



LETTERS

T O O U R F O R M E R S E L V E S

Published by Ericka Clay

Letters to Our Former Selves

Goodbye to who we used to be...hello to who we are.

LETTERS TO OUR FORMER SELVES

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“But perhaps that’s one of the gifts of doing any kind of sustained, prayerful self-reflection—taking an unflinching look at who you used to be and then loving yourself anyway.”

- Ruth Everhart, Ruined

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here!
2¹ Corinthians 5:17*

Dear Reader,

When I first started this project, I titled it *Letters to My Former Self*, and it was meant to be an epistolary memoir of sorts written from my current life as a follower of Jesus to my former atheist self. You'll still find these letters strewn throughout this book, however, I felt called to ask some of my fellow Jesus followers to also share their own letters written to the people they used to be. I've since titled this project *Letters to Our Former Selves*, and I'm excited for you to dive in and see how God always has a beautiful plan for our lives—one where we have the privilege of intimacy with Him, even in the wake of our past missteps.

May you continue to keep moving away from the person you used to be to the person He's created you to be.

Talk soon,

Ericka²

1. <https://dailyverses.net/romans/5/3-4>

2. <http://erickaclay.com>

It's the act of being broken that unbreaks us.

*Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart that God raised
him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Romans 10:9

Dear Me,

I've wanted to speak with you for some time now, but you've been busy digging through your darkness. I feel it like fingertips, a soft reminder of some place I used to be but no longer know the directions to. I don't mean to come off smug about that. My heart is broken for you. I step on the pieces, or at least used to, the soles of my feet bleeding with compassion for the me I used to know.

Have you thought about the light, yet?

Maybe not. Maybe we're not there yet. And that's okay. God's timing and whatnot, and thank you God, for that.

Because if I were you, which I am, I would have wandered off into the street by now, combing the cars and dead leaves for a way out. You found one for a while in a bottle of vodka and all the words you'd never write. But then all good things must come to an end.

And all bad things too.

I'm all right although you didn't ask. I'm living your same life now but with different components. Same soul, different temperament. Different eyes for all the seeing.

I no longer come with the bottle or unsaid words. I'm affixed with a pretty healthy understanding of the bigger picture.

And I need you to know this isn't something I (or you) will or have ever achieved. It was given—a free gift—by the God you don't currently know.

But one day you will. And that day will be a shut door on all the rest.
You live behind it now, those pieces still broken.

But here I see them no longer lodged in flesh but repurposed for something greater. They're a product of God's kintsugi, melded with gold and now a something better than when your heart was intact but small.

It's the act of being broken that unbreaks us.

It's the act of giving back to the Giver that sets us free.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You didn't know then what you've learned by now.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9

Dear Me,

There was so much pain thrust upon you. Primarily because you were born into a world that is familiar with turmoil and despair, shame and sorrow.

You survived. I commend your resilience, especially since your mother frequently scolded that you were "too thin-skinned and needed to toughen up." You lived with a red-welted glyph across your tender heart.

You didn't know then what you've learned by now. You didn't know that profligate grace would be the conduit to overthrowing guilt and sin. Would stand nonplussed in welcoming your sensitive nature.

You had to experience the prodigal years, too, to learn that all your efforts to fix and perform would only deplete your faith in God, would only drive you further away. Would create a gleam in the enemy's eye, make him clap his hands in glee that you fashioned a beaten-down, dusty pathway to the canyon of legalism.

You hadn't bargained on the fact that the Savior followed your trail and waited for you in that rocky basin—waited until you consented to be carried out. Placed you upon His shoulders (that one lost sheep) and took you from that arid, pristine environment. You believed the topography was perfect, but then felt ambivalent because you couldn't keep it tidy, couldn't keep it shiny with all your human solutions and well-rehearsed formulas that could never be proved.

It felt too easy to give consent to be carried—to merely relax and luxuriate in the warmth of the Savior’s embrace. To inhale the scent of His goodness, to hear the joy in His voice when he said, “I’m so glad to have you near.”

Now I know. Repentance is not about being bullied into reformation. Now I understand that resurrection life is granting permission to be rescued from the hostile gorge, to allow forgiveness for all the ways I fall short and miss the mark. I am seen and accepted by a good God who finished all the work, so I don’t have to earn salvation. To perform. He doesn’t scold like my mother. He runs his finger across that pinkened glyph on my heart and reassures me that all that sensitivity is His gift, because He created me that way. There is even a Kingdom awaiting me. That perfect geography I long for. Because of Him.

Talk soon,

Priscilla¹

1. <https://priscillakgaratti.com/>

You're naturally gifted in the art of pretending.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

Psalm 25:16

Dear Me,

You look at them like the plague you don't want to catch. Who set this seed inside your heart you insist on watering?

Maybe it was Belinda who lived in the trailer with her mother because her father left. She told you the same thing would probably happen to your parents, too, and that it's okay, it all works out, she says as stray hair halos in dirty waves around her braid.

No, Belinda. That would not be okay.

But your heart doesn't know how to communicate this kind of thing, so you run to your mother on the playground—the first-grade teacher with the "go inside" bell silent in her hand—and you tell her to give Belinda detention.

She laughs because it's not within her jurisdiction, and Belinda technically didn't do anything wrong. And then you get a feeling that will be a feeling you suckle and nurse for a long time. It's the upside-down feeling, like everyone's glued to the ceiling, and you're the only person standing upright.

As you march forward through time, there will be friends. You're naturally gifted in the art of pretending. You watch people like they're a thing to be observed instead of a gift to understand. You mimic the way they laugh, the way they cock their heads. You watch sitcoms and *The Simpsons* and pick up jokes and the art of hooking interest to the end of your sentences. You mime what you must do but never truly feel.

An act of survival.

There are some that leave bread crumb trails, and you stupidly trip over your own feet to follow them. You're led to give yourself away like

sliding a dull knife through warm bread—a finger, a toe, a shoulder. An absent-minded moment when you pour a little too much to drink. And you drink it heavily to be anyone other than you.

You come to sometimes, totally coherent. The girl people acknowledge and with whom people joke. You're a soft pretty and then a fierce one, and my goodness, girl, you're not going to want to hear this, but one day, that pretty goes away.

Did you ever stop to think about that?

You probably feel sorry for me now, plain-faced and crow-footed, but when I look around, I see fresh hearts surrounding me. People who love me and not the joke.

And what do you see when you do the same?

Yeah. I know.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Born with a purpose.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart!

I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

Dear Me,

How would you know that your life would begin at the age of fifty?

It would take a full fifty years for you to surrender and face the fact that you alone are the problem.

Why would you think that just because you were baptized as an infant you would be spared a lifetime of hardship?

After all, you were born into a dysfunctional “Christian” home, a mother filled with the Holy Spirit and a father who worshipped the liquid spirits.

Did you really think a few drops of water on your precious, infant head would keep you out of jail and rehab?

When really after the baptism you were set free and eventually would succumb to the corrupt world.

Didn't you see it coming?

You spent years abusing your body with alcohol and making poor choices.

Whose fault do you think it was?

I don't blame you because you needed to experience life to really start living.

Do you know how bright your future is?

At the age of fifty-three you chose to be baptized, not just sprinkled with water, but full head immersion.

Do you know how proud I am of you?

God has big plans for you, just be patient and know your life is purposeful.

Talk soon,

Karen¹

1. <https://grow-together.blog/>

Maybe one day you can walk barefoot without getting self-conscious.

*I have given them your word and the world has hated them,
for they are not of the world any more than
I am of the world.
John 17:14*

Dear Me,

Seeds sit under your skin, threatening to break earth and grow. There's a woman who confounds you. She's kind and gives you warm hugs, and as much as you want to make fun of everything she is, you can't. She is water on dry land.

You don't speak until years later about the things Jane taught you. That a hug is more than a hug. It's an invitation to release your heartache like deep breath over a shoulder. That connection doesn't always have to be the butt of a joke.

