

More Than Love Letters

Rosy Thornton

Published by Headline Review

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First published in 2006 by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

0 7553 3386 1 (ISBN-10)
978 0 7553 3386 8 (ISBN-13)

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

More Than Love Letters

42 Gledhill Street
Ipswich
Suffolk IP3 2DA

Mr Richard Slater, MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

14 September 2004

Dear Mr Slater,

I am writing to you as my constituency MP to express my concern about VAT on sanitary protection. As you know, these essential goods have been subject to a lowered rate of 5 per cent VAT since January 2001, but in my view they should be zero-rated. Mr Singh in my local chemist's tells me that the special 5 per cent rate causes great accounting headaches for pharmacists. For me, the charging of any VAT on sanitary towels and tampons is an unarguable example of sex discrimination. It is also a hygiene issue.

Yours sincerely,
Margaret Hayton.

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

20 September 2004

Dear Ms Hayton,

Thank you for your letter of 14 September, raising an issue of concern. Your view has been noted, and I can assure you that I shall be looking into this matter in the near future.

Yours sincerely,
Richard Slater, MP.

Rosy Thornton

42 Gledhill Street
Ipswich
Suffolk IP3 2DA

Mr Richard Slater, MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

28 November 2004

Dear Mr Slater,

I am writing to you as my constituency MP because I am dismayed about the British government's failure to take steps to implement the EU Emissions Trading Directive, which is to come into effect in most member states in January 2005. The government is planning instead, I understand, to increase allocations of carbon emissions to British power generation and other industries, placing in serious jeopardy our ability to meet Kyoto targets for cuts in greenhouse gas emissions by 2012. Do we want to be among those few European countries which are not keeping pace with staged reductions in emissions? (Us and the Greeks, basically.) It is the future of the planet that we are talking about here.

Yours sincerely,
Margaret Hayton.

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

4 December 2004

Dear Ms Hayton,

Thank you for your letter of 28 November, raising an issue of concern. Your view has been noted, and I can assure you that I shall be looking into this matter in the near future.

Yours sincerely,
Richard Slater, MP.

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42 Gledhill Street
Ipswich
Suffolk IP3 2DA

Mr Richard Slater, MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

10 February 2005

Dear Mr Slater,

I am writing to you as my constituency MP to raise a matter of considerable local concern. The zip-wire in the park between Gledhill Street and Emery Street has been broken ever since I moved to Ipswich in September. Not only is this a considerable loss of amenity for the local children who use the park as their main play area, but the older children use the broken platforms from which the wire formerly ran as vantage points from which to 'bomb' the younger ones with twigs, sweet wrappers and other detritus. Only yesterday I had to comfort a small girl who was in tears as a result of such an attack. I hope steps may be taken as soon as possible either to mend the zip-wire or to remove the platforms. I wrote to the borough council about this back in October but have received no reply.

More dog waste bins in the park would also be a highly desirable improvement.

Yours sincerely,
Margaret Hayton.

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

16 February 2005

Dear Ms Hayton,

Thank you for your letter of 10 February, raising an issue of concern. Your view has been noted, and I can assure you that I

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shall be looking into this matter in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Slater, MP.

WITCH

Women of Ipswich Together Combating Homelessness

Minutes of meeting at Alison's house, 17 February 2005, 8 p.m.

Present: Alison, Ding, Emily, Pat, Pat, Persephone, Margaret

Apologies for absence: Susan

New member

We were pleased to welcome Margaret as a new member of the collective. Emily and Pat T. agreed to redraft the rota for emergency evening and weekend cover at Witch House to include Margaret's name. Alison agreed to go with Margaret on any call-outs for her first few times.

Witch House: current occupancy

Room 1: Carole

Room 2: Lauren

Room 3: [void]

Room 4: Joyce

Room 5: Helen

Referrals for room 3 were considered. The possibilities were (i) Moira, a 44-year-old who has been staying at the Women's Aid refuge since leaving her violent husband, but who finds the noisy child-dominated environment there affects her tinnitus badly, as well as her auditory hallucinations; and (ii) Nasreen, aged 18, newly arrived from Albania via Felixstowe, who has been referred through the Housing Advice Centre, and is currently sleeping on

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Pippa from Cyrenians's sofa. After some discussion it was decided to offer the room to Nasreen.

