MINOR CHARACTERS FROM MAJOR MOMENTS

THE GREATEST NOBODIES of HISTORY



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ADRIAN BLISS

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

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ADRIAN BLISS

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For the nobodies

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Contents

Author's Note ix

1. The Dog Philosopher 1
2. The Vestal Virgin 23
3. The Plague 49
4. The Master's Ferret 68
5. The Visitor to Strasbourg 92
6. The Deputy Groom of the Stool 143
7. The Royal Oak 166
8. The Last Dodo 195
9. The Inimitable Charlie 234
10. The Wheat Field Marshal 266

Afterword 291

Acknowledgements 293

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Author's Note

I think it was Julius Caesar's barber who once said, 'Everyone remembers the heroes, but it is the nobodies who make history,' which was just *so* like him. He was right of course. If Genghis Khan's childhood nanny had been a touch more attentive, and if Alexander the Great's friends hadn't suggested a group trip to Persia, everything would've been different. Neither you nor I would be here and this book would never have been published. Thankfully, in this timeline, everyone did their bit, from Michelangelo's marble dealer to Cleopatra's hairstylist and as such, we are all here, and so is this book.

The following pages contain the (mostly) true stories of ten extraordinary side characters from humanity's biggest moments. Some historians will discredit my sources. They'll tell you there's just no way a psychic medium contacted a ferret and transcribed its memoir, or that a nineteenth-century horse could be so articulate. To these neighsayers, I say this: it is impossible for us to know exactly how any historical event unfolded. The past is overflowing with embellished tales, subtle propaganda, outright lies, vicious rumours, harmless exaggerations, misheard anecdotes and people just getting things wrong. In history, nothing is certain, so perhaps, and just perhaps, the lives of its greatest nobodies went a little something like this . . .

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1.

The Dog Philosopher

In the fourth century BCE, under the watchful eye of Zeus and the Olympians, Ancient Athens and its mortals were enjoying the fruits of the golden age. After a hundred years of good fortune, the marble city gleamed with temples to the gods and heroes, and its people (or at least the lucky ones) enjoyed a life of enlightenment, strolling about on the cobbles, thinking up inspirational quotes.

The most famous of these thinkers – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – fascinated, dazzled and discombobulated their fellow Athenians with their philosophies, eventually making a cultural impact so large they are still household names to this day. Unfairly, their equally fascinating contemporary, the cynical Diogenes of Sinope, isn't quite as well known, most his life and teachings being lost to time.

That all changed in 2009, however, when a hoard of letters was found buried under the Ancient Agora of Athens. After spending more than a decade translating the documents and filtering out the junk mail, historians were able to piece together an extraordinary collection of complaint letters from a disgruntled Athenian

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citizen, finally shedding light on the controversial antics of the man Plato dubbed 'Socrates gone mad'.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to file an official complaint regarding a disturbance in my neighbourhood.

I should caveat that I am a very kind and tolerant man. Sometimes my friends say I am too kind and too tolerant, and that I need to stop being so kind and tolerant, but I'm afraid it is in my nature and not subject to change.

This morning, while leaving my home on Aphrodite Avenue, I found that my route past the Temple of Apollo* was blocked by a very large, overturned stone jar. Passers-by agreed it was a dreadful shame, for it is a beautiful street in an upmarket part of town, and to see it go to the dogs in this way was most upsetting.

I was already running late to brunch with my mother, but as an honourable citizen it felt remiss not to stop and investigate. Well, I wish I hadn't, for as I drew closer I was hit by the most heinous stench which remains in my nostrils still!

'Whose pithos is this?' I said, covering my nose with my chiton. I looked around for the offender. 'Who has left a giant jar of faeces and carcasses in the middle of the

* The Temple of Apollo Patroos situated in the Ancient Agora of Athens. The Agora was the beating heart of Athenian life, and by extension the bedrock of Western civilisation. Here the city's citizens would meet to conduct business, attend a political gathering, worship at a sacred temple, purchase a little something at a shop or stall, and occasionally cower for their lives while Persians, Romans or Vikings ransacked the place.

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street?' A boy sitting on the steps of the temple stared blankly and shrugged. No one owned up.

I was bending down to look inside when, to my horror, it moved. I jumped back, and from the cavity came a man, unfolding his arms and legs until he was outstretched and yawning, completely naked. All the flies in Athens seemed to gather, drinking up the cloud of noxious gas that encircled him.

'You can't leave your pithos here!' I stuttered. The man rubbed his eyes and scratched his groin.

'It's not my pithos,' he said, before stumbling over to the temple and relieving himself against one of its columns. 'It's nobody's.'

