

PARALLEL

LIES

By Lindy Jones

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Dear Ms McKendry,

Thank you very much for your recent enquiry regarding writing to a prisoner on Death Row in America. After looking through our files we have managed, we think, to match you up with a suitable prisoner who, at present, is incarcerated in Texas.

The young man in question has been on Death Row for nine years and is highly intelligent. He graduated from his High School with honours and is a regular user of the prison library. He is currently housed in the block which caters for prisoners deemed to be non-violent and who have not violated prison rules.

As requested, he has not offended against women or children and you may find details of his crime on the website listed at the end of the letter. He has requested particularly that any potential pen pals should be, intelligent, well read and enjoy reading poetry. You seem to fit this description perfectly so we are hoping that you will enjoy writing to Troy Howardson.

However, may I please remind you of some of the ground rules we make to ensure that the writing experience is a positive one for both parties.

1. Please do not discuss their case with them whilst it is going through the appeals process.
2. Do not be persuaded to send large amounts of money on a regular basis.
3. Do not send anything through the post other than letters. Books may only be sent via registered providers.

4. Please be aware that many of these men are extremely lonely and vulnerable and may form very strong attachments to the people who write to them.
5. Be aware that your letters might be read.
6. Do not write about matters of a sexual nature.
7. Be aware you may need to contact a counsellor once your prisoner has received an execution date.
8. Report any letters of a violent or sexual nature to the prison authorities.
9. Do not send them pornography under any circumstances.
10. Do not disclose too much personal information about yourself.

Thank you again for your interest in the humanitarian work we do here at 'Write to Life' and we do hope you enjoy the experience of helping someone less fortunate than yourself.

Yours sincerely,

Harold Atkins
Director of 'Write to Life.'
26th October

27th October

Dear Troy,

My name is Evie McKendry. (my father was a Scot, you know, from Scotland). I shall be introducing myself to you later on, but first of all let me explain why exactly I am writing this letter. (Sorry, I'm a little bit nervous.)

Several weeks I woke up in a very emotional state, having dreamt I had been buried alive in a dark underground tomb. It was a vivid and terrifying dream but I knew it was trying to tell me something. Something about my life. But what? And then, later on that day, I had a sign. Do you believe in them? I opened the Sunday newspapers and there, staring at me was a headline, 'Lives in Limbo: the anguish of prisoners waiting to die.' The article was about a woman who become a pen-pal of someone in prison on Death Row and after reading it, I was so moved by his terrible suffering that I decided to pull myself together and write to someone myself as I knew, it must mean, that I needed to stop being so wrapped up in my own problems and think about someone else. Well, here I am, but you'll have to excuse me if my letter isn't very interesting as It really is terribly difficult writing to someone you have never met!

I'll start by giving you some information about myself.

I am fervently against the death penalty which goes without saying really and I chose to write to you because of your interest in reading fiction and

writing poetry. I am very similar in my interests in life, though I have to disappoint you and tell you I have no knowledge or interest in basketball! My ex-husband took me to a rugby match once but I found the sight of all those grown men fighting on a muddy field over a ball really rather worrying.

Personally, I'd rather have stayed at home with a glass of red wine (preferably from France) and a good book. (Not that I'm a heavy drinker you understand.) There's nothing like losing oneself in someone else's world is there? Do you like to drink?

I am an English teacher in, what I think you would term, a High School and I have been in my current job for nearly ten years. Although I quite enjoy my work, I often feel that schools have become places that are just obsessed with examination results which means a lot of young people today simply don't read or write for pleasure anymore. So I am really excited about being able to share ideas about Literature with someone who appreciates the written word. Who is your favourite author?

I love to cook and am passionate about poetry, particularly Emily Dickinson, who I'm sure you must have studied at school seeing as she is American. (Oh some of her poems have moved me to tears!) I am also a member of a poetry group which meets once a month, taking it in turns to host the event at someone's house. Which reminds me, it is my turn to choose a poem to bring along for discussion and I hope I can find one slightly more engaging than the one Hetty brought along last month. Oh dear, we had to read this turgid poem about a fish by someone called Elizabeth somebody or other, I can't seem to recall her surname. Anyway, I must confess an excessively

long description of a fish did not inspire me and I felt my eyes closing as Hetty's dull voice droned on and on. It was all I could do to stay awake.

I'm quite a spiritual sort of person and try and read a poem each night which is, I find, a most effective way of relaxing and allowing the mind to wander into the realms of fantasy and the imagination. I write the odd poem but I fear I have no talent although I did get one published in the local paper a few weeks ago.

I like to lead an orderly life and strongly believe in living in a well dusted environment. I clean the kitchen two or three times a day with plenty of bleach in order to eradicate germs which I believe thrive in most people's kitchens. I once read a disturbing article about the bacteria infesting an average house which apparently amounts to literally millions of all sorts of invisible little creepy crawlies. I must say, I rather regret knowing this now; ignorance can be somewhat blissful at times.

I'm a very sensitive person, and I really do try to treat all living creatures with kindness and respect. Most of my friends consider me to be kind, well-balanced and hard-working. What kind of person would you say you were Troy?

I am single, since my divorce several years ago, and now share the house with four cats. I would really like to have a dog, or even two, but with working such long hours it wouldn't be fair. However, I have lots of friends and regularly go to the theatre or cinema when I can find the time and energy as working with young people is extremely demanding and tough. I

must say though that I enjoy the challenge of stimulating young minds and teenagers certainly keep you busy!

I don't have a family but when I see my friend Josie's house I feel completely relieved that I am free of all those responsibilities. Let me tell you that the state of her sitting room after her sons have had their friends round is absolutely terrible. And, she has a laundry basket full of clean clothes in the hall which never ever seems to get emptied. I nearly fainted when she told me that having teenage sons means that they get through a loaf of bread each day! I suppose I would count her as my best friend even though her life always seems full of dramas with her children. What I like about her is her warmth and humour despite her eccentric personality. I just wish I could be as relaxed as her about chaos.

I must say I really like your name which was another reason why I chose you to write to you. Actually, as well as being unusual, it reminds me of Captain Troy Tempest a character on a children's programme called 'Fireball XL5' which used to be broadcast in England. Have you ever heard of it?

I expect it's still quite hot in Texas. It's raining as I write but promises to be fine at the weekend. Well, I'd better get on and do some washing you'd be surprised at how filthy the net curtains become with all the traffic fumes in London. Sometimes I find myself pining for the countryside; life in a city is always so busy with the constant noise of traffic, police sirens and crowds of people everywhere.

I do hope this letter isn't too dull although I fear some of it might appear to be somewhat superficial

and tedious. I really do hope that you decide to write to me and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Evie

PS If you don't want to write back to me, I'll understand.

November 3

Dear Evie,

Thank you for your letter. How has life been treating you as of late? I certainly hope and pray that you are doing just fine and hope this letter finds you in the best of health, as well as your spirits high and a smile on your face. It was a joy to receive a letter all the way from England and no, it wasn't at all boring and from the way you write, I don't think a letter from you could ever be. (smile) It arrived on my birthday yesterday which definitely seemed like a sign from the good Lord. Yes I too believe in signs.

I'm glad you like my name, I guess it is quite unusual but not quite as cool as DeLord who used to be on the same pod as me. Now that is one hell of a name, he told me his mother actually made it up herself. No, I've never heard of Troy Tempest though I asked some of the guys and one thought it was on television once. I really like the name Evie which I guess is short for Eve as it kind of reminds me of the Bible and the stories my Grandmother used to tell me when I was a small boy. You use the word boring about your letter but life on DR is just that. Each day we just go through the same routines it will send you mad if you let it, but I'm far too strong for that. I've been on the Row for nine years now and I am fighting, with my lawyers, to clear my name, being that I am innocent.

Your letter came as a big surprise and I want to thank you for taking the initiative to write me. Your letter wasn't at all 'boring' and I really do look forward to getting to know you. I simply want someone to converse

with on a regular basis in hopes of alleviating some of the loneliness of this place and brightening up my day to a certain degree. I want someone that I can talk to about whatever is on my mind but I don't want this to be all about me and my situation. What I want is to build a lasting friendship with you, one where you are comfortable being yourself at all times. I place no limitations on this friendship so feel free to talk to me about whatever is on your mind. I also want to be here for you if possible. I want you to share your thoughts and ideas with me if you feel like it. Don't ever think your letters won't interest me because, from the way you write, I don't ever see that happening. Hell, you already had me smiling about you and those worms and flies. Here's an interesting woman I thought to myself. I also appreciate you telling me about yourself and your family, but four cats! That sure must give you a big food bill.(smile)

You mentioned how you are into writing poems, I would love to check some of them out if it's no problem. I have given some thought to writing a book about my life but never got round to it. What with learning about the law and working on my case I've never gotten round to writing about my life but I can tell you, it might open the eyes of some people here in the United States of America.

You mention how you like to cook. Well all I can tell you is that the food in here is real bad. I don't want to offend you by swearing. They serve breakfast at 4 30 am, lunch at eleven and the last meal at 3 30 and half the time it's not worth getting up for.

You said you was divorced and it seems like you have a busy social life with your friends and your work. I too need to have order in my life and like to keep my cell clean and tidy though this one has a slight leak in the roof and everytime it rains, water trickles

down the wall. I have complained to the officers but nothing has been done which just shows what they think of us; that we are not human beings but animals kept in cages.

I am a very dark skinned black male. I stand 6 2 and weigh 200 pounds. I have a long oval shaped face and brown eyes. Everyone tells me that I have a great sense of humour and some of the female officers in here have nicknamed me 'Good lookin' even though they are not supposed to get too friendly with us. I just love to have a good time and back in the day I was always playing practical jokes on my friends.

I have to tell you that I've never heard of any poets called Elizabeth- ? What kinds of things does she write about other than fish? I studied some Emily Dickenson at school and can still see my high school teacher almost breaking down whenever she would read one particular poem. She got humiliated by some of her students so I hope you don't let your emotions show like that.(smile) School students can suss out any vulnerable people a mile off. When I was out in the world I just loved her Literature class and she thought I was one of her best students.

I hope you don't mind but I have a few questions to ask you. I really want us to be close and for us to have the deepest friendship we can have.

How old are you?

What was your husband like?

Do you have any other hobbies other than reading and writing?

I really appreciate you taking the time out of your busy life to write me and I really wish I could taste one of your delicious meals.(smile) As I said before, the food in here is real bad. Only the other day, I swear there was rat droppings in the stew so I refused to eat it. The officers in here really don't

be caring about us at all. If they had their way they would just give us bread and water to eat.

Back in the world I loved to eat chicken I'm just loving meat I'm afraid.(smile) My grandmother cooked it for me every Sunday. She is the most important person in the world to me other than my mother, standing by me throughout this nonsense. She knows I just shouldn't be in this place and I wish she could visit more often. I hate that she has to drive two hundred miles to see me. The authorities just like it that we prisoners are isolated miles from anywhere so our families can't visit. I'm lucky, my grandmother has a car.

My boy Ron he hasn't had a visit from his family now for near two years being as his mother and grandmother got killed in an automobile accident and his father is in prison. However he has regular visits from his French pen-pal who's a really wonderful person.

The isolation and loneliness of life on DR is what can drive men mad. We spend day after day alone in our small cells and you could never imagine what it is like to experience this. Words cannot fully express what life here is like. In my cell there's only a tiny slit at the top of the wall where I can see outside and I can see the cars in the parking lot but it is a long way away. I go out for recreation for one hour each day and I sometimes just shut my eyes and enjoy the feeling of the sun on my face. Damn though, my skin is so much paler than it was that some of the guys be telling me I'm turning into a white man, no disrespect to you Evie, hey I am thinking you are white!(smile)

There are lots of blacks and Mexicans here and by the way, did you know that Texas executes more people than the whole of the rest of America? Now that is not a good thing. Where I lived they sure hated us

brothers but I never let that prejudice make me bitter or they would have won. Sometimes though I get to think that God just put me right here on this earth to suffer.

The sport I like is basketball and I had won a university scholarship because I was the best player in my high school and a straight A student (smile). I was going to study math and engineering but now my life is not going to go that way unless I get to clear my name.

Talking of school, I'm really pleased you are a school teacher as some of the conversations I have round here are just plain dull. There be guys here who seem to have forgot about the outside world and just spend their time moaning and bitching about each other. So I'm looking forward to kicking it with you on a regular basis that is if you do decide you want to write me.

I laughed about you going to watch rugby they don't play much of it in the States. Do you drink much alcohol? I was never the kind of guy who got his drink on too much. I like to be in control and don't be wanting to look like a damn fool. My good friend Jerry now he was liking his drink far too much and one time after he'd been to a party he got into a bad fight sticking up for me when a white guy called me a nigger but the fact that he'd been drinking so much meant that he just could not see properly to aim his punches straight. His face got smashed up real bad in the fight but he sure was a cool guy. I 've not heard from him for five years now. I miss him real bad.

I am pleased to hear you look after yourself living on your own. Do you miss your husband at all or have you got used to living without him? I am around the company of men far too much though some of the officers are female.

Well I'm going to bring this letter to a close. My neighbour fixed me something to eat. We manage to get stuff to each other by hooking it through and passing it down the row. Some of the officers are cool and don't mind helping us, even though we're not meant to. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully yours,
Troy C Howardson

PS Could you please send me a photograph of yourself?

14th November

Dear Troy,

Thank you for your letter. I had been wondering if you would write back to me. It is so hard writing to a complete stranger isn't it? After I posted the letter I kept thinking of other interesting things that I could have included as well as wondering how I came across to you.

First of all I'll start by answering your questions. I am thirty five years old. My husband David, was a good man but unfortunately we grew apart and he met someone else. As for hobbies, well what with school work and housework it's hard to find time for much and although I try and swim once a week, the standard of cleanliness at the local pool leaves a lot to be desired and sometimes I just can't force myself into the water. I have also just joined a salsa dancing class and have my first session next Wednesday. I'm already worrying about what shoes to wear!

By the way what is a pod? When I first read your letter I thought you had written pool and was having trouble thinking about pools in prison! I think I need to get my eyes tested. Anyway, back to pods. You mentioned being on the same pod as someone, is it where you are housed together? I must compliment you on your excellent grammar and spelling! I'm sure you must have been an exemplary student. I'm really impressed that you got a scholarship but not surprised as you do seem like a very intelligent person. Your handwriting is quite amazing too, if only some of my students could write so clearly. I'm so sorry after doing so well at school you ended up

where you are. I understand you aren't allowed to discuss your case so I'd better not ask you anything. Do the authorities read the letters? I'm being very careful about what I write, just in case.

I'm delighted that your grandmother manages to visit. What about your mother or father? You didn't mention them but I really hope they are able to visit you regularly seeing as you have been in prison for nine years now and are only twenty eight. Actually, I was thinking about you in the supermarket this week and suddenly, this really odd thought just popped into my head. 'Troy doesn't ever go shopping.' Mind you, I wouldn't mind someone making me a meal sometimes as cooking for one can be very dull. Occasionally, I am even tempted not to bother and just make myself a sandwich or something, but I force myself to cook the way my mother brought me up to. She was heart-broken when David and I divorced and told me one evening she thought my dreadful mood swings and over-zealous cleaning had driven him away which hurt me terribly I can tell you. Mind you, I think she'd had a few too many gin and limes, you know how a bit of drink loosens the tongue. However, if I'm totally honest, I think she's mostly concerned about the fact that she hasn't got any grandchildren but I keep trying to reassure her that there is plenty of time, though I certainly don't want to pick another teacher. Two teachers living under the same roof can be tiresome particularly when one of you has been a little bit more successful in terms of their career.

I'm sorry to hear the food they give you isn't very good, I am a vegetarian as I don't like the thought of eating animals given how much I love them and also I went off fish after my marriage ended as David had

just cooked cod in spicy tomato sauce when he told me it was all over.

Well that's enough about all that business. I'm over it now. In fact, I got asked out this week by Geoff a colleague from school and we're going out for a meal this Saturday. I hope it goes better than my date with John. (A rather tedious man I met on an internet dating agency) What an evening that turned out to be I can tell you, let me tell you what happened. I'd been in regular contact with this man called John who, from his e-mails, sounded very funny, lively and sensitive. Perfect, I thought, particularly when he offered to take me out for an Italian meal in a very exclusive restaurant in Covent Garden. However, when I actually saw him in the flesh so to speak, he certainly did not resemble the picture he'd posted of himself on the internet. The stallion, as I'd been calling him in my head (I like imagining people as animals!) had metamorphosised into an orangatang. As we shook hands awkwardly, his grip was cold and clammy and all I could think about was taking a pair of scissors to his long greyish hair. Just after the main course he tried to tell me a joke about a hamster and sellotape and well I won't even attempt to explain it other than to tell you I practically passed out and had to stop him mid sentence. From that moment on I realised that this date was a big mistake. And I mean big. Anyway, John got up to go to the bathroom, as you Americans call it, and fell over in the middle of the restaurant practically knocking a middle aged woman to the floor as his hands flailed about like a windmill. Can you believe this, he had actually slipped on a grape!

I rushed over to help him as he was screaming and swearing so loudly the waitress insisted on calling

for an ambulance and we ended up spending four hours in Casualty. It was a nightmare. John was sick over my new suede boots and I'm afraid to say, despite the fact it turned out he had indeed fractured his big toe, I just couldn't face seeing him again. I'd discovered, sitting with him in the waiting room that he was incredibly bad-tempered, arrogant and opinionated. Between telling me his life story and insisting he knew more jokes that I would find amusing, I think he only stopped for breath once before that unfortunate incident and that was to ask me if we should order another bottle of wine. (He'd managed to polish off three-quarters of a bottle before the main course.) I'm afraid he didn't take it too well when I suggested to him later on in the week that drinking most of the bottle himself might have contributed to his failure to negotiate a safe passage across the floor.

I fear I'm talking about myself a little too much so I'll stop in a minute but I must just tell you about Geoff as I think I need some advice. It wasn't a complete surprise him asking me out as, to be honest, I'd noticed a kind of twinkle in his eye when I asked him to help me unblock the paper jam in the photocopier last week. When he had finished pulling out my worksheet he noticed that it was a poem entitled, 'The One that Got Away' and he immediately announced his own interest in poetry and asked me if I would read one of his poems. The next day he left a copy of his poem in my pigeon hole and a short note asking me out for dinner at the weekend so we 'Can make poetry together?' Do you think he's being a little forward? To make matters worse, his poem rather disturbed me. I'm somewhat disconcerted by the reference to 'dead desire', not that I'm a prude or anything and a dark abyss is not a place I want to

visit, well not with a man I hardly know, although I'm quite partial to depressing poetry. What do you make of it?

Artistic Licence

In one otherness I rail against the flame of dead desire.

Drooping down into despair,
The pink rose dissolves
Taking me into the dark abyss.
Alone beneath the yew tree
I yearn for a connection.
Between the clouds
Whilst the silver fishes
glide towards my soul.

I'm sorry to say that the fact that fishes feature in it completely puts me off, given my dislike of them and the bad associations I have with the subject matter. What do you think?

I'm just reading your letter again and I'm thinking about the horrible food you get served and at such strange times too. Why is this? Do you get out to have exercise or meet up with any other inmates? I read somewhere that you are locked up twenty three hours a day, is that true? It sounds awful. I'm sure my petty worries about Geoff's poem must seem ridiculous to you when you have such a life of terrible suffering.

Is it still hot in Texas? It's been raining here all week and Mrs Pink has brought three dead baby rats in and put them outside my bedroom door. I nearly stepped on one with my bare foot the other morning.

Our ideas about 'presents' are certainly not the same and now I keep dreaming about big whiskery giant rats knocking on my front door to reclaim their lost children. I do hope there aren't any more family members Mrs Pink can sink her teeth into. I must admit though that when I laid their stiff little bodies into the earth I shed a few tears. I really am ridiculously sentimental about animals.

I'm glad you like my name, I prefer it to Evelyn, the name on my birth certificate it but I'd much rather have been called something exotic like Ruby or Scarlett. I don't suppose you have read 'Gone with the Wind' have you? What I really liked about the character of Scarlett O'Hara was her refusal to give up hope even when it was clear Rhett had had enough of her. I think the last sentence in the book is something like. 'Tomorrow is another day.' I have found those lines to be strangely comforting when life has been hard.

I must end now. I'll try and send you one of my poems next time. Well, I do hope you are as well as you can be. I think about you a lot and am sending you my best wishes. Did you have a girlfriend before you ended up where you are? I look forward to your next letter.

Best wishes,
Evie

PS. What does the C stand for in your name?

November 21

Dear Scarlett/ Ruby,

Hello! So, how has life been treating you of late? I hope and pray that you are doing just fine. Well, everything is the same here. I'm just maintaining and trying to stay focused and positive. Each day I try to find a way to motivate me into doing something creative and not just sit around and pass the day doing nothing. I must admit that at times it can be a difficult task. I see so many guys here who have fallen into a deep state of depression and have pretty much given up.

Now, quick subject change. Let me thank you for your letter. I have to let you know I was wondering if maybe you would change your mind about writing with me after receiving my letter. I am so glad that it didn't turn out like that at all because I am really looking forward to building a nice friendship with you; one where we will feel comfortable talking to each other about whatever is on our minds. Feel free to discuss whatever you want when talking to me. Ask any questions that you may have and if I can give you an answer then I will certainly do so. I place no limitations on this friendship. All I ask is that you be yourself and don't feel you can only talk about certain issues.

I must say you Brits really love getting your drink on.(smile) I laughed out loud when you told me about ol' boy John slipping on that damn grape. I bet you went right off of him being that you was responsible for getting his sorry-ass to the hospital. He doesn't seem like the sort of guy a woman of your intelligence should be hanging out with.

I'm real sorry about what happened to you and your husband. You deserve better Evie, you sure do. That

man did not appreciate what a wonderful person he had the privilege to be married to. Some men in this world just don't treat their women well.

You know what I don't understand. What was the deal with your husband? Why couldn't he just come straight out and tell you that he didn't feel the same anymore? I believe communication is the key to a happy marriage but that if it's not working out then you have to separate as some things are just not meant to be. I don't think if one person is unhappy in a relationship the other one can be. Hell, I can't see myself being happy if my wife isn't happy. No disrespect to your mother Evie, but were you suggesting your mother was drunk when she told you that you was partly to blame for the divorce? You shouldn't listen to people when they have been drinking they chat a lot of bullshit sometimes and I'm sure it wasn't true. It takes two people to make a relationship work and you don't seem like the kind of woman who would drive someone away.

When people say stuff about me, hell, I just be thinking about what is making them say it. I have learnt the hard way that people aren't always straight with you and don't always say what they mean. There are some sorry-ass people in my family who I will no longer give the time of day to. My sister, Patrice, can write me as much as she wants but I'm not replying to her until she can be bothered to get% herself to visit me. Hell, she keeps giving me excuses about being busy with her children but she can't spare any time for her own brother. I figured she's thinking I'm already dead and on bad days, it can seem like that. Not a day goes by without me thinking about my last free day out in the world and how I would change it if I could.

In answer to your question about whether I had a girlfriend back in the day, how could a good-looking

dude like me not have one!(smile) I was the kind of person who females loved and I had no trouble finding me a good looking one. I was going steady with this cute girl called Roseleen she was one hell of a person but her mother was so damn strict, going out anywhere with her was real tough. On the night of what happened to get me into this hell-hole I had a date with a sweet girl called May. She'd been after me for ages and when Roseleen finished with me I wasted no time giving her my phone number.

Unfortunately we never got it together that night but if I'd made it to her house, maybe my life would have turned out different.

Some of the guys in here they just can't deal with the shit in their lives and have to be on medication. Hell, last week someone had to be pepper sprayed after he started throwing feces at one of the guards just because they told him he'd catch a case if he didn't take his poster down from the wall. Damn, his hollering and shit woke us all up and the smell from the pepper spray made my eyes water for hours. He's been transferred to C pod, the pod I'm on is F pod which is where the prisoners who don't make too much trouble are housed together. The officer in question is trouble for real, he just hates us brothers and if we have any pictures of white women around he rips them off of the walls.

You asked me about my family. Well growing up was real tough but I love my mother despite her mistakes. I grew up with just my mother who was only sixteen when she had me, she felt that alcohol and drugs would make life better. By the age of eight I had to take on the responsibility of raising my younger sisters because there were many nights when she wasn't there. One time, when I was nine years of age, she was gone for several weeks but I never

missed a day off of school and every morning I took my three sisters to their daycare center and the teachers at school never knew. I matured at an early age but I always had high self-esteem and I was a hard working motivated student who wanted to make something of himself. I never got into trouble with the police. What kind of a childhood did you have Evie?

You asked me about the conditions on DR. Well, here in the good old US of A there is no program of rehabilitation. We are locked up for 23 hours each day in a cell the size of a small bathroom and when we do go out for recreation, it is only for an hour and we are always on our own, though there is usually someone on the other side of the wire. There is no television or socialising together at all but we can speak to each other by hollering as there are gaps with bars at the top and bottom of the doors. When recreation is inside, the officers take you to the 'dayroom', but of course they handcuff you first, you don't ever go out of your cell without being escorted by two officers.

In the dayroom is a table with four stools, a blue mat and a chin up bar. Other than going out for recreation you leave your cell to shower, visitation or medical appointment. Right now we are on lockdown which means we aren't allowed out of our cells at all until the lockdown is over. This is where the officers go cell by cell searching for contraband such as weapons, money cigarettes etc. Sometimes they trash our cells if they feel like it. On lockdown we just get two sandwiches and some raisins or prunes or a peanut butter sandwich and a sandwich with some type of meat on it. Breakfast will probably be a boiled egg or two pancakes, and a small bowl of dry cereal and milk.

By now you will, hopefully, have had a pleasant evening out with Geoff and I look forward to hearing all about it.(smile) I just hope Geoff didn't get his drink on like John and ruin your evening. A special lady like you deserves to be treated real nice. I laughed out loud about you going all red like a teenager and being so clumsy and I'm sure he didn't think badly of you, hell we are all human and can make mistakes. You seem to be quite hard on yourself sometimes Evie like you don't have much confidence as you was so quick to believe what your mother said about you. I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, if I am it's my bad.

As for that poem, Evie, or should I call you Ruby! (smile) it had me totally baffled. The only thing I could say about it was that he seems like some lonely guy. So you be careful of him. Remember, some men can be very controlling and just want a woman who they can boss around. Writing stuff about dark abysses bothers me a bit as well. I don't want my girl going into one with a strange man either.(smile) Evie, I'm not sure I like the sound of him at all and don't yew trees grow in cemeteries? You be careful.

The last thing that had me baffled was you telling me about Mrs Pink. I hope and pray she is not some mad old lady that lives in your house (smile) and that she is one of your cats!! But I was concerned about you crying over those baby rats. Evie they are vermin, plain and simple. Save your tears for more worthy causes. You do seem to be a very soft and sensitive person who could get hurt easily. You need to take good care of yourself. Can you dig what I'm saying?

It's time for me to finish this letter now. I do hope you enjoy reading it as much as IÓ've enjoyed writing it. I look forward to checking out your work.

Respectfully yours,
Troy

PS What is a pigeon-hole? The C stands for Charles and where is that photo?

PPS I laughed out loud when you was telling me how you like to imagine people as animals. What do you see yourself as? What animal is Geoff?

28th November

Dear Troy,

I received your letter this morning which was amazing as the post here is not what it used to be at all. Thank you so much for telling me about some of the conditions on Death Row. I had tears in my eyes when you described the small size of your cell and the shocking isolation of your life. You must be such a strong person and I have nothing but admiration for the way you are so determined to make the most of each day and do something creative.

I seem to have so little time in my life really, I mean keeping the house clean is almost a full-time job and the amount of books I have to mark is terrible. Recently, I have had so much work to mark that I have had to start getting up at five-thirty each morning. I mark and prepare lessons all evening and of course there's the cats to look after as well! Sometimes, when I'm feeling tired, I start to notice dust everywhere, and it can make me feel extremely anxious particularly if I start to imagine the way it could attach itself to the germs so that their little bodies are wrapped up like miniscule mummies. My grandmother was fixated on germs although, ironically, her house was not always as clean as it should have been, but sometimes I can hear her voice in my head telling me to get up and clean or I'll never find another husband, not that I'm at all interested in finding one of those again. No, one was quite enough and it is so much easier to get straight without all David's stuff everywhere. Actually though, I wish she'd never talked to me about germs as I often imagine I can actually see them creeping

and crawling around although I know they are not visible to the naked eye. Maggots must definitely go to my number one list of most repulsive creatures. I know I have a bit of a soft spot for worms but maggots are something else entirely. I can still recall my grandmother's hands, swollen and chapped after hours spent rinsing them under the hot tap and one summer she put all my soft toys in the washing machine. They never looked quite the same after that I can tell you!

You mentioned in your letter about the men out there falling into despair. I'm certainly not surprised at that, they would be far better off doing some work to take their minds off everything. What happens to the men who can't read? It must be very hard filling all those long hours with nothing to occupy their minds. I don't think I'd be able to sleep properly without sufficient exercise. That is the positive aspect of having a large house, by the time I've hoovered, polished and dusted I feel quite exhausted and then I have to go and do a full-day's teaching.

You'll have to excuse me jumping around in this letter, I've made some notes from it but I'm somewhat exhausted from the week. We had a particularly fraught day at school on Wednesday when a gang of students from the other local school arrived to have a fight. Two of them had baseball bats and eventually the police had to be called. I really don't want to even think about it. Did students at your high school ever use foul language to the teachers? What happened if they did?

Yesterday I got into an argument with an obnoxious boy called Billy when I tried to stop him racing down a corridor so he could have a good look at the fight

going on outside. When I told him I didn't think it would help things if he went he said, 'I don't give a flying fuck what you think,' and ran off. (sorry about the language) I know I should have reported it but what's the point? He won't take any notice of anyone and nothing will change.

Anyway, on the subject of marriage and communication, I totally agree with you about being honest, which brings me to the subject of Geoff. Well, he'd booked us a table at a lovely little Thai restaurant not far way but unfortunately he also brought along five more poems and I'd forgotten to bring my glasses which I was too embarrassed to admit. (Yes I had my eyes tested recently as I mentioned that I might need to.) I don't suppose it was terribly sensible of me to have read them after two glasses of wine on an empty stomach but my mind went completely blank. Suddenly, I remembered what you'd said about him being a really lonely person and I started to mumble something along those lines and that I thought his poems hinted at his own loneliness. He nodded slowly, telling me what a marvellously intuitive and caring person I was and then he reached out and touched my arm looking sorrowfully into my eyes like an overgrown labrador puppy. Unfortunately, at that moment, I saw a little tear trickle out of the corner of his eye and I just didn't know what I should say other than, 'It'll be fine Geoff.' As soon as I said those words I started remembering scenes of dying people on a recent television programme when the kindly doctor told each of them they'd be fine. Geoff looked as though I'd comforted him though. But despite this display of emotion revealing to me what a sensitive and sweet man he is, I felt disappointed in him. I know this sounds awful but I suddenly saw

him as being a bit weak. Oh Troy, don't I sound cruel?

He then talked for ages about his ex-wife, or rather his soon to be ex, they aren't actually divorced yet, and I just listened. By the time the main course came I was feeling desperately sorry for him but I kept getting distracted by the way he ate. I know this might sound petty, but at one point I looked up and saw a piece of spinach lodged between his two front teeth and a piece of noodle dangling from his lip. Several minutes later, after I'd overcome my feelings of nausea, a small piece of red pepper shot off his plate and almost landed right on top of my spaghetti! His marriage seems to have been a very hollow affair though with her drinking sherry every night on the sofa, and him buried in his shed writing poems. Evidently she had been a lesbian all her life which she only got round to mentioning after twenty-five years of marriage and this has obviously deeply affected him. He keeps asking himself how he didn't realise and why she took so long to actually be truthful with him. I think the poor man has been left worrying about whether he is a 'real man' or not. Anyway, I really wish now I hadn't given him the details of my poetry group as he wants to start coming. I do quite like him and I need to give him a chance I know but..... Anyway, I ended up agreeing to go to the theatre with him tomorrow night. Do you think that is a good idea?

Oh Troy, you poor soul. My heart goes out to you having to look after your sisters like that. What a brave person you must have been, and, still are. I think it is amazing that you never missed a day off school and I do admire the way you are so loyal to your mother. Does she ever come to visit you? What

about Roseleen? How long were you in a relationship with her for? I was curious that you mentioned you were going to see someone else on 'That night,' by which I'm assuming that you are referring to what happened to put you in there. It really isn't any of my business what you did and I know you aren't allowed to discuss your case whilst the appeals process is going on.

However, if you want to share anything with me, of course I will listen and not judge you. I am amazed that you have such high self-esteem and no bitterness in you. Yes, I suppose I am a mite unconfident at times but aren't we all? You astounded me in your letter by the compassion you have for your mother as I'm ashamed to admit I don't have such positive feelings about mine, who, coincidentally, was also a very heavy drinker hence of course the reference to the gin and limes.

After the death of my father when I was seven, she withdrew from me and my brother referring to him always as Edward, and never as Dad and she also used to drink a lot which could be very difficult. Sometimes she cried a lot, which I hated. Actually, she's recently started to hint about coming to live with me at some point in the future and I'm not happy at all. I don't see us being able to tolerate each other living under the same roof, much as I love her obviously.

You are an incredibly perceptive person Troy, you really are. I know it was hard for her after Dad died but sometimes I felt invisible, like I wasn't there and didn't matter. Still, from today, I shall take a leaf out of your book and attempt to be more understanding.

It's nearly ten o'clock now, and I must get to sleep. Augustus has just come in and is standing on my desk. He is soaking wet as it is pouring with rain. Still, at least he decided to kill the pigeon in the garden this evening and not bring its corpse into the house. What I do hate is when he brings something wounded in. The other evening I managed to rescue a very small field-mouse which I found stiff with terror by the laundry basket. I held it in the palm of my hand for several minutes and stroked its mangled little head. Poor thing. I confess I was crying quite noisily as I buried it by torchlight in the back garden. (Heaven only knows what my neighbours must have thought.)