News of residents

Joyce is much better since Dr Gould changed her medication, and relationships in the house have been far easier as a result. There has been no repeat of the Coco Pops incident.

At the weekly house meeting, the main issue was still Carole's overuse of the washing machine, and her constant showering after other residents are in bed. Emily and Pat T. led a helpful discussion about the difficulties of living with obsessive-compulsive disorder. On the positive side, it was recognised that since Carole moved in there have been no more arguments about the state of the kitchen.

Mrs Roberston from number 27 has complained again about noisy male visitors late at night. Emily and Pat T. have spoken to Lauren once more about telling the boys to keep the noise down, and explained how vital it is for the future of the project that no money should change hands.

News of former residents still receiving support

We were pleased to hear that Marianne is out of rehab and working part-time at the chemist's.

Angie has gone back to her partner, now that he is out of prison, and they are trying to make another go of it. It was agreed that members of the collective should continue to visit on a weekly basis, provided this can be arranged at times when her partner is out of the house.

Finance

Lauren's housing benefit has finally come through, so there are no current rent arrears.

Ding has completed this year's application for the borough

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council grant and sent it off; she has also got the forms for the Lottery Fund application, although she reported that this is only available for capital grants or short-term revenue funding.

With her job going full-time and her mum being out of St Jude's and back home with her, Ding said that she wasn't sure whether she could continue to act as treasurer for much longer. Margaret will meet with Ding in the office on Saturday to hear about what the job involves, and may take on the role of treasurer from the beginning of the new financial year. Thanks were expressed to Margaret for this kind offer.

Any other business

We have all been invited to the Rape Crisis Centre social on the 25th; please bring a bottle and something for the pot-luck vegetarian buffet. (Any nut roasts should be carefully labelled, please, after what happened to Judy last year.)

Next week's meeting: 8 p.m., at Pat and Pat's house.

42 Gledhill Street
Ipswich

20 February 2005

Dear Gran,

It was so good to see you out of hospital and back home last week. How did the interview go with that woman (Kirsty, was it?) who you were seeing about being your home help? I do hope you find someone quickly – someone you can really get along with. I know you don't want just anyone coming in in the mornings to get you up, and seeing you in the old Little Mermaid pyjamas that you had when you were twelve. (Though that's me, not you – I don't suppose they had pyjamas for girls when you were twelve,

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did they?) But, you know, you do need to get someone soon, Gran. It must be very hard, with one side of your body not up to doing a lot, at least until the physiotherapy starts to kick in a bit. What a good thing the stroke affected your right-hand side – I mean, with you being left-handed like me. It's funny that, because Mum's not. It's something I must have got straight from you.

But it does mean you can write – and of course all the other things, like buttons and bras and spreading your Marmite. I always remember we had Marmite for tea at your house, making the toast in front of the fire, we never had it at home, no one except me liked it. I am sorry that this letter seems to keep going off in all directions, but when you said about writing rather than ringing, because of not getting to the phone so well, I thought I'd try to write just as if I was talking to you, and you know I don't think I've written a letter to family or friends for *years*, not since those awful production-line thank you letters Mum used to sit us down to write after Christmas when we were little. I guess you've had quite a few of those from me, down the years – wonder if you ever kept any of them? I'm sorry the letters were so soulless, but I do remember lots of the things you gave me, Gran. I've still got Killer-Eyes Ted here with me, sitting on the end of my bed – and the Jill pony books, it was you who started me on those, and I must have read them all about twenty times. And do you remember that funny puppet that was Little Red Riding Hood one way round and you turned it inside out and it was the wolf? I played with that non-stop, and I cried when I took it to school and Jackie Baker threw it on the roof of the infant toilets, and Mr Hughes wouldn't fetch it down with his ladder like he did all the footballs because he said I shouldn't have had it out in the playground in the first place.

