



Caroline Smailes

Letter to My Younger Self

DEAR ME,

Last week you saw the poster on a noticeboard in your university department. You've been thinking about it all week. First meeting's about to start and you're pacing outside the library, smoking a cigarette and clutching a bottle of white wine with a screw top lid. Poster said it was 'bring a bottle' but you've already drunk half of it. You're nineteen and you're in the second week of your first term at university.

You go in. You sit at the back, on your own. Black dress, black DMs and that oversized black cardigan with holes in the elbows; you think you're invisible. You think you might be an imposter too. You've seen some of the people there in lectures and seminars, but you can't remember their names. The Creative Writing Society's meeting begins.

You want to be a writer. You want it enough to have come along to this meeting, even though every single thing about it – confident people, reading your writing aloud, speaking to strangers – makes you want to be anywhere else. You stay though, one hand clutching your wine bottle to try and stop the shaking. You watch as people rush to the stage, you hear them read their work aloud. They're poets mainly. Their hands don't shake. They don't look like they're about to vomit over the audience. They're confident. They're born performers. They're entertainers too. And that makes you feel even worse about yourself. Thirty minutes of watching self-assured people, you decide they're all writers and, if that's what being a writer is, then you're definitely not one.



You slip out before it's your turn to read. And on the walk back to your student accommodation, while drinking the rest of that cheap wine, you decide you'll never have what it takes to be a writer. You're super-critical of everything you do. Sometimes your thoughts are meaner than those bullies ever were to you. And today you decide that you're not talented enough to go to another Creative Writing Society meeting. You'll keep writing in secret though, because writing's the only thing that helps you make sense of you.

And it'll take years of missed opportunities before you'll realise that you need to stop listening to those negative things you tell yourself; they're not facts. They're not protecting you. But, eventually – ten years later – you'll be ready. You'll have had enough of writing in secret and you'll finally have the courage to voice that you want to be a writer. You'll enrol on a course. You'll give yourself permission to write; it'll be a priority. You'll even share your work with others, because you'll have reached your limit and all that'll matter is knowing if you've got what it takes.

You have, by the way. You were a writer at nineteen and you're a writer now. There are several books published with your name on the spine and there's a feature film of one of your novels too. You write what you need to write; you write because you have something to say. That pain that you've persisted already will thread chapters and characters into a tapestry of your survival and hope, because you keep writing.