I think I'll have to go and make a nice hot-water bottle now as it is so cold. I don't suppose it ever gets really chilly in Texas or does it? I hope you are bearing up alright I look forward to receiving your next letter.

Best wishes,

Evie aka Ruby-Scarlet!

PS What does 'catching a case' mean?

PPS I promise I will try and send a photo next time but David cut my face out of most of our photos before he moved out. Can you see what I had to put up with?

PPPS I like to see myself as a cat; intelligent, independent and a bit aloof, not the timid calf David used to tell me I was.

December 4

Dear Evie,

Hello! Is that a big smile I see on your face? Yeah, I thought that's what it was! (smile) In any event, I hope that this letter finds you in the best of health as well as your spirits high. As for myself, everything is everything on this end. Thank you for your letter which I received yesterday. For once, the officer in charge of delivering the mail bothered to get off her sorry ass and get the mail out to us. I am enclosing a picture of me and my grandmother taken last week when she came to visit. As you can see, the photographs are taken outside the transparent booth. We are not allowed to have any physical contact with visitors, not even at the very end. They now only allow photographs to be taken on the first of each month and when you come to reception you have to fill in a photograph request form and then the officer in charge will take a Polaroid photograph for you. We had a great visit and she promised to come again as soon as she can. My grandmother means the world to me I don't know what I would do if anything happened to her. After my mother walked out when I was twelve, she took us in to her house and raised us up.

Yeah, they were tough times for real.

Evie, I don't want to mention this really, but I may not be around for many more years and I do want to be honest as you are beginning to mean a lot to me but what is the deal with Geoff? I have to tell you I do not feel happy about you seeing a man whose wife was really a lesbian. I mean, check it out, what was going on between them all those years that he didn't notice that his wife was, well, somewhere else really? You know what I'm saying. It sure

wouldn't have taken me long to figure out that we just wasn't making a connection. If I'm offending you, it's my bad for saying how it feels. You mean too much to me for me to sit back knowing that this guy is no good for you but not saying anything. I'm not trying to turn you against him but you need to realise that there are some guys around who will take advantage of a kind and genuine person like yourself.

Evie, you are a wonderful woman, and you deserve someone real special. I hear guys all the time here talk about how they want someone to write to just for the money but you know that isn't for me, for real. I know how valuable a true friendship is. We are getting to know each other very quickly through these letters and hearing from you allows me to escape the grim world I live in and spend some time in a much better place.

The weather isn't too bad here but Thanksgiving is upon us again, not that they do anything special for us here. This place is not where I should be Evie, I am living the wrong life. I am an innocent man condemned by an all white jury because of the colour of my skin.

Many times, back in the day, I was stopped when driving my car when I was with my white friends I guess they couldn't figure out why they was with me. like maybe I was kidnapping them or something.(smile) Once, I got into a real bad fight at a party when someone bad-mouthed my best friend Jed, who was white. I bus' my hand real bad but I wasn't having Jed called a nigger lover, no way as Jed and I went everywhere together we was like brothers. I don't hear from him anymore though but I know he still thinks about me. Marvin wrote me last week and he's still in touch with Jed. I'm not sweating it though. I hope and pray his life turns out better than mine

has. Jed and Marvin came to my trial everyday and took to the stand testifying as to my character. Yeah, I was a good student in my high school but sometimes it was real hard being one of three black students in my class. I got some bad stuff said to me about my white friends and of course I could never take them home. This all reminds me about what you said about your childhood. Hell we was the same, not having a father figure around. I knew who my father was but he never tried to be one to me so I grew up to face my responsibilities at an early age.

Were you beaten as a child? Mama only beat me when she was really sad and mad about things but she tried her best to bring us all up knowing right from wrong. I was lucky that I had my grandmother and grandfather and aunty and uncle around so I had a big loving family.

It's good to hear you like things clean too. Yeah I right on like to keep things looking clean and nice and I include myself as well.(smile) This cell was dirty as hell when they moved me in here and I spent me the whole day cleaning. Some sick, messed up person must of had this cell before me and it made me sick. I'm sure you like your house to stay tidy, but do you need to get up at 5.30? Surely you could do all the marking and housework in the evening.

I don't like to think of you getting yourself all worn out. You seem to be overdoing it Evie and you won't be getting no prizes for wearing yourself out. My girl Roseleen was also someone who liked things kept just so, I still think of her every day and how much I loved her but some bad stuff happened between us which messed up the love we had for each other. But before we split, I know I loved her and my heart just swells when I think of the deep and true love which we had. It was all her fault though Evie, she

plain messed it all up and pushed me into May's arms. I wrote a poem about her which I'll send next time. Hey Evie, before I forget, what did your husband do cutting you out of the photographs? I don't like the sound of him at all.

Evie baby, I don't want you to cry about me. Hey, I'm going to be calling you a crybaby for real! (smile) I sometimes cry when I'm alone at night thinking about what happened to get me locked up like this. Not a day goes by when

I don't think about that night. Being that I can't really talk about my case whilst the appeals are going through, I'll just tell you that I am innocent. I'm enclosing an article which Jed wrote for our local paper which will tell you a lot more about what happened and that Jed believed in me. Many other people believed in my innocence as I had never been in trouble with the police before and never missed a day off of school.

Talking of school, what's the deal with your students fighting with baseball bats? I worry about you Evie, now don't you be taking on the responsibility of breaking up fights. What's the deal with this punk Billy and you not reporting his insolence? You straight up can't be leaving that situation. Your principal needs to deal with him severely and it's not gonna do no good you just pretending it hasn't happened. Make sure you handle it in the correct way. You know what I'm saying?

It is time for me to go to the dayroom, so I will bring this letter to a close. Know that you are being thought of everyday and I hope and pray that you enjoyed your trip to the theatre with Geoff. Please be careful Evie and try and send me a photograph. I really want to see what you look like, you can tell an awful lot about a person just from looking at

their face. I want to be able to see into your eyes Evie. I don't know what colour they are but I imagine them as deep brown pools because you are such a warm person.(smile) Enjoy your Christmas shopping and I hope you take care of yourself. Has it snowed yet?

Love Troy

PS Who is Mr Rochester? Is he an ex boyfriend?

12th December

Dear Troy,

Thank you for your letter which I received a couple of days ago. I wanted to reply straight away but I have been feeling extremely tired and am very irritable with my classes. The children have been bad-tempered and restless as it has been raining non-stop for the past three days and, inevitably, they are all excited about Christmas. However, the Head made it very clear that we must on no account play games in lessons and that learning must continue to the end of term. Where is the fun in education these days? In my humble opinion, it has all got much too serious.

Last weekend had me careering around the shops like a crazy woman attempting to complete all my Christmas shopping but unfortunately, I really seem to be developing a dislike of crowds and I nearly had an anxiety attack on the tube coming back from London. When I reached home I had to lie down for a couple of hours. Being on those crowded trains since 9/11 can make me feel very tense and apprehensive at times I can tell you and one of my students told me there are more germs wriggling about on those tubes than anywhere else so that didn't help either!

Also, I can't seem to be able to bear the crowded corridors at school anymore and have begun to feel physically sick when the bell goes for change of lessons and they pour out of classrooms shouting, swearing and talking on their mobile phones (even though they aren't meant to have them). It is an

uphill struggle I can tell you Troy attempting to enthuse them about the joy of reading and writing. You remember me telling you about that boy Billy I'm sure, well yesterday I asked him to hand me his phone after he'd almost shoved it in my face and taken a photograph of me as I emerged from the staffroom. As I reached out to grab it he shoved it into his pocket and said, "You touch me and I'll get you. I know my rights." I felt a chill go right through me I can tell you. He really is vile.

Another thing that happened was the other day when I was on duty in the canteen. I loathe and detest this part of my job as on wet days it can be full of several hundred students and I'm often tense, waiting for an argument or a fight to break out.

Well, this boy in a grey sweatshirt walked past me- not that he's supposed to be wearing that anyway- and dropped a crisp packet onto the floor. In an attempt to enforce the school policy of litter dropping I challenged him about it but I wish I had just pretended I hadn't seen it. He refused to tell me his name even though I tried, politely, to ask him for it the way it was suggested in last month's staff training day. Basically, according to this bigwig from the Behaviour Management Consultancy using someone's name gives you power over them, as long as you use it in a firm but positive voice, making eye contact. It was also suggested, we should not use the word please, as it sounds like you are pleading with them, so instead, you should issue your instruction or whatever, with the word, "thank you" instead. Well let me tell you I attempted to follow these instructions by saying, "Tell me your name, thank you," but they had absolutely no effect whatsoever. His friends were all laughing, trying to

tell me his name was Spiros, when he was patently English, and I felt my heart beginning to race. Troy, I saw him drop it with my own eyes and he just stared at me with such a look of contempt on his face that I felt like slapping him. "It weren't me," he sneered and walked off. The smirk on his face as he left the canteen made me want to rush up behind him and rugby tackle him to the floor (if I knew how to do one.) Instead, I scuttled behind him shouting that I would find out who he was. He yelled back, "Well you just try then, you ain't got no proof. It's your word against ours." Little bastard. Sorry about my language.

I know this looks so petty Troy, being as where you are. I know it is nothing and, on the scale of things, it doesn't really matter but it is this kind of behaviour that is wearing me down. Later on the same day after I'd told this boy Chris to sit in his seat and stop wandering around the classroom at least five times, he waved his exit card at me saying I couldn't stop him leaving the room as he had 'issues with anger.' "Issues!" I screamed at him, "Instantly breaking the new policy of not shouting. "I'll give you some issues when I don't enter you for your exam as you haven't got any coursework." I will be really glad when we break up this week I honestly don't feel I've the energy for this anymore.

I do appreciate your concern about Geoff, but he really is an honest man and not out to exploit me in any way, he just wants to get to know me gradually and feels we have a lot in common with our love of poetry and teaching. Mind you, he teaches maths which I have no interest in at all!(not like you).

I didn't think Geoff would bother with the poetry group meeting but he did. Unfortunately though, I was a little embarrassed by him. He did not like the Sylvia Plath poem I had brought to discuss and said in front of everyone that he found the whole idea of confessional poetry quite disturbing. I could see that cow Henny nodding in agreement flicking her brown hair behind her ears whilst Jenny smiled at him congratulating him on his honesty.

Obviously encouraged by them he went on to say that he thought her obsession with death and dying was rather self indulgent which I'm afraid to say I took as a criticism of myself having told Geoff I'd been a 'Plath girlie' all my life. And then I couldn't help myself Troy, I really couldn't but I blurted out that his poem about despair and yew trees was hardly life-affirming either. Oh god, he looked like I'd slapped him and I instantly wished I could have snatched those words right back. Everyone else looked away in embarrassment whilst Henny gave me the most evil look and started braying about the wonderful bottle of Riesling she wanted us all to sample. Geoff was very frosty with me for the rest of the evening and we barely spoke on the way home.

However, the next day at school he apologised for his habit of taking comments about his poetry too personally and said that he realised afterwards that he might have hurt my feelings (of course I denied it!). On the Saturday we had a lovely evening at the theatre and I laughed till I cried. We went to see a show where three men, Americans as it happens, perform the entire works of Shakespeare in one and a quarter hours. It was absolutely brilliant. We seemed to be getting on so well but now I'm not sure what is going on.

After our visit to the theatre we were chatting on the way home and he brought up the subject of the death penalty in America how he'd read an article about these barmy women who wrote to inmates either falling in love with them or believing they were innocent. I could feel myself getting all hot and flustered wanting to tell him about you and how it wasn't like that at all. I know I went very quiet then and even though he kept asking me what was wrong I refused to tell him and changed the subject to school.

I really do like him Troy. He's extremely knowledgeable about lots of things and has a great sense of humour, even finding my description of John and the grape amusing. He couldn't have been more apologetic about our first disastrous date and he hasn't mentioned his wife since. I know I shouldn't be burdening you with all my problems and yet you seem to be a sensible, rational kind of person, not like me! All my life I have struggled with trying to understand myself and despite being in my mid-thirties sometimes it can seem like I haven't made any real progress. Perhaps I should just give up on men completely or just turn into a lesbian! Don't worry, I'm only joking! The trouble is now that since our visit to the theatre last Saturday he hasn't been in touch at all. I'm also worrying now that showing him my poem about my father's death might also have been a big mistake.

Anyway, back to your letter. I was really sorry to hear that where you have been brought up is so full of ignorant people who judge you by the colour of your skin. I have always been totally appalled by racial prejudice and I know the Deep South is full of

quite bigoted people. I once had a black boyfriend many years ago when I was eighteen and very innocent. One evening driving back to the university campus where I was living at the time, we got stopped by the police. I was completely shocked that they thought it was acceptable to assume he might have stolen the sports car he was driving. Al was very accepting and cool about it as he said it happened all the time. Ironically, I was the one who was absolutely livid and told to calm down by the surly policeman. It certainly was an experience I've never forgotten so I have some idea of how you felt.

I'm so glad you had a visit with your grandmother. What about your mother? You haven't mentioned her much so I thought I'd be brave and ask you which leads me on to the question you asked about whether my mother ever beat me. No but she could be very cruel mentally, disappearing into depression and heavy drinking and ignoring me and my brother. She was so unhappy after my father died and as a result it was as if I spent my whole childhood trying to cheer her up, unsuccessfully I might add, as I'm not even sure she liked me very much. But, you know something, I wish she could have married again, I really do. Being responsible for a parent's happiness is a heavy burden isn't it?

Obviously I was very young and don't remember exactly what happened to my dad but when I was a teenager I once overheard her talking about him mixing antidepressants and alcohol whereas I thought she'd told me he'd had a heart attack. I felt sure she seemed to be suggesting that there was a possibility of him taking his own life. Somehow after that, you know how self obsessed teenagers are, I got it into my head that perhaps it was something to do with me

and my brother. I know, rationally, that this is a common reaction but it's been hard as I just couldn't bring myself to ask Mum for fear of upsetting her. Of course she wasn't crying and miserable all the time and when she did smile oh Troy, she looked beautiful with her red curls and green eyes, I'm sure she could have been a model. What a shame I didn't inherit her good looks!

No, I haven't got brown eyes, but grey ones though one of them has got a strange brown fleck in it which Geoff referred to as my 'spark.' My hair is brown and wavy but Geoff told me he found me unusually attractive though 'unusually' seems an odd choice of word and I think I might have preferred stunningly or amazingly!

I'm really sorry, but I have to go. I've got the end of term meal in a local restaurant tomorrow night and already I'm worrying about what to wear. Also, Geoff hasn't suggested we go together which is puzzling me slightly and I'm not sure why he laughed when I told him how much housework I did. When I started asking him if he always wiped the doorhandles in his house to stop the spread of germs he went slightly pale. Obviously he has never considered the way diseases spread between people. He told me he didn't ever iron anything either so perhaps that explains why he looks a little crumpled on occasions. Not that I judge people by their appearances.

By the way, does every prisoner wear white? I could see from the photograph that you were wearing some kind of white jumpsuit. Do you work-out? I hope you don't think I'm being personal but your arms certainly look like you do. I could also see from the photograph that you have a lovely smile oh and your

grandmother looked so smart in her coat. I think she must be very brave driving two hundred miles on her own to visit you. Personally, I have always been a bit nervous about driving and despite having about forty driving lessons a few years ago, I just couldn't face getting back into a car after the test examiner wrenched the steering wheel from me and screamed, "For God's sake Evie, you nearly sliced the side of that car off." I mean really, there is simply no justification for a man you are paying to take the wretched test losing control like that. I admit that perhaps I did get a little close to the edge but nevertheless he was supposed to be the professional. Anyway, I'm quite happy getting on the bus every morning.

I must go and write some Christmas cards. I do hope your family manage to visit over the Christmas period. I will be sending my thoughtwaves to you and hoping that you are bearing up. I look forward to your next letter.

Love and best wishes,
Evie

December 25

Dear Evie,

Now let me thank you for the long and interesting letter that you sent to me. You already know that I have been missing you.(smile) You know how much I appreciate having someone like you who really does care, you really do mean such a lot to me. And I hope you can see how special you are being as I'm writing to you on Christmas Day.

Everything is slow motion this end and this is the day I think of all the times I spent with my family until I arrived in this hell-hole. I sometimes wonder if I'll see another Christmas after this one, so I try to live in the present. I'm sitting at my desk writing you, imagining you unwrapping presents, maybe with Geoff? I sure hope he treated my girl to something special as deserves a wonderful person like you. Truthfully Evie, I just don't know why you are so hard on yourself it's hardly your fault if the men you hook up with happen to be such sorry-asses. I always treated my women good and would make sure any special occasion was made real special. Straight up now Evie, I'm really not sure about this Geoff.

You've had two differences of opinion already so far, and I don't see him be compromising with you. I don't know the poetry of Sylvia Plath really but can't think poems about death and dying would appeal to me being where I am. I live with all of that stuff on a daily basis and I try and get through each day without thinking about that kind of thing. Can I ask why you get your kicks from someone who wants to write about it?

Hey, maybe I should invite her to visit me here in good old Texas.(smile) Hey, don't go taking offence about Geoff I'm just keeping it real and saying how I

see things. I just don't want to see my girl bad-mouthed by someone. Hell he sounds like he has some serious stuff to deal with and I don't want to see you hurt again. How long has he been separated from his wife?

So you had a black boyfriend? You sure surprised me. I hadn't got you figured for liking us black dudes. Hey, I'm only playing with you girl so get that frown off of your face! Seriously though, I'm real sorry he didn't turn out to be sweet. Do you mind me asking you what happened?

After I wrote you I was thinking that I hadn't really made it clear about the situation I was in with May and Roseleen. You see females used to be falling for me all the time when I was out in the world and Roseleen used to get real jealous. So are we clear now? I was seeing May after Roseleen blew me out though really I was hoping that Roseleen would come running back. We'd been out only the night before and she'd been bawling and hollering about me having disrespected her but I was young and full of shit, so I wasn't into listening. Do you dig where I'm coming from? Now that's not too hard for my girl to remember is it? (smile) I'm not sweating it though, maybe I didn't make myself clear. I sure do miss the company of women and although there are some female officers here some of them are just straight up ugly and fat. I really hate that people don't take care of their appearance and I already know that you aren't like that. I hear you talking about what you was going to wear to that school party. So how did it go? Was Geoff there? I sure hope you have come to your senses Evie and got rid of him. He doesn't seem right for my girl and I'm sure you can do a lot better for yourself.

Evie, you need to keep your cool with your students, you are allowing them to steal your cool and they can

see that. I don't recall students in my high school behaving the way some of yours do. Are you in some kind of school for pupils with behaviour difficulties? I can't see my old principal putting up with pupils bad-mouthing teachers the way you describe. Is your school typical of schools in the UK? I really am gonna worry about my girl getting assaulted by some sorry ass punk. I was brought up to respect my teachers and no matter what my family circumstances were, I never missed a day off of school and I knew that getting an education was the only way of getting out of my environment.

I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer, I wanted to make a difference. I never would have believed when I was at school that I'd end up in prison waiting for the government to murder me. All my life I struggled against the odds putting up with being called an Uncle Tom, getting straight A's all through school, for this.

Back in the day there was this one teacher who used to teach us math and he was a sorry ass son-of-a-bitch he used to moan and go on about how lazy and stupid we were and how we would never amount to nothing. And he had it in for me. I swear one time I heard him mutter the word nigger under his breath and me being me of course I challenged him then and there. Boy you should have seen him cringe when I stood up and asked him to repeat what he said. He sure as hell was scared of me, this big black kid with more guts than he had in his puny white ass. I wouldn't have done nothing, I wasn't gonna let him get me finished with school, but after that I could make him sweat whenever I wanted to. You know what it showed me Evie, it showed me that you can get whatever you want in life if you want it bad enough. I wanted to show him that I could steal his cool whenever I chose. The fear in his eyes is something

I've never gotten out of my mind. So next time you get into a confrontation with a student, stay calm and show them who's the boss and I don't want no pathetic excuses from you about not being strong enough! (smile)

I really am sorry about your father dying when you was a girl but try not to be too hard on your mother I'm sure she loved you and your brother. Put yourself in her position left alone with two young children and having to cope with her own grief must have been real tough. Lots of issues in relationships can be sorted out if the two people involved communicate honestly with each other so you really need to get the matter straight in your own head and find out the truth by talking to your mother. You are letting what you heard and thought when you were younger influence your adult thinking which is never a good idea and you may even find it improves your relationship with her. Hell, what have you got to lose? You really need to toughen up a bit Evie, I know you are a strong person who has had to put up with a lot of pain in her life but you can deal with it and move on. You don't need to be stuck in the mind-set of still being a child. You are a wonderful person and you shouldn't still be beating yourself up like you do. It was not your job to keep your mother cheerful, people are responsible for themselves. Hell, I bet if your told her how you felt as a small girl, she'd be really surprised. I could drive myself crazy if I thought too much about things but I'm not sweating it though. I'm just trying to stay focused and concentrate on the legal stuff so that I can get out of here.

What are your favourite smells? I know this sounds like a strange question but I was laying on my bunk last night just chilling to the music on my transistor radio and I was thinking about all the

things I haven't smelled for nine years. Fresh coffee now that is one of my favourite smells and I can still remember the smell of cut grass whenever I went to Roseleen's house and her mother was always out in the garden tending to all the roses which grew in it, hell they sure smelled like something else.

I'd like to get me out of this cell right at this moment cut me some of those roses and sent them to you as my Christmas present. One of the guys is fixing me something to eat and I should be going for my shower soon. Damn, my Mexican neighbour is hollering at me about the basketball match on my radio. He sure can talk, I think I'll have to get me some ear-plugs next time I go to commissary that is if we aren't on lockdown.

Evie, I got to tell you I am down to my last few stamps now so if you don't hear from me for a little while, you know why. I am hoping my family will put some money into my account very soon but my grandmother has just had to pay out for some car repairs.

I just want to tell you that you just don't know how much you have come to mean to me and before I get deeper I'm going to bring this letter to a close. I'll be hitting you back up as soon as I hear from you. Take care of yourself and know you are always being thought of.

Love, Troy

PS Thank you for the photo! You have a lovely face and a warm smile now don't you be blushing now!

January 20

Dearest Evie,

I'm writing this short note as I haven't heard from you in a little while and I'm hoping and praying that you are doing just fine. Your last letter is dated December 12 and it goes without saying that I am missing you. I'm thinking about my last letter and if there was anything in there that offended you in any way. It is my bad if I have upset you Evie and you must be honest and tell me.

I said when we was first getting to know each other that I wanted a true and honest friendship and I believe that is what we have. True friends like us need to say whatever is on our minds and Evie I believe we do have a deep spiritual connection. I keep thinking about you and the guys are getting on to me about how I'm going around with a long face. So many people have let me down in my life and you are the one light in the dark and lonely place I exist in. Don't give up on me, please. You are my girl, for real.

Your loyal friend,
Troy

PS I'm enclosing a poem I wrote specially for you called, 'Love Everlasting.'

26th January

Dear Troy,

I got your letter this morning and I have to confess it made me cry when I read it and I have now put your poem in a frame. The words are beautiful and it is so clever the way you've made it rhyme. I have missed you too but it has not been an easy time for me. I've had forty five profiles to write as well as mock examination papers which had to be marked over the holidays and because the mornings are so dark and cold I've been finding it really hard to get up at my usual time of 5 30.

We have been busy starting a campaign at school to get the women's toilets improved as the plastic container for sanitary towels never seems to get emptied. I went to tell the Head that I could not come into work and have to put up with such a revolting sight as the previous day one had actually popped out beneath the lid and landed on the floor next to my right foot. I'm not joking when I say that I think your cell is probably cleaner than our staff toilets.

I really want to apologise for my last letter. I fear I have just burdened you with all my petty worries and problems. Given your current situation, my whining about school and men makes me sound really pathetic and superficial. I also want to apologise for mentioning the poet Sylvia Plath. It was thoughtless of me to mention the subject matter of her poems given your current situation.

That is enough about me. What about you? I'm sorry Christmas is so dreary where you are but I hope your family managed a visit. At least the weather in Texas is warm and balmy in the winter months, I think I'd find the heat very hard to deal with it just makes me feel sick and I start to get this kind of heavy feeling in my stomach. I do so admire the way you keep going, you are an incredibly strong person. I think I would be on medication by now which is I guess why a lot of the prisoners have to be kept sedated. It must have been hard for you to have to be with a lot of criminals how did you manage to adjust? The one thing that does confuse me though about your case though, was why you confessed in the first place? Well, I suppose you must have been questioned for hours and have been totally traumatised and deeply confused. Every time I think about the death penalty I get really angry; it must be the worst form of mental torture that there is.

Actually, I haven't been all that well recently, I've been getting these blinding headaches and I've had to have a few days off work. Year eleven are exhausting as a lot of them just seem to rampage around the corridors and frequently don't turn up at their lessons. If you dare to say something innocuous like, "The bell has gone" you are most likely to receive, "So?" said with a real sneer of contempt. Girls seem particularly good at this especially tall ones who like to look down on you. I've decided now to target the short ones.

I was doing that dreaded duty in the canteen as I usually do on a Wednesday, when this terrible fight broke out between two of them. One of the girls grabbed hold of a fork and stuck it into the other girl's head; there was blood everywhere. The worst

thing was all the other students were piling in to watch with their mobile phones held high so that they could get a picture. I tried to shout at them but they just laughed and took no notice of me at all. I was shaking like a leaf afterwards and Lindsay, my head of department, offered to teach my next class which was sweet of her. I really do hate violence and it seems to be getting worse in schools here but I'm sure they aren't as bad as in America.

You are very caring the way you are always trying to help me see the way I get things wrong sometimes and I know I am hard on myself but that was the way I was brought up, to put others first and that to do what I wanted to do was selfish. It was so hard when Dad died and after my brother emigrated to Australia a few years ago I started feeling even more responsible for my mother. She once came to stay with David and I for a few months and it was quite a difficult time. Well, as I've already told you, she did like her gin a bit too much and could become very bitter about life after two or three of them. In fact I took to watering down the gin bottle which seemed to help but I'm convinced she had a secret supply in her bedroom. When I was a child I'd hear her sometimes in her room at night crying. Actually Troy, I've never told anyone this but it used to make me feel angry. Does that make sense? I must be a very uncaring heartless person to feel this way, mustn't I? I don't really understand why. I used to tell David that she had ruined my life with herself pity and couldn't she have got over Dad's death and married again. David thought I was very hard and quite unpleasant about her at times as he really liked her and wouldn't hear a word against her so in the end I stopped saying anything.

Truthfully I have only hazy memories of my father though and sometimes it feels like I've spent my life inventing stories about what he must have been like. Once though, I remember him taking our dog Bubble to the vet's without any explanation at all, (he wasn't always very communicative) but Bubble never came back and Dad just said: "Evie, it's for the best."

I still don't understand exactly what he meant but after I heard that conversation with my mother that sentence began to disturb me. He kept telling me that Bubble had gone to Doggy Heaven but couldn't seem to explain why he couldn't come back home.

Sometimes I think about the way Dad stared at Mum in the evenings. He would look at her for ages, following her around with his eyes even when she was ironing. Me and my brother Jem would be sitting on the small sofa watching the television and every so often he would give us a faint kind of smile and he'd put his head back in his newspaper and sigh. I could never work out what this sigh meant though gradually I began to have the weirdest feeling that we were just a big inconvenience to him and that all he really wanted was to whisk Mum away somewhere without the irritating presence of his children.

I never felt anyone noticed me when I was a little girl so thank you for your kind words about how much I mean to you. I do want to make your life a little better if I am able to and please feel free to open up to me, I promise I will not judge you. I just hope my mother meets up with Dad again not that I believe in life after death but I'd like to and I find it comforting to think about them being together again. Are you religious at all?

You asked me in my last letter why I liked poems about death and depression and as I'm writing this letter and telling you about my parents I'm wondering if they are the reason but I don't want to think about that anymore.

Dwelling on things is not a good idea though I find myself thinking about my childhood as I write, in a way that I don't want to. The process of letter-writing seems to unleash the hidden child inside me, it's all very peculiar.

Dear me Troy, here I am going on about myself again what must you think of me! I hear what you say about keeping my cool, but it is so hard. I really hate it when students blatantly disregard school rules and are so disrespectful and rude. Hate it.

David used to ignore me when he was doing his marking. I'd ask him what he wanted for his supper and he'd have his head buried in an exercise book whilst I was wrestling over steaming pans and burning grills staring at my own pile of exercise books at the other end of the table and he would just grunt. Once I served up a piece of paper on a plate which said, 'mark me ' on it but he wasn't very amused by my little joke as he'd been at a long staff meeting. Come to think of it he'd probably been with Her, although I was completely oblivious to this at the time. Mum once told me after he'd left that perhaps I hadn't been as supportive as I could have been towards him. Oh I was livid, mad as hell and terribly hurt at the way she always seemed to take his side about things. I didn't tell her that though as she would have cried and then I would have been the one feeling bad. So I made a nice curry instead and put an extra serving of hot chilli sauce in hers! Was

that really bad? I sound horrible don't I? Perhaps I'm really, deep down, a cold and unfeeling person. I'm reading your letter over again and thinking about how brave you were standing up to that teacher but he could have got you into a lot of trouble. I do so admire the way you had the courage to stand up for yourself though, not something I find very easy. I shall try and take your advice about showing my anger though without losing my cool. Perhaps I should go on an assertiveness training course. Oh how I long to appear to be confident and in control!

Anyway, next week it's our poetry group meeting and thank goodness I won't have the embarrassment of Geoff. It seems it is all over, though he hasn't said the actual words. He spent very little time with me at the Christmas meal and left early with the Head of Drama, Geraldine. I've seen them talking in the staffroom at lunchtime, so I've been staying in the English office at lunch time to mark books. I want to ask him about what has happened and what was it about me that he didn't like but somehow, I've been too nervous to approach him. Well, I've just got to get on with it haven't I? It's no good crying over what might have been although I admit I have cried quite a lot about him recently and Christmas alone with just me and my mother was really quite depressing.

Moving on swiftly, you'd be impressed by the way my pine floors are looking. I've been on my hands and knees at every available minute cleaning them until they shine. I've washed all the net curtains and cleaned the skirting boards. My task this weekend is to give the bathroom a thorough clean. Now that I write to you most Fridays I have rearranged my schedule to ensure everything gets done.

I'm still waiting to hear back from the Head about what she proposes to do about the staff toilets. They finally collected the box full of soiled sanitary wear but soap seems such a rare commodity we've organised a rota of 'soap fairies' to ensure we never run out! And as for this blue towel that has lurked on the window sill for months well, it must be totally infested with germs by now. I nearly reached out to dry my hands on it the other day, momentarily forgetting its lethal surface but luckily I came to my senses just in time as a strange scream rose up in my throat. I'm sure you don't have these problems and get everything supplied to you!

Lastly, I'm answering your question about favourite smells. I too love the smell of roses but I also love lavender. We used to have some where I was brought up, the only thing I didn't like was all the bees it attracted. I just can't get on with things that buzz at all. I also have a phobia about wasps and spiders, in fact anything in the insect world makes me come over all peculiar though, as I told you, I don't mind worms.

Well, I'd better get on now. Squeaky Boy is yowling on the window ledge and attempting to seize a poor moth who is flying around the small light I have on the corner of my desk. Mrs Pink likes killing flies though thankfully she doesn't put those outside my bedroom door! Pongo is on the bed whilst Heathcliff is curled up by my feet. My cats are a great comfort to me despite their murderous tendencies. Did you ever have any pets?

Best wishes and love,
Evie

PS Do hope you receive some money soon.

February 5

Dear Evie,

Hello stranger! It's about time I hear from you. I thought that I was gonna have to file a 'missing persons' report on you! (smile) Being that I hadn't heard from you since December 12 I was really worried and you know I'm always missing you. I look forward to your letters so much. I just love to check out what is happening in your world as mine is just the same old boring shit. (please excuse my language) I can never fully explain to you how dull my life is here and receiving letters from people is the only thing that takes me out of this hell-hole if only for a brief while. I really do appreciate you taking time out of your busy life to write me. There are people I know who really could make an effort to come and see me or write me but they don't.

Some of the guys in here are totally illiterate and so they can't pass the time reading or writing letters, these are the guys who talk all the time just because they are bored and lonely. This really is the loneliest place ever. I could tell you about how lonely it is but you still wouldn't fully understand it. To be honest with you, I find it hard to believe the loneliness hasn't driven me insane. At times I try to avoid it if that's possible, by keeping myself busy and I'm guessing that's what you do being as how you are always so busy with your house-cleaning and correcting papers.(smile)

It is very noisy here as a lot of the guys will stand at their door and talk all damn day long. My neighbor on my left is like that. He never shuts up. He'll conversate with someone for two hours straight and as soon as they catch out on him he'll call someone else. If he's not talking it's because he's finally

asleep. I really don't like him because of the fact that he talks so damn much and he's always in everybody else's business. Like if anyone gets mail he's straight up wanting to know who it's from and I was foolish enough to mention your name to him once so now, every time I get a delivery from the mail room, he be hollering at me to find out what's going on in your life. With his cell and my cell being the way they are, we can look through the side of our door and into the side of each other's cell. His cell is probably three foot from mine but we have an adjoining wall. He can just about see in my cell through the side of the doors and tell if my light is on or not. If I'm in a funky mood I just put my light off and listen to my transistor. At the moment we are on lockdown as someone tried to commit suicide by smashing his head against the wall of his cell. I overheard two of the officers talking about how there was blood everywhere.

I hate it when we are on lockdown as we can't go to commissary, luckily I got me a load of stamps last week and some soap and deodorant. The soap they give us here brings my face out and I just can't use it. I was sorry to hear about you and Geoff but I don't think he's the right kind of person for you Evie so stop being so hard on yourself and worrying that it was something about you he didn't like, maybe he's not in the right frame of mind to be with someone as sweet and sensitive as you. He's just come away from a marriage and maybe wants to check out a few different females, you know what us males are like!(smile) I'm only playing with you. So he's hanging out with the female Geraldine, well you just hold your head up high and don't let him see you upset. Hell Evie, you are a wonderful person and I don't like to think of you being unhappy.

