

Lost Letters

by [Justin Wong](#) (September 2019)



Letter from the Front, Agnes Goodsir, 1915

Janie was a dreamer, that was a part of her vocation; she was a teacher of romanticism and why she chose to do the thing she was now in the midst of doing. She was writing a biography of the poet John Hopkins, a person who died midway through the 19th century, making the meagre sum total of his years 29, when he perished on April 23, 1864. His story, like many of his era, was a tragic one, dying in his youth, which led many to speculate that, by the time of his death, he had not reached the peak of his abilities. It was widely thought that he had more to offer the world of letters. Regardless of his premature passing, he left a vast and seemingly complete body of work, containing hundreds of poems and a vast compendium of letters. Some of the poems were the loftiest expressions of the era and his work was very much representative of the spirit of the age, containing wisdom for all ages.

It was these letters that drew Janie to the study of his life and works, becoming engrossed with him since adolescence. It was true to say that Janie was transfixed with his vocation, the fruits of his labours, though there were other things that drew her toward him, being his tragic life, cut-off short by consumption, and his unfulfilled engagement to the love of his life, Francesca Jones, a girl he fell for some four years before his passing. It was in his final letters to her that Janie believed that his reputation as a literary figure was cemented. His whole output was particularly good in this regard, becoming one of the most distinguished figures of the genre, of letter writing. It was believed that if he had never written a line of poetry, he would still be remembered as a superlative writer of prose for this alone.

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It happened to be because of his last letters that Janie dedicated a large portion of her life to this figure, who inspired her passion for English and her undying love for literature.

This is believed to be his final letter to Miss Jones:

Dear Beloved,

I am writing to you in sickness, on the bed in which I am to perish. My heart is consumed with regrets for not solemnising my affections for you. That if I knew that our love was to have this finale, I wish I never crossed paths on the day I glanced upon your divine form, and I would never in destitution have given over a portion of my soul unto you, to become an indebted servant to your commands. Though such thoughts are for those who never knew love, and if I lived a hundred lives in the time apportioned to me, I would be the slave to your heart on every occasion. I would suffer the pains of consumption that doth waste me like the worm does the corpse if it meant that my eyes would once again see your fair countenance.

In Love,

John

This letter wasn't only to inspire Janie, as countless others saw in it an ideal devotion, which became the basis upon which they were to build their romantic lives. It was perhaps the dreamier more idealistic side of Janie that was inflamed by it, for many of the men she met in this day and age weren't quite so romantic as to write a letter of this kind. Such notions, ways of going about the affairs of the heart, were most evidently to be found in a dead age, in the air in which John Hopkins and his circle breathed, when the idea of love wasn't as debased as it was in the contemporary age she lived, where men in college seemed all too eager to get her to jump in bed without constructing the bonds of attachment that would tie them together as an inseparable unit beforehand.

It would perhaps be asking too much if one of her would-be romantic interests wrote something comparable to the letter that John Hopkins wrote to his love before he died, and she wasn't asking this of any potential lover, though something expressing equivalent sentiment would in fact go a long way to making emotional bonds, to resurrecting a dead notion of love.

After her PhD was completed, and she was lecturing on 19th century literature she simultaneously worked on what she hoped would be the crowning achievement of her life thus far, a definitive biography of her subject, John Hopkins. This was difficult, she had to be sure not to trample upon old ground, as there were in print a dozen such biographies, and numerous volumes of criticism. It was her intention to tower over all of these and create a biography that would be emulated for centuries to come.

She had a method of doing this, and she was in the process of uncovering material that had been previously overlooked, she

was in the process of gathering information, from friends of the poet, and friends of friends of the poet, so as to learn more of the milieu in which he lived. She was told that there were lost letters.

Part 2

In the previous chapter you heard of Francesca Jones, the beau of the poet, the person whom he was engaged to, planning to marry. Janie was hard at work, and she claimed to be in contact with a great-granddaughter of Francesca Jones. She was in her late eighties, and sounded somewhat senile, not only in the way she came across on the phone when Janie talked with her, but also in her writing when they corresponded.

She wondered to herself if the things this old lady was telling her were true.

After they got to know one another, with Janie making it clear that she intended to write the definitive biography of her great-Grandmother's one-time love, she invited Janie up, saying that she could have and archive her great-Grandmother's letters, as long as she managed to take great care of them.

