankruptcy will be, whether I'm going to get personally nailed for some of the unpaid bills – I'm afraid to ask my lawyer at this point, because every time I talk to him he charges me \$200. I will find out the hard way, I'm sure.

Our president, a friend I hired earlier this year, is working the phones, and getting nowhere. Last week an old radio buddy of his told him he was considering investing, but we'd have to give him a brand new Harley Davidson if we ever went IPO or got acquired. Naturally we promised him two fucking Harleys if we ever went IPO. He hasn't called us this week. Last week our president talked to a guy who runs a company in L.A. that seemed like they wanted to give us money. That guy hasn't returned our calls in a while, either. This is an old story this year; every time someone wants to give us money, their stock in some other company slides 53,000 points and suddenly they're not interested.

The irritating thing is, things looked good for a while, and I think I pretty much blew the opportunity. I got started too late; I spent money unwisely – although to my credit, we never spent \$5,000 on a goddamn office chair. My spending mistakes were strategy mistakes, which is a much more painful category than just profligacy. I thought it'd be "cool" if we did X, thought it would "eventually work" if we just kept doing Y, gambled on getting another round of investment before the money ran out, neglected to budget money for promotion, etc., etc., until I wished I'd never had this idea in the first place. The only things I did right were getting us a round of angel investment at the start, and then hiring some extremely talented people; but even those victories are now bitter, because I raised the money from friends and family, and those talented people are good friends of mine. I can't imagine what it will feel like to tell

each one of them, it's over. I know it's going to happen, and it's like some sad recurring nightmare in my head – rehearsing for it means it keeps happening over and over again.

Tomorrow we have a pretty important presentation of the software we've developed for a much bigger, more impressive local company. They have our fate in their hands, to some extent. When I met with their CEO, he casually mentioned he could finance us if he liked what we had to offer, but the minute you start believing what successful people tell you, you're always in for a rude surprise; they hold cards you don't, and you're not even playing the game until you have eleven billion in capital from Pompous Venture Fund Incorporated.

Goodness, maybe this *is* self-pity. I apologize.

I started my career as a temp in Chicago, for the director of marketing for a huge global company with 30,000 employees. When she got promoted, she hired me on to be her full-time “executive assistant.” After a while, a friend convinced me I had more skills than that and got me hired as an “associate consultant” for another giant company, and then eventually I got promoted to “consultant,” and then I became a “content manager” and then an “associate producer” for multimedia-based training products, and then I wound up working as a “project manager” for web application development and web projects. Time elapsed: about five years, give or take, and somewhere along the way, I got the idea to start my own company, and so I became “CEO & Artistic Director.” For a while, I used to walk down the street giggling at the idea that I was a CEO. The idea for the company came to me in the middle of a heavy experience involving homemade ayahuasca, but that's probably another story altogether.

I convinced my uncle to chip in, and later convinced my old boss to chip in a big hunk, and then convinced our future president to chip in, and invited him to hitch his wagon to our rising star. Just in time, as it turns out, for all kinds of things to go wrong: I made some bad decisions early on concerning the viability

of video on the net; I burned up development time on a project that we would eventually replace with something smarter, but not before wasting months of effort; leads kept drying up for future financing; the sneaking suspicion began to overwhelm me that if I was an actual CEO, I'd know what to do, but instead I grew paralyzed as we slowly ran out of money. I had known all along this was the likelihood; most companies fail in their first year, and when dot-coms started collapsing all around us, my fight-or-flight instincts started selling me out.

The technical people who work for us have been slaving away. Our director of software development said to me a week and a half ago, “I don't want to look back on this and realize there was something more I could have done.” I don't have any such way to focus; the things I think I know how to do at this point require money I don't have to accomplish. I'm twenty-eight years old. I don't belong at the helm of a company, and it's clear to me now that that's one of the major reasons our business plan met with such little success. I am at a complete loss, and I spend my days waiting for something to happen.

My own personal network has been tapped out; the developers can keep developing, our president can keep making phone calls. This meeting tomorrow could go well; chances are, it will go just fine but they won't commit to anything and we will shut down before the end of the month, go our separate ways, and look back on this however we choose. I'm the only one who has to answer to those investors, of course, and god knows my old boss is going to kick my ass for losing his money. I'm going to go back to consulting, make enough money to pay off my debt, try to get on with my life without such enormous ambitions.

I think it's easiest if I just blame computers. I fucking hate computers.

Signing off,

Scott

a misfire

a letter from SHARON O'CONNOR, on pregnancy and mortality

Cabot, Vermont · January 4, 2001

HEY MIMI –

open letters

VOL. III, NO. 8

· 13 ·

I trudged down to the post office in the snow this evening, just before five, to find your birthday card: “Mon Cherie... a toast to the best day of the year! Your birthday.” It almost made me cry. So, it seemed appropriate to write to you on this, the last evening in my twenties.