You do seem to write about your mother a lot. Do you realise that? I was checking out your letters the other day and I just found so many things that you are concerning yourself with about your mother and the way she was when you was a little girl but you aren't that girl now and you need to find a way of dealing with these issues. Hell, half the time my mother wasn't around at all but I have nothing but love for her and know she just tried to do what she could. She took up with the wrong crowd Evie and we all know where that leads us don't we. I spent so much of my time in the world trying to stay away from the gangs and shit that was going around in my neighbourhood I could have gotten in with lots of bad people, like my mother, but I had too much respect for myself and that's what you need to realise Evie, that maybe you aren't like your mother told you you was like. I mean that is only one person's opinion. I can fully understand how you felt like you wasn't wanted but maybe she was just loving her husband so much and after he passed away she was missing him and couldn't show her children how she was really feeling. I think you need to talk to your mother about all this, don't you?

My grandmother be telling me my mother wants to see me, first time in three years, I don't care to tell you where she's been but I guess you can figure it out. I'm not sure if I can deal with her crying like I know you hated seeing your mother cry. Last time she came down here she just straight up bawled her eyes out throughout the four hour visit so she could hardly do any talking. My grandmother was trying to calm her down as there was a family in for a last visit and they was all crying a lot too. I've been having some bad headaches too but there's no point asking to see a doctor because by the time you've put in a request you'll probably be better

anyway. I just try and lie down with my ear plugs in. I been worrying about them but my grandmother told me she thought it might be due to stress as one of my closest friends has just got a date for May. Me and Brian was real close back when we was at Ellis together before we got here. Ellis was so much better there as we shared a cell and had recreation together and there was also a works program. After some inmates tried to escape, they moved us all here and tightened up on security so that now we're confined to our cells for 23 hours a day and never recreate together. Now I look back at life at Ellis and see it as a much better place. Brian was my cell mate and he married his pen pal last year. I'm gonna request a legal visit with him as soon as I can. You asked me why I confessed well I didn't at first. I don't really know. I was only 18 and I just wanted the questions to stop. I never dreamt I'd end up here. This is not the place I should be in but I have managed to adapt to my environment.

When I first got here I had to go to the infirmary and I saw this enormous dude handcuffed a few feet away from me and he looked at me and said, "Welcome to The Row boy." And as he smiled I saw that his mouth was full of gold. I was real scared I can tell you and didn't know how I was going to be able to deal with life in prison. However, later on I got to know this man and after eleven years he recently got a re-trial. The trouble is though that the State will grant you a re-trial only to find you guilty again and then you get sent back to DR and it starts up all over again. They have speeded up the appeals process now aiming to make it last from eight to ten years. I didn't know how I was gonna deal with some of the bad asses you get in here also there are some guys who are seriously ill in the head and I think I told you that lots of them are on medication. I would

never let that happen to me. I'm not having any drugs taking away my mind it's all I've got left of myself, everything else has been taken from me and I spend my time in the hands of strangers. There is no part of my life that I have any control over. It really does get to me at times.

I do worry about you at that school Evie. Hell that fight did not sound good at all there seems to be a lot of pupils who are very violent. Can't the school expel them? My High School principal was real strict and made it quite clear to us that he wouldn't put up with any fighting or acts of vandalism. We all think your schools are better than ours what with the uniform your pupils have to wear but I don't think you should take the behaviour of your pupils so personally.

Evie, it is not you they be disrespecting but what you represent, an authority figure. You should try to remember this when dealing with situations that you are a teacher and not my sweet girl, Evie McKendry. I don't want anything to happen to my girl and so I want you to promise me that you you'll look after yourself real good. Can you handle that?(smile) I trip out whenever you tell me about what some of those pupils get up to.

I had the strangest dream the other night. I was strapped to a huge tree and there was May and Roseleen and you was all standing and singing and then four cats just arrived with birds in their mouths and dropped them in front of me. You ran around shouting and was trying to get me off of the tree. Hell those cats must have been yours as I never had a cat out in the world. That was some dream.

That reminds me, your cats sure have strange names. Where does the name Heathcliff come from? We once read something at school about some bad-ass called Heathcliff who kept mooching about over someone who

was a ghost. It might have been called Withering Lights or something. We read some boring books at school and I never did like that Scarlet Letter either. I got B in my test on it and I'd never even finished the book!(smile) See what a clever student I was.

I really preferred math. I like trying to figure out a problem and get a solution to it. I always scored straight A's in math all the way through school. Evie, I'm real glad you liked the poem. I wrote it for you because you are a very special lady and you are beginning to mean a great deal to me. I don't want you feeling sad about me though, though just write me lots of letters!(smile) I don't ever see our friendship finishing unless you decide you don't want to write me anymore although I've had a few other penpals who suddenly stopped writing for no reason at all. I was annoyed with this one girl, Sharon, as she had quite a few photos of Roseleen that she never sent back and it makes me damn mad as Roseleen was my soul mate and if I hadn't ended up in this place I think we would have got married. I miss the company of women more than I can ever explain to you. Do you realise you still haven't explained to me why your husband cut your face out of all those photographs, he sounds like a crazy dude for real. He didn't seem understanding either when you was upset about your mother. I've never met him but I already dislike him for the way he treated you. How many years were you married for exactly? It's just started to rain, but it's not cold at all. I hate it here in the summer when the temperature goes into the hundreds. My neighbour is hollering at me as I've been writing to you for the past two hours and he's bored. He's started to call me 'yella man' as I'm going so pale with not getting enough

sunlight. Hit be back up soon and know you're always
being thought of.

Love Troy

15th February

Dear Troy,

I got your letter yesterday and thought I'd write back straight away as we are on half term, thank goodness, it couldn't have come any quicker. I am writing to you on Saturday as I'm completely and utterly shattered from last half term. I came home last night and went straight to bed after cleaning the house. The cat hairs I found were repulsive and sometimes I ask myself why I keep pets. Mrs Pink has a rather unsavoury habit of sleeping in drawers if I am silly enough to leave them open whilst Squeaky Boy favours the chair in the sitting room where my computer is so I have to be very careful I don't do any school work before I leave in the morning or there are white cat hairs attached to my clothes! Oh dear me!

I'm very sorry to hear about your friend Brian's date. What exactly is a legal visit? I am so sad for all those poor men on medication. Over here, we try and rehabilitate people and even those who have killed may be given another chance at a life lived outside. But at least you can talk to each other a bit even if you can't exactly mix in the real sense of the word. I do think it's important to have friends and I try really hard to make them but unfortunately, I think I have just lost one, and someone I have known for eight years too. I don't know whether I have mentioned her to you, her name is Louise and we have met as regular as clockwork once a month on a Sunday for afternoon tea at the Dorchester. The Dorchester is a rather grand hotel in the middle of London and they do the most

wonderful afternoon teas. They make delicious scones and the tea they serve is just, well, something else. Last Sunday we met up as usual but by chance bumped into someone she'd recently met on some internet chat room for the newly single, some chap called Andrew. It was peculiar really as the previous week she'd phoned me up and spent an hour talking about him and how she could really see herself living with him in his little cottage in South London and how there had been this amazing spark between them.

Feeling horribly jealous and unable to bear her face beaming with happiness, I'd steered her on to her second favourite topic, teaching. So Troy, there we were, moaning on about how soul destroying it can be trying to get the kids to appreciate Shakespeare when, in the next moment, she had risen to her feet and was screaming out, "Andrew, Andrew, over here!" It was as if we had conjured him out of thin air! Her face positively lit up as this tall grey-haired rather serious man shook both our hands and sat himself down between us. He insisted on ordering a bottle of champagne which has always gone to my head. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to excuse myself in any way, I admit, I did talk to him quite a lot and I also admit I might have laughed perhaps a little too enthusiastically at some of his jokes. But other than that I honestly don't understand why Louise took it into her head that I was flirting outrageously with him.

When he left, Louise turned on me, her face had closed up and her eyes glittered with hatred. And then her head turned into a snake. As her words shot their poison into me, I could see her forked tongue flicking in and out of her mouth and it terrified me

so much that I couldn't hear what she was saying at all.

At that point she gathered all her things and marched out, though it gratified me somewhat to see her stumble as she disappeared through the door. I decided to telephone her the next day but as soon as she realised who it was her voice turned to ice. I asked her if she was alright and she just mumbled, "Fine," in a tone which suggested she was very far from this state and then she proceeded to clearly outline all my faults. She ended by saying she could never feel the same about me anymore after the way I'd behaved. I can't remember very well who slammed the phone down, but I think it might have been me. I was shaking quite badly and the only way I could calm myself was to get the Hoover out.

I just wish I was better at handling these kinds of situations. To be honest, describing what happened with Louise has really upset me. We seem to view what happened in completely different ways. I honestly feel like I've been a good friend to her but I'm just not sure anymore. Well Troy, I'm going to leave it now. I must accept that maybe our friendship is over, for good. But I'm not going to cry. Crying is for weak people. I want to be brave and strong like you, accepting whatever life throws at me, and then being able to move on. You see you are giving me so much good advice! (smile) Anyway, Josie was very sweet and told me that Louise would be alright once she'd calmed down but that I should try and relax about things more.

You certainly have had a strange dream! The novel you refer to is 'Wuthering Heights' and yes Heathcliff, my cat, was named after the man in that wonderful

novel. There is something so romantic about the story; the image of him crying on the moors for his true love Catherine then banging on the window, begging and screaming for her to let him in is to me, a symbol of the power of love and what it can do to people. The trouble is, real life doesn't really match up. My marriage to David certainly contained little passion or romance particularly towards the end. That aspect of marriage always has to die anyway and much of day to day life is merely about who pays for what and who puts the bins out. In all honesty I don't think I believe in romance anymore. What do you think?

I was very sorry to hear about the suicide attempt of that prisoner. It really seems unbearable for you men to be treated in such an inhumane way. I often think about how you cope with the sheer loneliness and isolation and you are right, of course, I can never really understand the reality, though the other evening, I did try a little experiment.

What I did was, I made myself stay in the sitting room for three hours without leaving it. I didn't have the cats in with me, and I drew the curtains so that I could only see a small chink of light. Troy, I began to feel quite panicky as my hands started to sweat and my mind kept going to places I didn't want it to. Oh it was horrible and I had nothing to distract myself with, not even a book. I was almost hyperventilating by the time I opened the door. I'm really glad your mother wants to come and see you. I'm guessing that she's been in prison, is that right? However, I do feel you should let her come and visit. I know it is upsetting but you are always so kind and forgiving about her, so tolerant and understanding, that it really isn't in character for

you to be so against her visiting. I mean, it's normal for a mother to be distressed about her son being in prison.

As for my mother, well, I would love to talk to her but it's very difficult. Whenever I try to broach any sensitive subject with her I just can't. I really want to improve our relationship but whenever I see that wounded look in her eyes I end up I feeling like I'm seven years old again and then I just shrink back inside myself and say things like, "Oh sorry, never mind." I'm hopeless aren't I? Whoops out comes that low self-esteem again. Get back you beast! Which brings me to the subject of last week's 'feel good' week. I'm afraid an hour with year seven writing poems about their feelings in the afternoon was not in any way conducive to my feeling good though no doubt the one whose ball of paper hit me on the side of my head felt positively ecstatic at the way I'd been humiliated. Then the lady doing 'head massages' put in a complaint about the way I'd barged into the English office (given up by dear Lindsay) as the Head of Geography was sitting with her top half wrapped in a towel. I certainly hope heads were the only things being massaged in our office. As a result of all this, feeling good soon turned into feeling Fed Up and I had another F word threatening to come out of my mouth all week too! (Why oh why did the community policeman issue some of the dear little thugs with fluorescent 'thingies' one horrible child sliced off the top of his and poured green ink all over my desk.)

Truthfully, I'm a little tense at the moment as Mum wants to come and stay with me whilst she has a new kitchen put in. I'm trying to persuade her that her

sister Pat has a much bigger house since Uncle Billy died and she would probably relish the company.

I'm also trying very hard not to show Geoff that I'm upset despite weeping rather pitifully when I saw him and Geraldine flirting by the photocopier as he tried to refill the toner. First David, then Geoff and now Louise. Sometimes I wonder if there isn't in reality something wrong with me though I already hear you telling me that I'm getting all this out of proportion. Anyway Troy, I need to be ending this letter, I have a poetry reading to go with my group on the subject of love. As I write this I'm wondering why I am going. As I told you, I'm through with love. THROUGH WITH IT!

Before I go, I need to explain that it is very hard even now, to write about what happened between David and me. When I know you a little better I might feel I can confide in you but not at the moment. One day, you might understand about the photographs.

Love Evie

PS Can you explain what Ellis is?

March 1

Dear Evie,

Hello! How are things going on your end? Being that you haven't heard from me lately I know you're happy to be reading this letter. You better be anyway!(smile) Everything is slow motion on this end. It is so damn boring here. The weather is warming up it really does get hot here in Texas but we're used to it, not like you Brits and your cold and your rain. It's now 12:52 pm and I'm trying to go outside with Charlie on the next round if that is possible. I didn't get to recreation outside because the five guys on the other side refused. Some of them be too damn lazy to get off of their sorry asses to go outside. I'm not going to sweat it though. I just wanted to go outside and enjoy the sunshine and get me some colour back into my pale skin!(smile)

Now what is all this shit going on between you and your friend Louise? I don't know what the deal is between the two of you but she sure over-reacted. Are you sure it wasn't just all that champagne you said she drank? (smile) You know you was in the right Evie, she straight up saw you as a threat and she can't handle it. What kind of friends are you mixing with? Are you sure she hasn't been getting her drink on just before and then letting herself get all worked up over nothing? I just don't see my girl Evie as being a flirt.

Hell one time, back in the day, my gal Roseleen had some big trouble with her so called, best friend Sherilee. She'd gotten herself pregnant with some dude she'd been seeing for a few months and she was crying all the damn time, night and day. She'd telephone Roseleen sometimes ten times a day, wailing and crying and straight up telling Roseleen she was

gonna die if she had this baby and that her mama was gonna beat her to death if she told her. She tried to persuade Roseleen to run away with her as she had some crazy idea about finding a doctor in New York who would get rid of it. I wasn't having that Evie, terminating a life is a mortal sin and the Bible spells that out real clear. I saw it as my business to tell Sam, the father of Sherilee's baby, what she was planning to do.

I drove out to the bar he worked in one evening, it sure was a bad place. Outside there was these old white men talking real loud about the town getting full of uppity niggers who drove around like they had a right to be there. I couldn't see why Sam would wanna surround hiself by these kinds of ol' boys. I hollered for Sam who stumbled out looking real nasty. I could smell the whiskey on his breath. It hardly seemed right that he was gonna be a daddy and I wondered why the hell any gal would want to waste their time with him.

But anyways, I told him about what was going on and he hadn't even known Sherilee was pregnant. As soon as I told him about her so called plans he said to me. "Troy, I wanna thank you for saving my girl and my child from eternal damnation. Praise the Lord."

I knew then that I had done the right thing and done my duty as a man and a true Christian. I never told Roseleen that I'd been to see Sam but I told Roseleen she had to get rid of Sherilee because she was turning in to a real liability all the time behaving like it was the end of the world.

Evie, people have to look after themselves they can't just be about crying all over others like they all know what to do. Roseleen was driving me mad and in the end I had to lay it down and tell her it was either me or Sherilee. Naturally she chose me. A few days later Sherilee ran away and Roseleen straight up

turned and blamed me. I was real pissed. There was me, trying to do what was best for my girl, and she blames me for what happened. Several months later they found Sherilee's body in a ditch on the other side of town. There was rumours running everywhere about Sam but the inquest concluded that Sherilee had committed suicide and that was the end of it.

It all caused so many problems between me and Roseleen, we argued about it all the time. I'm still not sorry for what I did though, a man's got a right to know what his girl is up to especially if she's carrying his child.

So you see Evie, this Louise be trying to drag you down with her and you got to look after yourself in this life. I learnt the hard way that there isn't anyone else going to be doing it for you.

I hope you managed to enjoy your holiday. Schools out here don't be having things called half term. I sure hope your poetry reading went alright I was thinking of you in the busy subway trying not to get too close to all those people, knowing how you be hating crowds.(smile) I have read in the papers about all the people on them and I sure as hell wouldn't want to be so close to people I didn't know.

I understand your feelings about not wanting to share with me about what happened between you and David.

All relationships are personal and should be respected as such. I'm just a little disappointed though Evie, I thought we had a real honest communication between us one where we could be comfortable sharing our thoughts and opening our hearts to each other. Maybe I could help to heal the pain you feel, I really do want to as I care deeply about you.

You are my girl for real and I don't want to embarrass you but you really do mean the world to me.

You said there was little romance or passion between you and David and that it was about putting the bins out. Evie, I have no idea what you be talking about but I don't agree with you about those kind of feelings dying. I believe in true love and I don't believe anything can fuck up between two people who really love each other as long as there is honesty and truth between them. I'm sorry for my language but I have to say it as it is. Roseleen and I still had deep feelings for each other after we parted and when she told me it was over I cried like a damn baby.(smile) I know that you gonna be smiling at the thought of this big guy bawling but I never loved anyone the way I loved Roseleen. I still blame Sherilee. If she hadn't of been so weak and handled it all herself me and Roseleen would still be together. I just know she'd be coming to visit me as much as she could and wouldn't have let me being in prison stop her. I tried writing to her after all this business was kicking off and she came once to the County jail before I got sentenced. She looked real bad she'd gotten all thin and kept crying and asking me why I confessed if I hadn't done it and why had I made her choose between me and her best friend. She straight up nearly accused me of being a damn murderer. In the end she was making so much noise and started shouting and telling me I'd ruined her life that the officers had to come and remove her. I wrote her every week after that for a year but she never replied. I'm not sweating it though I just charge it to the game.

Of course it's not your fault Evie. Louise has got her own shit to deal with and so have Geoff and David. We can never really know all of a person, all we can know is what a person is willing to share with us, which is why I don't want us to have any secrets with each other. Secrets are what destroy a real

relationship and Evie I believe that what is developing between us is real deep. The loneliness here at times does get to me but your letters really do help to alleviate it. Regardless of how long your letters are I immediately miss you once I have finished reading them. I really think you should allow your mother to come and stay with you. You only have one mother in the world and you should try and attempt to get to know and understand her. My mother is everything to me, despite the fact that she left us to be cared for by our grandmother. I write to her more than anyone else and have no bitterness in my heart towards her. We are all flawed human beings Evie. Search deep into your soul and find the compassion that is inside you, you know it's there. I need to finish this letter as my neighbour is hollering at me that I promised him I'd tell him the results of the soccer score on the radio. Don't keep me waiting too long and know that you are always being thought of.

Love Troy

10th March

Dear Troy,

I want can't think I think I am going to hell. Me I'm damned. I have sinned. It was all my fault. Troy I am drunk. Drank and drunk I can't say what. I can't bear it can't bear it I can't bear it. Troy I'll be no good.

I've been no good. I loved him. I loved him.

Evie

12th March

Dear Troy,

I'm writing to apologise for the strange letter you may have received from me before this one. I'm going to be honest and tell you I can't remember what was in it. I'm also going to confess to you that I was drunk, horribly drunk. In fact I barely remember staggering out to post it other than the fact that I vaguely recall falling down on the path and hardly being able to get the key in the door. In fact, I hadn't been into school that day at all but I couldn't tell you what I did after I started on the second bottle of Australian red. Please please please ignore it.

Your last letter really affected me- deeply. I'd had a terrible day at school and then I bumped into David and 'Omelette' in the supermarket. After that I received a long letter from Louise outlining all my personality flaws; I won't bore you with too many tedious details. I went to the doctor yesterday and he has given me something for my nerves. Anyway, whatever ridiculous nonsense I may have written to you, please accept my apologies. I really do not make a habit of excessive drinking. My worst fear is turning into my mother.(smile)

Well it's Friday night and I'm sitting next to an enormous pile of books which are waiting to be marked. I just don't know how I'm going to get through them all. School is very stressful at the moment. My year nines have no interest in Macbeth at all and the only bit of the play that excites them is when Lady Macbeth says 'unsex me' which is the part

when she's calling on the spirits to give her power just before she tries to persuade Macbeth to murder Duncan. In fact a group of rather rowdy misbehaved boys practically ruined the lesson by screaming out that she was obviously into porn films. I tried to tell them that there wasn't even any electricity in those days, let alone videos or the internet but my voice was lost in the din about Lady Macbeth perhaps not getting enough sex....well I won't say anymore..it was just so depressing. In fact I don't feel like looking in their books at all. I'd like to put the whole lot in a dustbin and tell them exactly what I think of them. The girls sat looking at me with contempt as if I should be able to control them a bit better and I honestly wish I could but there's thirty two of them crammed into every conceivable seat and the desire to scream and run out of the room had never been stronger. I really do think I'm getting too old and tired for all this. Every year I seem to find teenagers harder and harder to interest. Thank God for the A level students, at least there's some job satisfaction there and no struggle for control.

My mother has written to me and arrives to stay for a month during the Easter holidays. I have tried my best to take your advice and have agreed that she can come and this time I really am determined to try and talk to her about my father's death. I shall hide the alcohol although she has assured me that she's cut down a lot on the advice of her doctor and has started going to a creative writing group for the over sixties but as soon as she'd mentioned it I immediately got dragged back in time to my childhood. I must have been about ten years old and I'd written a story for a school competition all about a girl who loved horses as you know how crazy I am about animals

and I was into a very serious 'horsey phase.' I'd received second prize and I was just so excited and happy. Well, one evening Mum had a friend round and I could hear them both laughing like two drains in the sitting room and I just knew they must both be drinking as my mother rarely laughed when she was sober.(sorry that sounds really mean doesn't it?)

I was coming to the end of my time at junior school and although she was adamant that I should go to the local comprehensive I knew she secretly harboured doubts about my academic ability. Anyway, I decided to listen in on their conversation and yes I know that wasn't a very sensible thing to do, but I was just desperate to find out what could make her laugh. I knew she and my father must have had some fun together but once he had died, there was little laughter in the house. So, in my childish mind, I saw it as an opportunity to research into what made her tick so that I could have a positive effect and make her the happy person she'd once been, although sometimes I'm not sure she really ever was. Honestly, this is all very strange the way it's coming back to me now although occasionally I wonder whether in actual fact I imagined it all. Does that ever happen to you? Well anyway I seem to recall being in the kitchen making myself a cold drink and just couldn't resist a little peek through the slight crack in the door. What I saw was her friend Denise lying on the sofa, a cigarette in one hand and a tall glass full of red liquid in the other.

I am convinced to this day that they were talking about how I was going to get on at secondary school and when I heard my name mentioned I can remember feeling the thrill of excitement that would surely

permeate her voice once she told Denise about my talent as a writer.

However, just at that moment one of the cats raced in through the cat flap and I heard mum getting up and calling out for 'Amber, her little baby' to come into the sitting room. Really she was ridiculous about her cats, much as I am of course! I hid behind the coats, terrified she's come in and tell me off for, 'eavesdropping' as she called it and so by the time I'd manoeuvred myself back to the crack in the door I'd missed part of their conversation, so I guess I could possibly be mistaken in hearing her mention my story which, for a few seconds made me quiver with joy until they both started laughing. Oh Troy, it was that laughter. It just went right through me. Were they laughing about me? I tried to see what they were doing and it seemed like mum had got a piece of paper in her hand but I couldn't be entirely sure I was right. How do real witnesses to a crime manage? There was literally an explosion as Denise gave this enormously loud snort of laughter, and, to this day, I'm convinced I heard the phrase, quivering nostrils and immediately I thought of my story. Was it being read? Was my own mother using it to entertain her friend?

Then they began to argue, between outbursts of laughter, about whether horses had lips I stood frozen with absolute humiliation. I was burning up with shame and fury. Was she reading my story out to her friend? Was she? And if she was, how dare she? In my head, in that instant I felt like she'd stolen something from me, taken the story that I'd loved so much and in that one quotation snatched all my happiness away. I wanted to run into the room and rip it out of her hands, it was mine, not hers it was my

story, my horse Beauty who I'd created to love because I had no one else. And she'd just taken it away. Well that's how I felt but truthfully maybe I was wrong, maybe it wasn't my story that she held in her hands. Oh Troy everything seems such a muddle inside me at times it's like I don't know what the truth is at all. Did I make all this up in my mind? I wanted to move, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to. Their words seemed muffled and unclear, like they were wrapped up in cotton wool. I heard the word 'melodramatic' and 'affected' and then 'death.' I think.

I knew what affected meant but somehow I felt like it meant I had an infection, that my Dad's death had caused something to go wrong inside me. I know this sounds ridiculous now but it was the word, 'melodramatic,' which bothered me, as the way she stressed it didn't make it sound like it was a very good word to use. I remember looking it up in the dictionary that night and the only word that made any sense was, 'play' so I thought it might mean I was a good actress or something, but as I'd only ever been things like a maid or part of a wall in school plays the word made no sense until years later.

I must have been about fifteen and having terrible trouble with my math's homework. I was crying over my books telling Mum I was never ever going to be able to understand algebra. When I threw the book across the room and stomped off up stairs she called me 'a ridiculous melodramatic drama queen' How mean was that to a sensitive suffering adolescent girl! Troy, now answer me truthfully, do I sound like a melodramatic person to you?

Now where did all this come from? It's strange what happens to me when I write to you sometimes, because

I don't know you, well not in the sense of you being someone I see on a regular basis and quite often I just seem to drift off back into memories I thought I'd buried and left behind years ago. I honestly hadn't planned to tell you about that incident at all.

I know this sounds absolutely crazy Troy, but after that, I got into my head that there might be something which had gone wrong inside me, something which had happened to me because my dad had died. After that, all my stories were about animals who had lost someone. I've still got them all in my loft along with all my teenage diaries. Oh Evie get a grip, stop wallowing over the past what's gone is gone. No. When she comes to stay I'm going to be mature and work on improving our relationship. Accept and move on that's my new motto!

How are you? I expect it's getting hot in Texas now, but it's still extremely cold over here. I'm sitting at my desk wearing a coat as the central heating has broken down and no one can come out until Monday. Louise phoned me to apologise for the letter but I don't know now what to do. I told her I understood but I don't and I don't know how to respond. Apparently she and Andrew are now seeing each other regularly and things are going quite well. I wish I could say I was pleased for her but I confess, I wish I could meet someone half decent. I think I'll have to renew my subscription to the internet dating agency though frankly, I'm sure some people put photographs of themselves from years ago on there. John certainly did not resemble the slim man who featured in the photograph.

As to your confusion about bins, I'll explain. Bins are dustbins full of rubbish! I guess you would call it garbage. I was merely using the bins to show you the kinds of disagreements David and I used to have. I know this sounds ridiculous, but every Sunday we had an argument about whose turn it was to take the black binbag out of the dustbin, carry it through the house and put it on the pavement so that the dustbin men would take it away. Whenever I put the rubbish out, David would accuse me of trying to make him feel guilty. He said I behaved like a martyr by, apparently, announcing in a pained voice, 'I've put the bins out.' He told me he felt I deliberately emasculated him when I said this by subconsciously implying that I didn't have true faith in him as a man. He actually cited this in his divorce petition along with my 'unreasonable behaviour' about other ridiculous and petty things such as, 'a morbid fascination for death and germs.' How low can a man sink? Just because I want to live in a hygienic environment.

Can you believe the small-mindedness of a man who also cites, 'wasting food' as another indication of my 'unreasonable behaviour'? Let me explain. Each morning I would take David a cup of boiling water with a piece of lemon in it, he said it cleared out his system. I was often busy and pre-occupied in the mornings, feeding the cats, making our packed lunches, thinking about lessons and quite often would take a fresh lemon from the fruit bowl, forgetting there was possibly, half of one, already in the fridge. Somehow, the sight of all these chopped up lemons would send him into a frenzy. Troy, the thing was, I hate waste as much as the next person, but I genuinely did not do it to

annoy him. I tell you what, living on my own is a lot more relaxing.

I was sorry to hear about what happened with you and Roseleen. Are you still sure you did the right thing? Did you ever meet Sam again? I know this sounds mad, but wasn't the man you were accused of killing named Sam? What a strange co-incidence as I'm sure it wasn't the same person. I could see in your letter the way you have such strong feelings about the sanctity of life that I just know that you would never willingly take anyone's life away from them. I am not sure I believe in God and I know you are very religious, but it must have been terrible for Sherilee to have been pregnant and so frightened of her mother finding out. I'm sure you feel you did the right thing but it's a shame it all ended so tragically.

You are absolutely right about honesty and truth between people. I sometimes think that if only David and I could have been more honest with each other we would never have got married in the first place. No, don't worry, I'm only, joking. David was, and is, a good man. It's just a shame he allowed himself to be led astray. Mind you, she looked to have put on an awful lot of weight when I saw them, I felt positively slender in comparison. I didn't stop to speak though, I hid behind the bread and then raced to the till before they could spot me. The last thing I need is David trying to pretend we are 'best friends' even though, inevitably we do bump into each other and have to speak occasionally about various things.

I know I'm not easy to live with, but is anyone? It's funny though, some weekends I don't talk to a soul

apart from the cats so you probably do talk to more people than me.

Right, must get on with the housework soon. I try and ensure the kitchen is spotless so that I start the day feeling relaxed. At least David isn't around to mess it all up and I can chop up as many lemons as I want! Then there's a huge pile of essays on Miss Havisham, have you heard of her? She was a very strange, well mad woman really, who spent forty years in a wedding dress after her husband jilted her at the alter. Why oh why do students ask me every year whether she had a bath? That seems the only thing that concerns them, not the fact that her heart had been broken and she could never recover. She certainly had no ability to 'accept and move on', and no matter how many times I read that chapter, I still find it hard to believe that she hobbled around with one shoe on for all those years!

Changing the subject, there is a family of foxes who have started appearing in my garden; they are amazing. London seems to have a lot of them and people now refer to them as, 'urban foxes,'. I love to watch the smaller fox-cubs running around beneath the trees and it's one of the few pleasures in my life these days, not that my life is terrible or anything you understand, not compared to yours. But some days it certainly is an effort to go to work. I wish I could think of something else to do. I still think about Geoff sometimes even though he hardly meets my eye. I look away if I ever meet Geraldine in the corridors. It's hard to keep one's spirits up but I know my problems are non-existent from your perspective, so I'll finish off now. 'Tomorrow is another day' ! But that's the trouble really.

Love and best wishes,
Evie

PS Have you ever seen a germ? I was talking to the students today and one girl insisted she had seen one on her lettuce leaf. I'm sure she meant it was a maggot.

March 21

Dear Evie,

What's the damn deal girl? You had me straight up really stressing about you when I received your short, very strange letter. Evie, you know that getting your drink on like that is not a good thing. Drink has a strange effect upon people's minds and your mind was not in good shape when you wrote that. I need you to explain why in hell you are thinking you'll be damned and who was the person you loved, David? It made no sense at all and as you seem like a really sensible and mature woman I don't like to think about you in such a state. If you really can't remember I'm going to tell you that you said that you was really drunk and that you'd be damned and that you really loved him. Who was that? I'm not mad at you I just don't like to think of my sweet Evie going out of her mind under the influence of alcohol. Remember Evie, no secrets. Facing up to your pain is the best thing you can do.

Back in the day there was this white girl I was messing with and she sure as hell liked to get her drink on. One time we was at a party and she started mouthing off to this dude who called her a nigger-lover and the next moment me and him is rolling on the floor and she's hollering and someone calls the cops. Luckily her father was cool with the police and no charges were made but you know what, she was just a spoilt little rich girl and I wasn't giving her the time of day after that. So you can see where the drink can take you Evie, it can take you into some difficult situations like you and Louise, or it can take your mind into some dark places you don't really want to go to.

I've never wanted to be drunk as I don't like to be out of control, yeah I'm Mr Cool for real, except when someone is disrespecting someone I'm with. If I had a drink in this place I'd lose my mind. I know that if I sit around thinking about how my life might end I would go crazy so I just try to take my mind off of it all by reading, writing, listening to music and joking with the guys.

Brian's scheduled execution date is coming nearer, it's for May 2. They've moved him to another pod and it's plain messed me up. Being that he happens to be my closest friend down here and that we shared a cell at Ellis just thinking about his situation makes me work that much harder in trying to get out of here. I really don't want to be thinking about the future.

I seem to recall now that you have asked me about Ellis well it's where we was imprisoned before. It was a different kind of place with a works program and shared recreation. Some inmates tried to escape and were shot dead and the result was that they closed Ellis down and moved us here and tightened up on security big time. If you ever come and visit you mustn't wear white because that's what us DR inmates wear and if there was to be a riot or something when you was in the prison they might mistake you for one of us and shoot you.(smile)

Once you get an execution date they move you to another pod so they can be sure you won't do away with yourself and a day before they transport you to Huntsville where they do the executions. Check this out, in Huntsville they have a museum and gift shop in the middle of the town where you can sit in a cell with a white suit on and have your photograph taken. Now what kind of shit is that? My boy Charlie's pen pal visited him last year and she went there and saw it for herself. She even told him you could buy a mug which said, 'I've survived Death Row.' You know what

is strange now but when I was out in the world I was no different than a majority of Americans who are out there now. Capital punishment never crossed my mind. Being that I had never been in trouble with the law and felt I never would, I didn't see a need to educate myself with the laws. To be honest with you, I probably would have been in favour of capital punishment. I never ever dreamt back then I would spend the next nine years of my life from the age of 19 incarcerated on Death Row. Not a day goes by without me thinking about what happened to get me where I am. I wish I had never started hanging out with Chuck and Roy. Roy was a no good son-of-a-bitch and I should never have agreed to go out with them that night.

Hell, it's too late now for all that but Evie, all I got to say to you is don't waste a minute of your life and don't waste it in a place where your mind isn't your own and I'm talking as well about how your doctor has given you medication for your nerves. Evie, I'm seeing guys turned to zombies in this place they aren't giving the world any thought because their minds are all muffled up and all they chat about is who's scamming who and what they be eating for their next meal. I don't like to think of you like that. Don't take them.

