

Dear Reader,¹

This letter was once intact. Perhaps you weighed the heft of the envelope, speculating on the content from some outer shape and form. I did the same, a quarter-century ago, sealed in my office high above the belch and lurch of London traffic, staring at the Irish stamp and careful copperplate handwriting on the envelope that lay on my desk. For a moment, I had thought that it was from my mother, and wondered why she was writing to me at work. It looked hopelessly vulnerable, too small and intimate to be official and kept at arm's length. Before I had even opened it, I knew disturbance. It came from the Parochial House of a small town in the west of Ireland. The Reverend Father thanked me for my recent letter informing him that his brother had been sentenced to a short term or imprisonment for housing benefit fraud. I remembered well that day in the Magistrates' Court. As duty officer, my job was to 'advise, assist and befriend' those who passed through the system. It was hard to live up to that description, shouting platitudes through the cell doors of the urine-scented custody suite under the sardonic eye of a police officer.

Most of those remanded did not want much to do with me, but the large shabby man with the soft Galway accent responded, drew me in, softened me. I was flattered that he trusted me enough to ask that I write to his brother, the priest. That evening, I walked to the tube station feeling, for once, that I had done a good thing.

The letter from the priest was warm and simple. His brother had been estranged from the family for years, drinking and living hard, and they had feared the worst. They longed for contact, wanted him to come home and start again. If I would only write back and tell them where he was, the relationship could be renewed, the ruptured ties restored and healed.

Even now, my stomach lurches as I think of that long, fruitless afternoon, telephoning every prison, trying to find the priest's brother. His sentence had been short. He had already been released. There was no statutory aftercare, no fixed abode. As the hope the letter had stirred evaporated, a helpless lethargy descended on me. I could not reply to the letter, which festered on my desk. I resigned soon afterwards.

Yours regretfully,
A former member of the Probation Service

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¹This letter is a work of fiction, although the writer, Ann Hull,² has drawn on knowledge and experience from her time working with the Probation Service.

²Ann Hull was born in London of Irish parents. She sat next to Patsy Kensit's brother at primary school, while her mum reared seven children and her dad got on with building Euston Station and various English motorways. By the time he'd finished Staples Corner and they had decided to go back to Donegal, she had survived bouts of education at Gumley House F.C.J. and the London School of Economics, and was employed for several years by the Inner London Probation Service as a research assistant, honing her letter-writing skills. She now lives with her husband and four children beside her parents' house, overlooking Lough Swilly near Rathmullan, which is a relief after all that aircraft and traffic noise. Her work has been broadcast on RTE's *Sunday Miscellany*, and published in *North West Words* magazine.