

# THE COLLECTION



(wow! That's a lot of junk)

By

*Chris Klassen*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

*Chris Klassen's, "The Collection," works within the digital and epistolary world. There is a juxtaposition of youth and the decrepit, of purity and vice, of justice and violence. When we live in a world where the discussion of truth lets rumor run rampant, how does a collection of women hurt by a bad man represent the spectrum of classification for the public?*

*This story rides the fine between the distortion of public insight, the modern condition, and the abrasiveness of violence that has always existed in humanity.*

*You will not know who hurt these women, but you will know they were hurt. You won't know whether rumor transcends truth into an indictment of the self. You won't know whether to stew in social helplessness or forgive (if forgiveness is at all even a possibility).*

*You will know your emotions in relation to this narrative.*

*You will feel pangs of hurt and sadness and of care.*

*I have known for a while now that I don't have it in me to forgive monstrosity, as oftentimes I've been monstrous, but forgiveness is not singularly up to me.*

*In the court of public opinion, the mob is god.*

*Klassen has done work here well worth reading.*

*Five Stars.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

Twenty letters, this collection, some more graphic and disturbing, some comparatively mundane, to twenty different women, all of them expressing a hurt caused or an explanation given or a combination of the two, all of them beautiful in appearance only. None of them sent. How could they be when they were found tied together in an envelope in a glass jar in a smoldered ruin at the end of a street by a bunch of teenagers.

The Collection

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That house at the end of the street, the old abandoned one, it burned down a couple months ago. It had been an empty eyesore for years, only inhabited by roaches and rodents and the odd squatter. Druggies shot up there too. We knew that because of occasional newspaper reports. And, to be totally up front, because we sometimes played there when we were younger and found syringes and rubber bands. We tried to keep that to ourselves but of course our parents found out and admonished us in the bluntest of terms and warned us of the dangers of exploring a derelict. Dangerous people could be there, they said. They could be sick or deranged. You never know what they might do to you. We still went back. Kids do that.

Nobody, well maybe excepting the roaches and rodents, is upset that the house is gone. The firefighters did their job and extinguished the blaze in due time. They probably didn't try too hard

knowing that no one would care if it burned to the ground. It did. When the hotspots were eliminated and the site was deemed safe and nothing remained but a warm black pile, they left.

About a week later, a rumour began to spread on social media. More than just a rumour actually, it was a modern-day epic compared to the typical online postings and digital tripe that bombard us unceasingly every minute of every day. It was detailed and extensive, complete with images purporting to validate its claims. It may be completely fictional for all we know. But it was enticing nevertheless.

Supposedly, less than twenty-four hours after the fire, a few curious teenagers, phones in hand as they always are, decided to explore the wreckage and, with luck, do a little pillaging. One of the teenagers found a glass jar that had survived the flames. They didn't find anything else. Inside the jar, if the posting is to be believed, was an envelope with the word "Collection" written in red ink on the front. And inside the envelope, again it may or may not be true, who knows, and maybe this telling does nothing but callously perpetuate a falsehood, was a folded-up bundle of pages obviously torn from a notebook and tied across the centre with thin brown twine. Of course the tie was cut, the bundle unfolded, and the pages read and photographed and

uploaded to the world from a pseudonymic address. Life today, it has come to this, only exists for real if it's digital.

Each page, it appeared, was a letter hand-written with elegant and artistic flair, each letter concise, never more than a few sentences long, always addressing at the beginning a woman's name, but never dated and never signed. The attractiveness of the letters' appearance contrasted ironically with the disturbing and unusual content.

"Dear Marjorie - thank you for your kindness. I so appreciate you helping me through my difficult times. I will always be indebted. But I slid back into my old ways and I have to leave. What you are going to find out once I'm gone is going to hurt you. I apologize for the pain and suffering you are going to experience. It's my fault but it's not my wish. I'm just a bad human."

That was the first letter, page one of the collection. The second, blunt and direct:

"Dear Lucille - I'm drinking and smoking. I'm in a room somewhere. It's filthy here. I might not be alone. I'm not coming home anymore. You'll be fine. I will too."

They continued.

"Dear Linda - why were you so upset when I only hit you once? It could have been more but I refrained. You know I love you. It was just an anomaly. But really, you never should have yelled at me. You know I don't like it when people yell at me. So I lashed out, no big deal. I forgive you."

