

Rose Strode

Thank You For Being So Nice

I still feel vaguely guilty about some thank-you notes I wrote, but never sent, in 1975. I was in first grade, and I had just celebrated my seventh birthday at a party with friends from my neighborhood. What puzzles me is that I recall writing the notes in far more detail than even the the best moments of the birthday party. I do recall the party, but in fragments: the cake my mother made from scratch, fragrant with vanilla and slathered with chocolate frosting; the frilly party frocks my friends wore, in the crazy floral patterns and plaids of the Seventies, adorned with lace and rick-rack and flounces; an impression of running from one room to another in a giddy, giggling flock; the intense light of a mid-winter mid-afternoon, reflected in the tinsel garlands my mother hung throughout the house in honor of the day. The party memories are like old photos out of order. But my memory of writing the notes is more like an old home film: rickety images sometimes fade, sometimes flicker and skip, and sometimes burst with clarity, yet always show a sequence of events.

My birthday is two weeks before Christmas. It fell on a Saturday that year. On the following Monday my mother and I were in the drug store when she said, "Why don't we buy some thank-you notes to send to your friends?" I had been jumping from square to square on the white-and-black Congoleum floor, but when Ma spoke I stood still for a moment. I imagined myself signing my name on some pretty cards the way my mother signed her Christmas cards. Immediately I embellished this simple vision: we were side-by-side at the kitchen table, working on our respective cards. The room was bathed in the same luminous blush-colored light used in Hallmark commercials. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" played softly in the background. It was a cozy image, and I was ready to agree. But before I could open my mouth, she added: "It would be a nice thing to do."

This statement, when uttered by my mother, transformed my interest into a driving desire for the cards that, five minutes before, I had not known I wanted. I knew my mother loved me, but because she was often tired and impatient with childish things, I was not always certain she liked me. Yet here she was, not only inviting me to partake of this card-writing ritual but telling me that this was the way to be nice. Bouncing on my toes, I didn't allow myself to wonder why my mother was already steering the shopping cart toward the stationery aisle before I actually agreed.

The cards we selected depicted a little girl with an oversized

head going for a walk. She was dressed in a pink and brown sprigged calico dress. I would have preferred something more colorful and whimsical: perhaps a woodland scene of rabbits with presents and party hats, or little birds singing in a winter tree. But the only other options were cards intended for adults. These had no images at all, stark as business cards. “They don’t have much, do they,” murmured my mother, though she scoffed at my suggestion that we go to the Hallmark two doors down: “We don’t have time to fool around. These are good enough,” she said, holding the calico girl between her forefinger and thumb. “Yes or no: Do you want them or not?”

Well, no, I didn’t want those particular cards. But if I turned them down I would not simply be expressing an aesthetic preference for stationery decorated with bunnies: I would be rejecting the task of writing thank-you notes, and my chance to write cards with my mother. I would be publicly declaring that I did not care to be nice. Because I knew from past experience that there was no middle ground and that Ma would never make a second offer, I said yes.

I cheered up a little when I discovered that when I shook the box the cards made a very satisfying *clackety clackety* sound. I was not supposed to talk to my mother as she shopped because, she said, she had to remember all the things we needed, and my chatter would distract her. I followed her up and down the aisles, *clackety clackety clackety clackety*, and focused on the surprise I imagined my friends would feel upon receiving a card from me. By the time we’d paid for the groceries and were back at the car, I felt happy enough that I sang along with my own *clackety clackety* accompaniment:

Thank you-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!

My mother had to ask me to stop singing and to put the box down before I drove her crazy. But that was all right. The cards had a purpose and gave me a sense of purpose, too. I would sit beside my mother and she would smile down at me as I wrote to my friends. It would be nice. I would be nice.

My second disappointment occurred on the drive home when I asked if we could play the records with the Christmas carols as we wrote our cards. Ma sniffed, “I don’t have time for that, I have to get supper ready.” My reasonable offer to wait until after supper was also rejected: I would write my cards the minute we got home; she’d wait till I was in bed so she could write her own cards in peace.

