

ROYSTON TESTER
DOG STARE

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DEAR LIZ:

My, aren't we full of surprises, Lizbie McFadden? Not a dicky-bird out of you for ten years, and now this letter from Manaus, if you please. The CBC did a headline on James's plane crash for last night's news. There's a snippet inside the Toronto newspapers, too. Did you contact Reuters or something? Where did they get that dreadful mugshot of my son? A frosh party? I recall hearing a radio report that he was missing back in January. Then nothing until yesterday. No doubt his hapless brother Alex and my former husband are glad for the additional publicity on their floundering gold mine. Judging by the stock-market price it could do with a nudge. As for James. Poor James. But you needn't have written, dear.

You will know, or perhaps not, that since Nick and I divorced in 1990, I've had nothing to do with the boys or him. Appalling, isn't it? More of a mutual disregard really. I knew Alex had joined his father in Bom Intento but, to be honest, I thought James was in Toronto with you, doing the odd bit of consulting anywhere but Brazil or near his brother and father. Poor James. As his mother I should show more concern, I know. You're likely shocked by my indifference but the news of his disappearance and possible death leaves me cold. I'm sorry.

Eleven years ago our family, as I knew it, came to an end on the Isle of Skye. It wasn't all your fault, as you later discovered, I trust. In fact, your conduct was the half of it. I never blamed you or was critical of your slip with that islander (I don't remember his name). But after my husband's treatment of me, after I defended your actions, I gave up on Nick. After my son Alex backed his father up—I dropped him too. Your husband vowed never again to speak to Nick or Alex after the way they treated me. I was proud of James for that. Standing up to his self-righteous, complicit brother

and their brutal old man whom I'd so mistakenly married. Your affair drew more than a little attention to everything wrong in my own life!

To my chagrin, however, James eventually included me in the—closed the door on his mother as well as father and brother. Figure that one out! Maybe he's mellowed vis à vis his brother and father. Certainly, and oh how typical, I am still demonized. Boys and their mothers! These days I've little time or patience for the McFaddens, to tell you the truth. I've reverted to my maiden name: Chartler. Best decision of my life. Maybe James is missing, maybe he's dead. I hope not. But where Nick, Alex and he are concerned, believe nothing that you haven't witnessed first hand. They're a barbaric clan, and James never comes out on top.

You ask for advice, not family recriminations. I apologize. At the risk of sounding blunt or insensitive (given that your parents are deceased and you're an only child), a mother-in-law's counsel might serve you well, but I do not wish to get involved with your predicament. I hold no grudges, Liz, but surely cannot be expected, after so much time, to demonstrate any stalwart, familial concern just because it now suits you to break a silence. How many years has it been?

I'm in the process of moving to England to see my days out there. This Toronto house and its unwieldy English garden are in tremendous flux, which I'm attempting to master. As I write, I'm surrounded by packing cases. Outside on the terrace there are all manner of gardening tools, and garbage bags and new plants, shrubs ready for the ground. I'm awash in chores.

If you do your sums, Liz, you'll know that I'm now seventy-six years old and a little shaky on my pins. My picturesque garden, as far as Canadian weather allows, preoccupies me day and night, especially as I try to get its flowerbeds and wilder part beyond the greenhouses under control before I relinquish it to the new owners. I've become witheringly selfish, I suppose, living alone with my books, booze, cigarettes, and herbaceous catalogues. What else could a woman wish for? Into the bargain, I'm taking myself off to another island! Closing up shop. That awesome privilege of the superannuated. How you and your generation must resent me.

Having said all that, for the purposes of this letter I will offer you some pearls to brood upon, for what they're worth. But please Liz, do not even countenance the idea of further dialogue. I'm too jaded for it. Many regrets, but I intend to savour my going out to pasture without any interference from the McFaddens or from you. To distort the words our illustrious

Marshall McLuhan, in my case neither the medium nor its message are of any consequence. No letters from you please, no phone calls, e-mails. Nothing. I insist. Solitude must be absolute—and I have earned every second of it

You ask how to proceed in Manaus. You're in the Brazilian city of short-lived splendour, my girl. Its opulent architecture and the mansions, as you're aware by now, are the result of a rubber boom in the 1890s. Take its message to heart, for a kick-off. Nick, Alex and your husband are consumed by the prospect of smash-and-grab riches (though they occasionally go to great pains to conceal it). They seek and will find, but then will have to find over and over. Their appetites are without satiation or human regard. Be conscious of your adopted city. It's telling you something.

Six months you've resided there, you tell me. Many might think that whatever means you're using to survive are means enough. But yes, just as that Englishman Sir Henry Wickham's pilfering of Amazon rubber seeds and planting them in Malaya destroyed Manaus's fortunes, so of course nothing lasts. You're right to feel disorientated and solitary, particularly as you try to locate James. On top, the possibility of his untimely end. Solitude is a friend, Liz. Don't run away from it, or from what it offers. There's nothing short-lived in solitude, though its 'splendour' is hard to stomach now and then.

