

Good news in the snail-mail

Jean-Philippe Drécourt
<http://dre-court.com>

2003 Creative Commons (BY-NC-ND).
Enjoy – Share – Reward
(Découvrez – Partagez – Supportez)

The news was waiting for Deana in the mail. The snail-mail. The envelope bore the intricate logo of CDC, the well-known Chambers for the Dead Company. It was addressed to her boyfriend Brian. They didn't receive paper mail very often as it was reserved for important and official matters. Even though Brian had never told her, Deana knew it was a letter of acceptance of Brian's wife in a chamber for the dead.

Deana sat down in the sofa. She was both jealous and relieved. Brian had been restless lately. Everyday he had asked whether they had received snail-mail. And he didn't want to explain why he was so impatient even though snail mail generally meant bad news. Rationally, she knew that she should not interfere with Brian's past life. They had only been together for nine months and she had moved in three months ago. From the beginning, anything concerning his late wife had been taboo. Deana had tried to broach the subject a few times but he had quickly avoided the discussion. Yet she couldn't help but feel that she had been cheated. She thought that she had helped to lessen Brian's pain caused by the loss of his wife so she deserved more consideration. She did not even know that he had requested a chamber for his wife.

Deana put the letter in view on the table so that she could see Brian's reaction when he came in. She sat in the living room and downloaded a magazine and browsed through without reading what she saw.

When Brian arrived and saw the letter, he didn't even kiss Deana. He just went to the bedroom where he had his little desk and closed the door. Deana waited. He came out of the bedroom tears running along his cheeks. He could barely talk:

"Ester has settled."

Even though she tried to compose a face of approval and happiness, Brian knew that she was offended. He could read her so well. So he immediately sat next to her and apologized. He tried to explain how good it felt to be with her and that she had been very supportive during all these months. But he still missed his wife, and he hoped Deana understood that there was space for both of them. She had to think of Ester as a long lost friend. He left for the local branch of the CDC. As much as Deana tried to understand, she couldn't accept it. The woman was long dead and still it felt like Deana was now in competition against her.

Deana went back to the Internet to download some information about the CDC. On the official web site, nothing interesting. Just some blurb about the happiness of meeting up with a loved one again, and the kinds of chambers available. No prices, no explanation about the technique. Then she looked for news about CDC. She viewed an old TV debate between representatives of the

CDC and priests of different religions. The priests were unanimous in agreeing that the CDC had to stop its activities. The official reason was that it was against their religious principles to preserve part of the soul of the dead when the Creator had called it back. Many critics of the time had said that the real reason was different. Religions feared loosing the lucrative and everlasting business of taking care of the dead.

Brian came into bed late. Deana was half asleep. She didn't do anything when he spread her legs. She just enjoyed the warmth and coziness. She was going to fall asleep with him inside her when he whispered a name, not hers. She pushed him out and faced him.

"You just called me Ester!"

"No I didn't!"

But he was lying and they both knew it. Brian was a small boy again, caught out by his mother. Deana felt sorry for him. He had had a difficult time forgetting his wife, and now with this chamber, he had to start all over. It has been a few months since he had called her Ester. It was a bad sign. She hugged him with a sigh.

Even though Brian was visiting his wife at the CDC every day, he seemed to get better. After the first days of confusion, life with Deana had taken a new turn. He sometimes came with flowers, something he had never done before. He invited her out to restaurant just for the pleasure of sharing nice food together. Since the incident on the first day, Deana had not heard the name of Ester anymore. But she could feel that he still was depressed. Many times she found him in his sad meditation position, his head down, his back bent, as if he were ready to fold back into fetal position. Whenever he heard her coming in the room, he stood up straight, trying to put a smile on his face. But she could see sadness in his eyes, sometimes the tears.

"Why are you so sad?"

"You know, I miss Ester."

"But you have her back. She's over there. In the chamber."

"Yes I know. It's just not the same. "

As she took him in her arms, he hugged her passionately.

"I know you take very good care of me," he said. "I shouldn't complain, not to you. You're much more understanding than Ester would have been."

It meant a lot to Deana. She had the hard task of coming after a woman who seemed to have all the qualities a man wanted. She had seen her in pictures. She was beautiful, almost precious with her long blond hair and her doll face. Deana did not consider herself as being ugly but she was of a sporty type, not as refined as Ester. And Ester was cultured. She was a specialist in XXth century art. She read real paper books from this period. Brian had kept them but Deana never dared to open any of them. She knew the titles and had read most of them in electronic form but she was afraid of damaging them. As a primary school teacher, she was used to children-proof objects, not to the fragile paper sheets of a book.

