

If You Find This Letter: My Journey to Find Purpose Through Hundreds of Letters to Strangers

By Hannah Brencher

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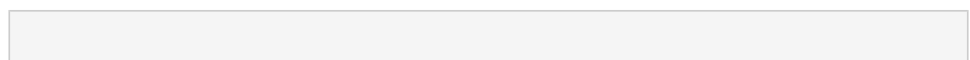
A heartwarming memoir of love and faith from Hannah Brencher—founder of The World Needs More Love Letters—who has dedicated her life to showing total strangers that they are not alone in the world.

Fresh out of college, Hannah Brencher moved to New York, expecting her life to look like a scene from *Sex and the City*. Instead, she found a city full of people who knew where they were going and what they were doing and didn't have time for a girl still trying to figure it all out. Lonely and depressed, she noticed a woman who looked like she felt the same way on the subway. Hannah did something strange—she wrote the woman a letter. She folded it, scribbled “If you find this letter, it’s for you...” on the front and left it behind.

When she realized that it made her feel better, she started writing and leaving love notes all over the city—in doctor’s offices, in coat pockets, in library books, in bathroom stalls. Feeling crushed within a culture that only felt like connecting on a screen, she poured her heart out to complete strangers. She found solace in the idea that her words might brighten someone’s day.

Hannah’s project took on a life of its own when she made an offer on her blog: She would handwrite a note and mail it to anyone who wanted one. Overnight, her inbox exploded with requests from people all over the world. Nearly 400 handwritten letters later, she started the website, The World Needs More Love Letters, which quickly grew.

There is something about receiving a handwritten note that is so powerful in today’s digital era. *If You Find This Letter* chronicles Hannah’s attempts to bring more love into the world—and shows how she rediscovered her faith through the movement she started.



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- Sales Rank: #434388 in Books
- Brand: Simon & Schuster
- Published on: 2015-03-10
- Released on: 2015-03-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.00" w x 6.00" l, .95 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 272 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“If You Find This Letter is the story behind the letters, how they came to be, what inspired them and what’s next for this letter-writing rock star. The book was beautifully written, uplifting and heartbreaking at the same time.” (*Huffington Post*)

“Brencher will make you laugh. Her turn of phrase, and the letter requests will make you cry, and the idea behind More Love Letters will restore your faith in your fellow humans, if it is waning. It will remind you that love is strong, that strangers can be full of love for you, and that, most importantly, we are not alone.” (*Christian Science Monitor*)

“Through emotional, real-life—albeit universally relatable—moments set in specificity and passion, these pages describe the crises and self-discoveries that shape us all with palpable honesty and encouragement. Love is tangible here, as simple as ink and empathy left across hometowns and in each other’s mailboxes.” (*San Francisco Book Review*)

“*If You Find This Letter* is certainly engaging... [Brencher’s] not just a good writer; she’s an exceptional writer, a fresh voice reaching out across generational lines.” (*Woman Around Town*)

About the Author

Hannah Brencher is a writer, national speaker, and founder of The World Needs More Love Letters. The global community has grown to over 20,000 individuals across six continents, fifty-three countries, all fifty states, and is established on over sixty-three college campuses. Named as one of the White House’s “Women Working to Do Good” and a spokesperson for the United States Postal Service, Hannah has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Oprah*, *Glamour*, *USATODAY.com*, *Chicago Tribune*, and dozens of other publications. Hannah graduated from Assumption College in 2010 with a double major in Sociology and English, with a concentration in Writing and Mass Communications. For more information, visit HannahBrencher.com or MoreLoveLetters.com.

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If You Find This Letter

Sticky Love

The day I moved to New York City is way more poetic in my memory than it actually was. My mother would tell you the air was dry that morning and we didn’t talk the whole car ride to the train station. I tend to exaggerate the whole thing and say I witnessed the birds chirping and the mailboxes waving good-bye with their little red flags as we rolled through New Haven, Connecticut, to get to the station. She would tell you I left stray bobby pins in the corners of my bedroom. I would say I packed everything I needed that day—dreams tucked beside cardigans and wishes packed up against rain boots.

That’s always been my downfall, the thing my mother always calls me out on. I romanticize things. I insert heartbreak where there shouldn’t be any. I feel things too deeply. I hold on much longer than I should. All of life has always been one big book of poems to me. I think every person is a living poem—from their hopeful heart to their ugly habits. Life is just too busy to ever stop and dwell on one thing for too long.