My landlady (I suppose I should call her that, but it sounds so 1950s – really she's more like a normal housemate, even though she's miles older than me) is called Cora, and she likes

to rent out the room because her husband Pete works away a lot on the oil rigs. He works three-month stints so I still haven't met him yet – I missed him at Christmas when I was at Mum and Dad's. I say Cora's older than me, but actually I've no idea how old she must be, maybe in her forties, maybe her fifties. I can never understand how people (usually older people) can seem to tell just how old other people are by looking at them. I mean, I know when people are young (student age or a little bit older, like me), and I can tell when they are old (it's the grey hair and wrinkles, isn't it, really?) but in that whole in-between zone, thirties and forties and fifties, well, I can never tell at all. Most of the other staff at school are in that middle zone. Except Karen (she's the person who helps in my class with Jack Caulfield, the blind boy I told you about), she's not much older than me. Oh, and Mrs Martin the deputy head, who's in the grey-and-wrinkles camp. And I honestly couldn't place the middlies to within ten or twenty years in most cases. Maybe it's because I never really look properly: they aren't young or old, they are just people. I guess it comes as you get older, spotting people that are younger or older than yourself. When you reach your age, Gran, do you lose the skill again, because everyone is just young?

Oh dear, I am worried now that Cora will walk over and see what I have written, about her age, I mean. She is writing a letter, too – we are sitting in the living room together, both writing away at our letters; it is very Jane Austen, I think. The lost art, and all that. She writes to Pete every week, never misses – I think it's rather sweet, at their age. Apparently it isn't always easy to get through to the rig on the phone, depends on the weather conditions in the North Sea or something.

Anyway, Cora seem very nice. There's a little Baby Belling in my room, and space to sit (mine's the front bedroom, the best one in the house, which is very kind of her and Pete), and at the

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beginning I used to do my baked potato or my pasta up there on my own, but I hated waking up to the smell of last night's onions, and it really seemed too much trouble to cook just for one, so I often ended up just having bread and honey for days on end. (I know how much you would disapprove of that, Gran!) And Cora was downstairs in her kitchen doing the same thing. So recently we've started to cook together most days. It was just weekends at first – she'd invite me down to share her supper and then I'd do a return fixture upstairs. Now we always use her kitchen, whoever's turn it is to cook, because she's got all the little jars of herbs and spices and everything, and my Baby Belling is under a slopy roof thing and right up against the wardrobe door, so not the easiest to get to.

Oh dear, this letter has gone on a lot and I haven't really told you anything yet! Well, work is going fine. We learned a song about Louis Braille today (we've been doing about him because of Jack); we're just finishing the class project on spiders and starting one on Islam, and Daniel McNally hasn't pulled down his own or anyone else's trousers for two weeks. I've also joined a women's group. They meet every Thursday evening, and they run a safe house for homeless women. They seem like a really friendly bunch. Must go, I've promised I'll take Cora's dog, Snuffy, out to the park. She's called after the man who wrote the music for 'The West Wing' (which struck me as odd, since Cora doesn't seem a very political person) – the guy's name is W. G. Snuffy Walden, and apparently it always made Cora and Pete laugh. Dreadful name for a human being, Cora says, but an excellent one for a spaniel.

Lots of love,
Margaret.

Rosy Thornton

42 Gledhill Street,
Ipswich

20 February 2005

Dearest Pete,

Well, I'm sitting in the old armchair that came from Aunt Alice when she died – I know how you always like to be able to picture me when I'm writing to you – and Snuffy is lying across my feet doing her impersonation of a draught-excluder – though I never saw a draught-excluder with its eyes tight shut and a yellow rubber duck still in its mouth.

Margaret is writing a letter too, in fact we are both sitting here scribbling away like it's a wet Sunday in a Jane Austen novel! It's her gran she's writing to. She had a stroke back just before Christmas, and has been in hospital all this time. Now she's home again, and getting by on her own, but she finds it stressful to try to get to the phone when it rings, and has told Margaret that she would rather have letters from her. I expect it's nicer anyway, when you're old and alone, to have a letter you can take out and re-read over and over, rather than a phone call which is over and done with once a week. I often get out your letters, Pete – I had a bundle of old ones out the other day, and it felt just as though you were here in the room with me.

