

DEAREST
JOSEPHINE



Caroline George

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798



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Since 1798

Dearest Josephine

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ISBN 978-0-7852-3618-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-7852-3619-1 (e-book)

ISBN 978-0-7852-3620-7 (audio download)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[[CIP TO COME]]

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[[Dedication TK. Please hold 1 page.]]

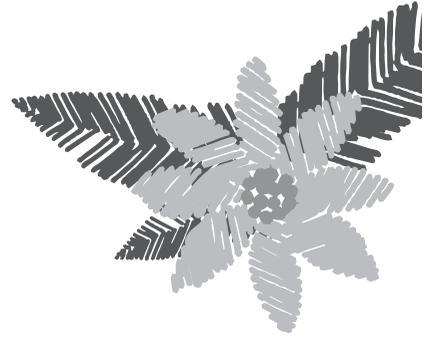


THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

*For a moment with you, I
wait an eternity.*



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Since 1798



ONE

JOSIE

From: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>

Sent: Monday, June 20, 1:38 PM

To: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>

Subject: Neil Is Rubbish - We Hate Neil

Hi Faith,

I did a thing. A big thing. And I'm not sure how to tell you without sounding like the rotten human being who abandoned her best friend for a boy. The rotten human being who reached out the moment she broke up with said boy. But surprise. That's what I'm doing. Reaching out.

Rashad and I broke up. Well, I broke up with him after he said we needed to cool down for a while. Maybe he broke up with me first. I mean, the whole relationship was a blurry mess.

You said he wasn't good for me. I should've listened. I should've gone to the school dance with you, taken you to the airport after graduation. Though you might not believe me, I haven't forgotten that our first day at Stonehill Academy, we planned to end our thirteenth year by replacing all the headmaster photos with cut-outs of Leonardo DiCaprio. Epic prank idea. Headmistress Poston would've freaked.

I'm sorry for ruining your last year in England.

Guess my brain was scrambled by Rashad's chocolate-brown eyes and hair that always looked windswept, like he'd been on a motorbike. Ugh! And his gold chain. Laugh all you want, but chains on the right boy . . . (*kisses fingertips*) *perfecto*.

Rashad drove me to the bus station afterward. As I yanked my luggage from the trunk of his MINI Cooper, he said, "We need to break up, love. Your mood swings put a damper on my creativity." (Like my dad's death triggered his lack of artistic talent.) I told him we'd already broken up. Then I poured his cherry-lime energy drink onto his Fenty trainers.

Not my best moment.

Anyway, I decided to email you because (1.) I'm the wordiest person alive and (2.) I have no idea how international calls or texts work. Part of me thinks I'll get a bill for two hundred pounds if I try to phone you. That's not an excuse for my lack of communication. I know I've been rotten and selfish—and you deserve to hate me. I can't even blame cancer.

You lost my dad too.

I want to be friends again. Remember our first slumber party

at my house? Dad made the worst jam roly-poly, and we filmed videos of us singing karaoke. We promised to stay friends forever. Swore it. Heck, I think we did a friendship ritual to seal the deal.

Please forgive me, Faith. London is rubbish without you. I'm rubbish without you. Really, everything in my life seems destined to go wrong. I forgot to post my application to university and won't be able to re-enrol until the spring term. I ruined our relationship. Dad passed away, you returned to America, and Rashad . . . well, Rashad ended up being *Rashad*.

How did you put up with me for so many years? I can't even be alone for a couple hours without getting annoyed or wanting to dye my hair pink. That brings me to my second bit of news. I'm on my way to Atteberry—a village only an hour drive from Scotland's border. After Dad passed, I learned he'd purchased an estate in the town. He liked to renovate historical homes, but he never told me about the property. Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise.

Dad got a kick out of surprises.

I need to be alone (and hopefully not dye my hair) while I figure out what's next for me. I feel like a volcano about to explode, like I haven't breathed—really breathed—in months. I threw some clothes into a suitcase, texted my boss at the café, and left Dad's townhouse without even feeding the cat. (Don't worry. Mum agreed to care for Antoni while I'm gone.)

My first term at uni starts in January, which means I have seven months to decide what I want to do with my life. I'm seriously considering becoming a hermit with pink hair.

So far this holiday isn't off to a good start. My bus stopped at a petrol station not long ago. I went inside and had a mental breakdown while waiting to purchase tampons, jelly babies, and chocolate. Tears and snot everywhere.

The cashier gave me a pervert stare, you know, like the guys at Stonehill Academy. His lopsided name tag read: *HELLO, MY NAME IS NEIL*. He touched my candy with his tobacco-stained fingers and said, "One awful period, huh?"