What was it that made you open that drink? Was it seeing David? Where's your pride Evie? You should have walked over to them and smiled your best and biggest smile not be hiding from them. Or was it that letter from Louise? You shouldn't set so much store by what others say about you. You have to see where they are coming from. Now I've told you about this Louise and I don't see her being any good for you at all. She straight up sees you as a threat and judging from the photo of you I've put on my wall, I'm not surprised. You are a very pretty

woman.(smile) Just accept that this has happened, chalk it up to experience and move on. I don't like to hear you are getting yourself so worked up about shit that is so unimportant.

I hated to hear about how you thought your mother and her friend was laughing about your story, but are you sure? You said yourself you didn't hear everything and maybe cause you always give yourself such a hard time you imagined what you heard. And anyway even if they was talking about your story you shouldn't take any notice. If you don't mind me saying, you seem to let other people's opinions about you feed into yourself and then you just take it all as real. If someone says something about me I immediately try and think about what is going on with them first. I find it real helpful but I have a lot of respect for myself Evie and I think this is what is causing you your problems in that you don't believe in yourself enough. Can you not think that at least your mother and her friend did talk about how you was affected by your father's death so it proves she understood that you was suffering. By the way, what is your brother up to? You very rarely mention him in letters.

I'm hoping that you manage to sort some things out with your mother when she comes to stay. Didn't you tell me she lived with you when you were married? Talking of which I found it unbelievable that your sorry-ass husband should be so concerned with those lemons but I have to confess, I did smile when you told me. I was just getting this picture of you two squabbling over those bags of rubbish and those lemons.(smile)

Roseleen was really fussy about her shoes she always had to put a pair together and they had to face the door she said if there was any ghosts going to come she didn't want them slipping into her shoes and gliding across the room. I'm kind of glad for all the

noise in this place it's never quiet and I think we would get real spooked out if it was. If I told you Roseleen wrote me that was my bad. I wrote to her, that's what I meant, but I never got any letters back. Maybe you could write her and ask her to. She might listen to you being that you are school teacher and well-educated. Would you at least think about it? I just want a last chance to tell her how I felt.

You know Evie, I have some very strong feelings for you. I think about you nearly all the time and miss you. You have been there for me since your very first letter. I realize how fortunate I am to have someone like you to write to me. It has taken me all these years to find a penpal as special as you and I'm not just saying it but I mean it when I say you are a wonderful person.

I don't want to go over what happened with Sherilee and Roseleen and me again and yes I do believe that life is sacred but there are some people in this place who've done some real bad things and I mean real bad. Some of them don't deserve to live in my opinion. Murdering a child or rape should get you the death penalty and they shouldn't allow those who are definitely guilty to appeal. I respect your views about God but couldn't believing in our Lord give you some peace? There's many guys here who have made their peace with God, confessing their guilt and I believe they have gone to a better place. In my opinion taking the life of an unborn child is murder and that is what Roseleen and I just couldn't agree on. I would do the same thing all over again.

In answer to your question about whether I've ever seen a germ you know as well as me Evie that they are not visible to the naked eye. Back in the day we had some bad cockroaches in my mama's house and I sure hated them. My sisters would holler at me all the

damn time to kill them and I can still hear the way their nasty bodies would crunch under my shoe. I'm going out for recreation in a few minutes so I'll bring this letter to a close. I'm going to put in to have a legal visit with Brian I need to see my boy real bad. Don't keep me waiting for too long now.

Love,
Troy

4th April

Dear Troy,

Well it's Sunday and the sun is shining through the sitting room window as I write and, despite my enjoyment of knowing how near spring is, I can see that my bookcase needs a thorough dusting! Oh housework is such a bore!

I've also got a lot of coursework to mark but I won't send you to sleep with a description of the grade boundaries for GCSE's. No, what I want to tell you about first of all is what has happened to my mother. As you know, I've been somewhat anxious about her arrival and I spent all day Friday cleaning the house. It was a perfect day, quite warm, glorious sunshine and putting my new yellow rubber gloves on I felt more cheerful than I have for months. The thought of no ghastly teenagers for two weeks put a positive spring in my step as I took down the dark blue winter curtains and replaced them with my summer ones (pink and yellow roses). I put some music on and danced around the house with my feather duster I just hope none of the neighbours saw me! The only sour note was David phoning, he wants to talk to me about something important which he refused to discuss over the phone. I tried not to think, concentrating instead on the tasks in hand. Spotting one of David's old socks nestling at the back of one wardrobe, made me decide to go through every other cupboard and chest of drawers in the house and literally purge them completely just in case there were any more nasty surprises such as old handkerchiefs lurking amongst my neatly folded clothes.

After he left, I took everything he didn't bother to collect to the local Oxfam shop and came away with some wonderful little bargains of my own. Since then I have to confess that I have developed a real passion for charity shops and quite often do a tour of Cancer Research, the Heart Foundation and Oxfam on a Saturday. What some people discard is astonishing. I picked up a brand new designer jacket for ten pounds last week and it looks very smart for work. Anyway, in my 'purging' I found two of David's shirts and a rather revolting pair of leather trousers he bought years ago. Knowing there was nothing left of David at all in the house was quite an odd feeling and Troy, I have to confess, when I picked up the shirt it still smelled of him which for a brief moment brought up some very painful feelings but I simple will not let myself cry about him. So, I stuffed everything into a binbag and very soon the last remnants of him will be gone.

Half way through my attempt to pull Mrs Pink from the bottom drawer and stop Heathcliff from sharpening his claws on my suede boots, the phone went. Rushing to answer it I practically impaled myself on a coat hangar and it turned out to be Mum. She sounded rather odd on the phone making so much small talk I was beginning to feel quite irritable when suddenly she blurted out whether it would it be alright if she brought her new friend with her to stay for one night as HE- yes He was on his way to Scotland to visit his son. When she said the word HE I nearly dropped the phone. A man! Mum has a man friend and she's sixty five years old! For one horrible moment I thought she was going to ask if they could share a room but she was obviously thinking the same thing, insisting that they would be sleeping separately. They are arriving tomorrow morning driving up together from Brighton.

I've thought of nothing else for the past two days trying to imagine what sort of man he is, I think she said his name was Jack. She also asked me to buy several bottles of sparkling water as Jack doesn't drink and she says she has stopped drinking more or less since the doctor informed her that she needed to lose weight as her blood pressure is high. She was always such a slim woman until she got to fifty, I guess it happens to us all, still I've a few more years to go!

Enough about me Troy but I'll probably be writing to you again this week telling you about what has happened. You've become a bit like a diary to me, does that sound strange? But a diary that can write back and respond in the way a real diary can't! I gave up writing a diary once I married as David didn't like me keeping one. He said it made him feel uncomfortable as if I wasn't communicating with him but keeping secrets in my notebooks. He said if I kept one that he couldn't promise not to read it so I had a choice; to keep one which would probably be read or not to write one at all. The latter seemed the best option and even though I could keep one now, I just can't seem to break the habit and put words down onto paper, unless it's to you. Oh dear, I've got back to me again, what a self-centred person you must think I am!

I have your letter out in front of me and I'm afraid to say it's covered with bloody paw prints! I'd left it on the kitchen table when Squeaky Boy dived through the cat door, fur standing up on end, yowling and crying and leapt straight onto the table where he proceeded to hiss at this enormous ginger cat in the garden. His foot was bleeding, hence your poor

letter, but I can still read it though. I do worry about the fights he gets into and despite the fact they drive me nuts at times, I don't know what I would do if anything happened to one of them. I am deeply touched that I have come to mean so much to you and of course I will write to Roseleen if you think it will do any good. Thank you for the compliment about my looks, I don't agree with you though really. I've always wanted high cheekbones, brown eyes and red hair, still I guess I could dye it. Don't worry about me Troy, the pills are merely tranquillizers and I only take them when I feel my nerves starting to jangle. I've told you about that gang of year eleven boys haven't I? Well in the last week of term I confiscated a phone from the one called Billy who, as a result, was thoroughly rude and unpleasant all week. On Monday there was a group of them coming down the stairs when a huge dollop of spit landed on my shoulder, honestly it was disgusting. I looked up and there they were, all laughing, with Billy in the middle who shouted, 'Alright Miss?' Like he knew I wasn't. I'd like to have stuck two fingers up at him but of course I'm a true professional and looked away.

The next day in English his friend Mustafa told me I'd got it coming to me as I was poking my nose into their business and I 'couldn't do nothing' to them. At break in the staffroom I took a pill to stop the shaking. Actually Geoff was the person who had found me sitting with my head down at the end of the lesson, too frightened to walk down the corridor as they were outside my classroom. He insisted on making me a cup of tea and offered to drive me home but I couldn't accept. Lindsay, my head of department, arrived but I wouldn't tell her what had happened either, what's the point? Nothing will be

done, as usual. The students in my school think they run it. Anyway, I'm on holiday now and trying not to brood on it all.

I have to admit I was quite surprised about your attitude to capital punishment and people who have committed terrible crimes, they are still human beings don't you think? I'm not criticising you, just noting my surprise at your views. The organisation I joined in order to find a pen-pal is very clear that you choose to write to a person irrespective of the crime. Of course, knowing you are innocent does, obviously, make a difference. I think of myself as really lucky to have met such an intelligent young man who seems so confident and courageous. If only I could meet a man like you. I really don't want us to ever stop writing to each other, you talk such sense at times and I have come to depend on you being there for me with words of comfort and advice. We have become very close haven't we?

Why did you start going around with Chuck and Roy? After you mentioned them I remembered the article Jed wrote about you for the local paper and how Jed had hinted that you hadn't known them long and that they had almost forced you to go along to the store that evening. Why did you start going around with people you knew were no good Troy? It makes no sense that you stayed out of trouble all your life to end up where you are now. Oh I hate thinking about you locked up in that small cell if only there was more I could do to help you.

I must end this letter now and make something for tomorrow. I thought I'd do a nice mushroom quiche and rocket salad, followed by lemon cheesecake. Oh no it's starting to rain, I must run and get the washing

in. The foxes still appear regularly in the garden. They seem to be a family of five now and it's ridiculous how worried I get if I don't see them for a few days. I find myself peering at the end of the garden every night just to check they are still there.

Love and best wishes,
Evie

PS I'll try and tell you more about 'that letter' when I'm feeling a little stronger.

6th April

Dear Troy,

I'm sure you're really surprised to be hearing from me again so soon but I need to talk to you about what has been happening. All sorts of thoughts are buzzing around my head and I am in great need of your sane and rational opinions.

Mum and Jack are here and I don't know how to feel or be about it at all. I didn't know what to expect so I've left them downstairs doing a crossword whilst I made some excuse about some pieces of coursework I had to mark. I've just spent ten minutes lying on my bed with my eyes closed trying to unjumble the confusion inside me honestly it was all very strange. Half way through supper Mum and I were talking about a recent television programme about working with dysfunctional children when she asked me whether I thought she'd been a good mother to me. I honestly didn't know what to say taken off guard like that and naturally I muttered, "of course," whilst inside me longing to ask her if she'd actually liked me as a child. I asked her what had brought this on and she started telling me that as well as doing her writing she is having some sort of therapy. I was absolutely 'gobsmacked' as they say.

Jack, who seems really into all this ridiculous psycho-babble nonsense, then started talking about the importance of being open about our feelings and that repressing them is extremely unhealthy. He proceeded to pontificate about this book he is reading about people who suppress their feelings and develop various obsessive personality traits. I couldn't help wondering if his interest in people's

compulsive habits might well be a result of being in the company of too many teachers as an Ofsted inspector. Observing teachers must surely reveal a breed of neurotics who obsess about a whole range of things. Apparently he and Mum met on a creative writing weekend in February, entitled 'Writing from Life' but I've yet to discover what either of them are writing about. Troy, I fear I'm rambling a little but I am just trying to process it all hence coming up here to write to you!

When they knocked on the door yesterday, they presented me with a huge bunch of flowers and Troy, I can honestly tell you Mum looked twenty years younger. Next to her stood a short bald man with a rather large nose and a small bow tie; a bow tie, can you believe it? (He reminded me of an owl with his round face and beak like nose.) Personally, I thought he shook my hand rather too vigorously whilst muttering about how much he'd heard about me and what a beautiful house Joan told him I always kept. Creep, I almost mumbled out loud.

Mum just had to criticise me, as usual, by asking me if I was well and was I eating properly as I had become far too thin. Troy, thin is not a positive word is it? If she'd called me what I really am, which is slim, I wouldn't have felt so hurt, but I deeply resented the inference that I wasn't looking after myself. You know how I prepare nourishing meals for myself every night. Well, most nights, as I must confess, recently, I may have become a little careless about eating. But, quite frankly, given her rotund figure, I think she is simply jealous. She just has to accept she is no longer the slim attractive woman she once was.

Anyway, in her usual bossy way she insisted on settling me next to Jack on the sofa, so we could, 'get to know each other,' whilst she shot into the kitchen to warm the oven and check up on my rocket salad. I couldn't help noticing that Jack badly needed a shave, his 'five o'clock shadow' was positively at midnight and his finger nails were badly bitten suggesting to me he was definitely of the highly strung variety.

Anyway, he tried terribly hard, I'll give him that. He asked lots of thoughtful and penetrating questions, a refreshing change from some of the self-obsessed men I've been out with recently, and showed a genuine interest in the difficulties of teaching in London schools. Troy, it was a very strange experience for me as I kept wondering what my own father would have been like if he had lived. Would he have been interested in me and my life? The blurred memories I have of him suddenly seemed to well up from some place inside me, and, I'm embarrassed to admit this, but my eyes filled with tears and much as I tried not to blink, one annoyingly trickled down my cheek.

'Oh dear girl, I'm most awfully sorry, here, let me get you a handkerchief,' and he dashed off in to the kitchen where I heard him 'telling Mum he'd only asked her about school. He sounded so genuinely concerned about me that it brought on a fresh sob, so that by the time they both returned to the sitting room with a cup of tea and some tissues I was feeling really embarrassed. I mean, there I was trying to give the impression that I was a capable, self-sufficient career woman, but all I appeared to be was a pathetic child.

During the meal, Mum giggled and blushed like a schoolgirl, particularly when Jack talked about her talent for writing and do you know something Troy, I felt terrible pangs of jealousy. I mean Jack isn't exactly what you'd call an oil painting but he is so warm and genuinely interested in other people. But, no wonder they are both on the chubby side, they demolished two thirds of the pie and all the pudding between them! By the end of the evening I was crying with laughter as Jack described a terrible lesson on his last inspection whereby this teacher's phone kept ringing and she just took no notice at all. The kids kept telling her that her phone was ringing and one cheeky one volunteered to confiscate it at which point she raised her hands into the air displaying ten beautifully manicured nails with such long extensions she explained that she couldn't actually turn her phone off because of them. The next time it started ringing Jack was forced to try and turn it off himself except, not being up to date with the latest gadgets, he couldn't do it. Eventually he had to ask one of the kids to help him which he felt was utterly humiliating as you can imagine. Apparently it turned out she was a supply teacher and Jack had been directed to the wrong room as the Head of English had prepared a really high powered all singing and dancing lesson waiting to impress him with her incredible range of activities and was really annoyed that he never made it to her. Not surprisingly 'Ms Nail Extensions' was not invited back the next day. Honestly Troy, they both fussed about me all evening, insisting on clearing everything up and making me hot chocolate. I can't remember the last time I was looked after like that. The other strange thing was that the normally nervous Mrs Pink took a real shine to Jack, lying across his lap and batting her big green eyes at him. She really can be such a flirt. I

had the best sleep I've had in months last night and no bad dreams about school.(smile)

Troy, I'm really annoyed with myself. What on earth made me cry like that last night? I think I'm writing this letter to calm myself down. Maybe I'll have one of my pills just in case... I know you don't think I should be taking them, well I'm not sure I should be either really, but they certainly help to take the edge off things at times. Oh Troy, I'm so sick of myself and my life.

I'm going to finish this letter and hope you haven't minded me bothering you again so soon after the last one. I hope to hear from you soon,

Love and Best wishes,
Evie

12th April

Dear Troy,

Where are you? What has happened? I can't believe that I haven't heard from you for so long and I am missing you terribly, particularly today. This is the day I dread every year. It is just the worst thing. Everyday, I'm sure there's going to be a letter waiting for me on the door-mat but nothing. So much has been happening that I need to talk to you about. Have you got fed up with my whining and complaining? I am worrying that I have offended you in some way, please please tell me if I have and then I can apologise.

Mum is still here, thank goodness, and we've been doing lots of spring cleaning! She is, however, obsessed with her 'vinegar-wipe' and utterly refuses to use cleaning sprays from the local supermarket insisting instead on tipping vinegar onto a duster and giving all the surfaces 'a really good do.' Jack phones her every evening and is dropping in at the weekend so that they can go back to Brighton together. I never thought I'd see myself write these words but, I'm really going to miss her when she goes home. The house will be so quiet with just me and the cats.

Oh Troy, write to me please. I'm missing you so much. We go back to school next Monday and I'm really really dreading it. I need to talk to you, I am in a terrible muddle about everything. I wanted to talk to Mum about how I feel but old habits die hard and I just couldn't quite find the right moment or start the sentence. She didn't ask about the crying episode which is just as well as knowing me I'd have simply brushed it aside whilst inside begging her to ask

again. I wonder about the balance of my mind sometimes, I really do.

How is the weather in Texas? It has been glorious here and daffodils are sprouting up in the garden. But the pink and white blossom is too beautiful for the sadness of this day.

This Day. Today would have been my son Jamie's birthday. My beautiful, smiling, blond boy who died before he lived.

Mum and I went to the grave today. We took some daffodils but it seemed terrible that the sky was such a brilliant blue. Neither of us could bear to think about that sweet little boy who, if he'd been alive today, would have been at school. Oh but Troy I blame myself for it. Even now, all these years later, I am still tortured by my last sighting of him. Perhaps it would help me if I could tell you about what happened. Maybe then I'll be able to pinpoint the moment when it all went wrong. Sometimes I think, if I could just isolate the exact moment that I might be able somehow to bring him back. To stop time and bring him back to me. But I can't do it. Oh please, please, write to me.

Your sad friend,

Evie

PS I found a dead rat on my doorstep last night so now I need to call out. 'The Rat Man.' I can't sleep now thinking about rats running around the house.

April 19

Dearest Evie,

First of all I'm going to apologise for letting you down not writing but the deal is, I'm straight up out of money. I have one dollar left and I managed to persuade my neighbour to lend me a stamp so that I could write you as I knew you'd be stressing about not hearing from me. My family keep promising to put some money in my account but when I went to ommissary last week there was still nothing. Evie, I hate to ask you to send money but I don't have anyone else I can rely on like you. I'm enclosing some slips with this letter which you can use to pay money into a bank, I've filled out all the details for you and according to my boy Charlie's pen-pal, you get a foreign draft from your bank. You know I'm not using you for money, I'm not like some of the sorry asses in this place who just be wanting pen-pals who will send them money. No, I'm straight and level with you Evie but my pride usually stops me from asking you to help out. Can you check it out that a man of twenty eight has to ask for money? You don't know how hard this is for me and I wouldn't do so unless things was really bad. Without money I cannot write you and I know for sure you'll miss me and be mad if I don't mail off a letter to you each week. (smile) I know you need me as much as I need you and we mustn't let anything stop us from communicating with each other. I truly believe we are soul mates.

You know I've been real happy receiving so many letters from my girl but I'm concerned about what's been happening in your life. First up Evie, you've not been telling me everything and you know that's not what it's like between us. Why didn't you tell me about Jamie? The issue of your son's death has caused you a lot of pain and I was real cut up to read about

it but surprised that you have not mentioned ~it seeing as how we've been conversating with each other for the past six months. Having a child is what you women was born to do. God put you on this earth to procreate and to deny your only child's life is going to be hurting you for the rest of your life.

I hate to think of what it has been like for you, grieving for your child. You have kept all this pain from me though, and that is not how we do it. You should have told me sooner, no wonder you have been feeling so down recently with it coming up to the anniversary. I'm sure you was a perfect mother to Jamie as I know you are a wonderful, warm caring woman. How long had you been married to David for by then and how old was he? Also, what happened to him? You wasn't at all clear and I hope you don't mind me asking you, but why didn't you have any more children? You know I'll always be here for you and I will help you deal with the pain you are feeling. You just have to let it out.

Talking of David, you mentioned in one letter that he wanted to see you and talk about issues of importance but you never told me what it was all about. I trip out when I think of the way you let that man treat you. If I was ever to come to London, once I get my freedom, I hope you never let me meet him. I'm not a violent man Evie but I don't like to see my women getting mistreated.

I want to tell you something I have never told any of my other pen -pals which happened back in the day when I was maybe ten years old. I was already a foot taller than all my friends and nearly as tall as the good for nothing bad-ass who calls himself my father. Evie, he never did nothing for me and my sisters and even from that young age I knew he had no love for any of us. He use to come round sometimes, whenever

he felt in the mood and mostly he'd sit and drink with Mama. She was a damn fool, letting him get his foot in the door, letting him eat our food and sleep in her bed when it seemed to me he treated her no better than a damn slave. Whenever he'd been and then gone, she'd sit and cry and cry and tell me she'd never loved anyone the way she loved him. Even his name was and he was the blackest man in the town with a head so bald and shiny it looked like one of those snooker balls. I swear he must have shined it every day with oil to get it so smooth. I didn't understand how she could love a man who cared so little about his children or her, she was just blind to the fact he just used her and it made me mad as hell to see it. Mostly he left me alone as long as I didn't speak to him although he'd occasionally leave money for my sisters, never for me though. The only thing he ever used to say to me as he staggered out of the house half drunk was, "Look after your mother for me boy." I don't know what it was about that line that got me maddest. Being called boy reminded me of some of the ol' boys in the town who hated us black people but his order to look after Mama for him, was just as bad. I used to ask myself why he couldn't look after all of us when he lived in a much better house than us and why was it my job to hold Mama together just so he could bring his sorry ass round and hurt her all over again. He was a low-life for real and to this day I still hate the thought that he was responsible for bringing me into this world. Well one day he came round real late, about twelve o'clock at night. We was all asleep and he began hollering at the door to let him in. I got up, mad as hell, and told him to go away and leave us all alone, but Mama appeared all wild eyed and told me to butt out and that it was none of my business if she wanted to let him in. I was so mad, madder than I'd ever

been. I just couldn't hardly stand to see Mama suffer. We'd all got school in the morning and I'd got a math test which I'd been studying for all week and I straight up didn't want him coming in. But of course he did.

He looked kind of strange. His eyes was all red and he seemed different, it's hard to explain how. Mama ran and put her arms round him but he pushed her away and just went over to where she kept the drink, grabbed a bottle and sat in the old rocking chair.

"Get to bed boy" he said, but his voice scared me and suddenly I was frightened for Mama. She looked over at me and told me to go to bed and not be worrying myself. She walked over to me and kissed my forehead, her lips were soft and warm. She ruffled my hair in that funny way she did when she was teasing me so what choice did I have? To please Mama, to keep her happy, I went to bed. I know now, I should have stayed. I did have a choice but I was too scared of upsetting Mama and waking up my sisters I couldn't deal with them all crying and shit so I left the room and got into bed. It was only a small house, my sisters all slept together in one bed in the corner of our bedroom. I had a small single bed against the wall. I can remember putting the covers over my head and then squeezing pieces of the blanket into my ears so I couldn't hear any noises.

Mama's scream woke me sometime later. She was hollering my name so loud I just got up and ran to her. She was lying on the floor, her nightdress all torn and Evan was standing over her shouting and screaming at, he punched her in the face.

I heard something crack and then she went still. Evan was standing panting over her."Serves you right bitch." He yelled and punched his fist so hard on the table that the glasses fell on the floor and smashed

into pieces. I was so scared I just stood there like when a rabbit gets caught in a car head light. I was just frozen when he whispered in this strange voice. "You didn't see nothing boy did you?" And he stared right into my eyes which were deep black, like two raisins and when he swiped the sweat off of his shiny head something snapped right inside me. It was like those words had broken something, like they had cut through this wall I'd built up inside and I went crazy. The last thing I can remember was picking up this metal stick that Mama used for the fire. I know I was hollering and crying and I couldn't see nothing but his black head and then everything just straight up dissolved. When I woke up on the floor my sisters was all crying and shit and Mama was groaning but Evan had gone.

I wanted Mama to tell the police but she wouldn't. She said she didn't want no trouble and she didn't want me getting a police record. A few months after that she went out one morning and that was the last I saw of her for months. I sometimes think that it was because of what I did to Evan, that she left. It seems to be that sometimes whatever I do it's wrong. Protecting Mama didn't do no good as she left us anyway but I'll never stop loving her. She couldn't help the way she felt about Evan because she was ill and couldn't see the truth of him. It was the way she was with the drinking and the drugs, she had this addiction and it was like he was part of it too. No matter how bad Evan treated her or how bad the drugs made her feel she just couldn't help going back to them. You don't know how happy it makes me feel to see my Mama off of everything.

Evan has a big jagged scar on his stupid bald head and when I look at it I feel proud. Proud that at ten years of age I was more of a man than he'll ever be. But do you know what Evie, he has never said anything

to me about that night and he never ever set foot in that house again, though I know he and Mama still use to meet. Sometimes I wonder if us black people are all so messed up because of what happened to our people when they was made slaves. My neighbor lent me this real good book called 'Beloved' which made me think about what was done to our minds. What could have made Mama and Evan the people they are is all that suffering and violence in their pasts. I won't be making excuses for Evan but I know his Daddy beat him till he nearly died and that on his death bed he told him he'd been just a straight up disappointment to him all his life.

Evie, we all have pain that was given to us by other people when we was children but it doesn't mean it was our fault or that we was bad. Somehow, I managed to come out from my childhood with pride and a great deal of love for myself and that's what you need Evie. From the way you talk about your mother I can tell that she loves you very much. Try and be happy for her that finally, she has met another man though that word ofsted had me vexed for real as I have never heard of it before and I like to think I have a pretty wide vocabulary.(smile) You know what a good student I was at high school.

I hate to hear that my girl has been crying and you know I straight up don't like you taking those pills. Why are you so damn hard on yourself Evie? What is the deal with David? You must tell me what is so important that he wants to talk to his ex wife, notice the word ex Evie, you are not married to him anymore and he has no rights over you. I don't really know why you are still in contact with him. Were you crying because of David or was it your school or your son?

You need to contact your principal as soon as you get back to school Evie, you are being harassed by a

bunch of sorry ass teenagers and they need their butts kicking for real. Please make sure you go straight to see your principal when you get back and tell them what has been going on. You need to make sure you have filed a report about the spitting incident. You can't let those no good punks get away with things. Don't ever think you was over-reacting. You just don't know how much I'd like to get my hands on those sorry-asses. It's no good keep telling yourself things won't change. They will only change if you take certain actions. You can't let other people tell you what to do.

Life is pretty much the same here. I've been in a funky mood as Brian's date is getting closer. We had another inmate pepper sprayed last week as he wouldn't leave his cell. We was on lockdown for a few days as a result so I missed all my recreation. My eyes watered for hours and the whole pod was straight up in a strange mood which always happens when there is an execution. No one can ever understand what it is like living like this, wondering who will be next. My lawyer is working on my case real hard and we have a few more issues to work out together but some of them don't try hard because they are paid so poorly by the state. The system here in the USA is fucked-up for real. Sometimes I think they like to keep us on DR so they can make money at our expense whilst we remain locked up for years and years and all our family and friends gradually forget about us. One of my pen-pals has written me that she may come and visit in the fall. I would love to see you though Evie, you know you are my girl for real and even though we have only been corresponding for a few months, I feel closer to you than anyone else. Evie, I hope you don't mind me saying this, but I really am getting some powerful feelings about you. I think

about you so much of the time during the long lonely hours I spend in this small cell. It's like we was destined to meet as, I never told you this, but your first letter arrived on my birthday, now that must be a sign.(smile) When I get the freedom I deserve and all this nonsense is put right I hope that we can meet. I imagine us together talking over a candle-lit meal and we would just get along fine. I would never hurt you like so many others seem to have.

I need to finish this letter as the officer on duty has just hollered that it is nearly time for my recreation. The weather is very hot right up in the eighties but, of course, they still have the heating on. I am sweating sitting here but I look forward to feeling the sun on my face and hope I can get some colour back. Damn, my hands be looking like a white man's.(smile) I look forward to hearing from you real soon and know that you are always being thought of. You take it easy, do you dig me? And remember you loved your son and you was a wonderful mother to him. If you can explain what happened to him, I might be able to help you deal with it. Life throws some bad shit at us sometimes, look where I am? Being alive is all that matters Evie, and I am truly sorry you have had to go through the pain of losing a child. Keep your head up Mrs Lovely.

Love, Troy

27th April

Dear Troy,

I received your long letter yesterday, and truthfully, I don't know where to start. There is so much to respond to. I have been to the bank and this morning received the foreign draft which I am sending on so that it can be put in your account. I really didn't know how much to send so I sent you fifty dollars. Was that enough? I'm not really sure how much stamps are. What happens to prisoners who don't have any money? How do they manage? Do the authorities supply them with stamps?

Troy, your letter was so sad and so moving. I can see from the way you write about your mother how deeply you loved her and what a terrible childhood you had. It just astonishes me how you were able to go to school with everything that was going on at home. If I was religious, I would go to church and pray for you so hard God would simply have to respond and release an innocent man from prison. I know you are not a violent person. I could see so clearly how much you loved your mother and sought to protect her from the vicious attack by your father. Oh how could a man treat his children so cruelly? Has he ever come to visit you? The thought of you cowering with fear and witnessing the violence against your mother must have left terrible scars inside you.

You really are a most remarkable person, I am nowhere near as strong as you, I would simply not have been able to bear it all, particularly as your mother vanished not long afterwards. She must have been very ill to have disappeared and it must be so painful for

her having to come and visit you, her only son, in prison for a crime he didn't commit. It would break my heart to have a son falsely accused and then to be incarcerated far away from me.

I had a terrible nightmare after receiving your letter I was running after you yelling at three prison guards, trying to stop you from being locked back in]your cell. You kept saying over and over again, 'I am innocent of this heinous crime.' When I woke the pillow was wet with my tears and instead of going straight to the shower, I wrote a poem about you. I read it out at my poetry group last week and they all loved it. Obviously I didn't tell them that I actually write to someone on Death Row, as I've learned to my cost that not everyone is very positive about it.

I foolishly mentioned it to a woman at school I've been getting friendly with recently, Joy a new geography teacher, but she told me she didn't think it was a very healthy thing to be doing, writing to someone who had probably done something appalling. I found my legs beginning to tremble as I tried to tell her that I knew you were innocent as you were very intelligent and logical and that there was no way a man who loved his family so much would ever take anyone's life from them. But Troy, her answer was that just because someone appeared to be these things, didn't mean they actually were. I was shocked, totally taken aback by what she seemed to be implying. I have to say I find it hard to feel the same about her since this conversation. It seems to be a repeat of what happened with Geoff and I still wonder now if that's not what put him off me. It's not like I'm the only person in the world who writes to someone is it? And where's their humanity? In my

view there's not enough compassion in the world and at times, I despair of the human race.

Changing the subject now, you know I told you about my little spring clean over the holidays, well when Mum and I pulled all the sheets out of the airing cupboard I was really annoyed to find one of David's jumpers despite thinking I had got rid of all signs of him, but this one made me feel ill. It was the one he'd been wearing the night he told me that he was leaving. It was a dark blue ribbed tank-top, so not exactly a pullover as such, but I noticed it had a thin line of old tomato sauce down the front of it. I had this sudden awful recollection of seeing the tomato sauce dribble down his chin after I'd tried to hit him with the lemon squeezer. I'm not a violent person Troy but being rejected over that fresh haddock and tomato sauce was just too much to bear. It was just typical of David to tell me something important when we were eating.

Mum could see I was upset but she was very kind, sitting quietly whilst I cut the jumper to shreds before I hurled the pieces round the room. I tell you, I felt a lot better afterwards. Being angry was so much more empowering than simply crying, Jack is certainly right about that, and after I'd calmed down I honestly did feel a strange sort of peace settle over me.

I have often reflected upon the idea that our marriage was a bit like one of the knitted jumpers my granny used to knit for me and my brother each Christmas. One year, for some reason, she left a long thread dangling at one edge. So, for a dare, after Granny had complained that me and my brother didn't look 'appreciative enough' I cut the thread and

pulled it. Well Troy it literally seemed to unravel of its own accord but the awful thing was, I simply couldn't stop tugging at that string until all there was left was a large pile of wool. Mum, of course, found it and announced that was typical of me in that I had to keep going despite the fact that it was obvious all along what exactly was going to happen. So, when David met his 'Spanish omelette' as I have started calling her, and we then attempted to discuss what had gone wrong we realised our marriage had completely unravelled, just like poor old Granny's jumper.

Writing about pieces of clothing reminds me of a little poetry game I play at school sometimes with my classes. It's basically an exercise to develop similes and metaphors. You say to the children that must think carefully about what they are like as a person and you give them certain categories like animals, fruit, and so on.(I avoid articles of clothing for obvious reasons) You then get the class to write down what they see themselves as and sometime later, they have all written a poem. It is great fun and the students always enjoy the exercise. Actually I'm still trying to work out why Matthew Eveleigh compared me to a hamster the other day when we played the poetry game. Quite honestly as you know I see myself as a cat and I have to confess I was somewhat hurt by the idea that he sees me as a tubby little furball who spends their days running pointlessly in one of those ridiculous wheels and with their cheeks puffed out with nuts. I definitely have put on a few pounds recently but even so.....

When I took him to one side at the end of the lesson to ask him about his comparison he talked rather

cheekily I thought of my habit of racing around the school with two enormous bags. (hence the pouches) He then went on to describe my habit of constantly rushing around the classroom every lesson searching for keys I have put down. This, he explained, reminded him of the way his pet hamster Cyril behaves when he is looking for nuts in his cage. Quite frankly Troy, the boy is utterly precocious and the fact he has a hamster called Cyril only confirms my view of him. Honestly Troy, children these days.