You will like Margaret. She's fearfully earnest about things: she's just joined some homelessness group (all women they are) that runs a little hostel place near the town centre. She gets fired up about everything going – you should hear her sometimes in the mornings, she actually argues with the radio if John Humphrys has someone on she disagrees with. And she writes letters to her MP! I didn't know people still did that. I hardly know anything about him, though I've lived here for thirty years: that man Slater, you know, he's New Labour, and from what you read in the *Town Crier* he's too smooth for his own or

anyone else's good. Maybe all this crusading passion is because Margaret's young; she's just in her first teaching job, so I guess she's twenty-three, maybe twenty-four. But even at that age I don't remember ever caring quite as much as she seems to! She's beautiful, too. I don't mean just pretty, I really do mean beautiful, it's the only word for it. I don't think I've ever described her to you, have I? She's tall, with curly almost-black hair, and big grey eyes with these little flecks of amber in them. And her skin – it's so white it's almost see-through. There's a word for it, I think it begins with a t, but I can't remember it. She has that gawky awkwardness of tall girls, completely unaware of her beauty. 'Coltish', I think would be the word for it – like Katy Carr before she fell out of the swing. (Sorry, Pete, I know you won't ever have read *What Katy Did*, but you know me and my books.) Anyway, Katy is too tomboyish an image for her, because of that astonishing skin.

Things have been pretty quiet in the bank this week – it was Dora's birthday, and she brought in cake for coffee break. Homemade it was, a proper old-fashioned Victoria sponge with raspberry jam and butter cream (real butter in it, too, none of your soft marge). I must admit I did enjoy my slice, but it made me sad to think she'd spent all the time making the cake for us – like she doesn't have enough on her plate, with her eldest back home after splitting from his wife, and Dave off work again with his bad back. She's the one who should be being spoiled on her birthday – and I bet she cooked a special tea at home, too. Oh, and the garden is starting to burst out all over the place, love: everything seems to be beginning to sprout these last few days. That forsythia we put in by the back fence – four years ago now, is it? I was trying to remember – is a riot of colour. I think it's come earlier this year, with the mild weather we've had, and that and the daffs really make a splash through the kitchen window.

Well, I'd better stop now, there's the supper to get on. I'm

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cooking for Margaret again. Chops, we're having. I did them for her once before and she really loved them; might do something for that pale complexion, too! All my love, Petey, and I miss you, as always.

Cora xxx

From: Margaret Hayton [margarethayton@yahoo.co.uk]

Sent: 22/2/05 22:07

To: Rebecca Prichard [becs444@btinternet.com]

Dear Becs,

You'd laugh at me. I've joined another of my groups that are going-to-change-the-world, as you always used to put it! It's homelessness *and* the great patriarchal conspiracy this time. It manages to combine all the aspects that you would send up most of both Women's Action and the Homelessness Support Group, from college. They work as a collective (go on, sneer, you know you want to); two of them are paid workers and the rest are the voluntary support group, but they didn't bother to tell me which were which, and it didn't seem to matter. They meet every week in each other's houses. Last night Alison (who seems to be the sort of unofficial self-designated queen bee) served organic herbal tea without a trace of irony. There's a lesbian couple and they both appear to be called Pat. I suppose that can happen – it's not one of the difficulties of a gay lifestyle that had ever occurred to me before. Oh, and in fact, when I say I've joined the group, I also seem to have become treasurer. Not only did I make the mistake of revealing that I possess and know how to use a computer and spreadsheet package, but in a mad moment I actually uttered the fatal words, 'What does it involve?'

