

Part 7- Letter from Penthly

Dear Nexter,

I don't know when you're going to pick this up but it's been a rather long time since I wrote. I hope your travels have been rewarding thus far. It's approaching two years since your departure, and so I write with some concern about your well-being.

It seems your letters have become shorter and shorter. You seem to be on vacation, as you never write to me of your thoughts. Your observations about the various cultures you have wandered through are limited to comments on architecture and women. Your writing has become sloppy...and is rife with slang and cliché.

When you left your friends, you seemed intent on discovering yourself and indicated you would be no longer than a year. Now, it seems you are less and less interested in returning and more interested in extending your hiatus from reality.

I hope you will understand that it takes a true friend to tell it as it is. I think I still have some sway in your mentation, and so without further adieu, I will embark on my own 'journey' with you. That is the journey of countering your assertions that there is some value to the experience of self-exile.

In my most recent role as the junior critic of the Free Press, I edited an article that was published just yesterday. It was written by 'a wayfarer', as you would put it, who had returned home after three years in India. When all was said and done, I got the truth out of him. His journey had served no other purpose than to estrange him from his work ethic and his opinions. In other words, he admitted it was a sham.

By the time I had edited his work completely, there was very little of import, and so he was easily convinced to rewrite it on the impact of culture shock and the misleading nature of "the trip" as you like to call it.

I have enclosed it here as it was published finally in the Free Press. Of course I am pleased that I had such an edifying effect on the writer and expect that this will have a favourable impact on my future.

It is of great concern to me that you no longer write to me of your opinions at all. After all, what is a man without an opinion? Besides singing songs for strangers, what do you

do to earn money? Surely, you have considered that while you fritter away your most important years of development, you weaken your chances at competing in a meaningful way with your peers. There is such a thing as a job market after all. What will you do if you return home only to find, as this other wayfarer did, that the world has passed him by, while he indulged himself in an endless orgy of self-delusion.

Next, it is about time that you understand something. Your friends won't wait forever for you to return. The employers won't be putting any gold stars beside your name just because you have travelled somewhere. The girls won't be interested in a displaced hack guitarist. No, they will be dating the guys who show some promise for a solid future. Your last girlfriend Kim is dating a gentleman who is eight years older and is well established in the insurance business. By the way, she says "Hi".

I, for one, have just returned from a jaunt to Mexico where I covered the development of the Yucatan Peninsula. Now, I know it's fun to pretend your going somewhere special, but really, it was no different than watching a bloody travel show. Smell the java Next. You may be living out your beat fantasy novel, but like so many...you will find it a fast read, not a deep read.

I also received a strange letter a good six months back. There was a weird address on the envelope, stamped and sealed in wax with a contorted 'Y,' and signed 'Kat'. In it was your citizen's card. Apparently, you had misplaced it, and she thought you should have it. In any case, and I feel in your best interests, I am keeping the citizen card for you.

In so many words, this girl had nothing to say. What kind of people are you meeting out there? Farm girls? Hippies? What? I hope they have more to say than she did. After all, you did stay with her a year, didn't you?

I am deeply concerned and so are your friends and what family you still have not disappointed. I strongly suggest that you phone me at your next opportunity so that we can discuss this, man to man. If you have no money...call collect. I am doing well even though I am still in college.

So far, I outperform in a very competitive profession. There are guys ten years older who would kill to do what I am doing part time. I seem to have a natural affinity for my position, though you know my strongest talents lie in the area of prose and fiction. Mark my words, Next, sometime they will pay millions for my books...millions!

Everything is the way it should be. I wish you were here so you could see what you are missing.

There is much more that I could say, but I will refrain until I receive your call. I feel that my role is not so much as friend anymore, but guardian. I might as well say it. Nexter, you are betraying my friendship and yourself. You are disappointing to the extent that I am embarrassed to have to answer for you. But then, your circle of friends hardly ask anymore. They have already given up on you. It is hard to defend you when people use the word 'flake'. They look at me strangely, and I feel my own prestige being minimized in their eyes. I ask myself, "Why don't I just completely dismiss you?"

And don't knock prestige, Nexter. It feels pretty damned good when you have it. Enough said. The experience is here. Not out there. And we both know that I'm right.

Kind regards,

R.I. Pentheus

N- Whew, man. Heavy. I just read a letter from Penthy. I have kept it for the time being...as a reminder. I must go further, much further. There must be a place where I will be safe. For now, I remain untouchable.

N- I have decided to head north over the Alps. In this last week I have been troubled. I am blue. I found myself unable to play and deeply sad for the first time since I left home. Maybe the mountain air will chill the melancholy.

The Key of G seems my only friend...and yet I can't bring myself to play his songs. I am slowly trying to collect all the questions she asks in the Key. This seems to keep me distracted and troubled at the same time. I think there is a sequence to these questions. G wrote them down where he found space, probably in a hurry because some of the notes are scrawled. It is almost like he had to get them down before he forgot.

My interest in her questions was voyeurism at first. but I have five of them now. What I thought were erotic teases are now becoming something quite different. I hunt for clues about her in his songs...but she's a mystery. She is a mystery.

It made me think about her again, my slave girl. "Be true or be cursed". Maybe it's mystery that makes us sad...those things we'll never know, and those strangers we'll never know. Better to have faith in something...better to have hope. Hope...it's a beautiful

thing.

N-Surely Penthy doesn't understand what it is to be on the road...and off the path. I swear, if I didn't feel this guilt, I would say he was afraid of something. Or maybe it's my own fear...Am I going too far for too long? It can't be. I haven't even begun to go East.

N- I saw the Alps for the first time today. I have been hitching rides from Torino to the north. These northern Italian women are goddesses. They are generous in giving me rides. They stop frequently for roadside espressos. I wish I knew what they were saying to each other. They seem to look at me and laugh a lot. Then another takes me up the road a little further.

N- Fuck...it's cold up here. I waited for a bus to take me into Switzerland for three hours. Oh that's right. It's fucking Sunday. No bus coming today, Nexter. A nice old lady opened her shop just to make me some hot chocolate. I stood in front of her place the whole time...I'm sure she thinks I'm pretty fucking stupid.

It seems strange to me that Penthy has Kat's address. She wouldn't give it to me. She didn't want me to contact her. Maybe I should get that from Penthy. Maybe she wants me to write after all. I hope she is O.K.

But why did he open the letter? Why didn't he forward it? He forwards his newspaper clippings. I'm miffed.

Being far away has softened my sense of privacy. I am an open book. Yet, it bothers me. Penthy always reads what he wants into me...like it's a race to know who I am.

N- Well, that was yesterday. Today, I'm [still] here until four p.m. Roman time. Then I've got a ride with the old lady's son, who drives a truck. Her name is Grunag or something. Now that sounds German to me, but I'm not even in Switzerland yet. Cool. Apparently, we're taking some pigs with us. These are definitely not corporate pigs. Apparently they don't have a whole lot to say about their future. No opinions coming from these pigs. They're just going to slaughter.

N- I sent Penthy a postcard from Geneva. Thanked him for his concern. I asked him to send Kat's address to Jasmine's place in Rome. But there won't be a phone call. I've had ten days to think about it. There won't be any phone calls.

I smelled the City of No...and it was fear.

Yes It Is.