

YOU IF IT WASN'T FOR YOU

IF YOU HAD THE CHANCE TO SAY A VERY SPECIAL
THANK YOU, WHO WOULD YOU SEND A LETTER TO?
THREE WRITERS PUT PEN TO PAPER

PHOTOGRAPH CAROLYN BARBER

*'You showed me what a difference
being kind can make'*

A random act of generosity from someone she'd
never met had a life-changing effect on Claire Nelson

Dear stranger,

Thank you for the shoes you bought me for my birthday. They were shoes I'd coveted, but was in no position to buy for myself. After all, this year has involved making sacrifices in the pursuit of a lifelong career goal, and shopping has been the first thing to go – no more buying things unless they were 'practical'; which these beautiful shoes, sadly, were not.

You knew all this, of course, because I'd mentioned both the shoes and my career change in passing on Twitter – a throwaway comment lamenting that these shoes were never to be mine. Except I was wrong about that – because you, in an incredible gesture of kindness, bought them for me.

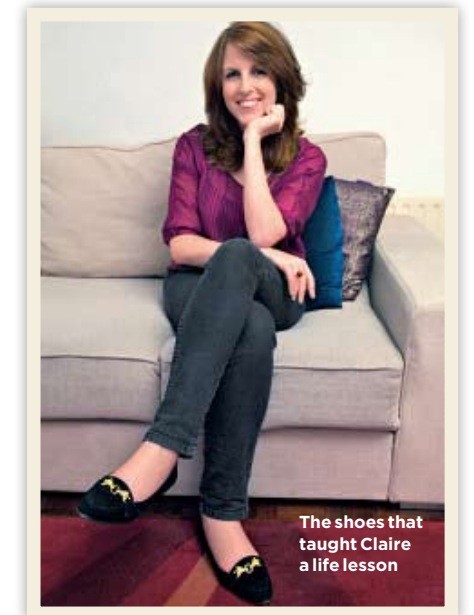
You were under no obligation to send me anything for my birthday. After all, we had never even met. You knew me only within the realms of online social networking which, technically speaking, made us strangers. Yet, as you explained, you knew that, in chasing my dream, I was struggling financially and, at times, flailing. Recently, my life had been a terrifying mix of good days and bad days, through which I had done my best to stay optimistic. And you saw that. You empathised, so you reached out and made a gesture, for no other reason than to offer a pick-me-up.

That took a lot of guts and, more so, a lot of goodness. To be generous is not difficult, yet it can be daunting. Putting yourself out there is an intimidating prospect. It seems we have all become less trusting, more suspicious, unable to believe that kindness doesn't come at a price. What you did has made me believe that true kindness does exist after all.

Since you sent me those shoes, I have found myself making an extra effort to give something back. It doesn't even matter whether it's asked for, or whether it's needed, just as long as it makes someone smile. Whether it's stopping to offer directions, help with a heavy suitcase or give a stranger at the station the change they are short of for their ticket, it doesn't take much. These are only small gestures and, really, they cost me nothing.

When I do something for someone else, I hope they feel the same warmth that I did, and discover for themselves how easy it is to pass that on. That's the thing about kindness: the more it is given, the more it multiplies.

The truth is, I always thought I was a generous person; I wanted to do good things for others. However, it seems that, over time, I'd forgotten that I could. I had become so wrapped up in my own



The shoes that taught Claire a life lesson

struggles that I didn't believe I had the means to be generous. Here I was, trying to muddle through myself – what could I possibly do? As time passed, I'd become closed and guarded but, thanks to you, I feel open again. Now I know I have the potential, every day, to do good.

So, thank you for the gift, and I don't just mean the shoes – although, of course, I love them. It wasn't easy to accept such a generous offer from someone I'd never met, but I also realised it would have been unkind of me to turn you down. Because your gift wasn't just for me, it was for every person to whom I will now pass on that kindness. 🐾

Love, Claire



Alexandra owes a debt of gratitude to the Material Girl



'I'd never be this brave without you'

As a geeky kid, she fell for Madonna, and Alexandra Heminsley's admiration has lasted to this day

Dear Madonna,

I wasn't keen on the Kabbalah phase, I'm not sure I ever want to hear you play the guitar again and I wish you'd go easy on the cosmetic rejuvenation. But it's you I have to thank that I have the balls to admit that. Because, until you, I didn't know I was allowed to disagree with anyone.

I grew up in a large Catholic family, with my childhood divided between the girls-only boarding school I attended and the military bases we lived on because of my father's job. There were, as you can imagine, a lot of rules.

By the time I was in my teens, I had been under the wing of a succession of institutions, and the consequences of disagreeing with them were unimaginable to me. I'm instinctively non-confrontational, and I like knowing what the rules are – often, it seems easier to keep the peace if you just obey them.

