



"Letters Home"

The O'Leary Letters

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Inspired by: Peter Hodges' "A Loss of Innocence"



Gillian,

I'll spare you the insincere greeting as I look out my window at the tiny Earth in the distance. Hello just doesn't seem to cut it when you're 384,000 km away. I know I haven't written since leaving so suddenly eight weeks ago, but I figured I'd let you know that I was still alive. Yet, I guess that's only relevant if you have the courage to open this letter. Who knows, after everything that has happened, I have this image of you just burning anything arriving by post with my name on it.

I don't blame you.

Isn't it funny how guilt seems to follow you no matter where you go? There is something to being raised "the good little Catholic girl". All that self doubt rears its ugly head when you're all alone, doesn't it? I thought I'd accomplish something by signing up for the SMC, but it looks like this little fish has just found herself in an even bigger pond than the one she left.

I do miss you.

*A lot.*

I never thought I'd be the one who'd get homesick, but as I sit here looking back at what used to be my home, I am horribly forlorn. You may find this funny, but I miss all the *green*. When everything is replaced with fabricated metal, and you've been living in a tin can for 8 weeks, you tend to miss the opportunity to take in some fresh air. I'd give anything to walk in the rain again.

The one thing I find terribly ironic in this new life is that I'm surrounded by newly trained soldiers and although we've been taught the 'benefit' to being one unit, no one will really know the real me. I'll watch their backs as they go rushing head first into combat, but I can't say that when I'm saluting a fallen comrade, that I knew anything about him or her.

Do they still have that place in D.C? The tomb of the unknown soldier? With the rush to defend the planet against the Rak'lan, I fear we will become only the statistic that everyone against the agenda throws out as a deterrent. Perhaps they'll need to build another memorial to remind everyone that we're all still human.

I've only a few moments before I receive orders. *Jack Daniels* has been keeping me company in the vast blackness of space and although he's nothing like the smooth and familiar companionship of *Cooleys*, it's nice to know that even this far from home, they still have the good stuff. It makes the first weightless steps in a terribly heavy environment that much easier to bear.

Enjoy the green while you still have it.

Shannon.



Gillian,

My sweat stained helmet sits at my side as I scribble this on the first piece of available paper I could find. There are so many things going through my head that I had to get them down.

We had our first real encounter with the Rak'lan not 12 hours ago. I can't give specifics of course, as they'll not let the letter pass and I'll probably be censured. The only things I can possibly impress through this letter are the emotions of a first battle. It starts with this little tiny knot of tension that slowly builds in the pit of your stomach. When your brain registers a move from simulation to real combat, this tiny and insignificant ball that stays dormant through our daily activities starts to rapidly grow. With each passing second, you immediately start to feel the weight as you move across the relative safety of a boarding ship into enemy territory. Besides staving off the impulse to vomit, you are very aware that your body is now crossing into the "flight or fight" response to your environment.

The first drips of sweat that hit your nose are dreadfully annoying as you try to reach through the mostly bullet-proof glass that protects your flesh from space exposure. Remembering the barrier, you close your eyes and try to press on as orders start flying through the small speakers at your ears.

The simulations only scratched the surface of emotion. You see your fellow soldiers stumble with fake injuries as their suits immobilize them from further action. Yet something deep strikes at your very core when someone falls aside you in an alien ship. Fighting the urge to disregard your surroundings, you leave him or her for the trained medics and continue to press forward knowing that you could be the next casualty.

You hear through the muffled whir of the mini-gun and surrounding grenade explosions that an enemy is approaching. Instead of the battle cry you were taught as you mentally and physically prepared for this moment, the usually comforting sound is drowned out by the fierce beating of your own heart. Between the sweat, and the large gasps that heave from your chest as you keep moving towards danger, there is little calm and resolve. Facing your mortality is something you never train for...

I didn't fool myself to thinking a first encounter would be easy, yet there is always that odd comfort in the back of your head in training that you are still safe. Wounds are superficial or false at best. That security blanket is ripped away when you are face to face with those bastards and there is nothing you can do to stop the flood of fear in those initial moments.

