

THE LETTER SHE WRITES FIRST

*From a wife who wants the work of building him
A companion to the Three Letters — for adults 18 and over*

A note before the letter. This is written for the case the library did not originally provide for: the wife who has read all of this and wants it, and now has to say so to a husband who has not asked. It is a model rather than a script — the words should end up being hers. What matters is the order of the argument, and that she says the difficult parts plainly instead of hinting and hoping he understands.

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My love,

I have been carrying something for a while now and doing it badly — hinting at it, half-saying it, waiting for you to somehow arrive at it on your own. That is not fair to you and it is beneath both of us, so I am going to write it out properly and hand it to you, and then I am going to leave you alone with it for as long as you need.

I want to run you. I want a formal, written, permanent role in what you become — not more say in the house, which I already have, and not the last word in an argument, which I do not particularly want. I mean something more serious than that, and something stranger. I want the job of building you.

Let me say what I mean, because I know how it sounds and I know what it sounds like it is about.

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Here is what I have watched for years. You are a capable man — more capable than the life you are currently living requires you to be. There is nobody in your world whose actual job is to notice that. Your work takes what it needs and does not ask for more. Your friends like you as you are and would think it strange to say anything. Your mother thinks you are wonderful and always has. And so the whole of your improvement, all of it, has been left to you — to be done in your own time, by your own effort, with nobody checking, on top of everything else you carry.

No one does that well. Not because they are weak but because nobody does. Left to ourselves we all drift toward whatever is comfortable, and we all have a hundred good reasons why this month is not the month. You are not failing at anything. You are simply doing what every unmanaged person does, which is slightly less than they could, in a way that is invisible year to year and perfectly visible across a decade.

I do not think you need to be fixed. I think you need to be held to something — and I think the reason you have never been is that you are the sort of man other people assume does not require it.



So this is my offer, and I want you to hear it as an offer rather than a complaint.

I will take that on. All of it. I will set a standard for you and I will hold it — on the evenings I am tired, on the evenings I would rather read, on the evenings you are charming and it would be easier to let something go. I will notice what you do well and I will say so out loud, which nobody else in your life does. I will notice the drift early, when it is still small, and I will tell you rather than storing it up. And I will be, for one man on this earth, the person whose whole attention is on what he could be.

Understand what I am volunteering for. This is not a privilege I am asking you to hand over; it is work, and a great deal of it. It means I do not get to be vague or moody or inconsistent, because the whole thing depends on my being the same person on a Tuesday as I was on a Friday. It means I am accountable too — the pages I have been reading are quite clear that a woman who governs badly answers for it, and I have agreed to that before asking you for anything. And it means every evening for the rest of our lives has a small piece of unavoidable honesty in it, which will be harder for me on the nights I would rather let it slide than it will ever be for you.

I am not offering you my authority. I am offering you my attention — the whole of it, permanently, pointed at one thing. Authority is only the tool that makes it stick.



Now the part I most want to get right, because I think it is where men like you turn away from a thing like this, and turn away for a reason that is wrong.

This does not make you less of a man. I need you to sit with that rather than skim it, because everything about how you were raised will tell you otherwise, and everything about how you were raised is wrong on this particular point.

What you have been sold is that a man is measured by the number of people he answers to — fewer being better, and none being best. It is a poor measure and you know it from your own working life. The men you admire are not the ones accountable to nobody; those men are usually a mess in some private corner nobody is allowed to see. The men you admire are disciplined, and discipline in every other field on earth is understood to be something imposed by another person. Nobody thinks an athlete is diminished by a coach. Nobody thinks a soldier is unmanned by a standard. The only place we have decided that submitting to a standard makes a man smaller is in his own house, and that decision has not made anyone stronger. It has only left a great many men entirely unsupervised.

So no, I am not asking you to be softer, or quieter, or smaller in any room. I am asking for the opposite, and I intend to be demanding about it. I want you turned out properly. I want your word to be worth something in small matters as well as large. I want you steadier under pressure than you are now, harder to knock off course, and more use to everyone who depends on you. I want you to walk into rooms and have people wonder what it is about you.

That is what I would spend my years making. And if it works, nobody outside these walls will ever know why — they will simply think you are formidable, and they will be right.



There is one more thing and it is the only part I cannot make easier for you.

None of this works if you merely allow it. I do not want your permission and I do not want you humouring me because I clearly want it and you love me. That would be worse than nothing — it would waste years and we would both know it and neither of us would say so. This only has any force at all if you choose it, deliberately, with your eyes open, having read every page and understood exactly what you are handing over.

And you must know that you may refuse. Not politely — actually. If you read all of it and say no, then it is no, and we are exactly as we were, and I will not raise it again in six months in a different shape or let it colour anything between us. I mean that as plainly as I have meant anything in this letter. If you cannot say no to me about this then your yes is worth nothing, and I would rather have neither than have that.

So do not answer me tonight. Read the whole of it — all of it, including the pages about limits and stopping and what happens if I get it wrong, because those are the ones that protect you and they are the ones people skip. Take a fortnight. Take longer if you want it. Come back with a yes, or a yes with things changed, or a no, and I will take whichever you bring me.



I have thought about how to end this and there is only one honest way.

I am not asking because something is wrong. We are fine. That is exactly why I am asking now — because fine is what most marriages settle into and then quietly stay in for thirty years, and because I have looked at that particular future carefully and I do not want it. I would rather spend the time I have making you into something than spend it comfortably beside you while we both slowly become slightly less.

You have spent our whole life looking after me. Let me have this. Let me be the thing in your life that made you better, and let me have earned the right to be that by doing the work of it every single day.

Read it, my love. Then tell me the truth.

Yours — and, if you will have it, yours to answer to,

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over. Nothing is signed on the night it is discussed; the answer must be free to be no.