I left, trying to process what I had just seen, and by the time I arrived at brunch (ten minutes late), the smell of sweat and urine still hadn't left me, making it very difficult to enjoy my English yoghurt.

Now, before you make assumptions, I should tell you that I am a big – no, *huge* – advocate of poor people. Just last week I smiled at a homeless orphan in the Agora and I even have that thing Plato said, 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle', on a tote bag. But it works both ways! I'm still putting off taking a wife (purely for financial reasons, there are plenty of women who like me) and I've just had to sell my second home on Aegina. Times are tight, but we must keep up appearances. We must rise above the barbarous domain of animals and live ordered, civilised lives. Otherwise, we are merely dogs!

On behalf of all the good people of Athens I request the man be moved to a more suitable neighbourhood. It breaks my heart to see him look so out of place, and I

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can't help but feel he would be much happier living in one of those lovely far-off suburbs.

I look forward to your swift action in this matter.

Yours sincerely,
Concerned Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

P.S. Thank you for *finally* removing the illegally deposited cone on the statue of Eros.

*

To whom it may concern,

Just following up on my previous letter. Did you receive it? Only, it has been three days and the unsavoury man seems to have set up permanent camp next to the Temple of Apollo. Thankfully he now wears a chiton from time to time, but his odour still offends everyone within a four-mile radius. Has he not heard of Aesop?

In case you're of the opinion that desecrating a holy temple and spoiling its aesthetics isn't grounds for exile, I would like to tell you about what happened today in the marketplace.

Now I don't normally visit the marketplace (I have slaves to do that for me) but my 30th birthday is coming up and I intend to put on a fabulous party for my many friends, acquaintances and prospective business clients. There has never been a more perfect opportunity to show them all just what kind of man I am, so I am going all out.

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There I was, perusing the fine silks for my birthday chiton, when I heard a ruckus over by the meat and cheese section. The smell alone should've been a giveaway, but I found myself compelled to find out what all the fuss was about.

Lo and behold, there he was, standing in the middle of the aisle munching on a ham and cheese toastie. A circle of mortified onlookers had formed around him, all totally perplexed as to how someone could defy social conventions and *eat in public* like some kind of stray dog.* *This* dog loved the attention and remained on a constant 360-degree rotation so everyone could see his barbaric jaw masticating away.

'You monster!' said a woman, close to tears. The Dog (for if he insists on behaving like a dog I shall call him one) licked his fingers and said, through a mulch of saliva and feta, 'If a thing is not shameful in private, why should it be shameful in public?'

I tell you, my eyes rolled so far back into my head they nearly detached. He thinks he's a philosopher! Well, I've never heard anything so hilarious in all my life. Oh how I laughed! I suppose he'll be setting up a school next? I wonder how they'll all fit in his pithos?

Now I'm an easy-going guy. Childish stunts don't rattle me. The problem is when these things catch on, which is exactly what happened next.

* After witnessing his peculiar antics, the scandalised residents of Athens did indeed call Diogenes a 'kyon', or dog. While it was meant as an insult, Diogenes and his followers considered it a badge of honour. After all, dogs lead happy lives, free from the distractions of wealth and the bizarre cultural norms that cripple human beings, like it being obscene to eat in public for some reason.

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One of the bewitched onlookers, a well-to-do woman from a respectable family, reached nervously into her pocket, pulled out an almond and started giggling. Before I knew it, she'd popped it in her mouth. Right there in the open! I stared at her, hardly able to believe what I was seeing. She ate another one and another one, grinning the whole time like it was some great thrill. I had to sit down for fear of fainting.

I implore you, for the safety and sanity of all Athenians, to take action before the Dog's horrid ways infect more suggestible civilians. I have seen it happen before! My barber went to ONE Plato lecture and now he's convinced he's a featherless chicken called Paul.* His wife keeps finding him squashed in the coop, harassing the hens. It has completely torn their family apart!

Perhaps you could put the Dog in a little boat and push him out to sea? Alternatively, I've heard the steps of the Acropolis are quite slippery this time of year . . .

Yours impatiently,
Shocked Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

* While trying to settle the age-old debate of 'What is a man?', Plato gave the seemingly reasonable response that a man is a featherless animal that walks on two legs. Diogenes, ever the master of debate, countered this by plucking a chicken, throwing its carcass into Plato's Academy and screaming, 'Behold! I've brought you a man!' It's fair to say, Plato didn't love the guy.

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P.S. Those new marble benches around the Agora are in all the wrong places. Too cold in the morning shade and too hot in the midday sun! Who arranged them, Oedipus?!