I felt hurt, yet still determined to be nice and to write those cards no matter what. As a seven-year-old, the only mail I ever received were the birthday cards from my grandmother in Ireland and my aunts in Boston—a grand total of four cards a year arrived on my

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birthday at our post-war split-level house in the Northern Virginia suburbs. But seeing my name on those envelopes, and tearing them open to find a card decorated with flowers, or cartoon animals, was enough to make me feel special. Although I could read third-grade library books by myself, I needed my mother to help me translate the scrawling grown-up letters, all looped together as if the words had been crocheted. My mother read the cards to me and then clipped them to a tinsel party garland that swagged across the kitchen wall over the electric clock. Suddenly, people who were far away seemed close.

Now I was going to be part of this tradition. In spite of my disappointment, I realized that I still looked forward to the task. The anticipation of writing the notes made me squirm with excitement in the confines of my seatbelt. Glancing in the rearview mirror, my mother asked me if I needed to go to the bathroom.

When we got home, I announced loudly that I was going to write my thank-you notes now, and no one should bother me. In retrospect, I imagine this was precisely what my mother was hoping for: an hour or so without me wandering around the kitchen and pestering her while she tried to make dinner.

I took the cards to my room, sat down at my desk, and opened the box. The edge of each card was die-cut around the shape of the girl's head and the flowers in the border. Flowing across her dress was the first half of an inscription,

Just a little note to say—

Inside, it concluded,

—Thanks for being so nice!

The script was bright pink—the same cheerful shade as the shag rug on my bedroom floor. Only my best handwriting could do it justice.

I considered the tools at my disposal. The cards sent to me by my aunts and grandmother were written in ballpoint pen, but I decided that was too risky—what if I made a mistake? I picked up a pencil and wrote the name AMY in capital letters at the top above the script. I chose to write Amy's card first because her name was the easiest to spell. Below *Thanks for being so nice*, I printed my own name. This was the protocol Amy and the others had used on the birthday cards they had given me: birthday kid's name on top of the greeting, sender's name underneath.

As I sat there, gripping my pencil, my stockinged feet hooked over the bar of my chair, I had a momentary vision of Amy receiving the card and experiencing the same delight I felt on the rare occasions

I received mail. I imagined her wondering the same thing I always wondered, *Who is this from?* Then I imagined her seeing my name and thinking of me, at which point I also saw myself, just for an instant, as if from the view of a third, invisible person: my hair hanging down to my waist in two long braids tied with Wil-Hold elastic bands adorned with clear pink plastic marbles; my plaid pants; my apple-green sweater. In reality I must have looked garish, but I wished my mother would walk in to check on me and see me working diligently in a beam of celestial niceness. I was filled with a rare, but delightful sense of assurance: for once, I was doing the right thing.

It did not take me very long to finish. The task took enough time to be satisfying but not so much time that it became boring. I sat, admiring the stack, pushing the cards a little so their edges lined up in an orderly fashion. Nice girls wrote thank-you notes. Nice girls finished tasks their mothers gave them. Nice girls were neat—I was on a roll. If only Ma would let me write the addresses on the envelopes too, but I knew my handwriting would not pass muster with the venerable United States Post Office. Instead, I contented myself with running my fingers over the edges of the cards and studying the girl in her frock. Replete with happy memories, the sense of accomplishment, and my own incredible niceness, I left my desk, skipped to the kitchen, and asked my mother if I could play outside.

“No,” she said. “Go write your thank-you notes.” She refused to believe that I had finished them so quickly. “Let me see,” she said when I protested. She followed me back to my room and twitched open the card on top of the stack. My sense of accomplishment withered as she frowned. “You haven’t written anything,” she said.

Stung by this accusation, I pointed at my name and the name of my friend. That was writing, right there. Wasn’t it? But my mother wasn’t having it. “You have to write *thank you*,” she told me, in spite of the fact that the card clearly said *Thanks for being so nice!* Even at age seven, I was repelled by redundant writing.

I struggled to explain this to my mother. She replied, “No. Write it yourself. And be specific! Thank her for what she gave you.”

This was not what I had signed up for. I asked Ma to help me, but even as I did I knew it was a lost cause: she was too busy getting supper ready. In my mind, and probably her own, my mother was always getting supper ready.

