

(1) Don't Leave Too Much Room for the Holy Spirit

by Tom McCarthy

from: *Things I've Learned from Women Who've Dumped Me*

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Dear Liz,

Forgive me for taking twenty-five years to reply to your last letter but I just wasn't ready before this moment. I am now a forty-year-old man. I think we are the same age although I can't actually recall. I was never conscious of age when I was young, there was only big and small. Life was like the dog park in that way.

(2) I am writing to you because last week my parents politely asked me to remove the last of my belongings from their basement. They wanted to repaint the floor. I'm not sure why, the floor seemed fine to me. But I didn't argue. I try not to argue with them now that they are getting up in years for fear that the one time I do some tragedy will befall them and I will never have a chance to make amends. (3) I can't stand the thought of living with regret. I'm fine with guilt. I think guilt is healthy, actually, it keeps me thin. Most people think I have a high metabolism or that I still smoke but my real diet secret is guilt. But regret interferes with my sleep patterns and I just can't have that. Sleep is too important.

So when they made their request I just smiled and said, "Sure thing. I love you, Mom. I love you, Dad." And I walked down the stairs, leaving them both shaking their heads at what a perfect child I turned out to be.

(4) I didn't leave much there. A few milk crates filled with college books, some camping gear I never used, a computerized chess set, and a small lock box that contained some keepsakes from my youth. I opened the box and there, under some fake Confederate money from a field trip to Gettysburg and next to a bottle of Japanese shampoo shaped like a samurai warrior, I found a stack of letters held together by a single rubber band. (5) Those letters were from you. They were sent over the year-and-a-half period after we met at Young Life Summer Camp. The summer camp with a faith-based initiative. Two hours on water skis and one hour discussing how to enjoy Jesus and high school at the same time. It was a Protestant organization and though I was raised Catholic, I still enjoyed it. I was confident in my orthodoxy.

(6) I saw you for the first time on the big field. You were my exact size but perfectly proportioned. I wasn't so fortunate. I had a tiny torso and a rather large head. My arms were short and my legs were long and wire thin. You had black hair and brown eyes and a little pug nose. The moment I saw you I understood you were my type. In fact, I think that was the first time I realized I had a type. And my type happened to be wearing black shiny jogging shorts. (7) I thought they looked like black satin and that's what I called you before I knew your name. Black Satin. Even my cabinmates started calling you that. "Hey, I saw Black Satin, in a prayer circle by the volleyball courts." I didn't mind them calling you that. They always said it with the proper amount of respect; like the disciples talking about Mary Magdalene.

(8) I thought, for just a moment, that you noticed me during the relay races but I quickly dismissed it. Then later that night I thought you were noticing me at the sing-along but I couldn't be sure. The next morning, I was close to certain you were noticing me on the "hike to the heavens." And then, as I was on my way to "quiet reflection by the lake," I was finally convinced. You were noticing me.

I didn't notice you back. I was too guarded for that. I lived in fear of rejection. Being smaller than everyone else in my class made me feel, well, small.

(9) Then one evening, our cabin counselor, Roger, gave us a pep talk. Roger was prone to giving pep talks before each camp event regardless of whether we needed it or not. But that night was the big dance and I think Roger sensed the rising tide of panic gripping the cabin. We sat in our bunk beds hoping to get through it quickly but Roger didn't speak. He just stood there and looked at us. Then he started slowly moving around the room and standing in front of each of us individually. (10) He would look us up and down for about ten seconds

and then move to the next boy. It was very unnerving. Then he stepped back to the center of the room and said in a quiet, intense voice, “Tonight I want you all to be confident in who you are because God made us exactly according to his specifications.” I pictured my oddly-shaped body laid out on some graph paper in God’s studio. I wondered if my buckteeth were part of the plan or just a production error.

(11) “And if we are made according to God’s specifications then we are divine. And if we are divine then we are perfect!” Roger pounded a bunk and made Peter Kessler jump. And then he looked directly at me and said, “So you should marshal forth into the dance tonight with the confidence of God’s perfection regardless of your size, your shape, or your overbite!”