I can only tell myself it will get easier as this war continues; that my resolve will harden and I'll face the danger with confidence, but right now, I'm having a very hard time convincing myself.



Hey Gillian,

I'll take it since it's been some time, and that I've not received any return correspondence, that you're probably not going to write back. Its okay, I guess. I never asked for a pen-pal, just someone to experience this war through my eyes. Hell, you can even consider this a diary should I not return. It could be my famous last words or some sappy shit like that. Hopefully, that admission will take away some of the awkward pressure in your decision to put pen to paper.

It's funny, immediately after I sent the last letter, I met up with a colleague at the NCO bar at my request. He's a sweet kid, and like a lot of the boys back home; both you and I could drink him under the table. It was only a few shots before he was looking at me like I was Goddamn Aphrodite.

Man, remember those days at Matt the Millers? Between the two of us, we'd have almost every bloke drooling at our heels and begging to take us home. God, I really miss that.

Could you hear my over exaggerated sigh from this far away? I really do hope you're doing okay and that I haven't messed up things too badly for you. I guess you were right when you've accused me of jumping ship when things got ugly. Without any contacts from home, I really have no idea what became of, well, anything. Even if I'm not there to meet the consequences, believe me when I say that I think about it almost every day. I don't know if you are pumping that fist in some small celebration of the thought of my mental demise, or actually worried about me out here, but as I've said in every other letter; I do miss you.

Regardless, back to my little soiree. My Platoon Sergeant gave a small and informal lecture on 'experience', after overhearing me spit out conspiracy theories during our

first engagement. She felt it was her duty to make sure I wouldn't be spouting such nonsense so freely without the proper education. I don't get it, even after facing our own deaths, and surviving the best Terran training, we are still considered 'green.' Newbies. Freshmen. Bottom of the food chain. There are terms and phrases for lack of experience no matter where you end up, but the truth is, mostly everyone who has to work for something starts in the shit. I don't know why, but her words, no matter how wise they were, hit me harder than any stun-fire exercise that I had suffered in training. I've always been one to roll up my sleeves when it's been needed, but I would have thought somewhere between fighting for the survival of the human race and your own hide, the bar would be set lower as to where you belong up here.

It's a rather big jolt to the system that despite my intelligence, I still know absolutely nothing and I guess I need to keep my mouth shut.

Shannon

P.S. Collins is his name. Mum would be so proud to know I bedded someone at least appearing to have Irish blood.



Gillian,

I think I've finally parted ways with my homesickness. I'm wrapping up a one week leave and I've finally managed to relax. Michael Collins turned out to be rather enjoyable company (in more ways than one) as well. I have something funny to share with you, though.

Remember that time you got to go to *Disney* in Paris and I was home with the chickenpox? Aside from a Winne the Pooh doll that I secretly loved and openly hated, I was so extremely jealous that while you were dancing to the music of the Main Street parade, I got to read about it on a stupid postcard. Nothing would ever fix the gaping hole I felt as an eight year old! I'm not one to hold a grudge...but if you'll notice, I've enclosed a rather festive postcard from the moon that I found in a sundries store. A quick banter with the clerk revealed that the postcards were originally designed for the tourism industry that never really took off what with the ongoing war. Instead, the biggest buyers are military personnel desperate to send any images of their lives back home since digital cams are censored.

If you'll notice the upper right picture; that's the *AeroG*. They're a set of bamboo,

nylon, and beryllium wings that you strap onto your back and arms. You can leap off of a man-made aerie in a gymnasium that was made from an old water storage tank. The floor has different vents in it that blow warm air directly up at random times, allowing you to glide, dive, and slowly climb once you get the hang of it. It was amazing, Gillian. Never in my life have I felt so free as when I was swooping back and forth with Michael. I got to fly just like your precious Peter Pan...without the fairy dust.

