

My letter to my brother, the Boy Who Ran:

(two people sitting opposite each other one the BOY and the other the writer of the letter the boys brother)

When we are aggrieved with another person we often vent our anger imagining them sitting there in front of us. This is it today the older brother vents to the younger brother ...

You are the strangest and least accessible brother to me.

(younger brother sits down)

Impetuous. Careless. Demanding. So selfish, you leave me seething, jealous, envious.

On the face of things, you and I have little in common. I've never run away, or squandered an inheritance, or given myself over to "dissolute living." But neither have I felt the ardent, tear-soaked embrace of a lovesick father — human or divine — welcoming me home. Maybe this is why I dislike you. Am I envious because your father is generous? Am I hurt because your father's love is a wild, unfettered thing, unpredictable and unfair? YES, I AM. YES. I AM.

Here's what I'd like to know: was your penitence genuine? Did you mean that pious speech you composed in the pigsty, or were you just a clever talker, well-versed in your father's soft spots? Did you feel bad about your adventure, or just bad that it failed dramatically?

Here's the other thing I'd like to know: did you get your act together, once the party was over and the fatted calf was eaten? Did you get up early the next morning and pull your weight in the fields? Did you apologize to me, your brother? Take care of your father? Make peace with the villagers you scandalized? Did you understand in your heart that really, there's no such thing as going home? Not in any simple way? Did you get that everything — everything — would have to change?

Here's what I really need to know: what is this bitter root in me, that needs a guarantee? That wants to make sure you understood just how much fear, destruction, and sorrow you caused, before I let you off the hook? Why do I need to withhold the forgiveness that alone might restore you? What will I gain if you bleed repentance first?

I know this is my problem. My spite. My withholding. Everything in me accuses you of having no empathy — of not giving a damn about how you ripped your father's heart out of his chest — but the truth is, I'm struggling pretty hard to empathise with you. So I'm digging down, trying extra hard to find the tender places where you really live. Who are you beneath the labels? Beneath "prodigal," beneath "transgressor," beneath "estranged? beneath Brother, Son?"

"**Dying of hunger.**" That's how your story describes your final days in that far-off country. When your costly adventure was over, when your funds ran dry, when your so-called friends abandoned you. There among the pigs, covered in filth, you finally realized who and what you were. "Dying of hunger." Brother can I give you a new label? A new name? One I can relate to? Aren't you, at the very core, **The Hungry One?**

Hey **Hungry one.** It was hunger, wasn't it, that first lured you away from a good life and a good father? A gluttonous hunger, maybe, but hunger still. For freedom? Self-expression? Novelty? Something in you — something wild and insistent — needed feeding.

But here's the thing that knocks the breath out of me: your father, in his vast, unorthodox wisdom, understood you. He didn't hold you back. He didn't decide what your journey should look like. He let you go, maybe he to had been different to all expectations placed on him?

What did he know that I refuse to know? That you couldn't return home without leaving first? That you couldn't taste life without dying first? That maybe lostness is part of the deal — the prelude to the most magnificent finding? Can it be that I, too, need to know such hunger — know it on the tongue, in the gut, like a fire in my bones — before I can savour the feast?

Your father understood. What a remarkable thing that is — his deep and patient comprehension of how life and desire actually work. He respected the hunger that pulled you away. **He knew a wiser, sharper hunger would bring you home.**

Was it admirable? What you did? Coming home. I don't know. But there is this: even though it cost you, even though it wounded your family, you honoured your hunger. I can't speak to the rightness or wrongness of your decision, but maybe there is something in it that I should attend to. I usually ignore my hunger. When I can't ignore it, I hide, minimise, and vilify it. Is there a chance my hunger wants to point me to God?

Your journey ends in a passionate embrace. Unrestrained welcome, overflowing joy. Were you grateful? Were you indebted? Did you try extra hard in later years to earn the feast your father lavished on you? Or did you simply rest in his prodigal love, knowing it can never be earned? It seems your father didn't much care; he just wanted to feed and clothe you.

There's so little of your experience I can applaud. Despite my best attempts to reconcile my heart with yours, my envy remains. Your Father ran to welcome you. He cared for nothing in this world so much as having you safe and snug in his arms. This is not everyone's heart experience. To hear we are loved is one thing. To feel ourselves embraced is

another. You are fortunate. Do you know that? Something jealous in me wants to make sure you know it.

But something broken in me wants to reach you, too. To build bridges between your life and mine. What do you know that I know, too? I know what it's like to hunger. To hunger for life, for depth, for passion, for joy. I know what it's like to imagine an exotic Elsewhere, a more perfect nourishment miles away from my father's all-too-familiar table. I know lostness — the lostness of being small and sorry and stupid in a world too big and unwieldy to manipulate or control. I know what it's like to "come to myself" in the broken, impoverished places I create in my own heart. And I know what it's like to feel shame — shame that I've disappointed everyone, shame that I'm damaged goods, shame that I'll never, ever be enough to earn the love I crave.

Brother I still don't like you. But maybe we're not so very different after all.