(12) It was as if God were speaking to me directly through Roger. It was electric. I jumped up and screamed, “Praise Roger!” Roger responded without missing a beat, “Praise God!” And suddenly the room was alive with jumping and praising. It was a pre-dance revival meeting.

I marched into the barn on a holy mission. I was going to notice you back. It didn’t matter whether you were noticing me or not. I was going to notice you and I was going to notice you hard.

(13) The barn was packed when we arrived. Haystacks and checkered cloth covered tables lined with punch and cookies were spread around the room. Large groups of girls were already dancing as large groups of boys milled around the perimeter working up the courage to join them. But I didn’t have time to be shy. I quickly moved to the center of the dance floor and scanned the room. (14) Most of the girls were taller than me so I climbed onto a stack of hay to get a better vantage point. You were nowhere to be found. My mind was racing with possible scenarios. Perhaps you stayed home to read scripture or paint the clay chalice you made in pottery class. Or worse, perhaps you had already stolen off with another camper who had the good sense to notice you back the first time around.

(15) I jumped down and began to circle the room, dodging bodies left and right. My heart was pounding. “How could I be such a stupid dork!” I said aloud. Then, I saw you. Perched perfectly on a stack of hay, hair held back with a bright red ribbon and your hands clasped in your lap. You looked like a tiny movie star doing a photo spread for Ralph Lauren’s Fall Riding Collection. *And you were noticing me!* (16) I was momentarily stunned. My confidence dashed, I stumbled backwards and, slipping on some loose hay, I crashed to the floor. I quickly scrambled to my feet and was met by your warm smile. That was all the motivation I needed. I planted my two feet firm, lowered my gaze, and I noticed you with all my might. A direct hit. And you reciprocated with perfect poise.

(17) I don’t remember actually moving my feet but suddenly we were face-to-face. It seemed too good to be true. Three and a half days of yearning were behind us. The connection was palpable and effortless. We played the perfect game. You told me you were from Canada and I asked if you lived in an igloo. You shrieked with laughter. I preened with confidence. My joke about seal meat provoked you to reach out and touch my hand. (18) Contact was made. We were on fire. And I knew at that moment there was a very good chance I would spend the rest of my life with you. It didn’t matter that we would have to prolong our engagement a few years so we could legally drink champagne at our wedding. I just figured we would have more time to plan the event. But as soon as our affair ignited, fate intervened again, this time in the form of a Dance Caller.

(19) “Pick your partner and skip to the loo!” And with that the room began to spin. I looked around, rattled by the sudden commotion, and when I looked back you were gone. Swept away in a tide of teenage bodies. I had no choice but to jump into the crush. I had to find you.

The Dance Caller barked out instructions. The room responded. I kept catching glimpses of you through the arms and elbows of other campers. (19) We dosy-dosed closer and closer to each other, until we were in the same circle. You were still noticing me and I was noticing you right back. The dosy-ing. The doe-ing. The noticing. It was intoxicating. And then our hands met. A charge shot through my body and I could tell by the arch in your brow you felt it too. We started spinning, faster and faster, our tiny, sweaty hands clutching tight as if our lives depended on it.

(20) The call came to switch partners but we refused. We just kept spinning as if we could make the room disappear through sheer velocity. The Caller directed his charge at us. “Hey, little campers, switch your partners and skip to the loo!” But I wanted nothing to do with “the loo.” Wide-eyed and breathless, we kept holding and spinning, staring deep into each other’s eyes. (21) The other kids started to back away, sensing something divine was happening, something that transcended the realm of square dancing. A few counselors tried to intervene but we could not be slowed. They simply bounced off us. We were fused, anointed by the Holy Spirit.

The other kids started to chant. “Love Spin. Love Spin.” And our speed increased. Finally, one of the counselors climbed onto the stage and grabbed the microphone. (22) He signaled the band to stop playing and when they did he said in a loud voice, “I want you two to separate right now!” But we were joined by God and let no man put us asunder. We increased our speed and now, without the band playing, you could hear the whirl of our spin. It was a celestial sound. I imagined it was similar to the sound of angels at play.