You aren't a hugger. You don't know what it's like to have pure, unadulterated joy tap from your veins. You have moments of happiness wrapped in your own selfish wants. You have peeks and glimpses of a stroked ego (is that a size zero I see after having a baby?) and the pride that comes when people realize that girl, you can write.

But snug jeans don't hug like Jane and ink on paper has never looked at you like you were worth getting to know.

You can't even smell your own loneliness because it's the scent that's soaked through the curtains and carpets for so long now that everything is yellowed with heartache. And when everything looks the same, it's always hard to spot what's different until it's right there in front of you.

Like Jane.

Maybe one day you'll be a good mom like Jane. Maybe one day you won't have to drink another drop to forget how tightly wound you are or the demons that scream inside your skin, threatening to devour those

seeds. Maybe one day you'll hug with reckless abandon and have friends who don't care what brand of car you drive or when you last colored your hair.

Maybe one day you can walk barefoot without getting self-conscious.

Because Jane doesn't live like all the world is looking into her, a mere thought to be absorbed. She lives like she's not of this world but merely walking in it. And even though you spy the bits and pieces of her that point directly to Jesus, you ignore the root and go directly for the fruit of her.

All you want are the things that come with utter submission without having to submit. But just wait.

There's still time.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Wishing for a connection but afraid to commit.

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.
2 Timothy 4:3-4

Dear Me,

You're a young, a new mother. You want your young family in church. Your husband doesn't care where you all go. "Just choose one," he says. "They're all the same."

No, they're not all the same. If you choose the church nearest you (because it's the most convenient) and settle in, you'll get attached to the people. Over time you'll start studying the teachings, the public policies of the church, and the church budget. Because you're like that; you're always asking "why?"

Why is the pastor teaching without referencing the Bible? Why is the church literature trying to promote a feminist ideology and not God's Word? Why is the church officially funding and populating protests in Washington, D.C. for abortion rights?

You, Priscilla, believe abortion is wrong.

So, you pretend for a while that all is well with the church. Until you can no longer pretend.

You'll try to speak up, to explore with fellow church members truths in Scripture, to have a say in where the tithes go. Can't they go to more tangible needs... pastors' salaries in poor areas or church repairs or the homeless right there in your own community? Other members are aghast at the expenditures of the denomination. They didn't know.

You'll be politely shut down for stirring up trouble. You and your family will have to leave the church. Remember all the people you got attached to? It'll hurt to leave.

Instead, from the very beginning, look for a church that teaches sound doctrine. You have a study Bible. Study it. Bring it to worship and follow the pastor's reasoning in his sermon. Read the church literature. Find out how church funds are spent.

You know that little, white clapboard church at the end of the road? The one with the pastor who don't talk good grammar? He may speak colloquial English, but he's also pretty darn sharp when it comes to Hebrew and Greek. Why don't you give that church a serious try? Or the cowboy church on the highway, or the church on Fort Avenue in the mod-1960s building?

Then, when you're my age, maybe you won't be floating around as a perma-guest between two churches, wishing for a connection but afraid to commit.

Talk soon,
Priscilla¹

1. <https://thewellreadfish.com/>

Freedom isn't the release from truth, it's the embracing of it.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.
Galatians 5:1

Dear Me,

The first time you sinned, you picked up the crystal bowl at Jones department store and then proceeded to drop it. It wasn't the dropping of the bowl; it was that your mother very specifically asked you not to pick it up.

But that request really rained on your parade. At three years old, you were a perfectly capable adult. And to be assigned a baby's task of keeping your hands to yourself was an obvious offense to your senses.

Who did this lady think she was?

You laugh sometimes in your head about that memory, especially it being your first. The feeling of indignation settling on you so strongly and so early. I wouldn't have expected anything less.

Later in life, you still won't put two and two together. You see God as a big drag raining on all the parades. At least your mother only rained on one. It will take you a very long time to understand something crucial.

You didn't create the game, so why do you think you deserve to create the rules?

Rules are not a list of "you can't." It's a list of you "you shouldn't because." And the end of that sentence is the clincher. Because you could get hurt. And others too.

Haven't you seen that in real time? Drunken "what did I do last nights?" floating through your head, that obnoxious headache joining the chorus. And what about sitting in cars with strangers or walking down lonely roads when you can barely remember your middle name?

You've looked through the wrong lens for so long. Freedom isn't the release from truth, it's the embracing of it. And what's true is that we have a Creator who created you and knows each of your parts so intimately. You're a writer. You should get something like that. You've created whole worlds of people who freely choose their own choices and all along you already know what they're planning in their hearts. You've created them. You've created their worlds. And you know what those choices will do, whether bad or good.

And don't you think God understands the same?

He sits up high, a macrocosm of all we can't fathom. Who are you, little one, to say otherwise? Were you there when he built the foundations of the world?

No. No, you were not.

You're right here, pouting about all you've lost when it wasn't yours to win in the first place. But one day you'll know better. You'll understand better.

And you will want to play the game the way it was created.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Prayer is intimacy of the spirit.

Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Mark 11:24

Dear Me,

The chief difficulty about writing to my former self is determining who that self really was and what he thought and believed—he had the same problem. A secondary difficulty is determining the age of the self I address. After some thought, I have chosen my self as he was two or three years into his time in San Francisco. Early twenties, with an apartment, alone, working on a master's and looking for work and living in a city whose population seemed mostly to be refugees from other parts of the country.

Spiritually and emotionally, he had cut his ties from family and church and lived in a continual exploration of ideas and people foreign to his youthful self. He went to a George Wallace rally, ran the Noe Valley branch of a whole foods distribution collective, and met a young, ambitious, but at that time hapless politician named Diane Feinstein. He shared a meal with a sad group of Communist Party members, whom he thereafter considered a Leftist branch of the Amish.

He had a girlfriend he did not love and was writing a novel he did not like, and as with many explorers, the more he saw, the less he knew. In fact, he was a lousy explorer because he did not like getting lost.

He was an only child: naïve, sheltered, inexperienced, lonely, and unhappy. He'd grown up in the Presbyterian Church, and that church had been a lifeline. He sang in its choir, went on trips and to camps and made friends, many of those closer than the ones he made at school. Until his senior year, he was pretty much a nobody in high school, but from eighth grade, he was a somebody in the church.

So, I am choosing the point where my younger self had pulled up his anchors and sailed, he knew not where. The future seemed beyond the horizon.

To this person, first, a promise: I will not treat you as a foil, a comically misguided and inadequate clown I shrugged off when I became, by God's grace, my amazing and sensible current self. You were wandering, but that was not a bad thing: you were testing and holding fast to what you felt was good. The times were fermenting, and you were at the center of that ferment, occasionally drinking some really lousy moonshine and wishing you could find a better brew.

I admire your tenacity—your ability to forge through many failures without giving up. Your love of nature. Your openness to people and ideas. And your poverty. That's what Dad most admired and Mom worried about—your willingness to live without. I'm glad that you did not denounce your faith, though you set it aside. Several of your friends were almost but not entirely ex-Catholics. At the time, you considered that a denomination: ex-Catholicism.

But there is also a lot I don't admire. Too often, your explorations amount to a kind of tourism: touching this or that idea or person or activity without ever taking the time to understand. Even that admirable poverty was a willingness to do without. You weren't looking for a foundation, you were learning to surf on sand and complaining when you could not keep your balance. Some people had trouble figuring you out, and I suspect that was because you didn't want them to.

We are sitting across from each other at one of the rickety tables in the Meat Market Coffeeshouse, being served Mexican chocolate by a girl whose face is a road atlas of scars from an accident where her face hit the windshield. My message to you: take more chances, not less. Engage more. Hurt more.