Anyway, talking of David, I still haven't managed to see him. He has phoned me twice arranging to meet and then cancelling at the last minute and now the phone has started ringing at odd times but there's no one there. I'm wondering if it is him. I've seen Omelette twice recently on her own and, I have to say, she is looking somewhat plump. It merely confirms my suspicions that Mediterranean women lose their slim girlish figures very quickly once they get past their youth. At least no one could say I've turned to fat, well not yet anyway, but seeing Mum certainly put the frighteners on me in terms of what I eat. Now she's returned to Brighton, I'm back on broccoli and cottage cheese every night as I've put on several pounds with her lavish cooking. The house is very quiet though.

One evening, I was determined to try and talk to her about Dad and how she was afterwards. She said very little other than to say that she knew she'd not been a very good mother which I tried to reassure her hadn't been the case, but she looked so sad and upset I just couldn't go on. I so badly wanted to ask her if what I'd overheard about his death was true although I don't want it to be, not at all. Something like a heart attack is almost a simple

and straightforward death in that it just happens to someone, they do not choose it. I just could not bear the thought of Dad willingly leaving us all. Maybe digging up the past serves no purpose whatsoever.

Asking Mum to explain the way she behaved all those years ago will make no difference to me whatsoever. Whatever she says cannot undo the way I felt then. Maybe the best thing is just to put the past in box, have a sort of yearly 'spring clean' to smooth away the painful bits and get on.

Talking of cleaning. The house looks beautiful, there's not a corner of the house that we left untouched though Heathcliff is malting and leaving cat hair everywhere. Mum insisted on buying me a new sofa for the living room, telling me the price was no barrier, making a reference to a recent little policy which had come to fruition. It's dark blue, and so soft to lie down on that after a hard day at school I can now come home, stretch out on it and shut my eyes for my daily 'cat nap'. Sometimes I just like lying down in the dark listening to my neighbour's wind chimes. They make this restful kind of twinkling sound and when I shut my eyes I can close my mind off from everything. Life as a teacher is so frenetic and busy there is no time to relax at all. I once tried to count how many people I interacted with in a single day and it came to over a hundred which is astonishing isn't it? So returning to a quiet empty house can be strangely calming even though in some moods I have to put the radio on. Sometimes, when I lie down on the sofa, Mrs Pink leaps up next to me. She likes to huddle her little body right next to my legs and growls whenever I try and dislodge her.

I'm supposed to be back at school but I phoned in and lied'. I told them I was recovering from flu. I tried to go on Monday, I really did Troy, but even my pills didn't help. I was shaking so much at the bus stop that when someone yelled 'Miss!' from the other side of the street I simply froze. I went home to rest and slept for six hours and then made myself cheese on toast. I really don't know what is wrong with me. Well, some strange things have been going on. I received an e-mail from Geoff yesterday asking if I was alright and telling me he and Geraldine are 'history' so to speak. He basically implied that there was no real connection between the two of them and that he found her liking for avant-garde drama a little hard to take.

I'm in definite agreement with Geoff as far as modern drama and art go. My trip to an art gallery with David in the early days of our marriage was not a success either as I hadn't realised that the old paint pots and brushes had not been left by the builders, but were actually part of an exhibition. David was particularly scathing about my inability to understand how these paint pots contributed to the idea of modern alienation. I merely thought the cleaners hadn't been doing their job properly. Did you like art at school?

Anyway, I'm not really sure what to make of Geoff's communication. Do you think he is hinting at renewing our relationship? If anything does start up again, this time I intend to play it very cool. I have been reading this interesting book about successful relationships and the author suggests in the early days that you need to keep up a veneer of cool sophistication and indifference. So I intend to develop an aura suggesting a heart of stone in the

future and not reveal my emotional nature. What do you think?

Geoff told me he has been busy writing poems but this time I shall not be so eager to read them. Maybe I ought to be brutally honest and tell him they are far too obscure but I just don't want to hurt his feelings. I'm afraid some of Geoff's poetry is on a par with modern art as far as my understanding of it goes, but I do quite like the fact that at least he has an interest in poetry. So few people these days seem to read decent fiction or poetry and even my A level students who are meant to be bright and motivated gasp when I tell them they have to read a whole novel. I mean sweet though the students are, some of them just can't cope with reading anything longer than a chapter.

Honestly Troy, I do wonder if I'm getting too old to do this job, I really do.

I just don't know what to make of Geoff's e mail. Am I reading too much into it do you think? It seems his wife has embarked on a love affair with a woman living two doors down. Poor Geoff, has suffered dreadfully with his divorce and his children, as, despite being in their twenties, they are not coping with the situation at all.

Troy, I hear what you are saying about David being my ex. Obviously I'm under no obligation to meet him, I realise that but truthfully I'm curious to know why exactly. I can look after myself Troy, really I can, you don't have to worry about me. Being married to him for eight years means I can never totally just cut him out of my life and we did have a child together.

I'm going to end this letter now I must prepare some lessons. I need to go to school tomorrow and the prospect of seeing Geoff has cheered me up. I hardly see Louise anymore as she and Andrew seem inseparable. Actually, hearing her gushing on the phone about how happy they are together is hard to take. She seems totally disinterested in me now. I promise I will go and see the Head about those boys. But quite frankly, the only thing she's concerned about is exam results. Honestly, that's all she ever talks about. I feel like screaming when I hear phrases like, 'value added' which means ensuring students achieve better than expected. Troy, some of the children are so intellectually challenged, they are never going to get the magical grade C. Why does no one seem to understand that not everyone has the ability to achieve academic success?

Well back to the Scottish play!

Love, Evie

PS I just wanted to say that I'm thinking of you as I know the 2nd of May is very near now. I will light a candle for Brian on the day.

PPS How strange that my first letter to you arrived on your birthday. I feel a bond with you too Troy. Our letters allow us to express our true and hidden selves don't they? I sometimes feel that no one actually knows me at all, except for you, dear Troy.

PPPS Thank you for your kind words about Jamie. Whatever you say though, his death was my fault. I will try and explain one day.

2nd May

Dear Troy,

Hello, it's me again. I haven't heard from you for a while but I realise you are probably waiting for the foreign draft to arrive into your account. I know that today is the day you have been dreading and I just want you to know that I am thinking of you and especially Brian today. I just can't stand thinking about what will happen to him. All the time I wish there was more I could do to help you in your life and I want you to know that I will always be here for you.

It is eleven thirty at night and I can't sleep. I can see the huge white moon in the sky, hovering there like an enormous globe. I'm wondering if you can ever see the moon from where you are, there's something so solid and comforting about it isn't there? When I was a little girl I used to imagine I could see a man and woman together in it. The woman had dark hair and the man had on a bowtie and they seemed to be dancing or at least clasping each other in a close embrace. It was such a romantic image and staring at the moon the other night made me aware of how much I long for some passion and romance in my life. I feel so unbearably alone at times.

Geoff was really sweet when I went back to school although my heart sank when I saw a folder of his latest poems in my pigeon-hole. Have you ever heard of the saying, 'be careful what you wish for' well I can remember thinking how wonderful it would be to meet someone who shared my passion for poetry. Wait a moment though, I've just realised I've got a half

finished novel in my bureau which has been languishing there for several years. I think I might just pass it to him and ask for his critical comments. I started writing it after attending a conference for English teachers but even the title makes me cringe now, 'Dancing out of the Shadows', sounds so pretentious doesn't it? I wanted my main character, Ruby, to finally become a brave and self confident woman but she just wouldn't behave in that way. Every time she was given an opportunity which needed her to take some risks in her life, she just wouldn't. I planned for Ruby to run away from her abusive marriage but she preferred to be a martyr, pretending all the time she was staying with her husband to protect her children from the pain of divorce whereas, in reality, she secretly enjoyed all the suffering and making everyone else feel guilty. Finally, I became so irritated by her lack of backbone that I abandoned the novel completely. Ruby was a great disappointment to me; someone so full of self-pity she just didn't deserve my attention. Frankly, I began to feel more sympathy for her husband in the end despite the fact that I'd exaggerated his bad points to such a degree that he seemed more of a caricature than a real character. Maybe you'd like to read it and perhaps you could suggest some ideas for the plot!

Actually Troy, I do need to confess something. I know we promised to be truthful but, well actually, sometimes I might just have told you a slight variation of the truth. I am actually forty two. There, it's out. I'm so sorry. I've been feeling very guilty about this deception and I know it was wrong of me but I find it very difficult to accept the passing of the years as each birthday takes me further away from Jamie.

Well I'd better finish this letter and hope you manage to write to me very soon. I'm sending my thoughts to you and hope you can see it in your heart to forgive me. Women do find being over forty difficult, not that I'm vain or anything. I think it's tied up with having children. Possibilities, for me, are now closing down and if I allow myself to think about the prospect of never becoming a mother again.

Well Troy, the night-jar is out in the garden, its eerie call has always frightened me so I need to finish this letter. I am dreading school as year nine are doing their exam question on Macbeth and I'm worried that not that many of them will be able to reach their target grades. I'll have to explain to Lindsay, my Head of department, why they have done so badly once the results come out. James and Jack still insist that Lady Macbeth was a sex-crazed nymphomaniac who took drugs all the time and if they write that in their exam they will not do well at all. Oh I'm sick of targets, learning objectives and plenaries. What has happened to the days when you could enthuse young people about the beauty of Shakespeare's language?

Goodnight my dearest friend,
Evie

PS Am going out for a meal with David on Friday. I'll let you know what happens.

May 10

My dearest Evie,

I hope and pray that this letter finds you in the best of health and with a smile upon that lovely face of yours. Everything is everything on this end but I've been in a funky mood since my boy Brian was murdered by the state of Texas. We had our last legal visit two days before and he was not in a good way. He was real upset as the pen-pal he married last summer couldn't face coming over to be with him. He told me he'd begged and begged her to come being that hers was the last face he wanted to see before he went to meet God on the other side. She wasn't hearing it though. She had originally agreed but wrote him that it would plain break her heart to see the man she loved die. I'm thinking how selfish she was being. They was married, Brian was her husband and her place was by his side. Doesn't it say in the marriage vows 'til death us do part?' I straight up feel like writing to her myself and telling her how she let Brian down. I just tripped out when he told me she wasn't coming over.

We laughed about some of the sorry ass guys we have known over the years, many of them no longer with us. When it was time to go Brian's eyes just filled up with tears. 'Give my love to Evie' he said and you know what I felt this lump in my throat growing so big I just could hardly hold myself together. We guys never be talking about what got us in to this hell-hole but as the officers grabbed hold of me to escort me back to my cell he hollered out, 'I did it Troy, I killed my daddy the son of a bitch.' Then he starts yelling and cussing and trying to kick the officers who was attempting to restrain him. And then he starts screaming like I've never heard a man

scream before and yelling 'I don't wanna die I don't wanna die' over and over as I was being taken away and then I smelt the pepper spray and all the guys started cussing and hollering and it was just madness. So now we are on lockdown and I can't see us being allowed off for a while.

Every time I close my eyes I can see Brian and it is something no one should ever have to witness. Evie, you don't know how much I'd like to be living any other kind of life than the one I'm living at this moment. People like you who write to us guys on DR offer us a glimpse into a real life where people are just going about their everyday lives with all its ups and downs and don't ever let anyone make you feel that writing to a prisoner is wrong. You know what Evie, it is only us having such special people like you and others write to us that keeps us all from losing our goddamn minds. Some guys just can't take this life anymore and give up their appeals. My boy Brian was brave and strong up until the end but knowing he had reached the final end of everything was just too much. We all live with that fear all the time. We don't discuss it but it's here, hanging in the air. This place is like Hell Evie, I don't want to write about this no more.

I straight up want to thank you for the money. I bought me as many stamps as they would let me have in commissary. Some of the guys have no one that sends them money or anyone who visits. Sometimes they have no families and at other times their family disowns them. Those guys might do drawings for other prisoners or just get their hustle on and make a few dollars here and there. The authorities were going to try and make us pay for any extra toilet paper we asked for other than the allotted amount each week but they backed down when an organisation which attempts to protect our rights, argued that it

constituted a violation of prisoner's rights. The soap they give us brings my skin out in a rash so I can't use it.

I bought a photo album from commissary and I fully intend to fill it with photos of you so please send me some more.(smile) Perhaps you could send me one of you on that blue sofa and what about those four cats of yours. Now don't keep me waiting too long for those photos you know I think you are a very attractive woman but Evie, I am concerned about your lying. Hell I know you women hate talking about your age (smile) but what we have is different. I don't mind how old you are Evie, you should know that. I like the thought that I am communicating with a mature and thoughtful person someone who has seen a bit of life. It's got me to thinking what else you might have lied to me about seeing as you've only just gotten round to telling me about your child. Sometimes I get a real strong feeling that you are hiding a lot of things from me and that is not how we do it Mrs Lovely is it?

You know we have something real special, a deep and spiritual connection. I do forgive you, but I want you now, to place your hand over your heart, will you do that now Evie, and swear that you have told me the real truth about everything? I'm not sweating about your damn age but you need to be real to yourself. My girl is not dishonest.

I've got several things I want to respond to in your last two letters and damn it girl you know how much I love hearing from you Evie, and it brightened up my day to receive those two letters. I've been picturing you lying on that sofa with your cat next to you and with your lovely dark hair spread out around you face. I can see you with your eyes shut, looking like the angel that you are. You just can't ever imagine what you mean to me. Receiving your letters is a

precious gift and I feel privileged to have you in my life.

By the way, did you ever write to Roseleen? I only ask because I haven't heard from her and I just know you would have kept your word. Also, have you ever thought about what I said about coming to visit me? I would so like to hear your voice and see you in the flesh. Of course we would have to talk on phones through glass but it would mean so much to me just to see you just once. Think about it please, you know I have nothing but love for you.

I hate to see you stressing yourself about that school and I hope you have managed to get yourself back in there. Problems don't go away by hiding from them you know. Sooner or later we all have to face the truth about ourselves and maybe the truth is Evie that you need to look for another job. That school doesn't seem to be any good for you and I hate that you need pills to get you there. I also think you should try and learn to drive, inside a car you'll feel a lot better than getting on buses with all your bags.(smile)

Back in the day, we had a teacher who reminded us of a vulture, his eyes were grey and expressionless and his nose was like a sharp beak. We used to call him 'The Vulture' as a matter of fact. Now if I was to be an animal you just know what I would be don't you? Yes, you've guessed right, I would just have to be a black panther!(smile) Being that I am tall and black, I couldn't be anything else could I?

I was surprised to discover that you had once started to write a novel. I wouldn't mind checking it out if you didn't mind. I might be a better judge of your writing than Geoff because Evie, what you don't seem to realise, is that you are probably a better writer than him. Hell I know you are as I have read his poem

and yours and I know who can write. That poem you sent in your last letter was something else. Sometimes when people are jealous of others, they like to put us down. Dig this, Geoff feels inferior to you and he writes these deliberately hard poems to make you think you aren't as smart as him. There be guys in here who pretend all the time to be real clever but half of them are so full of shit as they can't hardly read some of them, but do they admit it? Hell no. I was asking this dumb ass, Ray one time about a book he was bragging he'd just read and I had just finished it. I hollered down and asked him a question and I caught him out, He lost my respect after that. And I'd discovered the truth, he was just a damn bull-shitter.

I dig it when you say nice things about our friendship Evie. I liked the way you mentioned that we can express our true selves to each other, but I really need to know that you are telling me the truth. I don't know why, but sometimes I feel like you are telling me that you and David have been divorced for several years and the next thing you are writing is that you and he are going out for a meal together. How can you even contemplate an evening with such a sorry ass? Wasn't he the one who walked out of your life? And Evie, you still haven't explained to me why he cut your face out of those photographs and you never fully explained that letter you wrote when you was drunk that time and stayed off of school. You was writing 'I loved him' and why are you thinking you'll be damned? Was it just referring to your son or is there something you are not telling me? The trouble with you is you hold things inside yourself.

Evie, my feelings for you continue to grow. You'll never really know how much you mean to me. I hope you don't mind me writing you like this, but I want you

to know what a special person you are being as how you are always tripping out about yourself and how you aren't this or that. Damn it girl you are you, flaws and all. Stop beating yourself up about all the things you think your're not. And don't be listening to other people talking bullshit about writing. It's people like you who stop men like me giving up all their appeals.

In this cell, I can see the sky, though there is only a small amount of space to look through. It isn't a window. Sometimes I do see the moon but Evie I hate you saying how alone you feel and wish I could be there for you.

Believe me, loneliness is something I do understand, no one can imagine how lonely us guys on DR feel. We are confined to our cells for so many hours and if we start to think it can drive us all crazy. I am lucky. I always try to laugh and joke with the guys as well as some of the officers who are cool. I try and keep busy, writing stuff for my case, listening to my transistor and reading. I should be hearing from my solicitor any day now being where my case is, and I am hoping it will be good news. I have some real strong issues in my case and even some of the officers here don't think this is the place for me. Some of them know about what happened but they just can't understand why I confessed. At my trial the jury was all white and the judge asked them if they would feel safe if they saw me walk into a store. Just how fucked up can a legal system be that allows things like that to go on?

What the officers don't understand was how my head hurt with all the questions and I just wanted them off of my back and to leave me alone. If I could take back those words I would. Not one day passes without me thinking about what got me into this mess.

Hopefully, justice will be done and I'll be a free

man. Will you come and visit me when I am Evie? You know you and I would have such a good time together I just know we'd never stop laughing and we'd never run out of things to say.(smile)

You wanna know something Mrs Lovely, you already have love and passion in your life, you just can't see it. Look out at the stars every night and think about me. I'm like those stars, shining around you, looking out for you each and every day Can you handle that? Keep strong at school and don't keep me waiting too long for a letter, you know how much I love receiving them. No more lies now, the truth is what matters. And remember, you are not married to David anymore and Geoff has already let you down. Stay away from both of them and stay off of those pills.(smile)

Love Troy

Ps I'm enclosing a list of books I'd like to read. You need to send them through Amazon, you can't send anything to me directly.

19th May 19

Dear Troy,

I received your letter this morning and I'm here telling you that my life seems to be falling apart. Something terrible happened today at school and after I got home earlier on I had to take two of my pills and now I'm sitting with a large glass of red wine next to me and I just know I'm going to be reaching for another one soon. I know you don't like me relying on these pills but Geoff thought they might help to calm me down. I just don't know what to do with myself so the only way to take my mind off things is to write to you. I hope you don't mind. At the end of the day the Head called me into her office and told me a pupil had made a serious allegation against me. Basically I'm supposed to have sworn at Billy Jones and grabbed his wrist with such force that I hurt it quite badly. According to the Head, Billy showed her a red mark on his wrist, which he said, he was going to show to his dad who would not be happy. I told her the whole thing was ridiculous as I was the one being persecuted by Billy and his little gang of mates ever since the incident in the canteen before Easter. I told her about them harassing me and that I thought Billy might have spat at me, which I had intended to report but somehow hadn't got round to.

I then told her about various other things which have happened and all the while she just sat, stony faced, nodding her head every now and then. Suddenly, she flicked her blonde hair behind her ears, drummed her painted nails on the desk, leant forward and her voice changed to ice. She told me that these were

serious allegations which she had to take seriously even if, personally, she didn't believe that I was capable of calling a pupil 'a fucking waste of space.' She said she had statements from Mustafa and Omario confirming that this took place along the back corridor outside room 83. And then she started saying something else about child protection and Billy being under sixteen and if the step father went to the police, but by then I was frozen in shock and just couldn't react or say anything. Troy, it's all a complete pack of lies. It is my word against three pupils. I sat there staring at the picture of three ballerinas on the wall and I began to shake. I was desperate not to break down and cry in front of her I know how she detests weakness. Actually she rather awkwardly, put her arm round me and assured me she was sure nothing would come of all this and that, off the record, she knew exactly what Billy and his friends were like, but that I should have reported the two incidents as soon as they had happened. She assured me she didn't believe their side of the story at all but at the same time advised me to get in touch with my union just in case Billy's father decided to take the matter further.

I know that this is all trivial and ridiculous compared to what you are going through and I really am going to try my hardest not to let it get to me. Geoff made me lie down on the sofa today when I got home from school and he was just so sweet. He fetched my pills, fed the cats and made me drink a cup of tea with sugar. He held my hand and just kept reassuring me in his calm voice that everything would be alright and that the police were not fools and would soon get the measure of Billy, Mustafa and Omario. Also, he was sure Billy's father had been in the local newspaper last year for attacking his neighbour with

a garden fork. I know you don't think Geoff is right for me but he really is a kind man despite his disapproval about me writing to you. Actually he has been extremely complimentary about my writing and has convinced me that I must continue with it. He even disagreed with my analysis of Ruby being slightly pathetic and needy by telling me that if I continued with the novel she might just surprise me. He swore blind he saw real signs of strength in Ruby and that I wasn't give up on her.

I was so sorry to hear about Brian but maybe you are being a little hard on his wife. I mean it would be terrible to witness someone you love dying in front of you like that. I'm just trying to see it from her point of view as I'm sure it didn't mean that she didn't love or care about him. I feel for you and the other men so deeply I cannot imagine how people even want to work in prisons.

I know you would like me to visit you Troy and maybe I will one day but at the moment I have too much going on in my own life and I'm also a little nervous about flying. Going on an aeroplane all that way is a terrifying prospect and then where would I stay? Houston is a long way from the prison. I don't drive so I just don't know how I would get to it. You say such nice things to me Troy, and I want to thank you. I know I haven't fully explained everything to you and I have to see you are extremely perceptive about me at times. The cutting of the faces in a few photographs is easy to explain. After David told me that he was leaving, he proceeded to tell me that I had driven him away by my increasingly irrational behaviour. He said he found my constant knapping on the sofa in front of the television totally unreasonable as well as the fact that I had

started taking one of Jamie's soft toys to bed with me. (a small monkey we'd bought for him.) Writing this now I feel you must think how immature and childish I am but grief can do strange things to a person.

One night David kicked 'Softy' out of the bed kicked the door in a temper and sat with his head in his hands, his eyes shut. He told me he couldn't bear living with me any longer that I was just 'too much'. He listed my increasingly, as he called it, erratic behaviour as a sign that I no longer cared about him and that, since Jamie's death, I had shut him out, indulging myself in grief. I resented the word indulge and I'm ashamed to admit I was the one who snatched the scissors out of the kitchen drawer and started threatening to cut him out of my life literally.

I marched into the sitting room, grabbed our wedding photograph from the sideboard ripped it out of the silver frame and tore it to pieces. What followed was terrible, we began to fight and before I knew what was happening he had raced into our bedroom grabbed Softy by his tail opened the front door and thrown him out into the road, yelling at me to 'grow up.' I couldn't bear to think of Softy lying alone in the dark so I dashed out in my nightdress and brought him back in. David was very apologetic and tried to comfort me saying over and over how badly he knew I was hurting but didn't I realise he was as well? We sat crying together on the side of the bed but nothing got any better between us. And now David has the cheek to tell me things are not going well between him and his fancy woman. Honestly, what does he expect? If you want the real truth Troy, I actually cut his face out of all our photographs

after he told me he had met someone else. I still see it as being his fault though, so in a sense, the way he treated me made me behave in that extreme way. We went out for a meal last Friday but, to be honest, David didn't look very well. His eyes were bloodshot and his complexion almost grey. They had a new Head in January and he is busy changing everybody's responsibilities and David has now been put in charge of data analysis which he loathes. All the senior management team deeply resent this new Head who apparently, has spent vast sums of money on refurbishing his office whilst David has been moved to a small windowless one, next to the boys toilets. I'm afraid to say I couldn't help laughing when David told me how he has to keep leaving his office to catch the boys truanting their lessons to have a quick cigarette. Last week he foolishly left his door open and someone crept into his office whilst he was yelling at the boys to come out of the cubicles. Poor David, some wretched child had pressed delete on his computer and all his target grades for year nine disappeared.

He insisted on paying and actually began to apologise for the way he treated me when we were married. He says he knew he hadn't been a very good husband and that he'd been a fool to think hooking up with someone fifteen years younger would make him happy. Apparently, she wants to start a family but David hasn't told her about Jamie and he announced he'd been diagnosed with some sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome (a sort of delayed grief reaction) and is having counselling. He says we've never had, what you Americans would term 'closure' and his counsellor, Ophelia, has suggested that he talk to me in a non-blaming, non-judgemental way about what happened. We stayed for ages in the restaurant but it

hasn't finished anything for me. In fact it has stirred up all the emotion I try so hard to contain. With all the upset in my life I'm afraid my house cleaning has started to fall apart. You know how I like to Hoover every day Troy but I simply can't face it. After Geoff went home today, I fell asleep and woke dreaming of you sitting in your cell whilst I raced in with a huge silver key and let you out.

Thank you for the sweet kind things you so frequently say to me I'm sorry, one again, to have been such a disappointment. I hope the next letter you receive from me won't be written from a prison cell in London somewhere. I'm so scared about what might happen. Supposing I go to court? Everyone will think I am a violent and unbalanced woman and I shall lose my job and my house. How can Billy's parents believe what those boys have been saying about me?

Love Evie

20th May

Dear Troy,

I simply can't believe what has happened and I need to talk to you, the one person in my life I know I can truly depend on.

I went into school this morning having taken two of my pills so I would remain calm but during the first lesson I received a note from the Head's secretary telling me I must go and see her at break. Trying to teach after that was virtually impossible; my mind completely froze over. Sophie asked me why Desdemona mentioned Cassio when Othello is quizzing her about the missing handkerchief and I simply opened and shut my mouth without being able to formulate a single word.

Lizzie asked me if I was alright, and Steve suggested fetching Lindsay sensing there was definitely something wrong with my reactions. I allowed them to escort me to the English office where I burst into tears over Lindsay and told her the whole story. She couldn't have been sweeter although she did tell me she had been a little concerned about me recently, and that I hadn't seemed, 'quite myself'(whoever she is) and hadn't done for the past few months. She said the police would soon get the measure of the three boys although she voiced surprise about Omario who was very bright and actually a boy with real principles but she worried about Billy's influence over him. As for Billy's father, Lindsay had had 'words' with him at a parents' evening in year ten when he tried to suggest that Billy's disruptive behaviour was because he wasn't being 'fully

stimulated' in her lessons and that he considered poetry, 'gay' and appealing to 'poofers' He became so unpleasant and aggressive that she refused to see him at the next parents evening and admitted he was just the sort of man who would want to stir up trouble. Apparently, he'd been permanently excluded when he was at school for assaulting a science technician and as a parent now spends most of his time in school, arguing with staff about how, his Billy is 'a real clever lad' who is mistreated and unfairly judged by all teachers just because of who his father had been.

As you can imagine, by the time I got to the Head's office I was expecting the worst and I wasn't wrong. She looked awkward and tried feebly to smile but it was one of those fake ones and her eyes didn't show any warmth at all. I found myself thinking that she had shark's eyes; cold and grey. She started coughing nervously and began to tell me that that Billy's father had gone to the local police station and made an assault charge against me. I hardly heard the next words as a strange kind of buzzing started inside my head but phrases like "Billy is under sixteen" and "child protection have been informed" whizzed around in the room and around my head. And then the phrase , "suspend you from work until the matter has been formally concluded". I think I started crying after this phrase.

The Deputy Head Francis appeared out of nowhere and they passed me tissues and cups of water whilst I tried so hard to calm myself down whilst they both kept insisting they've never known these kind of cases go as far as going to court. Whilst Francis kept telling me that all the staff would be behind me my teeth started to chatter and the ringing in my

ears meant I just couldn't really hear much of what was being said.

The Head began to drum her red nails gently on her desk as I sobbed into the roll of toilet paper Francis had given me. I tried not to Troy, I did but all I could see was myself standing in a court room attempting to defend myself against three boys who were determined to ruin my career once and for all. She told me that she'd spoken to Lindsay who told her that I hadn't seemed, 'quite right' recently but when she asked me if this was true I totally denied it. Troy what could I say? I felt, or rather I saw, betrayal. Lindsay. No longer the sweet, supportive, kind woman I'd always imagined her to be but, like a Lady Macbeth, outside all smiles and praise, inside poison and plotting against me.

I managed to mumble between the tears something about the pupils in the school being out of control and that I was a very sensitive person but the more I said, the worse I seemed to be making it until the Head stopped me very firmly and picked up the phone to order me a taxi. She attempted a smile and asked me if I'd ever considered counselling. She told me I was entitled to some and gave me the number of occupational health to ring.

The cheek of 'telling me to get better' and 'to try not to worry.' Oh it's all very well for her isn't it? Safe from the mayhem round the corridors; shut in her lovely office. That red-lipsticked mouth moved again, a slash of scarlet against her white skin. Bitch I thought to myself between my sobs. Then she started creeping to me trying to make out what an excellent teacher I was even though she's never even seen me teach. Quite frankly I don't think

she's done any teaching for about the last five years so how would she know anything? They called a taxi for me and as she and Francis held onto my arms going down the stairs I felt like Blance DuBois in 'A Streetcar named Desire' being led off to the mental institution. Luckily lessons had started so there weren't too many students or teachers around. Troy, I haven't got the words to tell you exactly what I am feeling at this point in time. It's like watching my life play out and disappear in front of me.

Before I started writing this letter I tried to take my mind off things, shutting my eyes and hoping for sleep as I lay on the sofa but my mind led me down a terrible path. I began to remember how Ruby used to creep into her sons' bedroom, to make sure they were covered with their duvets at night. (Josie told me that's what she used to do when her sons were little) I remember writing, ' She bent down and kissed each sleeping child astonished as always by their velvet cheeks and quiet beauty.' After Jamie died I could not write another word.

You don't know how hard I've tried not to think about Jamie or anything to do with young children by throwing myself into my school work and cleaning night and day. Now what? At this precise moment, I cannot see much reason for going on. I must wait for the police to contact me and then I will have to go and make a statement which will allow them to decide if they will press charges or not. I have never been in trouble with the police and I just can't believe this is all happening. Is this how you felt? I have phoned my union and they are arranging for a solicitor to contact me who will accompany me to the police station when I have to give my statement.

I'm going to disappoint you by admitting I have poured myself another glass of wine despite it being only five o'clock. And now I'm sitting here, full of self-pity and self loathing, wishing, wishing for what? That I could be anyone else other than myself.

All I want is my baby back. To feel, once again, his soft cheek against mine, to be able to kiss his blond hair and hold his warm hand. Troy, I am crying and cannot write anymore. I do hope you are bearing up I know my troubles are nothing compared to yours.

Your true friend,
Evie

May 27

Dearest Evie,

I tripped out real bad when I got your letter dated May 19. I started to reply straight away but then I received the next letter dated May 20 so I decided to start again and respond to some of the issues in your letters.

Firstly Evie, I just know you are stressing yourself out too much with all the stuff going on at your school. You are letting the situation take you over. You need to keep a sense of perspective about it all. Nothing will happen.

Secondly, I thought I told you to stay off of those damn pills and yet you have mentioned how you have been taking them and that Geoff is now suggesting you need them. Just who does this dude think he is? I'm straight up worrying my sorry ass off about you mixing those pills with alcohol, that is not how it works. Check it out, I have to deal with my head every day in here and I could ask the officers for medication if I wanted to but I need to own myself and deal with the issues inside me. You be getting this incident at school out of all proportion and if you are not careful it will lead to you neglecting yourself. You mean a great deal to me and I hate to think of you getting so worked up over some dumb ass school students. Hell, hasn't the head disciplined those boys for the way they have behaved? You should have reported those incidents like I told you to. Your school does not sound a good place In my high school the Principal made sure us students obeyed the rules, we knew we couldn't mess him around. Those boys are lying and they will be found out. You just have to keep your cool and not let them drag you down.

Now what are you writing, wishing, 'that you could be anyone other than myself.' There is nothing wrong with you Evie, you just let other people have too much power over you. I grew up with a mother who couldn't look after me and my sisters we had nothing and you know what I hated most was that I could never invite any of my school friends home, especially not my white friends. I loved my mama, but I was ashamed of her too. I worried that I'd arrive home and she'd be drunk or worse, that that good for nothing Evan would be there too. But Mama loved me, I know it and she still does. But I have always believed in myself and never allowed others to make me feel bad. Hell, I could have grown up to hate white people like so many brothers do, but I don't. Baby, stop playing yourself short. You can deal with all this shit, you just need to find faith in yourself.

I don't mean to be hard on you Evie and now I'm going to tell you that you need to get rid of those good for nothing men in your life. They aren't good for you.

So now David has a counsellor to deal with the death of your child, hell he don't need a counsellor he just needs to grieve, accept it, and move on, there's nothing else that can be done. He must accept that he chose to leave you for a much younger woman and he's been wrong in not owning up to already having had a child. Maybe what he needs to do is start his own family, or is he afraid? He don't sound like a real man to me, it's like he still doesn't know how to keep it real. I know you said this was a few years ago but it all sounds like much more recent. Geoff be the same. One minute he's all over you, then he's with this female Geraldine, now he's back giving you his poems and telling you you need pills that take your mind away and you still don't know the score with him. If only you could let me out of here

with that silver key you dreamt about.(smile) I'd take care of you. No one would be able to hurt my girl anymore.

What is all this shit about disappointing me? I don't want you ever to think of yourself like that but you do disappoint me when you don't tell me the whole truth. Just be straight with me please, that's all I ask. What we have between us is real special and I truly believe we are soul mates. If only we had met out in the world, I just know we would have had such a good time.

I appreciate you letting me check out your writing and although it's not the kind of book I would read, you can write rather well. I'm not sure I agree with Geoff though about Ruby, I think you need to make her a lot more feisty. I want to see her stop taking that crap from her husband, he's a bully, like Evan was to Mama. I just hate to see women letting themselves be abused by men who really are weak on the inside. You need to get back to your writing Evie, you aren't going to school, you could get right back in to it. I'm not sleeping well at the moment. I keep dreaming about my boy Brian. It has been made worse by hearing two officers talking about him whilst they was standing outside the dayroom, which is near to the cell I have just been moved to. They was saying how he refused to say a word when he was strapped to that gurney and just cried. They be talking about how everyone knew his father had abused him since he's been a young boy. You know what Evie, his father deserved to be killed I just wish it could have been him having to suffer for years on DR living with the knowledge each time he woke up each morning that he was one day nearing to be being murdered by the State. Being shot, out in the world, when you don't know when it's coming to you is a much better way to die but America considers itself to be 'the land of

the free.' Yeah, right, but not if you are a black man living in the state of Texas. Do you know how many brothers and sisters there are on DR compared to how many of us there are in the population as a whole? Well let me put it this way, we are in a minority out there, but a majority on DR. So how fucked up is the system?