All manners went out the shop's window. Instead of answering the question with a polite *NO*, I wiped my tears and yelled, "Neil, I'm having a real crappy day. Give me the chocolate." And that's how I managed to embarrass myself to a point of extinction.

My bus reaches Atteberry in a few minutes, so I must bring this monologue to a close. Overall, I want to tell you . . . I know I messed up. I messed up when I ignored your phone calls. I messed up when I didn't talk to you at Dad's funeral. I'm a mess. I've been a mess for a while. But I don't want to be messy anymore.

You don't owe me a second chance, but would you forgive me just the same?

If you ever want to FaceTime, let me know. I'll be at Cadwallader Manor for the next few months, so I'll have plenty of free time.

Cadwallader—sounds like a creature I'd fish out of a pond.

Yours truly,
Josie

| (Sent from iPhone)

Josie: Bus reached Atteberry. Norman, the estate's caretaker, fetched me from the station. Headed to Cadwallader Manor now.

Mum: Thx for the update.

Josie: Any news from Dad's lawyers?

Mum: They advise selling your father's townhouse.

Josie: No! I want it. Plz don't sell.

Mum: Going into meeting. Talk later.

From: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>

Sent: Monday, June 20, 3:16 PM

To: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>

Subject: Re: Neil is Rubbish – We Hate Neil

Hey Josie,

Thanks for reaching out! I'll be honest. I stared at my laptop for a solid thirty minutes before I typed one sentence. And look at what I landed on!! Some corporate, autogenerated response that seems like I don't care about you. But I do care. I am glad you reached out.

I want to be angry and send you all the emails I typed up after graduation. I want to express how much you hurt me, that I thought Rashad was an idiot who used his good looks to

manipulate people, that . . . I wasn't okay after your dad passed. I needed you like you needed me. I wanted to be there for you, to cry with you at the funeral, to get angry at God and life and growing up.

Maybe that's what hurt the most. Not being there.

During one of our last school lunches, I sat in the refectory with Hannah and Hope while you ate with Rashad. I watched you drape your legs over his lap and snicker at the faculty, and I got so mad because you weren't you anymore. I almost took the BFF slap bracelet (the one you gave me during our first year at Stonehill) off my backpack. I almost whacked you over the head with it. Not to hurt you. I just wanted to beat some sense into your thick skull.

All that said, I think I forgave you a long time ago. I'm not mad anymore. We promised to stay friends, right? Through all the good and bad. Even when it seemed hard.

So yeah, I'd like that second chance.

Returning to New York was tough. I visited my family in Rochester before I moved to Brooklyn for college. My parents threw an Italian-style welcome party and invited everyone—my aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, godparents. (You would've loved it. So much food.)

After dinner I brewed a cup of tea while Mom served coffee. My uncle was like, "You fancier than us now, Faith?" He made jokes about England and my second family—what he called you and your dad. He talked about how my cousins went to public school and didn't need an expensive education to get into

college.

Everyone at the table seemed to forget I got into Stonehill on scholarship and because Aunt Sylvia recommended me to Headmistress Poston during her stint as a science teacher. They looked at me like I was an outsider, and I realized I didn't fit in with them the way I used to, at least not the way I fit with you.

Time has changed me. I no longer snicker at Uncle Sal's jokes. I prefer tea over Mama's imported coffee. I wear designer clothes thrifted from online boutiques, not crop tops bought from the mall. Maybe I should've noticed the changes sooner, but I wanted to believe everything was the same—my family would be my family again. Still, as I sat at that dining table, I saw it plain as day. The changes. The differences. Why I couldn't pretend those years in England hadn't opened a gaping chasm between us.

We had lived apart from each other. We'd gone our separate ways, and en route I stopped wanting their dreams, like the law degree, husband and kids, moving next door to my parents. I decided to pursue a career in fashion, maybe launch my own store chain like the Kardashians. They think that's frivolous. I guess . . . my family is disappointed because they want the old Faith, and I'm disappointed because they want someone other than me.

Gah, I miss you so much, Josie. I miss eating takeout with you and your dad. I miss our Saturday strolls through Notting Hill. I miss your dad's movie commentaries and popcorn obsession. I miss every little thing.

Life seems so different now. I live in a crappy one-bedroom apartment and take summer classes. I eat frozen dinners, binge watch *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. It's just . . . home doesn't seem like home without Headmistress Poston's room checks, our plaid uniforms, and Chicken Tender Tuesdays. I still expect to see you reading upside down whenever I enter my room. And thanks to you, I crave Dairy Milk bars at nine o'clock every night.