The bottom picture is Earthrise, as taken from the top of the *New Tokyo* dome. There is a wonderful restaurant there that serves cuisine from all across the globe. While lost in conversation with Michael, and stuffing my face with the best food I've had since childhood, I can look out and watch over you with serenity, peace, and more importantly—hope. While it's been said the dregs of the Earth come to fight for the survival of the race, I've found some great men and women that I am proud to call brothers and sisters.

When the party's over and I am finally called back to duty in a day or so, I will go knowing that I'm fighting for something worthwhile. And while I thought I had an excuse to jump ship and fly hundreds of thousands of miles away from everything I've ever known and loved, I've ironically come full circle. I'm fighting for you. I'm fighting for Dad and Mum. I'm even fighting for those jerkoffs at the pubs. The reasons why I came here don't matter anymore. The bottom line is that I'm doing something worthwhile that makes a difference in people's lives. Perhaps I intended it to be a penance for all the pain I've caused, but it has changed into something more.

Enjoy the postcard. The weather's beautiful.

Shannon



Gillian,

I fucking hate it here. These feelings may be a one-eighty from my last letter, but 2 weeks ago, I didn't have to deal with the likes of NCO training. You spend your entire life with people telling you there is no such thing as perfect, but as soon as you sit down in front of one of these, 'my shit don't stink, and neither should yours', instructors, that is all you're expected to be.

There is absolutely no middle ground here, just pass or fail miserably. You either know your shit or you don't and if you forget one stupid, minor little detail, you're ridiculed and humiliated past your breaking point. My frustrations come as no surprise, because just like this class, it's all or nothing with me. Despite being in the top 2 percent of my graduating high-school class, just when I think I've 'got it', I'm berated with facts that prove otherwise.

To make matters worse, I am tired. I have not slept in the last two weeks and despite every single hour of study, I feel like I am lagging behind. Michael seems to be right at home here, and despite our lengthy talks about everything, it bugs me to no end that I am bested by him at every turn. If I am not constantly reminded of how much of an unreliable piece of shit I am from every DI during the course of the day, seeing Michael tends to reaffirm that fact; despite the feelings that I may have for him.

The most ironic part of this whole situation is that every single Instructor wants you to leave. They line us up in the morning after running us ragged through the obstacle course and 3 mile balls-to-the-wall runs, just to whisper in our ears how easy it would be to just walk away from the training. I can take the exaggerated dismantling mere inches from your nose type of abuse, but it's the soft and comforting whispers in your ear, when every muscle in your body is screaming and all you want to do is collapse, that really gets to me.

"I know this is hard for you, Shannon. It's really tough to make split second decisions that could endanger the lives of your men. Trust me, there is really no incentive in completing this course, it just gets more and more difficult from here. It's really understandable if you want to quit and go back to being who you were."

As much as you want to just start sobbing, pack your bags and leave, the side of your brain that doesn't want to let your brothers and sisters down wins every single time. Their fucking mind games work perfectly. That I know that they are mind games just rubs salt in the wound.

I don't know if I'm going to have to opportunity to write until class is over, as I'm already using my precious study time to write this letter. I am not going to run away again, Gillian, no matter how hard it gets. Count on that.

Be well,

Shannon



Gillian,

Of all the things I recall as a child, I don't remember directly experiencing the horrors of San Francisco or Shanghai. Perhaps it was the fact that Mum and Dad would shelter me from the news stories, afraid of the nightmares they would give a 7 year old child.

Yet with every major twist and turn that unfolded, there were always a few kids whose parents thought them mature enough to watch the horrors of the world unfold via the news or sensational online magazines. This would usually result in a hyperactive 2nd grader getting into trouble as he mercilessly killed imaginary Rak'Lan around the playground with nothing but his non-existent 'superpowers'.

I guess at our core, we all want to be heroes.