Some days over the past few weeks I've hardly bothered to talk to anyone. I get real down because I know what I am facing and I know that the State isn't interested in justice. Evie, I shouldn't be in this place. I had so much potential and I could have been about so much more yet here I am a wasted life on Death Row. I can't do shit for myself and I have to depend on others to handle things that I, as a grown man, should be handling. At times I feel so defeated and I don't want to die like this. My case is in the Supreme Court at the moment but if my appeal fails, that is it and I'll get an execution date. So from where I am, not likely to reach the age of thirty, your problems seem like the kind of problems I would just love to have. So get a smile on that lovely face of yours and face your enemies, you know who they are and there's another one too; yes you've guessed right, Evie McKendry herself.(smile) I'm expecting a visit from my sister Sherelle next week. She sent me photographs of her wedding in March and when I saw them, I cried like a damn baby. I should have been in those pictures. I was the only face missing, one of the few black students to graduate with honours at school who should have been standing next to my sister in a smart suit and with a broad smile on my face. Not a day goes past when I don't think of the mistakes I have made that have locked me away forever.

I have to go out for recreation now as they have changed“ the regulations and we now have two hours,

five days a week, before we was getting one hour seven days a week. So now we have two whole days when we don't leave our cells except to shower. The weather is very hot here although not as hot as it gets in July and August when the temperatures get to over a hundred. Luckily, I've got a fan to keep me cool.

Don't keep me waiting too long for a letter and know you're always being thought of. Try not to worry and remember that I love you and don't forget to look up at those stars.

Your true friend,
Troy

3rd June

Dear Troy,

I received your letter this morning and am replying straight away but the new pills I am on are making me feel quite strange and as if I'm not in the world but truthfully Troy, I think that's just where I most want to be; out of all this. I want to be lying on a sun bed, surrounded by pink roses, smelling their sweet smell. Roses have beautiful soft petals don't they? Do you know, when I was a little girl, my best friend Katrina and I used to make a kind of perfume from the petals. We'd collect lots of them and put them in jam jars then mix something in. What was it? I just can't remember now.

I must have been about six years old then because I remember how we would take this, 'perfume' into the house and present it to Mum and Dad. However, before we gave them the presents from the King and Queen of Rosania, we would find clothes from the dressing up box. I remember there was this beautiful black velvet jacket with embossed flowers; great twirling patterns. We'd stroke this jacket, as if it was an animal and imagine it had special powers; that whoever was wearing it would be instantly beautiful and special. Katrina said her parents didn't want that 'smelly muck' in their house but she said she didn't care because she knew she was really a princess anyway and that her parents had taken the wrong baby at the hospital. I spent hours in that velvet jacket hoping its magic would work on me. Some hope.

One day Katy didn't come round anymore. Mum told me she and her parents had moved. I begged and begged

her to tell me where; to somehow find out where Katy had gone to, but she would only say she'd had to move very suddenly and had left no address. I was heartbroken. I missed her so much and after that, when summer came round again, I hadn't the heart to make the rose perfume. And not long afterwards, Dad died and everything changed.

There are huge white clouds in the sky today and I'm wondering if when you die you get a kind of view of clouds as you vanish upwards into the brilliant blue space which shimmers, just out of eyesight, on the edge of the world. We'll all be there Troy: me, you, Jamie, my Dad, Brian. We'll be at peace. Happy. Not trapped inside ourselves and our tiny lives. Do you understand what I mean? I mean we all get stuck with our situations. In a box. Like inside a dark box with no way out. We spend our lives feeling around in the darkness our fingers searching for the edge of something so we can prise it open and be free. We open this box and escape but to what? The freedom of death.

It's very hot here at the moment and my head is muffled like my thoughts are all mixed up in heavy treacle. Is it hot in Texas? I'm sure those cells must be stuffy and that you miss the feeling of the wind in your hair. I stood in the garden last night staring at the stars; thinking of you and the midnight rain felt so cold and smooth against my face, like it was washing everything away. I remember going to the police station Troy. I told them everything was lies. The police woman had the same shark eyes as Nova; cold and grey. I watched her sharp white teeth and waited for the bite. She didn't seem to believe me and said they had sent for cctv film to study and that she would be playing my taped

statement to her inspector who would decide if they are going to take the matter further.

It is so hard to speak properly when you are crying isn't it? Did you cry when you had to speak to the police? My solicitor was quite comforting. He kept passing me tissues and touching my arm in a fatherly way throughout. I should be hearing from them any day.

I must go and lie down now. The doctor says I need plenty of rest. Mum insisted on coming up to, 'look after me' and I must say the relief of not having to do anything is lovely. Everyone keeps telling me it will all be alright, but what if it's not? Lindsay came round to visit the other day and apparently lots of children keep asking when I'll be back and some have appeared to be genuinely upset about what has happened to me. Rumours are flying about why I'm not at school.

I dream about Jamie every night and this morning, looking out of the window, I saw a small blond haired boy rush past the house. I wrenched open the window and found myself yelling his name over and over. His mother bundled him into his buggy and shot off up the road as if I was about to leap out and abduct him. Mum sat and stroked my forehead. She is a great comfort to me even though she doesn't approve of my writing to you.

I guess I should miss going to work but do you know something Troy at the moment I don't feel like I ever want to go back. I'm going to lie here and shut my eyes. Sometimes I just wish I didn't have ever wake up again. I just want someone to love. If only I could see Phil for just one more time and tell him

that I couldn't help it. I know it was wrong. Oh no more no more of the past. I am done for Troy. Finished.

Evie

PS Why would you love someone as crazy as me?

PPS Sorry this letter isn't very long I'm not feeling too good.

June 11

Dear Evie,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health and with a smile on that lovely face of yours.(smile) Everything is everything on this end, each day is just damn boring and the same old thing. As you can see, I received your letter last night and wasted no time in hitting you back up.

Evie you're gonna have to pull yourself together girl. You need to get off of that damn sofa and stop feeling sorry for yourself. Come on, like I said in my last letter, I would straight up love to have your problems, in fact you haven't really got any as far as I can see. Firstly, you haven't done anything wrong. Even if this case goes to court, which I doubt, there is no evidence to convict you and I'm sure the police get this kind of thing all the time. Check it out, who are the police going to believe, you, a mature woman and an experienced teacher- or three sorry assed punks who look like they just wanna to cause trouble?

Secondly, you have to accept that your boy Jamie is gone. You have to deal with the fact that he's not going to come back. Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault. You was a loving mother to Jamie but loving someone is no guarantee of protecting them from everything. We are not gods Evie. We can love people as hard as we can but we can't stop the bad' stuff from happening. I couldn't stop them from killing my boy Brian. You have to let it go. Then there's the matter of David and Geoff and now you are writing about wanting to talk to Phil. Just how many men are there in your life Evie and who in the hell is he? Why would you wanna be talking to him now about

something you did wrong? Evie, don't be playing me for a damn fool. We was going to be honest with each other. Didn't you tell me I knew you like no one else and now you are messing with my mind. Can't you see what you are doing to me?

Yeah I'm kinda angry today, but where does your anger go to Evie? I don't think I've ever heard you say one angry thing about anything. Apart from how you got angry with your Principal. Girl you need to find it, and quick. You find that anger and you straight up be off of that sofa and ready to face the world. And what is all that shit about wanting to die and meeting me up in some bed of white clouds. I ain't planning on dying if I can help it and you better not be planning it either. How do you think I'm going to feel knowing you have gone off and killed yourself over all this shit. Evie, you are worth more than this and why are you letting yourself get into such a state over this nonsense? Why do you listen to other people's disapproval about you writing? What we have between us is the most wonderful and special thing I've ever had with anyone. I know more about you than I ever did about Roseleen, even though I truly believed we would be married now if I was out in the world. I've told you the truth, I didn't kill anyone and don't let anyone persuade you otherwise. I am an innocent man, condemned by an all white jury in the Southern States of America for a crime I didn't commit.

You must not listen to what other people say about me, we know the truth and why ask me why I would love you. Why wouldn't I? You are an intelligent, sweet, kind, funny woman. You have a lovely smile and a pretty face. You are a great teacher and were, and will be again, I 'm sure, a loving mother. When I look at your photograph I see nothing less than an angel, but an angel who is far too messed up to

believe anyone could simply love her for being herself.

Why don't you believe me when I tell you I love you Evie, for it is the truth. I'm not just saying it because I think it's what you want to hear.

The weather is very hot at the moment. All the officers are complaining about it but I'm surprised they haven't turned the heating on being as how we usually freeze in the winter and boil in the summer.(smile) I had my recreation at 6.30 am. I really hate having to go out so early but if you refuse it just means you are locked up for 24 hours. This new cell is so noisy by the dayroom. All day I hear talking and hollering and laughing and I don't get any peace to read or write in. I have to hang my towel in front of the door when I want any privacy. I don't feel like having to conversate with every sorry-ass who happens to find themselves outside of my door.

My solicitor told me that I should be hearing some news any day now, I just hope it is positive. We have some pretty good issues we have been working on and I just hope it all works out and that all this business can be forgotten. Will you come and see me when I am free? It will be so good to go out and have a meal.

What is your favourite food? I love chicken. My grandmother used to roast a real nice chicken. Now that's a smell I haven't smelt for a while. I love to treat my women to meals in nice restaurants and you'd be treated better than anyone.(smile)

My sister, Patrice, came to visit and we had a great time. I haven't seen her for over a year as she's been busy with her new job. I straight up felt like like bawling when it was time for her to go as she doesn't know when she'll be able to visit again. Her husband, Preston, doesn't like the idea of her visiting her brother in prison, and especially not

DR. She told me my grandmother and grandfather were planning on coming next month but that my other sister had her 24th birthday party recently and they haven't got enough money to put petrol in the car. I really don't have many visitors anymore. I've written three times to my mother but I've not heard anything. I can't help worrying about her. You know how I hate asking Evie, but I'm straight up out of money again. I'd really appreciate it if you could send me another fifty dollars. You know I wouldn't ask unless I had to. My family try their best but they don't have very much. I received the books you sent me, thank you. I have to go now, they have brought the evening meal round though I don't feel like eating. Know that you are always being thought of and don't keep me waiting too long. Write me back soon as I am worrying about you for real. Stop stressing yourself out about all this bullshit.

Love,
Troy

June 30

Dear Evie,

What has happened to our correspondence? What is the damn deal Evie? I'm straight up worried sick as I have never gone this long without hearing from you. If I wrote anything which offended you then that's my bad. I realise I might have come across that I was mad with you for that last letter you wrote which made me think you was planning to do some harm to yourself. I just don't even want to contemplate a world without my girl Evie in it and knowing what you mean to me I was mad that you was being so negative and talking shit about meeting everyone up in some place beyond the white clouds. I hated reading that stuff about disappearing into another place. Evie, don't you think that I don't spend every day thinking that I would give everything to be out in that world that you want to escape from?

Sometimes I wake up with tears on my cheeks because I've been dreaming I'm just somewhere standing on a road or sitting in my grandmother's house and there are friends and family just sitting about laughing and my sisters are teasing me. And I wake up to find that I'm still here in this small, noisy cell where I'm totally alone for most of the day but there is noise all the time. Sometimes I want to scream and holler at the officers that I can't stand being locked up for another second, but I know it would do me no good I'd just catch a case and would have all my privileges withdrawn. On a daily basis I try and make the best of my life. I am still alive and to me life is precious.

I never had any of these kinds of thoughts back in the day, I was just hanging out with my friends,

doing stuff and seeing Roseleen. I never imagined I would ever end up in prison.

Life on DR has forced me to think about the things that are really important and just being alive in one of those. Evie, despite everything, you are alive and free. You might be tripping out with all the things that are happening right now but you can leave your house and go anywhere you want to. You can decide what to wear, when to take a shower, when to eat, what to eat. Evie you have choices whereas I have none. Some of the men here have committed heinous crimes, but does it make it right that there is no actual thought that they could be rehabilitated? And then there are people like me, convicted of a crime I did not commit condemned to spend life in this 5' by 9' cell, knowing that most likely I'm going to die before my thirtieth birthday.

But you know what life has been strange here to say the least and you are never going to believe this, but I am a father! Yes Troy Howardson has a daughter of nine and a half years of age and her name is Kaisa. I received a letter from Roseleen. She was explaining how she never told me she was pregnant and made all her friends and family swear to keep her secret as she didn't want her daughter to know her daddy was a no good criminal and been charged with murder. She said it was that letter from you that finally made her change her mind in that she started to remember that at one time we had loved each other for real and that this little girl had been brought into this world in love.

Kaisa has kept asking about her daddy and so Roseleen has decided that she needs to see me. When I got the letter I broke down and bawled like a newborn baby it was so loud my neighbour hollered at me complaining that when I blew my nose it sounded like a foghorn.(smile) Roseleen sent me a photograph of her

and she is just the prettiest little girl you could imagine. I'm enclosing the photograph so that you can check her out for yourself. Now I have to change my visiting list to put them both on to it. Roseleen seems to have done well for herself and she's trained to be a teacher of second grade students. She says Kaisa is very intelligent (like her father!) and loves animals. Evie, this is the only good thing that has happened in the past few years since my life took its turn for the worst and everytime I look at this photograph I start bawling again.

All the guys keep teasing me that I'm turning into a woman talking about my little girl all the damn time. But some of them have said they be jealous that out in the world there is a part of me. Evie this is the best news I've ever had and I better change the subject soon or I'll be dripping tears onto this letter and then you won't be able to read it! (smile) My neighbour does really neat drawings copied from photographs so I plan to get him to do one after you have viewed my beautiful girl for yourself. Hey, check it out, now I have two girls to look after and make sure they are alright!

All this tells me to remember that miracles do happen and that maybe God is looking after me in his own way. If I should die and not get my freedom I know that there is a part of me still living. My only concern now is that Roseleen doesn't back down from her promise, I know how much I hurt her and I mean to make it up to her as much as I can and I need her to explain to Kaisa that I am an innocent man whose only crime was to fall in with bad company and make a mistake which might cost him his life. In this place there is nothing to look forward to; nothing at all. I do not have a future just more endless, boring days to pass, with the same shit happening and each one bringing the inevitable closer. Now I can spend

time thinking about Kaisa and all the things I'm going to talk to her about. I've enclosed a short note for her inside my reply to Roseleen. I just can't explain what this means to me.

I am thinking now about what has been happening to you and this issue at your school. Being a man I did not cry when I was arrested I couldn't really believe it was happening to me. Whatever I told them they turned it round and twisted it about so that when I told the next part of my story it didn't fit with what I'd said before. The officers who arrested me called me a 'sorry-ass' and accused me of having an attitude problem. They never actually used the word 'nigger' to me but they might just as well have. I remember how hot it was that evening when they came to my house. I'd just come out of the shower and the first thing one of the officers said before putting cuffs on me was, 'Get your clothes on boy we want to talk to you in connection with a murder and you are the prime suspect.' My grandmother stood with her mouth wide open I can remember seeing the sweat on her brow and the way she put her hands up to her mouth mouthing 'No no no' over and over again. When they dragged me through the door she began hollering my name and this scream like a banshee came straight out of her throat. To tell you the truth I felt like I was in the middle of a bad dream everything seemed like it was happening in slow motion. I watched the chicken stew crash to the floor and the dog rush to eat it whilst this terrible noise just went on and on as the officers read me my rights.

I can't hardly remember the next few days. Chuck and Roy had told some terrible lies about me and just like with you Evie, it was their word against mine. To this day I don't know why I decided to confess and it was the biggest mistake of my life.

I do hope you are not stressing out with it all that nonsense too much. Everything will work out for you Evie, I just know it will. Please write me as soon as you can as everyday when I hear the officers come round with the mail I wait at my door hoping that I will be receiving a letter from you. Keep your head up girl and don't stand out in the rain too much and get a chill.(smile) Did you know they used to execute people at 12 o'clock at night? Now they always do it at six o'clock, midnight in your time. Know you're always being thought of.

Your friend,
- Troy
PS I love you

10th July

Dearest Troy,

I am so sorry for the delay in replying to your two letters but the last few weeks have been very traumatic for me. I am still suspended from school but I have been deeply touched by letters and cards of support from students and staff. No one appears to believe the allegations but the police legally have to investigate any claims of alleged abuse or assault against a young person. Unfortunately, in my case, the police have decided there is enough evidence to try and get a prosecution and I should be hearing very soon as to when I'll be appearing in court. I am trying so hard to be brave and you'll be pleased to know that I have, metaphorically speaking, got off the sofa but I have to tell you that I could not have done it without the help of my mother and these anti-depressants that I am on now. In fact, she has only just gone home because she's a little concerned about Jack's health, it seems he has recently lost a lot of weight and is feeling excessively tired.

Since these anti-depressants have started to work I have been feeling an awful lot better despite informing my doctor they would make no difference to me. I've been amazed in the way my spirits have lifted and I am no longer overwhelmed with punishing thoughts about myself. I have also tried to take your advice about the writing and instead of lying in bed crying and feeling sorry for myself, I am trying to do a little writing every day. I can't face Ruby and her life so I've started to write about a woman who is accused of shop-lifting. I'm not quite sure where it will end up going but I like escaping into another

world and it really does help to take my mind off my real life.

I have been having some terrifying dreams though and I hope they are not connected to the medication. One of my most vivid reoccurring ones is that of a small, pink baby lying on a beach. It's night-time and the sky is pitch black and the baby is just curled up in the foetal position, not moving at all just lying there; abandoned and alone. In my dream all I can think about is that I must get to this baby before the tide comes in. In the dream I'm always running and stumbling across the sand, my feet sticking and sinking into it and I'm crying out a name but I don't know what I'm calling. The wind is ripping the breath out of my mouth and my arms are stretched out as I desperately try and reach the baby, but I never get there. I always wake up, just as I'm about to scoop it to safety. I wake sweating whenever I have this dream, my heart thumping like a machine.

At first when I started these pills I felt like I was going crazy. I can't explain but it's why I couldn't write. Oh Troy the panic was terrible; like something was alive inside me just about to break out like that ugly little creature in the film Alien. Did you ever see it? I've always wanted to be like Ripley, the cool unflappable heroine battling aliens and saving people. Unfortunately I'm more likely to be the one screaming, "Oh my God we're all going to die!" Anyway. After about three weeks I woke up one morning and it was like something had lifted off me. That I no longer had that heavy feeling of dread pressing down on my head. Bliss.

Oh dear, I must stop talking about myself and tell you how thrilled I was that you have discovered you

are a father. I know you have not met Kaisa yet but I do hope that Roseleen does bring her to visit you. Troy, it will be a magical moment, children really are the most precious gifts anyone can ever receive. I've never loved anyone else the way I loved Jamie and, If I'm being really honest, and this is a terrible thing to confess to you, I actually felt quite jealous when I read about Kaisa. I don't even like to admit to such a thought as it seems so selfish and ungracious of me. She is a beautiful little girl and once I'm well enough to go shopping, I fully intend to buy her a little present. Do you think Roseleen would mind?

I have got your letters out in front of me and I've just read them through again. I'm not always good with the truth am I? Do you know lately I've even begun to wonder if I know what the truth is and I think that's why I quite often feel I have disappointed you in some way. Being your sharp and perceptive self you are quite often able to read between the lines, or so it seems to me. Or maybe you just have more time to digest sentences more carefully than I do. I can't believe I mentioned Phil though and I honestly have no recollection at all of writing about making myself disappear. I do apologise profusely for such an error of judgement and insensitivity.

I only got divorced last year, I'm sorry I wasn't more honest, it's just that I wanted you to see me as someone who had managed to cope with adversity and move on in a positive way. I didn't want to come across as some sad, lonely middle aged woman with only one or two friends. Well, to be honest, one now since Louise has announced her engagement to Andrew and

never rings anymore. My other friend Josie has got too many problems with her a husband who is a compulsive gambler and teenage sons who spend their days with their friends smoking weed and eating pot-noodles. She doesn't have time to see me very much at the moment though we have spoken recently on the phone and she's due to visit at the weekend.

I haven't told you Troy but David is living with me again, temporarily of course but, don't worry, we are definitely not getting back together. It's just that Omelette has thrown him out and he arrived two weeks ago standing in the rain on my doorstep saying he'd nowhere else to go. Mum of course, was delighted and literally pushed me out of the way as she flung her arms around him and dragged him into the sitting room. I'm not sure it was a good idea and already I've found myself making him cups of lemon tea in the morning and those damn lemons are starting to appear again in the fridge!

Now Mum has gone, he's taken over the cooking and insists on making the most enormous meals every night. I keep telling him not to cook with full cream or I will be blowing up like a balloon. He's hidden all the wine as well since finding me with a glass at two in the afternoon last week. Despite my pointing out it was only because I'd just had a letter from the police. In all honesty, he's starting to behave like a detective himself insisting it's for my own protection as it's obvious I'm not quite myself yet. I really am sick to the back teeth of people using this phrase about me. But I am feeling much stronger Troy, much better unless I allow myself to think about what happens to me if I do actually get prosecuted but David doesn't seem convinced. In fact,

he's persuaded me to make an appointment with some sort of psychiatrist in Harley Street next week telling me what a difference seeing Ophelia, his bereavement counsellor, has made to his life and telling me that I'll be normal once I've had my head sorted out properly, so to speak. Someone from his school recommended this man and I know he's acting in my own best interests but I'm beginning to feel quite smothered. Also, I'm not sure that I really believe all this psychological nonsense.

He had the cheek to complain that the house was an absolute tip last week and what had happened to me? I snapped back that I thought he'd be pleased I wasn't obsessively cleaning all the time and that I was doing something creative. He looked really annoyed when I told him as an artist, that I didn't always have things like getting out of my dressing gown or loading the dish washer as high priorities anymore. For one horrible moment I thought he'd caught sight of the cigarette packet I'd found when searching through my desk drawers for a short story I remembered writing once. It had had one cigarette left which I smoked with real guilty pleasure. Holding the smoke inside my lungs and exhaling deeply produced the most amazing sensation of weightlessness.

He marched around the room picking paper off the floor and then began reading bits out loud. I was furious. He then started to tell me that he'd actually read some of it the night before and had been impressed but I was incensed that he'd just helped himself as if my writing was a bowl of custard or something.

It's the first time I've been angry in a long time but I couldn't sustain it. Reading my novel secretly, on his own, made me feel like I didn't exist, as if somehow, I was just a kind of shadow he could trample over. That's how I feel sometimes Troy, like a shadow, like a person with no substance, no strength. Have you ever felt like that? I'm sure you haven't. Despite my initial outburst of anger I ended up apologising for calling the male character David. I was at pains to reassure David that of course he was nothing like the smug chauvinistic husband in the novel. You know what, it was David who walked out of our marriage, so how does he always ends up making me feel it was actually all my fault? He had the good grace to apologise and promised he'd only read my writing if I invited him to. I even ended up feeling quite chuffed that he thought I definitely had some talent!

Enough about the sad life of me. How are you? I'm sure it's really hot in Texas now. Have you heard from your mother recently? Have you had any news from your solicitor? Isn't it strange that we've both been accused of crimes we haven't committed? I am so sorry that life has not worked out well for you. I'm not sure that mine has either really. But I want you to know that I think of you every day and wish there was more I could do to help. I'm not in a position to send you any money quite yet as I haven't been out of the house for several weeks. I don't really feel I can ask David he would not like me sending money to you at all, he's as disapproving as my mother really, and I hope he will actually post this letter. He has promised he will.

The weather is quite humid here and the cats do nothing but lie about panting. Heathcliff seems a

little unwell but David thinks I'm fussing and I've even caught him aiming sly kicks at him when he thinks I'm not looking.

Sensitivity to the animal world has never really been one of his strong points. Frankly he's beginning to get on my nerves. (David not Heathcliff.) He's assured me he has a few flats to go and see this week but I don't like the fact he's playing his Frank Sinatra CD's every night and can hear this dreadful music blasting out from the spare room and it is not good for my creative juices. He says he's going to cook me my favourite meal this Saturday and will allow me to have a little wine. What a control freak, honestly. He's obsessed with the danger of mixing alcohol and medication and luckily hasn't found the bottle of Australian Shiraz I've hidden in my wardrobe. I really feel like taking up smoking again properly, just to spite him.

Write soon dearest Troy,

Your loving friend,
Evie

July 17

Dear Evie,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health and with a smile on your lovely face. I was so relieved to receive your letter last week you don't know how hard it is for me to go for even a few days without hearing from you. It's like damn where in hell is she? I'm only playing with you girl so get that frown off of your face.(smile)

I know you've had a lot of trouble in your life recently but I've got big trouble Evie, big big trouble. It doesn't look likely that my appeal is going to be successful. My lawyer contacted me yesterday and informed me that all my appeals have failed. I am sorry to have to tell you this but I'll be very lucky if I'm still around at Christmas. Once your appeals have failed, the courts normally set a date very quickly. I don't want to die Evie. I don't want to leave all my family and friends. Hell I don't know how I'm going to face Mama and my grandmother and my sisters. How am I going to look my daughter in the eye knowing I may only get to see her a few times? I sure have fucked up my life haven't I?

Roseleen is bringing Kaisa to visit me on August 1 and despite the bad news, I'm really excited about seeing her. I appreciate you sending the photograph back to me I missed not having it to look at. I've managed to change my visiting list but I sure wish I was putting your name on it. You don't know what it would mean for me to see you but I can tell that you are not fit enough to travel. Heh girl I hope you be going out your own front door soon.

I am sorry to hear your mother's friend is not well, have they found out what is wrong with him yet? I 'm sure she's very concerned about him. Now Evie, what is going on with that sorry-ass ex-husband of yours.

I've told you before he is an EX-HUSBAND. Why are you letting him back into your life and dictating to you what you can and can't do? I felt so mad when you was telling me that he's persuaded you to make an appointment with a psychiatrist that I actually stood up and started hollering out loud. 'No No No'. One of the officers threatening me with catching a case if I carried on making such a noise. I wish I was the one looking after you, not him. He has proved he doesn't care by rejecting you in favour of a younger woman and now he's got you right back where he wants you, under his control. Can't you see what he's doing to you Evie? It's like he's got you as a prisoner and he's the guard. That is your house. Evie if you want a drink of wine girl, you have one, though truthfully I don't like seeing my women getting their drink on too much as you know. But we are talking about principles here and I'm not going to stand by and watch you having your soul sucked out of you by that sorry-ass. Why should you think of yourself as a shadow? The only problem you have is that you hold too many things inside of you instead of saying how you feel. You should practice getting mad Evie. Why are you crying when you should be shouting and kicking up a storm. Hell you be like some of the guys here who give up their appeals as they can't stand the stress. You would never catch me giving up and I don't want to hear you ever talking about giving up either. You know what I think Evie, you are always trying to find contentment through other people. You are looking in the wrong place, give up your unsuitable men and be your own person. You might find out that you stop feeling like a damn shadow then.

Hell, David will be putting locks on the front door next if you don't watch out. You making me so I'd like to shake you; to shake some sense into you and make you see Evie, the real woman, not some little

girl who is too frightened to grow up. Yeah, that's what I think the damn deal is and that's what your dream is all about. That baby is you and you don't need no doctor you just need to take a good look at yourself. I'm going to stop now before I say anymore things that I might regret you know I only want the best for you.

It is very hot here in Texas and I've been having trouble with my fan so my cell is almost unbearable. The damn thing keeps cutting out and I think I need to replace it. I'm also down to my last few stamps and I hate to ask again, but is it possible for you to send me any money? The trip to the bank will be a good reason to get you out of your house.(smile)

I forgive you for not telling me the whole truth about when everything happened to you. But what about you Evie, would you feel the same if you found out I hadn't been telling you the truth? I'm not saying I've lied to you but you frequently write about how you believe I'm innocent. Do you believe everything people tell you? Supposing I was to tell you I did kill someone. Would you still want to write me? Could you handle the thought that I might have taken away someone's life. Well could you Evie? I'm not confessing to anything I'm just raising the issue. You must have read about what I'm supposed to have done on the internet but you've never referred to it. I am going out for recreation soon so I need to finish this letter. If your case goes to court I'm sure it will be thrown out there and then. No one will believe those punks accusing you of all that nonsense. You've just got to believe it will all work out for the best and that your name will be cleared. I just feel sure you won't get prosecuted. Know you're always being thought of and don't keep me waiting too long.

Love Troy

PS Do you love me? I keep telling you I love you but you never respond.

23rd July

Dear Troy,

Miracles do happen! I am a free woman! I found out yesterday from the Head and the police that the case is now closed because one of the boys, Omario, apparently decided to tell the truth; that Billy had basically made up everything. Troy I feel my faith in human nature has been restored and the thing that I feel most thrilled me is that it is all down to Lindsay.

She had taken a group of students to see 'The Crucible' by Arthur Miller, do you know it? Well, seemingly, John Proctor's refusal to lie at the end, even though it would have saved his life, affected Omario so badly that the thought of their lies possibly ending my career, made him go and confess to Nova yesterday morning. Oh bless his dear heart. I feel better this morning that I've felt for months and although school officially breaks up for the summer holidays today I will be returning to work in September although I don't plan on being there much longer, there will be too many bad memories for me and truthfully, I feel like I need to get out of schools for a while and maybe do something else. I shall be handing my notice in when I go back which will allow them to find a replacement for me as soon as possible.

I'm very sorry to hear your news Troy, very very sorry. Do you want to talk about how you are feeling? I am here for you, you know that, and now this weight of worry has been lifted from me I'm hoping that some of my other symptoms will start to disappear. In

fact, as soon as I finish this letter, I shall be walking to the bank. David hasn't been keeping me a prisoner Troy, I feel foolish if I've given you the wrong impression, it's that I've been having panic attacks every time I've tried to leave the house. They really are horrible things and I hope you never have the misfortune to experience one.

A few weeks ago I decided to try to go out and post a letter to you but instead I ended up holding onto a tree with my eyes shut whilst an elderly couple attempted to calm me down. This poor old dear of about ninety kept telling me to breathe through my mouth as her husband stroked my hand and told me I was fine. One minute I'd been walking along the pavement thinking what a beautiful blue sky there was and the next thing I knew I felt like I might be going to faint and I couldn't catch my breath. I started to hyperventilate so badly I just reached out for the nearest tree, flung my arms round it and started to yell that I was dying and needed help. When I think back now, I cringe with embarrassment. I'm going to take it nice and gentle the next time I go out and if I start to feel at all anxious I shall breathe deeply and say, 'You are okay Evie, nothing is wrong.' I have found this technique works very successfully and so I'm sure I will be able to order that foreign draft for you.

I really hope by now you will have had a letter or even a visit from your mother and grandmother. You haven't mentioned your mother for ages, how is she? Jack is now in hospital as they can't seem to find out what is wrong with him. Mum is sick with worry and cried on the phone to me this morning saying how she couldn't bear to lose someone else she cared

about. For once I was able to be the one comforting her and I have promised to go down as soon as I am able to as Jack has asked to see me. Mum has been very good to me in the past few weeks, in fact it has made me wonder if I haven't actually been a bit hard on my judgements about her. It must have been terrible for her to be left to raise two young children after losing her husband. I think I'm finally beginning to realise that grief takes people in different ways.

Apparently, after Jack's first wife died, he had a headache for two years. Two years! I can't bear a headache for two days. The tests showed up no abnormalities in a neurological sense so Jack made his own diagnosis and concluded he hadn't actually cried enough. His solution was to buy as many sad films as possible so he could unleash his emotions and six months later, after many an evening spent sobbing into his handkerchief, he was feeling much much better. He swore that 'Shadowlands' which he watched ten times had been more helpful than all the bereavement counselling he'd been given. I laughed out loud when Mum told me what he'd said as he's such an advocate of 'The Talking Cure' as they say. She also told him I'm 'seeing someone' now (she's been worried sick about me apparently) and he said, 'About time too', which slightly irritated me.

Last week I met Dr Vonenburg for the first time and I'm not sure it went very well. First of all I thought he said his name was Kronenburg, which is the name of a beer, and so when I called him that he looked really annoyed and asked whether I thought I had a problem listening to people. So I began the session - you only get fifty minutes - explaining that I didn't really believe in these psychological

theories and that it had been my ex-husband's idea to book this appointment. The idea of me agreeing to something that I wasn't actually sure about made him start to talk about my obedience to authority. Being perched on a somewhat small chair as he sat behind an enormous mahogany desk waving his big hairy hands around I began to feel a terrible urge to giggle at the sheer irony of it; something he was obviously unaware of.

He was obviously paying close attention to my expression as he then asked what exactly was amusing me and when he fixed his enormous bulging eyes on me it stopped my desire to smile in an instant. Ye Gods I felt absolutely terrified.

Troy, I wanted to tell him what I was thinking, I really did, but his face seemed so huge and stern that, in all honesty, I was scared he would shout at me for being rude or something so I didn't mention his big desk and my small chair. The next forty minutes were spent with me telling him about the whole horrible experience at school and I got through an entire box of tissues. My eyes were so swollen by the time my fifty minutes was up that David looked almost frightened when I stumbled out of his room. When I go next time I'm determined to go on the tube myself as having David take me feels like I'm not capable of going there myself. Does that make sense? He has been very kind but I wish he would find somewhere to live soon.

I am quite sick of finding his papers and clothes everywhere and I can hear his snoring from the other end of the house. Despite his concern for me, having him around is making me remember the horror of the

last weeks of our marriage all over again and has been quite distressing.

I do hope your visit with Kaisa and Roseleen goes well I'm surprised they let children into visit. Before I forget, on the matter of your case. I did read about it once, before I started to write to you, I wanted to make sure you hadn't done anything which made me feel I couldn't write. Do you understand what I mean? But I believe what you say about your innocence, although from what you wrote maybe you don't think I would write to you knowing you were guilty. Troy, is there anything you want to confess to me? I didn't begin writing to someone on Death Row imagining they would be innocent. I know, obviously, there are miscarriages of justice but surely most people are there because they have committed a crime?