In actuality, the back wheel to one of my suitcases broke and everything was off balance after that. The wheelless luggage taunted me from the backseat as my mother and I took exit 1 off the highway and approached the New Haven train station.

I refused to tell my mother about the broken wheel. She's never been the anxious type, but she would have worried. And she would have tried—with every last motherly shred in her—to help her baby out.

That was me—the baby of the family. There was my older half brother, my real brother who I used to claim was my Irish twin (he isn't), and then me. I always tell people I am a balance between my mother's whimsy and my father's dirt-beneath-the-fingernails work ethic. I'm drawn to deep conversations with people and good-looking Spanish men because of my mother. I'm sucked into collecting things because of my father. The two of them make a good team. My father has been bringing things into our house for years, hoarder-style, and my mother has been waiting for him to fall asleep on the couch to cart all of it off to Goodwill. I'm somewhere in the middle—always wanting to hold on to everything that comes into my orbit and let it go all at the same time.

For the longest time growing up, a lot of people didn't even know I existed. People were surprised to learn the gangly, redheaded child who was silently weaving friendship bracelets beside the fences at baseball games was the sister of these boys who were town legends when it came to diamonds, or courts, or any kind of arena that was competitive. I lived in their shadows a lot. It wasn't anything I did on purpose. I just kept to myself. And I liked constructing my own little worlds where I could control all the elements and pretend I was best friends with all the good-looking men and women in the JC Penney catalog, models I cut out and pasted into my little-kid diaries.

I was the last one of the family to leave the house with the turquoise shutters and morph my parents into empty-nesters. My oldest brother had gone off to college and then moved in with his girlfriend. He and I were different in the sense that he's always known just what he wanted and gone after it. And me? I'm more of the type to have an existential crisis over selecting a coffee flavor for the morning. My other brother struggled with addiction at the time, so he lived in the house when he was sober and out of the house when he was not.

As we waited for the train, I watched my mother wedge something into the belly of my suitcase, with the hope I wasn't looking. I tried to force myself to forget it was there. I fidgeted and folded my ticket, waiting to leave. I knew it was a letter. It was always a letter.

My mother is a nostalgic creature. There are three things you should know about my mother: The first is that she is always, somehow, the life of every party. The second is that any person my mother has ever loved could tell you the exact way a kazoo sounds when it's left in a voice mail on your birthday. It's nailed tight to my memories of growing up—watching her flip through the pages of her address book and find the name of whoever it was she'd marked on her calendar. I remember hearing the dialing of the cordless phone. My mother would wait. And then the sound of a kazoo being played to the tune of "Happy Birthday" would stream throughout the house.

The third thing to know about my mother is that she's a nostalgic creature and I have to believe she made me into one too. She's hidden love letters for me to find all my life. There was a note tucked on top of a piece of chocolate cake when heartbreak visited my freshman dorm room for the first time. There was a card left on my dashboard the day after Whitney Houston died. Confetti fell out from the inside. Musical notes skittered across the front. She wrote six words to me in red Sharpie: And I will always love you. I am the product of my mother's bread crumb trails of love letters.

Every coming and going we've ever shared has been built up with letters, notes, trinkets, and the like, as if tiny wedges of paper and confetti could keep a person always coming back. She'd trailed tiny clues four years earlier as we moved me into my first dorm room. I found letters tucked in plastic Tupperware bins and notes within books I hadn't even opened yet. Pieces of my mother would pop up and appear throughout the semester. In random classes. At staff meetings. On retreats. My mother is an expert at leaving evidence she was here in the lives of everyone around her.

One of the notes she mailed to me in my first week of college included a long quote she'd copied from *O, The Oprah Magazine* while sitting in a waiting room of a doctor's office. The quote was about a mother and a daughter. The final point of release. The girl was leaving, marching into adulthood without her mother's steady hand to hold. The girl turned at the door and the mother went to reach out, wanting to tell her daughter one last thing, but she pulled back instead. It was that moment when the mother finally had to say, "I've given everything I can and I have to trust it is enough. She must go out there and see and feel and understand the rest on her own."

