

## **The Letter**

### **Winner**

By Julia Grammer

Forward by Zoe H.

*In this uplifting story, Julia Grammer uses a unique incident to showcase the profound power of words. Julia's thoughtful voice shines through her writing as she explores past experiences and depicts them with an eloquent style; her descriptions create vivid scenes that draw the reader into the story. Julia shares a time when she received an opportunity to observe the significance of her words, and through that experience, she realizes how truly momentous they can be. Through Julia's reflection, she encourages readers to acknowledge the impact their own words have, and she urges them to use their voices for good.*

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A few days after my twenty-second birthday I received a letter. It was square and green, and postmarked from Ireland, though I was certain I didn't know anyone from there. It was odd receiving a letter at all. I rarely got mail that wasn't either junk mail offering deals on groceries or addressed to a previous tenant of the tiny, utilitarian apartment I shared.

I sat down on my bed, hearing the groaning protest of aging mattress springs, and bemusedly slit the envelope open. Inside was a bright yellow card with one word on it: Hello. Opening it, several sheets of paper fell into my lap. Unfolding them carefully and flipping the pages over, I realized the letter was from a woman I had attended high school with.

It was strange. I knew who she was; I recognized the name, Phoebe Morris, but I was baffled to receive a letter from her when we had rarely even spoken. She was just one of those people you would see in the hallway. As a teenager I always thought she was cool, certainly way too cool for me, a weird and awkward nerd, to be friends with.

As I began to read the letter, I only became more puzzled.

Phoebe was writing to thank me.

She began to describe a situation that stirred a faint memory. It emerged slowly, like an old fish rising from deep water. I remembered a wet afternoon, tucked into the corner of my favorite coffee shop, the rain flowing down the windows in long streams. Over the sound of the storm, I just caught a choked sob. Phoebe was huddled at the table next to mine, phone pressed to her ear, silent tears streaking down her cheeks.

“They said I shouldn’t even bother, that I’m not smart enough.”

A brief pause.

“I don’t know, what if they’re right?”

Another pause.

“I can’t do this. I’m just gonna fail.”

A sigh, a few more words, and then she hung up the phone, staring down at the table in front of her.

I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but was hard not to. Her voice sounded hopeless, something all too familiar to me. I realized I had to make a choice. Be polite and pretend I hadn’t been listening in... or do what I was longing to do and say something.

I made my decision.

“Don’t listen to them.”

I was surprised to hear the firmness in my own voice.

“What?” She looked up at me, startled.

“Don’t listen to them,” I said again. “I believe in you.”

She gave me a small, forced smile. “Thanks.”

Soon after our brief exchange she left, and I put the incident out of my mind. I had almost forgotten it had ever happened until this unexpected letter arrived.

As I read further, I learned the other half of the story. In her senior year of high school, Phoebe was planning for college, and was even considering going to school overseas, but was facing intense opposition from her family. They had told her not to bother applying since she would obviously fail, and that studying in Europe was completely out of the question. She had been on the point of giving up. She’d started to believe she was just a failure who didn’t deserve to be happy.

When I spoke to her, I changed her life.

Phoebe said that feeling at least one person believed in her gave her the confidence to apply for college, something she is sure she would not have done

otherwise. Not only that, she applied to University College Dublin in Ireland, where she was accepted, and double majored in archeology and art history. Her life continued to blossom from there; she traveled the world, visiting over fifteen countries, and taught in an orphanage in India. She said she had always admired me for unapologetically being myself, and she was learning to grow into her own person as well, regardless of what anyone else might think.

All from one, short sentence.

I believe in you.

At the time, I didn't know any of this. I had no idea what she was trying to do or why she was so upset, but it was my instinct to try and make things better in some small way. I'd have done the same for anyone, friend or stranger, in that moment. Usually, you don't realize the true impact your words and actions have on other people, but in this rare instance, I got to find out. If something so small could make such an enormous difference in someone's life, imagine the ripples you create in the world daily. Use that power wisely, and above all, use it kindly. Kindness is never wasted.