You'd also scoff – I've eaten pork chops three times without turning a hair! Cora, the woman whose house I'm living in, offered to cook a few weeks back, and I forgot to say anything (seems like everyone was veggie at college, or at least knew that I was, so it was never an issue) until it was too late and there it was, staring up at me from the plate, a big slab of no-messing, like-it-or-lump-it meat. Having eaten that and not said, of course, the next time I couldn't possibly tell her, or else she'd feel bad! What an idiot I am – I expect I'll have to swallow my principles (and a lump of dead pig) every Sunday evening from now on, until . . . Well, until I can afford a mortgage round here on my NQT main scale salary, which will be (does rapid calculation in head) oh that's right, never! I suppose up there you can pick up a three-bedroomed semi on your way back from Asda.

School is good: the head is on another planet but his deputy, Mrs Martin, seems quite sorted, and the rest of the staff are OK. There's a kid in my class, Jack, who's almost completely blind, so he comes with a full-time helper, Karen, which means always another body around the classroom. I've got Year 3s, which I think is my favourite stage. The Infant nuts and bolts are already in place – they've sounded out their phonetics, and they've learnt to count forwards in 2s, 5s and 10s and backwards in green bottles, speckled frogs and monkeys bouncing on the bed – and now they are just beginning to unfurl their Junior wings. They haven't yet absorbed the view that it's cool to be bored. The most feeble attempts at teacherly humour are still rewarded with gleeful delight, and everything is fresh and interesting, so that life resembles an endlessly rolling episode of 'Blue Peter'.

How are you getting on at that Ofsted-failing, sink-estate-

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fed place of yours? I don't see how you can ever take the mickey out of me again for my world-changing tendencies, after accepting that offer! Have you thought about hiring some personal protection? I know you've only got a Reception class, but I hear gun crime starts young on Moss Side!

And how is the delectable Phil, by the way? Are you still together?

Love,
Margaret x

From: Rebecca Prichard [becs444@btinternet.com]

Sent: 22/2/05 22:56

To: Margaret Hayton [margarethayton@yahoo.co.uk]

Hi Margaret, great to hear from you! I was beginning to think they didn't have the internet down there in Hicks-wich, sorry, I mean Ipswich! (Is it true that the streets are paved with sugar-beet?) And I knew it was no use trying to text you – I remember your views about mobiles irradiating the brain. I do like the sound of the two Pats, by the way – a couple both homosexual and homonymic.

The delectable Phil is history (which is strangely appropriate since he's got a post teaching it in Swindon). I guess the delicate bloom of our relationship may not have survived the distance between Manchester and Wiltshire, but in fact it had withered on the bough anyway before we'd even packed up and left college. It seems that Julie Biddulph also found him delectable – and so apparently did Letitia 'Tits' Carvaggio, just the once, when she was drunk at a post-exam party. Her outfit was really accentuating her name that night, as I recall; I went home early, and Phil

always did have the willpower of a particularly suasive flea.

Since Phil there have been Aidan, Ben, and now my latest acquisition, Campbell (and no, before you say it, I've heard them all already – I am *not* working my way through the alphabet). Campbell is something of a toyboy, a third year Chem. Eng. student from UMIST. He's still here now, as a matter of fact. He has an essay to finish, which is why I happened to be checking my e-mails. He does such a cute little frowny thing when he's concentrating – makes me just want to bite his eyebrows!

But what about you, chuck? Any nice fresh-faced farmer boys on the horizon down there in Ipswich? Or are you still keeping up your vow of chastity? I seem to recall your being sworn off men, along with meat and overuse of the mobile, from some time in your second year, as being all equally injurious to brain, body or soul. You were practically married from the third week in college to your very own Mr Rochester (until it turned out he had that mad first wife locked in the attic), and for ever after that the cloistered nun! But I bet there are some Suffolk swains who can tempt you to leave the Order . . . ?

Big hugs,
Becs xx

PS. Incidentally, I am ignoring your taunts about the incomparable Brunswick Road Primary. I am not on a mission to save the socially excluded youth of tomorrow; I needed a job within striking distance of Dad's increasingly carcinomatose colon, and it was all I could get. But, since you ask, the kids are a blast. Four-year-olds are the same the world over. Teaching Reception is basically herding cats whether it's in Moss Side or Mayfair.