

Twenty  
Two

Letters to a Young Woman  
Searching for Meaning

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ALLISON TROWBRIDGE

# TWENTY-TWO

Letters to a Young Woman  
Searching for Meaning



ALLISON TROWBRIDGE



NELSON  
BOOKS

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TO EVERY YOUNG WOMAN  
WHO IS, OR WAS, OR EVER WILL BE, ASH.  
THIS STORY IS YOURS.

AND TO DAISY LOVE,  
WHO SHOWED US, AND WENT BEFORE US.



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## INTRODUCTION

It was late in the spring of my senior year, and my world was charging toward a new upheaval: college graduation. One warm evening, the night alive with uncertainty and expectation, my roommate and I drove home and parked the car outside our apartment. We leaned the seats back to gaze at the sky and stayed there talking till dawn, dreaming about years yet to unfold and laughing over memories until our faces hurt.

Staring at the starry abyss of our future, we wondered if we were really equipped to face all the changes that lay before us. “I wish there was a book that spoke to all the questions and pressures and hopes we have in this season of life,” I lamented. “We need that kind of guidance, and nothing like it exists.”

We were silent a moment, then I added, “Maybe I’ll write that book someday.”

In the years after graduation, life got busy. And in the process I gained a little more of the wisdom I wished I’d had that night at twenty-two. I went on to help shape a social movement and build an anti-slavery organization. I became a partner in an impact fund, where we incubated and invested in social enterprises to generate sustainable change. I had the chance to travel across the globe, and build relationships with some of the most influential leaders of today.

And through it all, my heart for young women and belief in their power to impact the world was amplified. Then one morning during a business trip in London, I awoke jet-lagged at dawn with the concept of *Twenty-Two* resounding in my mind. The book would not be a traditional compilation of advice and opinions like I'd once imagined: it would be a relationship. A relationship between the real me and a fictional character who represents all the young women I've ever met or mentored along



David Jay

*My college graduation,  
when I was 22.*

the way. It would be a correspondence that spoke to all the deepest life questions they almost uniformly possessed. I envisioned a friendship that would resonate with any young woman in the midst of her own journey. A journey that is, in itself, the destination.

What follows is the book conceived after my college night of dreaming. This is the book I so desperately wanted to read when I was twenty-two.

Sincerely,

*Allison*

 PART 1 

# FRESHMAN



CHAPTER 1

ON: SEASONS & ARRIVING

“Had we but world enough and time.”

ANDREW MARVELL

SEPTEMBER 2

Dear Ashley,

The answer to your question is yes. A resounding, enthusiastic YES. Consider this letter the first among many. Twenty-two, to be exact.

New Beginnings

It’s the second of September, and everything is changing—the pace of the streets, the weight of the air—as nature turns its colors in gold anticipation. Summer has yawned its last afternoon, our espadrilles have been traded for argyle, and everyone is walking with a briskness in their step. Fall is my favorite season. It feels like life is moving, the world is tilting, the hemisphere bowing its annual curtsy to meet the coming chill.

I think I love fall because I love new beginnings. And tweed,

and ombré leaves, and those sickeningly sweet pumpkin lattes. September signals the start of something, and for you, dear girl, this month marks one of the greatest beginnings of your life.

It may also be one of the most unsettling. I've learned the best of times can also bring the hardest of changes, and the high you're on now may soon dip into an aching of uncertainty and questions you can't answer yet.

I remember being where you are today: walking down that worn dirt path, through oaks and old white colonnades, bagpipes blaring sanctimoniously as a warm wind lifts the scent of kumquats and lavender, the nearby sea, and new beginnings. You feel awkward and at home, all at once. It's surreal in the way that any milestone is surreal, built up with so much anticipation before it.

And then the day finally comes, and the moment arrives, and you realize you're still the same you. But life is different. You are still today who you were yesterday, only now the surroundings, and the people, and the tomorrows have changed.

First days are magic: invigorating, nerve-racking, and totally freeing. My memories flood back to another first day. The beginning of elementary school, walking into a classroom for the first time,



David Jay

*The Westmont bagpipers. They know how to make the parents cry.*



*First day of kindergarten!  
With my pink lunchbox.*

shaking Mrs. Saam's hand. It was large and warm and inviting and otherworldly.

Kindergarten! I was thrilled.

As I boldly grasped my pink lunch box—my armor and social-normalizer—my mom asked, with all a mother's emotion, "Honey, how am I going to get by every day without your help?"

"Don't worry, Mommy," I comforted her. "You'll always have my help in your heart." And away I went.

It was, I think, a foreshadowing of our drive thirteen years later down the California coast, moving me to college freshman year. I fell asleep somewhere south of Santa Cruz, and my sweet mom cried the whole rest of the way. Three and a half hours. I awoke just north of Santa Barbara, so excited and nervous I didn't notice her puffy eyes.

Something tells me your momma did the same.

These transitions, of course, are bittersweet. But you and I both know, we only gain the road ahead if we leave the traveled road behind.

## Seas the Day

Tell me how you're holding up this week, dear girl. How are you processing this massive life move you're about to embark upon?

I'm giddy with excitement for your "firsts." The first awkward meetings with lifelong friends, the first classes that will lead to majors and internships and careers. The first time you realize you're away—I mean, really away—from home. Away from all the comforts and familiarities, the soothing drudgery of predictable days, and thrust instead into the reckless, wild ride we call collegiate life. I can almost taste the stale cafeteria food.

I envy this new adventure you're stepping into. I envy it in

the way I would envy a friend setting off to sail the Pacific. I know there will be sea-green days of sickness, ink-black nights of storms, and salt-encrusted everything. There will be exhaustion and disorientation and loss, and so much open ocean you could go blind from all the blue. But I envy that what's staring you straight in the face is nothing but that open ocean. The setting that will bring your miseries will also carry new worlds of delight: the bronze sun above, the wind whipping your hair, adventure stowed like treasure beneath your mainsail. Nothing but you and your boat and the possibility of a sea that will shape you and teach you ten thousand things you never knew about yourself, and would never have known, had you not left the comfort of the familiar wood dock.

Change is fraught with uncertainty and fear. But it's an exhilarating fear, don't you think? You feel as though your life is unfolding before you and every offer is available. Every failure and triumph and heartbreak and victory lap a pending possibility.

Which leads to my confession.

## The Journey

Ash, for as long as I can remember, I've had a deep-seated sense that one day I was going to arrive—that I would wake up one morning and stretch out my arms to the world and revel in a sense of finished self. Probably around the age of thirty-five.

Have you felt this?

I never used to admit it to myself, and I certainly didn't announce it to anyone else. What normal teenage girl daydreams about her graduation into midthirties adulthood? I'm almost embarrassed to write it now. And yet, from a very young age, I had this unrelenting sense I was moving toward a destination. I

was becoming someone, becoming the finished me, and one day I was going to get there. Even as a child, I couldn't wait to meet this worldly, wisdom-filled, thirty-five-year-old self.

I'll never forget the evening that all changed.

I was just a few years older than you are now, lying stomach-down on my mattress on the floor. We were approaching the start of senior year, and my girlfriends and I had moved four miles off campus into the Country Club Apartments. Each night we piled side by side into rooms that smelled like chipping paint and aging carpet, with more telephone wire than country club in our view, and it felt like the ultimate freedom.

I remember that evening so well: bright clangs of laughter and dinner dishes in the other room, the final strokes of neon sky outside my screen door. The flimsy lamp that had followed us since freshman year burned amber overhead as I flipped to the day's date in a worn, wine-red devotional: Oswald Chambers's classic, *My Utmost for His Highest*.

I've always equated underlining to learning, so, pen-poised, I found the day's page: July 28. I skimmed the first paragraph and, out of habit, pressed a line of ink beneath what seemed an important stretch of words: "What we see as only the process of reaching a particular end . . ."

I stopped. I put my pen down. I read the passage again.

