

J.J. and the little Magpie

Hello Ms. Valerie,

you offered me to tell my story about how I came to the point to write someone in the death row. Well, the story is too long to put it into a comment on your homepage, so I decided to write it down in a letter. By the way: please feel free to correct my grammar!

I'm 29 years old now, was raised in a family without some sort of higher education. I'm the first in my family to visit the university. My Mum has almost always been a housewife, my father earned the money for us. Me and my brother were raised into conservative beliefs and values. To say it short and clear: my father had control over us, our beliefs and values. He especially kept my mother „on a short leash“, or that's what we would describe it in German. It has always been a toxic relationship and marriage. I recognized it in my teens, but my mum refused to change things for her and her children – even though she was thinking about leaving him at my early age, but she never found the strength to do it.

Things have changed, when my brother and I became adults. Both of us out of the house and on our own. My parents spent more time with each other but that was no opportunity for neither of them. So one day my mum felt open enough to tell me that she has an affair with a man she really fell in love with. He was quite the opposite to my father. She wanted to divorce but was walking on eggshells to do so. The first time she wanted to break up, my father tried to commit suicide. We almost lost him when I wasn't even about seven years old. I don't quite remember...

He promised to change radically. But my mum was already through with it. And I have to add on that point: he didn't change at all. His narcissistic behavior would always come through, always in intention to hurt and to keep control over the life he's built up. Façade, nothing else, because everybody knew that his ego is unstable. He moved into his own apartment. And it happened what we all already expected: he committed suicide. Lied dead on his bed for about five days, exact five days before his 55th birthday.

As a daughter, who was forced to function next to a cognitive (almost) handicapped brother – the only „normal“ child, the only „proud“ of the family – a thread in my mind ripped apart. It's been six months to this point, where depression hit me hard in a way of numbness. I was not enough of a reason to keep my father away of committing suicide. Six months of numbness and overthinking the family situation ended with my father's death. I was lost. Something between anger and grief.

And I did, what I always do: I change things if necessary. I've quit my job, decided not to spend time with anything or anybody, what or who makes me unhappy. Told a „not so great friend“ a short goodbye. Got a job as a social worker with troubled teens – away from the desk and co-workers who judge every single step I make, and so on.

I've always been interested in documentaries about people who become penpals with a person on the death row. I know that there are women, who look specifically for relationships with a man in these situations, but for me that actually wasn't the case. I was interested in proving myself that these people are human beings. Was interested in their feelings, their reasons about why they did their crimes and how they feel about them today. I never had the intention to reduce a person only on what kind of crime they committed. I just love reading people. It's not only my job, it's my nature. Potentials and resources are everywhere, but people on the death row might have been forgotten...forgot about themselves probably, too. So, why I wrote a man on the death row, wasn't pity, it was true interest and the hope to find a friend. I missed the feeling of being appreciated. And my penpal would miss that, too. So why not helping out each other?

I found a man, whose announcement on a specific German homepage for finding penpals on a death row, interested me. I was ignoring announcements from men, who were looking for a romantic relationship and those with many typos and bad grammar. I was looking for a polite person with whom I could share things on the same intellectual base with. Didn't care for gender or race, either. I wrote my letter and about a month later, another name was written on the envelope in my mailbox. J.J. I was freaked out! The announcement has already been a few years old – what, if that man has already been executed or died under other circumstances? No. That man had his reasons not to answer and gave the letter, that was supposed to be for him, to J.J. He was polite, very interested and open minded. So I answered. And he answered back. And we answered each other every single time. We became friends.

We came to a point where we began to text each other via a special app for incarcerated people. I've sent him pictures of me, my home, my daily life. And he wanted to call. Lord, I'm a German girl from a small town – I wouldn't understand anything he's talking about and that's gonna be hell a embarrassing for both of us. But I was too curious and got myself an American phone number. And he called. Had a hard time to understand everything at the very first time of talking but that got a lot better in a very short time. I kind of speak English fluently today.

Weeks after calling almost daily, I was looking forward to our talks every time. We never got out of subjects to talk about. And gosh, he became flirty. I knew what was going on but I've let him be. He was happy about it and I was happy, too. He liked me in a way I never experienced before: unconditionally. It would still overwhelm me sometimes today. And it has been a sunny day in May when he said on the phone, that he wanted to talk about something serious. My heart was pounding, because I knew, what was about to happen. He said „M., I love you. I really do“. I cried my eyes out. That warm feeling scared me, because a relationship like that would be „madness“ – I actually really used that word right after his confession. I couldn't answer in the way he would have liked me to and he never pushed me into it. He only wanted me to know that he loves me. That's it. And whatever is going to happen, it will be. We decided not to put this kind of relationship into a category, didn't define it in any way. Just let it be. And a few days later, when he was talking about his past as a teen, I had an image of him in my head and felt it. I loved him, too. I already knew, but this image made it clear. So I told him. I think I just said it and even interrupted the story he told. He was baffled, but happy.

We had bad times in between, but we are still together. The circumstances of our relationships of course are hard. And it's hard to explain, why I can deal with it without physical contact. But I think, the reason for it, is what I already said: he appreciates me unconditionally. And I love him for being the most empathic and sensitive human being, I ever met. In the death row. A man, who is forgotten from society, but not for his little magpie, as he uses to call me.

A short explanation: his pet name „little magpie“ is made up by him after I told him, that I raised a magpie chick a few years ago. When she was old enough to be on her own, I freed her. Today I've got a tattoo on my right leg with the head of a magpie and a Latin sentence on its side, that says: nobody exists on purpose.

Nobody on the death row still exists on purpose. But I'm sure, many of them would use their existence for good, if they could today. J.J. does.

Thank you for reading, Ms. Valerie.
And greetings from Germany.

The little Magpie