Janie jumped at this opportunity, taking the train from the heart of the country, down south, when she had free time, a day to spare. It was a wonderful journey, seeing the beautiful country clothed in emerald green on what was a fair day in spring, an exemplary day for travel. After arriving in the area by train Janie walked to the village where Ethel, the

great-granddaughter of Francesca Jones lived. It was the kind of place of picturesque beauty, the idea of England that exists in the mind, of old houses surrounded by stretches of the country, of well-kept and tended gardens, with flowers invariably in bloom, and butterflies floating about, always in sight throughout the landscape. It was a joyous walk, though she became somewhat flustered when she reached the house where Ethel resided. It wasn't long to wait after knocking on the door, until she was invited in.

"It wasn't too difficult for you to find it?" she said in a somewhat elevated tone.

"No, it was fine," said Janie not needing to bend the truth, for her travels couldn't have gone more swimmingly.

She was invited inside, Ethel offered and made for her a cup of tea, which Janie all too eagerly consumed, desperate for something to drink, to end the thirst she developed in her walking out in the sunlight. Naturally considering the intimate situation they found themselves in, they talked, getting to know one another with a greater familiarity. Ethel wished to know about her interest in her subject, how she came to be engrossed in the world of John Hopkins, the man of letters—to whom her relative had been betrothed. Janie divulged as much information about her life as was relevant, her career in academia, her love of the poetry of the man she was now writing about.

After this Ethel returned from upstairs, with a box of letters, she said that she was free to take these away. Janie

couldn't stop thanking her for this and, peering into the box, saw that it was filled with letters that dated back to the 1800s, taking some of these out, she glanced at them as in a flash. She saw that many of these letters were written in an illegible handwriting that she would most likely have to pour over for hours to decipher.

These were of course letters that had been sent to her around the period of their engagement, and shortly after his death. She didn't want to take these away with her on public transport, on the train she came there on in case they, for whatever reason, became lost. The box was rather big, and would likewise be cumbersome for her to carry, it would likewise attract the unwanted attention of other passengers. So, she decided to tape the box, as securely as she could, and went to the post office local to the village where she was, sending it off in the most secure post they offered.

She said she would be in touch with Ethel, updating her in how she was getting on in her project. She told her she would send her a copy when it was published.

Over the next few weeks she looked over the letters, though this was troublesome for her to do, as they were severely mixed up, she had to make sure to sequence them. Though there were several hundred letters and it took her weeks to create sequences in terms of date out of them, where all the letters that were written in 1861 preceded those that were composed in 1865, the timeframe these documents spanned.

It was not only this that she had to think of, as she had to

weave these letters, in between the surviving ones of John Hopkins, seeing what she could make of his life through his love. This did prove to be useful, seeing as in the collections of letters sent to her, in which Janie was now in possession, there was mention of their relations, clear allusions to the poetry of John Hopkins and his work.

She knew by briefly scanning these, that her labours in searching out these obscure treasures were not an act carried out in vain, that such materials would be of use to her in her project.

Though she put such materials aside for a while, referring to them when they would be needed, particularly when these letters were of relevance to the section of his life she was studying, when she was writing of the end of his life, the four or so years before his passing away, the period of their meeting, when they started courting, and after this, when they were betrothed to be wed.

Weeks after meeting Ethel, the great-granddaughter of Francesca Jones, she started to study these in more depth. It seemed only right that she should do so, considering she was coming up to the part in her biography that was to deal with their first meeting, where he fell in love with her, and she with him, which signalled the closing acts of his life.

She read these letters, some of them were of use, though many of course were not. Though it proved to be fascinating nonetheless, her work as a biographer, taking on the role of an archaeologist, going through old bones buried in the past,

with her in the process of uncovering a mystery.

Though the more she went over these the more she became flummoxed, particularly when taking into account the period around his death in April 1864. For one Francesca Jones, received a letter after his death on 25th April 1864, which seemed ominous to say the least. It was from her friend Sally D'Arby, who wrote:

Dearest Francesca,

*You will see him at the summer races, as dazzling as ever.
Remember to look your best.*

Yours Truly,

Sally D'Arby

This letter was troubling, and she wondered if she got this right, if the letter was dated a year or two earlier, if she had made a mistake when filing, though this wasn't so— it was a letter that was sent to her on 25th April 1864, two days after John Hopkins had died. Of course, there would be an innocent explanation to this. Maybe it was that this Sally D'Arby was unaware of the death of her friend's beau John Hopkins, and was relaying news that she would see him next at the races of the coming season. Though the more she thought about this, the more unlikely it seemed, for why would her friend be privy to things concerning the man to whom her friend was betrothed and she herself was not. It also seemed

highly unlikely that John Hopkins, the man who was suffering from consumption, who was dying, was making plans to attend anything in the way of social events.