We should never have the thought that our dreams of success are God's purpose for us. In fact, His purpose may be exactly the opposite. We have the idea that God is leading us toward a particular end or a desired goal, but He is not. The question of whether or not we arrive at a particular goal is of little importance, and reaching it becomes merely an episode along the way. What we see as only the process of reaching a particular end, God sees as the goal itself.<sup>1</sup>

Ash, the soul—tuned by character—is an instrument. When words strike a chord, our spirit resonates. I think the heart can discern a cadence of truth as much as the ear can discern a melody, and that night, those words felt like music.

I lay there for a while, on my mind's empty beach, as the cold truths caught me up like a tide. What we see as the journey, God sees as the destination. I wondered if I'd had life a bit wrong, all these years.

Once upon a time, I believed that who I was today didn't matter as much as who I would become. That what mattered most was whether I hit the goals I set for myself, the goals I felt called to. I believed that hitting the sands of some tropical shore was what made the sailing trip worthwhile. But, darling girl, God wasn't waiting for me to get somewhere. He saw my life, the entire span of it, from birth to death, all at once. And he loved me as I was and as I am and also as I would be, in some eternal moment outside of time.

I'm not sure where you are with God, but I'd love to know. I have a lot more to learn about you, Ash, and you about me, as well. What I do know is this: That night was a revelation for me. The thought washed over me like a wave, and I pressed in until I was soaked. Absorbed by, and absorbing, this new reality: Our life's journey is our life's destination.

## Be Everything

We are living in one of the most remarkable periods in history for young women. I may be only a few steps ahead, but when I look at you, dear girl, I see limitless opportunity. Never have young women been given greater access to the world: education to seize, information to gain, platforms to create, blogs to post, social networks to join, online stores to shop!

Think about this, Ash: With just a credit card and a travel booking site, you can be anywhere on the globe within seventy-two hours. And with a smartphone, you can be reading the comment thread on your Insta-posts before you even feel jet-lagged. Your dad might not be thrilled at the reckless spontaneity—but that’s not the point. When in history has this level of access existed for an eighteen-year-old, let alone any woman?

A young woman, especially in the West, has never had more before her than the girl of today. Ours is the era of options, opportunities, and endless public opinions on how we ought to live. And yet, the girls I see exiting our twenty-first-century graduating classes seem burdened with more questions than answers, more pressure than prospects, and more feelings of doubt than direction.

I think our generation is caving under the many and, dare I say, unrealistic pressures of this brave new world. The societal, social, familial, and, most of all, personal expectations for what we should make of this life.

There’s pressure to meet your dream guy, to land the perfect job, to design a storybook home, to raise a small tribe of cherubic children. Pressure to look like the cover girls, to know the most glamorous people, to attract millions of followers, and, of course, to change the world. Or at least end extreme poverty by the time you hit thirty. I hope you don’t feel all these pressures yet, but you probably will. I certainly feel them, and more.

A wise woman named Courtney E. Martin wrote, “We are the daughters of feminists who said ‘You can be anything’ and we heard ‘You have to be everything.’”<sup>2</sup>

Don’t be everything, Ash. Be you.

Don’t do everything. Do you.

There’s only one you, and the world needs you desperately.

## Onward

I'm so glad I saw you last week, dear girl. You have courage and character and a beauty that breathes deep. I'm honored you would ask me to walk with you over what could be the most transformative season of your life.

It certainly was in mine.

I've never been terrific at keeping in touch, and the coming distance won't help, but I promise you this: I will write you every other month over these precious college years. Please write to me the months in between, so I can know you better, and know how you are. Tell me about all of the challenges, joys, and triumphs of everyday living, for living is truly a triumph.

I can't give you all the answers, but I hope I can help you ask some good questions. I think asking, the very act of it, is our lifeblood. Wonder and courage pump through us as we question, giving breath to our beings, strength to our bones. Some days it's tempting to live in concrete plains of black and white, but the world is full of color, and growing up is all about learning how to navigate the hues and the infinite gradients of grey.

There's so much more to say: on romance and justice, on wanderlust and red lipstick, and on the goal itself. I'm excited for this season you're stepping into, Ash. Thank you for letting me journey with you.

With love,

*XA*

PS—Do you mind that I call you Ash? It suits you.

PPS—Call your mom.

What we call the beginning is often the end  
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
 The end is where we start from.<sup>3</sup>

*T. S. ELIOT*

CHAPTER 2

ON: BEAUTY & SEEING

“Tell me,  
what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?”

MARY OLIVER

NOVEMBER 2

Ash,

My dear college student, I don't know where to begin! I have so many questions.

How do you like your classes? Are you enjoying the day-to-day? Have you fallen in love with this glittery seaside city? Or plain-old fallen in love? I can't believe just as you are settling in, I am preparing to move away—to San Francisco of all places. But I know you are exactly where you're supposed to be, and I am too. I think.

Sunset Decisions

Thank you for your letter, Ash. I cherished every word.

You wrote about the peace you felt the moment you first stepped onto campus, and I remember feeling the same. Which was strange, because until that point I'd been convinced I would attend some legendary East Coast school with more college students than the population of the town where I grew up. I wanted to spread my wings, and I assumed that meant getting as far away from the California coast as I could.



*First campus visit when I made my mind up.  
I was going to Westmont.*

Then I set foot onto Westmont.

I was in the midst of college applications, and my parents thought it would be a good idea to drive down the coast and let me see a few schools before I made a decision. You know, get a sense for what the next four years could look like, since I really had nothing to picture. They had never sent a kid to college, and I had never been, so the process was new for all of us.

The first place we stopped was a state school, which looked exciting, except several students from my high school were headed there and I've always had a strange desire to be different. *Check that one off the list.* Next we stopped at my dad's alma mater, which was large and vibrant and stunning. *This could be an option,* I thought. Until my dad, with the enthusiasm of a first-time campus tour guide, proceeded to show us the student housing and proudly pointed out all the places he'd lived with flea infestations. He drove us past buildings that were set on fire during campus protests in the 1970's, and told stories of the wild audiences who'd attended the rock shows he'd played with his band. My mom shook her head slowly in the front seat as

dad relived the good ol' days, and didn't understand my lack of zeal after the tour. I'm sure the fleas have long since migrated south—not least because of the fires—but my mind was made up on the school. *Sorry, Dad.*

The clouds rolled in that afternoon as our journey continued, and I wondered if any school would be just right for me. We drove south down the coast and pulled into a small 1930s estate-converted-to-campus tucked amid the sycamores of Montecito. I had seen Westmont's booth at college fairs and felt an instant draw to the scenic shots and smiling faces on the display boards. It looked magical . . . too magical. Too lovely for the stoic hardship I was certain college life would entail. Plus, it was small and on the West Coast, which did not fit my vision of getting lost in a sea of twenty thousand preppy people. But then we parked, and I walked along Kerrwood Lawn, and something in me changed.

Sometimes things that make the most sense in life don't make logical sense in our minds, at first. They are heart-knowing, not head-knowing. It was early January, winter break. The campus was foggy and cold and empty. There was nothing alluring, nothing that matched the palm tree landscapes on the pamphlets, but Westmont felt like coming home. I can't describe it any other way.

We spent an hour there, strolling the quiet hills, and I drank it in. As we drove off that evening along the ocean-lined 101, I turned back and saw the sky lit up in a brilliant flame of color, blurring with intensity like an oversaturated photo. I'd never seen a sunset like that before. My parents made plans in the front of the car and my brother nodded along to the music in his headphones, but the moment, for me, was spiritual. After that evening, I didn't worry about the college admissions process, or fuss over the other applications that had once caused so much stress. That sunset had secured my fate.

I knew, that I knew, that I knew—I was going to Westmont.

## Major Choices

Now Ash, let's discuss the overwhelming question hanging above your head—the great decision that will direct the course of your next four years. The choice that will set the bearing of your life's career, determine the places you go and the people you meet, shape the human being you become, and potentially determine the plot of land where you are buried.

Your major.

I began college with a plan to study religion. Yes, I know what you're thinking: I'm even more saintly and angelic than you thought! But I actually chose religious studies because I loved my church youth group, and my leader and mentor, Lindsey, and I wanted to be like her. I'm loads of fun at summer camp, and thought if I majored in religion then someone might hire me as a youth group leader and then I'd have ample chances to work on my canoeing.

