

17, The Cedars,

Featherstonehaugh Walk,

N.

Email: [inverse@outlook.com](mailto:inverse@outlook.com)

04.03.21.

Dear Claire

Hello! You'll be surprised to hear from me, after so long. I won't say it's been 'too long' (that's for you to decide) but I must say, I've missed you. There are some things we never get over and clearly you're one of them (btw, please don't think there's anything in my over-use of the plural - it's just that the single 'I' looks a bit lonely on the page).

But how are you? D'you know, the other day I was wracking my brains trying to recall the last time we saw each other and I couldn't remember either when or where it was. And I mean 'properly' saw each other: I'll admit to having glimpsed you occasionally across a crowded room (you were pensive, and I don't think you noticed me). You looked well, if inevitably a little greyer - but then I could say the same for myself. By my highly inexperienced estimation, it must be something like twenty years - if not longer. What do you say to a person you've not seen in over two decades - apart from 'Hello' (which I've already said)?

This is awkward, isn't it? It'd be a lot easier if we'd only been casual acquaintances - or even casual friends (they do exist). But - let's be honest - we were quite a bit more than that, weren't we? (By now you'll have noticed my habit of asking questions - take it for what it is: a self-conscious striving for affirmation). No, let's be frank: we were close. About as close as it's possible for two people to be. I've not experienced closeness like that in all the years since. At the risk of a bad pun, I've not even come close to it (sorry). I wonder if you have? Looking back, there was something almost indecently intimate about our closeness, though I stick the 'almost' in there for a purpose. Nothing that we did together ever *felt* wrong, either in the moment or in retrospect. Naturally, I'm

speaking only for myself here - I wouldn't presume to speak for you, not then and certainly not now. It all seemed rather innocent, didn't it?, and certainly not wrong. It was other people who told us it was wrong (if you're blushing as you read this, you're in good company: I'm blushing, too, even though I'm on my own and unobserved).

But there was other stuff, as well. Do you remember our trips home on the school bus? Do you remember the books we used to read, the films we used to see, the plays I introduced you to - or was it the other way around? We could only afford the gallery in those days but that didn't matter: we could have been in the front row and we wouldn't have been as happy. I have a very special memory of one occasion - I forget what we were watching - when I looked over at you just as you turned to look at me and we both knew exactly what the other was thinking: that there was nowhere else on earth we'd rather have been than in that place, at that moment.

It's remembering things like that that makes me sad about how it ended. Not that I was surprised that it did end - I just thought that when it did, it would have more ..... I dunno, maybe more sense of occasion? I envisaged something dramatic - a wham! a bang! a crash!, instead of our just drifting off into ellipsis as we did ... Maybe I'm old-fashioned but I think significant associations ought to end significantly. Don't you?

That's why I've decided to get in touch, this sense of something not being properly finished. Don't get me wrong: I'm not looking for 'closure' or anything as banal as that. The fact is, I'm not sure what I'm looking for. Maybe you can tell me?

I'm sending this to the last address I have for you, though I've no idea whether you're still living there. If you've moved on (as I assume you have), my only hope is that whoever's living there now will have both the means and the inclination to send it on to you. As you'll see from the address above, I'm still where you left me.

Hoping to hear from you,

Now I come to sign off, I realise I never got round to identifying myself. And, guess what?, I don't want to. No idea know why. I suppose it feels inappropriately intimate, to borrow my own phrase. Does that make sense? Well, if you get this and it does - or even if it doesn't - I hope you'll tell me.

05.03.21

From: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

To: [inverse@outlook.com](mailto:inverse@outlook.com)

I've no idea who you are.

But clearly, you know who I am, and that worries me.

I don't recognise any of the experiences you make reference to.

I'd suggest that you've confused me with another person but for the fact that you've used my name and written to an address where I used to live.

However, I don't live there anymore.

Just so you know, I've referred your letter to the police, something you might like to bear in mind should you be tempted to contact me again. But I suggest you don't, or there will be consequences.

PS: this is not my main email address and I now have a different surname.

06.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: thisisclaire@googlemail.com

Dear Claire,

Oh, come on! Stop pretending.

Obviously, if you'd rather not hear from me I'll respect your wishes. But I must say: I fear what the years have done to you to make you like this. You're behaving like some harassed housewife afraid to take the chain off the door (apologies if that's what you are, but you see my point). The Claire I remember was welcoming, engaging, curious and lots of other amiable adjectives. What happened to her, I wonder?

