

Introduction

Dear Kid I Was:

Hey there. It's me. I mean you. It is you/me, writing to me/you, from the future. We are almost forty-three, and I sure do wish there was a way for me to get this message from future me to past you, but so far, humankind hasn't invented anything like that yet, not that I know of, anyway, so all I can do is write this letter and put it in the front of this book, and just maybe it might help out some other poor kid who feels all alone, just like you and I did, way back when. I am hoping this letter might let them know that they are not the only one. Dear Every Kid Who Picks Up This Book: You are not the only one.

We graduated in 1987, you and I, who can believe it, but that was twenty-five years ago. I would tell you right now that the last quarter of a century has flown by, but I know you, and back then you/I wouldn't have believed me. Why? Because I am writing to the me I was in 1985, and you/we are fifteen years old, and smack dab in the middle of grade ten and graduation feels like five lifetimes from now. School sucks today, in fact, life sucks, too, and you are miserable. It is February, and last fall that thing went down with that dude you were dating (here in the future,

what he did that night to us would technically be called date rape, by the way), and the two of you broke up, but he was the popular guy, and you were kind of dorky plus also brand new to that school and he was two years older and about to graduate and in almost every club or team or whatever, and now him and his whole group of jocks and pretty boys and their girlfriends don't invite you to any parties, but you know what? You are better off without them. Better off without him, for sure. But you already knew that. You're no dummy, past me. And you only get better, little buddy. Trust me on this one.

So, while I have your ear, I want to tell you a couple of really important things. First, school is more important than you even thought it was. And I don't mean this in a boring I know it all and I am here to tell you kind of adult way, I am talking in the just between you and me as equals kind of a way. Educating yourself right now is your ticket to options, my friend. And I know you. You like options. So trust me when I tell you finishing school is important. Even more important than your mom thinks it is, and you know how she feels about a higher education. Well, she is right. I am here (or is it there) to tell you that every single thing you will ever manage to learn, every skill, every course, every bit of school or college or university you attend is going to help you on your way to becoming exactly who we always dreamed of being.

And you dreamed big. We dreamed of being a writer and a musician. You knew you wanted to be a writer since grade seven, remember, that assignment for what's-his-

face's class, the teacher with the chalk marks all around his front pockets, and sometimes even the crotch of his brown cords (why did that man own only one good pair of pants for school?), anyway, remember what's-his-name's English class, and how he made everybody write a short story? Remember how good it felt? Well, one day you will get to do this for a living. A good living, now, after all those years of hard work. In fact, I am sitting in my office in a small home that my wife and I own, and I am writing a story right now, to you, from the future. The view from here is beautiful. But we have to get through high school first, so hang in there, little buddy, you are almost there. I am not going to tell you it gets better, even though it sure did, because really, how is that going to help you get through grade ten?

What you need right now is information. You need someone to tell you it is okay to be you. And hope. You need hope, and someone to say hey, I know exactly what you are going through. So hey, here I am, and I know exactly what you are going through. And you are, as our dear departed gran once told us when I was you and you were very little, exactly who God meant you to be. And I am here with you. I get it, I do.

I went through it too, remember? I am you. How could I not know what you are going through right now?

Where was I? Oh yeah. Important things I need you to know. Or wish I had known then. Stuff I wish someone would have told me when I was you.

You know how you always loved Dolly Parton? Even though she was really your mom's favourite first, and that is

supposedly kind of uncool, right, to have the same favourite records as your mother, but who cares? It is Dolly. And one day you will go on to learn that it turns out she really is very cool, and even better, she is a survivor. Dolly Parton came from poverty, like, real poverty, and recorded her first songs when she was thirteen years old. She worked and worked and was smart, and used her brains and her voice *and* her body and her big breasts, and she built something for herself. And for her family, too. She always took care of her family. We have that in common, you and me and Dolly. Anyway, Dolly has a quote I love, and I want you to hear it now, and know it. It goes:

“Find out who you are and do it on purpose.”

So, how, you might ask me, do I find out who I am? Good question, my young friend. One of life’s big ones, in fact. Some of the greatest thinkers in the history of human-kind have put their noggins in gear to try to answer this one for us all.

I don’t really have the perfect answer, but I will tell you one thing I figured out. Or maybe I read it, or saw someone else doing it and copied them, but here it is:

One surefire way to figure out who you are is to never listen to anyone else tell you who or what you can be. Never let someone else decide for you what you are capable of being. Remember when that one music teacher told you that girls don’t make good drummers? Well, turns out he was wrong. I am here to tell you that he was very wrong about that. In many other ways he turned out to be a great saxophone teacher, but he was profoundly wrong about the

drumming thing. Right now, future you is in an all-butch choir, and you are singing and drumming and strumming your bursting heart right out, and it is a beautiful thing. I only wish that we hadn't listened to the guy who told us when we were thirteen that girls couldn't play drums, because then I would have started playing them thirty years ago.

