

THE LETTER SHE WRITES AFTER

*From a wife already in it, who wants it said out loud
A companion to The Letter She Writes First — for adults 18 and over*

A note before the letter. The first letter is for a wife proposing this. This one is for a wife already living it — a year in, or ten — who has never actually said any of it in writing. It exists because the things most worth saying in a covenant are the ones that go without saying for so long that they eventually go unsaid altogether: what it has made of her, what she wants from it, and the plain fact that she wants it. A model, not a script. The words should end up being hers, and she should write the parts that embarrass her rather than leaving them out.



My love,

We have lived this long enough now that it has stopped being remarkable. The ledger gets read, the evenings happen, the key sits where it always sits, and neither of us comments on any of it any more than we comment on the kettle. That is what a covenant is supposed to become, and I am glad of it.

But there is a cost to a thing becoming ordinary, which is that it stops being said. So I am going to say it — all of it, including the parts I would rather imply — and I am going to write it down so that it exists somewhere outside my own head, where you can hold it and read it twice.



Start with what it has done to me, because I do not think you know.

I was not this woman when we began. I was someone who avoided a difficult conversation for a fortnight and then had it badly. Someone who noticed things and said nothing and let them accumulate into a mood. Someone who apologised for taking up room, in this house and in every other. You know what I was like. You married her.

Holding this has made me into somebody else, and it did not happen because I read something or decided something. It happened because you handed me a job that could not be done by the woman I was. I could not govern you and go on being vague. I could not hold you to a standard while making excuses for myself. I could not sit down at eight o'clock and ask you ten honest questions while remaining someone who avoided honest questions. You did not ask me to become decisive — you simply made it impossible to stay as I was, and then you were patient with me while I caught up.

So when people say a woman in this arrangement is being served, I do not recognise it. I have never worked so hard at anything, and I have never been so much myself. You made me into somebody by kneeling. I do not think you have ever fully understood that, and it is the first reason I am writing.



Now the part I have never once said plainly, and which I am going to write rather than say because I would lose my nerve halfway through.

I want this. Not tolerate. Not agree to for your sake. Want — selfishly, and in my body, and often.

I want the sound the lock makes. I want the moment your hands come away because the clock said so and I did not have to ask. I want the particular way you go quiet when I set something down on the table and you understand what the evening is going to be. I want you across a dinner table being charming to somebody, entirely composed, while the whole architecture of you is sitting under your shirt and I am the only person in the room who knows. I have thought about that in the middle of perfectly ordinary afternoons for years.

I want your restraint more than I want your release. That is the thing that would be hardest to explain to anybody outside this house. It is not that I enjoy denying you — it is that a man holding himself still because I have not said the words yet is the most compelling thing I have ever been in a room with. Every time you do not ask, something in me answers. Every time you could and do not, I want you more than I did the day before.

And I want the authority itself, which is the part I feel I ought to be modest about and will not be. I like being the one who decides. I like the weight of the key against my collarbone in a room full of people who think it is jewellery. I like that your body is a matter I have opinions about. None of that is service to you and I am done pretending otherwise. You gave me something I wanted, and I have wanted it every year since, and it has never once gone quiet.



Let me tell you what I see when I look at you now, because you are too close to it.

You are not the man I married. You are turned out better. You carry yourself differently and you have no idea you do it — I watch other men look at you and adjust themselves slightly. You keep your word about small things, which almost nobody does. You handle bad news without theatre. Your children copy the way you speak to people. When something goes wrong in this family everyone looks at you, and you have earned that by being reliably worth looking at.

And there is a thing under all of it that I do not have a good word for. Contained, perhaps. Whatever it is, people feel it, and it is what makes rooms go slightly quieter when you speak. They think it is confidence. It is not. It is that you are the only man most of them will ever meet who is under actual management, and it shows in a way none of them can name.

That is what we made. And I made it, and I am proud of it, and I have never told you so at any length.



So here is what I want, going forward, written down so you can hold me to it as much as I hold you.

I want to go further than we have gone. Not harder for the sake of it — further in. I want the standard raised where you have outgrown it, because you have, in two or three places we have both silently noticed and neither of us has said. I want more of your day inside this and less of it outside. I want to keep taking your denial for longer than is comfortable for either of us, because it works, and because I have discovered I have more appetite for it than I expected to have.

I want us to keep writing things down when they change, instead of letting them drift into custom. I want the review taken seriously this year rather than done over a cup of tea in twenty minutes. And I want you to keep telling me when I have got it wrong, because you have done that twice in all these years and both times I needed it and both times it was the most useful thing anyone said to me that month.



One last thing, and then I will stop.

You could end this. Tonight, or any night, and I would take it, and we would still be a marriage. That has been true since the first evening and I have never let myself forget it, because the whole of what I have is built on the fact that you keep choosing not to.

That is the part that undoes me, if you want to know. Not the obedience — anyone can be obedient. It is that you have had a door standing open beside you for all these years and you have never once looked at it. Every ordinary Tuesday you do not walk through it is a thing given to me freely by a man who did not have to give it, and I do not think I will ever be entirely used to that.

So: I am not asking you for anything in this letter. I am telling you that I want it, that I have wanted it all along, and that I intend to go on wanting it for as long as you keep handing it to me.

Come here when you have read this. Do not say anything clever. Just come here.

Yours, and yours in charge of you —

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over. Everything here remains subject to the Schedule of Limits and the halt word, and the door described in the closing lines is real or none of the rest of it is.