*

To whom it may concern,

Hello! Is this thing on? I have yet to receive a response to my two previous letters, both of which are relating to a very serious, very pressing matter.

My 30th birthday is fast approaching and I'll be damned if it's not perfect. The Oracle of Delphi's assistant (the oracle was out) told me it would be a make-or-break occasion, changing the course of my life forever. If that doesn't mean an invite onto the top table of Athens then I don't know what does!

Of course, the bane of my life, the Dog (he's started calling himself that now, like it's a good thing! Can you believe it?) seems determined to scupper my plans. He has moved his pithos from outside the Temple of Apollo to – yes, you guessed it – my front gate! When I asked him why he had moved he told me the pithos rolled down the hill in the night and landed here. Likely story!

Now I am aware there is no specific law against living in a pithos outside somebody's house, but surely there has to be a law against what happened next.

I was enjoying a private moment alone in my bedroom when I was interrupted by a rabble gathering outside. I put on my chiton and went to have a look, expecting to find

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the Dog up to one of his usual tricks, but nothing could've prepared me for what I saw.

There he was, sat atop his pithos, chiton over his head, shaking the pillar of the Parthenon for all to see! And by shaking the pillar of the Parthenon I mean clutching his column, strangling his Spartan, man-handling his King Philip of Macedon!* I immediately threw up in my mouth, but like everyone else I couldn't bring myself to look away. A wave of laughter went through the crowd, people no doubt being utterly mystified as to how to react. But cutting through the laughter was the sound of children crying. An unfortunate school group was passing by on their way to the petting zoo.

Grunts in increasing frequency signalled the end of the monstrous performance so I bolted for my front door. Sadly, I didn't quite make it. The schoolteachers covered as many young eyes as possible, but they couldn't save everyone.

'If only it were so easy to soothe a hungry stomach!' said the Dog, bowing and climbing back into his pithos. There was a smattering of unconscionable applause as the onlookers disbanded, leaving me stuck with the horrible little creature installed by my front gate.

* Other sources have testified to this outrageous behaviour. In *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, written in around the third century CE by Diogenes Laetius (no relation), our pithos dweller was said to regularly fart, spit, urinate and masturbate in public. Those who took issue with this behaviour would face him farting, spitting or urinating on *them* (thankfully he stopped there). Eventually Athenians figured out it was easier to simply avoid standing down-wind of him.

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Look, we've all done a few evening classes or had a friend drag us along to some old bore's philosophy school. I think we all know what this amateur is trying to say with these outlandish performances, don't we? It doesn't take a genius. If anything, I think he's being too obvious! I got it straight away. What happened to nuance? What happened to handing out a pamphlet and going on your way? You would never have caught Socrates with his knob out!* (Except for that one time but I do honestly believe he slipped.)

Please won't you do something about this pseudo-philosopher defecating on the good name of Athens? He is an embarrassment to us all! And he is literally defecating all over Athens! Can't you just tie a weight to his leg and drop him in the Aegean? He would make a nice snack for the fish (if they can stomach the smell).

Yours with mounting fury,
Appalled Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

P.S. Did you change bin day again? Why have my bins not been collected?

*

* By all accounts, Socrates was also a fairly unsavoury character and was lacking when it came to personal hygiene. But, credit where it's due, he did stop short of having 'me time' in the middle of the high street.

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Dear Citizen of Athens,

We apologise for the tardy response to your complaints. An administrative error meant your letters were getting redirected to Catering who filed them under 'Figure out later'.

We have investigated your grievances and were able to speak to the gentleman in question. His name is Diogenes of Sinope, and when we broached your complaint with him, he simply said, 'Of what use is a philosopher who doesn't hurt anybody's feelings?' And aside from the stench we found him to be an affable man with an interesting outlook on life. We invited him back to the office and he ended up staying all afternoon, fascinating the staff here with his philosophies and anecdotes. We even booked him to do an after-dinner speech at our upcoming summer social.

In regards to your complaint, we gave Diogenes some vouchers for the local baths and have told him about Aesop. He has generously agreed to give himself a little scrub before your 30th birthday celebrations next week.

Kind regards,
Whom it may concern
Council office
The Agora
Athens

How am I doing? If you're unhappy with the service you received today, please contact the jurors of Athens who will duly ostracise me from the city and send me to my certain death.

*

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To whom it may concern,

Thank you for *finally* responding but I must urge you to reconsider your position. Things have got worse since my last letter, much worse!