I must confess, the need for revenge has been reawakened in me the last few days. But with reinvention comes inevitable questions. What would I have done had I been older? What would I have done had I been a government official? Would I have sacrificed as many as I did in China to quell the plague with the use of Nuclear weapons? How would I have handled the millions of requests from forlorn relatives? Could you possibly imagine what those horrible days were like? Entire families wiped from the planet in seconds, and those who tried desperately to save anyone left alive, became victims themselves. As an EMT, you would have been a first responder had one of the remaining asteroids hit close to home. Sheltered as I was from all that happened, just the thoughts of the past shake my very being.

To kill that many people is the worst kind of evil. I am pretty sure that to this day, there are people still missing and unaccounted for. The one memory I do have after this happened was hearing Dad warily ask our neighbor Mr. Shane why the Rak'lan initially went for civilian over military targets. You know what Mr. Shane said to Dad? "I'll tell ya why. Because they are nothing but animals, O'Leary. Anyone who attacks the innocent either don't know anythin about love, or are the lowest of cowards."

Now imagine being on this roller coaster ride I mentioned in my last letter. One day you're inspired to help the human race fight off the greatest threat ever known, and other days you question your own loyalty to a cause that will most likely send you or your mates to an early grave. While I may not be in a position of political authority, my decisions will ultimately determine my successes and my failures, and the lives

of my colleagues will be on the line with every, single order.

Today, I don't want to be hero.

Perhaps tomorrow will be different.

Shannon



*Screw Michael Collins.*

I am so tired of being betrayed. Just once in my life, I would like a happy, *fuckin*g ending. The last thing I needed was another drill instructor. I needed a best friend. A lover. A partner. I craved someone to tell me my worth without breaking me in the process. I wanted to know that no matter what happened in this tin can, no matter where the SMC took us, that someone loved me. I thought that's what I had with Michael.

I know, my previous letters never mentioned how strong my feelings were for him, but I didn't realize how much I depended or loved him, until this.

God! Why did he have to screw this up? I actually thought he meant it when he said he loved me in return. What utter bullshit!

I am heartbroken, Gillian. I poured everything that I am into him. This has twisted me in ways I didn't think possible. Anger and sadness constantly push and pull at each other, and as I desperately try to keep myself together, I quickly fall apart. There are moments where I want to scream and hit something, and others where I just put my head against the cold tiles of a shower and cry.

I can honestly say that I am sorry for ever putting you through something like this. I wouldn't wish these feelings on my worst enemy.

What bothers me most is that he was the one person who I thought I could really trust. Who I thought would be there to pick me up when I fell. Despite what he thought was best, or what would make him look better, he shit on everything that we had built in one selfish moment.

I'll spare you the details, Gillian. Just know that no amount of alcohol can dull this ache. With each sip, I find myself getting more frustrated and weepy, so I thought I'd write home and let you all know how miserable I am.

Whatever. At this point, I have nothing left to lose. I am right back where I started; bitching about being alone and sad with my self-made situation. I just want to forget about Michael Collins, but it seems like with each word I write, it just hurts even more.

Michael will get what he wants in the end, I guess; a nicely decorated officer who is in complete control of herself and her command. You know what though; I am going to do it on my terms, and not his. I will make damn sure that he knows that his decision cost him something that was far more valuable than a few more stripes on a uniform.

I need to hit the sack, class in four hours.

Mr. J. Daniels sends his regards.

Shannon



Gillian,

I have had a lot of time to think since my last letter to you. NCO training is coming to a close and I am happy to say, that while I'm not at the head of the class, I will graduate with the respect of my teachers. That's more than others in my class will be able to say.

It's rather amazing how anger has become my biggest motivation in the past few weeks. I have gone from hiding in the back of the room, to finally gaining the courage I need to excel at my studies. My drill instructor now passes me by as I stretch from the early morning 5 mile runs, and heads over to less fortunate souls. I guess I've finally turned the corner and I can't help but smirk when Sgt. Abrams starts whispering weakness at the poor sap behind me, instead of filling my ear with the sweetness of failure.