When Brian told Deana that she was better at something than Ester, it made her rejoice. Until now she had not been keen on seeing Ester. She thought that if the two of them were in the same room, Brian would immediately see how worthless Deana was. But now she was curious.

"Do you think I could meet Ester?" she asked.

The answer came back a bit too quickly. Had he planned something already? "How about tomorrow evening? I'll pick you up and we'll go together."

Deana had never been to a chamber for the dead. It was dark and cold outside. A nasty drizzle was falling on the town, covering the pavement in an oily and shiny layer that made the little side alley they were walking in look even more threatening.

"Why do we have to go this way? Can't we take a larger street?"

"It's just over there. The alley is well protected and monitored."

"Why do they have their entrance in such a creepy place?"

"It's because of religious activists who want to shut them down. They have to hide."

They arrived at the door. Brian put his thumb on a plate for DNA authentication.

"You need to be authenticated," he said.

Deana felt the tiny prick of the sampling on her thumb. A metallic voice asked Brian to confirm the newcomer to the chamber.

The hall was spacious and luxurious, a striking contrast to the back alley they had been walking in. A tall and almost bald man walked towards them. Even though he looked in his seventies, he was standing completely straight. He looked like a faithful old-fashioned English butler, with the bearing of an old general. Deana could not help smiling at this picture that formed in her mind.

"Good evening Brian, nice to see you again. Good evening Deana, I am Tim, at your service in the CDC. How do you do?"

Deana hesitated for a few seconds, she was not used to this formal greeting that only her grandparents still used.

"How do you do?" she answered.

"Please follow me to a booth, I will tell you all you need to know about the CDC."

Dark blue carpet covered the walls and the floor, muffling all sound. In some booths Deana could see families, in others just old ladies who had probably lost their husband. All wore the same face as Brian, a mixture of sadness and happiness. And almost all the CDC representatives had the same look, the same old benevolent trustworthy smile.

The three of them sat around the round table. The booth was designed so that they were almost entirely isolated from people outside the booth, while it still remained open. Brian was holding Deana's hand. His eyes were wide-open, full of admiration for the place, like if he had never been here before. Tim started to explain how CDC worked. The body had to be collected as soon as possible after death so that the brain could be analyzed. He did not mention the techniques they used to analyze the memories, just that the brain was the only part of the body that was kept by the CDC. The rest of the body was prepared like in any funeral home and was given back to the family. The personality of the tenant was then restored in one of the chambers, in the form of a haze. Deana noticed that Tim never mention the word dead. He was the host and the dead were the tenants.

"Are we breathing the smoke that is in the chamber?" Deana asked.

"Yes indeed, that is part of the communication with the tenant. But do not worry. It has almost no odor and absolutely no texture. Our first trial involved

an invisible gas but people did not respond so well. They preferred to see this haze."

Tim waited a couple of minutes. Deana had to sign some legal papers, among others agreeing that she came of her own free will, that she would not sue CDC for anything resulting from her visit. It looked like the usual legal stuff but it only made her more nervous. Tim, almost too thoughtful, provided her with a mild sedative.

"It is usual for our visitors to be nervous the first time they come. It is more than meeting a person after a long time, it is also their whole vision of the world that is questioned."

Deana couldn't agree more. Ester was a ghost, created by man. "We were not afraid of the myths any more, we had to provide ourselves with real ghosts," she thought. The sedative was effective. She was surprised that she could think about this without feeling fear. Fear hadn't disappeared. It was just locked in a small part of her unconscious self, ready to come back as soon as the chemicals of the sedative disappeared.

Tim invited them to go to the vault. For security reasons, he explained, the tenants were located in a highly protected area. Brian took a key from his pocket. Tim and Brian opened the door by turning their keys simultaneously in keyholes placed on each side of the door. A computer-generated voice told them that a transport pod was on its way. Then the door opened with a hiss and there was a sphere covered in reflecting material that opened onto a set of four seats.

"Please have a seat. Enjoy your visit," Tim said.

Deana sat next to Brian and held his hand. They looked at each other.

"I am so glad you agreed to come."

Deana wasn't sure anymore she wanted to do this. She was shaking. Brian gave her a kiss, the door of the pod closed. From inside, the pod was transparent. They could see the door of the vault closing. The door to the chambers opened behind them, the sphere turned so that they faced the direction of movement. And before Deana were the chambers for the dead. Two concrete walls made of hexagonal cells, like a beehive, on each side of a long corridor. It was dark and she could not see the top of the structure. Brian inserted his key in the panel in front of them. The sphere moved and an artificial voice said "Location 28, 43, Ester Mc Graft."

