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Laura Beil

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LETTERS FROM MAX

By Laura Beil

The Max Lale I remember is the one who appeared in letters starting in the fall of 1982. At the time, the death of his first wife was still a fresh wound. Though he would smile and hold his place in conversation, a palpable sadness would fill the silences.

Max was generations removed from me, but I felt an odd kinship with him that summer. I had newly dislodged my parents' home, having just finished my freshman year of college. In many ways, we were both trying to orient ourselves in worlds that had undergone a seismic shift. "Can I write to you when I go back to school?" I asked one evening before my return to College Station. The question was not premeditated, and I'm still unsure where it came from.

I wrote of classes, roommates and boys. He sent chatty dispatches of his civic and historical interests, his trips to visit my horse, Renada, and the progress of his daily walks. He made me laugh with his self-deprecating accounts of the characters in my hometown and his work on the PBS documentary "Marshall, Texas; Marshall, Texas." Max provided an emotional mooring to life outside my dorm and lecture halls. He became the first person to read my rough attempts at writing stories.

Max's letters sat in an overstuffed drawer in my parents' house for more than two decades. The night before his funeral, heavy with grief, I retrieved as many as I could find. I experienced the warmth and wit of those pages, and the encouragement that had helped calm the insecurities of my youth. I wept to unfold a hand-drawn valentine, sent when I had mentioned I had no suitor, which stated simply, "My [and he drew a heart] belongs to you every day." In the company of those pages, I was nineteen again, and Max was with me.

Perhaps, with the preservation of these fragments, he can be with anyone.

September 27, 1982: "To be properly dressed to meet Renada for the first time, I attired myself in boots, western shirt and cord riding slacks. Quite a pretty sight, though I'm not sure Renada appreciated all the effort I had gone to. Nor, for that matter, that I now must remove saddle stain from the pants. Your mother kindly gave me some instructions about squirting something called Spray and Wash on the spots before I subject them to my inept laundry attempts.

Happily my feet seem to have recovered from toes overlapping each other inside the boots, and miracle of miracles, I am neither stiff nor sore this morning from 20 to 30 minutes aboard Moon, the first time I have ridden a horse in at least 40 years. I am inordinately proud of myself. I could, in fact, get my left foot in the stirrup and my right leg over the horse without difficulty. I figured the odds at eight to five I would make a fool of myself."

October 18, 1982: "The strangest thing happened last week. You know, I think, that I drove to Shawnee last Thursday for the first-ever reunion of my

high school graduating class. Although I haven't changed, all my classmates look dreadfully old. The prettiest girl in the class is still pretty, though, and I was greatly upset when she asked me to dance with her. I'm sure she was just being charitable.

I am delighted to learn you have joined the ranks of published authors. Not only have I read the story of Sun Hillow, I even have a photocopy of it. And I understand the emotion with which you wrote the piece. Afterward, I wrote something similar about Fritz, which your mother thinks is quite good. She thinks yours is quite good, too, and I think this establishes her credentials as a critic."

November 10, 1982: "I saw your parents for a few minutes last Sunday, so I suppose you know, they having told me they had talked to you, that a trail ride of sorts has been set up for next Saturday. Tom has found a number of Caddo Indian burials about 15 minutes away (by horse) from Renada's barn, and the proposal is that four or five of us will mount up for an expedition to investigate them. It sounds like fun, especially inasmuch as I have been promised a rocking chair for my own mount.

Somehow the dream that life would become simpler after the ignominious end of a television career hasn't worked out correctly. The fault lies, I think, in the fact that I can't say no instead of yes. Last Thursday I spoke before the Rotary Club. Yesterday afternoon it was two sixth grade history classes. Tomorrow it's the annual Veterans Day Ceremonies on the public square. I guess it's the price of fame."

January 24, 1983: "Yesterday I went all the way to Woodlawn to check on Renada for you. (To be absolutely truthful, I rode as navigator for your mother. She didn't get lost once.) Renada is very round and independent. And rather shaggy, too, it must be confessed. All the other residents seemed to be in good fettle, too, so your mind should be free to concentrate on German at 8:00 each morning instead of worrying on that score. Bowing to her obsession to improve things, if not punctuality, your mother added gloss to the shining hour by planting some bluebonnets at the highway gate. I was detailed to sow some likewise seed."

March 7, 1983: "You may recall that your mother was paid \$15 for her service on the federal jury. And I was paid only \$10 for each day of my service on the state grand jury, now happily at an end. Does this seem fair? It was my impression that all this sort of thing was at an end, but obviously it is not. The only recourse I can see is to attack the system and demand that men should be treated as are women. This seems to be the time-honored method, and I sure you will agree that my suit is correct and proper."

April 13, 1983: "Back to your Mother once again. I'll bet you don't know that she is a preliminary winner in a recipe contest being conducted by the newspaper. This win is worth \$25, and Gail is about as giddy as a sixteen-year-old. The big prize—not to be announced until next week—is \$100. The Lord knows what fireworks will go off if she should not win the big one.

I am genuinely flattered that you wish me to see your literary efforts, and in all candor I think they are good, good, good. You must not stop. Even if your career plans do not encompass a typewriter or word processor, writing is the best discipline and the most satisfying hobby I know anything about."