If God seems distant, even absent, that may be because you are distant from yourself. You indict him for evil and pain, but you don't confront those evils or seek to ease that pain. If you want to understand, you

have to be involved. Get involved. You may make a lot of mistakes. Make them. You will hurt more, and may hurt other people, unintentionally, I hope. You may even think of yourself as a bad person. Do it anyway. Martin Luther advised us to “sin boldly.” That seems wrongheaded, but it isn’t. You are a sinner and always will be. Stop denying it and stop backing off from it. Be yourself as boldly and sincerely as you can.

For some, constant engagement is just a messy way of being a tourist, and even more confusing. If you haven’t yet the tools to build a firm foundation, at least be honest. About yourself, about others, about your beef with God. Pretense leads to pretension, and pretension is just egotism in fancy clothes. Care about what you really care about. Take time to know what you think you know. Act when it, whatever it is, really matters to you. Don’t repeat your mistakes. That’s foundation enough, for now. It may shift from time to time, but don’t worry. There’s no building code.

Seek to be good, don’t seek to be nice. Good people engage with the world; nice people try to keep it at bay.

And if you honestly do have a beef with God, challenge Him, wrestle with Him. Your favorite book of the Bible right now is Job. Okay, treat God as Job did. Demand answers. Don’t listen to comforters. And when He speaks out of the whirlwind you have made of your life, listen.

You’ve got a copy of the Bible. Read it. Forget the Old Testament, for now, read the gospels, over and over. Read the Epistles at least once, treating them not as a set of prescriptions, but as a window to the gospels. Find a pastor who enjoys conflict—there aren’t a lot of them, but they aren’t rare. Wear him or her out with your concerns.

Spiritually, stop acting like a child who wants his parent to behave better, and start acting like a man.

You’ve seen real love and real pain. You had a Jewish friend named Stan, who was killed bicycling in Italy when a car veered into the bike lane. Iris, the love of his life, was distraught, and you were and are even now filled with a strange admiration for her grief. It is real. It is love tear-

ing the sky to pieces in its anger. When she addresses God, it is with absolute fury, as if God had been driving the car.

Open yourself to feeling and expressing love that deeply. Love and generosity and hope and creativity are not just words, they are acts. Caring is not a cure. It doesn't bring back the dead, but it allows you to see, a little more clearly, through windows the world has darkened.

You want intimacy? Pray. Not thinking about that kind of intimacy? Pray anyway. Prayer is intimacy of the spirit. As my friend Rev. Jeff puts it—into me you see. Open yourself up to God, even if it seems absurd. Lots of your life is absurd. So what? In time, you will find intimacy, and it will bring regret. Regret is the source of the words I am now speaking to you. It isn't awful as long as you don't wallow in it. It's just the insight of a chastened heart.

Love will come, eventually, and you will drive twenty hours through snow, rain and fog, navigating your way around bridges that have washed away, to express it. But that's later, and it shouldn't be. Why wait?

Tell your parents you love them and why. Believe it or not, they really don't know. Tell your friends why they are special. They don't know either. Learn more about the nature you so frequently walk through. Care.

Be willing to live in the suspended animation of inklings of God and your fellow humans and the world around you, while admitting you don't know a damned thing. That is true intimacy. And it's something you have to learn over and over again.

You will reach a destination, many destinations, and know you are there, wherever there is, but don't ever stop searching. God and His creation are infinite and eternal, and inexhaustible.

Talk soon,

Richard¹

1. <https://richardspilman.substack.com/>

You've simply turned your shoulders slightly to the left.

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil;
cling to what is good.
Romans 12:9*

Dear Me,

I feel I was a little harsh in my last letter. Knowing God has never given up on you makes me think I shouldn't do the same. I know how this ends. I know what He's capable of.

But still, isn't that typical of me? Hardening my heart towards something that needs to be loved. You've been loved all your life. Probably unfairly so. And yet you hold tightly fisted to each ounce of it like dirty coins.

When did love become a bargaining chip?

It didn't start with a boy because there's always a heart behind your motive. And your heart was there the moment God blinked it into your mother's womb. So, it began with said heart and your inability to conquer its deceitfulness.

But maybe boys can't be ousted completely.

There's Gregory who's kissed you hard on the back of your head, one of the reasons you bemoan not having eyes in the back of it or a fist that can throw punches from that angle. There's Alex who's all elbows and whose bones make you think of twigs waiting to be snapped. There are crushes years later, boys who probably aren't as dapper as your twelve-year-old mind insinuates, but there's no real test in any of this. It's merely an imaginative exercise that never grows stale.

As you grow older, you blend your brush in both love and lust. There's the tightly wound good girl in you holding things together, but

then there's the "bad" girl—the version of yourself that you won't recognize as normally human until years later. And she? She's untying all the knots you've perfectly tied.

You're no longer willing to throw those wayward punches.

You are living a sixteen-year-old tragedy. You've become depressed, a term that isn't thrown around like it is today, so you keep it secret, crushed beneath the mattress. You still brush your teeth and hair and wear your uniform skirt the exact right length above your knees because the good girl wills it so. But eventually there comes another boy. There's eating and drinking, imbibing life, watching him steal cutlery at the Chinese restaurant, heads on shoulder, head against the car window, blink-blink-blinking away real time with the heart God's set inside you.

There are pieces of yourself scattered everywhere in floorboard of his car, and you go to gather them but come up empty handed. Why not just let them sit and be for a while?

Recently, I've learned that "sin" means missing the mark. It refers to an old archery term and how better it describes everything we're not than a laundry list of "never getting it right." You've simply turned your shoulders slightly to the left. But one day, God will set you straight (in more ways than one).

But at the time it's hard to be set straight.

So goodbye, heart, and hello, dirty coins. They've nearly melted in your palm. And you try your best only to pay for the things you're willing to return.

But where's the bargain in that?

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Some things you learn only by loneliness.

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Psalm 25:16*

Dear Me,

You don't need a chain wallet
you need Johnny Cash
in the future no one will play hacky sack
learn a language instead
don't obsess over Bighead Ed's sister
she won't love you back
in fact don't obsess over anyone
you'll miss out on being young
which is an accomplishment
drinking won't stop anxiety
just makes it slower
you worry God will send down lightning for one slip
but each time you fall you hit a cushion of love
sometimes you'll even feel it
don't worry about not getting what you want
there's another plan
you win by losing
you burn through panic to get to the calm
it's waiting for you
some things you learn only by loneliness
there's still time to pick up an instrument
Crowbar and Plankfoot are not good role models
they believe the universe is empty

the universe is not empty
Talk soon,
Justin¹

1. <https://www.trampolinepoetry.com/>

You'll yawn at it like a cat bored with itself.

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor
depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us
from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:38-39*

Dear Me,

There's a time when your dog, Roxie, won't be able to handle the new hardwood floors. You move into a new house in Louisville, Kentucky with your husband and daughter and two dogs in tow. Your rental sits in a neighborhood that reminds you a little bit of dreamland, a small handful of houses down a winding row and set between the trees.

Roxie is not amused. She spends her evenings click-clacking against the hardened floors, an anxious something in her bones. She never settles until morning comes and then she's thickly nestled in a couch cushion or a dog bed, soft and gently snoring.

You have no idea why she feels this way in this house until it comes for you too.

I won't get to that yet, the point when the dark seeks you out. It's been a long-term companion of yours, and even when your heart changes, it will continue to stalk you. No worries, though. It eventually gets the hint when every ounce of your being relies on Jehovah alone and His angel army to keep you from the evil that's been feasting on you for some time now.

But let's get back to Roxie.

Roxie does die one day but not then. I'm sure you're aware that this is in fact a possibility. You'll have so many beautiful memories with her, and you know now that this small gift, this Chihuahua mix with a short snout and endless love is a salve God's given you to cover your wounds.

Look at His goodness in this when you yourself are not good. And guess what? Neither am I.

