

A Letter to My 30-Year-Old Self

Dear Nat,

I feel a sense of love and pride viewing you through 40-year-old eyes.

You are beautiful and bruised.

I am entranced and terrified for you — for what is to come.

Do you remember that day on the steps of the town hall,
when an older woman told you that your thirties are “weird”?

You listened politely but dismissed the idea.

You were optimistic – a trait that has served us well.

She was right, though.

The decade has been both joyride and car crash, minus the seatbelt.

The death of your grandmother has not yet sunk its claws into you in the way you will later recognise.

On the face of it, you’re fine –

retreating into your trademark efficient autopilot even before she takes her final breath.

That has always been us: hypervigilant and forward-thinking,
camouflaging heartbreak at the loss of your fountain of unconditional love, no longer of this earth.

You disappear,

flying and fighting your way into work you love.

Later, when your therapist suggests you were running – hiding in the crevices of your productivity – you’re offended.

How dare she?

You? Run?

She knew her stuff.

Below the surface, you’re cracking –

in subtle ways you haven’t even noticed yet.

But you will.

Those with empty eyes salivate at the prospect of your vulnerability.
They take far more than they deserve, and for far too long.
I do wish you had guarded your heart just a little.
But I also adore your capacity to care –
when, in the face of all you've endured, it would be easier not to.
A breakdown – only two weeks off work.
A pandemic – stripping at the door after long days working at the hospital.
A community – goddesses, all of them.
A wedding – giggling through a ceremony with your handsome husband.
A death – your father, who, though absent for most of your life, leaves a scar down
the centre of you.
A loss – an ocean of them, if we're honest.
A win – a night sky full, too.

Old and new lives swirl in a vortex,
crumbling at the cliff edge of who you thought you were.

You become unwell – heart and mind sick.
You make self-abandonment your theme song,
one you sing with cracked lips and empty hands.
You experience multiple heartbreaks – mainly from friends.
You berate yourself because you knew they weren't right for you.
But your heart has its own ideas, as it often does – and that is a thing of beauty.
For a life to be lived is for love to be lost.
But it still bloody hurts.
Sometimes, too much to bear.

You are plagued by night terrors –
a symptom of a particular kind of mourning.
For your childhood.
For your broken threads.
For all the things you spent thirty years hiding from to appear successful.

A recurring question haunts you:
If I gather accolades, titles, awards, it means I deserve to be here... right?

The centre of your world breaks – and repairs itself -- so you can finally stop asking
that question.

You become a human being, not a human doing.
You love yourself back to life.

After a meltdown in Sainsbury's, you are diagnosed as deaf.
Hardly a surprise to you or your loved ones.
Covid grips and exposes.
Masks conceal, and your world shifts.
The champion lip-reader loses her title.
Hearing aids pick up every single sound,
transforming your once-quiet world into chaos.
It's loud.
Too loud.

You accept a deaf identity while battling internalised ableism.
You don't know BSL, but people assume you do.
How do you feel like a deaf fraud and admit you need help at the same time?

Your childhood taught you to shrink your needs in favour of everyone else's.
Now, you're forced to advocate for yourself anew.
Strive to be a giant in your own story.

You move through the world at the intersections of race, gender, and disability –
facing multiple barriers, but holding multiple blessings too.
You see and experience life in ways few do.
You see the soft underbelly of things.
The vulnerability.

It has made you tough –
but it has also honed your softness.
A softness you rarely reveal.
One that those who cling to the "strong Black woman" stereotype cannot see – until
you make them.

And still, you rise.

An author – your absolute dream.
An award-winning business owner.

A troupe of dancers who feel more like family.
A hobby, a vocation, a home – a love you love.

Oh, the love.
Did I mention the love?

Mostly for yourself.

That's one of the highlights, Nat.
In the face of your mistakes and missteps,
the harrowing pain and the poor decisions –
you love yourself.
You accept yourself.
You are kind to yourself.

It is the best thing we have ever done.

But it isn't a destination.
It's a choice – a daily practice.
One you must return to, especially on days when your brain and body feel like burial
sites for the casualties of other people's wars.

It gets harder.
It gets better.
It exists in the nuanced in-between.

We have each other, though –
and that is the greatest gift I can give you.

You are the love of my life.
I am sorry it took me this long to realise.

Nat

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