

DEAR ME by Meghan Kinney

Dear Nine-Year-Old Me,

Sweet girl, you are trying so hard to maintain a persona of maturity and strength. You want others to think you've got things figured out. You're the oldest; you want dad to watch over you and see that you can help with adult things now that he isn't here to do them himself.

Turns out you don't know the first thing about adult responsibility but you'll pretend like you do, because it feels like the right thing to do. You've never been shy about words and speaking your mind, but how does a nine-year-old talk to other kids about death?

It feels weird, like you are out of place. This event has shaped your entire life and is all-consuming, but how do you talk about it without seeming like a stormy cloud over everybody else's day?

Dear Thirteen-Year-Old Me,

You've been working so hard on trying to be brave again. Any activities outside of home make those anxious thoughts go round and round and round.

*What if I'm not there and something happens to mom while I'm away?
What if I fight with my sisters and say something mean and it is the last thing they ever hear me say? Who would we live with if something happened to mom; would we have to lose our home too?*

Every year, you've had to have that same dreaded conversation with your teachers as you fill out those emergency cards and have to write "deceased" next to "father's name and phone number".

It's getting harder and harder to remember his smell, remember the sound of his voice. You hold on to those precious memories and pictures, and hang them up in your locker to remind yourself that he is always with you.

Dear Sixteen-Year-Old Me,

There are so many things that have been impacted by childhood loss that you would have never expected. Learning to drive is agonizing: what if you get into an accident and kill somebody's dad and a child has to grow up without a parent because of your mistake?

Going on the annual family beach vacation is a double-edged sword: you can feel dad everywhere you are and this brings you immediate comfort and a sense of security, but also an aching sadness that it's not the same without him.

You almost fail English twice because you get almost all the way done with an assignment and burst into tears and frantic breaths once it's time to submit it. Once something is finished, you can't go back and change it. You don't get a second chance to make things better if it doesn't turn out the way you want it to. You don't want to disappoint your family and the legacy of this amazing man, and you spend many hours awake at night trying make sure this doesn't happen.

Dear Nineteen-Year-Old-Me,

You have now experienced quite a few other losses in your life: grandparents, an uncle, family friends. You begin to grieve the deaths of these beautiful individuals, but you also relive that first major loss, as you watch your cousins and aunts and uncles learn what it is like to live their lives without the person that raised them. Each loss hurts in a different way than before, but something unexpected happens. You begin to look at the grieving process as beautiful, raw, and authentic. You recognize how lucky you are to have a support system and you begin to slowly accept the things you can't change. You focus on the littlest, most beautiful parts of life because you know that no matter what else happens, these little moments give you a reason to wake up in the morning and live fully. You decide to live honestly and be transparent about what you feel and what you

need from others. You begin to practice self-care, because you realize that you deserve to love yourself and that dad would want you to feel good about who you are and the decisions you make for yourself.

Dear Twenty-Four-Year-Old Me,

You are currently a teacher of students who are the same age as you were when you lost your dad. You remember feeling so old, but you look at these innocent, tooth-less rugrats running around and realize how much they have left to experience in their beautiful lives. You know that as you continue on life's ever-changing journey, you will reach new milestones that will fill you with bittersweet moments. You will feel a sense of adventure and excitement, followed by a pang of intense sadness knowing that he won't be there to dance with you at your wedding, or to help you move your couch through that too-narrow doorway into your first home, or to hold his grandchildren with a misty look in his eyes that he will blame on allergies. But you are ready to handle that, because you have made it this far, and you're not doing it alone. This loss has shaped you, but it has not defeated you. As Dad would say, "keep your chin up". You've got this.

- Meghan Kinney

<https://childrengrieve.org/awareness/dear-me-letters/154-dear-me-by-meghan-kinney>