I started to write to you earlier this month to tell you that Charles and I were expecting our third. Then I started bleeding and eventually miscarried. You know me well enough to know that death's really never far from my thoughts, but usually it's more like an airplane thing. You know how the whole time you're flying you tell yourself all those stats, “It's safer up here than in a car... it's more likely I'd be hit by a bus...” But you still think about your mortality every three seconds and until you land you don't quite breathe easy. If I thought about how everyone could zip out of my life like Dad and Brigid did (almost ten years ago now), I wouldn't be able to function.

So I spent the last few months thinking about life, a new life in me. I kept thinking about how fifteen years ago I gave Misha a tarot deck for his fifth birthday. The first thing he did was turn over the three of cups, which has three women on it, and said, “These are your daughters.”

I guess I've talked about and believed in Misha's prediction for so long that my brain had actually wrapped itself around the idea that this pregnancy would be my last. I had kind of settled on Hazel Francis being her name. It seemed surreal to be casting the last character of our little drama. Like, okay, all the members of the family are here. Charles and I are the

matriarch and patriarch of this little life we've created.

What freaked me out was the thought that we've created little beings that will have to feel what it's like to lose someone they love. And sometimes it was so surreal, like the sunlight would be coming through the window a certain way, a magical way, and I'd see the girls take that in and I'd realize they were making one of those memories that they'll have forever. It could be thirty years from now and they might be anywhere and the sun will come through a window a certain way and they'll feel that weird mixture of nostalgia and sadness and happiness all at once. And that's what being alive is. But it's so big, so huge and we were going to pass that on to yet another soul; that huge mess of experiences and emotions to navigate.

Then I was out Xmas shopping with my mom on a Saturday. I came home with a really stiff neck. We got the kids to bed and Charles and I sat in front of the fire watching TV. He rubbed my neck for a long time and when he was done I was crying, though I had no idea why. Really crying, really sad. I went in to pee before we went upstairs and I had started bleeding. I called my midwife, and she said it was a hopeful sign that I wasn't cramping, and that I should keep her posted. But I bled all weekend and on Monday she explained that I would probably miscarry in a day or so. She said the fetus had probably been dead for over a week.

The good news was you only have to dilate to three cm (not the ten cm you need for labor). I was still a little shocked on Monday

night when the cramps turned into contractions. Forty-five minutes of contractions and then such a bloody mess that I had to camp out in the bathroom until I birthed the little mass. It was a few inches long and I could make out the basic shape of the spine. Then it was over. I was so relieved not to be having contractions any more. I actually thought, “Well, at least I’ll be able to have wine on my thirtieth birthday.” Isn’t that sick? And then on Wednesday I was out Xmas shopping with Mom again. Nothing skipped a beat.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about my friend Maria, from grade school. The night before Jamie and I tripped with her for her first time she took a shower before we went to bed. She came in afterwards and said, “That was my last shower before I trip.” Her mother was very religious and it made all of Maria’s events, all her choices, shimmer with an importance I didn’t have to reckon with. I can’t remember the last shower I had before I miscarried.

Since the miscarriage I’ve had the oddest flood of memories about Maria. When we were thirteen she spent the night at my house and we lied and said we were staying at a friend’s. We took a bus to Atlantic City via Camden. I still get shivers when I think of us, two silly white girls in Camden, at thirteen, by ourselves. We ended up spending the night with two losers in an abandoned shed outside one of the casinos. Earlier that night, I lost my virginity to loser #1 on a toilet in the casino bathrooms. I remember lying and saying I had just finished my period because I had gotten blood on his white sweat-shirt (because it was my first time) and I didn’t want him to think I was inexperienced. Maria got away with just giving loser #2 a blow job. We got back into town at daybreak and went to Friendly’s to eat breakfast. The weird thing was, as we talked over breakfast, she seemed more changed by that blow job than I did by my own deflowering. Everything that changed her seemed so symbolic.

I think I must be craving a little of that purity

that Maria seemed to embody. I know where to put the mythology that is me and Charles, I know what drugs and sex and travelling and death of loved ones did to me, and I can honestly say that nothing has altered my life more than Mazie and Clemmie’s births. But I’m at a loss to know what to feel right now. And that’s a little unusual for me. It’s rare that I actually make room for a random glitch. It seems belittling that it could have just been a misfire, a mathematical inevitability.

Charles and I noticed the lonely pregnancy test on the top of the bookcase the other night. We’d saved Mazie’s and Clem’s for their scrapbooks. I know that’s kind of gross, since it’s just a stick with my urine on it, but it heralded their births. With this one we really didn’t know what to do with it.

Last night I had a dream that we were all in Ireland. Charles and the girls were at a pub with some other family while I went to do some errands. I was driving up to a rotary. I think I had just bought groceries. I saw in the rear-view mirror that I had narrowly avoided being rear-ended by a big semi truck. Then I felt the impact and realized I hadn’t gauged right. The truck was going to plow right over me and I wasn’t going to make it. The last part of the dream I remember I was screaming Charles’s name with all that was in me. I woke up almost shaking and kind of slid over to Charles, spooned him, and cried myself back to sleep.

So that’s been my life lately. I’m fragile and fine. Snappy with the kids. Tense with Charles. Unsure if we should be using birth control while I get my body in a little better shape. And very aware that turning thirty tomorrow means that time is careening along and I hope I’m not too self-involved to notice the gloriousness around me. I love you Mimi. Thanks for writing. I’ll call you soon.