We're not kids anymore, but we're not grown-ups, either. People said we were adults once we turned eighteen. Do you feel like an adult? I sure don't. I can't figure out how to reload my transit card or file taxes. Sometimes I think life would be easier if we could rewind time and do high school all over again. Maybe we'd do it better the second time around. No Rashad. No bangs and Converse. No fights over who'd play Sandy in *Grease*.

I'm still with Noah, by the way. We managed to survive two years of long-distance dating. He moved to Brooklyn too, so we see each other all the time. Recently he's started talking about marriage, which terrifies me. I am NOT ready for more adulthood.

That's all my news! I guess the best way to conclude is to say you're forgiven, Josie. We're friends. Through messes, sucky boyfriends, bad haircuts, whatever—we'll stay friends. I hope you enjoy your time at Cadwallader Manor. Breathe. Learn to be alone. Figure out what you need to figure out, and I'll be here, ready to talk or listen or send memes.

Please tell me about Atteberry and your dad's secret estate. I

need details!!

Faith

P.S. Let's stick to emails for now. I need to download a messaging app so my cell phone provider won't charge a fortune for international texts and calls.

Mum: Are you settled in?

Josie: Yes. Norman and Martha helped me unpack. Then we ate dinner at a restaurant in Atteberry. How was your meeting?

Mum: Fine. I'll chat with lawyers about townhouse tomorrow.

From: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>
Sent: Monday, June 20, 11:37 PM
To: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>
Subject: Cadwallader Manor

Faith, here is my detailed report, per your request.

Atteberry rises from kilometres of farmland, its sprawl nestled at the base of a grand hill. The town possesses a cosy sort of quaintness, almost like that porcelain village my grandmother displays at Christmas. People wander its cobblestone streets and live in homes with thatched rooves. Very old-fashioned. Don't fret, though. I spotted a few restaurants and bakeries

while Norman drove me to the Cadwallader estate, so I won't starve or lose my mind to the North England quiet. And according to a gentleman at the bus station, Atteberry houses the finest knitting clubs in the country. Would you like a scarf for your birthday?

Norman seems quite a character. He and his wife, Martha, take care of Dad's estate and inhabit a cottage on the property. One word to describe them: adorable. Norman served in the navy, then became a farmer once he retired. He dons a wool jumper and navy cap. Martha, on the other hand, resembles Headmistress Poston. Same bobbed grey hair and motherly smile.

The landscape here projects a vibrant gloom—beautiful and melancholy. Every coppice and patch of grass blazes green, and the overcast sky washes the world with a blue haze.

Did you consider London a dreary place? I used to love the city. Dad took me for picnics in Kensington Gardens. Once a month we had cream tea at a shop near Windsor. It must've rained then. But I only noticed the dampness when he got sick.

Mum doesn't understand. Granted, she left after the divorce and refused to join our outings. Oh, I need to tell you!! Dad's lawyers want to sell the town home. I won't let them. That house means the world to me—to us. (Your pyjamas are still in the guestroom.)

Going to FaceTime you after I use the loo.

Josie

| (Sent from iPhone)

From: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>

Sent: Monday, June 20, 11:50 PM

To: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>

Subject: Re: Cadwallader Manor

I saw your Instagram story, Faith. I know you're watching television with your dog. Do you like Netflix more than your friend? LOL

Whatever. I'll tell you about Cadwallader Manor, and I'll be extra wordy because I'm petty and have nothing better to do.

The house stands at the end of a gravel drive, built in the Gothic Revival style with buttresses and stone walls. Do you recall Thornfield Hall from *Jane Eyre*? That's where I now reside—within an eerie manor surrounded by moorland and fog.

I asked Norman about the estate and why Dad kept it a secret. This is what he told me:

Dad purchased the property at a private auction while I was at Stonehill. He planned to renovate the house so we could use it on holidays. But his cancer ended those dreams. Maybe he thought he'd recover and finish the project. Maybe not telling me was his way of holding on to that hope. Whatever his reason, he intended this place for us.

I'm not sure what to think or feel right now. To be here and see evidence of Dad—his sweater on the coatrack, the sparkling

water in the fridge—reminds me of things I don't want to remember. Losing him. Getting swept away in the chaos that followed.

A few months of quiet will do me some good. Maybe I'll finish the renovations and have furniture appraised to complete Dad's project. He wanted me at Cadwallader. I cling to that truth now, while I huddle near my bedroom's fireplace with a cup of Earl Grey and an oil lamp. (The manor has electricity only on its main floor.)

Of course, Dad bought the creepiest fixer-upper in all of England. Too many spiders and drafts that seem to come from nowhere. I wish you were here to see it.

I wish you were here.

Email back as soon as possible! Your communication keeps me sane and less spooked by the creak of old wood and wind against shutters.

BTW, I planned to give you a virtual tour of the house. You missed out.