In the interest of creating an aspirational environment for my many friends, acquaintances and prospective business clients, I spent a very large sum of money acquiring luxury rugs, vases, sculptures and artwork to decorate my home. As the slaves accepted the enormous delivery and carried everything inside, I was enjoying educating the admiring crowd on the items I had chosen. There was frivolity in the air and we were all having a pleasurable time when the Dog (still unbathed) climbed on top of his pithos and loudly proclaimed: 'He who has the most is content with the least!'

At first people laughed at him, as they should, but then to my horror they started asking questions. 'What do you mean?' asked one curious passer-by.

'This man', said the Dog, pointing at me, 'believes his pretty vases and fine rugs will bring him happiness. He believes they will elevate his position, impress his friends, bring him esteem. All in the search of contentment. This man' – he looked right into my eyes, and all his hypnotised gaggle did the same – 'is a fool.'

All was silent as half of Athens stood and stared. Even the slaves carrying my things had stopped to listen. I was dumbstruck! Gobsmacked! Speechless! Never have I been so humiliated! I made my excuses and ran inside, reeling from the vicious attack.

How dare the Dog lecture me? ME! I am a respectable man! I live in a house, whereas he lives in a big jar. I wear

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nice clothes and he wears an old sack (if you're lucky!). He represents the lowest rung of humanity, whereas I represent the highest. I am better than him! How much clearer could it be?

Well, the joke's on him because I have put in an order for even MORE nice things. We all know true happiness can only be achieved through external means. Why else do you think the King of Persia is surrounded by all that gold?

Mark my words, if you let this man ruin my birthday there will be hell to pay!

Yours incandescently,
Incandescent Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

P.S. The noise coming from the blacksmith's has got *much* louder recently. Has he changed his tools? Please can you have a word.

⋆

Dear Incandescent Citizen of Athens,

Thank you for your recent letter. We are sorry to hear of your ordeal but must remind you that it is not against the law to do philosophy outside somebody's house. The citizens of Athens are welcome to do philosophy wherever they please, except at the swimming pool.

We advise you to settle this matter with Diogenes directly. Perhaps buy him lunch and ask him to go a bit easier on you?

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If someone tries to philosophise you at the swimming pool, please get in touch as a matter of urgency, but until then we're afraid there is not much we can do to help.

We wish you all the best for your upcoming birthday.

Kind regards,
Whom it may concern
Council office
The Agora
Athens

*

To whom it may concern,

Who am I talking to here? Are you the manager? If you're not the manager, then get me the manager!

The Dog's actions are *really* derailing my birthday week. Surely that is a crime? One shouldn't be able to go around derailing other people's birthday weeks unprovoked!

The violent attack on my character has left me unusually pensive. It is not a feeling I am familiar with and not something I particularly like. Here I am, surrounded by nice things but unable to enjoy them. What a waste! And it's all because of the Dog. I fear he is being allowed to run amok in the city, infecting people's minds like an insidious plague.

This morning, while going to fetch my custom birthday chiton from the tailors, I ran into an old acquaintance, a highly intelligent and well-stationed gentleman you no doubt know, Theodoros of Poros (he owns a whole swathe of land south of the city). We were exchanging

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pleasantries when I noticed he wasn't wearing any sandals. I looked at his grazed and dusty feet, stunned, and he said to me, 'Oh, that. I'm doing Sandal-less Saturdays.'

It had the whiff of the Dog, so I asked him where he had got such an idea.

'My friends and I are really into this new philosopher, Diogenes of Sinope. Have you heard of him? I've been to all his gigs. I think he's just fantastic,' he said. I stood there dumbfounded.

'Oh, nice,' I managed to stutter, not wanting to fall out of favour with my now mentally compromised old acquaintance.

'Yeah, his whole thing's like radical simplicity and authenticity, y'know? He believes we should reject societal conventions and live more in accordance with nature.'*

'Oh cool, I'll check him out,' I lied, slipping away. Sandal-less Saturdays! Can you believe it? What's next, tunic-free Tuesdays?! Are we all to stroll about butt naked like animals?

Admittedly, on the way home I tripped over while trying to avoid some faeces on the road (wonder where that came from?) and snapped the strap on both of my sandals. Despite trying my best to mend them, I had to walk home barefoot. Yes, it was the most comfortable I've been in years and my backache suddenly disappeared, but was it worth the crippling embarrassment? Absolutely not! I shall be carrying a second pair at all times so my soles never have to touch the earth again.

* In rejecting conventional desires for wealth, power and worldly possessions, the removal of footwear is seen as a significant step. Diogenes consistently went barefoot, even in the snow.

