

Dear Much Much Much Younger Self:

There you sit, scribbling in your diary, aged ten. You've just moved again and writing is your island of stability. The boxes are still to be unpacked (you've no idea where your favourite sweatshirt is, *again*). You've no friends again. Your parents aren't speaking to each other again – very loudly, while your little brother is having another asthma attack. But none of this matters because you're writing. *Dear Diary*, you begin each entry. Diary is a girl, coincidentally also ten. On paper, you become a fascinating person, living a tragic life. Your family is charmingly idiosyncratic. You imagine that one day your life will be seen for what you clearly is: extraordinary. Beyond the satisfaction of recording your life for posterity, is the cathartic joy of pouring out your unhappiness. Nothing is so bad it cannot be written out of your system. Write it down, and zap! It is gone, gone, gone.

I want to tell you this: Don't mind the loneliness – you've stumbled on a way to escape it. And always being the new kid in town means you'll feel at home with detachment and can simply observe the world. Your daily honest writing will become the basis for the rest of your life's work.

Dear Much Much Younger Self:

There you sit, at your typewriter in your bedroom that used to be a balcony, looking over rooftops. You've begun your first novel, semi-autobiographical of course, and meet a professor once a week in a café to show him chapters. He doesn't have much to say. You wonder if he has a crush on you, and consider writing a short story about this. The novel is, of course, about the agony of romantic love.

I want to tell you this: Your novel is terrible. But that doesn't matter. You have to write it, so you can write better stuff later. Clear the decks, so to speak. You'll look at it many decades later and cringe. Then smile. And decide that professor was definitely in love with you.

Dear Much Younger Self:

There you sit, having finally come to terms with your first word processor. You've begun writing stories again. Not that you have more time, but because looking after your babies is often boring. Guiltily you ignore the chaos and write. Your first story is about riding that freight train one summer with your brother. You're so pleased with it, you send it to the *New Yorker* and expect an acceptance letter any day. The rejection, when it comes, is personal and kind. You keep it safe and keep writing.

You now live in another country. Homesickness rides under everything; a melancholic nostalgia seeps into your fiction, and the thousands of letters you write.

I want to tell you this: Don't ever let the kids eat you up entirely. They'll not thank you later, for giving up writing for them. And think of all the great ex-pat writers. Don't fight the homesickness. It's your muse.

Cynthia Rogerson

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