Josie

(Sent from iPhone)

Faith: Worth the international fees . . . I AM SORRY!!!

I was watching Stranger Things and didn't realize you called. I'll respond to your email tomorrow. Love you.

Josie: Sleep tight. Don't let the Demogorgon bite.

From: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>

Sent: Tuesday, June 21, 12:23 PM

To: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>

Subject: Re: Cadwallader Manor

Josie, if you don't respond, I'll assume you froze to death in that creepy mansion, and my day will be ruined. JOSIE, RESPOND ASAP!!

Your description of Atteberry—although beautiful—makes the place sound lonely. I'm a full supporter of rest and self-discovery, but isolation can sometimes cause more problems. Please don't join a knitting club. But if you do, promise you won't become a hermit who collects yarn and wanders the moors and dyes her hair pink. Geez, I get nervous just thinking about you in that village with only Norman and Martha to keep you company. I mean, they're better than Rashad.

Pretty much everyone is better than Rashad.

I must know more about your first night at Cadwallader. Any ghost sightings? Or even better—did Mr. Rochester call on you? Oh, I wish I could visit and help renovate the house.

Your dad would have wanted you to finish his project, though.

OMG, your mom and lawyers better not sell the townhouse. That place belongs to you—your dad said so. Remember when we tried to slide down the laundry chute and you got stuck? I was so scared your dad would be angry at me when he saw your feet dangling out of the shaft, and I couldn't believe it when he just laughed and slathered you with vegetable oil to get you out. Didn't that stain the clothes?

I miss him too. He treated me like a daughter, and I needed that. I needed a family during my time at Stonehill. Did you ever hear about the skirt? During one of our weekends at your house, your dad overheard us talking about how I'd ripped my uniform. He went to the store and bought a plaid skirt, then put it in the guest room for me to find. He didn't say a word about it, but I knew what he'd done.

You both mean the world to me.

So yeah, I understand your reason for visiting Cadwallader Manor. Loss changes our perspective of the world, exposes its instability, and leaves us to gather the pieces of our broken selves and stick them back together. Your dad must've known that, Josie. Maybe he bought the house to give you a safe place—somewhere you could heal.

Explore the estate and let me know what you find.

Faith

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798

Rashad: You misunderstood me, Jo. I don't wanna break up.

Josie: Wrong number.

Rashad: We had one fight. It's no big deal.

Rashad: Guess you're giving up on us, huh?

From: Josie De Clare <JDeClare@mailbox.com>

Sent: Tuesday, June 21, 4:01 PM

To: Faith Moretti <Kardashian_4Life@mailbox.com>

Subject: Weird Finds at Cadwallader

Good news, Faith! I didn't perish in the night and turn to ice. The fireplace warmed my bedroom to a comfortable temperature. I slept beneath a mound of quilts and didn't wake until Norman led his sheep past my window. Neither ghosts nor Mr. Rochester paid me a visit, which probably disappoints you. I can, however, report horrific texts from Rashad, but I won't waste time—or words—telling you about them.

I took your advice and explored the estate. First, I ravaged the kitchen and put together a breakfast of toast, eggs, and tea—like a genuine domestic. Martha left homemade butter and clotted cream in the fridge to liven up my meals. She even filled the pantry with canned soups. (I tell you this to prompt a craving for British food so you'll return to me.)

The weather seemed decent enough, so I took a pair of work boots from the cellar and went outdoors. I followed a stone wall around the property, then chased sheep onto the south ridge. Call me a child—I don't care! The air tasted like snow, and a frigid breeze clawed through my jumper. But I wasn't cold. Not for a moment. I felt something—something that didn't hurt—and I liked it. So, there I sat on the sod, scribbling in the notebook I carry around with me. I would've stayed for hours and watched mist swirl over the countryside, but a storm drove me back to the house. And that's when my day turned weird.

Granted, I find oddities in the simplest of things—you know this to be true. Case in point: when I spotted Headmistress Poston's star-shaped tattoo and invented an explanation

involving spies, covert operations, and hidden identities. All that to say, I doubt my observations hold significance in the logical realm.

While roaming the house, I discovered a study in the manor's west wing. It overlooks the courtyard and contains a desk, chair, and shelves piled with books, each old and likely worth a small fortune. Above the fireplace hangs a portrait of a young man with dark curly hair and hazel eyes—and a chiselled jawline no person could forget. He looks about eighteen years old. Broody. Slender. Posed next to a horse and dressed in a tailcoat.

Our type of boy.

I've attached a photo. What do you make of it? Doesn't the guy resemble Ian Wyatt from third-period arithmetic? Same pale skin and angular features. But this boy looks mature, almost serious to a point of sadness.