This pious plan lasted a full three weeks and one welcome barbeque before I acquired a wandering eye. Oh, the wily temptations of greener academic fields. I heard a senior talk about her decision to be a communication studies major, and I envied the blissful, well-branded classes she must be attending. That was my gateway sin, in a collegiate sense. Once I opened my mind to majors beyond religious studies, every discipline became enticing.

I love liberal arts colleges because they require you to sample every dish at the banquet table of knowledge, and I had a smorgasbord. I devoured courses in history and doctrine and literature. I loved them each in different ways, which led to an increasing uncertainty about what track my life was supposed

to take. I had wanted to go to law school for as long as I could remember, so I thought I should pursue political science, and probably philosophy, to boost my future LSAT scores.

Then again, I also wanted to speak another language and charm future suitors, so maybe a minor in French. Although, English could be ideal, because writing was key to a law career, and a background in history would strengthen my future run for president. Or art history, perhaps. My mom was an art teacher, and my family owned an art store, so this plan made a lot of sense. Also, Prince William was an art history major, so I thought that would give us something to talk about if he ever came calling. At least, that's what I thought until I met the business students. I'd never even thought about studying business! It seemed they knew something about the way the world operated that the rest of us did not, and there weren't many women in the business department, which implied a challenge. I love a good challenge. I would have to explore business as well.

I toyed with the idea of majoring in a liberal arts education. Can people do that?

Finally, one long year of exploring later, I settled on communication studies, the canon of coursework I'd initially longed for but had not allowed myself to entertain. I figured I could always pursue French or philosophy as a hobby, but if I didn't learn how to communicate well, I wouldn't be much use at anything entrepreneurial. I might have an idea for a company that could reshape the modern world, but if I couldn't communicate the concept clearly, I would never impact anyone. The fact is, I had mostly ruled out communication studies because it sounded like *fun*. But who's to say we can't enjoy the way we spend our days?

I had tried in vain to plan my perfect future, Ash, pointing every area of focus toward some ephemeral haze of a career or grad school application or life plan. Until, finally, I gave up—and just decided to study what I loved.

## What to Do

And so, my dear, I suppose that's the advice I have for you, even though it's as unoriginal as telling you to eat your fruits and vegetables and get eight hours of sleep at night. Which you should also be doing!

Study what you love, Ash.

Devote yourself to a topic you want to think about, write about, and read books about, regardless of whether or not they're assigned.

You aren't here to memorize information, my love—although it might feel that way before midterms. You are here to get a liberal arts education, so you can learn how to *learn*. To become a lifelong learner, as our college president, Dr. Gaede, used to say. You aren't in trade school; you are learning the trade of learning. This skill will prepare you most for whatever vocation life throws at you.

Ash, this time in college will help you hone the skills that make you unique. As you learn about the world's greatest needs, you'll begin to see where you, with all your gifts, quirks, passions, and even shortcomings, can rise to meet those needs in a thousand meaningful ways. It's not your job to save the world, but it is your calling to offer your best to it. More than anything, that means learning to serve, and to listen, and to love others well.

It's also worth reminding you that finding your life's work is an ever-evolving process. I never knew this starting out. I imagined careers were like airplanes, and universities the airports where we chose our destination before making our way to the corresponding gate. Careers and colleges may have looked that way in decades past, but not so in our present age.

A vocation today is more often like a road trip, with no set course or destination. All you have are the combined limits and

opportunities of the car you are driving, and the gas in your tank, and the many roads unrolling before you that will lead to innumerable places, exciting and new. Of course, you may end up taking a roundabout course to get somewhere, but what makes the road trip worthwhile may be the very time spent on the scenic route. So ease off the gas pedal a bit and take some time to choose your soundtrack. Stop for photos at the lookouts.

What makes you light up inside, Ash? Pursue that field, and study it with abandon. The future will work itself out, in time.

## As Children

You asked about my favorite teachers through the years, and I've since remembered one more who made the most unlikely, yet maybe the greatest, impact on me.

My ceramics teacher in high school, Mr. Emery.

My mom is an art teacher and could have taught me the craft on her potter's wheel in our garage, but I drank in the life lessons I learned in the course and kept signing up. Mr. Emery's classes were really half ceramics and half philosophy, if you really broke them down. I made vases and teapots and giant glazed serving bowls, and then I would stay after hours debating the finer points of religion and spirituality and the meaning of life—having, as I did, most of life figured out by sixteen. He would talk about his perspectives on the world and his pilgrimages in the desert and would challenge the very basis of my opinions and beliefs. I was a young and over-zealous teen, but he engaged with me like I was the most important meeting he'd had all week.

At first I thought Mr. Emery was out there, and then I thought he was brilliant, and then I just appreciated him whether I agreed with him or not. He didn't believe in Christianity as I did, but he liked the idea of Jesus and gave me C. S. Lewis books

to read as homework. These books—*The Great Divorce* and *Till We Have Faces*—still impact me to this day.

One of my favorite things Mr. Emery did happened at the beginning of each semester. We would walk into class and there, on the otherwise empty wall, would be a picture taken decades ago of an adorable, blue-eyed child. He would instruct each of us to bring in a picture of ourselves as a toddler, and by the next week the back wall would be covered with our childhood photos. All of them surrounded that first picture, which—we later would discover—was of him.

“When you are tempted to be angry or frustrated or unforgiving toward one another,” he would say, “or toward me when you receive your grades, I want you to look at these photos and see each of us as we once were—as children.”

The class of teens would fall silent. “It’s impossible to show anything but compassion toward a toddler,” he’d continue. “If you begin to see the child in each of the schoolmates around you today, tomorrow you may see the child in everyone. A child who is vulnerable, and learning, and lovable, and loved.”

Imagine, dear Ash, how many wars would wane if we saw one another as children.

*Me as a toddler. A reminder to think of each other as children.*



I want to challenge you to do something. Yes, I realize I'm sounding mentor-ly now. I challenge you, Ash, to see people. I mean, to *really* see people. Not with your eyes, but with your heart.

Most people are afraid of being seen.

We are often so afraid of how we look, how we talk, what we'll say, and what we won't say; that we soothe ourselves in our fear by casting a critical eye toward others. We see what the world sees, and we make assumptions. But I know, to a small degree, the depths of your character, Ash, and I know you're capable of seeing past the surface things.

When you meet new people throughout your time on campus, don't judge their shoes, their faces, their social standings. When you start to glance at their outfits, try instead to get a glimpse of their hearts. See them as the children they once were. Imagine their hopes and their fears and their dreams, and you'll be so full of love for them you won't remember to worry about yourself.

## Body Talk

Speaking of how we see others, let's talk for a moment about how we see ourselves. I've been thinking about that phone conversation we had last week, and a few of the comments you made. It's okay to not be crazy about your appearance sometimes, Ash, but I want you to dig deeper into why you're so hard on yourself. I want to encourage you to give yourself some grace. It breaks my heart to see how much we all struggle with the ways we see our physical selves. I wonder if it's not the greatest burden for women in our culture's comparison age.

But I get it. I mean, I *really* get it. I feel the pain and pressure too.

I love my body, and I resent my body, all at once. It's the border between my soul and the world; it keeps me both protected and trapped. It defines me, confines me; it empowers me, devours me; it has limits, it breaks down. It allows me to dance in the redwoods and to jump into waves and to paint. My mind cannot control or shape my body's natural form. It grows and ages outside my command, programmed by some preordered DNA that nothing can override. And yet, it's mine—and no one else's. It's the only one I've got and the only one I'll ever have. This side of heaven, at least.

There's a universal "no returns" policy on bodies, as much as I'd love to go shopping and swapping mine some days. And no argument with God will ever warrant a trade, no matter how much I fuss or complain, sweet-talk or explain. No exchanges, no returns.

I can't take my body back, but I can tend to it. My mind a gardener to this wild, messy, beautiful plot of land we call our being. I can feed it and care for it and decorate it, even. And that's really half the fun: the decoration. But so many young women, myself included, focus too much energy on trying to look like someone else, when all we can and should be is the healthiest, most vibrant versions of the physical selves we've been given. Besides, regardless of how we see and treat ourselves, the standard of beauty our grandchildren know will be different than today's cultural ideal anyway.

