

Henny & Mark

January 2019

Dear Henny (did I really used to call myself that?),

This is my second month of marriage counselling and apparently writing letters to my younger self is all part of reflection and personal growth. Your 52-year-old self is feeling a bit of a twit if I'm honest, but nobody is reading this so I can say what I like. This week Mark and I sat in front of Elena, the counsellor who has a silver ring in her nose which she's too old for really. I told her that we love each other, and we aren't going to let cancer tear us apart. This would break other couples, but we're in love and that simply won't happen. You have to stand up and fight when it comes to cancer.

Oh Henny, with your dewy skin, and capacity to stay awake for an entire film - you have no idea what lies ahead.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Hen is writing furiously at the kitchen table. If I don't join in, then apparently it means I'm not taking counselling seriously. Or, maybe I've had a day that started with a 6am commute and all I want to do is listen to the cricket in my study.

The benefit of writing letters to our younger selves, that we do not share, is not clear. Something about it being cathartic. Typical marriage guidance bollocks.

Be sure to look out for next month's gripping instalment of reflections from the future.

Mark

Henny & Mark

February 2019

Dear Henny,

Elena wants us to reflect on what led up to counselling. So here goes, the top 5 events of the last two years:

No 5 – Mark got a promotion at work. Now he's one step nearer the evil CEO.

No 4 – Apparently, I sneezed the wrong way and ended up with a herniated disc in my lumbar spine. I couldn't move for three days.

No 3 – Stella and Jack both left for university.

No 2 – Mark's mum died.

No 1 – Mark got diagnosed with cancer. Didn't expect that one did you.

Sometimes Mark doesn't sleep. Often I see him staring out the window of his study in silence – did he do this before the diagnosis? It's like he's lost his way. It happens sometimes Henny. I know you have a complete conviction that you're walking the path life intended for you – but sometimes things unravel. My job right now is to untangle the knots in our marriage.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

What d'you think happens when you get a promotion? How about an all-inclusive stay in a resort in the Caribbean to make up for all the crappy hours you've been putting in? Nope - a utility room and downstairs shower Hen wanted but we didn't need. And to top it off, the day after the builders left, it started - a flash above the trees, which could have been sunlight reflecting off an aeroplane. But there was no plane.

That was the month I met Maria Harrington at a conference on Quality Standards in Social Housing – not the most auspicious event to meet somebody.

Henny & Mark

The next time I noticed the flashing light Hen and I were in the car visiting my mum who was living out her life like Groundhog Day in a piss-soaked nursing home. This time it was like an old-fashioned camera going off. Hen didn't see it.

The next week I went to conference I didn't need to attend just to spend time with Maria.

The flashing happened at my mum's funeral, as my dad threw earth on top of her coffin. I nearly lost my footing and fell in to join the old girl. You've got to laugh.

The optician referred me to the doctor, who reassured me that I shouldn't worry - as he fast tracked me onto the cancer pathway.

A one in five million chance of getting my type of eye cancer apparently. The consultant called his buddy in to look at me. There's no complete cure, just treatment and then MRIs for the rest of my life to check if it spreads.

Hen found research papers on treatments, an online support group, bought eye patches, and started baking.

I calculated how many MRIs I'd need if I live until I'm eighty. 62 scans. I don't know why I chose 80. Optimistic.

I went to Maria's flat and told her I had to have surgery on a detached retina.

When I went into hospital my eye felt fine. After a course of radiation where even morphine didn't touch the pain, my eye looked like a piece of rare steak. I had double vision, and my world consisted of eye drops and hospitals scans.

When I finally told Maria the truth about my eye, I said we were over – some rubbish about not wanting to burden her with an uncertain future. She didn't say anything, so I drove home waiting for a phone call from her that never came.

My advice Mark: go to that all-inclusive resort before it's too late.

Mark

March 2019

Dear Henny,

You want to be a writer when you grow up, don't you? You have this fantasy that your hidden talent will just reveal itself to an agent, maybe as you waitress the split shift in a hotel, and a book deal will magically appear alongside the tip. And I realised as I dug out this moleskin pad and pen that I've never let the dream of being an author go. Well, Henny, if you want to be a writer then you really need to write, and at 25 you already are a grown up. But back then nobody shared these secrets with me, so this is the first writing I've done for about 20 years.

This month Elena suggested for homework we try the 5 minute listening exercise. We set a timer and each of us spoke uninterrupted for five minutes. The other is supposed to listen. I couldn't think what to say for the first 40 seconds and then for the next 4 minutes 20 seconds I talked about my day - the debate we're having at work about when to make the toilets unisex and whether there should be a consultation because Tracy in accounts said she'd leave if she was forced to share with the men. My five minutes was up, I wasn't sure that's what Elena had in mind. Mark talked about his cancer of course, and I spent the whole five minutes regretting not even mentioning his eye.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

When you were 15, all you wanted to know was whether Jack Winters could really see Diane McCloud from his bedroom window, rubbing on moisturiser in her underwear every morning (he could by the way). Nowadays I get distracted wondering if the dysfunctional cluster of cells was already inside my iris. Who knows?