He seems devastating in every way.

The portrait inspired me. I decided to write a few thoughts about him into my notebook, but my pen ran out of ink, so I opened the desk to search for one. I pulled too hard, and the drawer popped off its tracks. That's when I found the weirdness—a bundle of unopened letters tucked behind the compartment, each addressed to a Josephine De Clare.

Should I read the letters? Dad might've left them for me. Probably not. I mean, they look rather dated. The paper is brown and brittle, and the handwriting is faded.

I want them to be from Dad. After everything that happened,

I just want to make sense of the pain, understand why it happened to me. Maybe I need to find myself, or something cliché like that. But I feel lost at sea, and I'm not sure what being found even means.

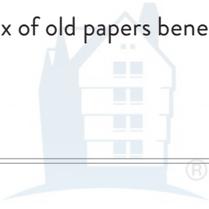
Thanks for staying friends with me. I won't get oversentimental because tears—even a drop—might dissolve these letters. Just know Dad loved you. I love you.

Please tell me to read the letters.

Josie

P.S. I also found a box of old papers beneath the bookcase!!!

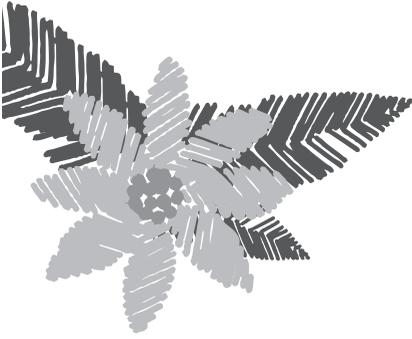
(Sent from iPhone)



Rashad: You obviously never loved me.

Rashad: Jo, I know these texts r reaching u.

Rashad: Are you with another bloke?



TWO

ELIAS

April 15, 1820

Dearest Josephine,

Not a day passes without thoughts of our fortuitous meeting. I think fondly of that night and the conversation we shared. Despite its brevity, our dialogue left an impression on me, which I cannot forget. I understand we have not engaged in an environment deemed socially appropriate. However, I feel the need to propose we begin a correspondence. Your wisdom and frankness lead me to believe only you can understand my situation. This was proven by your astute observations during our time together.

My father died a month ago. I barely knew him, yet I mourn him with a ferocity that makes little sense to me. I loathed his estate and his widow, hence my quick departure

from it. Indeed, I disliked every aspect of him, from the smell of his library to the way he sliced his venison.

I now reside at Cadwallader Manor—my father's northernmost property. Arthur Banes, my closest friend, and his cousin Lorelai Glas join me here. Their company eases the ache of grief or loneliness—or whatever emotions linger after a parent's death. In truth, I thought myself immune to the loss of Father. I thought myself immune to most emotions, especially those attached to such a man.

The Roch fortune belongs to me—Lord Roch's bastard. Though not quite nineteen years of age, already I am considered the richest man north of Newcastle. The wealth should appease me, for I spent my childhood preparing for it. I attended Eton College and obeyed my father's commands. Not once did I rebel against his wishes. Even when my mother—who served as a maid in the Roch household—perished from winter fever, I remained at school in submission to Lord Roch.

Fortune has not satisfied me, rather it has created an emptiness. Perhaps I am ungrateful. The inheritance provides status and opportunities a bastard should not be allowed. Tell me—what do you think of my situation? I would appreciate your candour regarding this matter, for you are the first lady to address me with plain, honest speech. No practiced formalities. No wary application of the etiquette that governs relations between men and women.

Recently I have found myself in an ill humour far more disagreeable than my usual temperament. I suppose the moors have altered me. Cadwallader Manor, large and dreary, receives a great deal less sunlight than my father's home in the

south. Cigar smoke from a previous owner clings to the walls. Candles burn tirelessly in a waged war against the darkness. Often I find the night more amicable, for at least the stars offer some consolation.

My housekeeper, Mrs. Dunstable, insists I replace my city clothes, which she starches and presses each morning, with wool garments. She fears my health declines, for I have not a dry head since my departure from the Roch estate, and my clothes remain in an almost-constant state of dampness. Outdoors the mud runs deep enough to swallow one's ankles. Inside, however, the fires burn smoky and weak. I must admit—a splash of brandy from time to time seems to best ease the chills.

At present, Arthur plays his violin in the parlour. He prefers to practice after breakfast, when Lorelai retreats to the drawing room for an hour of watercolour. His music echoes up the stairwell and fills my study with squealing notes. Rapturous songs do not appeal to him. Instead, he performs melancholic pieces, which magnify the house's already haunted ambience.