Alone, I sat down to finish the job. Instead, I sat staring at the cards, no longer neatly stacked. My dread grew as I sat. When I’d agreed to write thank-you notes, I thought it would be simple: that I could give delight to my friends as easily as I’d received it from them. I imagined that to receive a card, not for an expected occasion

like a birthday, but simply out of the blue, as a surprise, would be a wonderful experience, as if friendship made an ordinary day a little bit like a birthday. Maybe for adults receiving mail was commonplace. Maybe for them every task had to be turned into a chore. But from one kid to another, no written message should be necessary. The card was the message, and the message was this: I like you so much that I wrote your name on this card because thinking of you makes me feel as good as playing outside on the swings, or drawing happy rabbits, or watching the color of the snow slowly change from white to gold to blue as the light of the day wanes. I like you so much, that the idea that you might like me makes me like myself. *Thank you for liking me.*

My mother's scorn hit a vulnerable spot in my heart, yet I was not ready to give up.

Maybe it was not too late to salvage my sense of euphoria, or the possibility of hearing my mother say I'd done a job to her satisfaction. I chewed my pencil, studied my gifts, and tried to remember who gave me what.

After every birthday, instead of putting away my gifts, I piled them on my dresser where I could look at them: not as separate items, but a mountain of bounty. My mother didn't care for this tradition of mine but tolerated it because it clearly gave me pleasure and didn't get in her way. The Stack, as she called it, probably seemed to her to be a demonstration of my acquisitive nature, but to me it was solid evidence that I was liked, and a constant reminder of the moment of anticipation right before opening each gift. Every time I looked at The Stack I felt an outpouring of wonder and relief that other children liked me.

I pulled Amy's card to me, opened it, and erased my name to make room for this new assignment. I wrote, *Thank you for*—and stopped. Amy had given me a sort of art kit, and I had to get up, walk over to The Stack, and read the box to figure out how to spell it. *Spirograph*. A very popular toy in 1975, and I was excited to try it, but not excited to write about it, for its ten-letter name contained three consonant blends. I chanted the letters to myself as I went back to my desk. I sat down, wrote *S . . .* and realized I could not remember what came next. So I walked back across the room, determined to pay more attention, and when I returned wrote *p* Finally I realized had to carry the game back to my desk and copy each letter one at a time. I felt relieved when I finished, but after the labor of inscribing *Thank you for Spirograph*, my creative juices were utterly spent. I sat gnawing my yellow Ticonderoga pencil wondering what else I could possibly write. I hadn't yet played with the Spirograph. In fact, my mother had forbidden me to open it without supervision because of all the little pieces. The box was still in its sleek plastic wrap—a crisp veneer of anticipation around the game—but at seven years old it did not occur

to me to say *I look forward to playing it with you next time you are at my house*. What seven-year-old would? Anyway, to write about the future would be to write fiction, and at seven I was already a writer of essays—even if they were composed entirely in my head.

I went back to the kitchen to ask my mother for help, pausing at the threshold to assess her mood. Steam filled the air. She was mashing potatoes. When my mother mashed potatoes she really put everything she had into it: she was, after all, a housewife in 1975. There was plenty to resent, and few appropriate targets. Those potatoes never stood a chance.

I might have tiptoed back to my room, but she saw me in the door. To avoid the fatal appearance of dawdling, I confessed I was stuck.

“What do you mean you don’t know what to put? Aren’t you grateful?” Ma always sounded more Irish in moments of high emotion. Possibly those potatoes had gotten her worked up. I returned to my room with haste and sat looking out the window.

Outside, the sky was turning the blueish purple of the mimeograph solvent used in the ditto machine at school. The trees were a delta map of black tracks against it; their shadows were dark blue on the snow. I didn’t know it then, but this was my first experience with writer’s block, and the solitude of a writer’s life. To this day, when the evening sky turns that profound violet-indigo shade of isopropanol blue, I feel again the melancholy longing for something I know I want but cannot name.

I looked once more at the card before me and glared at the little girl, whose smile now seemed to be more of a smirk. What made *her* so special that she got to be on a card? I felt an urge to scribble her face out of existence. It was as if writing the cards was some sort of punishment—but a punishment for what, I could not tell. A lack of gratitude? Not being nice enough? Mediocre awkwardness?

And if indeed the task of writing the cards was a punishment, who was punishing me? My mother? That did not seem right, but who else could it be?

