

THE LETTER

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

KYLE Young man with an unsettling past.
MANDY One of Kyle's roommates.

SETTING

A small kitchen in a low-rent apartment.

SCENE

(It is a dingy kitchen in a house converted into multiple rental properties. Kyle is sitting at a small table, staring at a sealed envelope. There's a partially filled glass of iced tea near it. He's holding a chipped seashell, running his finger along the edge over and over. After a moment, Mandy enters with an empty glass in her hand. She was heading for the refrigerator, but stops when she sees that Kyle isn't moving.)

MANDY

Is this some kind of Zen thing? *(No response.)* Kyle?

KYLE

Huh? Oh. Hey, Mandy.

(He goes back to staring at the envelope.)

MANDY

What's that?

KYLE

(Looking up with a halfhearted smile, Kyle tries to say something witty, but his heart isn't in it...)

This? *(Pointing at the envelope...)* This is an inflamed appendix that has just—

MANDY

Please don't. If you don't want to talk about it, just—

KYLE

Sorry.

MANDY

So it's something serious?

KYLE

What?

MANDY

Whenever you're dealing with something important, and you don't know what to do, you turn to making organ jokes. Bad organ jokes.

KYLE

I don't do that...

MANDY

Every time. But anyway, I'll leave you be. I just came in to get a refill.

KYLE

The iced tea? It's warm. I took the last a bit ago, but I made more.

MANDY

Thanks.

(During the next few lines, Mandy goes to the fridge, opens the freezer part and takes out an ice cube tray. She puts some ice in her glass, then replaces it. She then pours herself some ice tea from a pitcher in the fridge.)

KYLE

Sure.

MANDY

So what's in the envelope?

KYLE

A letter, I'm guessing. Don't know for sure. It got delivered this morning.

MANDY

The mail doesn't usually come this early.

KYLE

It was a special delivery. Western Union, I think.

MANDY

Are they even still in business?

KYLE

Apparently.

MANDY

So what does it say?

KYLE

Don't know. I haven't opened it.

MANDY

And you won't know unless you do. That's how letters work, Kyle.

KYLE

It's from my dad.

MANDY

I thought you weren't on speaking terms.

KYLE

We're not.

(Mandy comes over and sits at the table.)

MANDY

How did he get your address?

(Kyle shrugs a "no idea" response.)

When was the last time...

KYLE

Not since he left. Long time ago. Let's see... Ennis was born that year, so I would have been... thirteen? Twelve? No, it was summer, so thirteen.

MANDY

What do you think he... you know, what the letter...

KYLE

Dunno. I can't imagine what he could possibly have to say to me. And especially in a letter.

MANDY

Maybe he wants to connect again. Maybe he—

KYLE

Doubt it. And if he does, that's too bad for him.

MANDY

Are you going to open it?

KYLE

I don't know.

MANDY

You must be at least curious—

KYLE

(Suddenly angry...)

Of course I'm curious! What kind of question is that?!

MANDY

(Surprised...)

I'm sorry! I didn't mean to... I'll let you—

KYLE

No. Please. I'm sorry. I just... I don't know... what to do, you know? It has me kinda... on edge.

MANDY

Yeah. I can imagine. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I don't want to pry, you know?

KYLE

It's okay.

MANDY

I'm glad to listen if you want to talk, though. You know that, right? Or I can see if Alex is awake, if you'd rather talk to him.

KYLE

Actually, I'd rather not to talk to him.

MANDY

Is everything okay between you two?

KYLE

Yeah. It's all fine. It's just... I don't know.

MANDY

Well, like I said. I'm glad to listen if...

KYLE

Thanks.

(There's a long silence, and eventually Mandy concludes that Kyle would rather just have some solitude. She gets up with her iced tea, and is just about out of the kitchen when...)

KYLE (CONT)

He always drank iced tea.

(Mandy stops, turns around.)

So naturally I hated the stuff. For years. But it kinda grew on me. Not sweet like that soda crap that Alex drinks all the time.

(Mandy walks back to the table and sits down.)

MANDY

I like this peach blend we got. Just that little hint of sweet, you know? But without actually—

KYLE

He was a black tea kind of guy. My father. Lipton, straight up.

MANDY

Each to his own, I suppose.

(They sit in silence for a few beats.)

Did you tell your mom about it? *(She indicates the letter.)*

KYLE

No.

MANDY

Are you going to?

KYLE

I don't know. I guess it depends on what's inside.

MANDY

Only one way to find out.

KYLE

I suppose.

MANDY

Kyle... What are you afraid of?

KYLE

I... It's hard to say. I guess mostly I'm afraid of finding out that I was right.

MANDY

About what?

KYLE

About why he left. Why he never came back.

MANDY

So you don't know for certain? Well, that's a stupid thing to say, isn't it. I guess there's no way you could really know. Sorry.

KYLE

I thought about that day so... *(He is about to say "much", but then just takes a deep breath)*. Hell, thought about it pretty much every day through the rest of my teens. Wondering...

MANDY

Wondering?

KYLE

Wondering how things would have been if I had...

MANDY

If you had what?

KYLE

Just kept my mouth shut.

(Mandy just watches Kyle, until...)

You see, my dad was kind of a lazy fuck. He never did anything to help my mom. Oh, he'd bend over backwards for anyone else, but when it came to our family...

MANDY

I'm sorry.

KYLE

(Not really having heard her...)

And he was the worst to my mom. He was so awful. “Mary, where’s my dinner?” “Mary, how come the clothes aren’t folded yet?” “Mary, do this.” “Mary, do that.” And my mom, she’d never say anything back. She’d just do it. Whatever he asked. Whatever he told her to.

MANDY

Maybe she just wanted to make him happy.