Believe it or not, some days I'm grateful I don't have a perfect body. I'm serious! Because then I would have to worry about losing my body's perfection someday. As it is, I'm not so enamored with what I've got, so I don't suppose I'll feel a devastating loss when it all starts to sag. Life is harder when you base your worth on your appearance, for it will always, eventually, let you down. Like any living thing, we cannot be preserved. It's not our body's nature. My darling, there is neither a beauty on this

planet that won't wither with age, nor a flower given to bloom that will not wilt and fade.

I've heard it said that only the perishable can be beautiful, which is why we are unmoved by artificial flowers.

I suppose that's part of the wonder of bodies: their absolute, undeniable frailty. One day they will up and quit, and there's nothing we can do when that final moment comes. We can spend our whole lives running from a certain end, or we can welcome it. For the promise of an end is the very thing that proves we are alive.

## Merely Decorative

Have you seen the movie *Little Women*, based on the nineteenth-century classic by Louisa May Alcott? I watch it every autumn, without fail, and reminisce over make-believing childhood days spent in the South with my cousins, Rebekah, Rachel, and Ruth. The mother in *Little Women*, Marmee, reminds me so much of my Auntie Fawn, who recently passed away from cancer.

In one of my favorite scenes, Marmee cradles her eldest daughter, Meg, on her bed. Meg has just returned from a ball where she's tried to impress the popular girls and potential suitors by wearing a revealing gown, drinking excessively, and acting in a way that doesn't match her deeper values. After collapsing at home in discouragement, Meg admits that she liked her moment of attention, despite the subsequent sense of self-loathing.

"I only care what you think of yourself," Marmee says. "If you feel your value lies in being merely decorative, I fear that someday you might find yourself believing that's all that you really are."

What is beauty to you, Ash? Is it found in being merely

decorative, or is it something more? Is it a cultural ideal, or is it a greater ideal that's deep inside you?

You know, I have plenty of girlfriends who have modeled through the years, and several who've won the most prestigious beauty pageants in the world. Yet, it seems to me the more they are celebrated for their appearances, the more they are also torn apart for their imperfections. The more they achieve some elusive ideal, the more comment threads debate their flaws. I have friends who've been sent home from modeling jobs because their faces were too puffy, or were told they needed plastic surgery to "make it" in the modeling world. They were criticized and judged in ways that would impact the self-worth of even the most confident girl.

One precious friend won a major beauty pageant a few years back, and I asked her what it felt like in the first weeks afterward. Was it a high? Was she in shock? Total bliss?

"I went on antidepressants," she said.

The higher you climb, the more people will stand by waiting to tear you down. "I've never felt uglier than when I won Miss America," another told me. At the end of the day, I know each of these friends would agree: Being externally beautiful does not make you internally happy. It is a wonderful gift to have beauty, dear Ash, but its fleeting expression ought never be our aim. The older I get, the more I'm convinced that what we all desire most is to feel comfortable in our own skin. To be confident just being who we are.

As Marmee went on to say, "Time erodes all such beauty, but what it cannot diminish is the wonderful workings of your mind. Your humor, your kindness, and your moral courage. These are the things I cherish so in you."

External beauty is just the icing on the character of your life. People may be enticed by icing, but no one wants to eat a whole cake of it. So be countercultural, Ash. Be a woman

who's willing to step into a bigger purpose than being merely decorative.

That's the opportunity before us today.

## Much Is Given

About this time my freshman year, one chilly November morning, I was listening to Shirley Mullen, the school's provost, teach my history course. Tall and lean with a crown of red hair, she was brilliant and commanding and noble. That morning she detoured from the content outlined on the whiteboard, as great professors typically do, and I'll never forget what she said: "To whom much is given, much is required."

I'd heard this phrase my whole life from my parents. It'd become a sort of mantra for me, but I never knew it was a verse in the Bible.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded," Shirley scribbled on the board, "and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (see Luke 12:48).

As the minute hand stretched to signal the end of class, Shirley gave an impassioned appeal about the rarity of our education, the privilege we have to scan the annals of history and impact our world. Never before has humanity known more, and never have we had a greater responsibility to do something worthy of this wealth of information and opportunities.

"If we knew, if we could truly grasp the reality of what we have and the responsibility it affords us," she exclaimed, "it would keep us up at night."

Did this keep me up at night? *Sometimes*, I thought. *Probably not often enough.*

I left shaken, inspired, and grateful I didn't understand my

full responsibility to the world yet. I'll never forget that morning, because Shirley's passionate speech shifted the paradigm of my taken-for-granted education. And I did toss and turn for a few nights after that.

We have so much life to live, Ash, and so few breaths to do it in.

Yours sincerely,

*XA*

PS—How are you and your little sister getting along? Better, I hope?

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

ROBERT FROST<sup>1</sup>

CHAPTER 3

ON: TIME & BECOMING

We have what we seek,  
it is there all the time, and if we give it time,  
it will make itself known to us.

THOMAS MERTON

JANUARY 7

Dearest Ash,

Happy New Year!

There's such energy in this week. Do you feel it, dear girl? A light humming all around as the world reflects and rests and prepares to break into something new. Resolutions have been made, and practiced, and—if they're like mine—forgotten already.

A new year marks the passage of time for all of us. As we hang our calendars we realize how much we have grown through the tiniest of increments, as the compound result of slight daily change is brought suddenly into sharp focus. New years are like tree houses we climb into for an afternoon to look out across the vista of forest we've been wandering through, a place from which we pause to chart our course.

New years give new perspective.

## Becoming Real

So far this year I haven't done much resolution making, but I have done a lot of reflecting. How about you, darling girl?

I'll be one year older on the 22nd this month, and in spite of a culture bent on immortal youth, I've realized something true to the contrary. Life isn't so much about growing up or growing old as it is about *becoming real*. Think of the Tin Man, who journeyed all the way to the Emerald City in search of a heart—only to discover the gift he longed for already beat inside his chest. What he'd gained, it turned out, was not a physical heart, but the capacity to love along the way. His was, in a sense, becoming real.

When I was a year old my godparents gave me a white stuffed bunny with floppy legs and round black eyes and two pink stitches that crisscrossed for her mouth. She was an Easter gift from a local department store, and because I was too young to have any say in the matter, my mom named her Esther, because it sounded like the holiday. There was nothing remarkable or

even memorable about my bunny, but to me, she was perfect. And she became more perfect, the more I loved her. The more I kissed her forehead and dressed her in my baby clothes and wore away her fur until raw material showed through, the more she became *Esther*.



*Loving my bunny, Esther.*

There's a beautiful line in a classic children's book about another beloved bunny of this kind—the Velveteen Rabbit.

You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.<sup>1</sup>

Our world doesn't talk much about becoming real, Ash. It talks about youth and beauty and amassing wealth and influence. But our culture has it wrong. Life is not about becoming somebody; life is about the process of becoming.

Becoming real is the reason you and I are here.

## The Red Mailbox

When I think about becoming real, I think of Marge. Beloved Marge: the woman who has shared her home and her life with me for the past year and a half.

You can't miss the house on Hot Springs Road, its iconic red mailbox welcoming passersby. If you head down the lane beneath the peppercorn leaves, past the towering eucalyptus, you'll be greeted by a single olive tree, her brown ranch house reclining behind it. The place is elegant yet understated—Marge was never one for show. Except for the yard, which is always blooming with a hundred different hues, full of primrose and hydrangeas and ranunculus beneath the ancient oaks. Winter at Marge's house tastes like fresh figs and artichokes; it smells like warm persimmon and garden rose and cool, damp earth.

It's a place where I've watched generations of young and old pass through for an afternoon tea or a walk in the garden or to drop off a holiday gift. I felt special, getting to live with Marge. But the fact is, I am just *one* in a long line of people Marge and her late husband, Hugh, invited to take shelter for a season in their Montecito home. My friend Christina resided there for two years before me, and to this day we call ourselves de facto cousins. Marge has become a grandmother to us both.

