

The Letters

LETTER 01

THERE'S NO HOPE IN WAR

Kurt Vonnegut to the Draft Board

28 November 1967

For as long as there have been wars, there have been conscientious objectors – people who refuse to fight in the military on principle – and the earliest on record dates back to the year 295, when Maximilian of Tebessa declined to enlist in the Roman Army. He was swiftly beheaded. Between the years 1965 and 1970, approximately 160,000 people attempted to abstain from military service in relation to the Vietnam War, including, in 1967, Mark Vonnegut, son of celebrated novelist Kurt Vonnegut. As Mark attempted to remove himself from proceedings through the standard channels, his father decided to strengthen Mark's chances by writing to the Draft Board.

THE LETTER

November 28, 1967

To Draft Board #1,
Selective Service,
Hyannis, Mass.

Gentlemen:

My son Mark Vonnegut is registered with you. He is now in the process of requesting classification as a conscientious objector. I thoroughly approve of what he is doing. It is in keeping with the way I have raised him. All his life he has learned hatred for killing from me.

I was a volunteer in the Second World War. I was an infantry scout, saw plenty of action, was finally captured and served about six months as a prisoner of war in Germany. I have a Purple Heart. I was honorably discharged. I am entitled, it seems to me, to pass on to my son my opinion of killing. I don't even hunt or fish any more. I have some guns which I inherited, but they are covered with rust.

This attitude toward killing is a matter between my God and me. I do not participate much in organized religion. I have read the Bible a lot. I preach, after a fashion. I write books which express

my disgust for people who find it easy and reasonable to kill.

We say grace at meals, taking turns. Every member of my family has been called upon often to thank God for blessings which have been ours. What Mark is doing now is in the service of God, Whose Son was exceedingly un-warlike.

There isn't a grain of cowardice in this. Mark is a strong, courageous young man. What he is doing requires more guts than I ever had—and more decency.

My family has been in this country for five generations now. My ancestors came here to escape the militaristic madness and tyranny of Europe, and to gain the freedom to answer the dictates of their own consciences. They and their descendents have been good citizens and proud to be Americans. Mark is proud to be an American, and, in his father's opinion, he is being an absolutely first-rate citizen now.

He will not hate.

He will not kill.

There's no hope in that. There's no hope in war.

Yours truly,

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

LETTER 02

I SHALL DIE WITH MY HEAD HELD HIGH

Blanca Brissac Vázquez to her son, Enrique

5 August 1939

Beginning in July 1936, the Spanish Civil War lasted for two years and eight months and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths; the dissolution of the country's democratic government, the Second Spanish Republic; and, in its place, the installation of a military dictatorship headed by Francisco Franco that lasted until his death in 1975. Executions were commonplace during the initial conflict, and they continued for some time afterwards, too, as Franco's forces exerted their authority and removed potential troublemakers. It was during this period of cleansing, weeks after the war ended, that thirteen young women later known as las Trece Rosas (the Thirteen Roses) – most of whom were members of the Unified Socialist Youth – were arrested and sentenced to death. They were executed by firing squad on the morning of 5 August 1939. Hours before they took their last breath, one of the Roses, twenty-nine-year-old Blanca Brissac Vázquez, wrote to her son.

THE LETTER

My dear, my precious son,
I'm thinking of you in my last moments. I only think of my darling boy, who is now a young man, and knows to be as honourable as his parents were. Forgive me, my son, if I ever did wrong by you. Forget that, son, do not remember me like that, as you know how distressed it makes me.

I will die with my head held high. Just be good: you know that better than anyone, dear Quique.

All I ask of you is to be good, very good, always. Love everybody and do not hold grudges against those who sentenced your parents to death, not ever. Good people never hold grudges and you must be a good, hardworking man. Follow the example of your Papa. Won't you promise me that, my dear son, in my last moments? Stay with my beloved Cuca and always be a son to her and my sisters. Take care of them when they grow old. Make it your duty when you become a man. I won't say any more. Your father and I face death defiantly. If your father has confessed and taken communion, I am not aware, as I won't see him again until I face the firing squad. I myself have confessed.

Enrique, never forget the memory of your

parents. Go to communion, well prepared, with a proper foundation of religion, as I was taught to do. I would keep writing to you to the very last moment, but I must say goodbye. My dearest son, until we meet again. My love for all eternity.

Blanca