

Dear Olivia,

There is a house opposite my regular supermarket, and every Thursday it seems to watch me bicycle home, the grand windows watching my movements. It is a brick house, with orange roof tiles, and large white windows. It has sunken into itself, like it is too tired to stand up straight anymore. The garden outside is overgrown; I see the dandelions sway in the wind. The wind is different here Olivia, which is not something that I would expect, let alone something I thought I would notice. The bricks are chipped and I can see small purple flowers creeping into the driveway cobblestones. The house reminds me of you, and every time I bike past I think to myself 'And there's Olivia's house.'

Well, I just returned from my shopping and, watching me as usual, there was your house. And I thought about you, not in the way that I normally do, where I remember you and sigh and continue. I thought 'And there's Olivia's house; I should really write to her.' So here I am, at my typewriter, click-clacking away into the afternoon. The weather here is different, as I said before. The wind has a bite, like a small dog constantly chasing your heels. Nothing like the waving calm that blew through the sycamores back in New Whren.

I'm not sure if you would like it here to be honest. The cold is pervasive, and the people aren't as funny. But, I mustn't complain. There could be far worse places to teach. The semester is over until the spring, but the university still wants me on campus to help prepare for the new term. My living situation is adequate, close to the beach, and so far I love my work. The students here have such vitality, such unfounded confidence. They still believe they will live forever.

But I am not writing this letter to talk about work.

I still think about you in the small moments, waiting at traffic lights, watching the seagulls spiral and spin in the air at the beach. I remember you once told me that you wished you were a bird, that you could just lift from the earth and float away. Do you remember, on our second date, you watched the sparrows soaring in flocks above us, great big clouds of birds chirping to one another, nesting in the oaks? We sat in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable or awkward. I didn't tell you, but that was when love wrapped its first thorn around my heart, growing like a vine, constricting and puncturing me.

With the holidays, I've had plenty of time to think about love. It's such a cloying desperate emotion, latching itself into every memory, every sound or smell. It's a sweet smelling poison, and you can't help but drink every drop, let it burn away at your insides. I think you would agree with me, but then it's hard to tell what you would agree on now.

Are you different now? Or should the question be how different are you? People change like gradients, like the sunset, where the change is so slight and imperceptible that when you look back up and realise you have changed, that the yellow is now orange, it's too late.

I feel guilty reliving our old memories, like I'm stealing joy from my past life. It's easy to romanticise the past, to watch it all back with a bittersweet hue. I try to remember how it was, try to remember our mediocre days, where we were in love, but we weren't interesting. But I still find myself missing it all. I miss knowing that there was someone out there, talking and walking and breathing and loving me.

Do you remember the caterpillar I couldn't be less interested in? You took it home with such delight, gave it a jar and some leaves. I tried telling you that it was perfectly happy outside, but you persisted, giving it water and fresh dirt every day. I remember when you proudly displayed the cocoon hanging from the lid, all shrivelled and brown. It was a promise, that one day, the jar would be an explosion of fluttering colour, and the lid would be uncapped and the butterfly freed into the open air. I wonder if you're still waiting for the chrysalis to crack, for spindly black legs to break open the papery shell.

Most promises are broken, or never fulfilled. Whether they be to other people or secret hidden promises we make to ourselves. The kind of promises you don't even realise you made until you feel the shame of trust broken, the shame of realising that you aren't who you believed who you were.

There is a girl who works in the coffee shop below my apartment. Her ears are pierced and her shoes never seem to be clean. Our routines don't line up perfectly, so I don't see her too often. I can feel her watching me from behind the counter as I in turn watch the people walking outside. Every time I see her I look away, afraid that she will burn into the back of my retinas, lodge herself into my dreams. I'll sit down, I'll think 'now, go, say something to her, launch yourself forward, take a risk for once John.'

I know that I'll never do it. I like her enough to think about her, imagine being with her, to envision her leaning back in laughter.

But there are so many unknowns. What if she sees me, and understands me, and then turns away? Who even is this girl, this walking enigma? Will it be worth the risk? Is anything worth the risk? The empty carousel of my mind will turn, the paint chipped and faded, the same music looping through the tinny speakers, and the fair is already two towns over, the spinning horses forgotten.

It's both a blessing and a curse to know yourself. That's something I always admired about you. I never heard you talk about yourself, like you were another person. There was never an introspective moment. Perhaps you hid it from me, decided your thoughts on yourself were for yourself only. But I believe that you just didn't think about yourself. You owned what you felt and what you wanted and didn't wonder about why you wanted what you wanted or why you felt what you felt. Maybe that's what made you so interesting to me, because you weren't aware of why you were and you didn't care to find out.

At times I feel trapped inside myself, like there's a more exciting John just waiting for me to wake up and see him, a John who is ready to grab life by the throat and wring it dry. There were moments when I was with you, when I was so comfortable that I felt I could say anything, that the safety net of your love could handle anyone I could be. I contemplated sitting up, telling you that there must be more, there must be something that other couples have that we haven't found yet. I wanted to stand, lift you to your feet, ask 'Is this really it?'

Maybe that's what life is. There are moments when you see a glimpse of the beautiful, where you feel in one moment that you understand what you've been doing and why. Our head breaks through the clouds, we see the clear sky and the path before us. But we suck the moment dry, desperately consume our own happiness, because who knows when it will come again? Then all that is left is the rind, the skin, the peel, the reminder that gravity will always, always pull you back down.

When we were together, I had a dream that we weren't. We both laughed, like the past year was an embarrassing misstep. I woke up and was disappointed to remember that I still loved you.

Because love is so binding, so primal and real. Our brain fires on all cylinders and screams 'This is it, this is how we do it, this is how we survive and continue and leave our legacy.' It creates a crisp, painful contrast, like the red bloom of blood through paper. How can something this intense be built on a person, this simple machine of flesh and bone? They are so regular, so human.

But maybe I wasn't really in love. Maybe that intensity was hatred wearing love's clothes. It's a fine line after all. Maybe other couples don't feel mediocrity creeping around the corner, stretching its fingers into their mouths, reaching behind their eyes and muting all the colours.

Sitting here, watching the clouds roll in from the west, their shadows passing over the rooftops in front of me, a display that, no matter how much you romanticize it, is uncompromisingly unremarkable, I can't help but notice the sinking feeling that this is all there is, that the small moments of peace and beauty are small because everything else is pressing in around them, crowding your vision.

Though I'm not sure, and I probably will never be. Some ideas are like wallpaper peeling at the corners of your room. Not offensive enough to pull down the whole strip, but still noticeable, lingering at the edge of your vision.

I just spent a minute away from my desk. I stood and stretched and wondered whether I bought enough milk to last me until next Thursday. I'm not sure why I'm writing this, I'm not sure what your house was doing differently that urged me to sit down and spill my thoughts to you. I mean, you may never read this. Hell, I might not even send it.

It's interesting that we were so close, yet I was never able to tell you any of this. I have to hide behind the distance between us, the barrier that written words provide. I doubt I would ever be able to tell you this in person.

I guess I just wanted to say the things I was unable to say before. To provide a neat little afterthought. Because one day I'll wake up and I'll have forgotten you, and what we had might not have been perfect, but it happened and that's worth writing about.

So thank you Olivia, for not sharing with me, and for being boring with me, and for giving me something to think about when the afternoon gets long. Thank you for killing a caterpillar and being pleased about it; thank you for being just interesting enough to stay. Thank you for being there for me to love and then to hate, and thank you for doing the same in return.

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope you write back soon, if you write back at all.

*Yours,
John Tucker*