In a word, she is golden. And it's not just the halo of honey-colored hair that encircles her head. Marge's glow is soul-deep, in the way a coin at the bottom of a pool makes the surface shimmer with light. She is as regal as the Queen of England and as warm as Belle, her old yellow Lab.

Marge has had a more profound impact on my life than almost anyone else. She has grit and quiet charisma, and she tells it like it is. I mean, *really* tells it like it is. If she doesn't like the new fella you're dating, she'll let you know it the moment he walks out the door. This became my secret means of vetting potential suitors for my friends and myself. I'd just ask if she liked the poor bloke once he left, and that would determine it.

*With Marge at my  
going away party,  
before I moved to  
San Francisco.*



Katee Grace Clay

Marge was never wrong.

She also forgets that she is in her mideighties. We were having lunch recently at the Montecito Inn, eating slices of their iconic coconut cake with the flair of Marie Antoinette, when a group of octogenarians pushed their walkers by.

“Look at all the *old* people in here!” Marge exclaimed. I couldn’t tell if she was serious—she was likely a few years their senior.

Living with Marge has made me think about life backward, with the end in mind. I suppose she has shown me what it means to build a legacy. Marge makes me want to live out stories I can tell my grandchildren, or the young people yet to be born that I’ll get to mentor someday. Stories of skydiving and mountain hikes, of deep-sea dives and life-changing conversations. Stories that mean something, unlike the things I spend most of my hours worrying about—like whether I want my coffee hot or iced or when a dress will go on sale or how many likes my social media post received.

Our culture fears old age, Ash, but watching Marge has helped me embrace it. To see it like a lifetime achievement award. I want the sort of heritage she’s left, to make the kind of impact she’s made, one person and one community at a time.

For decades Marge and Hugh have owned an outdoor plaza in downtown Santa Barbara called La Arcada. Ivy clings to the walls of local shops framed by red tile roofs as flags from every country flutter above the statues of everyday people that speckle the walkways and park benches. Those charming statues became a bit of a local attraction over the years, but there are no statues of Marge—here or anywhere else in the world. Her legacy has been her imprint on souls.

And that’s just the way she would want it to be.

## Desert Time

My most memorable travel adventures? Well Ash, one immediately comes to mind. During the first summer I lived with Marge, I took an incredible journey: to Jordan, in the middle of the Middle East. I brought my mom—her first trip outside North America. None of that typical Paris or London first-time traveler stuff! We went to visit my cousins who were living in Amman, the capital of the country.

“Ahlan wha salan, fil Jordan!” exclaimed my cousin’s four-year-old twins. *Welcome to Jordan!*

I surprised myself with how comfortable I felt in the Middle East, even amid unexpected discomforts. The night we arrived I collapsed, jet-lagged and delusional, on a small bed in the guest room. Then I shot upright at four a.m., the blaring of an Arabic chant reverberating through an open window overhead. A few deep breaths and a laugh with my mom in the adjacent bed, I lay down once more, the Muslim call to prayer still echoing in my dreams.

We explored that buzzing Middle Eastern country with its natural wonders and ruins, and then went camping in Wadi Rum. *Wadi* means valley in Arabic, and Jordan is known for its majestic valleys. Growing up, I hated camping. It usually involved bugs, and dull days at tourist campsites, and my brother pinching my arm along hikes when my parents weren’t looking. But camping in Wadi Rum was different. It was mystical.

We were greeted by a lanky, young Bedouin with an awkward smile and an epic unibrow. He loaded us onto makeshift benches in the back of a covered white pickup truck and bounced us across the amber desert. Up and down the rolling sand dunes we drove, all of them radiant shades of sepia and rose gold and burnt orange, the sky a cloudless, cornflower blue above. He

showed us where Lawrence of Arabia camped, and parked atop the tallest dunes to let us run down the sides. If you run fast enough, Ash, you feel weightless, floating down the face of glittering sand.

At one point, our Bedouin friend abruptly stopped the truck and told us to get out. We did so without thinking, leaving our bags and packs in the back. “Meet me ahead!” he yelled, then sped off without us.

For a moment, I panicked. We had no belongings, no cell service, no nothing. And then I smiled, shoulders relaxing, as I drank in the moment. Conversations quieted, and we let the magnitude of space consume us.

It was a moment when time dissolved.

We followed his wheel tracks through the open desert, our spirits radiating in the silence, until we rounded the corner of a glowing rock face and heard the faint undulations of Arabic music ahead. There was our guide, sitting by a small fire, *shisha* pipe in hand.

“Who wants to try first?” He grinned.

“I do!” my mom said, running forward.

## Chronos Time

Until that moment in the desert, my world had been spinning, phone ringing, emails pinging, on what the Greeks called *chronos* time—time that’s quantifiable, measurable, dependable, and immutable. Not even my away message could protect me from this barrage, for I willingly gave into every whirring demand. I could not disconnect.

But then I was dropped in the desert, and I saw the world a different way. I watched the sun go down that night and rise the next morning, suspending the infinite desert in the warmth of

its flame. I sipped sugared mint tea and sat in silence and let the stillness seep in.

Our world and our days run on *chronos* time, the time of alarm clocks and flight schedules<sup>2</sup>. To be honest, I've never gotten along well with *chronos*. You could say we had a working relationship, but I wouldn't call us friends.

For me, *chronos* is a bad assembly-line manager who will crank up the conveyer belt every chance it gets. Give me a task and we'll pack it in, which is great for doing lots of things, but terrible for doing them well. I'm optimistic by nature, which makes me overoptimistic about how long things take. Maybe this is why I am five minutes late to e-v-e-r-y-thing. *Sorry about last Tuesday*. There are only a select few people this works well with, like my best friend, Christie, because we usually both show up late to meet each other, at the same time.

Elizabeth Taylor wrestled with *chronos* too, you know. She used to say she'd be late for her own funeral, and so, when she did pass away, they started the ceremony five minutes after the hour.

## Kairos Time

Although I wrestle with *chronos* time, my life has a tendency to get lost in it. Amid my constant need to achieve, I surrender my days to the clock. I strive and push and struggle and schedule and rush. But Ash, there's another kind of time the Greeks wrote about.

The time the desert taught me: *kairos*.

*Kairos* time is measured by moments, not minutes. It's the feeling when you watch the waves ceaselessly hit the shore or see someone you love after being a very long distance apart. *Kairos* is living, kinetic, moving, breathing, and expanding. If

chronos clocks, then kairos creates. It's in chronos that a landscaper bills his hours working on the yard. It's in kairos that a toddler explores the infinite world of a flower patch.

Madeleine L'Engle, one of my favorite authors growing up, wrote more profoundly on time than anyone I've encountered. Her novels dealt with faith and quantum physics and things so insightful and true that she had to write the books for children. It was, she would say, too complicated for adults to understand. She described kairos as: "Real time. God's time. That time which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy."<sup>3</sup>

We cannot stop the physicality of time, but we can expand the space within it.

No matter what I do or buy or where I go this spring, in six months the world will turn golden, and in sixty years we will have wrinkles. But in those years, however many we have, we have the chance to magnify the quality of days. To win wrinkles that make us more beautiful, more real, because they're made of smile lines from decades of joy ground in. The sort of wrinkles that display an authenticity and wisdom only a weathered face can possess.

In chronos, we age. In kairos, we become real. Like the Velveteen Rabbit. I don't know about you, Ash, but I want a life of kairos days.

## Places

I went for a walk today along Butterfly Beach, my favorite place to stroll. The sand there is held back by a retaining wall of cement and stone, aptly named the Biltmore Wall after the glamorous hotel that stretches behind it like a Hollywood starlet.

The Biltmore Wall has a reputation among college students for a certain purpose. At Westmont we called them "DTRs," or

“Define the Relationship” talks, and we always had them at the wall. We’d stare out at the endless black pool of ocean, perched on the rippling ledge of cement with our legs dangling over the side. Two souls embracing the air together, a breath away, a world apart. Getting together. Breaking up.

As I grew older, though, the wall’s meaning began to change, and it became its own kind of home for me. I would return there frequently, sometimes daily, to run Belle along the loop of local road. Or I would speed down the hill from Marge’s house and park my car there at dusk, catching the last bit of sunset beside other onlookers, like spectators at a fireworks display.

