

LETTER TO A DEAD FRENCHWOMAN

Alexis Hunter

Dear Madame

You gave me such a look! And me staring as usual into your garden and at your house. Every time I passed too. It must have been annoying. But then you might have been ill. The Big C, looked like. The pale skin, the shadows around the eyes, sunken into the face. Black hair though. Was it natural? Or are you still (being a Frenchwoman) keeping up appearances?

I never met you in the village bar. Come to think of it I am usually the only woman there, except for the staff, filling my face with beer. Or wine. Or Pernod. "Drunken English people, staggering around." No Madame, I am from New Zealand. And I work all night sometimes. Even after several Pernods I might add.

But I have been watching your little ancient house for years. Twenty years in fact. Marvelling at the colour of the chickens you had running free outside, the beautiful tones and hues of their red and gold feathers against the olive greens of your plants. The dusty pink of the hollyhocks against the russet brown of the bricks. The lovely curve of the roof of your house is just right.

And you have died now. When was it? Two years, three years... I noticed the Notaire sign, 'For Sale', already broken on the ground, in amongst the weeds, the door bashed in. Windows broken. No chickens. It was raining as usual. What a sense of desolation!

I asked at the Notaire Office about your house and the girl at the counter said, oh it has been sold! So in a way that is a good thing because I would have bought it and do I need another headache? I thought, someone else will restore it.

I went inside, you know, it wasn't difficult, kicking the nettles aside, noticing there was a little rose tree still battling the weeds, going through the doorway, the door being off its hinges. Someone had taken the fireplaces already. The vent for the smoke was left sticking out like a big phallus where they used to be. Ivy was coming through the windows. Layers of wallpaper, flowery designs.

Oh! I thought of you, of course, trying to imagine you living there. Were you bedridden upstairs? The back garden was a jungle. How hopeless it must have seemed. Maybe you did not trust anybody to fix it up for you. Suspicious of the village men, and thinking that they would 'rip you off'. What is that expression in French? Take advantage that you were a sick old woman. Maybe you had a reputation as a mean bitch. I do not know.

I wondered if you needed help shopping, or I could have painted your fence to help you. But I just passed by, after looking at your garden and chickens. Noting that you had a rooster, to keep your hens happy. That is quite French really. An Englishwoman would think of the noise and not have a rooster. Or not want those bits in her fertilised eggs.

Now I have read your house is going to be torn down. The commune bought it and now it is to be a parking lot. For disabled drivers. So one would look like a mean romantic to complain about that.

I might avail myself of some tiles then, like everyone else. A quarter of them have gone already. You will not mind will you? I am an artist, and now you and your house will live on, I will make sure of it, even if only in a ghost-like way, on the internet. Madame, I give you my condolences not for your death, as we will all die, but for your poverty and loneliness.

Though again, possibly you were very rich but mean and left your relatives pots of gold.



I saw your kitchen cupboards. Not one was straight and it was this, that made me feel the most sad. Did you hang them yourself? Or got a man to hang them and you were angry about them not being straight on the wall for years? Who knows?

Michelle, my friend, has just come into the Bar Rallaye where I am writing this letter. I mention the witch's spikes on your roof – and said I'd like them, should I go to the Notaire, but he winks at me.

Madame were you a feminist? Most probably not – wrong generation – and people here seem to be very gender orientated, men's work/women's work, like in the countryside everywhere. But, I don't think of gender roles, instead whether an unfit, small person is going to clamber over a rotten roof – and what someone might want in exchange for that labour. Michelle likes the frisson of being naughty. No wonder the French had all those revolutions, it is in their character.

I had a wonderful studio in Hoxton, in London, an ancient Boy's Home. On the ground floor there were plaques to those who had fallen during World War I. I stayed until the developers' wrecking ball came through the window. Now it is a large Holiday Inn hotel and looking at it pains me every time I pass by. I look in each window and wonder if they have ghosts there – the fallen soldiers coming back to their old home.

But why I am mentioning this place in Boot Street, London, is that I climbed on the roof, in the rain, and took the old chimney-pots off. The sooty, freezing rain came through the chimney, down inside my coat sleeves and over my breasts as I held the heavy clay pots on the ladder, four stories up. All there was to do was curse with annoyance because there was no one there. Hoxton was an empty and deserted area then, but had a real atmosphere of people, poor people working and having families, in the past, a good feeling.

I put the pots on my patio in Kings Cross. But it's not the same... I could have bought them at a reclaimed building supplier. They did not bring old Hoxton with them. And that makes me sad most of all. That history and sense of place just disappear, and people are forgotten. So that's why I am writing to you, when I don't know your name, Madame, of the ancient house in Le Grande Rue.