The breath fell out of me when I read that quote for the first time. I kept reading it out loud. I felt bare and exposed through my mother's scratchy handwriting whenever I read it. The card with the quote inside of it somehow got lost and my mother couldn't remember what issue of *O* she found it within. I spent the next summer going through every *O* magazine at the town library, looking for any last evidence the paragraph ever existed, but I never found it. I'm still looking.

The letters from my mother kept coming throughout college. I was one of the only students who had a reason to go to their PO box at the end of the day, and that was mainly because my mother didn't have a cell phone or text messaging or any kind of social network to check into. I'd told her a bunch of times she should get a cell phone but she only ever said the same thing back to me: "I've gone over fifty years without anyone needing to find me. Why start now?"

I guess I never understood the power in her letters, or the reason why she sent them, until my grandmother died. I was a college freshman when she passed. It was September. The air was changing. My grandmother had spent that whole summer sitting in a hospital bed, delirious. She was like a stranger who borrowed the eyes of someone I loved. I knew my mother and all her siblings were just waiting for the release, a way to tell one another she was finally gone and in a better place.

I moved into my first dorm room with the assurance I would get the phone call about my grandmother soon. You know the kind of phone call. I remember sitting in my orientation program on the first night of college while leaders clad in matching outfits pranced around, strumming guitars and rapping like only white people can, initiating icebreakers that made us reveal the layers of our summer vacation like an onion. When it came time to share about my summer, I fought the urge to say, "This summer I learned how death unbuilds a house. Brick by brick. Shingle by shingle. Death shows up like a worker who rises to beat the sun and spends his days undoing a person you learned to love with your whole body. He unchisels and unscrews until nothing is left but the skinny frame and eye sockets of someone you used to know. That's what I learned. Do you want to sing a song about it?"

The call came three weeks into the semester. In the span of a weekend, I heard my father deliver the news, packed a duffel bag full of all the black clothing I owned, traveled home, tried to apply mascara to swollen eyes, laughed until I couldn't help but cry, swapped stupid memories with cousins, watched my grandmother get closed in a casket, and learned that missing someone is just the beginning of grief. Then I traveled back to college to push forward into my fall semester. It happened quickly, like ripping off the Band-Aid, trying to pretend there was no sting. Death is like that—it can teach you more in forty-eight hours than you've learned

in a lifetime.

The letter from my mother came in a golden envelope just a few days later. The envelopes never matched the cards but they were always the brightest colors she could find in the card aisle. Silver. Indigo. Lilac. A small sun—gold and stenciled—was on the front of the card. I stood there, in the middle of my college's post office, sucking in my mother's words:

It's beautiful outside. We took Scarlett and Chloe for a hike the other day. I've started crying. Finally. I find myself going into the bathroom, shutting the door, and spitting on the bathroom floor. Something feels freeing about that.

I pictured my mother hocking wads of saliva onto the tile floor. Spitting and crying. Spitting and crying. Trying, through the spitting, to let her sadness release. Letting loose on the linoleum. The image in my mind looked pitiful. Desperate. Too hard to watch for a girl who'd only ever allowed her mother to be strong in her eyes. It was one of the first times I realized you can tell a completely different story to someone when you've got all the vulnerable space of a page to back you up. You can say things you might not have the courage to say elsewhere. You can let honesty loose on the page and then fold it up and drop it in the mailbox. Away, away the release of your troubles could fly.

That letter is still the most treasured chunk of my mother I hold. Like a secret only I know. I kept the card on my wall all four years of college. I packed it with me on the day I moved to New York City.

"Do you need any help?" she asked as I hustled the suitcase with the broken wheel onto the platform.

"No," I told her. "I have this."

She tried to reach for the handle but I snapped at her. "I need to do this on my own. You need to learn to let me go."

She got real quiet. I wasn't being nice. I get snappy when I know a good-bye is coming. I sort of shut down and close off. The last thing I wanted my mother to know was that all of this was hard for me.

Realistically, I would only be a couple hours away from her. But somehow we both knew something different was happening this time. It wasn't like the kind of good-bye you said before college or summer camp. It sat in the throat for a very long time and made you hope you'd learned enough from the other person to be okay on your own.

"You have everything you need?" she asked. I nodded. "I made this for you. For the train. If you get hungry." She pulled out a thick wedge of tinfoil from her red pocketbook and placed it into the side pocket of my carry-on bag. Without unfolding the square mess of silver, I knew it was two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Four slices of whole wheat bread. Peanut butter from Trader Joe's. Raspberry jelly.