Ash, there are places we encounter in life that touch a certain part of us. Holy places. Locations that capture kairos and make our spinning lives stand still. These are places that speak to us. Every time we walk that street, or stand in that meadow, or stare at that shore, there it is. A sense of meaning, a stilling presence, an inexplicable peace.

For me, these places are as everyday as the areas that grew me up, and as exotic as the faraway, foreign landscapes that imprinted themselves in my memory. Each one distinct, knit as a thread in my story.

It’s the hill above my parents’ house that I climb after jogs. The place where I can stare down, sweaty and breathless, at my old high school and small town by the sea, and process all the hard and confusing and beautiful things of growing up. It’s my cousins’ room in Atlanta, at the top of their creaky staircase and down the musty hall, on the floor where I spent teenage summers writing in journals and staying up to all hours of the night musing about God, and cute boys, and the meaning of life.

It’s the chapel at Westmont, and the forest in Brussels. It’s a square I stumbled onto in London at dusk, where you can buy fish and chips with mushy peas. It’s an expat cafe in Cambodia with the best caipirinhas in the world, and Ta Promh, a playground

of ruins tangled in tree roots I climbed through in a downpour. It's the hidden benches of Central Park in fall, and an overgrown trail off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Asheville. In San Francisco, it's the chandeliered hall of the Palace Hotel and the striking columns of the Palace of Fine Arts. It's the winding cliffs leading up to Half Moon Bay through the haze and pumpkin fields and the moss-covered trees. It's the waterways of Bosnia at dusk, and those copper hills of Wadi Rum when sunrise breaks across the desert and lights the world on fire.

All these places are more than destinations, or even memories, for me. They are the locations where my soul feels open to the world, centered in time and space. They are homes for my spirit, where something in me comes awake. There's a frequency I pick up I don't tune into otherwise. I not only speak to God in these places, I listen. I stand on hallowed ground.

## The Cemetery

As I get ready to move, I've been reflecting on my years in Santa Barbara, a season that meant more to me than any other because throughout it I became more me. More real, you could say.

If I were a city, I would be Santa Barbara. It's small yet sweeping, peaceful yet vibrant, and it's built on community. People come from all over the world to pass the brilliant springs and foggy Junes and sweet Septembers. They come to walk on the pier and lie on the beaches and dance on the streets and crack confetti eggs during August's Fiesta. But the tourists don't visit one of my favorite places in the city. I suppose few locals do either.

The Santa Barbara Cemetery. I love this city's graveyard.

It might sound macabre, but I find it inspiring. Especially in the midst of a new year, as I stare across the span of my life. You

would never know it's there, tucked up on the cliffs overlooking the water. In college I would go to the cemetery some early mornings, vanilla tea latte in hand, and walk through the names put to rest in the grass and imagine their stories. I would look at the water from between the headstones and envision where my life would lead, what my stone would say.

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes often about the difference between résumé and obituary virtues. Between the accomplishments we pitch potential employers and the victories and values spoken over us at our memorials.

I suppose that's why I liked visiting the cemetery, Ash. Amid the stressful absurdities of term papers and boys who didn't call, it gave me perspective. It allowed me, like my time with Marge, to look at life backward. With the end in mind.

## Resolutions

I've been thinking as I write this letter that I do have a New Year's resolution, actually, and that is to let go. Whether it's painting, or writing, or cleaning, or dancing—most of the time I so desperately want to be perfect that I waste my time away with striving.

I'm resolving this year to paint in wide strokes, to write in mad flurries, to clean with broad sweeps, to dance with abandon. At least by myself. To create space for desert moments.

Let us always remember, Ash, that the goal is not to live, but to live fully alive. In the words of Emily Dickinson, "Forever—is composed of Nows."<sup>4</sup>

And speaking of now: I need to have you over to Marge's house soon for dinner, before I move. Why don't you bring your roommate, Madison? She sounds wonderful, and I can't wait to meet her. Let's do it on Friday, because there's such happiness to

Fridays. It's my favorite day of the week. We can pick up some things at the farmer's market on Coast Village Road, and the rest we can find in the garden. Marge has a glorious, overgrown, hidden gem of a garden.

Come whenever. We'll be on kairos time.

Big hug,

*KA*

PS—How wonderful your cousin is having a baby! Since the shower is soon and you're probably in need of a gift, I recommend you look for a snuggly stuffed animal with hangy-down legs to be easily carried and hugged. Ideally a bunny.

Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost,  
No birth, identity, form—no object of the world.  
Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing;  
Appearance must not foil, nor shifted sphere confuse thy brain.  
Ample are time and space—ample the fields of Nature.  
The body, sluggish, aged, cold—the embers left from earlier fires,  
The light in the eye grown dim,  
shall duly flame again . . .

WALT WHITMAN<sup>5</sup>

CHAPTER 4

ON: LOVE & CHOOSING

If you are not too long,  
I will wait here for you all my life.

*OSCAR WILDE*

MARCH 29

Dear Ash,

I can't wait any longer. Tell me about this boy! He's a junior? What's his name? You've only spoken once, is that right?

I assume he's the same one you told me about in February, who sat next to you in English lit and asked to borrow your pen. Is that him? I knew some small flame was alight by the way you told the story. And now he's written you?

Great crushes make for great stories. For all the wonderful torture of feelings and butterflies and embarrassing fumbles; what other thing could make you feel like you're flying and falling and twirling, all at once? Sometimes it's plain fun to have a crush. It gives us someone to dress up for.

When it comes to amusing romantic encounters, oh, the stories I could tell. Some were great crushes of my own, while

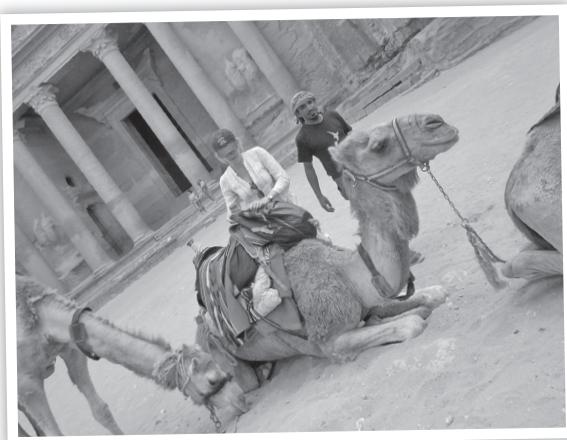
others are tales of unrequited love I will never forget—more for their humor more than any measure of actual romance.

## Three Camels

After my first week in Jordan, so many things felt familiar. The hearty tang of hummus and the browned halloumi cheese, the mysterious eyes and curious glances of veiled women on the streets, the groups of young men walking through malls and cat-calling girls and holding each other's hands. I found this ironic, because holding a girl's hand in public was completely taboo.

In Jordan, the locals drive as if they're still riding camels. In the desert days of old, my cousin Ruth explained, the camel with its nose furthest out always had the right of way. Whenever we came to an unmarked roundabout, I watched the cars edge forward in the dusty rush and, just like the camels in times gone by, the car with its bumper out furthest went first.

Camels became the theme of our trip, from driving alongside them as they ran down the highway's edge, to riding their wobbly humps through the burgundy walls of Petra. One day



*My Bedouin  
savior before the  
proposal. Note  
his three-camel  
offering.*

we made the dusty, hot descent into that picturesque valley, where generation upon generation built cities into the carved stone mountain face heralded as one of the Seven New Wonders of the World. There we found a local guide to tour us around on camelback, and that charming Bedouin escort, just four-foot-something tall, decided an American wife was exactly what he wanted that day.

First, he offered my mom one camel for my hand in marriage: the happy animal she was perched upon. He could tell she'd become quite taken with it.

"My daughter is worth much more than *one* camel!" My mom exclaimed.

"Three camels," he countered, hands spread wide in an offering, "and my heart. It is all that I have."

Moved by the mix of unrequited love and pure emotion in his voice, Mom looked back at me in earnest. "Honey, they *are* really cute camels."