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I fear Theodoros of Poros is too far gone, but something must be done to protect the rest of us from the Dog's philosophical warfare!

Please do not hesitate. Escalate this case to the highest level! Who's in charge in this place anyway? It's times like this we need a king. This democracy thing isn't working out. A king wouldn't stand for this nonsense.

Yours despairingly,
Despairing Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

P.S. I am NOT happy about the proposed road closures for the Panathenaic Games! Please find my much better plan on the enclosed map.

*

Dear Despairing Citizen of Athens,

Sorry, only just seen this! We all slept rough under the stars earlier this week for 'Moonlit Mondays' (it's a new weekly event Diogenes is doing up at the Acropolis) and it has had a knock-on effect on our workflow. In addition, Susan, who sorts through our letters and forwards them to the relevant departments, has left the city to live in a cave by the sea.

You'll be pleased to hear we have escalated your case to the highest level and have passed all your letters onto our Area Manager. However, please be aware he is currently

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doing 'Feral Friday' and is sacking off work to forage for berries in the woods.

It has been a pleasure working on your case and we wish you all the best in finding a solution to your grievance.

Kind regards,
Whom it may concern
Council office
The Agora
Athens

*

To whom it may concern,

I should've transcended to the higher echelon today. It was my 30th birthday party, my chance to impress my many friends, acquaintances and prospective business clients and be invited to one of those fancy dinners up on the Acropolis. I poured everything into making this party a resounding success but it has all been for nothing.

When I woke up this morning and tucked into my birthday breakfast, I was determined to keep the Dog out of my mind so I could enjoy the day. I like to stay busy, so I spent a pleasant few hours supervising my slave while he polished the shiny things in my house and later walked through the Agora in my special birthday chiton so anyone not coming to my party could enjoy it too.

As I returned home, I realised I hadn't seen, smelled or even thought of the Dog once all morning, and I felt optimistic about the day ahead. But as soon as the first

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guests arrived it was clear his pernicious tendrils were everywhere.

They arrived barefoot. Barefoot! To my party! I chastised them and reminded them it wasn't even Saturday. 'We're doing this full time now,' one of them said. 'It just feels right.' I couldn't believe my ears when the other barefooters woofed – yes, WOOFED – in assent.

As more guests trickled in (it was a disappointing turnout despite EVERYONE saying they would come), I waited eagerly for their compliments on the decor, on my art and on my special birthday chiton. But, to my horror, no one was impressed by my nice things, despite me choosing the very nicest things from the catalogue. At one point I overheard Theodoros of Poros (who was wearing nothing but a linen sash around his crotch) bitching about my vase collection and calling my painting of a cat with a moustache tacky and embarrassing.

All the usual chatter of such events was replaced by talk of philosophy. More specifically the 'philosophy' of the hottest new thinker in town. And to add insult to injury, they all left early to catch the start of his gig on the Acropolis. Even my own mother cut and ran!

I was so upset I crawled into the giant vase I'd purchased for the party and cried myself to sleep, shielded from the cruel world and everyone in it.

Yours crying myself to sleep,
Bereft Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

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P.S. Why is it so surprisingly comfortable to sleep in a vase? It makes absolutely no sense. Do something!

*

Dear Bereft Citizen of Athens,

We are currently out of office for 'No-work November' but will endeavour to respond to your letter as soon as we return.

Kind regards,
Whom it may concern
Council office
The Agora
Athens

*

To whom it may concern,

Don't bother. It doesn't matter. You're too late. You stood back and did nothing while an exemplary citizen's good name was torn to shreds.

The party that was meant to change my life has ruined me, and now not even my nice things can bring me solace. As such, I've decided to renounce it all, even my slaves. I dread to think what the poor things will do without me, adrift in the world without a purpose. At least I know how they feel.

I shall be taking a sabbatical to the coast to be sad. Perhaps, someday, I will be able to make sense of this

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irrational destruction and return to pick up the pieces. Or perhaps I will just tie a weight to my leg and sink into the Aegean.

Either way, you shall not be hearing from me again.

Yours dismantled,
The Shell of a Citizen of Athens
No. 24 Aphrodite Avenue
Kerameikos district
Athens

P.S. Thanks for nothing.

⋆

Dear Shell,

Apologies for the delay in responding to your letter. We have been working through a lengthy backlog since returning from 'No-work November' and since half our team now live in caves by the sea, we are a bit thin on the ground.

We trust your issue has been resolved. Please let us know if this is not the case, otherwise we will go ahead and close your file.

Kind regards,
Whom it may concern
Council office
The Agora
Athens

⋆

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