I also wonder how far you've got with this - or even if you've opened it at all? I changed my email address in the hope that you wouldn't recognise it, but maybe your Junk Filter has dealt with me and your eyes - hazel-grey, iirc - will never alight on these lonely scribblings. Maybe I'm just writing to myself. They say that writing to yourself is only one step down from talking to yourself (or is it one step up?). Anyway, it hardly matters. You've made your decision and I will Cease and Desist forthwith.

It was nice knowing you and I hope you're having a nice life.

P.S. - And just as I'm about to close this short correspondence, another memory creeps into my head: a hostelry (OK, call it a pub) somewhere in the country. A day in late winter, or maybe early spring. A log fire ablaze in the hearth of the lounge bar, a glass of white wine atop the table and us snug on a banquette, no doubt with the rest of those present playing gooseberry. We didn't say anything - we didn't need to. It was one of our moments of 'companionable silence' (we didn't call them that then, but it's how I think of them in retrospect) . We had many, but this particular one I remember with freakish clarity because of the way you brought it to a close. You turned to me, just as you had that

time in the gallery, and you asked me a question. More accurately, you made a request. I wonder if you remember that moment?

Well, I certainly remember it. And I certainly remember my response.

07.03.21.

From: [asiledzija@googlemail.com](mailto:asiledzija@googlemail.com)

To: [complement@outlook.com](mailto:complement@outlook.com)

Hey,

Thanks for the email. It was an interesting read.

You sound like someone with plenty to say for yourself.

Better get disappointment out of the way first: this isn't Claire replying. It's Claire's husband.

I thought Claire was pretty straightforward when she asked you not to contact her again.

Naturally, she's upset you've chosen to ignore her wishes.

You'd best not ignore mine, though. I'm a capable bloke and I make a bad enemy.

Claire said she'd pass your letter on to the police. That was easily done. I've been in the force for the last thirty years.

I've run a check on your address and come up with nothing, so I know you're being as evasive about your whereabouts as you are about your name.

But don't start thinking you're clever. We have radical methods for finding people like you, and I won't hesitate to employ them if you give me cause.

So, let's call a halt to this here and now, shall we? It'll be best for all of us.

Respectfully yours,

A. Siledzija

(I exist - trying googling me).

08.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: [asiledzija@gmail.com](mailto:asiledzija@gmail.com)

Dear A Siledzija

Even though I wasn't addressing you, I'm grateful for your 'response'.

I did google you, as per your suggestion, and was suitably impressed. That has to be the most formidable Linkedin profile I've ever seen and the attached photo is quite the warning in itself! I'm sure it does you justice but - if you're willing to accept some constructive criticism - I think you may be trying a bit too hard.

I'm afraid I don't entirely believe in the persona you're so anxious to present to me. If you're as capable as you claim to be, how come I haven't had my collar felt already? If you really have 'radical methods', why haven't you already deployed them? In my experience, these are the tactics used by all dogs who bark but rarely bite. In other words, if you'll accept the abrupt shift in metaphor, you are a paper tiger.

So, go ahead. I invite you to do your inconsiderable worst.

P.S. Presumably you're already aware that your name translates as 'ruffian' in Serbo-Croat. If you weren't, I make you a present of the knowledge. Finally you're in on the joke your more sophisticated colleagues have been sharing for years.



22.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: thisisclaire@googlemail.com

Dear Claire,

Well, it's been two weeks since I replied to your (*soi-disant*) husband. Two weeks in which I've crouched down in bed each night wondering if I'm going to be awakened by rough hands on my neck and a stentorian cry of, 'Get up! This is a dawn raid!'. So far, nothing's happened. Have I called somebody's bluff?

You always did have a thing about authority figures, didn't you? Whether they wore a badge or an apron, you fell into line to please them; or do I mean 'appease' them? But let's leave that argument for another time ....

I know I shouldn't be writing to you again, since you specifically asked me not to, but I can't help myself. After all these years of silence, I find I've become an incorrigible communicator. And I have a hunch - no more than a hunch - that you're not entirely displeased to be hearing from me. I was always very intuitive, don't you remember? 'Scarily intuitive', you once called me: skilled in the black art of establishing what someone really means, especially when it appears to contradict what they say. You'll remember how good I was at that with your mother: how I could tell she didn't like me, even though she was civility itself. How is she, btw? Do remember me to her.

You didn't always appreciate that particular gift of mine, either - did you, Claire? I can understand why. It's not always comfortable spending time with someone who knows what you're thinking, often better than you do yourself. And I'll admit, I did get terribly possessive towards the end - but only because I could sense you moving away from me (which, of course, you were).

