

**Mary Barnes**  
**Short Story**  
***Importance of a Letter***

As I walk across the campus of the University of Massachusetts, I go past the old chapel and many other campus buildings. The sun was shining, feeling the heat on me as sometimes happens on a February day. I stopped to go between classes to the little chapel of the Catholic church. The priest was a young man he talked like a student. As I headed into the building, the priest started the service, and he was talking about a student that had a mouth like a truck driver. He stated that he thought he could help her and work with her. She stated she received a letter from an aunt who was a nun telling her the importance of doing things in life. And she told her whatever she did to have a true heart and spirit. Within a few weeks, the student got word that the nun had passed away. She was killed with the other Nigerian nuns that were killed in the 1970's. The student became one of the first heads of nursing in a Boston hospital. That letter changed her outlook on life to be able to do the schooling and act as a professional.

In my early teens, we would go to a camp on Mopang Lake which is located near the Canadian border. We took boats from the loading dock to another shore to swim. As we were swimming away, we saw three young adult children laughing and waving from a paddle boat. The young adult children were twins, Heather and Pauline and their sister Twyla. They paddled themselves to the other shore. Twyla had just received her pinning to be a nurse. She spoke of her plans to go to Alaska and do nursing.

Ten years later, Twyla was raising her children in Alaska while nursing at Anchorage Hospital. She did her dream. She suddenly got sick with a staff infection and died in three days. I wrote a letter to Heather and Pauline talking about what Twyla had meant to me -- the things she did as a child. Twyla had a lot of courage -- even as growing up. I also wrote about the time I had a birthday party and the dogs had puppies on the lawn. Twyla said, "Oh that's nothing", but some of the other girls that were there were shocked.

This was one of the stories I told Heather and Pauline in my letter. It had the laughter and the sadness of us growing up.

Heather and Pauline told me how much that letter meant to them. They had mentioned it many times. When my father got ill, Pauline (a nurse) came down to check on Dad, and Heather would bring food. When I tried to pay them, they said “Look at what you did for Twyla and that letter”.

My father, George Barnes, was a letter writer. He would tell my brother, Charles from Alaska, he wished he would write a letter instead of calling. He felt like a letter was something you could hold onto. Dad traveled all over the world, and he would write postcards to all of us. On January 26, 2020, Dad was home visiting with his sons, Tom and George. I brought in many grocery bags in which there were six gallons of water. I had left them on the porch. I went into the house and put a bag of donuts on the table. Tom was Dad’s voice and project planner. I came back in and kept bringing the groceries and I told Dad he could have a donut. Dad said to me smiling, “We already ate them”. It was one of the times Dad and I laughed together. The day was a happy time. We got Dad an appointment for COVID vaccination for the next Monday. Tom and George went on their way.

I got a phone call from George. He wanted to tell Dad something. Then I heard screaming, “Mary come, Mary come”, as I’m trying to talk to George on the phone. I dropped the phone and I saw Dad burning. The fire was coming out of his boots and up his pants. I looked around as Dad was saying, “Put it out, put it out”. I poured the water on the fire, on the pants, on him. Dad yelled to get his boots and pants off – they were still smoking, and the smoke went in my face. I took the boots and the pants and took the coat off. I poured the water on all the clothes as I pulled three layers of socks. He went to sit on the chair. I noticed it was smoldering and I said, “Get off!”. During this time, Dad yelled instructions to take things off. When he sat down on the chair, he defecated. Then we walked into the bathroom. He sat down on the toilet. I told George to come down here right away. Dad was burning up. George said he didn’t have his

shoes on. I said, "I don't care. Get here!". Then George came and called the fire department. Then George handed me the phone. I told them that Dad had burned himself up. The fire officer came directly in less than two minutes. And then the rescue came. The EMT's took him to the burn center. It would be three months before I saw my father again. Only one person could visit because of COVID. In that time, Dad wrote me a letter. The doctor said Dad was one of the oldest people he had ever had that survived a fire. In those three months, one brother spoke to me about the fire, and another brother had said he had previously told Dad not to stand so close to the fire. I got a letter from a friend of my oldest brother. Her name is Marlene.

Marlene spoke of how scared I must have been. She spoke of different feelings that I must have had. She knew my father and his history with the Marines. She also wrote about healing things. That letter helped me to heal. My siblings did not speak of the fire except for what was happening in the hospital. Many people did not talk to me about the fire. But that letter made all the difference. I read it sometimes when I think of how lucky we were.

Over the years, Dad would write letters to those who served with him in Howe Company. Many letters came back from families thanking him. He especially wrote letters when a person in his unit had passed. You never know what feelings you'll have when you open a letter -- except for taxes!