All my love,

Sharon.

he makes his move

a letter from X., on a day at the beach

Winnipeg, Manitoba · September 22, 2000

DEAR MIKE,

open letters

VOL. III, NO. 8

· 15 ·

It's fall now. He's got a new pair of And One Basketball shoes that are half baby blue suede, half white leather. And one size bigger than his last ones. He's reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in L.A. (language arts) and studying integers in Math. He and his friends are trying to plan a trip to Minneapolis in October to see the Vikings. It would be his birthday present. I guess you know he's turning fourteen at the end of October.

This summer we went to L.A. (Los Angeles) and while we were there O. insisted that we go to Venice Beach. Specifically, to the Venice Beach basketball courts. They're famous, he told us, movies are shot there, some of the Lakers play there once in a while, we have to go there. We'd be fools not to go there. We can't not go there. Plus, he said, Jonathan Richman sings about Venice Beach. This summer he started loving the music of Jonathan Richman. When we drove all day through the sequoias to see the big one, general sherman, the biggest living thing in the world, he said he didn't care, that he'd rather sit in the van and sing along to "I, Jonathan" one more time. So we went to Venice Beach.

At first we strolled along the boardwalk looking at different stuff, eating ice cream, talking, laughing, the usual. Then, suddenly, there were the courts right in front of us. And you could just feel this kind of tension come over O., like the way a dog gets when he sees a cat or a squirrel and just stops and stares and you know something's going to happen. The happy, easy feeling of strolling along a boardwalk in

the sunshine was gone and it felt like we'd just entered another zone or something. And O. says oh man, oh man, there they are. And then suddenly his voice kind of gets lower and his body kind of slumps around the shoulders to indicate that he's one badass killer dude, unfortunately with an ice cream cone in his hand and with his mom and little sister standing next to him, and he says, in this low voice, uh, I'll be over there, and jerks his head towards the courts, and starts walking away using the new L.A. killer dude walk that he's been practicing. Can I have your ice cream, O.? G. yells after him, which at this moment is for him like being shot in the back with an AK-47, but because he's such a sweet badass dude, he slowly turns around and holds out his cone to her before heading towards the courts.

Naturally, the rest of us can't follow him. We know this. So we go and sit far away from the courts, on a wooden bench, and we watch. We can barely see him, he's about an inch tall, but we can see enough to know, sort of, what's going on. First of all he goes and sits on these bleachers that they have set up between the main court and one of the three other lesser courts. He's smart enough to know that he's not going to get to play on the main court. There's a full game happening there already and these guys are really fucking good, and much older than O. But on the court beside the main one there are some other guys playing three on three and these are the guys O.'s watching. We figure that he thinks he can get to sub in one of these games. But he just sits

there, he doesn't make a move. He's waiting.

And it's really hot outside and finally G. says she wants to go to the beach, so C. takes her and I stay on the bench reading and watching O. from time to time. He's still not moving, not playing, not doing anything but watching from the sidelines. Then C. and G. come back from the beach and C. sits down on the bench to watch, and G. and I go back to the beach. We're there for a while, splashing around, digging in the sand, collecting seashells. Eventually we go back to the bench to find out what's going on. Nothing, says C. He's still sitting there. And I think to myself, he's not going to do it. Then, suddenly, we see O. get up and walk over to one of the guys playing three on three. He's saying something and the other guy says something, and then O. goes back and sits down. Shit! I say, they're not going to let him play. But O. doesn't leave the bleachers. He just sits there. The only difference is that now he's taken off his baseball cap.

Behind us is the spot where those guys lift weights and swing from metal hoops and stuff, Muscle Beach, and C. and G. and I turn to watch these guys for a few minutes. Then we turn back to look at O. and right then, he makes his move. He gets up off the bleachers, walks over to the same guy as before, they say a few things, and then the guy sits back down where O. was and O. starts to play! He's playing. He's playing basketball at the Venice

Beach Basketball Courts in Los Angeles, California, USA. His dream has come true.

And then he plays for what seems like forever, he plays for at least three hours, while the rest of us watch him in between doing beach things, totally in awe of the kid's nerve and patience. He looks good out there on the court too, he's younger but he's just as good as some of the guys he's playing with, and better than a few too. He's the only white guy and he's so white and with his shirt off and his long, skinny torso darting in and out, moving around, he looks like a ghost or a flash of lightning or something. Afterwards I offered to take a picture of him in front of the Venice Beach Courts sign and he said oh god, mom, no. Then G. asked him why he waited so long to ask the guy if he could play, what was he waiting for, Christmas? I don't know, he said, smiling through all his sweat and whacking her over the head with his T-shirt, yeah, whatever. We kept walking, all of us silent as though we had just witnessed a miracle, and then O., forgetting that he was the top shit brother of the Boyz of Venice Beach, kind of arched his back, put his arms up in the air, sank to his knees right there on the asphalt and said oh man, this is the best day of my life!

See you in the photos, Mike.

X.