There are times I catch myself in front of my bathroom mirror though, just staring at the tired reflection before me. While I would consider myself stronger, I do have my moments. It's those times where I am reminded of the night I joined the SMC.

I don't know if Dad told you, but it would have been hard not to find the straight razor and bottle of pills on my comforter the night I left. I downed a whole bottle of whiskey as well, trying to forget about what I had done to all of you. Holding the cold metal in my hands, I was about to swallow all of mom's valium and make the first cut when in the reflection of my old bedroom mirror, the HD sang about the joining the corps. Everyone knew about the mortality rates, and if anything it was an easier way out than slitting my wrists or overdosing on sleeping pills.

Perhaps I was just too chicken shit to follow through the old fashioned way. You know me, I always wanted to go out with a bang. So I tossed some things in a bag, wrote a note to everyone to forget me and called a cab. All I could think about as we drove away, was dad's SMC rant about sending boys and girls into the meat grinder and believing it was where I belonged.

Oddly enough, the recruiting center was open late into the evening. I found out later after sleeping off my hangover in a strange but comfortable bed, that the SMC did most of their 'volunteer' business in the early hours of morning. Even as I signed on the dotted line, another drunk barged in the doors yelling something about saving the world. I cringed only wondering if I had looked as pathetic.

I was handed my orders and told to board a train to Dublin. As I sat at the station with nothing but a small bag of useless keepsakes, Dad found me. I had apparently pushed replay on the SMC announcement on the TV, and when he woke the next morning to find me gone, he rushed to the recruitment office to find me enlisted and leaving.

I couldn't even look at him, Gillian. He didn't yell. He didn't plead with me to stay. He just stood there as the train approached. At the time, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was glad to see me go, but as I remember it now, I saw him start to cry. Had I been so naïve to think he didn't care? He was burying me at that train station, and I didn't even have the guts to say goodbye.

I don't know that I will ever have the opportunity to tell him in person that I am sorry. As the war continues and we push further out into the solar system to fight the Rak'lan, the chance of me ever returning to Ireland is slim.

Please tell him, and Mum, that I love them.

Shannon



Dear Gillian,

It's amazing what a little anger can do for a girl in the middle of a little pity party. I've graduated, receiving orders to serve aboard a naval vessel that will be on a deep patrol to Saturn. I've adjusted well to the new environment, but the boredom of a long trip is interrupted only by duty and practice, practice, practice. You can't possibly imagine how good it felt when I was told I have one of the best performing squads in my new platoon. Who would have thought that just a few months after graduation from NCO school that I'd be quietly praised by my superiors?

Frankly, I always thought I'd be a bad officer. It's frustrating and worrisome to have people look to you for every single decision. I've never been the best at staying cool under pressure. I always let my anger or my passion tell me what to do and where to go. It was early on in NCO instruction when that fear of failure in tense situations would keep cropping up its ugly head. And yet, there is an amazing difference between hypothetical questions while sitting behind a desk, and the craziness of a simulation. I've figured out that I can focus—I can lead, Gillian. I can make tough decisions without thinking about them too much. I can take men and women fresh from high school and turn them into something that Earth can be proud of. Instead of running away from trouble, I want to take these people with me into the fire. That's not the Shannon you knew, is it?

I am spending more time alone since leaving training, but I am coming to cherish the quiet. In previous letters I have whined and complained about my solitary state, but I'm finally finding the self reliance that I've lacked for as long as I can remember. As much as I'd hate to admit it, perhaps ending things with Collins was for the best. I never gave myself a chance to succeed by relying on him to the extent I did. It's nice to look into the mirror and be happy with my own reflection for the first time in a great while without having someone constantly looking over my shoulder.

There was a deep sense of accomplishment when I was handed my orders, especially by the one DI who had made my life a living hell. His murmured, "Good luck, soldier," was devoid of a smile, but his approval was obvious in the firm grip of his handshake.

