

Jill Bielefeld

Emporia, KS

to: Jill Bielefeld, Emporia, KS

from: Kyle Dort, Neenah, WI

Jill-

I had my hopes for the opposite, but all the same I anticipated you would respond the way you did. And it's true that sometimes I leap head first into things that probably could use a bit more thinking through. As you said, it just comes naturally because "we are who we are." (Not just quoting you here but including the originals to show I really am reading what you wrote!)

"Getting stoned and/or drunk off our collective asses after work and dinner, almost every night it seemed, only to get up at the buttcrack of dawn and work another 10 hours the next day." You can do that here. There's been such upheaval with regards to the drug culture that nobody even cares whether you grow it, smoke it, whatever. I've got a couple plants in back with my little garden, but buy most of it from a dude I knew from high school. Hell of a nice guy. Oh, sure we'd have Stella to take care of, but she'd have friends to play with around here. There are quite a few children in the neighborhood, including that aforementioned dude's. He's got a daughter and a son - rambunctious, too, just like Stella sounds. And I've got plenty of room now that dad has passed on, God rest him. It's been confusing lately, what to do, what to do with all this space, but it really would be perfect for you and your daughters. Even got a new solar heater installed last year, so it gets plenty warm during the day even if there is no firewood. But there is!

Speaking of which,

"What could you do to support not just yourself, but Stella and me as well?"

Point well taken, but after some thinking I know that yes I ABSOLUTELY CAN support you both. I've figured it out, how to fit into the Double-Star-and-Bar operation. So, it's a ranch, right? Bunch of cows. Well,

"Remember the number of majors you had as an undergrad? I do: four."

Now, remember what one of those majors was? Dairy science. I'll readily admit that it only lasted a semester, but I picked up sooo much I know that I can make a big impact in the variety of the products the ranch can offer to its customers! There's really not all that much to it, if I remember correctly. Feed the cattle, milk them and add rennet and salt - which, hey, plenty of cows means you'll have plenty of rennet available. Put it into molds, then, a few weeks later you've got cheese!

Again, the option is yours. If you decide you want to come up this-a-way, just let me know soonest. I know a trip up

this fall would be virtually out of the question, but if you wait just a season or so, I can save up a bit and send it down to fund your exodus. After all,

"It's really intolerable here." Alternatively, if it's still "such an unconscionably large risk." that you can't take, I think I've adequately stated my ability to help you make ends meet down on the ranch.

with high hopes!
Kyle

P.S. - Yes, I re-used the letter you sent, but only because we're still working on steam operation for the mills. Progress has been slow, and they may have to cut our staff further if there are further cock-ups (pardon) and/or delays, but I think things will work out.

Dear Kyle,

So good to hear from you the other week. I must say that I was a bit surprised by what you proposed. Let me start by telling you that I'm remarkably flattered you feel this way, and that you are a wonderful man and will be a wonderful husband to someone. But, difficult as it is for me to do this, I must decline your offer. I hope to make clear why in this letter.

First and foremost, I was so sorry to hear your father passed away. I remember meeting him that first summer after we met.

Now, to the heart of the matter, and I'm sorry if this is hard for you to read — and it's harder for me to write than you can imagine — I feel that you are prone to snap judgment and sometimes really rash decision-making. Granted, you kept yourself in the biological sciences — more or less — but still, you did a lot of jumping around. I remember being so glad you settled on forestry. Summers on the Superior NF's trail crew. Man, what times. Out for days, maybe weeks, on end at spike camps.

Not showering for days and days — remember when that used to be fun? Now not bathing, much less showering, is just a way of life (around here anyway — no doubt you have better access to water up there).

More to the point, I'm not sure you've thought this whole thing through. How would you get down here?

I know Neenah might be a bit lonely - especially in the winter - but you still work for Georgia-Pacific, or whatever it is now, right? However you've managed to hold on to that job, you'd better keep on doing it. Cling to it, because there isn't anything better down this way. (And, needless to say, there are no forests down this way, no good work for you despite your experience and education.)

I've mentioned this before, but Emporia still smells like Satan's asshole ... pardon my language. After six plus years, you'd think all that stuff would have finally been converted to whatever it turns into, you know ... found some kind of state where it can't decompose any further. Maybe that's the case, in fact, but the odor still permeates the entire city.

Have to get a few miles out of town - to the west - to catch a whiff of any real fresh air. The whole area around the railyard and packing plants are simply deserted, you can't even get close to them without retching. Paper mills might have smelled a touch worse than the slaughterhouses before, but I'll bet they're like a spring bouquet in comparison these days. Especially now, at the height of summer. And we're accustomed to it out here - as habituated as you can get to the smell of

tons of rotting meat, anyway. I don't mean this to be discouraging to you, but it's just a statement of fact that the whole town smells real bad.

They've reconstituted a bit of the ~~sack~~ ranching out here, from some of the cows that weren't killed before the lights went out. I was really lucky to get on as one of the tutors at the Double-Star-and-Bar Ranch, which has been doing about as good as any of the others. I kind of had an in with them, as Stella's father is the son of the owner of the ranch. Hadn't filled you in on that previously. Never meant to mislead you at all about anything. I'd known him forever, it seems, from before college. We're not together in any real sense of the word. The desperation I felt after the lights went out and I couldn't get out of town again... it was a mistake I'd not repeat given a second chance... I don't want to revisit it in my mind more than necessary.

Regardless, the upshot is that they can't really fire me without there being a big stink - he ha! - and I can raise Stella and tutor her along with the other kids at the ranch, so she'll get a modicum of an education. At the same time, I'm pretty much tied to the ranch. They put me and Stella up, feed us and make sure we've at least got clothes and a couple creature comforts. Their fortunes are my fortune, now, for better or worse. And, there's been real serious talk of the ranch moving to an entirely different city. Moving the whole damn operation

so it'll be closer to a reliable source of water. Martin and his father have had scouts out looking for good routes on which to move a herd, but no one's told me where to, of course. Might be up to Council Grove, might be to Burlington, or even further afield. Just can't say where we'll be moving on to.

As for the suggestion of Stella and I moving up to Neenah, well I just can't entertain the thought of it. I have a fair idea of where you're located, but no reliable transportation, much less any money or goods with which to barter our way up north. And even if we were able to and did get there, what if you and she - hell, you and me, for that matter - don't get along? She's a... lively and strong-willed child. Not her fault, really, just the situation she's in and the fact that her father and I... well, that ~~are~~. And the winters up there. I know you're connected with a good source of firewood, but the climate would be such a change from what we're used to...

It's just
one I can't take. I just can't."

It's

I really and truly don't mean to sound hostile towards you. We've always been close and I'm fond of you - all the fun we had at Carleton, reading your letters and writing back. It's just that... I feel like I need to reiterate these things, as you sometimes seem to not listen (or read) as closely as you ought. Regardless, do write

back please, and soon. Again, I enjoy corresponding with you, reminiscing about the "good old days" and learning of your latest adventures up in Wisconsin.

Best wishes, Kyle. Take care of yourself.

Your friend,
Jill Bielefeld