This month Hen said we had to listen to each other for 5 minutes without interrupting. She started chuntering on about work and I tried to listen, but I tuned out before the time was up.

I talked about the bleeding obvious. And then it was over.

April 2019

Dear Henny,

It really feels like early summer now. I have a chair in my sewing room facing a window with a view of the garden, the light in there is so beautiful. It's the kind of room you used to dream about while you were cleaning your tiny flat. Sometimes I fall asleep in there and it's gone dark by the time I wake up. I can hear Mark snoring from upstairs – he probably went up ages ago. He never used to be this tired. I'd call him my Tigger because he'd bounce into a room and fill it up. Where have you gone my Tigger?

I shove in ear plugs and lie awake wondering when he started coming to bed without me and then realise it's been ages. Before the kids left for uni. A long time before cancer.

Elena asked us to share one thing we're grateful for each day. All I could think of today is the receptionist at work has obviously fallen off the dieting wagon and was looking huge again. I tried to think of something more generous, but nothing would come. Mark didn't mention the gratitude exercise, so I decided to not say anything just to see if he'd remember. He hasn't. I don't know why I feel I need to test him. I think he's got a scan coming up so maybe I should be more forgiving. Sometimes cancer seems to be sat on the sofa with us every night and I'm just tired of it.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Last month the doctor prescribed me pills for anxiety. I read the side effects last night: dry mouth, nausea, decreased appetite and weight gain (covering both bases), and a loss of libido (although I think the flannel pyjamas and a fleecy dressing gown Hen changes into as soon as she's home from work puts paid to that).

Some marriage advice Mark: make sure you insist on no pyjamas before 6.30pm.

Mark

Henny & Mark

May 2019

Dear Henny,

Finally we went on a date night. I thought this would be the bread and butter of relationship counselling. This month was my turn and I chose the tiny theatre at the back of the local pub. It was showing a play about someone having a lucid dream about time travel, which turned out to be their journey into dementia. I hadn't read the blurb before I booked it, and it wasn't the evening I'd hoped for. Afterwards we ended up talking about our parents and the guilt Mark feels about not having his mum live with us during her last years. I didn't say that our house wasn't big enough back then, and that Stella and Jack were doing their finals - only because I'd said it all before.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Why do marriage counsellors suggest bloody dates nights for struggling couples?

Mark

June 2019

Dear Henny,

This month Elena suggested we give the different parts of our life a mark out of 10. I noticed Mark scored intimacy 2 out of 10 and I could barely look at him. His idea of intimacy used to be a quick grope while I was washing the dishes, but he doesn't even bother with that these days. Henny, you may imagine that most women in their 50s would rather curl up in their PJs with a good book and a hot chocolate than have sex, but you'd be wrong. He didn't mention the low score in the session so I talked about how tiring it was doing a job I didn't enjoy and how this exhausted me so all I wanted to do in the evenings was sew or watch mindless TV. Mark said uncertainty about his future took the joy out of most things. Is it wrong to think he keeps pulling the cancer card?

You'll be a bit surprised I just wrote that. I'm a bit surprised I wrote that. I wonder what it means.

Henny & Mark

Writing my top 5 events from last year made me realise three of them were about Mark, one was about my herniated disc (so barely qualifies) and one was about the children. I feel like I'm not even a character in my own life.

So I started writing again and yesterday I sent a short story off to a woman's magazine. I didn't even tell Mark and I'm not sure why.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Hen seems to spend all her time writing these days, what sort of nonsense is she telling her younger self?

We had to rate all areas of our life in the session this month. I don't think Hen's got any idea what it's like. I can't even book a holiday without being interrogated by the insurance company who then triple the cost of cover because of my diagnosis. It never goes away.

Last week I was flicking through my phone and saw old messages from Maria. I felt a stir which I thought the drugs had buried.

Mark

July 2019

Dear Henny,

We've not had a counselling session this month because Elena is going away. Neither of us asked her where to.

Henny, before Mark, you used to love going away to hot countries where nobody spoke English, sitting in a dusty courtyard under the shade of a tree, with your notepad and pen to watch locals setting up market stalls or shouting at their children. But when I met Mark he described himself as a Labrador, panting uncomfortably in the heat, so we stayed in cooler climates.