But when you look back at Roxie's two weeks of anxious pacing, you'll understand something pivotal about the light and the dark. How the good can't settle into it. How it's always aware, that sense of salvation, prickled skin at something willing to take it away.

She was a smart dog, but also, she was God's dog, a bit of His creation, giving you the foreshadowing you've always loved for in books. An alarm, an alert, a warning. Be ready because here it comes.

You'll know with your whole soul one day that nothing can tear you apart from your Lord, not even evil trying its best. You'll yawn at it like a cat bored with itself. But you can't ignore it now, your dog who loves you like you're the only thing to love, setting you up for the next phase of all you could never imagine.

Do me a favor. Go hug her for me.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You didn't deserve the abuse you've endured.

*The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates
the wicked and the one who loves violence.*

Psalm 11:5

Dear Me,

You don't know me yet, but you will in a few years. Life has never been kind to you, and you have suffered a lot. I wish you hadn't seen what you have, and I wish you hadn't been through all that you have, but you have so much fight and resilience in you.

What your mother has done is something you will never forget, and you use it every day as you get older. You turn into a mom at nineteen, and even though you don't see her every day, she looks just like you.

Your first marriage doesn't work out, but it isn't just your fault. He wasn't the right one. Your second marriage though, let me tell you. The man you marry and spend life with turns into the man you used to dream about. He is loving and encouraging, always pushes you to slow down and be yourself. The first few years are hard though, so heads up.

You have a son in 2019. He becomes the very air you breathe. He acts just like you too and loves cars just like your daddy and papa (oh, and your dad gets sober and him and your stepmom become your best friends too). He is stubborn, and when he looks at you with his big brown eyes, you learn not to hate your own. God gives you everything that you have been begging for. Life isn't easy for you, but every now and then God reminds you that He is there.

Your traumas make life very hard for you to handle but God gave you a gift for art. Not just in drawing, but photography, which you discover in high school after your adoptive mother shows you her camera. You fall in love with it and continue doing it for many years. You become a teacher too.

There is so much love and life coming, little one. You just have to hold on. Keep going, and you'll get there.

Your birthday was yesterday, and you turned thirty-one. There was no celebration, but you got to sit on the couch with your son and watch tv and eat some ice cream together. You laughed and played and cried that this is something you never got to experience from his side.

I promise, you become a good mom. The lies you have been told are always in the back of your mind and sometimes they slip forward, but you have to ignore them, they are wrong. You didn't deserve the abuse you've endured, but it makes you into someone that so many people care about. Even when you don't think they do. You have such a kind heart, and the love you give others gets returned many times over. You are loved, you are appreciated, and you are more than enough.

Always keep fighting.

Talk soon,

Fancy¹

1. <https://www.facebook.com/storyteller93/>

Why do other people make being happy so hard?

*Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God?
Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please
people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Galatians 1:10

Dear Me,

Your anger is a hunger-stricken kitten. You hardly hear it delicately mewling because drinking shuts out the noise and so does writing all those words.

Growing up, hitting is bad although you've been taught the mechanics of it. There's a sense that swallowing your voice gives you the upper hand, so you learn to shut down and look inward when there's conflict, and isn't it better if there's no conflict at all?

Isn't it better if everyone's happy?

As a young wife and mother, happiness is outlined to you step-by-step on social media. Your friends have all figured it out while you struggle into your costume and douse on the powder. *We'll do this and this and this...* goes the narrative in your head when all your husband wants is for you to appreciate the here and now in its shade of nude and your daughter wants to run, legs pumping against your hard-stacked expectations.

Why do other people make being happy so hard?

Resentment grows. You're just not good enough now, are you? And maybe the ones you've been stuck with aren't either. You wonder at your daughter, a strong-willed child who has a knack for pulling back the curtain you've placed between yourself and the world. You wonder at your husband who loves you lackadaisically like love should be easy.

Why won't they try harder?

You scroll aimlessly and with a vengeance and in a tumorous heartache. Did they really just buy that new house and isn't that the re-

frigerator you'd sever a limb for? And don't get me started on that new car. I can smell the freshly stretched leather from here. And is that *another* trip to Disney?

Their husbands are all handsome and helpful and fairytale-crafted and their kids can all play the piano and started reading at two.

And your daughter is hitting her head against the wall out of spite and biting you hard when she nurses and laughing like there's an underlying joke in all this.

And there is, friend. And it's you.

You can't even stop to see it right now, your delusional eyes craving the delusion. But the un-reality of everything you've ever wanted to achieve is the serpent head He crushes with His heel. What side of that fight do you want to be on? Head or heel?

Think carefully, friend. Because all the stainless-steel appliances or trips to anywhere but here won't save you now.

And in the deep down, you know that, which is why the surface always seems so tempting.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

God fixes the broken.

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 10:9

Dear Me,

I'm writing this letter to you from the year 2024. For you, the year is 2014, and you are currently making some of the best laid plans of your life, oblivious of your—our—future. It's just around the corner, and I know you are so optimistic. It's good to be optimistic. It's good to be infused with the hope that is Christ. Unfortunately, though, I have some bad news. I wish I could tell you the road ahead of you in the next decade will be void of hardship—that it will be a road full of career advancement, creative productivity, and massive spiritual growth (and don't get me wrong, those will happen, eventually). But before all those things happen, I must tell you that you will be tested. Severely.

Your wife has already lost her mother a year ago, and her father will also pass on to glory this very year. This will devastate the entire family, a family that was so dependent on both the patriarch and matriarch to guide them and support them through the ebbs and flows of daily life. The family will suffer a blow that they will never fully recover from in short. And your beautiful wife...she will break and undergo a change that will change both your lives forever.

Will you survive? Will she? Of course, you will. God's grace and mercy will remain throughout. But the days will become very bleak. Dark. Satan will attack you both through mental illness, traumas of the past, job troubles and more. And you will feel like you are hanging by a thread of sanity on some days. You will pray and cry out to the Almighty God

to spare your better half, because the Devil will be trying to take her life on a weekly, sometimes daily basis.

The suffering between you two of one flesh will be isolating: no one in your life will understand, because the test that you and she have been chosen to endure will be foreign to them. No one, not even your fellow Christians, will have an answer or explanation for your troubles. Much like Job, only God Himself will be equipped to answer you out of the whirlwind of hardship called your life...and His answer, both definite and sure, will come at His determined time. Not yours.

In the meantime, you will be forced—compelled—to cling to your faith in Jesus, proving its realness and your blessed assurance even as EVERYTHING in your life points to the certainty that you will LOSE. Lose her. Lose your job. Lose favor with the Lord.

Of course, God will deliver you and your wife. He will deliver you in ways that your pitiful, small mind cannot fathom. God will do what he *always* does—He will make a way out of no way. And when He does, you, my friend, will be overwhelmed with thankfulness and awe! But there will be a few years of great highs and terrible lows. What I need you to do, Daniel, is to just hang on. Change does come. The sadness will not last forever.

Eventually, things will get better. Years later, God will have brought your love into a much better state of health. You—a better job. And you will have been blessed with a new renaissance of creative productivity, creating something that you never dreamed you would, although you've dreamed it your whole life.

But the Devil will not give up. During this time, you will still suffer losses. The Pandemic will arrive. You will lose your job, gain a better one, then lose that one as well. You will be blessed with an even better job—probably the best day job you ever held—yet, as your wife's good health rises to a level she hasn't seen in years, your own health will

begin to fail you. This will begin to affect your artistic aspirations once again—and by April of 2023, you will be admitted into the local ER, in critical congestive heart failure and very literally, knocking on Heaven's door. You, during the two-week stay in the hospital, will begin the process of getting your affairs in order, preparing to draw your last.