Remember when everyone in school called boys who liked drama class or played the flute or who wanted to be cheerleaders fags? You know that guy Corey from home economics class, and Michael, and that blond kid, his name started with a D, I forget his name? Remember how that blond kid did that dance number for a talent show that one time in grade nine, and he could really dance, remember him, his name started with a D, and you don't know this yet because it hasn't happened, and you might wanna sit down because I know you, you are sensitive and this next little bit of news I am bringing you from the future is going to tear your tender heart right out, but I need you to know that he will go on to shoot himself in his father's basement with a rifle one winter a couple years after we graduate. And Corey, he will asphyxiate himself in Yellowknife in a car inside a garage in the dark of a long northern winter and see, I don't think either of these boys had to die, and that is why I am going to ask you a favour. Oh, Michael will make it, by the way. In fact, Michael will turn out to be a real nice guy who works with your sister and grows orchids in his spare time. But those other two guys, well, it didn't have to go down the way it did with them.

Past me, I know you have not accepted this about yourself yet, but I am here to tell you that you are queer, and not only is this fact about us nothing to be ashamed of, it will go on to be one of the things that teaches future you/me so much about the world, and about what is really important. Things like love and truth and honesty and compassion and respecting others who are different than you and friendship and community and chosen family.

So I am going to need you to do me a favour, like I said. I need you to go and find those kids they are picking on even worse than they are picking on you right now. I need you to be kind to them. Even when this means taking a risk with what is left of your own coolness at school. I am asking you to be brave and stick up for those kids they are calling a fag or a dyke, I want you to stand up for and beside those kids that get pushed around and left out and picked over and picked on and made to feel less than worthy somehow. Have their back, and in turn, they will have yours. And together, you will be better than the bullies. Braver. Taller. Truer. More righteous. Someone you can look back on one day and be really proud of.

Because trust me, no one ever gets to be forty-three and thinks about their life and what it all means, and wishes that they had stood aside more often and allowed more injustice to happen to more already struggling kids while they were back in high school. That is not going to happen. But what will happen is that you are going to grow up and look back one day and be sorry for your silences, and regret the times you stood by and let someone be cruel to someone

else, or even worse, joined in on it all yourself. And I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that I don't get it, that I have forgotten how hard high school really is in your here and now, because it is my way back when now. But I have not forgotten. I know for a fact that standing up and doing the right thing when more popular or prettier or richer kids are doing the wrong thing, or worse, is some of the hardest shit you will ever have to do in our entire life. But it is so worth it. You don't know this yet, but one day we will travel all over the world talking to scared and lonely and bullied and brave and smart and talented queer youth. One day you and I will literally save a kid's life, maybe more than one, even maybe, if we keep it up. But I need you to take that first step for me earlier than I was brave enough to do when I was your age. You feel me? In a way, you are kind of my second chance at doing it better, kid, and I am counting on you. I believe you can do this.

I can't do it all over, but I can pass on some of what I have learned to you. So, to sum it all up, here it is again: Make art. Write stories. Don't pay any attention to the haters. Most of them will grow up to be adult haters, too, and they will not leave anything behind but a bad taste in your mouth as their legacy. You are capable of great things, and beautiful things, but you need to be strong. Please, don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't sing, or dance, or do math or play the drums or hockey or be a full-time working writer. You can and will one day grow up to be a writer who plays the drums while dancing and singing and counting, all at the same time.

School sucks sometimes. This is the plain truth of it. Parts of school, just like parts of society, are meant to train you to conform, to make you afraid to be anything else but just like everybody else. But look around. Kindness and compassion will reward you with so much more than your fear or apathy will. Trust your heart, it is a lot smarter than you know. Find out what moves you, and be it. Be brave. Be fearless. Be fabulous. Make me proud of us. I know you can do it. I am living proof that you can be anything you dream and work and fight to be. I wish someone had given me these words when I was still you, but they did not. So I am giving them to you now. What you do with them is, of course, completely up to you.

With much love and affection,

Ivan

February 9, 2012

P.S. Do us both a big favour, would you? Don't ever start smoking. I hate to admit it twice in the same letter, but our mother was right about that one, too. It is a filthy habit. We quit four years ago today, and we have never looked back.