With the distance of the years, I suppose I was heartbroken when you left. And we're never equipped to deal with heartbreak, at whatever age. Are we, Claire? But since I've admitted to being possessive, I'd better tell you why. It didn't feel like you'd gone of your own volition. It felt more

like you'd been stolen. Removed. Made off with (but by whom?) I know it was, apparently, your choice and I have to respect that choice; but I'm still puzzled, all these years later, as to why.

Yours, hoping for a reason

24.03.21.

From: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com).

To: [complement@outlook.com](mailto:complement@outlook.com)

You know the reason.

I grew up, and moved on. That's what people do.

You should've done the same.

What's extraordinary is that you sound just like you did all those years ago - the same style, the same voice, the same deluded ideas.

No, you couldn't 'read my mind', as you liked to think. You thought a lot of things that had no basis in fact, though you were right about Mum never liking you. But then, if you remember, not many people did. You know why.

Whose fault is it that you're 'still where (I) left you'?

I don't think it can be mine.

My suggestion: do your best to forget me. I certainly did my best to forget you!

Claire.

25.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

Dear Claire,

An acknowledgment - even a cold one - is cause for celebration, so despite your harsh words I'm writing this with a smile on my face. A big, cheesy smile: the kind that bewilders uncomprehending passers-by!

You're entirely on point about my lack of progress. It's actually worse than you presume. I'm sure even you'd be shocked if you understood quite how little I've accomplished since we last met. You could be forgiven for thinking I'd been in some kind of suspended animation - there are times when it feels that way to me. It's a tough one to admit - that your life stopped twenty years ago, but at our age what's the point in hiding from the truth?

I don't blame you for this, or anyone else, in fact. It happened, I should get over it. I've made attempts, some serious, some less so, to do exactly that over the years. But they've all foundered and I'm sure these lumbering efforts at (if you will) re-connecting are part of my search for an explanation.

But I do go on, don't I? And always about *me*. I should ask how you are, *where* you are, how married life is? I had a go at that, too, but (guess what?) it didn't work. I'd prefer to draw a veil over it, really. No, when I reflect, I haven't got much to crow about. But I'm glad you seem to have done better. The police superintendent, whatever his other qualities, does at least sound like someone who knows his own mind, and I'm sure your mother approves of him (I hope she does, if only for his sake).

Anyway: that's more than enough from me for the moment. Just be reassured - if you ever feel like a chat, you know where I am.

26.03.21.

From: [abgarland@yahoo.com](mailto:abgarland@yahoo.com)

To: [complement@outlook.com](mailto:complement@outlook.com)

Hello,

This is Claire's mother.

Claire isn't well at the moment. She hasn't been well for some time. It's nothing serious, and that's all you need to know.

I've been going through some of her things - old habits die hard - and I came across your correspondence. It didn't take me long to realise who you are and that you probably have something to do with Claire's present indisposition.

I'd like to correct any impression I gave that I 'disliked' you: I didn't, I just didn't think you were good for Claire. Girls of her age (I mean, the age she was when you knew her) are not meant to mope about indoors; nor are they meant to go to the kind of places you insisted on taking her, or cultivate the habits you encouraged her in. I had a hard time weaning her off those things, as well as all the ideas you put in her head. I've not forgotten, either, your habit of taking her to places and then leaving her to find her own way back. That was truly reprehensible.

I know it's considered 'normal' for girls of that age to form unsuitable attachments and had it been clear to me that you were nothing more than a 'phase', I'd have said nothing. But I had an intuition (yes, I have them, too) that you were more than that; and that was why I felt moved to intervene. Reluctantly, I fear I must do so again.

Claire has worked very hard to get to where she is now but, with a bit of help, she's managed to turn her life around, and is both happy and fulfilled. It's because I value what she's achieved that I'm anxious for this correspondence to end, here and now.

I do hope you'll respect my wishes, which are also Claire's wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A. Garland (Mrs.)

27.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: [abgarland@yahoo.com](mailto:abgarland@yahoo.com)

Dear 'Mum',

You'll forgive the familiarity, but someone who takes it upon herself to speak for others ought to be sanguine about the way she is addressed.

I'm sorry to hear Claire's not been well, but your kind words don't reassure me. If you're still the person you were, Claire could be dead and buried before the world knew a thing about it. Still: nice to know you've not lost your talent for secrecy.

Your talent for condescension seems to be bearing up well, too. I always felt you wrote and talked as if you were dictating an especially withering school report: 'Beta minus: must do better.' Still, I suppose you must speak as you find. But I'd like to correct one serious calumny you lay at my door - at no time did I take Claire to any place and then leave her to find her own way back. Nor did I encourage her in anything she didn't want to be encouraged in, or put any 'ideas' in her head that weren't already there. When we were together Claire made most, if not all, of the running: fact. I was her accomplice; it wasn't the other way round.