I laughed, in mild horror. She turned back to the expectant Bedouin. "That's a generous offer," she replied, "but there's just no way my daughter is going to live in a cave." Which was, in fact, this Bedouin's address.

"Oh, it's no problem," he grinned. "I come to California!"

## Thoughts on Love

So, my dear, since you seem to have love on the brain and I'm afraid you're going to start charging toward an MRS degree—because we've all heard the campus joke, "a ring by spring or your money back"—let's talk a little bit about love and marriage this month.

I'll begin with a few things I used to think.

I used to think relationships were only about finding the

right person . . . until a mentor told me relationships are 50 percent about the right person and 50 percent about the right timing. We can meet a partner who seems like the right fit at the wrong stage in our life, at a time when we're not ready for a lifelong commitment. I've known fellows whom I could have dated, but when I was single, they were not. And vice versa. So friends we stayed. Right person? Who knows. But always wrong time, so it wasn't meant to be.

I also used to think I had no control over timing. But we do, Ash, to some degree. If you are caught up in dating the wrong guy, in an on-again-off-again merry-go-round of heartache, how do you ever expect to meet the right person? You simply won't be available. Your heart won't be free when it's tangled up in the wrong relationship.

So many people see each breakup as a failure. But I've learned to see them as a success. Whether you get married or not, the point is to see if you *should* get married. If you break up, you've found your answer. If you get married, also an answer. Success either way. And if the answer is parting ways, well, you are now that much wiser and prepared for what's next. Every relationship has the power to transform you and shape your character, even the unhappy and slightly more regrettable ones. As my friend Summerly reminds me often: every person who comes into our lives for a time has something to teach us.

## Soul Mates

Ash, I used to think the goal of life was to find our soul mate.

Today, I don't believe that's true. It's not true because your soul is not incomplete until you find another half to make it whole. Are you half a person before you meet a partner, or decreased by half if you and that person part ways? Hardly. The

truth is, no relationship will complete you, darling girl, but the right relationship will enhance you. It will magnify all the best parts and challenge all the bad. It will help you to blossom and bring you to life and make you *more* of who you already are. More of who you were designed to be.

You see, Ash, our souls are not a puzzle designed to fit only one piece. What if your soul mate was born halfway across the world, or died at birth, or married someone else, or lived in another age? We don't find a soul mate, we find a mate for our souls. We choose someone we can connect with on the deepest level, who seems to understand our soul more than we understand it ourselves. Someone with whom our spirits can journey, so long as life allows.

Someone becomes a soul mate in the way two trees grow into one. Inosculation, it's called. Rooted individually but planted side by side, the two trees grow independently until one day—their branches touch. And then gently, as the wind blows and the time goes, their bark abrades and the inner parts graft and the two grow together, as one. On and on this entangling goes. From afar you still see separate trees: two trunks, two sets of roots. But up close you cannot tell where one tree ends and the other begins, so entwined they've become by the weather and the years and the necessity of leaning on each other. Sycamores do this, and willows and olives and ash trees, even.

Marriage trees, some cultures call them.

And so it is with soul mates. We root ourselves beside another, and as the winds of life blow and the storms of life come, we grow together and intertwine until we forever grow as one.

## Falling in Love

People talk a lot about *falling in love*, Ash. And falling in love is wonderful, exhilarating, addictive. A rush of emotional caffeine to the groggy, awakening heart.

I remember my first falling so well. Write to me about yours! I was sixteen going seventeen, just like the Sound of Music song, and he was twenty-two. Dark and mysterious and covered in tattoos, Logan was the worship leader for our youth group. All the girls adored him, but for some odd reason, he gave his attention to me.

And I fell hard.

That crush, so sweet and innocent as our friendship grew, was in fact a tiny scandal in the youth group. High school students weren't supposed to *like* the leaders, and vice versa. So we waited. Which was hard—there's a reason why the word "wait" sounds heavy. But wait we did, through long, arduous months of daydreaming and cryptic messages with Tony Bennett song quotes. My girlfriends and I would watch Logan sing, and he would stare out at me from the stage and my stomach would do triple-toe loops.

Those foggy summer evenings before my senior year our big group of friends built bonfires on the beach and took swing dancing classes downtown. I would wait through the

rotation of fumbling dancers to meet Logan for a twirl before we'd rotate once again. As a leader, he couldn't take me on a date, so instead we all went everywhere together. For my seventeenth birthday he took me and all our friends to a restaurant called Fleur de Lys, where we wore prom dresses and ate tiny dishes of unknown foods handed to us in unison from white-shirted waiters. In the end, all of our friendships flourished. I still wasn't convinced he liked me back, but the uncertainty itself was an adventure.

It was also the first time I opened up to my mom about my heart.

She asked me about Logan one warm evening as I sat on the living room sofa. I paused, debating whether I was ready to share the feelings churning inside me—and then I told her everything. We talked for hours that night, and then many nights after. That summer my mom moved from being just my parent to being my confidante—my friend.

There was growth and beauty and goodness in the long anticipation.

That Valentine's Day I went by Logan's office, still convinced we were only friends and I was reading into things and that it was the most natural thing to drop by on Valentine's Day. I brought him one white rose from my hostess job at a local restaurant, and he played me a song he had written called, "Waiting for June." The month when I would graduate. The month when he, the gentleman he was, would ask my parents for permission to take me on date.

That was the moment I realized he probably—just maybe—actually liked me back.

## Your List

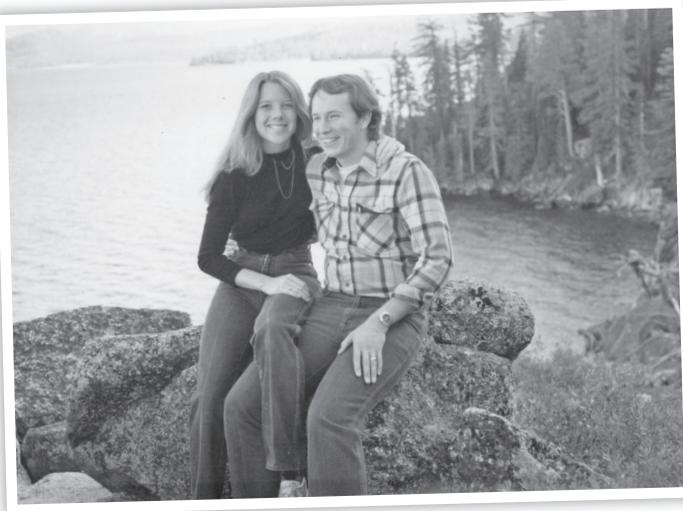
What are your nonnegotiables, Ash? What do you want? What do you need? What will be your litmus test so that when you finally get to know this fella, you can know if he really is *right* for you? When we are dancing in the butterflies, it becomes very easy to know what we want, and nearly impossible to know what we need. It's hard to see what traits we're overlooking when we so badly want some new romance to move onward into the sunset.

I used to laugh at girls who made lists in high school with

the qualities of their dream guy. Now, I think it's wise. I mean, if I make a list for the grocery store, why wouldn't I make a list for my future hubs? When I don't make a list for the supermarket, which I often don't, I usually go there hungry and come home with snacks and carbs and not much substance or produce or any of the ingredients I actually require for dinner that night. When it comes to marriage, we ought to know what we need, what we want, and what we absolutely won't settle for. If we know we want kids, why date a guy who is wholly uninterested in childrearing? If we know we're going gluten-free, why marry a wheat farmer?

Let me be clear on one more thing: "Six foot two, chiseled abs, and croons like Sinatra" does not a good list make. If those are important qualities to you, put them in the "Nice to Have" column. But I encourage you to dig deeper. Describe his character. How does he treat his family? What about his heart? What are the qualities you absolutely won't budge on—or, when you see them in a man, will make your heart soar?

When my mom was in her early twenties, she got caught up



*Mom and  
Dad as  
newlyweds.*

in a toxic relationship. He appeared to be a charming, fun-loving guy throughout their first year together, but then something changed, and he became someone she could no longer trust and soon began to fear.

