

7th March 1797

My dear Martha,

Will you forgive me? We thought to be home by Candlemas but, I'm sorry to report, events conspired against us - tempests one minute, slack water the next, as if even the weather wanted to keep us reaching home. It was a long time until the shadows on the quarterdeck fell westward. Some had bad dreams about sea monsters and doldrums. I wonder if you can guess what I dreamt of? Auburn curls and bright eyes?

Since I wrote last, we left more good men at the bottom of the ocean. Not all died from Spanish cannon, disease was rife, one putrid affliction took men very quickly, you never knew who would wake in the morning. Being out on deck got us seamen away from the foul miasmas below, even if the hot tar for the rigging smelt almost as bad. Some of the stores went rotten also and poor nourishment does not help health or morale. Like the cod's head pie your new mother cooked that time, I hope she has not made it again and you weathered another Christmas with her. I am sure she does not really mean you ill.

Midshipman Poyner asked who was signing on again. Rest assured I told him not me, my love, I had other plans. I felt lucky to have survived the voyage that long. Jenkins got into a fight with Brown over it. Brown's woman ran off while he was halfway round the world, he implied we would find the same. I told him he did not know you. Poyner let them fight for a while, he makes money from betting on the outcome. I pulled Jenkins away in the end, getting a punishment that close to home not being worth it. Brown is a sour, bitter old man but you cannot help feeling somewhat sorry for him, there is nothing at home for him now. His words did play on my mind, twas many months since we received any letters from home so our fears ran wild sometimes. Two years being a long time to be away from you, although not enough to dent my feelings.

I dreamed last night of us in that little home you pictured, the one with a patch of garden for you to grow vegetables while I tended my Uncle's fields, and the extra

room in case of an addition to our number in future years. I could see your bonnie face there, turned to the sun, smiling as you slipped flower seeds in amongst the vegetables. How precious that time alone was, planning and dreaming, your dog was the best walked of the county! Did your father ever find out?

These memories and your letter are all that have kept me going many a dark night. This voyage has been very hard, I never thought to see so many deaths, but I know how much you wanted to leave your father's house and my apprenticeship would never have afforded it. Our last run in with the Spanish provided enough to keep us that first year until the sale of the harvest. It was my dearest hope you could wait.

I thought us to wed straightaway when we landed, no more delay, so I planned to write to the parson and my uncle. With luck, within two weeks I would be a farmer, within three, we would be happily married (if you still wanted). Except Jenkins insisted we went ashore to celebrate first. I am sorry I postponed travelling home to you to say goodbye to my shipmates. I hope you understand I had lived and fought with them. Lord knows, I regret it now.

If we had drunk less we might have heard them, the press gang, searching the ports for merchant sailors. Or been able to fight them off. They wouldn't heed our pleas, nor, I'm ashamed to say, my tears. "Be glad to do your duty", we were told, being marched to the man-of-war. "We are at war, your country needs you".

Brown was wrong about Jenkins' woman. She was crying on the dock for him as we departed again, headed back to hostile waters, this time on a warship. Was he wrong about you? I suppose I may never know. I realise you cannot wait another two years in your unhappy situation so... I release you. I would rather you were happy. Please be happy.

Goodbye my love, I bid you my very best wishes. The shadows on the quarterdeck will turn again soon, the port becomes smaller and smaller, like my dreams. I hope one day you can forgive me, even if I cannot forgive myself.

I am yours ever,

Robert