He and I became friends during our time at Eton. You may recall a few of the stories I shared, ones about secret parties in the boarding house and night-time trips to the local tavern. Arthur was involved in all misadventures. Of course I would like to blame him for our frequent punishment, but I must accept responsibility. I was rowdy and liked to anger the headmaster, for he treated me poorly due to my illegitimate birth.

Eton College prides itself on rearing boys from distinguished families. The school offers a superior education and

lack of coddling—qualities which attracted my father. Lord Roch wanted me to grow into a strong man, not spend my youth in the servants' quarters, where people showed affection. Roch men, even the bastards, are expected to demonstrate their manhood through intellectual discussions and unsentimental conduct.

My reason for writing you must lie in the details of my upbringing. I find myself out of sorts, hardly the boy who climbed from his bedroom window and clowned at the pub. I feel as though my mind has imprisoned me, Josephine. You offered solace and friendship, and so I ask for your help. A gentleman should not request such advice from a lady, I realize.

Our acquaintance has not been conventional from the start. Why change that now?

Did you feel unlike yourself after the death of your father? I behave without the faintest trace of madness, but I feel it coursing through my veins. No one can know about it except you, for you are well acquainted—despite our limited engagement—with my sequestered notions of self and the world. Please know I am grateful for your tolerance.

Arthur has finished his violin practice, so I must conclude this reintroduction. He wishes us to venture into town for entertainment, which will likely consist of drinks at the public house followed by a visit to the hatter. Lorelai does not plan to join us. She prefers to go on walks and collect things for her art. Just yesterday I found her bird feathers scattered about the manor and dried flowers pressed between the pages of my books.

I pray the South agrees with you, Josephine. If you do

find yourself near Atteberry, I invite you to visit Cadwallader. Although my description of the estate does not merit enthusiasm, I promise to be an exceptional host and introduce you to the finest of Northern England.

With respect and admiration, I await your response.

Yours ever,

Elias Roch

P.S. I shall post this letter once I learn your address. Our quick parting left me without your information, and my contacts are not familiar with the De Clare Family. I have written to relations who live in London, Manchester, and Liverpool, in hope they might be acquainted with you—or at least know how to reach you.



April 17, 1820

THOMAS NELSON

Dearest Josephine, *Since 1798*

If not for my wretched state, I would consider this letter and plea for correspondence an impertinence, daresay humiliating. I wish to preserve the sanctity of our meeting and your first impression. However, I believe only you can relate with my circumstance.

Arthur would consider my feelings a sign of derangement. Lorelai would lose all respect for me the instant I shared these thoughts swarming within my mind. They mean well, and they are dear to me. But those dearest to us cannot always understand what causes us pain.

I awoke in a panic last night, before morn smeared gold

across the horizon, before the household staff began their chores. I had not a dream to frighten me, rather a weight that came from nowhere and settled on my chest. A weight I could not touch nor remove. It pressed until I struggled to breathe, and I sat up in bed, gasping at the gloom.

My thoughts went to Mother. I did not visit her during her illness, and I saw her only twice after I left for Eton. She contracted winter fever not long after I started my second year. Perhaps the weight I felt was nothing more than a reminder of her death.

Eton was not an amiable place in my experience. I considered its schoolrooms bleak, its recreations barely tolerable. Arthur's company helped me to survive the education, therefore allowing me to become the son Lord Roch wanted. I doubt I truly met Father's expectations, though. He anticipated a great deal from his heir, and I never seemed enough.

The past haunted me last night, and I sense it here still. I feel enclosed by a cage, but the bars are set wide. I could escape, and yet I choose to stay within confinement. Do you make sense of these scribbles, Josephine? Have I indeed lost my mind?

Arthur took me to the public house yesterday for amusement. The pub is small and noisome, its floor sticky with ale. Few candles glow within its rooms, perhaps for the best. Those who frequent the establishment are a far cry from Atteberry's respectable folk.

My friend brought his violin to the pub, for he relishes attention. He played a jig while I embarrassed myself by dancing on tabletops. Such behaviour came from my schoolboy days, when I clowned at the tavern more than thrice a week.

I tell you this not with pride, rather to offer context. Arthur and I doth share a handful of reckless habits.

Patrons made wagers on how many rats the pub's cat would drag from the keg room. A foolish diversion, perhaps, but it lifted my spirits for several hours.

Exploits with Arthur tend to ease my moods. He is a genial person, the most reliable and loyal friend in my acquaintance. I consider him my brother, for we have known each other more than a decade. You would fancy him, I think. Although he does not possess the gift of eloquence, he makes up for all shortcomings with his knack for entertainment. In Arthur Banes's company, one shall never find oneself bored.