Might I suggest that in your grief you do some honest, hard work? As you will recall, I've developed a modest reputation as a landscape watercolorist, as the experts call it. My sustenance, between painting, is a German poet: Rilke. Do you know his work? Probably not. Rainer Maria Rilke? He can be oh-so-delicate at times, but I must say he's helped me a great deal. His letters on Cézanne and to a young poet, I often dip into. You might do the same. I know you trained at the Upper Canada School of Art when James was in mining at the University of Toronto. What happened? Surely you didn't spend all those semesters drawing so that one day you could enslave yourself in the institution's administrative offices?

For the decade or so I knew you, your main preoccupation, apart from very public fretting about your daughter's schooling, was how you looked and whether you could make it to our cottage at weekends. In fact, your life seemed abuzz with frantic dashing about from one rather meaningless activity to another, whether James was in town or not. **YOU WERE TERRIFIED OF PAINTING.** Never, never did a sketch emerge from those expensively manicured fingers of yours; and what about all that creative tension expended on shoes?! The days of young ladies learning the arts for mere accomplishment

went out with Jane Austen, you know. I advise you to draw. At least until there's something more definitive about your husband's whereabouts. Get yourself paper, charcoal, paints. Install yourself in that wretched jungle.

To lean on my poet, I suspect you're feeling something akin to Cézanne, who in Aix-en-Provence would return home after a day's hard graft at Mont Sainte-Victoire bubbling over with troubles and frustration. Much like you after a day's grappling with that rockface of James's disappearance, I wouldn't wonder. In time, Cézanne realized how these powerful feelings depleted him. You too spoke of enervation from the hopelessness you feel in tracing James, and now this plane crash mystery to disentangle. Cézanne worried about everything as well, Liz: colour, the state of the world, his work, industrialization. How does Rilke put it? Here it is: "Out there, something vaguely terrible on the increase." You must feel this too. Horrified at what might come to be? What the "vaguely terrible" will expose? I think so. Go paint your Mont Sainte-Victoire, my child. Let it engage you. Be crazed with it.

You bemoan solitude but, frankly, like someone who can't believe her luck. I shudder at your phony misery. Besides, to judge from what you tell me, have you ever not been alone, especially in recent years? Maybe this is the first time you've actually looked solitude, real solitude, in the face. My poet would tell you to love it and to embrace the suffering it causes you. That does sound a trifle 'S&M' doesn't it? Or, Protestant masochism. There's truth to it, though. Just remember it's inner solitude we're talking about, and that needs your attention. It's very difficult, but in that loving of your deepest nature you'll find some true solace, not to mention confidence. Excuse the New Age tone! Patience and calm really are the ticket, dear.

Remember, too, in all this recent exploring of yours, that your daughter is in Manaus as well. No short-lived splendour is she! Don't neglect her, Liz. Two solitudes do not a mother and child make, believe me. Be mindful of your daughter. Don't keep thinking only of yourself.

Once in England, settled in so very quaint a Norfolk cottage, I shall look forward to hearing that your Brazilian paintings are on display in the gallery your institute runs (and which rejected my own work some years ago). I'm certain that, with application, yours will fare better.

Get a good night's rest, rise early and take a boat (without the guide) to Janauari Ecological Park. I went there myself several times between visits to that godforsaken mine in Bom Intento. You'll find your subject, a plant, flower, an obliging three-toed sloth. I envy you the trek. I do. Don't

be frightened by any of it, nor by that creeping solitude. Face it. Paint what you see. Dog stare.

Meanwhile, back to a wheelbarrow anxiously awaiting me beneath the maple trees. Such overgrown paths to clear! Then later, more packing of china. Be safe, young Liz. Let's keep our fingers crossed about James.

Kind regards,
Catherine Chartler

P.S. I suggest that you leave Hotel Manaus and find an inexpensive room, say near the Centro Cultural Palácio Rio Negro. I enclose the address of a Brazilian woman, Alma Olinto, whom I met on one of my three visits to Manaus in 1989–90 (the divorce). In fact, I'll write her a note this morning, to introduce you. She used to run a small collective near the Museu do Homem do Norte on Avenida 7 de Setembro. They make meticulous, coloured lanterns, floral shoppers, photo frames and boxes all out of jute. A generous, worldly-wise lady, part-Tikuna Indian, who'll offer you guidance. She doesn't have much time for first-world women down on their luck, I warn you. So don't do too much whining. She's got the keys to that city of short-lived fortune, and will show you the right doors. Use that woman. Not me. You're on the verge of something tremendous, I sense that deeply. Leave this geriatric out of it, I beg you. She has a garden to tame. Solitude is the greatest gift, my dear. Take it to your heart.

Catherine