Though there was of course another explanation that Janie toyed with when contemplating this, though the more she thought about this, the more far-fetched it seemed. This was that his death was a fiction. Or at least his death didn't occur when it was believed to have occurred, which did much to explain their plans of next seeing each other at the races.

Though this was to Janie unsettling, for she had no foundation in which to base this. This letter opened a door previously unconsidered, and she desired nothing than to learn the meaning of all this; Francesca's plans to meet the love of her life, the person whom she was to marry, despite the fact that he had been dead for two days.

She could have, of course, thrown this all aside, becoming wilfully ignorant of its existence, at least as it related to her biography. Though there was something about it that gnawed away at her in what otherwise would be moments of calm, leaving her anxious spirit in a state of restlessness.

Part 3

Though she understood that her labours maybe carried out in vain, that a herculean amount of work remained to be done, to uncover the letters from relatives of Sally D'Arby. Getting in contact with such relatives was hardly impossible, she had

managed to do this with Ethel, the surviving progeny of Francesca Jones, and was given the treasure of the unseen letters. Though even if she did manage to find the surviving relatives of Sally D'Arby, it didn't mean that they would be in possession of letters sent to her dating back to the 1860s. She spoke to someone with the name D'Arby, someone who was a relative however many times down the chain. She was sent on something of a chase to search out the goose that strayed. She was assured by the relative she spoke to that she was not in possession of any artifacts of her dead relative, and that she would have to go elsewhere, giving her a number of a distant cousin, who was believed to have all in the way of heirlooms of their clan. She rather reluctantly gave this information to Janie, handing over details on how she could best get in contact with her.

She managed to track this relative down, her name was Elizabeth Cane, and got hold of her on the phone, telling her of her vocation, as that of a Biographer, telling her of her subject of John Hopkins, and carefully tried to explain to her that her relative however distantly related, however many years dead, was friends of his beau, Francesca Jones.

"So, she was a friend of John Hopkins?" said Elizabeth as if baffled.

"Yes, well a friend of his lover, Francesca Jones," said Janie.

"Then why do you need information on her?" she asked, which was fair enough for her to do.

“Well I need to know if you are in possession of letters that Francesca Jones sent to Sally D’Arby. It would go a long way towards helping me with my book. Would this be something you would be willing to help me with?”

“I know there are some heirlooms and things going back several centuries buried away somewhere in my loft. I’ll let you know if I find anything.” she said taking her phone number and swiftly slamming the phone down as if Janie was an infuriating salesman.

Janie thought this rude, her bluntly saying that she would get to the bottom of this and then discourteously hanging up, which to her felt like something of an empty promise, something said in politeness so as to comfort her, with no intention of following through.

Though she knew in her heart, deep down inside her that this was unlikely to come to fruition, that the thing she thought she could get to the bottom of was an impossibility, and it would be something pertaining to a miracle, if Elizabeth Cane, the woman she spoke to had letters sent from Francesca Jones in her attic. That was to say if she was interested in going there, and searching it out, which she didn’t seem to want to do, if her tone was anything to go upon, speaking as she had so abruptly.

Janie wasn’t counting on this coming to pass, the discovery of buried artifacts, and it was wishful thinking to suggest that some wondrous revelation would come about through her

research.

In many respects it was irrelevant, which was a thing she told herself, for she devised a complete biography, regardless of unexcavated heirlooms buried in an old lady's loft.

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She wrote the crux of her book, and was finishing off the ending which spoke of the legacy of his work, a person who deserved to be placed in the company of the most eminent poets of his age, making him one of the most eloquent lyric poets of the language. She went on to say that it was also in his letter writing that his legacy will linger through the ages, these expressing the highest attainments of the form. His writings to the one he was tragically betrothed, were elevated to a kind of poetry in itself, making them the highest expression of the human heart we have in the language.

