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Letter to Myself

by Micah Cozzens

You did nothing but drool until the age of eight, the same year you finally learned to read. You were—to put it mildly—developmentally challenged. Social interactions were learned painstakingly, almost as painstakingly as piano. All those plunked-out notes over so many afternoons. Your music teacher was nothing short of a saint.

Your first friend was foisted upon you, when your baby tooth fell out in her lap. After wrapping it in tin foil foraged from a Pringles can, she said she liked you, and that you belonged to her, officially. And so you became hers. And when her father started pushing her into walls, you wondered at it because your father called you pumpkin and bought you ice cream with strawberries atop swirls. He knelt down on floors and helped you arrange your stuffed animals in a congress. He took this as a matter of course. He never shoved you into a wall or snapped the neck of your dog. Hers did.

Your mother kept you perhaps too well fed; your cheeks were always thick with slices of cheese, rounded full from the good wheat bread she made from scratch. And when you weren't eating, your mouth hung open, in a state of perpetual bafflement. You were a PB and J brand of stupid. Your sisters had to explain sex at least four times before you understood.

You played outside during the summer and ate popsicles while sitting beside lizards on the front porch. And when you played in the red, rain-flushed mud, the grime accumulated on your unnaturally pale surfaces until you were more dirt than child. And your teeth—they were gap-toothed. You were certainly never cute. You were preternaturally solemn, somewhat inclined to sulking, and a little violent. When you played soccer, you never had the sportsmanship of other girls. You shoved people down, hit them hard. You wanted to win. When Trish McMann called you ugly, you shoved her too. She never called you that again.

Except you weren't always violent. Sometimes things got to you. One time a dog whelped and its newborn choked and died right in front of where you sat, and you sobbed for two weeks straight. You were so sorry. Who knows what for.

You stopped eating when you were twelve. Someone had called you fat. Who knows what for. And so you stopped eating. And one day, after one hospital trip too many, your mother opened your mouth and put a peach inside and worked your jaws for you, helped you chew. You swallowed on your own. It was a good peach. You picked up another and ate it too. She went back to peeling potatoes. And so you remained alive.

At age eighteen, you told this to a coworker, a man from Ghana—drooling and all. He said he too had been an odd child. "I wouldn't eat either," he said. "So my aunt told me to stand on

her feet. She said that when I ate, the food would pass through me and into her.”

“Did it work?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Children are so senseless,” you said. “So strange.”

“Don’t overthink it,” he said. “Peaches and clean underwear. Just give kids peaches and clean underwear. The rest will figure itself out.”

Dear self, when your shift ended late that night, you bought yourself a peach and praised God for keeping objectively useless things alive.

He answered with the wail of a baby, from the next apartment over. The cycle of drool began for some other child, and you were—in your solemn, useless, drooling way—more than thrilled.