"It's Ester's chamber. You'll love her, I'm sure."

Deana should have been scared by the movement of the pod along the concrete structure, so close it seemed that it would crash at any time. She did not notice any acceleration or deceleration but suddenly they had arrived. Twenty-eighth floor, chamber forty-three. The sphere docked into the hexagonal cell, and stopped there. Deana looked behind her as a door locked them in the cell. A light turned on. When she turned back, she saw the door to Brian's apartment. In fact, the whole wall was the wall of Brian's flat.

"Welcome," Brian said, "I believe you have the key."

Deana felt her heart shrink. The only key she could think of was their apartment key. Automatically, she tried to open the door with the same trick she used at home, a little pull on the key before turning. She remembered the first time she had to learn this. It seemed so old fashioned. Brian had long ago decided to keep the mechanical system instead of DNA locks. He had argued that thieves didn't know how to pick a lock anymore. The door opened. Deana

let the keys fall to the floor. She was at Brian's again. Apart from the haze, the place was an exact copy of Brian's apartment.

"Welcome," Brian said again.

Deana gasped. Why did they choose to reproduce this apartment?

"You told me that she didn't like that apartment, that you planned to move. Why did you decide to turn the chamber into *our* apartment?"

"We had our memories there."

It was not Brian speaking. It was a female voice. It came from everywhere at the same time, and from inside Deana. She looked around, searching for someone hidden in the mist.

"Don't look, I am everywhere. I am in the haze. I am the haze. You're breathing me, you move through me."

Without Tim's sedative Deana was sure she would have died. She felt the bitter taste of fear in her mouth, and had to sit down on the all too familiar brown sofa. Brian sat next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. She shivered. This woman had been dead for months now, and the body cremated, but she was still here. She had not expected such a realistic experience. She had pictured the chamber as some kind of virtual reality experience with an artificial personality, modeled as closely as possible to the real person. But this voice was all too real. The intonation was too human to be a virtual creation. The empathy that Deana felt upon her first contact with Ester was the same as with a living person. Brian said something to her but she could not understand, she was not listening. And then the blood chilling voice again.

"I am Ester. How do you do?"

She hesitated. Again this formal introduction. Brian smiled.

"Go on, speak to her, she can hear you," he said.

She hesitated. "I... I am Deana, how do you do?"

The two living people and the dead started communicating. First they exchanged polite remarks, and then the discussion went deeper. With great effort, Deana managed to put her fears aside. She was curious to know what kind of person Ester was. The remarks, the way she formulated her sentences made Ester sound too wise for her age. Although Deana was only ten years younger, she felt like a child next to Ester. Maybe it was because Ester had died. But Ester refused to talk about it. She was still a young dead, she explained. And the experience was so traumatic that it has been removed from her memories. It would have disrupted the fragile balance of the haze.

Deana didn't know how to react about the chamber. She managed to enjoy Ester's company. Ester could become a mentor for Deana. Her wisdom and her knowledge were amazing. Yet the silence of the chamber was sinister. In the real flat, she could hear the noise of the street or the neighbors. Here nothing. Just a slight hiss from some maintenance system. And the voice of Ester. After a while, Deana noticed the difference. She could hear Brian talking with her ears, but Ester's voice came directly from inside her brain. For the whole time she was in the chamber, she wondered whether Ester could read her mind as well as she could generate sounds in it.

They left after two or three hours. Deana wanted to go home before the effects of the sedative wore off. She knew the only reason she didn't leave the room screaming was because she was half numb. On their way home Brian asked:

"Did you like her? She's a fantastic woman, isn't she?"

Deana sighed. She didn't want to hurt Brian.

"I liked her."

"But?"

Brian was reading her again. They were in the street, but she started shouting.

"Why on earth did you copy our flat? This is not hers anymore. It's ours. I am alive. She's dead. Don't you have enough with the living?"

Brian didn't answer. His face was stern. They walked home in silence.

The weeks passed. Deana refused to go to visit Ester again. She could not face that creepy room again. When sitting in the sofa, she couldn't help thinking of this virtual presence. Deana moved all the furniture around in the flat. It was clumsy, less practical, but it was hers. Only hers.