I know this is terrifying to hear, my dear brother. But this is the most important part. I need you to listen, listen with all your heart, mind, and soul. God will NOT FORGET YOU. He will NEVER leave you nor forsake you. And I, brother, am living proof of that. He brought you back from the brink of death. You will experience a recovery in health that some of the most revered doctors in this country will not be able to scientifically explain. God will reveal Himself to both you and all around you—THROUGH you and your recovery.

And you, with all your doubts and hesitations—with all your frustrations and confusions, once and for ALL time, will be shown by the Almighty Father just who He is and what He can do! You will see a real-life miracle manifested in your life, and it will remove all doubt as to the power of whom you serve...the invincible power of the one who hung on that cross and sits at the very right hand of the Everlasting God to this VERY MOMENT.

If I can leave you with one piece of advice, Daniel...it is this: BELIEVE in all circumstances. BELIEVE in your beloved Christ in ALL circumstances you find yourself in. When things are at their darkness, KNOW that God is there, and that He will NOT fail you! He CANNOT fail! And whether you live or die, the Lord God will remain on His throne. He will deliver you in this job or the next—this body or the next...this life or the next. Truly...ALL things work for the good of those that love God and have been called according to His purpose. Hallelujah.

This is my prayer for us both...that Christ gives us the strength to hold onto this wisdom, down to our very last breath. In Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

Talk soon,
Daniel¹

1. <https://www.instagram.com/danielbrianmoble/>

Closing your eyes is a gut level act.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

Mark 12:30-31

Dear Me,

You waste a lot of energy not teaching her about Jesus. It weathers through you like rain-soaked clothes.

She sees something that's not there and talks to it in her room. She calls it Jesus, and she's only three-year-old.

You do your best to conceal your panic.

Your nights are filled with researching how to raise the perfect child, and your days are testament to that fact. You become vegan because meat and dairy are the love children of Satan (if you believed in him too), and there's nothing that makes you happier than forcing a two-year-old to read. What you don't understand (and the God you don't believe in has been trying to show you) is that your child has ADHD. She is not perfect. Neither are you. And how the truth proves only to be inconvenient but not a total deterrent.

Closing your eyes is a gut level act.

When she's nine months, she falls out of her crib. No wait, she pulls her body up in a daring act of defiance and flips out of it like an acrobat because you are too slow for her demands.

And at eighteen months, she eyes you with a raw immutability, conscious of your need to overpower her, and reacts with beating her head against the wall. Literally.

"Ava, we don't do that." The glare she gives, and is that a slightly arched eyebrow? Your declaration on what is done and not done is met with even harder whacks against the wall.

At this point, you almost want to believe in God so you can be angry at Him. After all, this is somebody's cruel joke, isn't it? How many years did you spend sweeping all your "bad" under the rug where no one could see it, whereas this child—this miscreant—wears it like a badge of pride. And you know that people will mistakenly lump you two together even though you would never beat your head against a wall, at least not where people could see.

But isn't that how it always goes? After all, you are the mother.

You've never been more jealous of your husband in your life.

Breathe. Your daughter isn't your foe. Honestly, she turns out to be one of your greatest friends. She teaches you how to pull back each clenched finger until your hand relaxes and all the earth is no longer yours to police. She teaches you how to crack a smile, raise an eyebrow of your own.

She teaches you that real love has no regard for the "rules" and the only ones that truly exist are to love your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.

But isn't that what you've been running away from all these years?

Your God and yourself?

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

The woman at the coffee shop.

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

John 4:13-14

Dear Me,

I see you in the coffee shop. You're on your second cup of coffee, drinking it through a stir stick.

You're absorbed in your tortured thoughts and your latest self-help book purchase, (something about self-esteem or living your best life now or simply not feeling like crap all the time) when the Methodist pastor walks in.

He has kind eyes. He cares about people. You appreciate him, mildly. You went to his church for a couple of years. But ultimately, you left because you were looking for a superhero, a super-heart, a super-intellectual who could answer all your questions and resolve all your conflicts and settle your anguish with a sentence or two.

They couldn't do that at the Methodist Church. They were (oddly enough) into Joyce Meyer and Beth Moore. They wanted louder, faster music. You'd been through that already and now you wanted old hymns and liturgy and, perhaps, a Gregorian chant or two.

"Where are you going to church these days?" the pastor asks, his kind eyes looking at you as though he really cares.

"Nowhere," you say, a bloom of shame spreading from your neck to your face.

You've had five churches, your interior voice quips, and the one you're with now is not your church.

The pastor nods kindly, shares a thing or two about his family, and continues on his way.

You're like the woman at the well. Only you collect churches instead of husbands, your interior voice continues.

There is something true about the accusation.

Perhaps, even, it is a key of some kind, though you will mull it over for years before you get it.

You've given up on the Baptists, the Charismatics, the Methodists, the Presbyterians. You hung with the Seventh Day Adventists for a couple of years but could never get into all that sci-fi and vegetarianism. And now, you are hovering around the edges of Roman Catholicism, looking for something ancient, borrowing its stained-glass light, its intellectualism, its vast silences.

You like it because it's different; it doesn't remind you of your bad church experiences: the splits and factions; the abuses and distortions; the tight, impenetrable friend groups.

The songs are different. The books are different. The lingo is different.

Sometimes, on Sundays, you walk to the front with your arms crossed over your chest to receive a blessing. But you are skeptical as to whether or not this "blessing" means anything.

What you don't realize is that the answer is simpler than you think, and—as usual—you are trying much too hard.

The answer to your heart's question is *yes*.

Yes, Jesus Christ is still with you. Yes, He loves you. Yes, He is the Living Water, the Superhero, the Super-heart, the all-knowing, infinitely wise One.

Yes, He is waiting for you—in the wreckage of this world, in the ruins of His church, in the devastations of your life.

Someday, you will see the secondariness of the things you obsess over today. Someday, you'll see the churches and their people for the beautiful mosaic that they are. And you will see yourself arrayed with them, one of His shining ones, lit up from the inside by His love.

Talk Soon,

Jessamyn¹

1. <https://jessamyn.bandcamp.com/music>

You are not the normal you project.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:6-7

Dear Me,

Your little girl heart is as knotted as your stomach. You roam around aimlessly in your mind while the other children play. Don't they know their parents are late and most likely dead on the side of the road?

No, they don't know that because that's not the way they think.

For a long time, everyone else has been wrong, and you are the right one. On airplanes you manage the course and direction and altitude with your mind. You are the reason the plane doesn't crash, which is the reason you never sleep on one.

If only everyone knew, then how much they'd thank you.

Your mother makes a practice of dying but never succeeds. Her body is an anomaly, a sick bed of everything wrong, but her outside is patient and accepting. Everything is there—your future walk with loneliness, the invisible ulcer that never stops growing, the way everyone else on the planet gets everything and you only get the whisper of what's to come. You are as selfish as your mother lacks self.

You have a small dog, a toy poodle you love lavishly and treat like a divine entity. You hold her leash tight, your hand sweating as you walk around your neighborhood with your parents. Your dog gets close to the edge of the curb, too close to the street, and you lovingly yank her back to her rightful place. Your father laughs at your fear, says you've learned it from your mother, but how to let go of one more thing that will ultimately leave you too?

You don't even think about this when you have a baby. You don't even think about how babies replace all the bad in people's lives although the bad is only patiently waiting, knuckles grazing the door. For a time, you can make everything right with your mind and good looks and canny ability to worry more about the clothes you wear than the heart wrapped up beneath them. And for a while, that bad is merely brushing bone and skin against the door of your soul. *No bad, not here. Not today.*

But then it surely comes, the anxiety a great big, massive thing that no longer scoots to its corner when you throw it a look. You are not the normal you project. You are very much "unnatural," relying on the world to bat you around, eating all the worry that eventually returns the favor.

Peter, who you don't know yet, asks the Lord to whom else would we go? Who else can he follow now that he knows the truth? Can you still hold onto that ever-present strain of fear when fear has been banished, its head under the boot? Can you serve two masters, you of the duplicitous heart and head full of doubt?