"Dear Victoria - we had a lot of fun times together in the early days. Our trip to Florida will always bring me good memories. You were beautiful in that bathing suit. But I'm going away,

frankly to find someone better. You bore me now. Say goodbye to the kids. They'll understand eventually."

"Dear Marie - I'm a con. Your bank account is empty. You shouldn't be so gullible, especially at your advanced age. You think a young man like me would really like an old woman like you? You're just going to be conned again if you don't smarten up. Retirement isn't going to be much fun now, is it? All the best with whatever future you have left. Consider this a lesson. Life is mean."

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There was a final page though, a twenty-first, inconsistent with the pattern of the rest. It was on parchment paper printed in red ink with a different hand-writing. Not elegant and artistic in appearance like the others, instead clumsy and ugly with coarse lines, inconsistent phrasing and spelling errors.

"Dear God - I destroyed alot of women with my actions. I upset innocent kids too. I've drank too much done too many drugs and sometimes been violent. For lots of years. The problem is it's just life right. I'm not the only one who acted like this. Some have even been alot worse than me and they got through ok with no problems and just kept going with their actions like it was no big deal even though looking back now that I'm old it was a big deal. It would be best not to cause pain and stress to women and kids, that's the truth. They really don't deserve that kind of grief, I know it. They may learn from it and become better people but they don't deserve it. But the problem, God, is I'm not so sad about anything like maybe I should be. I'm admitting my actions and asking for forgiveness but I don't regret what I did because I enjoyed it all at the time. Even when I apologized to someone it was just words I didn't really mean. Maybe I thought I meant it at the time but I didn't. So am I supposed to be sad now when I ask for forgiveness? Should I be crying as I write or maybe crying after? Well I'm not and I won't. I'm being honest. I'm not sad or remorseful. Humans are bad alot of the time you should know that since you made us supposedly. Don't blame me. But I am asking for forgiveness anyway, for whatever it's worth. I'm old and I guess that's what old people do. Sincerely..."

The responses to the posting of the collection started appearing almost immediately.

"I had a friend named Marjorie," one began. "She dated a guy in Nashville who was a drug addict. She got him clean and then he up and left."

"My cousin worked at a company in Boston with a guy who was married to a girl named Victoria and they had kids and one day he just vanished."

"Marie was my mom and she got conned in an online dating scam. She was never the same after. It must have been him, that rat."

"That sounds like a guy who beat me up. He did it more than once though. It was in Birmingham a long time ago."

Hundreds of responses seeming to validate the content of the letters found in the jar. It seemed implausible that one man could have existed in so many different places at so many different times but no one questioned. Also taken at face value were all the responses that supposedly came from the man himself.

"That was me," four said succinctly from four unique addresses.

"I did all that," another nine said in slightly varying words.

The rapid flurry of communication continued for a week or two before it started to slow down and then slow down some more. Soon the participants were no longer engaged at all. Attention spans, these days, only last until some other fluffy distraction comes along.

So those teenagers, the ones who explored the ruins of the burned-out old house in the first place, well they went back again a month or so later, if their newest postings are to be believed. They were bored and had some time to kill and some vodka to drink. Wandering through the rubble, still not cleared away because, let's be honest, it's not an important street in the grand scheme of things, one of them supposedly stumbled upon another glass jar, roughly in the same location as the first. There's no way they could have missed it the first time, they thought, so it must have been placed there after. They opened the jar and removed, like before, an envelope, this one labelled "Collection 2", even though it only contained a single piece of paper, ripped from a notebook like the others and folded in quarters.

"So am I forgiven?" it asked.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Repeating themes in my writing lately have been repentance, reflection, and technology. It is impossible to take anything at face value today, yet, since social media is the ubiquitous method of unfiltered communication, we have no choice but to constantly face the disinformation and wonder. I find it exhausting! For this story, my goal was to combine all the above themes into one and create a fiction around them. I can thank my buddy, Franz Kafka, for the small dose of absurdity, and my other friends, Poe and Dostoyevski, for the hint of mystery.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Chris Klassen lives and writes in Toronto, Canada. After graduating from the University of Toronto and living for a year in France and England, he returned home and worked the majority of his career in print media. His stories have been published in Short Circuit, Unlikely Stories, Across the Margin, Fleas on the Dog, Vagabond City, Dark Winter, Literally Stories, Ghost City Review and The Raven Review.