She'd handed me those wads of tinfoil for the last fifteen years. They were the first form of religion I ever knew, before a Bible or a pew. Just several sandwiches she carried with her always to pass out to hungry people she would see along the way in New York City. She never took a train into the city without them. She taught me to be a brave little child who walked up to bums and handed them peanut butter and banana sandwiches. No matter how many sandwiches she packed to hand out, there was always one left for me. It was her way to tell me, "You've got this. You've got this day, but you'll grow hungry along the way." All those years, we called it Sticky Love.

And that's just what my mother always told me to aim for—Sticky Love. It's different than a skinny kind of love. It is a love so much rarer than the kind your eighth-grade boyfriend could give you. It's big. It's loud. It makes you into the kind of person who leaves something behind when they finally turn to walk away. And though no one can quite touch it or understand the DNA of it, everyone can still tell, by the way the atmosphere has shifted in the room, something was left behind.

As the train pulled into the station, she reached in for a hug. "I love you. Be good. Be safe," she whispered. It felt like we'd been on that train platform for hours.

"I love you too," I whispered back. We pulled away and I walked toward the train.

I hoped the engine would start and pull away quickly. I needed her to go home. Like I said, good-byes have never really been my thing. I'd rather go in the night. Leave a note. Walk away quickly and not linger in a hug. I don't want to be the one left standing there. It's the hardest part about making new friends and giving them rent space in your heart; you have to be okay when they tell you it's time to go away.

I tried to focus on the passengers around me. They were staring down at their newspapers. There were businessmen wearing suits that looked stifling in the August heat. I noticed a woman two rows up standing outside the train. She was putting her hands up against the window and leaning her forehead against the tinted glass. It was my mother. Trying to find me. One last time.

She looked crazy enough to scare the people sitting in the seats ahead of me, with her head of gray hair and plain desperation painted across her face. She didn't look like poetry in that moment. She looked like someone who didn't know how to say good-bye.

She went window after window until she came up next to mine. I sat back as far as I could in the seat and sank down low so she wouldn't see me. If she found me, she would see the tears dribbling down my cheeks. She would know I was afraid of everything ahead of me. Of never finding significance. Of missing the point. It was like I packed each emotion up the second I felt it, not wanting to look it in the face. That sort of stuff becomes baggage if you don't take the time to unpack it.

She peered for a few moments and then walked back to the middle of the platform, her red satchel at her side and matching red flip-flops on her feet. I put my hand up against the window and scripted a letter to her silently in my mind.

Mama,

Life is looking brighter than it ever has before. Even with you looking a bit pathetic with your face smashed up against the train window, we both know that life is looking bright for me.

This is my chance to make you prouder than you've ever been before. I know you'd tell me you're proud already, that no motive in life should ever be about making someone proud, but I can't help but want it.

Now is my chance to show you that I can find my place in the world. Maybe find God too. (I know that you and I haven't always agreed on Him—how He looks or how He smells—but I still thank you for at least giving me something to believe in that's bigger than my own body, even if I don't fully understand it. I'll keep my eyes open for Him in Manhattan.)

I know you're worried about me. Not because you think I am incapable but because you secretly have always

worried that life would go by without my ever learning how to stomp in the puddles or fall in love. I can promise you I'll learn. If anyone is a teacher for that kind of stuff, it has got to be New York.

Thank you for letting go. Even if we both could have held on longer, thank you for letting me go.

Love,

Your girl

I never did say those things to her. So many of the things you think and want to say to a person never spill out in real life. They stay locked in secret rooms inside of you. They live for tiny lifetimes inside the hearts of people who don't have the courage to say what they meant this whole time. Some people leave, and go, and die, and change, without your ever getting to tell them how you truly feel about them.

My mother began to wander away from the platform. The train started pulling away slowly. I watched her body get smaller and smaller on the platform. I made quiet promises beneath my breath I hoped would float out from the windows of the southbound train and get stuck in her hair. "I'm going to try to make you proud. So proud."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Amanda Grant:

Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yes, you can choose the suitable activity for spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to the particular Mall. How about open or even read a book eligible If You Find This Letter: My Journey to Find Purpose Through Hundreds of Letters to Strangers? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have some other opinion?

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