Brian seemed to resent her not giving it another chance. He was spending more and more time with Ester and less and less time with Deana. He tried not to show his resentment, to respect Deana's wishes. They still talked a lot when he was home. They made love passionately. It was a gift from Ester. Brian had never been such a passionate lover before Ester's chamber opened. It was as though he was trying to cling on to life, to stop his mind from drifting towards the world of the dead, the world of Ester, the world of the love of his life. Deana was not a fool. She knew very well that Brian was still deeply in love with Ester. He was trying to change Deana into a living copy of Ester. He insisted on her opening one of those books, turning the pages, smelling the paper, feeling the sensuality of reading a real paper book instead of an e-book. But she did not feel anything apart from being uncomfortable knowing that she was reading something really expensive. She did not like the fact that she had to put the book back in the safe every time she had finished reading it. A book had to be practical, like the polymer screen that she always carried folded in her pocket. She had a whole library in there, and she could download any new book in a couple of minutes before traveling.

Brian questioned her about the books. It was like being back to school. While he was cooking dinner, he would ask about her readings.

"You know, you'll never make me like Ester. I'll always be different. I don't like those books. And I don't like the fact that you try to turn me into something I am not."

Brian stopped chopping the carrots he was preparing. He looked up at her. He had the same sad expression on his face as in the street.

"I know. I can't go on like this, trying to change you, trying to fool myself. The thing is, I can't choose between the two of you. I love Ester and I always will. And I love you too. You know, it's different. You keep me alive. You have this energy that I don't find when I sit for hours in Ester's chamber."

"But she's dead!"

She immediately regretted saying this. Not only was it mean, but it showed also how little she could find to say against Ester. Brian continued with the same tone.

"She seems so alive in this room. I miss her physically of course. But she's there mentally. And she's so challenging."

He paused for a while. He hesitated. After a long sigh, he went on.

"You know that CDC provides suicide facilities. And they can collect their data just after the death. I could be reunited with Ester. I checked the price of the books and with the grant from the Institute of Population Control, the fee for the thirty years I am allowed in the CDC would be covered."

Deana's heart sank.

"You're not serious."

"I don't know yet. I'll make an application this evening. It takes one week to be processed. It's the legal time for people to retract their decision."

"But..."

Deana didn't say more. Of course Brian wasn't happy. But suicide! Yet, as she sank in the sofa and started sobbing, she felt a kind of relief. She didn't want to admit to herself but it looked like the perfect solution. She surprised herself thinking that it was her only way to freedom. It made her cry even more.

"Don't blame yourself," Brian said. "You're not responsible. It's only me, my twisted mind and my love for Ester. I have to go now; the more I talk about it, the more I think it is the right thing to do. I don't belong in the physical world anymore."

Deana was speechless. He hugged her and kissed her goodbye.

"I'll be with Ester for the next two days. I want to be sure I take the right decision."

She didn't want to move or to say anything. Any action would betray her new hope for freedom. The possibility of a normal life. Not a threesome with a dead person. At the same time she could not get Brian's parting remark out of her head. "I don't belong in the physical world." It had not occurred to her before that a human being could be so dissatisfied with his physical experiences that he wished to be stripped out of his body to be pure spirit. Maybe it was the future, she thought. Maybe we'll get rid of our bodies altogether and become pure mental beings. She remembered reading an old book about aliens that were all energy. She did not remember the title. Ester would know it for sure: it was from her favorite period. Deana was jealous, but she knew she couldn't compete.

The sadness came later during the evening. Deana wasn't dependant on Brian. They had their own lives and they shared only a small part of it. They had also projects. Holidays, moving out. They even talked about a baby. It was long time planning but the thought that Brian would not be the father of her child made her realize how much she would miss him. Only then she started to understand why Brian was so keen on being united with Ester. Before she died, they had probably so many projects in common that it was impossible for Brian to live another life. His life had been planned with Ester. Deana could not change it. She was not ready to die. She wanted to try to go on, to plan another life, probably with someone else. But she would go and visit Ester and Brian. Just to recall her previous life, the one she did not live up to the end.

When Brian returned, they did not even discuss the decision. Deana knew it would happen. In the few months she had been with Brian, she had never seen him so peaceful. It took him the rest of the week to resign from his job, sell the books and apply for suicide support. They did not see each other so much. The last night before the ceremony, they made love as if Brian wanted Deana's body imprinted in his memories.

Deana followed Brian to the CDC, but did not go in. She kissed him a last time. He had a blissful smile on his face. He looked like the holy people she could see in the temple. She could tell that he had found his way.

"Come with me," Brian said. It was not a plea, just a logical suggestion.

"I am not ready," she answered.

She turned and left. She sighed. The jigsaw puzzle of their lives was finally solved. The world was balanced again. She went back to Brian's flat, which was now hers, and went on with her life as usual. Except that every evening she checked for snail-mail.

*Discover other texts by Jean-Philippe Drécourt at <http://drecourt.com>.
Découvrez d'autres textes par Jean-Philippe Drécourt à <http://drecourt.com>.*