Then I saw you: on a boat, in Venice, wearing a crucifix. I was transfixed. I had only ever seen a rosary on my mother's bedside table before, and I was pretty sure that dancing like that wasn't what virgins did. But I wanted a piece of the action. A fan for life was born. I began scouring pop magazines for interviews with you,

hanging on your every word. I was amazed at the way you seemed so self-possessed, fascinated by your assumption that you deserved your position as an icon and intrigued yet confused by any interview where you explained your song lyrics.

For a while, I was worried that was it – I was going to be left with a cassette of *Papa Don't Preach* and some rubber bracelets. But then came *Like A Prayer*. At exactly the same time that adolescent

'What you take flak for today, we'll be reaping the rewards for tomorrow'

boys arrived in my life, so did the revelation that maybe you didn't have to be a virgin to be a valid woman.

And the news kept coming. It was you who taught me it was okay to disagree with authority figures (because you might turn out to be right), it was admirable to wait for something other than second best (even Sean Penn wasn't worth taking crap from), and I might end up valuing respect over just being liked (where's Debbie Gibson now?). And you did it all looking amazing.

When the school bully found out I had been raised Catholic and told me to 'go fuck my rosary beads', I defended myself, because of you. She grew up, and we eventually became friends. Years later, we watched *In Bed With Madonna* together, awestruck at the world of possibility that could be ours if we dared to demand it. Even now, I won't become friends with anyone who won't admit how much our generation has to thank you for. What you take flak for today, we'll be reaping the rewards for tomorrow.

You gave me a fail-safe method of weeding out the women I can never be truly close to, while being a subject of endless discussion with those I am. You gave me the courage to rebel against my mother, while your honesty taught me to appreciate and admire her. And you gave me the balls to follow a career I considered valuable, while making sure I knew the importance of hard work as well.

So, thank you: for the best friends I've ever made, for the best sex I've ever had and for the best jobs I ever got. And, perhaps most of all, thank you for teaching us the importance of well-groomed eyebrows. 🖤

Love,
Alexandra

'I'm old enough to recognise your home-grown charm'

As a teenager, Laura Barton dreamt of escaping the Lancashire town where she grew up – but 13 years after leaving, she's begun to appreciate her roots

Dear Wigan,

You may not be a town that people often rave about. You are small and rainy and industrial; the sort of place you pass by on the way to somewhere bigger or prettier. But you are also the town George Orwell wrote about, and George Formby sang about, a town famous for cotton and coal, for pies and rugby, and mint balls and music. Wigan: a town like many others, and, save for your mild claims to fame, really quite exceptionally unexceptional.

And yet, these days, I'm increasingly struck by your specialness. By the charm of your streets and the sweetness of the air, by the gifts you've given me: the warmth, the patience, the humour. I miss the people, I miss the pastry and I miss your peculiar prettiness. Two hundred miles away from you, my hometown, I can finally perceive your beauty.

Like many young women, I grew up itching to leave where I was from, and, by the time I finally did escape, at the age of 19, I was weary of my town's familiarity: the faces, the streets, the conversations. I knew you too well – the arcades, railway station, park and market hall, once places of teenage adventure, had become too small for me.

I railed against your well-worn routines, the half-day closings and last trains, how, as the working week gave way to the weekend, we'd find ourselves taking the same bus into the centre, heading to the same pub and then the same nightclub, to dance to the same old songs; there seemed such a dreary inevitability to it. Most of all, I was petrified of somehow getting stuck there, of marrying and settling down and staying in Wigan forever. I feared I was anchored to you.

I moved away in 1997, and have never moved back. I travelled abroad, went to university in a far away southern city, then settled in London. I came back to Lancashire in the holidays, of course,

and to see family and friends. But mostly, I confess, I came back reluctantly.

Then, seven years ago, I returned for Christmas, and suddenly saw you afresh. I stepped off the London train into the billowing cold and felt a tightness in my chest, a lurch in my belly – something akin to the yearning you might feel for your first great love.

I realised then, how much I owed this town, how much I belonged to you. You are there in the flatness of my vowels and the paleness of my skin; you are there right deep in the marrow of me. You are the way I make tea and the jokes I laugh at and the music I love. You are under my skin and in my veins, a mingling of irreverence and passion and dourness. And you are a scent, a palette

of colours that I kept in my head, filed neatly under 'home'.

Slowly, gladly, I have realised my teenage self's worst fear was right: I am anchored to my town. I may never live there again, but you will always be the place that moors me. In London now, when I am sad and sick for home, I hope for rain; I want to hear it falling on rooftops and pattering the glass, I want it swishing under bus wheels and weighing down the leaves, I want to breathe it rising up off the pavements: grey and flat and sad. I want, more than anything, to walk along the London streets and think of the small and rainy town that made me. 📧

Love, Laura



ABOVE: Laura, top left, with friends in 1996 – a year before she decided to leave Wigan



'You are a palette of colours that I kept in my head, filed neatly under "home"'

Who – or what – would you like to say thank you to? Email us at: red@redmagazine.co.uk