

## An anticipated return

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I think Henry would have guessed I might turn his letters into a book. Not for any publicity for himself, that was never his interest, but because he knew that this is what I tend to do. It is my way of processing and organising, of introducing and concluding. I do not know if he liked my writing. There had been occasional words of quiet approval, but he was never one to gush with superlatives and excessive compliments. Perhaps that was because he knew there was something in me that wanted him to do so, and that this something was a feeling best ignored, not indulged.

Faced with these letters, what else would I do? So here they are, put together under a title I chose, because it reminds me of that day, in his study, in his house, as the sun began to climb in the morning sky. Henry's letters, songs of the bright morning. Why 'songs' when there are none here? Because when I was younger he enjoyed turning to me and asking what background music would I give to a tree or a sunset, a conversation or a meal? He would then solemnly say "That says a

lot about what you think of it.” He said this final phrase so often that I would sometimes join in, and we would laugh together. Child and adult, two friends joined by a familiar joke.

I am older now, nearly thirty, but the thought of the phrase still makes me smile. As I gazed at the box of letters I knew each one would gently hold the question “James, what music goes with this?” Music behind words, songs of the bright morning.

I have kept the letters in the order he determined, which was chronological, and have kept the headings he gave them. My guess is that there were other letters he chose to exclude from this collection, and I am intrigued to know what might have been in them, and why they were left out. In any conversation one only hears what the other person is prepared to reveal.

Let me take you to a morning in May, a year ago. Or rather, first, to the night before.

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I thought it would be strange sleeping in the house again, more familiar to me than any other I had known, but now feeling so different, because he had died. He was not here.

It had been a long journey; I arrived late in the evening, the trains had been bad. I still had a key to the house, the same one I had been given

when a child. I did not properly look round the downstairs, that could be left until tomorrow. A quick glance through the doorway of each room, as if somehow simply checking that they were all still there, seemed enough for the moment.

I went upstairs to the small room I knew so well. It did not feel so very strange after all, and perhaps the long and tiresome journey had done its work. The bed was not made, so I lay on top, hopeful that the spring warmth would be enough in the unheated house. I went to sleep.

Henry Felix-Hammond had been a friend of my parents. He had always been a person of some stature in the village, partly because of his ancestry (his family had been there for generations), partly because his private means were such that he did not have to go away to work. He was a constant but unobtrusive presence in village life, quietly interested in people and books. His most regular commitment was his weekly afternoon at the library as a volunteer.

He was a little older than my parents, and I think he had welcomed them kindly when they had moved to the village. Children do not always know exactly how their parents make friends, but for as long as I can remember, Henry was part of the scenery.

My family story had been complex, difficult, unsettled and sometimes just plain unhappy.

Henry had opened his home to me. For me, as a child, then an adult, his house was stability and sanctuary, it was rescue and welcome. It was always there. It was the closest thing to home I had experienced. And now I had come back.

And he was gone.

The next morning I woke early, while it was still dark. I got up and went to the kitchen. There was some coffee powder, no milk or sugar, but that would be enough. The kettle was where it always had been. I made the coffee, took it into the study and looked around. There had been so many conversations in this room. Henry had been able to connect with me whether I was nine or nineteen or twenty-nine. Sometimes he talked too much, sometimes he lost track of what I had said, but the rambles and the anecdotes were kindly meant. In this room, I realised I missed him so, so, much. What had he been to me? Uncle, grandfather, counsellor, friend all rolled into one. *He had never given up on me.* Half of me wanted to hug him, half of me wanted to be terribly strong and ignore him.

The dawn began to creep around the curtains and on his desk I noticed a wooden box that I had not seen before (and I knew most of Henry's belongings as well as he had done). I opened the lid. And there was a note to me. I could just about read it in the lightening gloom.

My guess is that you, James, will be the first person who sees this (If it is someone else, please pass this on to my old friend James, who will appear before long).

James, when news spread that I was going to die, one or two people happened to let slip to each other that they still had letters I had written. Word spread, and someone had the idea of collecting some of them together. They are not of any value, but the occasional phrase may have been of some inadvertent help in reminding them of much greater wisdom than mine. They gave me the collection, and here are some of them, for you.

‘Hope’ is something you and I have talked about many times, even if we did not always name it. You have shown great courage in keeping going when the journey has not been smooth, in fighting when the battle has not been easy. You have always been willing to be encouraged - to receive courage - for the next step.

Continue to be encouraged, and in your turn, encourage others. Take note of the dreams that may yet matter. Travelling with hope means that you feel the destination is worth the journey. Travelling with hope shapes the journey itself. Travelling with hope means you do not travel alone.

Thank you for all your patience and friendship.

Goodbye for now. Forgive me for what needs to be forgiven. Be thankful for the happiness you brought me. Be mindful of the blessing you can be to others.

With love, as ever

Henry

I laid this note down, next to the box, went to the window and opened the curtains. How did he know that I would be the first?

The dawn was growing and as the colours brightened I looked out at the garden. I stood there for some minutes, and then turned and went back to his desk, sat down calmly and picked the next sheet out of the box.

## Letter 1

# Any offer of hope makes a difference

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*October 1990*

Dear Major Quilter,

I am pleased to hear that you are putting on a Christmas play for the village. I do not take part in amateur dramatics myself but am full of admiration for those who do. As requested, here are some thoughts about the role of the innkeeper. I realise I may have allowed my thoughts to tumble over each other somewhat further than you need, forgive my ramblings! What you will do with all this in a village play, I do not know. That is the tricky thing about Christmas, the more one looks, the more one sees; the more one thinks, the more thoughts there are to be had. Anyway, ignore or use as you wish.

*Song of the innkeeper*

*It was busy, it was busy,  
There was no denying that.  
People from all over.  
One or two, excited to see the  
town.*

*Seldom visited,  
A name at the edge of a  
Half-remembered dream.*

*Most were reluctant:  
Census fodder;  
Imposed upon.*

*Oppressed again.*

*It was busy. It was busy.  
There was no denying that.  
The money was good  
and the inn was full.  
And there was room below,  
in the straw*

*For that last  
young  
couple.*

Will the audience know the context? Joseph and Mary have been forced by a remote government order to travel from north to south of their country of Judea, on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to the town of their ancestors. All over the Roman Empire, people similarly were walking or riding, back to their family roots. The newer towns were emptying, the old ones were filling up. And Bethlehem is old, and so many descendants of former inhabitants were arriving there. It may have seemed hopeless for Joseph and Mary, trying to find accommodation. It may even have felt slightly panicky; after all, the baby could be born at any moment. Were the promises surrounding the baby forgotten, as they went from door-to door, asking increasingly frantically whether there was space? Perhaps not, perhaps the promises were remembered, perhaps calm prevailed.

Either way, it must have been a relief when the innkeeper said he could find somewhere. Anywhere would do.

Anywhere, anything will do. When we are feeling hopeless, then anything that can bring hope is a treasured relief. It does not matter if it is the offer of the best room in the inn or a place where the animals are sometimes kept; if it means the story can go on, it is a relief.

Anything will do: it is the lack of hope that can make a bad situation feel much worse. Suffering becomes unbearable if it feels endless.

Anything will do – but only if it is positive. False hope, found in the wrong place, can worsen the situation. The hope for an alcoholic does not lie in the temporary (very temporary) flash of pleasure when the next drink momentarily dulls the pain.

The innkeeper found space for Joseph and Mary. It was not the best room, but it was enough. The story could continue. He offered hope, they received it. The offering and the receiving seem to be what mattered.

Might this be of help for the play?

Yours sincerely

Henry Felix-Hammond