“In the name of God, I compel you to let go!” he boomed over the microphone.

(23) How dare he compel us in the name of God. Our Love Spin was clearly an act of God. It was a manifestation of all that is Holy. I shook my head in disbelief and rolled my eyes at the hypocrisy of it all. And that’s when I saw the flicker in your eyes. But it couldn’t be. It just didn’t seem possible. Then you blinked and I knew it was true. Doubt. I tried to lock eyes with you, to reassure you, to convince you, but it was useless. You were corrupted. Your doubt breached our Love Spin and we started to lose velocity. (24) Then I felt your fingers slipping. And I knew, at that moment, the end was inevitable. Finally, you locked eyes with me and simply mouthed the words “I’m sorry.” And you let go.

I fell backwards into an abyss of darkness, dumped among the scattered hay. I watched from the floor as you were swept into the air, your tiny legs dangling lifelessly in the arms of a counselor. You surrendered our passion. And then you were gone. And so was our love. Forever.

(25) When camp was over I returned home and I stopped attending Young Life meetings. My friends thought I just lost interest and I never let on. Then, later that summer, I received your first letter. My mother handed it to me with a sly smile and a wink. I tried to play it off like I received letters from women in other countries all the time. I dashed up to my room and ripped it open. I shook as I read it. Your words were so delicate and tender. (26) There was even a cute drawing of you in an igloo eating seal meat. I must have read that letter thirty-five times. And they kept coming every two or three weeks – long, detailed accounts of your life in Quebec, each one ending with a gentle plea for me to reply. But I never did. I never even thought about it. I understood you were trying to reconnect, to fix what you had broken, but it was too late. I couldn’t forgive you for letting go.

(27) When your letters finally stopped arriving, I simply put a rubber band around them and locked them in a metal box. I think I put the bottle of samurai shampoo in there to guard them, like an Egyptian burial site, but I can’t be sure.

I sat on the basement floor all afternoon reading your letters and drinking Coors Light from my father’s private stock. The letters were as funny and touching as they were so many years ago. (28) As night fell I lit some old Christmas candles to make up for the poor lighting. Finally, I arrived at the last letter. I read it slowly, the same way you read the last pages of a great novel hoping it will never end and that’s when it happened. That’s when I read those twenty words in the last paragraph of your last letter that have forever changed me.

(29) You wrote, “Well, I have to stop writing now. My palm is sweating and that makes it hard to grip the pen. I’m sorry. That’s gross.”

I gasped and then I took a long pull of my Coors Light. I crushed the can, threw it on the large stack of empties, and then said out loud, “We just never stop learning. Oh no, my friend, we never do.” And I read the words again and again.

You never stopped loving me, Liz. You didn’t give up on me that night. You didn’t let go of my hands. You

slipped away due to some physiological disorder, which was probably inherited in the first place. (30) Our love was done in not by your doubt or weakness but by your sweaty palms. That's what you meant when you mouthed, "I'm sorry." You were sorry that you had gross sweaty palms!

But my pride, my silly pride, wouldn't let me see that. No! I was too ready to blame you for betraying me and all that was sacred. And in doing so I condemned myself to a life of mistrust and loneliness. "God, I'm fucking lonely!" I muttered, cracking open another can of Coors Light. "And I have no one to blame but myself."

(31) You see, Liz, sometimes, when we anticipate the worst in people, we destroy what's best. I'm so sorry for not responding to your letters. Your sweet and lovely letters. The loss is as always, mine.

Unless, of course, you are still single. Then perhaps we could arrange to meet up and have dinner or at least a drink at some point. I just happen to be single right now myself. I know it's been a long time but maybe it's worth a shot if you are, in fact, single. I mean if you're married or engaged then just disregard this. Unless you're unhappy in said arrangement and then perhaps we could work something out. I could even come see you in your igloo. (Ha ha!) So let me know. I look forward to hearing from you. Write back soon!

Warm regards,

Tom