A pile of lovely, brand-new presents lay in my room. In the turmoil of my heart, a murmuration of brand-new perceptions—dark, wild, and inarticulate as starlings—swirled through me. I was a terrible friend, an ungrateful child, a waster of stationery, and a burden to my mother. I could hear her grunting as the metal masher clashed against the sides of the steel pot and thudded on the soft bodies of the boiled potatoes like a hammer. A starchy smell permeated the house. The electric kitchen clock made a buzzing *tick*.

In other houses on my street my friends were now listening to the twinkling xylophone prelude to *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

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Although they watched on different television sets they, and children everywhere, I supposed, were somehow connected by this ritual. I felt left out and deeply lonesome. Probably if I had simply pushed the cards aside and gone in to watch TV, my mother would not have objected. She was busy: a lone woman against a world of spuds.

But escape did not occur to me. I sat there, in despair, until my mother called me in to help set the table.

I never finished writing those notecards. I kept them for a long time, telling myself I would eventually complete them. Even after it was too late to send the cards I kept them because if I threw them out I would also throw away—what? Some sort of opportunity, I suppose: a chance to be a better friend, a chance to be a better daughter, or simply a chance to be better in my own eyes. Eventually I could not stand the pang of guilt I felt each time I looked at them and hid them deep in the back of my closet, and for a while I was able to forget they existed.

I did not see them again for four years. I was eleven. It was the middle of January. My birthday and Christmas were over, and my family was preparing to move to what my parents declared was a much better house in a much better neighborhood. It was sad but also exciting. As a preteen who would soon have to go to a new school where I would not know most of the students, it seemed to me that, in a new house and a new room, I would certainly be a new person, and if the house really was better, then I would be better too.

While cleaning out my closet, I found the thank-you notes. I held the box in my hand for a moment, then opened it and looked at the first card. There was AMY, the girl who still lived on my street, and was still my friend, though I did not yet know that the turmoil of middle school would change our friendship, to the point where we would pass each other in the hallway of our new school without speaking. I felt a surge of the old guilt and quickly closed up the box. *Clackety clackety* went the cards. The cheerful old sound brought back, for a second, the desire to be good and sweet and pleasing, the hope that I could be better than I had been, the assurance that this hope was possible. Yet on the heels of this optimistic longing came an immense surge of rage. I raised my hand and cast the cards, box and all, down into the trash, with the same useless fury as if I were bringing down a potato masher.

What I find truly baffling is the compulsion I still feel to buy thank-you cards, Christmas cards—all kinds of cards—because, in spite of everything, the idea of sitting down with beautiful stationery to send loving notes to my friends gives me a momentary sense of contentment. But please permit me to repeat: the *idea* makes me feel good. Even now I do not actually want to write them: I want to *have* written them. I want to feel the sense of purpose without the agony of

self-doubt that still arises whenever I attempt to find a way to express the magnitude of my love.

Sometimes I manage to finish the cards I start and to send them out in a timely manner. In fact, a few years back, one of the aunts who sent me birthday cards told me that I send “the loveliest cards.” At first I assumed I she meant I picked out pretty designs. But then she told me that one of my cousins had showed her a card I sent when she, the cousin, was going through a rough time. I no longer recall what I wrote, or the circumstances of writing it, but my aunt said, “What you wrote to her was just so understanding, so kind. It was really nice.”

I wished I could go back to my younger self and let her know. Even more, I wished I could have heard those words from my mother.

In a way, I have. Not in so many words, and not during my mother’s lifetime. When I was twenty-six—nineteen years after the thank-you note debacle—I was going through my mother’s possessions after her funeral. In her closet I discovered a shoebox packed with every birthday card I ever received from my first birthday until I left home for college. The earliest ones I had no memory of receiving, yet I was moved to see the writing of my aunts and grandmother. Other cards I recognized with the delight of meeting a childhood friend. I founds cards from my mother herself. But really, although the cards were written by many different people, in a way they were all from my mother, for she was the one who took the trouble to save them. What a strange, painful, delightful thing it was to find a box full of *Happy Birthdays* a week after her death. When she hid them away, did she think about a day that I might find them and read them again? Did she imagine me piling the cards around me as I had once piled my birthday presents? There were cards of girls riding bicycles and girls picking flowers and girls swinging on a garden gate. I read them all. I took them home with me, and kept them. I re-read them every year on my birthday. After all the years they have spent in their box, they are still bright.

