

THANKS FOR YOUR LETTER

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JOE DUNTHORNE: It is the year 1512 and Europe’s most famous humanist Catholic philosopher-priest, Desiderius Erasmus, is sitting in his study in Cambridge, trying to think of one hundred and ninety-five different ways to say: *‘thanks for your letter’*.

[MUSIC: a rippling romantic jazz piano line begins]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *‘Your brief note refreshed my spirits in no small measure, he wrote... Your communication poured vials of joy on my head, he wrote... May I die the death if anything more delightful than your letter ever came my way... Can you imagine the tide of joy in which I rode as I perceived in your letter your affection for me? ... Good god! What a mighty joy proceeded from your epistle!’*

[MUSIC ENDS]

JOE DUNTHORNE: He is writing a textbook to help his students develop in their writing what he calls ‘the abundant style’ – endlessly varied and effusive. And yet I can’t help but think that fifty examples would probably have got his point across. But he just keeps on going...

[MUSIC: rippling romantic jazz piano line returns]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *‘Your letter caused me quite to smooth my brow... I love you as no one else and I delight in your letters as in nothing else...’* until somewhere around the hundred and fiftieth example it starts to take on an air of desperation... *‘May I perish if I ever met with anything in my whole life more agreeable than your letter’*

[MUSIC: piano line finishes with a flourish]

JOE DUNTHORNE: Half a millennia has passed since Erasmus wrote these sentences and yet anyone who has, you know, just thinking of a random example off the top of my head, say, attempted to write a super breezy email to someone they are unhealthily in love with and then accidentally sent that person all the many draft versions of the message at the bottom of the email...

[MUSIC: Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto no. 2 begins to rise in the background]

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...so that said person then scrolled down and read the numerous ways in which you had attempted to casually but characterfully ingratiate yourself – Hi Maria, Hey Maria, Yo Maria, Wotcha Maria...

COMPUTER VOICE [rising in the background echoing Joe's lines]:
Hey Maria... Yo Maria, Wotcha Maria, How goes it, Maria?

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...anyone who has done this and then been compelled to immediately send another far less nuanced email in which you try and explain that it is *absolutely* standard practice for you to write five distinct drafts and that it is *no way* to be taken as indicative of your embarrassingly strong feelings – that it was all merely a clerical error – anyone who has done something in that region will know where Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam was coming from.

[MUSIC: fades to black]

JOE DUNTHORNE: Twenty-five years earlier, when Erasmus was a young man training to be a priest at an Augustine monastery, he fell hard for a tall young monk by the name of Servatius Rogerus. They started writing passionate letters to each other but...

[MUSIC BEGINS]

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...pretty quickly, it became clear that Erasmus's feelings were far stronger than those of Rogerus, who started to find Erasmus a little bit annoying actually, the way he constantly sent notes and expected a reply...

[SFX: Phone buzzes in background]

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...texting at all hours and then getting annoyed when they didn't text back – metaphorically speaking – and Erasmus was aware that he was becoming clingy and whiny but he was unable to stop himself from clinging and whining and so he just kept going on and on, the equivalent of constantly checking the person's Whatsapp status to see when they are online and then immediately sending them an emoji of a waving hand.

'Dear Servatius, what reason is there to withdraw and conceal yourself so determinedly, like a snail?... I sometimes seem to see, I know not what – that you do not often think of me, or have

even quite forgotten me. My wish would be, if it were possible, that you should care for me as much as I do for you, and be as much pained by love of me, as I am continually tormented by the want of you... you, crueller than any tigress, can easily dissemble all this as if you had no care for your friend's well-being at all. Ah, heartless spirit!

But the thing to remember about all this, painful though it is, is that Erasmus definitely moves on, he goes on to great success, becomes one of the continent's most celebrated thinkers, his Latin and Greek translations of the New Testament do really well, so he's not going to be, like...

[SFX: Noise of phone in background]

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...spending his time *still* thinking about that one person who he loved obsessively – and who didn't love him back and who even got a bit mean towards the end – because he's got so many better things to do now, he's *super* busy, I guess the modern equivalent would be like...

[Sound of one of Joe Dunthorne's previous audio essays for Short Cuts rises up quietly in the background]

JOE DUNTHORNE: ...I don't know, someone who's recording one or two audio essays a year for Radio 4...

[Radio recording of Joe speaking, '...your eyes look like hamburgers']

JOE DUNTHORNE: So he's not going to be still banging on about that person because for one thing, he's got to update his best-selling and influential style guide. Having composed 195 versions of 'Thanks for your Letter', Erasmus then writes two hundred variations of the following sentence which I can only assume he chooses purely for linguistic and technical reasons...

[MUSIC: fades to black]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *'Always, as long as I live, I shall remember you'*.

[MUSIC begins]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *'You are too deeply embedded in my memory for anything to be able to dislodge you from there,'* he wrote... *'The last day of my life will discover me still mindful of you'*, he wrote... *'I myself*

shall be borne to the grave before your memory is borne from my heart...

[SFX: Computer voice echoes next sentence as Joe reads it]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *'Even though I regularly delete old emails so as to avoid having to pay for extra storage space I always take care to save your messages in their own special folder...'*

[SFX: Computer voice disappears]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *'In preserving your memory I shall never be untrue to my nature, unless I cease to live', he wrote... 'Could I ever while alive forget so delightful a companion?'*

[SFX: Computer voice returns to echo Joe again, before eventually standing completely alone]

JOE DUNTHORNE: *'Even though I left Facebook a decade ago, I've never been able to fully delete my account because it would obliterate traces of you...'*

COMPUTER VOICE: Goodbye Maria. Farewell Maria. See ya, Maria. Later. Catch you on the flip side. Bye-bye. So long? Arrivederci. Mind how you go. Au Revoir. Toodles. Parting is such sweet sorrow. Yours faithfully, sincerely, always...