It's a slow, long process, friend, of allowing God to rewire your mind and remove all the shackles—an act that is merely spectacle because the brunt of it was done and spoken for 2,000 years before.

He died for you, and He survived. So, what are you so afraid of?—

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You discovered something you weren't even looking for.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.
Romans 1:20

Dear Me,

Hey, past-me.

So, this is weird, but I guess I'll tell you about you.

Right now, you're a college kid on summer break living in a Best Western because you're a rebellious know-it-all that your parents don't know how to deal with. You don't think that's the reason you're living there, but it is, and you hold both bitterness and relief in your heart. You go to the hotel after work, and sit tucked away, out of sight, kicked out of the house, but not quite because it was your choice to, and you're still being taken care of. Hotel paid for. Believe it or not, you've always been taken care of and always will be.

But that's all beside the point. You sitting around in a hotel is not the reason for this letter, so pay attention, I'm getting there. You're in a hotel room and you're watching one of those nature shows, and this one is about kangaroos. You're struggling. You feel dead inside because you discovered something you weren't even looking for, and something you didn't want: there is no God. You've always questioned God's existence in one way or another, but now it's definitive in your heart. And that discovery is breaking you. Hard. But something about the kangaroos speaks to you. Something picks at you as you watch them hopping around carrying their babies in pouches and kicking it out in crazy kangaroo fights, and it won't go away. These animals were thought out. Created. All the amazing things they do to survive, and all the complexity of their mere

existence, were designed and meticulously planned. And you fiddle with the idea that maybe you're wrong. Maybe there is a God and He created kangaroos. Which means He created the world, which means He created you.

You fiddle with the idea, then drop it in the plastic trashcan beside the desk for the cleaning lady to pick up later. Hope is a delusion. No matter how much you want to believe in God, you can't. There is no future beyond this life, no God, and you will not delude yourself into thinking there is. You're smarter than that.

You won't think about this nonsense again until many years later, after you're married and raising two kids who are shaping you in ways you never imagined. In ways that are sometimes wonderful, but most of the time, painful and hard. And then one day, with a ball of anxiety inside your chest that feels like a black hole, you'll sit on your couch looking at a beautiful tree in your backyard. The tree is full of buzzing insects and little chirping birds, and that thought will creep back into your mind: these living things dancing in front of you and around you were created. Before this recurring thought, you can't look at anything without seeing death. You can't look at a person, pet a cat, or eat dinner with your family without thinking about how they all are going to die one day. About how you are going to die one day and no longer exist. And how you just wanted to get it all over with. But on this day, in the tree, you see life.

Staring at the tree brings up questions that are the only things keeping you from a complete existential breakdown. But they're questions that seem unsolvable; how are the tree and the grass and the bees and the birds alive? Why am I alive? Why is there life? By this time, depression and anxiety leave you feeling desperate for truth, whether good, bad, or ugly. Delusion was never an option, and it still isn't.

What happens next, I wish you had done back in that hotel room. It would have saved you years of heartache and destructive decision after decision that should've ended badly but somehow didn't. Because a few days later after asking these questions, after feeling a weight of terror in

your chest the size of the Pacific Ocean that you looked out on every day, you finally decide to ask God Himself if He is real. And like a gentle Father, He not only shows you that He is real by taking your hand and walking you through the trail of belief Himself (because you don't trust people to tell you the truth, and you won't trust people at this stage of life either), but He shows you that He has been right in front of your face your entire life. He gives you the truth (Jesus) and it's so much to take in you feel physically nauseous for months. It's so much that you can't take a shower without crumbling and weeping from gratitude. Because there is hope. There is a way to know truth. And not only is God real, but He loves you.

Talk Soon,
Veronica¹

1. <https://veronica-mcdonald.com/>

How can they listen when they can't even see?

He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.

John 12:40

Dear Me,

Soon you'll go on a trip to Arizona with your parents. You'll eat candy shaped like a cactus, and on the way there, you'll fall asleep during the best dinner of your life. But on the Sunday of that trip, you go to church, and there you see her: the lady whose eyes won't leave the cross.

It's not that she's looking at Jesus, it's how she's looking at Jesus, and it will soon become a memory you store with other trinkets of your past. You stand in the beautiful Catholic church and then kneel and then you sit, each position an opportunity to stare and see what she sees. But you don't see it. You hurt from the hardness of the pew, and are so bored, the priest could be reciting lines from *Home Alone II* and you'd barely notice. What is it with this woman? Why is she so captivated?

It's the penny in your pocket you rub recklessly during future Masses. You sit as an adult, still slightly bored, and come to appreciate how bored and restless others look too. There's a whole lot of you there only to please other people in your life, and you consider seeing if a few others want to go out for brunch afterwards and make a list of all the other places you'd rather be but can't.

This goes on after your Catholic wedding and after your daughter's Catholic baptism (five years too late. Sorry, Mom) and will continue until that night when everything is dark and hurts harder than a wooden pew. It's the next day when you realize God has given you what that lady had all those years ago that you've been quite deficient in all your life—eyes to see.

It's a beautifully cruel joke, really—you desiring to break down and explain the truth of what you know now to a whole group of people who only want brunch.

Right now, things are bad, friend. The whole world has finally lit the match, and all the things Jesus has said are playing out in fleshly form. You watch the chaotic dance, the horrible theatrics, the reality of evil gnawing a heart like teeth through an apple. You want to stand on your box and shout the words you read every day, the Word of God, but how can they listen when they can't even see?

Maybe that was what that woman saw all those years ago. Maybe she saw these little bits of hate like cat o'nine tails in flesh or nails through wrists. Maybe her vision spread further, spread through to where she could see the party, the one where she'll sit with Jesus and all the others, this nightmare life a mere blink and not even worth thinking about anymore.

You can't wait to meet her.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You sometimes feel like “one or the other.”

*“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.”*

Jeremiah 17:7

Dear Me,

Nobody understands the workings of a Southern girl, especially one like you. You’re fed and watered on country music, boot scootin’ across the playground and wailing about your achy breaky heart with a knotted lump of first graders. Even you know it’s bad music, but there’s something that even bad music can do. It can make you feel a part of something.

As you grow older, it’s more difficult to fit the mold. Southern women are beautiful and blonde, bright in their sarcastic wit and devilishly loudmouth if they’re from the part of Arkansas you are. You watch one mother’s friend get it all right without her even knowing she’s doing anything at all. She crows loudly across parking lots and packed stadiums, not even aware anyone else is in the room looking at her. You keep all the panic she should be packing inside her five-ten frame like an organic storage facility. Doesn’t she know that everyone’s looking?

More importantly, doesn’t she know that matters?

And still, you continue to grow, like it’s somehow wired in your DNA, and soon you’re full bodied—full hipped really—and look nothing like the Miranda Lamberts of the world. You’re big-nosed (not unsightly just unexpected) and darker-haired and darker-eyed because of the Mexican genes swirling through the pot like stray olives. You sometimes feel like “one or the other.” If only one or the other would have made up its mind to dominate, maybe you could be purposefully stalking through a crowded mall, your lungs on the highest setting. But your whiteness and your Mexican-ness play like docile friends frolicking through a field, and you’re left to avoid eye contact knowing everyone’s wondering why the white girl’s got hips like Shakira.

It is a whole lifetime of pulsing knots, a tangled array of Christmas lights that you intend to unfetter with unskilled fingers. How your completeness, your self-worth relies on all the things you aren't and never will be. How many moons of self-tanner and Sun-In and practicing an obnoxious laugh in the mirror before something snaps, gives way to the torrent of reality that's been bubbling beneath your chest all along?

You figure it out eventually. Not so much you, but Him. He'll whisper truth into you like the sieve you are, and you'll go and let it leak into puddles at your feet for a while. But then you get to patching and mending, working shoulder-to-shoulder with Someone who never feels the urge to shout or let their presence be known in a crowded room.

