

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2011, Second-Place Fiction Winner

By Kathleen Murdock

Dear Grade-Seven Self

I can't sleep tonight thinking about you. Sometimes I look back and I worry about you so much. I feel like I'm remembering it all like a story told through third-person omniscience, and I wish so badly that you knew everything that I do now as I follow along.

I know how lost you feel right now. You don't know it yet, but there is something within you that is off balance. I want you to know that there's nothing wrong with that. Somehow, one day you will end up being thankful for this, too. You won't realize what it is until it comes to you in a nightmare in about four years, but it's something that will explain to you why there's something in your personality that doesn't quite fit with the rest of you. It's called an anxiety disorder. I know that you wonder why it feels like your natural traits are disintegrating into a confusing mist of moods. You wonder what has changed so much within you. You were outgoing last year; you were fearless and sassy and funny and proud. These days you're just afraid for no real reason; you feel emotionally and physically weak. You feel incapable of handling anything. You are beginning to realize that it isn't exactly "okay" to be as overweight as you are.

Others are noticing that too.

Mom is going to tell you about how she wants to leave Dad soon. It will be like the time she said it when you were four, only this time she really means it. She has to. She deserves to be happy. However, I wish you would tell mom to stop telling you so much. You should tell her that you're too young to know about all the details that she spews as you walk away from your house together into the frigid, empty winter night. You should tell her that maybe she shouldn't inform you of the bottles lined up under his sink, the names of the medications, or what the loud thud upstairs really was last night.

Mom and Dad will argue. This is nothing new; I know that you've had years of experience with this. You already have memories of hiding under your blankets gasping for air between sobs, knowing that the neighbours can hear. You've already threatened to call the police on them, standing there with your small trembling fingers on the trigger of the telephone, enveloped by a hurricane of yelling. However, things will be different than that now. You're a bit older now; you understand some things now.

Your brother, he's broken. He is so lost and you're going to hear him praying in his room, shakily asking God to make things okay. He is so helpless, and I don't think that you'll ever have to hear him sound that helpless again. You'll see him like that and you'll sneak out of the house and run away.

You'll lay on the grass a few blocks from your house and wonder how things all got so messed up. They always were, though. Mom just got good at pretending. As you look up at the sky, the stars just seem lonely, as if they were simply left, littered against an empty black canvas. Dad drives by. He stops. You get in. You drive in silence. You know things are going to change between the two of you. They already have been.

You have already been realizing how much he has lied to you throughout your life. The worst lie he has told you and continues to tell you is that you should feel guilty for being a woman, and especially for being "just like your mother."

You're a smart kid; you really do know that there is nothing wrong with being a woman. Additionally, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being like your mother. You tell him from an early

age that this is a compliment if anything, and I'm still proud of you for that. Things will never really be better between the two of you, because you'll always be bitter. I'm sure he's proud of you, but he'll never show it; that's something that you're going to have to get used to.

I know that something you're having trouble getting used to right now is the way your friendships are... changing. The way kids are treating you at school while everything else in your life gets worse is completely undeserved. They were your friends for years, but because you're the sad, chubby kid, they'll literally run away from you. They'll start running when you come towards them. They won't look you in the eye when you approach them. They'll make the boys say nasty things to you about your appearance. You'll end up spending lunch hours in the bathroom hiding until you meet a couple of lone drifters in the grade, out-casted for their eccentricity.

The teachers watch it happen; they watch people make you cry in class. It's a small school, so no one can really do much about it -- or at least that's the mentality. You exist for a while just trying to get by. You quiet your personality. You don't really know much about who you are right now anyway, so you're not quieting much. Soccer is fun. Reading is fun. You'll find out in about a year that running is fun. You'll wish you'd been running your whole life. It makes you feel like you can run through the spaces of time, right through the universe, right through your own soul. Nothing can touch you. You don't need anyone or anything, just this. In the solitary night time of your hometown, you'll fly through the night and feel like nothing could ever be better therapy. However, in grade seven, you'll only begin to realize that you like exercise.

I'm not sure that anything you go through could ever feel as gloomy as grade seven. Don't get me wrong, you face great struggles in the future. You break down and rebuild yourself multiple times. Yet, it's not like this; it'll never be like this.

The feeling never leaves you that people run away when you're sad, and because of this you're going to spend years avoiding getting too close to people. No one ever fully runs away, but you'll always think that way.

Because of this, the way you deal with feeling betrayed by others is incredibly dangerous. It seems almost subtle at the time, but you'll look back later and know that that's where the real problems started, with feeling betrayed. Somehow it all started there. I can't say much more on this, but you'll never fully figure it out anyway. I wish I could just stop you in advance from developing the habits you do later. I wish I could tell you that it's okay to feel alone, that being alone is the beginning of a big adventure.

What I wish I could tell you more than anything, though, is that you don't need to take crap from anybody. You're better than that. Underneath it all, you're still a brave girl with fierce dreams and strong conviction.

I don't want you to worry about all the extra weight. It will come off. By grade eight, you'll be tiny. You'll never realize that you're thin though, until you look back on the photos years later. I wish I could tell you to enjoy it, to embrace feeling good about yourself. I don't think you'd listen to me anyway. You are too self-conscious about the braces that hug your small teeth and the archipelago of little dots that often attack your complexion. Over all, you really are awkward-looking. I still question why you wear so much pink, and why you decided to only streak two pieces of your hair.

Despite all of this, you are completely and utterly beautiful. I wish I could tell you that. I wish you knew that. I wish you didn't ruin yourself for so many years following in order to try and feel that way.

You already are. You already were. You always will be.

And the world is too beautiful of a place for you to waste your time on the people and the things and the aesthetics that you absolutely obsess over in the end. When you go for walks and witness the sky blending lemon pinks that sift through the clouds into a creamsicle-orange backdrop, you are a part of nature, and nature is a part of you. In those moments, you aren't anxious. In those moments, you know that there is more to life.

I need you to know that you're going to be okay. You're going to see one day that you are exactly who you need to be. This will help you accept those around you for exactly who they are, no matter what. You're different, but so is everyone else. You are a woman, you are strong, and you are alone. There is nothing wrong with any of that.