The outing refreshed me until I returned to Cadwallader Manor. One step into the entrance hall, and those feelings I had endeavoured to bury within the graveyard of my mind were exhumed. I went to my study and locked its door, the ale still fogging my head. I felt wrong. Even now I cannot explain the wrongness that swelled within me, its presence dark and despondent.

Arthur and Lorelai dine with me each night. We go on frequent walks across the moors, play games in the drawing room. I should not endure this sadness, for my guests are splendid company. They give this house purpose and strip away its shadows.

Lorelai seems most content here. She likes to paint the landscape and spend afternoons practicing her French. Not older than eighteen, she possesses an earnest countenance. Fun and games do appeal to her but in moderation—the opposite of her cousin. I suppose the best way to describe Lorelai would be by way of her fashion. She wears an ultramarine

dress made from the thickest satin. It never loses its shape, like the bun that rests at her neck.

She and I get on quite well. A few days ago, she persuaded me to sit for one of her paintings. Arthur made jokes the whole time, which only provoked Lorelai into a rage. She lectured us both for over an hour, then conscripted Arthur to work as her assistant.

The portrait turned out to her liking. I rather loathe it, for it depicts my physique as lean and sharp. Her image of me has skin whiter than bone and dark curls that appear long, daresay true to life. I had best groom myself and request more cakes with afternoon tea. Perhaps a large dinner—white soup paired with lambchops and potatoes—will correct my spare build.

I need to resemble an adult if I am to lord over this estate.

Josie: CHECK YOUR EMAIL!

Josie: I'm reading the letters.

Josie: Not sure how international fees work, so don't text back.

Faith: You just spent a pound of your own money. LOL. Checking my email now.

Father left his entire fortune to me. I manage his properties and assets, represent the Rochs in society. I am a gentleman, not a gentleman's bastard, yet who am I without Father's orders and disapproval? What shall I do with myself? Once, I mentioned my struggles to Arthur, and he laughed.

He wishes to talk only about Eton and gossip.

You must think me ungrateful. I have friends, wealth, and a large estate, yet I fill pages with complaints. I wish ardently to restore my wits so I may acknowledge the benisons of this world. Truly, if you find my words tedious, do tell me, and I shall cease all correspondence. Your good opinion means far more than letters.

I hope you are well. The night we met seems a lifetime ago, and I must confess that I miss you, perhaps more than one should after such a brief encounter. You are marvellous, unlike any woman in all of England. Please do not view my compliment as mere flattery. The repetition of accolades may dim their significance, but I state mine with sincerity.

Cadwallader Manor seems eerie today, more so than usual. I sit at my desk as a rainstorm pummels the land. Lorelai made wind chimes from old silverware and hung them outside the kitchen. They knell in the rain now.

Perhaps I should have moved into the Roch town home in Bath, enjoyed assembly halls and warmer temperatures. However, I felt drawn to Cadwallader, for its isolation suits my moods. I do crave brighter places, though. At present, wind claps the attic shutters. Spiders weave their gossamer tapestries in corners. And the maid dusts soot from my fireplace, stirring up a smog.

~~Did you fight for sleep after your father died? Were your thoughts and feelings jumbled like mine?~~ I shall not pester you with questions, but I wish to comprehend why I grieve a man I disliked, why I desire this pen and your company more than the persons downstairs.

Please write to me.

Elias

P.S. My friend in Liverpool confessed no knowledge of your location nor your existence. He claimed the only De Clare in his acquaintance is a clerk at a London bank. You must not be related to this person, for your apparel—what I remember—suggested distinguished birth. I shall continue to write as I search for you, in hope of one day posting my letters.

April 24, 1820

Dearest Josephine,

Writing to you calms me. I retreat to my study once everyone bids their good-nights, and I scribble until my thoughts steady themselves. I seem to write for several hours a day, either to you or no one in particular. The words inside me are so palpable and consuming they withhold rest until I let them out in the world.

My new habit vexes Arthur. He dislikes all pastimes that allow a sombre mood, except for his violin playing. To him, life should revolve around merriment and pleasure and avoid what causes discomfort. His intentions are noble, for he has seen me at my lowest. He found me in Eton's courtyard after I received news of Mother's death. He embraced me—which breached our school's code of conduct—and said he would always be my family. From that day on, he has endeavoured to make life a bit easier for me. He was at my side when Father died.

He has been at my side all these years.

Arthur and Lorelai plan to stay at Cadwallader Manor until autumn. They want to enjoy Atteberry's social season. At

least such is their claim. I suspect they fret about me. Lorelai seems to watch my every move. Arthur insists on keeping me company throughout the day. Neither of them asks questions, but they remain on alert.