I won't lie, it does still hurt when I see Michael. We've been deployed to the same

ship and it's hard to not to remember what happened between us. I have no doubt that we will cross paths in battle and on the ship alike, but the white hot anger and confusion has turned to a cool indifference. I do miss him, sometimes. I guess you'd know exactly how that would feel, wouldn't you, Gillian?

Enjoy the enclosed commencement picture. This is my only copy and I ask that you frame it for Dad. I'm hoping that it will lessen his worry that his little girl has been sent through the meat grinder.

Shannon



Gillian,

Sometimes I wish you were here to smack me upside the head when I make crazy decisions. Lord knows I've needed it on occasion. I don't know if it was the pleading in his eyes, or if I missed him too much, but I've taken Michael back. His apology was genuine and there was that moment of realization where I thought I might be played for a fool, but I think I'm going to embrace this while I still can. It's weird, out here in the loneliness of space, I didn't know how much I missed the warmth of someone near me until I had it once again.

You never realize how much it takes to forgive someone until you're thrust into a difficult situation. Perhaps it's easier for some to let things go when the offender is someone who you've met by chance, but when it's someone close to your heart, there are layers of resentment that you must peel back in order to see if you're ready for such a decision.

With Michael, I had to remember everything about him that I loved. His smile, his intelligence, and our ability to work well together as a team. I guess despite all the bullshit that makes a relationship difficult, you have to ask yourself if this would be a person with whom you'd spend your last moments. Would you trust them to be there for you?

I don't know if you can ever forgive me for what happened to Ian, Gillian. I don't know if I've even had the chance to tell you what really happened that night. Yet as I sit here writing about one of the hardest things to do for a person who's wronged you, I can't help but find myself sitting in that car with your husband.

I remember him taking the keys as he pulled me from the pub. Yelling at me that I was destined to end up dead if I kept running away from my problems. It was raining so hard, Gillian, and yet he stopped me and lectured me about responsibility to you, to Mom and Dad and most importantly, me. At first, I can remember sloppily accusing him of coming at your request, but he countered that his presence was of his own accord. I can remember turning my head towards the clouds with my eyes closed and feeling the water hit my warm cheeks. Suddenly feeling sober enough to comprehend his words, I looked at him as he stood there, running a hand through his wet and disheveled hair, his eyes sparkling with anger. At that moment, I realized how lucky you were to have found him.

“You can’t keep running away, Shannon. There will be enough time for you to find out what matters in your life, instead of wasting it away every night pissed and in the company of some random bloke! Stop sabotaging yourself, for the love of Christ. You’re slowly killing everyone who loves you.”

He took off his jacket, Gillian. Wrapped it around my shaking body as I nodded and felt my own tears start to fall. Leading me back to the car, we drove in silence most of the way home, until I felt myself offering an apology.

“Say that to your sister, Shannon. I didn’t come for that. I’m just tired of trying to calm your sister when she finds herself inconsolable over your selfishness.” I looked at him as he stared forward and felt my heart sink. Putting a hand on his shoulder, he looked at me for a single moment and I could tell how deeply hurt he had been by my actions and could only guess at the amount of strife that everyone else had experienced.

It was only a split second afterwards before I saw the flash of a large animal cross the road and felt the brakes screech against the wet tires. In what felt like slow motion, the car spun out of control and the grove of trees was the last thing I remember seeing before waking up in the hospital.

I am so sorry, Gillian. I can understand how angry you would be not only that Ian was killed trying to talk some sense into me, but that I repaid his efforts with ultimately running away to the SMC. I guess I haven’t had the courage to talk about the things that happened, because like everything else, I seem to be an expert in pushing things down.

Ian was an amazing man and it shattered every piece of me to know that I was responsible for his death. I am not asking for forgiveness from you, Gillian, just an understanding that his words did matter and I find myself heading into every obstacle with the courage and discipline that I once suppressed with vices.

If you take away anything from this letter, I hope it is the realization that I love you

very much and that I will never forgive myself for taking Ian away, even if you peel away those layers and find it in your heart to do so.

Shannon