It seems to me you still have a very skewered, not to say prejudiced view of what went on between us. How could you fail to, being who you are/were and seeing only the externals? I suppose I ought to be big and forgive you: you were only obeying the dictates of your age, class and background, after all - and doesn't that excuse get everyone out of gaol? But, as you may have realised, a significant part of me can't forgive the way you 'managed' things. Maybe I should blame myself for being too diffident (that great frailty of youth) and not standing up to you? Who knows how it might've turned out if I had? Perhaps we'd all be happier today; I've no doubt at least two of us would be.

So, I hope you'll understand my scepticism when you claim to speak for Claire. To put it plainly: you don't. You never did.



31.03.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

Dear Claire,

In the last couple of weeks, I've fielded responses from your husband and your mother, both of them claiming to be 'speaking for' you.

I'm just wondering if they are correct - or if they are who they claim to be?

I'm afraid I was less than polite in my response, mainly because they made certain assertions that forced me onto the attack. Although in many respects I've not changed, I'm no longer as easily-dismissed as I once was. I can't afford to be.

Your 'mother' claimed you hadn't been well, but she was typically mysterious about the nature of your illness. I do hope it *is* 'nothing serious'. You'd tell me if it wasn't, wouldn't you?

If I can make a personal observation: throughout this correspondence, I've been aware of two voices in your replies. One ordering me away, barring the door, pulling down the blinds; another, running in counterpoint, urging me closer. I flatter myself I know which voice is really yours and hearing you're not well only increases my sense of urgency (your mother, typically, attributes your 'illness' to me - but what does she know? What did she ever know?) .

Although I'm trying not to read things into your 'silence', it's getting to the point where just a word from you, even a harsh one, would make all the difference. Please send me that word.

02.04.21.

From: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

To: [complement@outlook.com](mailto:complement@outlook.com)

Please - just go away.

I thought I'd already been clear about this.

If I'm ill, if I'm not ill, it's nothing to do with you.

I'm happy where I am. You should learn to be happy where you are.

Can't you do that?

02.04.21.

From: [complement@outlook.com](mailto:complement@outlook.com)

To: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

Dear Claire,

What the hell do you mean by 'be happy where I am'?

Loathe as I am to take up cudgels with the ailing, I wonder if you've been listening to me at all?

I can't 'be happy where I am' - ie, in limbo. It would be beyond anyone to be happy here.

But I suppose I could possibly accept it (in a 'fall on my sword' kind of way) if I believed *you* were happy where *you* are.

Thing is, it's clear that you're not (that counterpoint voice again!).

They've all gone and left you alone, as we knew they would.

But you did make a point, all those years ago, of asking me not to leave you alone - that time at the table, if you remember. That cold day in late winter/early spring.

Well, here I am to make good on that promise.

09.04.21.

From: complement@outlook.com

To: thisisclaire@googlemail.com

Claire?

Where've you gone?

27.04.21.

From: [thisisclaire@googlemail.com](mailto:thisisclaire@googlemail.com)

To: [amtyler@outlook.com](mailto:amtyler@outlook.com), [liz\\_gordon@bt.com](mailto:liz_gordon@bt.com), [paul.heston@orionwindows.co.uk](mailto:paul.heston@orionwindows.co.uk) + 104

Hi, everyone

Sorry about the batch email - they're every bit as bad as round robins in Christmas cards afaic. But there's no way around this, so I've decided to break my rule about never sending them.

I'm feeling a lot better now. Sorry for going off the radar the way I did - no excuse for that! But, as you know, it's been a very tough time for me, and what with Mum dying and Andy disappearing (anyone heard from him? If you have, I don't need to know), I felt I'd no option but to go to ground for a bit. And, on the whole, I'm glad I did.

So, what have I been doing while I've been out of bounds? Well: nothing and everything. A lot of thinking, a lot of reflecting, a lot of pondering: what next? I've still not got it all worked out (I'm not sure I ever will), but I've made one big decision: after I send this email, I'll be deleting my account and moving on - from this address and from the area. Don't worry, this isn't a split decision. It's the result of a long discussion I've had with an old (very old) friend who came back into my life at this crucial moment. Opportune, or what? And when I move on, this very old friend will be helping me. So I'm not looking at a lonely journey!

Thanks for all the good stuff over the years and sorry if it sometimes seemed like I didn't appreciate it. But I've got some idea where I'm going now. I didn't have that before.

All good things,

Claire.