I wish they would ask questions. Perhaps then I would find answers, and this loneliness I feel would subside. I am desperate to make sense of the fervour that plagues my thoughts, for it is full of contradiction. I suffer from isolation when surrounded by familiars. I want to be alone when I long for companionship. How strange. I live here, yet I am not here. I am somewhere else, entirely.

Do you ever get the sense that we are not where we ought to be, as if God made an error in our placement? I sound foolish, of course. Arthur and Lorelai have right to be concerned. Perhaps I should agree to Arthur's request and host a ball. He believes the event will make Cadwallader seem more like home. Strange enough, I am at a loss for excuses.

Lorelai refuses to enjoy an idle moment. She assists the servants with their chores, which baffles me, for most high-born ladies consider household work a violation of their class. Lorelai does not abide by those conventions. This morning she noticed a tear in my coat and took upon the task of mending it. She repaired the hole, then stitched my initials onto the sleeve.

She mothers Arthur and me in a gentle way, ensuring we stay out of trouble and do not visit the pub too often. After dinner we all gather in the drawing room for charades or chess, sometimes to hear Arthur play his violin. Lorelai talks but rarely about herself. She wants to know about the management of Cadwallader, a topic not usually of interest to ladies.

Is it horrible that the longer she stays here, the less I think of her as a girl?

Arthur and I spent the past few days hauling sheep from mud. A storm washed out some of the hills, trapping much of the estate's herds in mire. We laboured with groundskeepers, shepherds, farmers—anyone strong enough to rescue the animals. My body still aches from the arduous work. I pity Mrs. Dunstable the most, though, for she dealt with Arthur's and my mess.

She threatened to hand in her notice if I kept tracking sod through the house.

Due to the drudgery, Arthur demands I take part in the social season. He wants to attend dinner parties, host gatherings, and dance with young ladies who fancy his coquetry. Yes, I shall give him the ball to satisfy his need for amusement. Besides, an introduction to the local gentry may allow me to better integrate myself. I am Lord Roch, not a bastard schoolboy.

Illegitimate birth means little now that I have wealth and title, for money alters society's attitude. People once stared and whispered about my father's scandal. Not anymore. Because of my rise in station, they request my presence at their events. They curtsy and bow, introduce me to their daughters in hopes I might marry one of them.

When I told you of my circumstances, you did not even blink, and for that I shall always be grateful. Arthur once said those things we hate about ourselves are the same things others never notice, but I did not come into this world disliking myself. Rather, I was taught to hate by people who did notice.

Speaking of which, how are relations with your mother? I recall your mention of disagreements after your father passed. Have you reconciled? Also, do you plan to participate in the season? If so, I hope we have opportunity to meet.

To dance with you again as we did that night—I cannot think of anything I would enjoy more.

Cadwallader Manor will provide sanctuary while I toil to recover myself. From where I sit, the moors do not seem as desolate a place. Sheep graze across their slopes. Mist skirts the ridges and ravines. Yes, I shall endeavour to find peace here.

Rashad: Want me to apologize? I'm sorry.

Rashad: If u don't respond, I'll date someone else. Bet on it.

Josie: We're over. Do not contact me.

Rashad: Your dad's death sure did a number on u.

Behind the manor's east wing, where the smokehouse merges with a stone fence, resides an alcove fashioned from gorse and fallen rock. I write to you from that recess.

Atteberry forms a cluster in the distance. I ride my horse, Willoughby, there once a week to buy stationery, for I am quite particular about my paper and ink.

That said, despite my theatrics, life at Cadwallader is not a morbid plight. In fact, the estate's beauty needs no words to express itself, only the eyes of those willing to see it. I choose to see, and I will endure my troubles.

Worse things have tried to break me.

Josephine, we did not meet by accident, for no two people meet—especially not in the serendipitous circumstance that brought us together—by mere chance. I met you, and you knew me in a moment. For that reason, I state my request a final time. Would you write to me?

I shall not lose hope that we will meet again. Even the astronomers believe those destined to collide, whether they be stars or people, might cross paths and go their separate ways but eventually doth find themselves brought together once more. And so, I hope.

Yours ever,

Elias

P.S. Against my better judgement, I wrote to my father's widow and asked if she knew your whereabouts. I have yet to receive her reply. Each day, I question whether I should forsake this pursuit, for it seems childish. Then I recall how we talked and laughed, and I wonder if perhaps you wish to find me too. Such a notion compels me to continue my search.

Josie: I don't care—I'll waste my savings on texts.

Josie: A boy named Elias wrote the letters two hundred years ago! He knew a Josephine De Clare who lost her dad too. Weird, huh??

Josie: He didn't send the letters, though. I wonder if he saw Josephine again.

Josie: I found a stack of papers. Looks like a manuscript. Going to read the first chapter.