Henny & Mark

This month we took a road trip to Sweden which was my idea. It reminded me that city life is so noisy and stale. We stayed in lodges in the woods or in painted wooden houses. I finished the first draft of a story I've been struggling with. It's about a daughter's sense of obligation, guilt and end of life decisions. I based it on everything I've seen Mark going through with his mum before she died. They say write what you know so I'm tapping into this material like it's a library. The human memory always amazes me, and to think, if I hadn't captured it in my writing it would all be lost. I've changed the story context and characters but I think it still sounds genuine – listen to me, I sound like I'm talking to Mariella Frostrop on radio 4!

We stopped in Denmark for two nights and hired bikes to cycle through the woods. It felt like it used to be before life got complicated. That evening we ate pizza in a busy little square and I noticed my shoulders drop about a centimetre. We shared a bottle of wine and Mark had a smile on his face for the first time in ages. I'd never shown Mark any of my writing before, so I brought along a copy of my story. This is a big deal because I've hardly shown anyone. He looked at it but then said he wasn't a big reader so couldn't tell if it was any good or not. Then he drained his glass, and said it was too cold to sit outside. He didn't even finish his pizza before we left - sometimes I wonder why I bother.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

We drove over 900 miles to Sweden this month. Not my idea of a holiday - the exhaust on the van only stopped rattling when we were sitting in motorway traffic. At least it took my mind off things.

Before mum lost everything to dementia she would repeat the same sentence over and over, "The problem with Mark, he has to be the centre of attention otherwise he spoils it for everyone". The nurses always gave me a sympathetic nod but I always wondered if it was actually true.

Hen asked me to read the story she'd been agonising over. When I finished it I couldn't look at her. She wanted to know what I thought, but I was concentrating on breathing in and out.

Henny & Mark

Story outline: Elderly controlling mum manipulates whole family until finally she died alone in a hospital bed.

I'm writing this at 2am because I can't sleep.

Mark

August 2019

Dear Henny,

Today is a great day. The magazine didn't accept my story but they told me to write for another category and asked me to reapply. I know this doesn't sound like much— but they could have just turned me down, so I'm thrilled. All that dreaming about being a writer Henny, and now I'm knocking on the door of nearly doing it! Nothing much else is happening. Mark seems OK at the moment too. Maybe the counselling is working. Although he's still always working late, I'm not sure I mind now I have a very important story to write. I can imagine being a writer, with a studio and maybe a dog to keep me company. And Mark, obviously.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

At lunchtime I picked up a box of the chocolates Hen loves, but when I got home she asked me where *her Tigger* had gone. And when I didn't reply she disappeared into her sewing room and didn't come out. The next day I left the chocolates by the printer at work and overheard the girls complaining as they ate them about the coffee soft centres.

Mark

Henny & Mark

September 2019

Dear Henny,

I miss laughing at his silly jokes. Or when we both spot the same odd couple in the street. Or when he talks while he's flossing his teeth because he just has to finish an anecdote, even though I can't understand a word he's saying.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

This month Elena asked what we missed, I mumbled something about the illusion of immortality, but the real answer is Maria. I miss her asking me questions and caring about the answer or smiling at me before I leave her flat. I miss how it felt getting her text messages.

Yesterday the toast I made for Hen was all wrong apparently, she looked at me like I was a piece of cat shit.

Mark

October 2019

Dear Henny,

Never go to sleep on an argument. This was our promise we made to each other. But what if you don't ever argue because there's nothing left to say?

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Last month I messaged Maria. I know, not a good idea. When she replied I had to take my phone to the toilet to read her message. It feels like she's the only thing getting me up in the morning. Hen and I have failed to do the 5 minute listening exercise again this month. And I hope she doesn't suggest it now.

Henny & Mark

I'm tempted to drop in and see Maria before my scan appointment next week but I don't want to do that to Hen.

Mark

November 2019

Dear Henny,

I've started writing in my study now instead of the kitchen because I could hear the drone of Mark's radio from his office. It sometimes means we don't speak all evening. Last week Mark told me he needed more space – how much space can one person need?

So I walked into his study and said that if things don't change I don't know if I can carry on. It sounded more dramatic than I'd intended and he looked at me like I was crazy.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

Maria and I have been messaging each other all month. She hasn't really asked much about the cancer but it's not the easiest subject to bring up over WhatsApp. I need to tell her that we should stop, but I can't. Last night I went for a run and stopped halfway round to call her. I was sheltering in a bus stop laughing like a kid.

This month in counselling we talked about Hen's childhood and how she coped when her parents split up. She said she'd seen them rip each other apart and that it'd given her trust issues. I felt like someone was twisting my guts and all I could do was stare at the door.