Lastly Troy. Love. It is very sweet of you to tell me you love me but I've always assumed it to be a kind of brotherly/humanitarian kind of love, you surely don't mean you love me in a romantic way do you? Oh dear Troy I am very fond of you, you know that, but love? I'm scared of love, you know that. Love has brought me nothing but unhappiness and I'm far too old for you anyway.

We have never met and despite the fact that we write very honestly you don't know me. Troy, there are things I have done which would shock and appal you, believe me and if I told you the truth you would soon change your mind about my character. Not for one minute though am I suggesting I have lied though as you know, I have slightly altered the truth at times, but I haven't deliberately tried to deceive you. What I am trying to say is, do we really know who we are when we exchange these letters? Recently I've begun

to seriously about this whole idea and sometimes I'm not even sure if I know who I am. I hope I haven't upset you and that you understand what I am trying to say.

Well I need to finish this letter now. I want you to know that I will never give up on you Troy and that I would still write to you even if you had killed someone. One terrible moment does not mean that you are a terrible person and I could never believe that about you. My thoughts are with you in this stressful time. Write soon and say hello to Roseleen for me.

Your true friend,
Evie

August 5

Dear Evie,

I received your letter yesterday morning and thought I'd hit you back up straight away being as this is my last stamp and there are some issues that we need to clear up between us.

I can't believe that an intelligent woman like you has not realised the way I feel about you. On numerous occasions we have both expressed very deep feelings and I have often told you that you have grown to mean an awful lot to me. It's like you have chosen to ignore my feelings entirely being so wrapped up with your own issues and problems. You write about feeling like some damn shadow but put yourself in my position, in your last letter you spent most of it describing your visit to that sorry ass doctor and then complaining about all sorts of things all related to the fact you have allowed your emotions to get totally out of hand. Damn it Evie you don't know how much I hate hearing about how you beat yourself up all the time about things. You are your own worst enemy.

I wrote you that at any moment I am going to be informed of the exact day and time that the State of Texas is going to take my life from me and you was going on about shit like you can't go out of your house because of the fact that you are so messed up inside of you. Did it ever occur to you that I can't leave my cell without being handcuffed and accompanied by two officers? You are damn right about giving me the wrong impression; the impression that you care about me and returned the love that I feel for you. You'll just never know the effect you have had on me and the thought of never ever seeing you just breaks my heart in two. I rarely cry in this place, you can't be seen to show weakness but for the

past few days I have just been staring at photographs of my two girls in front of me and been lying on my bunk face down with my eyes closed so I don't have to see those four walls which stare back at me every damn day of my life. I've sent away all my meals and even one of the female officers who I'm cool with has been back a few times to see if I'm okay. Hell I must have looked bad as she actually called me by my name and not my number, which is how they normally refer to us.

You also wrote, 'Do we really know who we are when we exchange these letters?' Just how fucked up is that? I have shared myself with you in a way I've never shared myself with any other person. Damn it Evie, I have shown you the person that I am and it's not my problem if you haven't been the same way with me. Now I've even been wondering why exactly you chose to write to someone on Death Row in the first place was it just to make you feel good about yourself or was it that you thought you could just, what, use someone like a diary, someone who you could confess all of your feelings to and who would love you despite your failings? True love Evie is being able to love someone who is a flawed individual yet be able to accept them. Have you ever imagined how I feel having you write about David and Geoff? Then you start mentioning Phil. Just how many others are there exactly? You know what Evie, I don't think you are telling me the truth in that you would still feel the same about me if I was a murderer. I think you just love the idea of writing to a person who is a victim as that's how you seem to view yourself. Or was it to solve your white liberal conscience? To ease your guilt you could just write to some poor black guy with a fucked up life? Because that's what it seems like at times.

I'm sorry to have to write you like this but we always promised to say what we think and I'm just telling it how it is. I'm going to change the subject now and tell you about my visit with Kaisa and Roseleen. I'm so pleased about the date because it's the beginning of the month and they allow an officer to take photographs with a polaroid camera and I've got one now of the three of us together although obviously I am behind the glass partition. All that keeps going through my head when I look at the photo is that I shoFuld have been out in the world and married to Roseleen and that this photograph should be of the three of us standing in front of our own house, not in some damn prison.

Kaisa is so sweet. First of all she was too shy to say anything and just sat with her arms round Roseleen chewing her fingernails but after a little bit she started to tell me all about her school and the animal stories she loves to read but every now and again I could feel my eyes filling up with emotion and she kept saying, "Are you crying Daddy? The guys be teasing me all the time since, calling me Mr Mum.

The four hours seem to just rush by and when the visit ended it was all I could do not to try and smash through the glass and run after them both. I am never going to feel my little girl's arms around me and I'll never be able to protect or look after her in any kind of way and I now understand and appreciate more fully how you feel about losing your son. When you was telling me first of all I couldn't really 'feel it' but after I saw my own child and experienced that rush of pure love for her, Evie, I did think of you and what you and your husband must have gone through together.

Roseleen has promised to bring her back to see me in two week's time. She knows I don't have much time

left and she was crying herself when she said
goodbye. We all put palms onto the glass together and
it has plain broke my heart.

I am so glad your ordeal is over. My execution date
has been set for December 3.

Your true and loving friend,
Troy C Howardson.

12th August

Dear Troy,

I am so sorry to hear your news and truthfully, I don't really know what to say except that I feel helpless to say anything other than maybe you will get a reprieve or something.

Perhaps you are right about me. Perhaps my reasons for writing to someone on Death Row are, or should I say were, suspect and perhaps I wasn't honest enough with myself that the real reason I wanted to write is that I have felt so desperately lonely and miserable over the past few years and that maybe I thought I could try to offer some friendship to someone who was also locked away and isolated from the world in the same way I have felt I am. But Troy, you have become a real person to me now and a person whose courage and strength I totally admire.

Your letter felt so angry and disappointed in me that perhaps we ought to stop writing to each other. Truthfully, there's no point in us carrying on with this friendship if you think I'm merely using you. If I have come across to you in that way, I am truly sorry, it certainly wasn't intended but, in my defence, you gave me the impression that hearing about my life sort of took you away from where you are.

Didn't you say, quite often, how you wanted to know about my life? Perhaps I misunderstood what you meant.

The day after I last wrote to you, on the last day of term, Omario was attacked by Billy and his gang outside school, for 'grassing them up.' Omario is lucky to be alive after receiving serious knife wounds in his chest. The Deputy Head, was on duty outside and knows first aid, he basically saved Omario's life. The police were called and Billy and Mustafa are being charged with grievous bodily harm, though personally I think it should be attempted murder.

I went to visit Omario in hospital to thank him for what he did. I don't know if I would have been able to do what he did, given the circumstances. His father, Xavier, told me they were going to send Omario to a private school, to get him away from the gang culture all too prevalent in inner city schools these days. I didn't say anything, but I know how he feels. I love teaching but at times it feels like school is just incidental to everything else that's going on in young people's lives.

Well Troy, I won't bore you with going on about myself for too much longer. I want you to know that you are in my thoughts and that I honestly do care. I never intended to hurt you, I will miss you. I'm really, really sorry.

Your friend,
Evie

August 19

Dear Evie,

First of all I want to thank you for the money that is now in my account and I've been able to get me some stamps from commissary as well as order a new filament for my fan. It is over a hundred degrees here at the moment. I'm not complaining though, I love going out to recreation and feeling the sun on my face. In fact I've just come in from nearly three hours outside as the officer somehow forget how long I was there. I was having a great time kicking it with my boy Tommy who was in the next pen. I haven't seen him in a while but he's been moved back into my pod as they've been moving us around again.

I want to apologise completely for my last letter Evie. I was just pissed at the world and you got it all. I could never be mad at you for long and I know that some of what I said to you was way out of line. You mean the world to me and if you don't feel you can handle me loving you, that is okay. I'll just accept you as a true and loving friend. I just straight up got touched by your loneliness Evie and being what a wonderful person you are, I just got feelings for you which I wanted to express to you. What I liked about your letters was your honesty, well apart from those little fibs, (smile) you just don't know what bullshit I have to put up with from some of the guys in here as well as some of my other penpals. They be just so full of shit at times. Evie, I don't want to lose you. I never want us to stop writing each other, we have too much between us to throw it all away. I'm real sorry for hurting you.

Can we move on from what has happened? I just tripped out you telling me that you have done some bad

things. I just can't think what kinds of terrible things you could have done. It sure has played on my mind.

When I wrote you last I had just seen Roseleen and since then I have had a real nice letter and am expecting them both in two day's time. I'm trying to make the most of each single day. I don't have much time left on this earth and I don't want to waste a minute of it. Hey, don't laugh, I have started to write a book of poems. I want to be able to leave something behind for Kaisa so she doesn't spend her life with nothing but a memory of some sorry-ass dude behind some sheet of glass. I'm gonna write one for you as well so you have something to remember me by.(smile)

I was sorry to hear what happened to your boy Omario. He was lucky that the wound wasn't nearer to his heart. He sounds like a fine person and if I was in his father's position, I would do exactly the same thing. Gangs are a big part of life in America too and in Texas they still be having people who support the Klu Klux Klan. When I read Beloved I straight up felt like she knew what our people have suffered and how it is still affecting us today. Check it out, me and the guys was talking about how we got our names because in that book she writes how the African slaves got their names taken from them. I think I told you how my boy DeLord got his, but we was laughing so loud about my neighbor suddenly hollering, 'Praise de Lord' over and over again. Then this dude Albert starts telling us how his father and grandfather got given this real old English name. Omario sure is an interesting name do you know what it means? What about your name Evie, do you know where it comes from?

I'm going off the point now what I was trying to tell you about was that there be bad gangs around where I

lived. Chuck and Roy was part of a gang and they had asked me to join but I refused. I didn't mind just kicking it with them from time to time but I wanted to make something of myself and didn't want any part of the shit they was into. Chuck was into drugs big time and his uncle was well-known in the area as a real bad dude; lots of people was scared of him for real. His name was Charles and rumour had it he'd kidnapped and murdered a local family who supported the Klan. This was a few years back, when I was a boy and everyone knew not to cross Charles.

I remember once when I was fetching my sisters from the day care centre I saw him and this other brother outside a liquor store. They was hollering real loud to each other and I didn't want my sisters to see anything but I couldn't pass by quick enough and then I saw his gun. He rammed it into the other man's neck and he was swearing and cussing. I waited for the shot as I ran with my sister's back down the street and into a candle store, but it never came. I was shaking so bad Evie. There be some real nasty people in the town I was raised in, I'm sure England is not so full of racists. Some of the whites here still think us black people should be in slavery you can just tell by the way they look at you but I try never to judge a white person. I try to take each person I meet on merit and not fall into the trap of seeing others in terms of skin colour. I have met some great white people and being as though I was in the minority in my class at school, I just had to get on with everyone. I'm sure I told you I was in all the higher classes at High School and never once missed a day off of school.

To me, getting an education was what school was all about. I wanted to make something of myself and I was the first person in my family to graduate. My mother and grandmother were so proud of me. I've got a

photograph of me and Roseleen at my graduation ball, I'll send it to you so you can see what a good-looking dude you are writing to.(smile) Hey, I'm only playing with you girl, don't go reading anything into it.

I have starting praying again in the last few weeks and I truly believe he has answered my prayers by giving me the gift of a daughter. I'm going to be praying for you too Evie, I want you to have another baby, not so as you can forget your son, but so can once again have the experience of loving a child. If I could have one wish granted in the whole world, it would be to hold my little girl in my arms just once. But I know, not even God can grant that.

I wrote and told my mother she was now a grandmother but I haven't heard from her for six months now and neither has my grandmother. I'm not sweating about it too much as she has done this before, so it's not so unusual but I just want to be able to tell her about Kaisa. I know she won't be wanting to hear about my date but I need to see her one more time; she is my mother after all, and I do love her.

Has David managed to find another place to live? It must be hard living under the same roof when you are divorced. You haven't mentioned Geoff for ages either, what is the deal with you two now? Your description of your meeting with that psychologist did bring a smile to my lips when I read the letter again yesterday. Imagine you calling him by the name of a beer! He's got your number though Evie, allowing other people to have too much power over you.

Hell, I've been telling you that for ages. (smile) I hope you have kicked that sorry-ass ex husband out, I really don't like to think of him taking charge of you in your own house. If you want to do things you should be doing them not letting David make rules about what you can and can't do. I'm real glad to

hear you've been doing some writing. You really do have some talent and I'm not just saying it, I really believe you have the ability to get a novel published. How is Jack, is he out of hospital yet? I'm sure you mentioned you was going down to visit. How did it all go?

Well it's time for me to go out for recreation now, even though it has been raining. It's even reached 104 degrees this week, I'm sure you just wouldn't be able to handle this heat, being as how you English are always complaining about the weather! (smile) Is school still out over there?

Know you are always being thought of and hit me back up soon that is if you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I was way out of line Evie but I can't help my feelings for you.

Your friend,
Troy

29th August

Dear Troy,

Thank you so much for your letter which I received yesterday and yes I forgive you. I understand that the strain of your situation must be unbearable at times and I have often felt quite bad about burdening you with too many of my problems. I too am sorry. Sorry if I've come across as a selfish and self-obsessed person. Perhaps I am.

I can't believe how the time to go back to school has come round again and another academic year starts next week. I am going to start looking for another job soon but I'm going to take my time and choose carefully, I don't want to take the first job I see. I am really glad that we managed to sort things out between us. Troy, you have so much courage. I really admire the way you are coping with your situation. I think trying to live in the present is something that could apply to everyone as so often we spend our time imagining the future or remembering the past, well I certainly know that I do. Sometimes though, the present can seem intolerable, can't it, and that's the hard bit.

David is still here but I really am getting increasingly annoyed by his presence. No flat seems good enough and he's started to drop hints about us getting back together again, despite my telling him it is impossible. Despite caring deeply about him our marriage is over.

Last week, or was it the week before, he insisted on us having an honest, 'heart to heart.' over an

enormous chilli con-carne covered with sour cream. (I have put on seven pounds since he moved back in.) He talked for ages about how cold I was after Jamie's death and how he felt I pushed him away, making him feel that I was the only one suffering, and that I wanted to shut him away from me. In a horrible way Troy, it's true and even now, some nights I lie awake going over and over in my mind the night before he died as if by replaying it, I might, somehow, be able to change what happened. I want to tell you all about it, but I can't. I just can't. Sorry, I've got to go.

The next day

Sorry. So sorry I couldn't finish my letter. It is too hard to write about what happened to Jamie at the moment.

However the weird thing that happened on the evening of our meal and 'honest talk.' was that Geoff popped round quite unexpectedly with a big bunch of flowers and some poems. I felt extremely awkward but David insisted he came in, recognising him from a recent course they had been on together at the teachers centre. What was even more amusing was that the two of them hit it off immediately, and after another bottle of wine, Geoff was reading his poems out to David who was fervently nodding his head and talking about Geoff's use of the extended metaphor. I was almost asleep on the sofa until the two of them insisted on bringing me into a discussion about which Bronte sister had written the best novel. David knew I was on Emily's side and rather unkindly used this to point out to Geoff that I had a decidedly unhealthy interest in tortured women. I know it was cruel, but I couldn't help pointing out that a lot of

Geoff's poems featured images of drooping yew trees and dead flowers and that maybe men were just as concerned with the darker side of life. That did not work as then Geoff was off on great Russian writers like Tolstoy who'd been fascinated by unhappy women and by the time he'd analysed character development in War and Peace' I felt myself beginning to develop considerable sympathy for Geoff's wife. No wonder the poor woman had taken to sherry and passed out on the sofa most nights. God he could talk for England and when I looked at them both laughing together on the sofa and I realised to my horror they were both wearing identical sandals and socks. I can't believe I have never noticed the similarities between them before!

As they got onto the topic of senior management and self evaluation I started to think about the way Geoff had treated me. Supposedly being keen, then going off with Geraldine, then e-mailing me all summer dropping hints all the time about us going out but then never actually asking me and the room began to spin a bit.

I remembered telling him my panic attacks had disappeared since the court case had been dropped, in case he'd been worried about me hyperventilating in a restaurant somewhere, but even then he had mumbled about being busy with redecorating his house. Suddenly the room appeared to shimmer as I wondered if I'd spent my whole life trying so hard to love people that I'd actually never really experienced caring for anyone at all and least of all myself. I crept up to the toilet and smoked an illicit cigarette. Smoke billowed out into the night air as I thought about the one person I had truly loved.

The weather here is glorious. As I write, the sky is still a beautiful deep blue although the leaves have lost their freshness. Before we know it, autumn will be here again and the nights will be drawing in as my granny always used to say.

Poor Jack has cancer. Have I told you? Mother is in a dreadful state, but never shows it in front of him. He has something called, 'Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma' and has been started on a course of chemotherapy. The prognosis is good because they have caught it early but, according to a book I've been reading on the subject, it's not a very 'good' cancer to have as it is an aggressive one which is hard to deal with. I nearly gasped when I saw him at the hospital though, he looked terrible. It seems he's lost a stone and a half in the past few weeks, but when he caught sight of Mum as we came through the doors his pale, grey face seemed to light right up inside. They hardly took their eyes off each other for the whole time we were there and as I watched her stroking his wrinkled hand you could tell without any doubt that they loved each other.

Later, on our way home Mum admitted how much Jack had come to mean to her and how scared she was of having to cope with all the pain of losing love after being without it for so many years. But what's even worse though, is that she won't tell him how she feels. She says if she says anything it will just put a burden on him, as if he's under some sort of obligation to love her back. I told her anyone could see Jack was besotted with her but she won't have it. Since then whenever I look at David, and remember our marriage, I wonder if we ever looked at each other the way Jack and Mum do. When it was time to go and she bent down to kiss his cheek, I had to look away.

He made a huge effort with me, I must admit. Despite his obvious weakness he talked about what had happened at school in a way that made me feel he really did understand about how deeply it had affected me as well as all the other awful things that have happened in the last few years. When Mum went to the toilet, he told me to look after her if anything should happen to him and then I found myself kissing his cheek. I could hardly have been more shocked as I then, very embarrassingly, burst into tears.

It all made me feel rather melancholic on the train journey home I can tell you and it got me thinking about love as a concept. For example, how do you distinguish between being fond of someone or even just liking them? Maybe I'm not capable of real love and that I'm flawed and unable to let myself feel it. That's what Doctor Vonenburg thinks anyway, that I am frightened. He thinks it's all to do with the loss of my father, I don't know though. I thought I loved David a long time ago but now there's just an empty space inside me. I sometimes wonder if I have ever really loved anyone, apart from Jamie that is. Oh dear, here I am rambling on about myself I do hope I'm not using you like a diary again! Please forgive me, you know how much I like talking to you about what is going on and how I feel. I always look forward to hearing your thoughts about things I have told you.

I'm just reading your letter again. It sounds to have been very violent where you grew up. Luckily we don't have too many people with guns around though knives seem to be becoming more of a problem at the moment. There are gangs in London, and every so often trouble brews up outside schools with rival ones. Obviously

I'm not a teenager so I've no personal experience of gangs but every few months there's some sort of violent assault on someone which the newspapers suggest is invariably gang related. I wish some of the children I have taught could hear you talk about how proud you are of never missing a day off school and seeing it as a place which offered you something. So many of the students in my school see school as an inconvenience to their social life or just pointless and a waste of time. Teaching them can be utterly soul destroying at times. Don't get me wrong, I really do feel for the ones who can't achieve, I really do, and it's not at all surprising that they hate school when everyday just confirms their feelings of failure. I don't honestly know what the answer is, I really don't.

I'm so glad you have found comfort in God, I wish I could. Mum was a total unbeliever and so religion has never featured in my life at all. Dr Vonenburg is on holiday at the moment but I don't intend to see him for much longer I really feel he's judging me all the time. Whenever he peers over the top of his glasses and scrutinises me with his steely grey eyes I just feel like he can see right inside to the pathetic little creature I really am. I just wish I could go out and buy some confidence! I am feeling much better in myself though and my panic attacks appear to have disappeared entirely but I am very nervous about going back to school next week. I'm determined to stay right away from Geoff and am desperately hoping he doesn't leave me any more poems to read. I simply don't want to upset him by telling him I don't think they are very good. Also I want him to stay right away from me. I no longer feel any desire to start seeing him again.

I honestly don't know what to say to you about 'things'. Do you want to talk? I think about you every day and just wish I could help you. Whenever I try and imagine what you must go through on a daily basis, I get overwhelmed with emotion.

I hope you are bearing up alright. Oh Troy, I just don't know how to be with you given the situation you are in. Tell me how I'm to be? I fear the two glasses of wine may have meant I've rambled on a bit, but I'm going to post this letter anyway as I need to prepare supper. You know more and more I just want to have another baby before it's too late. If only David and I could have had another baby together, maybe now we'd still be a family. Then again, maybe not.

Love from Evie

10th September

Dearest Troy,

I'm hoping to hear from you very soon but I felt the need to talk to you. I do hope you don't mind. I am sitting here with my letter of resignation in front of me which I am going to hand in to Nova tomorrow. I just cannot bear to be at that school anymore. I intend to leave at Christmas and hope that I see another job that appeals. I just know I can't stay. Not now.

The first two or three days were reasonably okay but although people were pleased to see me, I seemed to see doubt in some people's eyes. Have you heard that expression, 'No smoke without fire.'? Well that's what I think some people are thinking. Maybe I'm over reacting and being totally ridiculous but that is the way I feel. I walked into the staffroom at break yesterday and I swear I felt a kind of silence descend as if people had been talking about me. Even a few children have made some remarks. Unfortunately, I have one of Billy's friends in my new year ten group and throughout the lesson, he sat staring at me in a most unpleasant manner. When I went over to him towards the end of the lesson, attempting to do all this positive behaviour management by asking him very politely whether he'd understood what I'd asked him to do, he just looked up at me and said, "This work's crap. My brother earns £1, 000 pounds a week and he ain't got no poxy GCSE so what's the point? And anyway, you're a rubbish teacher, Miss Taylor was

much better than you. Why don't you go off sick again."

I stayed calm and decided to ignore this provocation, as that's what it was, and then I heard, "Billy's got mates you know. He don't forget. You and Omario are done for." I tell you what Troy, my blood literally turned to water and I felt suddenly frozen despite the fact the sun was pouring through the windows. The room seemed to go dark and no one said anything.

"Miss can you help me with this last part please?" a voice said breaking into the silence but by the time the bell went I was shaking and began to feel that terrible panic begin to grow inside me. It feels like it has all started up again; that I can never get away from what has happened. And that was the moment I knew I had to leave.

I cried over David this evening and bless him, he told me I was an excellent teacher but I must try and keep it all in proportion. He then told me that he and Omelette had made up and that he was moving back in with her. I felt quite upset when he said this but I didn't show it. I don't want David worrying about leaving me on my own.

Despite the fact that I've been complaining about him, I don't want him to go. Of course I didn't tell him as in one way it will be a great relief to have the house back to myself again. The Frank Sinatra CD's and his piles of exercise books all over the sitting room floor, do get on my nerves but, in all honesty, being alone in this house again is not something I'm looking forward to. Still, I have to move on and try and make the best of things. I am trying hard to be positive.

I think about you every day. Have you heard from your mother yet? What is the weather like in Texas? I heard on the news that there were some really strong winds this week, almost hurricanes. How was your visit with Kaisa?

I have given up writing my novel for the time being. I seem the main character's preoccupation somewhat trivial in comparison to what you are going through. I've actually started a children's story about a little boy who loves to dress up as that's what my friend Josie told me her son Danny used to love doing. She told me she had so many little outfits for him and that she'd still got them all in a suitcase. His favourite was his Spiderman suit which she'd found the other day when cleaning out a cupboard. She says that she can't help feeling sad sometimes when she sees him hunched over his computer glued to MSN or his computer games and thinks of the little boy who used to rush up to her with such love.

I must go and prepare some lessons now. I'm really looking forward to receiving a letter from you. I do hope you are bearing up alright.

Love from Evie

September 17

Dear Evie,

I got your letter just about an hour ago and decided to hit you back up straight away seeing as I have had two letters from my girl in the past few weeks.

(smile) Everything is everything on this end just the same boring shit everyday. It is so damn hot, over one hundred degrees and even the officers are complaining about the heat and not having air conditioning. Some of them have told me how sorry they are about my news as they have heard about my case and believe that I am innocent.

I am sorry to hear about Jack's cancer but hopefully he will pull through with you with your mother's support. Evie what is all this nonsense about you being unable to love people, because you are flawed in some way? You don't know how much I hate to hear you putting yourself down like this. Maybe David isn't the right man for you and with all that the two of you have been through together it's not surprising your feelings for him have died. Maybe what the two of you once had wasn't powerful enough to last through the adversity that God has chosen to heap upon you. I believe He does things for a reason and maybe you need to be thinking about what that reason might be but you mustn't think for a moment that Jamie was taken from you for not being a good enough mother because sometimes it seems like that is what you are thinking.

Listen up Evie, you are not responsible for whatever happened. Can't you explain properly to me what happened as then I might be able to help you to see the truth of it. I wish I could help you to come to terms with it all as it sure seems to be eating you up inside all the time. If you are not careful Evie

that guilt is going to destroy you. You need to lay it all to rest.

I am trying every day to come to terms with the fact that I have brought a beautiful little girl into the world but that soon I will have to say goodbye and how is that going to be for her? Some days I just lie on my bunk thinking about whether it was right for Roseleen to have told her about me. What must I seem like to her? Why didn't I have enough sense to stay out of trouble? Maybe it is wrong to bring an innocent little angel into this world of loneliness and desperation which is the only way to describe life on DR.

After our visits have finished, I just get to thinking about what impression they are making on Kaisa, to see this man dressed in white, behind glass who can only speak to her on a telephone. And this man is her daddy who is not going to be around for very much longer. I don't know what Roseleen will tell her about December. Every day I refuse to think about it but the dreams are bad. I wake every night hollering and my neighbours both sides have complained to the officers. I've no appetite for food any more either and have lost ten pounds in the last month. They weighed me last week as an officer complained about me turning away the food trays.

I've written to my mother twice in the last week but haven't heard a damn thing. I've been praying so hard but God seems like he has forgotten about me. Hell I can't be thinking about never seeing my mother again and telling her how sorry I am that the son she was so proud up ended up this way. I really thought I was gonna make something of myself and now I'm in deep shit with no future except one that has been given to me by the State.

I'm relieved to hear that David has finally gotten his act together to move his sorry ass out of your

place even if he's going back to his woman. You don't want to be in a relationship with him so don't be wasting your time even thinking about it, there's plenty more fish in the sea. I just know that a woman like you won't have any trouble meeting someone who'd treat you like the queen you really are.(smile) You be hanging on to David because you have neglected yourself and despite you telling me about all these friends you have you don't seem to mention any of them much in your letters. Hell those cats get more of a mention! If you do have all these friends then that is my bad for misunderstanding. Don't waste anymore time thinking about David. What has happened between the two of you is over. Gone. Finished. You never had another child between the two of you because it wasn't meant to be. Maybe David was the one who wasn't the good enough father and God wasn't gonna pass down another child to him being as he'd had his chance.

Hell when I think of how Sherilee was trying to get rid of her unborn child I know even more now how right I was to do what I did. Just imagine if Roseleen hadn't gone through with the pregnancy? I'm straight up worrying about you in that school and I hope you filed a written report on what that boy said to you. You can't allow yourself to be treated that way and hell Evie, if you resign you are allowing yourself to be intimidated.I can't believe you have given up your job with nothing to go to. Evie that is not how it works. You have to stand and fight not run away and let those punks know they have got your number.

I'm going to have to finish this letter now as an officer has just come to tell me it's time for recreation. She is the coolest officer working on this pod being that she calls me by my name and not my number. I sometimes refuse to answer when they

just holler my number out. At times in here it seems like no one gives a shit about us. If it wasn't for my pen-pals and my grandmother I don't know what I'd do. Life in here really does get to you at times the boredom and loneliness are hard to bear especially when you know what is waiting for you in the future.

Hit me back up soon and know you are always being thought of. Keep your head up girl! (smile)

Your friend Troy

PS. You still haven't told me about why you was wanting to talk to Phil. The truth Evie. The truth.

27th September

Dear Troy,

Thank you for your letter which I have open in front of me. Before I address some of what is in it I desperately need to talk to you about a number of things and one of them is not very nice at all.

First of all, Mum and Jack are getting married and I've got a dog! But also there's something I need to tell you. The issue of truth-telling -is there such a phrase?- came up with Dr Beer this week, (that is my nickname for him) and I need to tell you something which might finally explain my somewhat erratic and emotional state to you. You will be very upset and disappointed in me, I just know you will, which is why I'll explain about the other things first.

First of all my mind is buzzing around thinking about this wedding! The worst thing though is the way I behaved towards them. Troy, I was so jealous and full of resentment and bitterness that when they beamed at me like two cats who had just, metaphorically, got the cream, the word, 'Congratulations' had to be dragged out of my throat. The feeble smile I gave must have looked completely false as I had been totally unprepared for this news. It was when I went down to Brighton last weekend they told me, well they actually did ask me if I had any objections, trying to make it into a joke. Oh but Jack is so thin now and his eyebrows have vanished now he's started his chemotherapy. He looks very odd. He is staying at my Mum's house so she can look after him and she fusses around him teasing him about his messy side of the sitting room and the fact that he has to watch 'Neighbours' every night on the television. She

looks amazing, at least ten years younger but it's her eyes that have changed now, they shimmer with love particularly when she looks at Jack. She used to have such sad eyes but what is between the two of them has transformed her.

I feel wretched with guilt afterwards travelling back on the train and deeply ashamed of my selfish nature. I rang up when I got back to London and sent them some flowers. The wedding is to be in three week's time at a local registry office which just a few close friends and family. Jack has a son and a daughter but I don't know if my brother will come. I know I've not really spoken much about him but he's quite a strange person and makes little or no effort to stay in touch. He's working for an engineering firm in Sidney and has never married. After I'd telephoned to order the flowers on Sunday evening I'd just poured myself a glass of delicious Merlot when I heard a strange kind of scratching at the front door. I have to admit for one awful moment I thought it might be Billy and his friends come to torment me and when I heard this weird howling I nearly phoned the police but, for once, I decided to be brave and I peered out of the front window which allows me to see into the porch, and that's when I saw the dog.

He was standing shivering and shaking and then I saw him slump down onto the porch. I put some thick gloves on, just in case he decided to attack me, and opened the front door. He looked so sad and sorry for himself and had a huge gash on his side which was oozing all sorts of horrible things and despite thinking about all those germs wriggling and writhing about, I gave myself a quick metaphorical slap and stroked his head. The way he looked up at

me was like he was asking me to help him and who was I to resist his plea? So I opened the door right up and he walked in to the sitting room and collapsed on the floor. The cats ran out as fast as they could I can tell you but now Mrs Pink has decided she likes him!

I called the vet out who has given him all sorts of injections and pills - I won't tell you what he charged me - but he is adorable, really Troy, the dog, not the vet! Of course I couldn't go to school and leave him so I told them I had a virus and needed to rest at home for a few days. The dog is a cross between a Labrador and an Alsatian and as he's not wearing a collar or micro chipped I have put up some notices in the road but the more the days pass the more I don't want to give him back. He has started to wag his tail now whenever he sees me and he has the sweetest nature. I've called him Strider after the wizard in a book I read as a girl called 'Lord of The Rings' and it certainly seems fitting since he strode, or rather staggered, into my house. I'm going to employ someone to come and walk him once a day once he's better, and it is given me the determination now to find a job as near to where I live as possible.

Troy, Strider has given me a reason to get up in the mornings again and it has been so long since I ever felt like that it has made me wonder if I ever have. I'll send you a photograph in my next letter. Do I sound crazy? No, you'd better not answer that!

Before my 'confession' I just want to tell you how sad your letter made me feel. I am so so sorry for everything that has happened to you and I do hope that our friendship has helped you feel less alone.

Thank you for the way you always try and cheer me up. That shouldn't be your responsibility but you aren't right about what happened to Jamie. It was all my fault. In fact I have been punished. It's all about being punished. Okay now Troy, I'm having a glass of wine to give me the courage to tell you the truth. To own up to what I did, and have done and know that in telling you this you may never want to write to me again. I'm taking deep breaths now to still the panic and the fear.

I don't want to see the words written onto the paper. The words that will condemn me in your eyes. Jamie never got to live as a real live little boy, he died in the womb at twenty seven weeks. I know I hinted that he'd had some kind of accident but he didn't. I'm sorry Troy to have led you to believe by my lies that he was real. But in a way he is or rather the little boy who might have been is terribly real to me as he lives inside my head like a ghost. But Troy, what I need to do is need to face up to what I did all those years ago before Jamie and explain the pretence. How strange this all is. To have grown to love someone who I invented.

So this is where Phil fits in to all this. The missing piece so to speak. I was at university and in my final year and I fell deeply, hopeslessly and passionately in love with Phil. I thought about nothing else for about six months when, out of nowhere, he met someone else and finished it and the result was that I became a hopeless mess. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep and was drinking far too much. Well, one night, I went to a party and got absolutely drunk out of my mind and woke up the next morning in a stranger's bed. I can still remember trying to focus my eyes on his unfamiliar face when he

said, "What did you say your name was?" For years that question has stuck in my head making me feel like I was the lowest form of life.

When my period didn't come all my terror about catching an unspeakable disease vanished as the line turned blue. Yes, I was pregnant and although I have been pregnant at least six times in my life with David, I never keep them because of what I did. The reason? I had an abortion. And that was my mistake. Are you still there? I'm imagining you now throwing this letter to the ground in disgust thinking, not only is Evie a damn liar but a murderer as well. This is so hard for me but I can't carry on the deception any more. Each time I got pregnant with David I lost the baby at about twelve weeks, until the last time. The last time, that was when I got passed the twelve weeks and we celebrated by buying all sorts of things and giving him or her a name. Jamie for a boy, my father's second name and Kate for a girl after my childhood friend. I was so happy. Finally I thought, no, I'm not being punished, that was just my guilt, I'm going to have a baby and this time I wasn't planning on abandoning it. But at twenty seven weeks the baby died inside me and I had to go into labour. I had to give birth, like a real mother.