He just is, emanating that fact from the very depths of a heart you can't even fathom. And slowly but surely, you get the hint.

Talk soon,
Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You can't be conquered by what's already been conquered.

*"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us."*

Romans 8:37

Dear Me,

There's so much trauma in your body, and sometimes, it plays a story in your head. The hard part is not being deceived.

"Woe is me" is a language you're often fluent in. Things are always roughest looking at them from over your shoulder.

There is no woe in this though. Everything you've always endured, all those miles on glass shards, that was your doing. And true, sometimes life has a way of catapulting right at your face, but it's not life's fault either.

You were just never rooted in the Right Thing to withstand the storms.

I look at your self-induced loneliness. I even laugh a little when I see a guy wearing a t-shirt on some TV show that says, "I used to be a people person. But then people ruined it." You would have worn something like that in the quiet of your room, shown off for an audience of one but never for the people who have ruined "it."

To them, you're the good girl. But to you? You're a wayward heart. You love when convenient and hold contempt for all those you smile at.

You're a coward, deep down.

But I'm not condemning you. Truth is, you're still a coward. The only thing different between you and me is that I've finally recognized this fact.

And I've finally gotten His help.

When you're ready, you can take off the t-shirt and your bitter way of thinking. You can throw them in the trash and sit down with the truth. And you can realize the world isn't doing this to you (although honestly,

it probably is, being run by Satan and all), but you can't be conquered by what's already been conquered.

You have Him now, the Difference Maker in all of this. He runs your show and even though the trauma and the cowardice and the woe try to tug on the hem of your skirt to bring you down in the dirt with them, He holds your hand. He lifts you up.

It's time to stop struggling.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You can no longer stand the heat of it.

“But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”

Romans 9:20

Dear Me,

If you think one day you stop beating your head against the wall, you don't.

You try to do this the human way even in the face of His way because it's so much easier to see others as worthy of forgiveness than to wrap your mind around the possibility of you being a person someone else is able to forgive.

But see, that's where you (and I) are wrong.

Your ego and ability to warp your sins into the world's kryptonite is a narcissistic bent on the truth—you never will ever stop God's ability to give love and grace and mercy to even the worst of sinners.

Even you.

That's what chases you through feeble attempts to write words and hating every ounce of this endeavor that smells so human to you. It's for God's glory, but what if you just take a little nibble for yourself?

I suppose that's where confession comes in. A barebones fingering of the lies we tell ourselves, now basking in the light. If we're honest, we desire all of this for ourselves because didn't Eve? And who are we if not Eve's children?

But that's when the miraculous comes into play. Those feelings and longings are no longer expected nor accepted. They cast a worldly glow, one that makes you ill when you can no longer stand the heat of it.

Your Eve's child no more, friend. You are God's.

And in absorbing that notion, there's that slight turn, that gorgeous arc against the human thing that always intends to bind you. You move

away from what Eve birthed with her Adam—a delicious consequence to the bitter taste of one's own fruit.

But He knows, and He knew it, too, forever has always known. And He bears the marks of all that knowing, taking His bite and spitting the seeds.

And who are we, this little mound of flesh, to stop what's already been set into motion?

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

This thing we call forever.

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

*But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

1 Corinthians 15:55-57

Dear Me,

Do you remember the time you had those boys kill that praying mantis because it stood between you and the door of your apartment? They had come out of nowhere like a shallow-breathed answer to a heart-crushing prayer, knights in shining armor on dirt bikes.

Their heels left the thing limp and practically lifeless, but you could still see the life in it. And the weight of that act hurt you worse than your initial fear. You took it inside and tried to nurse it back to health, telling your mother that maybe you could bring it in for show and tell the next day, but then just like that, it was gone.

And a part of you too.

Death then becomes a thing you think about without meaning to. You realize your grandmother is old and suddenly break out in tears over this travesty. You often think of your mother gone too soon while you're fated to live a life making your father baked chicken and broccoli when you don't even know how to use the oven.

But I can tell you, these things don't happen. Not yet anyway. Thirty-nine years and counting, friend.

But what does happen is time curling and yellowing at the edges. It flicks off like something you can't even see until you hardly remember it at all. Like your daughter, small and her innocence fringing upon your guilt. Blue eyes and blond hair and skin that hasn't had enough time to become allergic to this world.

Or your dogs, sweet little things that love you like loving never comes at a cost. You go to find them only to remember this year is not the one in which they exist.

Tiny bits of moments of people you used to know, and one time did, but now they lay dormant until something sets them off—dead people come to life in the recesses of your brain.

Like God does with your useless heart that can only be used with His say so.

Like death is more than a goodbye—a forever thing—unless you know the One who created this thing we call forever.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Burning through our darkness.

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”

2 Peter 3:10

Dear Me,

They say you look like her in your blood-red prom dress, hair high on your head. She wore almost the same one a few years back, and you're even shown the video. She was different than you, dark-headed but there's that same reserved, careful look of a Catholic girl out of her element.

She's going on a trip with her fiancé, and you imagine the “one day” of something like that. You're a junior in high school—untethered, unleashed—and the thought of going anywhere with anyone outside a sixty-mile radius is unfathomable, let alone Hawaii.

That day, her mother is walking with your mother around the neighborhood and her father has a golf game scheduled later that afternoon with your own. But you sit early in the morning, eating Kashi cereal, “rabbit food,” your friend Jamie says as you two loiter the morning away in homeroom, her pretending to read and you pretending to enjoy cereal that tastes like it was intended for small mammals.

But then something happens that you're not expecting. One of your other teachers barges in and turns on the TV. “You have to watch the news,” she says, scrolling until you see one tower, then two, the first crumbling into itself like a mindless game of Jenga. The second one's still standing, but suddenly it isn't because a plane has flown unabashedly, unreservedly into its mirrored-faced side.

All those people.

You watch them hold hands and jump, and you blink away the thought of what they're jumping into. It's a vast canvas of sky, and that's

all the camera will show—them out into the ether, nobody knowing (but of course you know) the ending, the outcome.

You know your parents are home, but you're terrified for them. And when you get called to the principal's office, your heart stops.

They're fine.

But she's not.

"She was on the second plane," your father says, his face lost at what this day has become. He's supposed to be on his way to a golf game with her father, and instead, all of you are crammed into their living room, holding your breath, confirming what you already know.

That night you dream the world's on fire, and it's the most vivid, terrifying dream you've had to date. It's just you standing alone in a sea of what seems like lava, the fire melting into itself, set against the darkest night.

That dream haunts you for years until the one year you give it back to Him. One day, your finger scrolling against the black ink of your Bible, you find it. A verse that explains what you saw. But this time, there's no fear there. There's just an understanding that all these things we do to each other are an unbridled evil that will come to justice, His justice.

And there He stands burning through our darkness like diamonds refined in fire.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You live with a wide-open wonder.

*“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship
the Lord with gladness; come before
him with joyful songs.”
Psalm 100:1-2*

Dear Me,

You have a daughter one day, which is much like holding up a mirror in the dark. You can't see everything so clearly, and you feel out of control—a spinner that won't stop spinning.

When she is young, she is fast and unbridled. She doesn't have a quiet sense about her like you've always had. In fact, she doesn't have one quiet bone in her body. One day she says, “I'm literally using all of my voice!” and it's the perfect descriptor for what you've had such a hard time describing.

She is more sound than human.

You pull her out of a school that doesn't appreciate that kind of sound (I have to imagine most don't), and your dream is to give her a world where she can be herself so you can stop wishing she weren't.

You've got it all planned out (because you're quite the planner now aren't you?), and your eyelid barely twitches when the saleslady asks her if she'll like being homeschooled, and she juts her thumb out at you and says, “Probably but first I just have to figure out this one over here.”