Hen and I used to have this pre-work ritual that ran like clockwork – I'd make her tea while she showered, she'd make me breakfast while I got ready, we'd eat at the table and leave the house together. Now I get up early, Hen stays in bed and I leave the house in the dark.

Last week I told Hen I needed some space, I want her to know something isn't right. The next day she stomped into my study and said she doesn't know if she can carry on. I wonder if she's met someone. It would make things easier if she had.

Henny & Mark

I've collected a few of my things together and I'm storing them at work just in case things get bad and I have to leave.

An appointment came through for my scan follow up and Hen normally comes with me but I just don't want the long car journey together. She thinks I'll be at work.

Mark

December 2019

Dear Henny,

OK, I can't actually breathe as I write this. My story got accepted and I'm now waiting to hear about the offer of a writing residency! If Mark and I hadn't been having such a terrible time we wouldn't have gone to counselling, and I wouldn't have started writing these letters and wouldn't have rediscovered the author inside of me. I feel like I've traded in a husband to be an author. Oh Henny, is it really worth the exchange? I wish I thought it wasn't.

It feels like Mark is on a satellite circulating a faraway planet these days. Last night I came to bed and he was reading his book and didn't even acknowledge me. I said things can't go on like this and I felt exhausted in a job I don't enjoy coming home to a husband that's like a robot. He muttered something about bloody cancer and turned his light out.

Make the most of your twenties Henny.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

It's two weeks until Christmas, the children are going skiing with their other halves so we're not bothering with decorations or gifts.

I went for my follow up appointment and it was a different doctor this time. He checked if Hen was here and I said she was at work. Then he said, *Mr Rickard, I'm afraid the scan shows a shadow on your lung and we need to investigate further. Until we do another scan we can't rule out the chance that your cancer has spread.* I didn't hear much after that. The first time in two years there's been any bad cancer news and Hen is in her office eating an egg salad. I heard myself asking about scans and the next thing I remember I was sitting in

Henny & Mark

the waiting room at radiology. I didn't message Hen, she'd only worry. And she'd wonder why I didn't tell her about the scan in the first place.

The following week when the doctor asked me to take a seat I could tell the shadow on my lung wasn't a fault on the MRI machine or a cyst.

I messaged Maria and told her about the results of the scan. I said I hoped she'd be OK, and she'd understand that I had to say goodbye. I went back to the office and picked up my emergency bag I'd packed. The toothbrush, change of clothes and spare phone charger seem pathetic now.

Mark

January 2019

Dear Henny,

Not much to say this month. The satellite seems to have been propelled to another galaxy. Sat in the lounge and watched a film together but he fell asleep less than half way through. Went into M & S and bought some nice underwear. Haven't cut the labels off yet.

Henrietta

Dear Mark,

I haven't told Hen about the scan results. I held onto the news and now it seems the moment has passed. Maybe if I don't tell anyone then it won't be real. But I can't look her in the eye anymore, and yesterday morning I crouched in the shower and sobbed until she shouted up the stairs that I was making her late.

Mark

February 2020

Hi Mark,

By the time you read this I'll be gone. I've written you this letter because I can't say the words out loud, they just won't come. I tried last week, and nothing happened.

Henny & Mark

I need some space away from you, and I'm not sure you'll even notice I'm not there.

When we started counselling, I thought we'd just need a bit of help to get us back on track. But what I didn't realise is your track was in a completely different country, a different galaxy even. We thought we could stop the cancer from pulling us apart, but we didn't realise how far apart we already were.

I've won a place on a three-month writing residency so I'm using my savings and taking a sabbatical from work. There's no wifi or even a phone connection. I know this sounds a bit drastic but I want to throw myself at the writing and I can't do that if I have to keep thinking about us.

I said if things don't turn around then I can't go on living like this. You've been hinting that maybe we need some time apart, so I'm taking some.

The kids know where I am but don't be dramatic and try to track me down. I don't have the bandwidth to deal with our marriage and write the first draft of my collection at the same time.

Henrietta

March 2020

Dear Mark,

The house doesn't look any different without Hen. In the morning I tiptoe around the kitchen and empty the dishwasher without clattering plates. And then I realise she's not upstairs in bed. A couple of days after she'd gone I called her mobile and it rang from a drawer in her sewing room.

I wonder how far she's got with her stories.

The oncology department sent a letter saying the operation to remove a lobe of my lung will happen in 2 weeks. I know I could ask the kids to tell Hen but I haven't even told them yet.

Henny & Mark

I've packed my hospital PJs, ear plugs, kindle and for some reason I dropped one of Hen's silver and turquoise earrings into my washbag. It's from a pair I bought on our first holiday together.

Let's hope nothing nasty happens during the operation and the hospital have to contact the children to track her down.

I really think it might break her.

Mark

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In loving memory of Tigger