KYLE

Maybe, but it was really hard to watch. Lilly and me... we’d... sometimes we’d say stuff to him. You know, tell him he should help out. But it always just ended in a fight. He’d call us ungrateful, we’d call him... all kinds of things. And then mom would come in and stick up for him. Well, not stick up for him, so much. Just try to defuse things. She was president of the “if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say it” fan club.

MANDY

So what happened?

KYLE

Mom was pregnant with Ennis, and it was a really hard one. She was sick a lot of the time. Her doctor told her to stay off her feet. You know, get as much rest as she could.

MANDY

I’m guessing she didn’t?

KYLE

She tried, but he wouldn’t let her. He’d call her lazy, and say she was just making excuses. So she’d get up – even though she wasn’t supposed to – and do everything. Me and Lilly would try to help, but we were in school, and she’d... Sorry. This is...

MANDY

It’s okay. Really. Go on. I mean, if you want to.

KYLE

Anyway... We’d always come home to find that she’d been up and doing stuff all day. Then this one day about a week after school had ended, he came home in the middle of the day. Lilly and I were doing chores around the house, and he started in on mom, making her feel bad for ‘just lying there’ while we were cleaning.

MANDY

Jesus.

KYLE

Yeah. Anyway, that was kind of my breaking point, I guess. I said some stuff... stuff I... I shouldn't have said.

MANDY

What did you say?

KYLE

I called him a bum. At least that was gist – I... used a few more adjectives than that. I told him he didn't deserve my mom.

MANDY

Sounds like he didn't.

KYLE

No. He didn't. I said some other things too. Angry things. And then he got angry and yelled back. And I yelled louder. Then he started throwing things. I remember him running his arm along a shelf and everything crashing to the floor. A bunch of things broke, including this really cool clay pot that Lilly made for him in art class. We used to keep a bunch of seashells in it, and they went flying everywhere.

(Kyle shows her the seashell that he's been holding.)

Like this one.

MANDY

Is that why you carry it around?

(Kyle nods.)

KYLE

After he did that, he started to storm out. I should have just let him go... I almost did. You know, I think if he had just left... gone wherever he used to go to... that would have been it. Just one more fight in a long list of... But he didn't. When he got to the door, he turned around and looked right at my mom and said "You better have that mess cleaned up by the time I get home."

MANDY

Oh my god...

KYLE

That was the breaking point. I picked this up and threw it at him as hard as I could as he was leaving. Hit him right in the back of the head. (*Pointing to a spot on the shell...*) Here. You can see where it chipped.

(*He shows the spot to Mandy.*)

He spun around, and I remember... screaming at him. Said he was a monster, and that we'd all be better off if he just walked out the door and never came back.

MANDY

What did he say?

KYLE

Nothing. He just stood there staring at me... and then turned around and left.

MANDY

And that was it?

KYLE

That was it. He never came back.

MANDY

Oh my god, Kyle.

KYLE

It got really bad after that. Everything was in his name. He canceled the credit cards right away, so mom had to go get a part-time job just so we could buy food.

MANDY

But you had the house, right? I mean, if he never came back.

KYLE

For a bit. We stayed there until after Ennis was born, but he had stopped paying the mortgage, and they foreclosed on the place by the end of the year.

MANDY

But what about child support, or...

KYLE

What, are you kidding?

MANDY

But he'd have to. As part of the divorce, the courts—

KYLE

What divorce? There wasn't a divorce. Technically they're still married, I think.

MANDY

Oh my god. So what did you do?

KYLE

We stayed with my aunt for a little while, but she didn't have enough room for four more people. Eventually we got an apartment and... you know. You do what you have to.

MANDY

I'm so sorry, Kyle. I never had the slightest idea.

KYLE

How could you?

MANDY

Sounds like you're definitely better off without him, but...

(Kyle looks up at Mandy, wondering what she's planning to say.)

I just... I mean... I hope you don't blame yourself. You were thirteen. And he's the one who made things like that. If—

KYLE

No, but it was my fault. The way it worked out.

MANDY

I don't know. It sounds to me like it was just a matter of time. You couldn't have known what would happen. Hell, when I thirteen I was about as dumb as—

KYLE

No. Don't give me that "we were all thirteen once" crap. You want to know the bad part?

MANDY

Jesus. That's not the bad part?

KYLE

Here's the real kick in the head. I found out a couple of years later that my mom had been planning to leave him. She'd been saving up money for a while, but then when she got pregnant, she decided to stick it out until after Ennis was born. So that she'd have insurance and everything for the birth.

MANDY

Oh my god.

KYLE

Then I went and fucked it all up. He cleaned out mom's savings... took everything out of the deposit box... Everything. I cost her *everything*. So don't tell me how we all do stupid things when we're young. There's stupid, and then there's stupid.

MANDY

You couldn't have known.

(Kyle just looks at her.)

I'm so sorry.

(Kyle flips the shell into the air, catches it.)

KYLE

Yeah.

MANDY

I...

(Kyle waves her to silence, then stands up and puts the shell into his pocket.)

So what are you going to do with that *(motioning at the letter)*?

KYLE

I don't know. I feel like I should open it, but I just can't imagine anything he'd say that I'd want to hear. But if I just throw it away, then I think, 'what if the fucker somehow grew a conscience'? Maybe he sent a check and I could give it to my mom. I mean, I don't really care about anything that he'd say to me, but if there was a chance for something good to come out of it for her, you know?

MANDY

You could open it and see if it had a check, but not read it.

KYLE

But maybe he left something in a will, or he... I don't know. I just think that if I open it, I'm gonna end up reading it.

MANDY

Unless...

(They look at each other for a silent moment, then Kyle reaches down and picks up the envelope. He hands it to Mandy, who steels herself then opens it. She takes out a letter, reads it. She then looks up at Kyle with an expressionless face, and lights out.)