The brought his little body to us so we could hold him. David and I touched his tiny fingers and stroked his little cheek. It was the saddest thing you could ever imagine. We sat for ages crying together telling each other that we had finally nearly managed, to have a child together. I so wanted to have had my own precious baby to hold and love but he was taken from me and after that David and I started to fall apart. He moved into the spare room and we began living this weird kind of half-life. Oh we did all the day to day stuff but what lay festering between us was all our

little babies all the pain and the ghost of the one I'd chosen not to let live. Troy, if I could have my time again I would have had that baby and maybe then my life would have gone in a different way but at the time I wasn't brave enough.

And I wish I'd felt I could confide in Mum. I couldn't go on with the pregnancy. I didn't even know the father. How could I have brought a child into the world and explain that their father was someone I'd slept with drunk out of my mind and deranged by grief at losing Phil?

But the moment I came out of the operating theatre I knew I had made the worst kind of mistake; one you can never take back, or make good. Afterwards was indescribable; the emptiness inside almost more than I could bear and all I could think about was getting pregnant again to make up for the one I had abandoned.

Now my time left for a child is running out. I am forty two years old with no man in my life or even much prospect of meeting one and every single day I think about the one who should have been and all the ones afterwards who have been taken from me. You see, you were right about me after all. I haven't been telling you everything.

So, there we are. The truth is out and I wouldn't blame you at all if you didn't want to write to me again given how you view the subject of abortion. I'm deeply sorry for the lies I have written.

I need to feed Strider now. He's just come in and put a paw on my leg as if he can sense my distress. I just adore him.

Love from Evie.

PS I do hope you have some news from your mother soon.

October 5

Dear Evie,

your letter did come as a great shock to me but listen up, who am I to judge what you did? No, I do not agree with abortion but what happened to you was what happened and you have found out for yourself why it is the wrong thing to do.

What kind of person do you think I am Evie that you would be imagining you throwing your letter around and cursing you? You must think of me as being real cold and nasty. No. If one thing being on DR has taught me it is that firstly, lots of people have issues with the truth and secondly, there's this business of judging people. Back in the day I was real hard on people I considered to be weak or who made the wrong choices or decisions. But being locked up with some of the kinds of guys we got here has made me think about the way I was.

Evie I have been shut way from the world for a long time and being on my own so much has made me think about issues that never concerned me back in the day. I straight up had a tear in my eye when I'd finished your letter and wished I could be there to give you a big hug and tell you everything will work out for you because I truly believe it will. Don't ask me how. It wasn't your fault Evie, you gotta get that into your head.

Check this out. When you'd realised the way you treated your mother and Jack you did something about it and then the dog showed up on your doorstep. Now if that isn't a sign from the good Lord, I don't know what is. I believe that He gives us signs but that we have to be looking out real careful for them so we don't miss them. You have had a sign Evie. Just you be looking out for the next one.(smile)

The day before all that nonsense happened I can remember this crazy old crow that kept flying around my grandmother's house. It was behaving like it was nuts and hollering so bad that I just wanted to get rid of it. So I got me my grandfather's old gun out that he never used, and I shot it dead. There was blood and feathers and shit everywhere and when I woke up the next morning I found a feather with dried blood on it stuck to my sneaker. Crazy or what? When I told my grandmother the next morning she started wailing and saying stuff about bad omens. I just put it all down to her being an old woman who was ignorant and getting on in years. I took no notice of what happened to me until afterwards when I kept dreaming about that damn bird. But now. Now when I look back and think about it. When I remember the crack of the gun and the blood I know straight up it was a warning from the Lord but I was too full of shit to see it. Yeah I was Mr Cool and there wasn't nothing that could go wrong in my life. Nothing and no one could touch me.

You convinced me that Jamie was real. No kidding. I don't feel disappointed Evie. I'm just glad that you have finally been able to tell yourself the truth. I always had the feeling that you was hiding things from me and now I know that I was right. I could never hate you Evie, whatever you have done or did you are a good person and you mustn't think that all those miscarriages were your punishment. What have the doctors said?

Life here on DR is not good and I've just heard we are going to be on lockdown tomorrow. There was a guy in the next pod who just got a date and they found him with his throat cut yesterday morning in his cell. I didn't know him very well but another guy who I also knew at Ellis has just gotten one too, my boy Carl. We shared a cell for a few months back then.

Hell Evie, they are killing all my close buddies. I will put in for a legal visit as soon as I am able to. I've still had no word from my mother. It's like she has vanished off the face of the earth. My grandmother is worried sick even though she keeps telling me not to worry. At this rate I'm never going to see her again.

Please send your mother and Jack my best wishes. I'm sorry this letter is so short I've just been told by an officer I've got to go to the infirmary. They might be giving me some medication as I've been keeping the guys awake with my hollering and shit. Know that you are always being thought of.

Love, Troy

12th October

Dear Troy,

Thank you for your letter that I received today. I must apologise for the fact that it was simply full of me and my own problems, sorry. I'm very conscious now that, at times, I do burden you with my feelings about things. I am sorry. Please forgive me. And thank you for the compassion and understanding you showed to me about 'you know what.'

How are you? It must be upsetting that your mother still hasn't been haven't been in touch with you. Doesn't your grandmother have any idea where she might be?

School is the same, I really hate it. I wish I could fight back but I've no strength or will to do so anymore, I'm just biding my time until I can escape. I just want to leave and turn my back on the past especially as Omelette's pregnant. Have I told you? That's why the two of them have now decided to 'work at their relationship'. How I hate that phrase. I wish I could say I was pleased for them but I can't. You know why now.

What is the weather like in Texas? It's beautiful here, really warm with a brilliant bright blue sky. The leaves are red and gold. I've never seen such an array of colours. As my house is going up for sale soon, have I told you? I'm having decorators in to redo the walls and I intend to replace all the carpets. Heathcliff is shedding hair everywhere, I'm not sure why, he has developed strange hairless patches on his back so I guess a trip to the vet

in order. However, I'm pleased to say that all the cats are gradually getting used to Strider. He is a complete wimp despite being so enormous and fierce-looking and Squeaky Boy has taken to growling at him every time he goes anywhere near his food dish. Mrs Pink seems to have decided she's his mother though and sleeps next to him in the basket I've bought for him, they look so sweet! No one has claimed him and I've taken down all the notices now. I've warned Jack and my mother there will be an extra guest at their wedding! Jack loves dogs and they might even get one themselves when he is better. It's also been very mild this autumn and at school each lesson is interrupted by at least one 'daddy long-legs' do you have them in America? They resemble spiders but have a thin body and they fly. I must say they aren't very attractive creatures at all but every time a child spots one they start screaming particularly the little ones. My nerves get stretched to breaking point by their cries of 'Kill it miss, kill it.'

This year I have been given a year seven form and they are already driving me crazy with their name-calling and complaining. Every day Sam tells me that Paul has called him, 'fat'. I go through the motions of stern talks and detentions but inside I simply no longer care. Sometimes I go to the cupboard and the back of my classroom and take a few deep breaths after swearing. It's most therapeutic. Then this morning Jim decided to blow up a condom at the back of the classroom and after asking me whether I'd like to 'feel his dick' I snapped with rage, snatched the condom from him and stamped on it outside in the corridor. Hopefully I was out of range of the cctv cameras they have in the corridors. He has been suspended for two days.

I am worrying about how you are coping with the situation you are in. You are so strong mentally and emotionally. Oh I am going to miss talking to you so much, if only I could change things. I'm sorry this is such a short letter but I've got a lot of things to do. Please take care of yourself.

Love and best wishes,
Evie

October 19

Dear Evie,

How are you? I do hope this letter finds you in the best of health and with a smile on that lovely face of yours.(smile) I'm still maintaining myself here in HELL whilst the State of Texas prepare to terminate my existence in the not too distant future. It is now less than two months away.

Mama was found dead last week. My grandmother came to visit me last week and told me. I was just shot fuck to pieces when she uttered those words, 'She dead Troy, them drugs finally nailed her.' My grandmother cried throughout our visit. "My baby girl dead. My grandson here. Ain't no place big enough for the hurt." She kept saying it real loud until one of the officers told her she'd have to leave if she didn't quit her hollering. It tripped me out to see my grandmother like that, she's the strong one and I'm not going to lie and tell you I didn't love my mama but she didn't raise me on account of her addictions and so, in some ways, my grandmother has been my mother.

After the officer spoke to her she began to calm down and explain what happened to Mama. Of course she straight up blames that sorry-ass Evan being as she was found at his house. That man, I can't call him my father, fucked my mother over for years and years encouraging her to take drugs and get her drink on. I tell you something Evie, that is one of the reasons I never got my drink on too much out in the world. I saw what it did to people on account of them losing their inhibitions and behaving in an inappropriate way. Y'all know how I hate to hear when you have had too much to drink and I get that from seeing my Mama drunk and crying begging Evan not to leave her.

So many nights as a small boy I had to comfort her. Me and my sisters would cuddle up to her, fix her supper and make sure there was plenty of food in the house before we went to school. I was pretty much running the house by the age of eight and my sisters were six, five and four. I just hated to see Mama so sad. 'Baby you's all I got that good in my life.' That's what she used to say. Sometimes though when Evan hadn't been around for a while on account of him being in the county jail Mama would start smiling again. She'd lay off the drink, clean the house and walk us to school if she wasn't working. She cleaned houses for some of the rich whites who lived in the town and sometimes she'd bring us toys or books back. She couldn't hardly read or write but I could and I'd read to her and my sisters.

'My Troy sure is a smart boy.' she'd say and she'd kiss the top of my head. 'You gonna go far baby.' And I'd glow inside with pride. But look at me Evie yeah I went far alright, I went two hundred miles from my home town and ended up here on Death Row. I know it plain broke Mama's heart when I got sentenced. I'd look at her in court every day, standing next to my grandmother and they'd wave at me and smile, trying to keep my spirits up.

Sometimes though, I'd look up and see Mama's head bowed down and she'd be wiping her eyes and my grandmother would reach out and pat her arm. I hated that people would be looking at them and judging. Yeah I know what they'd be thinking Evie, there's goes another dysfunctional African American family with no good male role model to keep the boy in order and of course he gets involved with crime and hangs out with gangs and does bad shit. But hell Evie that wasn't me. I hadn't ever been in trouble with the police. I'd cared for Mama, I'd worked hard at school I fully intended to make something of myself to raise

myself out of my background. I wanted to be able to go back to my home town with qualifications and money and to look at some of the rednecks who'd cussed me all my life and say " See, you were wrong. Here I am. "And I'd stroke the smooth surface of my brand new car and take out all the gifts I'd brought for my family and there would be a banner announcing my visit. Then out would step Roseleen, my beautiful fiancée wearing the biggest ring you could imagine and looking around I'd know I'd fulfilled all Mama's dreams for me.

Now I look around where I am and all I can see is a bunk where I sleep, a toilet and the small desk I am sitting at. I have no clothes of my own and I can't even walk to have a shower without being handcuffed by two officers.

On the rare occasions that my family is able to get down here I'm not even able to touch them. Evie, what did I do to deserve this life? I tried at all times to be a good person. Now all I can see is my Mama's sad eyes and her smashed

up face and wish I was in here for killing Evan at least then there'd be a good reason for being locked away. Still, at least Mama didn't know I had a date and I won't ever have to face telling her. But do you know, apart from my wish to touch my own daughter, I would like to have made Mama proud of me. Despite all her faults, she was my mother and I love her.

David's girlfriend is pregnant? Hey, I pretty much tripped out when I heard that. Now you know this is a sign that you need to cut David out of your life for ever. You are just gonna have to get a heart of stone where he's concerned and move on from it all. Hell Evie, it don't do no good for you to be still seeing him. The past is over.

Don't worry Evie I just know you will be a mother again one day. You have so much to offer and God

would not want all that love you have to give to go to waste. (smile) By the way, Kaisa loved those animal books you sent her. She brought them to show me last Saturday and I know you will be receiving a letter from her real soon. It was kind of you to send them but I know that is the kind of person you are. Now what are you going to do about a job? I can't handle the fact that you have handed in your resignation with nothing else to go to. This doesn't seem like a very responsible thing to do. You know what else is tripping me out Evie, it's that your house-cleaning hardly seems to get a mention these days. I sure hope this doesn't mean that your house has gotten real dirty. You know how to keep a house in good condition and I haven't heard you mention cleaning it for quite some time now.(smile)

Evie, you know how I hate to ask for money but I'm down to my last few dollars now. I would really appreciate it if you could send me some. I can't eat the food they serve to us in this place and I'm running out of the only kind of soap I can use. I really don't like asking but hey, I won't be hassling you for much longer. And you better get your damn life in order for when I'm no longer around to look out for you.(smile.)

Hit me back up soon you know how I hate waiting too long for a letter. Take care of yourself and know that you are always being thought of.

Love Troy

27th October

Dear Troy,

Thank you for the letter which I received a few days ago. I was so sorry to hear about your mother. When I was reading the letter about how you looked after her as a small boy I had tears running down my face. Suddenly, my own petty world seemed to pale into insignificance compared to what has happened to you. I am so sorry about your loss please pass on my °sympathy to your grandmother. I know your mother meant the world to you and I'm amazed that you feel no anger towards her with the way she let Evan continue to abuse her like that.

It made me think about my own mother again and realise how much energy I have expended feeling bitterness towards her. My mother wasted years of her life in unhappiness and seeing her with Jack is so lovely that I'm glad she's been given a second chance in life. Maybe it means I might too and that it isn't actually too late.

The Omelette days are well and truly over now and I'm glad Troy, really glad for David, he deserves someone who really loves him. From now on I shall be referring to her as Carla, her real name. There was no point in us trying to resurrect the dead bones of our marriage. It finished ages ago.

My mother and I have talked a lot about what happened with Phil and about what happened afterwards. She wishes I had as she would have told me to follow my own heart rather than listen to what other people thought was best for me.

She also apologised for once telling me I should be nicer to David but explained in a way she was talking about the way she felt she'd let Dad down. I didn't really understand what she meant until I tentatively managed to broach the forbidden subject of Dad's death. She shook her head and for one minute I thought she was going to get up and stalk off but she didn't. She then told me that he had been taking anti-depressants at the time of his death which she blames herself for as they'd been having a few marital difficulties. She has never actually known whether he intended to die that night or not as there was no note and she can't really believe he would have done that to his family, but, that the lingering doubts have tormented her for most of her life hence the drinking and latterly the therapy. She also apologised for neglecting me and my brother as she was in such a state herself paralysed by grief and guilt she could hardly function. It was a very strange experience having such a conversation but I know easy it is to fall off the edge, so to speak. To be honest, David and I both went to pieces after Jamie's death and together destroyed the love we had once felt for each other. Grief can do terrible things to people but now she's found Jack and says she felt, even at her age, a bit of a thunderbolt when she first met him, although Jack frequently teases her about how, on their first meeting at the creative writing group she accidentally grabbed hold of his knee when she went to sit next to him and that the thunderbolt was his scream when she then trod on his foot! Honestly the two of them do make me laugh. She's convinced it will happen to me one day, 'yeah right' as the kids would say, and is going to throw me the bouquet just to make sure.

Last night I dreamt again about a baby trapped in a dark room crying but this time he held a small purse in his hand, "Mama, Mama," he kept saying, "have, have dis" and he was trying to give me a purse which was gold and covered in what looked like diamonds and sequins. I knew I had to be able to get near to him to take it but I just couldn't reach him. My arms were outstretched and I kept running towards him, like you see those zombies doing in horror films. I woke with tears streaming down my face. What do you think it means?

I am still seeing Dr Vonenburg and much as I hate to admit it, am finding it quite helpful. His speciality seems to be on the interpretation of dreams so hopefully he might be able to shed some light on this one.

I've finished my story for children though it's called, 'Doodleman Saves the Day.' It's all about a little boy called Freddie who loves dressing up and has a cat called Squeaky Boy who talks to him and has magical powers. I've shown it to Josie who really loved it. She is nagging me about sending it to a publisher. I don't know though. All those rejection letters. Josie came over last weekend and was telling me all about her teenage son of fifteen who has changed into this hooded silent teenager, bringing his mates round to eat pot noodles and play video games after school. Her anecdotes about family life had me laughing out loud particularly the description of Freddie's little 'gathering' and her eldest son's fixation on bodybuilding and tattoos.

After she went, the house seemed eerily silent and I wondered how she will fare once the boys left home and I tried very hard to comfort myself because I'll

never have to lose Jamie to adolescence. No. he'll be for ever living on in my imagination. I'll never have look at the hair growing on his top lip, hear his voice deepening or feel his shoulders flinch in irritation whenever I attempt to reach out to the small boy who once loved me so passionately. I'll never have to comfort him when his heart has been broken or wait up just to make sure he has got home safely. No. But in other ways this is no consolation at all.

I need to finish this letter an estate agent is coming round to value the house and I must tidy up. It's not long now until half term and then I've only a few more weeks until Christmas. I wish I could say I felt sad about leaving, but I don't.

I will put some money into your account next week. Troy, I do feel for you so much. Your strength and courage never ceases to amaze me.

Your friend Evie

November 4

Dear Evie,

Hello! So, how has life been treating you as of late? I certainly hope and pray that you are doing just fine and that this letter finds you in the best of health. I received your letter two days ago but I've not been feeling like kicking it with anyone much recently since I lost Mama. However, yesterday I got a surprise visit from my three sisters who finally got off of their sorry-asses and make the journey to see me. They are so full of shit at times with their excuses about why they can't visit more often but it was a joy to see them all. They promised to come down again real soon and bring some of my nieces and nephews to see me too.

I'm not gonna lie to you Evie but I seem to be crying like a damn baby much too often these days. It's not what you do in this place and I hate the fact that my emotions seem to be getting the better of me.

When the officer came to tell me I had a visit I was real excited. I haven't seen one of my sisters, Cham-short for Charmaine and, obviously, named after my mother-for about a year. She's two years younger than me and the prettiest one of them all. She's much lighter skinned than me and my other two sisters and she and I were real close once. The fact that she writes but doesn't visit has tripped me up on many occasions but this time she told me straight that she hates coming so much and seeing her big brother locked up she just cries and throws up afterwards. She apologised for being a damn coward and I can't be mad at her but I pointed out that however bad it is for her to come and visit, it's me that is here. We all talked a lot about Mama and how sad her life had been although they have always felt much more

angry and let down by her than I ever did. I have tried to explain to them over the years that Mama couldn't help herself but they haven't wanted to hear it. Despite this though they have clubbed together to get her a headstone which will read, ' Charmaine Howardson much loved daughter of Earl and Darleen. Mother to Troy, Sherelle, Patrice and Charmaine. May you rest in peace and find comfort with the Lord. Til we meet again.'

I told them I want to be buried next to Mama and I will let them know what I want written on my headstone. They didn't want to hear this and Patrice and Sherelle had to go off to the bathroom telling me I was being cruel but that's what's going to happen to me Evie and there ain't a damn thing I can do to change it now.

After they got back they showed me lots of photographs of their children and being as Roseleen has brought Kaisa over to see them all I kfeel pleased that she's gonna have a family to support her even without her daddy around. I told my sisters I have been writing some poems and you know what Evie, I'm going to write Kaisa a letter that I want her to open on her 18th birthday when she might be having a few questions in her mind about the man who helped bring her into the world.

After my sisters left I lay on my bunk and even refused supper. I shut my eyes and listened to the ball game. I wouldn't involve myself in any of the conversations going on around me. My neighbor got pissed at me but I wasn't going to retaliate.

I was surprised about David. I thought he was wanting the two of you back together and yet he was really still seeing his girlfriend. I'm glad he is out of your life once and for all he never was any good for you. Just you make sure you stay away from him and his girlfriend. It's not gonna do you no good seeing

them with a baby. What about Geoff? You haven't mentioned him for ages. I'm real glad you cleared up some issues with your mother and hope that it gives you some peace. Evie you been stuck in the past for too damn long girl. I must go to recreation now as ol' boy who was before me, has just refused to go out. He couldn't get his sorry ass off of his bunk just because he saw a few dark clouds in the sky. Don't keep me waiting too long now.

Your friend,

Troy

PS Thank you for the money I just got informed it is in my account.

12th November

Dearest Troy,

I'm thinking about you every day and your situation is with me all the time. I'm finding it hard to write. I don't know what to say. I don't feel I can cheer you up so I'll just tell you about what's been happening in the hope that, for a brief while, you can escape into another world.

My mother and Jack got married last weekend it was a very moving day and I was pleased I'd bought myself some expensive waterproof mascara as I found it hard keeping the wretched tears at bay which were a result of a combination of emotions, as you can imagine. Mum looked radiant. She had on a pale blue suit whilst Jack wore black and of course his bow tie! He is very thin and is now completely bald but when they swapped rings and hugged and kissed I was almost overcome, I am so pleased for them and I am just hoping that they at least have a few years together.

As promised, Mum threw the bouquet in my direction but, well you can guess who caught it can't you? Yes, Strider, which caused a terrific amount of laughter I can tell you. However it brought painful memories of my own wedding back when I was young and hopeful; looking forward to having a family to call my own. Also, my brother Jem came! He looked so much happier than the last time I saw him and his girlfriend is lovely. I hope we can build a few family bridges whilst he is here, I hate it that we seem to have drifted so far apart in the past few years.

Strider was on his best behaviour and had been brilliant on the train despite almost terrifying the

guard when he came to collect the tickets. I explained that he'd inadvertently trodden on Strider's tail which was why he yelped so loudly but then he leapt up to his full height and began to lick his face! I'm afraid I still have a slight residue of my 'germ phobia' left and was therefore able to offer the guard some of the bacterial wipes which I carry everywhere.

After that, seeing as I'd bought him a rather snazzy collar and tied a red ribbon round it, Strider caused quite a stir. It was a bit like going out with a celebrity and I'm so thankful he has such a placid nature.

Nevertheless, there was one rather embarrassing moment outside the church when Strider spotted a large ginger cat sitting on a wall and charged off in pursuit so enthusiastically that I let go of the lead and found myself entangled with the photographer's rucksack. It gets worse. I apologised profusely, and propped it against the tree in the courtyard to get it out of the way. The photographer, Bill, had laughed about the fact I'd almost had a photograph of my backside taken but then, oh dear, as we were chatting and I introduced myself. I looked across at Strider and he was cocking his leg against the tree and, yes, all over Bill's rucksack. Now, if that had been David, he'd have gone absolutely crazy but Bill, well Bill seemed to think it was the funniest thing and actually started snapping away like no one's business despite my complete and utter embarrassment. Can you imagine how I felt? It turns out that he is a huge, 'dog fan,' and has two retired greyhounds. After I'd grabbed hold of Strider's lead again and scolded him severely, Bill persuaded me to

let him take a few more photographs and when he sends them to me, I'll send you one.

Actually Troy, he asked for my phone number telling me he quite often came up to London for various photographic things, but I am so scared of getting involved with anyone again. To be honest, I've pretty much resigned myself to a singleton's life with my animals for company; I'm just no good at this relationship business. I wasn't going to give my number to him, but at the end of the day he found me and told me he hadn't found anyone as funny as me for a long time as most women he had met since his divorce were so boring so would I please, perhaps, go out for a meal or something sometime! Anyway, I don't expect he'll ring but, well, we'll see.

I also met a really nice woman called Jill. I don't quite know how the conversation started other than the fact that I found her crying in the toilets and it transpired that her divorce had just come through. She and her husband had tried to have a baby for twelve years, spent a fortune on IVF and then he'd gone off with her best friend who, almost immediately, got pregnant. She has just started seeing Jack's youngest son, who is a few years younger than her. She lives in London and is a social worker in Hackney (brave woman!) so we're definitely going to meet up and go out one evening. What a weird co-incidence.

I went to see a really nice flat yesterday and have made the owners an offer. It's got a big garden so plenty of room for Strider and the cats. I also finally after so many months went to Jamie's grave. A weird thing happened before I went though. I was looking out into the garden thinking of how I need to

tidy it all up a bit when I suddenly noticed one sad and solitary rose blooming, how strange is that? I thought about taking it but when I thought about separating it from it stalk I thought. No. I need it to stay where it is, for however long it manages to last alone in the autumn weather. Out in the garden I stroked its soft petals and thought about that terrible morning in the hospital, and the way David and I had held Jamie's tiny fingers. I was crying as I also thought of you Troy; my head full of what if's..... Two lives cut short.

But then Strider bounded down the garden with a stick in his mouth wagging his tail and smiling (I truly believe dogs can smile!) and I had to laugh and return to the present.

I have got a teaching job in a private school. I don't really agree with private education but I'm sick of battling against apathy, indifference and downright rudeness. Of course they aren't all like that by any means and I'm very fond of many of the children but I just need an easier situation now. It's very near to the flat I'm hoping to buy and so I'll be able to come home and let Strider out for a bit. I have a lovely 'dog walker' called Michelle, who takes him out for an hour each day, but I know he misses me as I do him.

Sorry if this letter sounds a little mawkish. I'm thinking of you every day and hoping for a miracle.

All my love,
Evie

November 20

Dear Evie,

I'm not lying to you Evie but they've had to give me some medication and it's straight up has turned my head into mush so I can't hardly think straight. One of the female officers I'm cool with called up the medical officer and told him she was concerned about me as I have gotten so thin and they keep finding me huddled up on my bunk with just my boxers on. The officer in question reported to the authorities that she'd found me banging my head against the wall a few days ago. But this is just plain fucked up. I don't recall behaving like that at all. I don't know why they be telling these lies about me I just think it's because they wanted an excuse to drug me.

They be so concerned they be forgetting they going to be killing me in roughly three week's time. I'm now on suicide watch and someone looks into the cell every fifteen minutes just to check I'm still alive. Just how fucked up can things get? I'm going to be put to death and they be trying to stop me taking my own life before them. I nearly caught a case for having a pair of scissors in my cell but the nice female officer took them away and didn't report me.

You know what Evie, I think she's taken a bit of a liking to me as the other day when she was uncuffing me, I swear she stroked the inside of my hand. I tell you it was the first gentle touch I've felt in many years. But there again, maybe I'm imagining it. I don't hardly know what's real anymore. When I turned to look at her she just gave me a warm smile and patted my arm. Or maybe I'm imagining all this, I don't know. Evie my mind is fucked up so much that sometimes I can't remember what I'm here for or at

others I seem to see picture in my head of a man covered in blood but I don't know who he is. I see Chuck and Roy in my head too, laughing and waving a gun around. Sometimes that crow flies in and sits on the end of my bunk and laughs at me. "You fucking son of a bitch it says to me. You sure got it coming to you boy."

And then there's Mama, laying down on the floor caked in blood and shit with Evan holding a syringe in his hand. And he's laughing at me too making out Mama never loved me like she loved him.

Evie you have angels around you, I can see them. They be flying all around you like they is all your unborn children and they are looking after you. I sure enjoyed the trip out of this cell to your mother's and I did laugh when you told me about your dog pissing up against the rucksack. Now what is all that shit about you not knowing if you gonna accept going out with Bill. You only got the one life Evie and you gotta take what is out there. It's already late enough and I just got some good feelings about this dude, don't ask me why. I love my girl and I want her to be happy. I tell you what Evie, there's part of me that won't be missing these four walls. I been staring at them too damn long and there's only so much a man can take.

For a long time I hoped that my attorney would be able to turn things around for me but it hasn't happened. Now I have nothing ahead of me. Not a single thing to look forward to. My life has been hard Evie. I'm not making excuses but at times if I've wondered if I've offended the Lord in some way. At certain points in my life when I've had to make a decision I've always made the wrong one. Like the night I chose to go for a drive with Chuck and Roy. If I hadn't gone out with them that night I wouldn't be sitting here in a white jumpsuit with no

possessions other than a few books, posters and letters. Just plain nothing. I've no status, I'm just an undead; a forgotten piece of shit who's been thrown into the gargage and left to rot. All my life, even in here, I've kept my pride and my dignity but now that feeling seems to be slipping off me like a skin, and crawling out of it is just this good for nothing sorryass who amounted to nothing in his miserable twenty nine years on this earth.

It was my twenty ninth birthday on November 2, had you remembered? It was on that day last year when I first had a letter from my girl.(smile) It seemed like the best birthday present I could ever had gotten and it has been such a great year for me, getting to know you. You will never be able to understand how much you mean to me Evie and I have nothing but true love for you.

Damn it, there are tears rolling down my cheeks as I write, knowing that our friendship is coming to an end and that there won't be many more letters from you. I just want you to know that you have been a true friend to me and I will miss you more than you can ever imagine. When they come to murder me, I'll be thinking of you and your lovely smile. My beautiful dark angel with the tender heart.

You had a sign Evie, a sign. The Lord wants you to know that you've been forgiven. That shit about the rose fucked my mind over. You sure was right about me and your boy being like that rose.

I'm feeling kind of tired now so I shall be finishing this letter. Know you're always being thought of and hit me back up soon.

Love
Troy

27th November

Dearest Troy,

I am so sorry I forgot your birthday. What with everything going on this end with buying and selling properties there's hardly been time to think. I can hardly write this letter as I've tears streaming down my face. Where has the time suddenly gone to? Oh Troy what you must be feeling at this point I can hardly bear to imagine. I do hope your sisters, grandmother and Roseleen and Kaisa have been able to visit and that the medication has had a good effect on you.

Thank you for your words of encouragement concerning everything. Bill did get in touch and we went out the other evening he is such good fun I haven't laughed so much for ages. He's a little bit older than me, divorced and with teenage children who live with their mother nearby. He is such a positive person; there's no 'glass half empty' for him. David's glass wasn't even half full it was completely non-existent but Bill embraces every aspect of life with passion. Actually, he's a bit like a bear really being somewhat on the chubby side and he roared with laughter when I told him about the animal game and I told him what that cheeky boy Matt Eveleigh had said to me. 'Evie, you are a gazelle, beautiful, shy and graceful.' I tell you, I turned the colour of a tomato.

When I left him I felt different; like inside me something had shifted and lightened. Honestly I know it sounds crazy. I'm going down to see him next weekend, taking Strider to meet his dogs. I do hope they get on!

I'm very aware of time now, though I don't want to mention it but I also want to thank you for being such a true friend to me through this difficult year and I'm sorry if I have disappointed you in any way. I feel privileged to have been given the chance to get to know you and you just don't know how much I'm going to miss your letters. You have always tried to give me good advice and boost my confidence and for that, I'll be eternally grateful. I just know that you will never be forgotten by the people who have known and cared about you. Troy I just don't know what to say. How can I say goodbye?

I will try and write again in the next few days so you will hear from me before December 3rd but with the post being busy around Christmas I'm worried you won't get it.

I really don't know how to end this letter, my dear friend Troy. I love you,

Evie xxx

December 1

Dearest Evie,

This won't be a long letter although truthfully it probably should be seeing as it's the last one I shall be writing. The next few days are going to be filled with family and friends visiting me which will hopefully take my mind off of things. I've asked my sisters to witness my leaving of this world which they don't want to do, but I began crying like a baby again telling them I was scared to die alone and that I needed to see the faces of people who loved me before I sink into unconsciousness and go on my final journey to meet the Lord. I wish you could have been there too. I would have given anything for you to have been standing there next to my sisters.

Finally Evie, I want to talk to you about the night with Chuck and Roy. I wish I could tell you the truth about that night but you know what, I can't remember. We was high on drugs and had drunk a lot of whiskey. Believe me Evie when I say I'd never taken drugs before that night and I don't even know what we smoked that day or what the white powder was. When they got the guns out we was in Chuck's bedroom, messing about, that much I do remember.

The next thing is we was near an old rundown farm shooting beer cans. I'd never touched a gun before but it was exciting to an eighteen year old boy can you dig where I'm coming from?

I kind of half remember driving in a car, and then hearing a lot of shooting and stuff and voices hollering and Chuck and Roy being somewhere near me. It's all a mess after that. Then the cops arrived and I think I passed out. That's what it was. Damn it Evie, I just plain can't remember. I don't know what happened that night but the sober, decent person that

Troy is would never have wanted to kill anyone. Well, I don't think so anyway. Evie if only I knew what the truth was. Inside me I could never murder anyone but they told me I did and maybe that's why I got to pay with my life now.

Hell Evie, I've fucked up my life, for real so you just have to promise me that you won't give up on yours. Can you handle that? And don't you go stressing yourself out about stuff you be imagining in your head.(smile)

Finally, I just want to tell you that I love you and that it has been a real good experience writing you and receiving your letters this past year. You keep your head up girl and be brave. My time on earth is coming to an end real soon now and I sure wish I had been able to enjoy my life more and seen Kaisa grow up. Until we meet again.

Love always,
your friend Troy

January 30

Dear Evie,

I hope you don't mind me writing you this short letter but I just wanted to thank you for encouraging me to re-establish contact with Troy despite it being very hard. I have had to deal with the loss of Troy all over again and it has been real difficult these past weeks. His grandmother has gone to pieces and me and his sisters have been taking it in turn to look after her. When I look at Kaisa I just know keeping her was the right thing to do despite everything but I just wish that things had worked out between me and Troy. I told her Daddy was not well and has gone to heaven. How can you tell a young child that their father has been given a lethal injection for a crime he didn't commit?

The main reason for writing you is because there have been some developments in Troy's case and it now seems as if the District Attorney might be charged with perjury. There are some issues about Chuck and Roy's statements and a new witness has turned up, but it is too late now. Troy has been murdered and I am just sick with pain and anger about what happened to him. What a wasted life.

I know Troy really enjoyed your correspondence and always spoke highly of you. On the day of his execution it was raining and Troy kept saying they were God's tears, he tried real hard to be as brave as he could. We were all trying not to cry so he could see happy faces like he wanted to. He told me to tell you to be happy and that those angels were all around you and that you mustn't let guilt ruin your life.

He was very confused in the last days due to the medication they put him on after he tried to take his own life, no doubt he told you about this.

Well do keep in touch. We have to make the best of things and get on with our lives as Troy would want us to.

With very best wishes,

Roseleen Mosley