

Dear Mr D.G., Terrell Unit,¹ Texas Dept of Criminal Justice,

Thirteen years ago, in a fit of grandiosity that only prolonged periods of loneliness can bring about, I wrote to you, having found your name online, on a site for death row inmates seeking penpals, I wrote to you in the awful morally parasitic hope that by speaking to someone facing an imminent death I may find some clue about how to operate within life since that was a task at which I was failing at the time, failing mightily, although not grandly or destructively or profoundly, rather I was lonely in one of the worst places to suffer from that condition, Manhattan, lonely and politely adrift and fiercely unable to lift myself into the thundering, physical, frictive dynamo of that city, which is more than an inflated way of saying I wasn't getting laid but really did feel a tangible sense of distance between myself and every other person on that pulsating island, and so I wrote to you, unloading several pages of much the same sentiment that I just described but with more autobiographical detail, the names of friends now long unseen, the routines of a job I'd soon lose, the romantic targets, the familial history, whatever seemed pertinent and illuminating, along with some questions about your situation, your timed life, your marked minutes, and when I dropped the envelope into the mail with its lengthy, encoded address to some correctional dispensary I thought: There, I've done it, I've reached out, extended a hand into the world, but not the surrounding world, the elusive world, but a truer one where experience and consequence were the crucial things, perhaps the only things, and I'd graciously reached in offering my attention and I suppose you could say support and what did I expect in return, what did I want to take out but consolation, support of my own, a reminder that people are lonely everywhere and here is how you can cope because this is coming from a place where all you can do is cope, here is how you exist because I, who know when my time is up, know how to exist, but of course that isn't what you wrote back, when I got the envelope with the gnomic Texas return address and the strangely bubbly handwriting, six weeks of slow, fleshy Manhattan summer later what it was filled with was your own story, neglectful parents, abuse of drugs, missed but readily reachable opportunities, mistakes, the unfairness of the law, the unacceptable fate, you had a story to tell because you had to tell it to anyone who would listen, you were not resigned or in a mood for commiseration, you had to get this story out because your story was what would free you, not in a cheap metaphorical sense but in the actual legal and breathing sense – it was your life – and I silently expressed thanks that you'd written back, felt in an inarticulate way justified if not unlistened to, can you see what I've done, I thought, I'm bonding with the realest of all people, so much more substantial than this city, so much more, and I always believed you never responded to my next letter because I went into too much detail about not getting laid and you thought I was looking for something romantic or pornographic from you, a private penal Penthouse forum but now, nine years after your story failed and you were executed, I know that you simply had no time for me, that the best advice you could have given me was quit fucking around and wasting time but that the pragmatic everlasting silence you deployed would have to suffice and I want you to know that I still listen to that silence, thirteen years on, and there's no hard feelings.

Yrs,
Pete²

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YFS,

¹ The Terrell Unit, as it would originally have been addressed by the author, no longer exists. The original Terrell Unit opened in 1993, but did not start receiving death row inmates until 1999, at which point the unit's namesake, a Dallas insurance executive, asked for the name of the unit to be changed. Charles Terrell was reported to have not wanted his name associated with death row because of concerns over the administration of the death penalty. The unit was renamed the Polunsky Unit in 2001, and Terrell's name transferred to another unit. Correspondence with an inmate thirteen years ago would likely have been after the site was moved but before the names were altered. Were this letter to be posted today, it would reach an institution which has specifically never housed or received death row inmates, addressed to an inmate who is no longer alive.

² Pete Segall is a 36-year-old writer who lives in Chicago. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and writes for *The Classical*.