She wrote these things some two weeks after she spoke with Elizabeth Cane. She forgot the whole episode so it became buried in the backdrop of her memory, and appeared to her as if taking part in a dream like state, where any recollection of the particulars appeared as if vague.

Though it was when writing her conclusion, singing the praises of John Hopkins art, when in a mid-week evening, she received

a call.

“Hello,” said Janie somewhat expecting it to be her mother, or a friend.

“Hello it’s Elizabeth Cane here,” the voice said.

“Oh hello,” Janie said as her mind went somewhat blank, before she realised who she was talking with.

I have looked in the attic and have found two boxes of letters addressed to my great- grandmother.”

“Oh wonderful,” said Janie, “So can I have a look at them?”

“Yes, on the condition that you hand them back once you’re done with them.”

“Oh yes, I will,” said Janie, “Oh by the way, what years do these letters date from?”

“One of the boxes dates from 1858–1866, and the other dates from 1866-1880.”

“Wonderful. I’ll probably only need the first of these.”

After she made sure that she would return these, Janie gave Elizabeth her address, and Elizabeth assured Janie that she would find the box in the post over the next few days. Janie grew elated at this, never stopping to thank Elizabeth for all she had done.

Though she knew that it was perhaps wise for her to not become too optimistic, and just because she was going to be handed over letters, it didn't mean that there were going to be any from Francesca Jones, it didn't mean that they would say anything to address the strange and ominous letter from Sally D'Arby, which hinted at the possibility that John Hopkins was living even though all records marked him off as dead.

Over the next few days she was restless, waiting for the mail to arrive so as to go through the letters. Though over the next two days, there were no knocks on the door, or visits from people wishing for her to sign for a box.

Though after waiting anxiously for three days, the inevitable came to pass when the package was delivered. It was a box that was filled with letters spanning the timeframe outlined, hundreds of them, all in a mess, which she, like the other collection, had to make sure to arrange. The task was above all things arduous, though she managed to compose order out of the disorder, spending two days in the endeavour and rarely stopping to rest.

She was elated to find a good few of these were from Francesca Jones, around 1864. Her heart began to pulse like an exhausted

rabbit's, when she found a letter from Francesca Jones on the day of 24th April 1864. She stood there in a daze so weakened with anxiety that she couldn't quite bring herself to read it, she laid back overcome in her armchair.

The key was in her hand that would unlock a previously closed off safe, with all the possibilities of exotic treasures it may offer that eyes have yet to glance upon in wonder, that hands have yet to possess.

She sat down thinking to herself that the inconspicuous piece of paper she held, could unlock a mystery, that it could create a new theory as to his life and death. Though it was as if she didn't quite want to know the contents of the thing in her hand. She had adequate reasons for this being so, it may very well change the trajectory of her project, leading her to write a very different kind of book, with a rather eccentric theory as its basis.

Though she eventually read the letter, the one after hearing of the poet she was betrothed to, died of a consuming illness, after he wrote some of the most beautiful and enduring letters in the English language declaring the immortal nature of his love for her.

She wrote this to her friend Sally D'Arby:

Dearest Sally,

You know of John Hopkins, the chap who I'm engaged to? I found news that he snuffed it. What a shame. Anyhow, is that handsome guard I met last autumn at your place still free?

Yours Sincerely,

Francesca

Upon reading this, Janie was in a state of shock, not quite believing what she had read, figuring that this must be some kind of hoax. Though the more she thought about this, she knew that this couldn't be so, for no one knew of the other letter aside from her.

The next few days were spent in a panic, and she wondered to herself if she should record in her biography her findings, though the more she thought about this, the more she thought that this would be a mistake. For she would be lying to herself if she liked what she found, and wished that her eyes could unsee the thing she had seen. That it forever ruined the image of the man she revered and looked up to, as if his writing and premature passing represented something pastoral and idealistic.

She returned the box of letters shortly after to Elizabeth Cane, and made sure to leave a note thanking her for helping her in her project. Though she didn't return that letter back along with the others, taking it out and putting it in her desk, where only her eyes would know of its existence. She thought it only right to do so, it would only serve to undermine the mythology that the world constructed out of his

life. That was always more important than the cold facts.

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Justin Wong is originally from Wembley, though at the moment is based in the West Midlands. He has been passionate about the English language and Literature since a young age. Previously, he lived in China working as an English teacher. His novel *Millie's Dream* is available [here](#).

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