After that experience, my mom knew exactly what she wanted. Three things, actually. She determined in her heart that the man she would marry would be honest, kind, and faithful. She met my dad around that time, when she applied for a job working at his family's business, a local art supply store in Santa Cruz called Palace. A starving art graduate, my mom figured she could use a discount on art supplies. Smart woman. The store manager went to my dad and whispered, "I think you should interview this one." She got the job, and later when my mom needed a friend to turn to, there was my dad. My honest, kind, and faithful dad.

You could say my mom married her list. And a lifetime discount on art supplies.

## Working in Love

After so many months of liking, Logan and I did, eventually, date. We waited until the summer after my senior year and it was awkward and wonderful and so much fun. We went boating on the lake and strolled the Santa Cruz Boardwalk and spent Saturday nights with our friends eating french-fries in a red booth at Chili's. I loved everything about that summer.

What I know now, that I didn't know then, is that you don't keep falling forever. Soon the bright summer nights faded, as did the newness of everything, and we were left that fall with just ourselves and a relationship to tend to. I went off to college and he went off to art school and life got a lot more complicated for the both of us.

Ash, there's a reason why songs and movies and novels liken falling in love to a high. Falling in love releases serotonin to the brain—its own certain type of euphoria. The theme of so many daydreams and Jane Austen novels and rom-com box office hits, the very process of falling in love is addictive.

But there is another amorous stage, I've discovered, and it doesn't make many Top 40 hits. There is falling in love, Ash, and then there is *working in love*.

Here's what I've learned: Working in love is where the relationship becomes *real*—a feeling so raw it burns. Working in love is when you have the choice to either run the other way, or run at something so much bigger than yourself. It's the point of a relationship when you decide the risk of leaning in is worth more than the security of standing on your own. Working in love is when you fight, hard, but don't slam the door behind you. You stay, you learn, you get honest—with the other person and with yourself. You share what you feel at the core of your being, and the myriad life experiences that led you to that feeling, and you see what he does in response.

Does he listen? Does he hear you? Does he work in love too?

This, in some ways, is the most vulnerable love. When your emotional walls are about to spring up like battle ramparts; when every mechanism you've ever created to protect you from heartache wants to override the system, but you let that person in anyway. You know full well he could set fire to the motherboard, but you trust that he won't. And you believe that even if he does let you down, you'll be okay. Because you know how to heal, to forgive, to let go.

That, my dear, is working in love. And it ain't the stuff they show you in the movies.

## In the Wall

As Logan and I passed that next year together as boyfriend and girlfriend, he walked away from the church for a season—an all-too-common journey for those who devote themselves to ministry. He was burned-out, and our relationship suffered for that and a dozen other reasons.

My church, Reality Carpinteria, was being built that year, and we met each Sunday morning in a warehouse as the steel beams formed around us. I went each Sunday with my roommates. Logan came at first, but didn't love it. The night before the plaster went up, the whole church gathered to pray for the future of our community. I was handed a permanent marker, and as music played we wrote our prayers and the names of the people we were praying for beneath the beams.

I wrote Logan's name in the wall.

We broke up that autumn, parked outside the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. Yes, the one where we got our Caramel Ice Blendeds last week.

And you know what, Ash? I am so grateful for that journey with Logan. For the adventure we had and the lessons we learned and the friendships we formed in the process.

The truth is, in all of my relationships, Ash, wonderful as they were at the beginnings and as hard as they were in the endings, I've walked away thankful. My small cadre of suitors has shaped me, and challenged me, and pushed me. They've allowed me to see who I am, and to know absolutely who I am not. They've helped me discover who I want to be. I believe, with every fiber of my being, that we are better people today for having shared our lives for a season.

That's how I feel about Logan. We courted and we dated and we broke-up, and I wouldn't change that journey for the world.

## Aging in Love

Hugh, Marge's husband, passed away over a decade before I came to live on Hot Springs Road, and yet I feel as though I knew him. The warmth of his smile, his character, his affable approach. A pillar in the local community, Hugh embraced any quiet chance to help someone in need.

They were married late for their generation. Marge in her early forties and Hugh a few years older. They had courted on and off for years before that, their lives or locations or other romances always pulling them apart. Until one day, Hugh went all-in and declared his intentions, and the rest is history. Their love, which spanned four decades, was a romance for the ages.

My mom came down to visit me in Santa Barbara one weekend last year. It was the first time she and Marge had met. We sat together in the kitchen sipping coffee and chewing popovers hot from the oven as Marge shared long remembrances of Hugh. She rose from the dining room table at one point to clear the dishware, and passed by his picture. Unaware of our watching eyes, Marge nonchalantly kissed her fingers and pressed them to Hugh's face behind the glass.

I want a love like that. Don't you?

To me, Marge and Hugh's love embodies a legacy. It was bigger than the both of them, and they poured out that love on their community.

That, sweet daydreamer, is the greatest kind of love. My favorite kind, and the one our culture so often forgets: *aging in love*. This is the twinkle in the eye of a couple that's been married forty years, when they look at one another like they know something that you, young and naïve and supple-skinned as you are, cannot know and will not know until you've journeyed in love for as long as they have many—many years from now.

If falling in love is champagne and a silk dress, then aging

in love is a cup of chai tea and a cashmere sweater. Soothing, warm, familiar, with a spice all its own. A spice you've grown to enjoy as the sweetest of flavors.

Aging in love is seeing your partner one morning for the 48,924th time, and, with a breath of delight, catching a new fleck of color in their eye.

That's the kind of love I want.

## Hold Loosely

Ash, this fellow—from what you've told me—sounds like a wonderful guy, truly. And it was responsible of him to give you your pen back. But I must add briefly that just because he's a nice guy does not mean he's the *right* guy, or that this is the right season for the two of you. I hear you that you think he is perfect, and probably your future husband. That's exciting. But you are also young and your world is changing and he is not the last great guy you will ever meet. I swear it.

Some say when you find the one who's right for you, you must hold on for dear life lest the whole thing slip away. But when it comes to relationships, I've found we can only hold one another loosely, with open hands and hearts. You cannot nurture a living thing by suffocating it.

Imagine your palms out, open to the sky, being filled to their brims with sparkling grains of sand. Have you heard this analogy? We'll imagine Jordanian sand, in honor of my Bedouin friend. This is your relationship, Ash, the object of your affection. Picture yourself squeezing the sand tight to protect it from spilling out. You grip it tighter and tighter. Most people don't realize they do this until it's too late, until the volume of the relationship has seeped through their fingers and slipped from their palms, cascading faster and faster toward the floor.

Hold your relationships—and in this case, your hope for a relationship!—with strength, poise, and balance. But above all else, hold it loosely, that you may hold it at all.

## Be Your List

The great Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “We must be our own before we can be another’s.”<sup>1</sup> Too many young women waste away their days dreaming about a partner who will make their dreams come true, rather than building the life of their dreams. I’ve been guilty of this many times over.

I used to think the right man would bring my life excitement and community and meaning. I thought a man would be my adventure. Have you felt this way? Now, I’ve discovered I can make my own adventure. I’m building a life I love with all of those things. A husband shouldn’t be expected to supply the life I want, but I pray—if that day comes—he will enhance it.

Once we’ve made our lists, the best thing to focus on is becoming the person a life partner of our dreams would be thrilled to marry. And trusting the imperfect process too.

Logan and I were never meant to get married, Ash, but we were meant to be in one another’s lives. We had something to teach each other. I wrote his name in the walls of our church and walked away. Years later and two lives apart, Logan became a pastor in those very walls.

Sometimes the end of the romance isn’t the end of the story.

I’ve waxed poetic for long enough, so lastly, Ash, I will simply remind you of this:

You are worth it. You are worth fighting for, worth sacrificing for, worth the commitment, worth the wait. You, my darling girl, are worthy of adoration every single day, in every

single way. I want that for you. I want you to have a confetti-falling kind of love. I believe you will.

And, remember, in the words of Amy March, the youngest of the *Little Women*, “You don’t need scores of suitors! You only need one. If he’s the right one.”

With that, I am off to make a list. I have nothing in the fridge for dinner.

All my heart,

*SA*

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

*C. S. LEWIS<sup>2</sup>*

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