

To Stuart William Dugan, my dearest friend -

When I came down the hall to say good morning and check on you and saw that your door had been double-locked during the night, I knew in my heart that they had finally taken you to the hospital. I was relieved, for the condition of suffering you were left to endure in your cell was beyond inhumane. I knew something was terribly wrong with your health. We all did - those of us close to you. What I was not prepared for was the news that eventually followed. You had been ignored and neglected too long. None of this did you deserve. On the contrary. This isn't how the story was supposed to go, not after all you've fought for to be free and return to your precious Wodonga and beloved family you so dreamed of and shared with me every day since I've known you.

We're all devastated by the news – O'Kane, Charles, Norm. None more so than I. Neither I nor O'Kane have slept much since hearing the news. It is not just because of the heartache and anger – that is one thing. But we don't want to miss a moment to hold you in our thoughts. Frodo put a prayer for you during church services on Sunday. Many here are with you in spirit, old friend. I've written a letter to Macca, as well. He would want to know.

I pray for a miracle to suddenly find its way to you. I've seen such things occur in my lifetime. But in the event that you've simply grown tired after this long, difficult battle for freedom, I cannot let you go without saying in these living years how much your friendship has meant to me. You became and will remain my best friend. We've been through a lot together.

For five years you looked after me. When my hands could not hold a cup after the aneurism you bought me a cup with a large handle so I could have a coffee without dropping it. Not one day went by when you didn't ask if I had remembered to get my milk or made sure I had enough coffee. Since you've been away I have forgotten my milk at least a dozen times now! You were always concerned for me – and everyone else – in spite of your own hardships and troubles. Eric knows this well, and send his love, also. When O'Kane and I were wrongfully kicked out of unit 3 you still made sure we were taken care of. Frodo still hasn't fully recovered from when I dropped the egg sandwiches in front of the S.O and officers. He'll likely always have a slight twitch under his eye as a result now

There are a thousand stories we've shared over these troubled years together, not least of which is catching O'Kane sneaking the yogurt for himself! God, the laughs we've had in spite of this place. Who says prison can't be fun? You made it that way, with your quick wit and humor and antics. Won't the officers shit when they at last read in my book all the mischief we got up to under their noses! You always had a mischievous, cheeky grin and gleam in your eye as though you were up to something only you knew of. But as I came to know you I realized that you merely saw the humor and irony in everything, no matter how bad the circumstance.

It is difficult for those who have never been in prison to understand the friendships we form, or that each other is all we have and depend on for mental and sometimes physical survival, nor how many of us just simply should not be in here at all. They will, though, in the fullness of time.

You always referred to me as your ‘lifeline’ to freedom, to home and your family. We worked hard together on your appeal and against every obstacle they could throw at us. But it was finally heard in the Supreme Court just two days before they took you to the hospital. I’m sorry it took so long. I don’t know the final decision, only what it *should* be. But I swore to you I would never let it go, never give up on proving your innocence. I reiterate that oath. Those responsible will be brought to account. This cannot go on any more.

If some psychic had told me that one day I would find myself in a foreign prison far from home, and that I would even come to call some prisoners *friend*, I would have demanded my money back and laughed all the way out the door. But in the end it would have been that psychic who had the last laugh, to be sure. You became and are my friend in the truest sense of the word. As devastating as this experience of being imprisoned has been on my own life, frankly – save for the absence of my daughter these long years – I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Now I’ve seen it all for myself, endured it all, and now I know the truth. And I would never have met and come to know you, my friend. I’m glad I have.

You bragged of your family and your homeland of Victoria for as long as I’ve known you. You made me watch every TV show about Victoria. You dreamed of showing it all to me personally when we would eventually be free. I cannot say what my own future holds, and God knows I miss my home and family and the Rocky Mountains, but I swear to you that one day I will visit your state of Victoria. When I do, I know you will be there also - home at last, where you belong.

My dear friend, of the countless words I’ve written over the half-century of my life this letter is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to write.

How do I say goodbye, my friend? My mouth seems forbidden to speak the word. My heart just can’t accept it – not after all. No matter what I say it will never be all that needs to be said, and I will never get it all right. But again, I cannot let this moment pass in silence. As sure as we are born we are condemned to die, someday, some way. It is the cruel paradox of life itself. It is therefore not the length of life that one should endeavor to achieve – though life is sacred and precious – but rather, what we did with the time we had that matters most. The time which we were sentenced to, the time we shared together, is treasured. And it *will* make a difference in the future, to be sure. More than anything else, my friend, I wish I could be there with you now, as you’ve always been here for me. But know you are not alone. What I’ve said here to you I say also for the men who knew you and call you friend as well.

How do I say goodbye, my friend? I will *not* say good bye. You are always alive and well within my heart and thoughts and most assuredly in the stories I will tell. The world will come to know Mr. Stuart William Dugan – the man as I know you, not the number you were assigned. We were prisoners. We were friends. We were innocent.

Always with you, Stuart Dugan

John Victor Ramses
1st of March 2017.

The heart is forever young. It knew not that we had grown old.