It is a beautiful world you create, I'll give you that, but there's always a darkness that follows you, making you think you're barely doing enough. You take trails deep in the woods, you study a fireman's truck, you go and watch how tortillas are made, and help her set up her very own cupcake shop at the homeschool entrepreneurial fair. You “do, do, do” because

you're afraid the moment you don't, the spinning will stop, which is even worse than spinning in the first place.

The years grow arms and legs and crawl from one to the other, until she's a bit older and she's slapped a bird because it was "being mean to her." You laugh at the absurdity and then inwardly cry at the absurdity.

No amount of "do" will change her. And it's a real "come to Jesus" moment knowing that maybe that's never been the point.

Because as you thumb through it, all those projects and Elmer's glue in your hair, it's not her who has changed. It's you.

Ah, now, there we go. The actual point.

Your heart has stopped willing another's to beat the way you prefer, and instead, you've allowed God to retune your own. You live with a wide-open wonder at a girl who has (and still does) keep you guessing, one of those bright souls who dance to the beat of their own drum and never seem to live in the dark, cold corners of their mind.

And maybe that's why you desired change all those years ago. To validate the fact that you were scared and lost and alone, and what's worse than living it?

Knowing how wrong it truly is.

So maybe cut to the chase a bit quicker than I ever did and love her as hard and as fierce as she is. And don't even blink when she tells you, "I'll never be quiet."

Because all the loud? It's a lot more fun than you think.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Kissing the color of your skin.

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together
in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
Psalm 139:13-14*

Dear Me,

You keep thinking about the womb.

How you were formed unlike anyone else and how for so long that's bothered you.

Small and slight and pale and outwardly a discouragement to all the ways you feel inside.

But what do you really feel?

The quick snips of who God is and how you see Him pale in comparison to the truth of who He is. And it's no different now. No box can contain Him, and this is hard for your need to slice and dice and categorize.

But He is everything and everywhere, and in all that infinite space, He decided to make you exactly as you are.

Are you tired of fighting it yet?

One day you will be. You'll no longer feel disdain towards those who say you remind them of a librarian (I mean if the shoe fits...) or those who fear you've never seen the sun. Soon, the outsides of everything flick away like ash and all you're concerned with is the sticky soul-filled middle of everything that comes your way.

It's like breaking the mirror and then breaking open your ribs to find who you really are.

It's like ignoring all the other voices to only hear One.

And what can He say other than He loves you, He always has, even as He was fusing delicate bone to bone and bleaching skin so papery thin? He was creating what beats in His own heart, something beyond time and the locked little prison cell you desperately seek.

He's broken open the door and silenced the mouths of sheep run amuck, too blind and too stupid to know they were formed within the warmth of his heart too.

And how He holds you close as you both walk through, the light and warmth kissing the color of your skin.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

You quickly realize what a bad scientist you are.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

Revelation 4:11

Dear Me,

You're a young thing watching other people write their histories, a pint-sized scientist in a navy blue jumper with a tag-along dog. Your dependent variables? Your parents who you watch with immense curiosity and the type of love that borders on obsession.

What if they die? What if you cause it somehow?

That's a lot of anxiety to entrust to a toy poodle.

The independent variables are ashamedly out of your control, and you quickly realize what a bad scientist you are. Things are thrown at your parents that have nothing to do with you. Stress from running their own business, past hurts and jealousies, family dynamics, and inner turmoil—things that are aggravatingly no match for a kindergartner.

There's a short period where your father leaves, not on his own accord but of their accord together—a decision made again, without your consent.

It's only a cooling-off period, but you quickly realize how out of control you are. You'd give your left arm to be the controlled variable.

And you'd give the right one to make him stay.

I ask you, what is the controlled variable then, little one? Because for a world that likes to pretend everything is chaos, we already know the lie in it. There's a Grand Planner whose mind is more sound than the collective one we seek to maintain, a collective mind cracked out on caffeine

and unmet expectations. Any scientist worth His salt would make us sit on the sidelines.

But the One who concocted a world edged in light and bursting forth with green we can only grow and not create, had us work in tandem with Him, not as a prerequisite but as an honest offering we don't and never will deserve.

One day, your mind will open to all this, and so there's no regretting a past God has so tenderly woven and dedicated to you. He's given you two loving parents who wouldn't know a bus they wouldn't jump in front of for your sake and a deepened appreciation for all the under-workings of this life you're just not privy to.

And instead of desiring that control with a tight chest and sweaty palms, you've given it back over to the only One who so rightly deserves it.

If only Fifi could see you now.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Nothing more than poisonous fat.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
Luke 6:37-38

Dear Me,

You are the keeper of wrongs. You've spent a miserable amount of time writing down the sins of the one you love, knowingly nodding at the list like you couldn't have dreamt it up yourself.

And yet you have, haven't you?

Paranoia is like a serpent. No. Scratch that. It's like *the* serpent known by Eve, that smooth crest of skin sitting near her shoulder. *Look at him over there. He says he loves you. But how can you fully trust anyone who isn't yourself?*

That smooth talking beast is on to something, isn't he? He is the half-truth teller, giving a bit to chew on when it's nothing more than poisonous fat.

But God is the whole-truth teller, your Father who sent His Son to die on a tree for your adulterous heart. Yes, that's right—you are the adulteress here, friend. There's some fat for you to chew on.

For a long time, you won't know to confess this whole-body anxiety as sin. You won't acknowledge "not-letting-go-ism" is the number one cause of your deceitful heart. You'll refuse to believe you are just as culpable if not more, because in addition to breathing and exhaling sin, you act as if you're a god who needs to be pleaded with for mercy.

And what kind of relationship can stand that amount of hypocrisy?

Fortunately, those you love aren't so vicious. They love and forgive freely, giving you grace, even in this. My suggestion? Take and multiply it and share it until all the cups you lovingly wash overflow.

Because how you measure the forgiveness in your heart will measure your allegiance to the One who made it.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

The lover who's never left.

*He refreshes my soul. He guides me along
the right paths for his name's sake.*

Luke 6:37-38

Dear Me,

You've lost the little girl you used to know and are flipping rocks and stones to find her coiled in the damp earth. You never do find her because there was always another thing to be.

Like when you moved to Houston in the sixth grade and decided your Southern accent didn't suit you anymore. Everyone else was a child of parents who traveled and lived for a time overseas, their accents faintly intelligible like dirty dishwater. But yours is the sore thumb of accents, bringing you attention you decide you don't need.

Teenagedom brings more breakthroughs, like being pretty enough is a journey your feet must walk. It's painful, so many rough-edged pebbles beneath your soles, but you curl and swipe and pluck and suck and run away until your legs look a little less like your legs.

Nobody told you this would bring happiness, and that same nobody was right.

Instead, there's a deeper change that goes beyond contentment into the dark recesses of never being content. You hold onto it, your anger and bitterness mewling kitten-small until the noise in your chest is a roaring lion. "Who put it there?" you wonder in your head because saying it out loud is an exercise in shame.

You've jumped into this cycle feet first and can no longer find the exit. You stay stuck in it, running, running, running, until everything hurts, and you won't even think about sitting for a second. Instead, you bring others into your sick, twisted game, comparing yourself with women who are better than you, smarter, prettier. Will your husband leave? Will you be stuck all alone to know that everything was given to everyone else but you?

The questions build until you're slick with sweat, morning and night, your stomach shredded and scarred from paranoia. How can a body go on? How can a mind not fold its hand?

You understand that there's a lover of your soul you've kept on the outskirts of your heart. Each time the weight of your life doubles in grief, in misery, He stands firmly, waiting for you to acknowledge His depth. You sink toe-deep until every inch of you bobs beneath water, a spiritual baptism with the lover who's never left.

Talk soon,

Ericka¹

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Thank You

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May God bless you and keep you.

And thank you to all who contributed:

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