

# The Letter

*by* Daniel D'Arezzo

That day everything was fine. Of course everything was *not* fine that day. I was thirty-three years old, in good health, and everything *seemed* fine. I had been on the job for five months, which was a record for me, and I felt that I was fitting in at the Sullivan & Sons Funeral Home. I had never planned on a career in mortuary. I just fell into the job like an open grave. But it was going well. Maryann, my wife, who was the primary earner in our family, was pleased. Then came the letter.

I knew nothing about the letter at first. When I came in that morning and smiled and said good morning, it was a genuine smile and a heartfelt good morning. But the letter, which had arrived the previous afternoon, was already doing its corrosive work of undermining my situation. It was already poisoning the atmosphere. You don't have to be particularly sensitive to realize something is amiss when your heartfelt good morning is met with a blank stare.

"Mr. Sullivan would like to see you," Naomi said when I good-morninged her.

"Fine," I said. "What time?"

"Now, I think," she said. "I'll let him know you're here."

So that's how I found out about the letter. I knew instantly who had sent it, the younger of the two women, the one who was about my age and had come with her mother. They had come to pick up the cremains of their uncle/brother, or maybe it was their father/husband. But she was the only problem I'd had. It had to have been her. Everyone else, well, they were fine. Even the woman's mother, who was very upset and always on the edge of tears, she was fine, too, in her way—grieving, you know. That's fine. That's normal. But this woman, she was not fine. She was looking at me so hard, as if my fly was open, that I actually checked to make sure it wasn't. It was a relief when the two women left with the plastic box of cremains.

Then the letter comes and John Sullivan has me in his office. He smiles very blandly and I smile back, that primate thing. "As you know, Ray," he says, "we're almost to the end of your probationary period on staff."

"Just one month to go, sir," I say.

"Yes, well, I don't think we have to go another month," he says. "Read this." He hands me the letter. After I've had a chance to read it, he asks, "What do you think?"

"It's a very well written letter, sir," I say. It's a good idea to start off being complimentary, I've been told.

"Is that all?"

"Sir, I would like to say first that I very much regret any suffering I may have unknowingly inflicted on Miss Davis and her mother." A forthright apology is also, I believe, a good thing to do: soft words tune out wrath.

"And the damage you have done to Sullivan & Sons?"

"Oh, certainly, I'm very sorry about that as well."

But it wasn't just the letter, John kept saying. It was other things, my demeanor mostly. He didn't think I was really cut out for the mortuary business. Customer relations key. Reputation of the firm. Repeat business. I didn't understand any of it, but I did understand that I was being fired, and I've been fired plenty. I collected my personal things, very few, and left.

On the way home, I stopped off at The Pub on Solano and had an Old Speckled Hen. Maryann would still be home, and I didn't think I was ready to face her. She had been working for so long as a waitress, keeping us afloat while I tried to make a go of different things with nothing but continued failure. I had never found what I was cut out for. I tried to imagine my DNA with a specific gene for "billionaire" and tried to activate it, but I couldn't, not sitting in The Pub drinking beer anyway. I could only reflect. "Only reflect." Who said that? I'm very good at reflecting and I can tell you it's not enough.

After a few beers, I had not come up with anything satisfactory to tell Maryann, so I decided to tell her the truth, which is. . . . I have no idea.

That's not true. Here's my idea: I do not fit in. I shower, shave, comb my hair, dress, and then the moment I walk into a room with other people, it's as if I had emerged from a cesspool. It's the low-self-esteem gene that got activated instead of the billionaire gene, and that gene in turn activates the thirst-for-alcohol gene and the dying-for-a-smoke gene. It's mostly nature and a little nurture, but not a whole lot of the latter. Lots of people grew up in Yakima and managed to fit in nevertheless.

The pain is at once indescribable and nondescript.

I am at home, in bed, barely awake but awake enough to know that Maryann is home, the kids are home. I hear noises in the kitchen, small voices rising, rising. I hate them but I don't want them to know it. They know it and avoid me, and I hate them more.

Maryann knows that I have been fired again. When the kids have gone to bed, she asks me why.

"I gave the cremains to the woman and said, 'I'm sorry. It's a goddamn shame.'"

"They fired you for that?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

After a moment's thought, without emotion, she says, "You wanted to be fired. You said that because you knew you would be fired."

"There were things that I was supposed to say, that I had been saying and that I could no longer say." I make a gesture that could be taken to mean that I rest my case or that I have called a runner safe: a slight bow from the waist, arms spread wide.

"Oh, Ray." She looks so tired and small and drained of energy, and then she clocks me on the chin, a good hard right uppercut from the balls of her feet, and I am sprawled on the bed.

Ray can never trust Maryann again. It is the mirror image of her feeling about me: again Maryann trust never can Ray. We are quits; she has quitted me. The children have gone with her and will never

know their father. I have quit drinking after ending up in the hospital a couple of times. When one has done as much damage as one can possibly do, then it is time to quit.

By the time I quit, it was already too late to do anything about Maryann and the kids. I am comfortable with that. You push people away, and they finally take the hint.

I owe Miss Davis a debt of gratitude for her having taken the time to write a letter of complaint. She was not thinking of my welfare when she did it; she did it with malice in her heart, and maybe that fact cancels my debt. I should probably thank John Sullivan, who did not have to fire me and did so without malice but merely out of an ethos of propriety, which remains my ancient enemy, many times worse than malice. I have many times in my mind thanked Maryann, who acted out of weariness and resignation, which is how most things get decided in life. It is how and where this story ends.

