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Dear Little Me: A Response to My Former Self

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

DEAR LITTLE ME: A RESPONSE TO MY FORMER SELF

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Carly Steele

2014

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Carly Steele, and entitled Dear Little Me: A Response to My Former Self, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Meri-Jane Rochelson

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 7, 2014

The thesis of Carly Steele is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

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DEDICATION

For the little selves we still have somewhere inside of us,

and for the little ones who have yet to grow up.

For everyone discussed in this book,

Especially my family and close friends:

I hope you love me more than you already do,

and do not disown me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If we are going in chronological order, I would like to thank my parents for putting me in Pre-K early and enrolling me in early reading classes. I would like to thank them for all of the books I could have ever wanted and for quizzing me on them before we ate dinner. And thank you for the financial support, and for raising me, and for all of the things that you expect me to thank you for. I would also like to apologize for crying one Christmas, because I got books instead of Limited Too makeup like my older sister. You were wise not to give me the makeup— I realize that now. Speaking of my sister, I would like to thank her for unknowingly being my first reader. You had no clue when you first started reading my diary without my permission that it would be available for the world to read one day. More importantly, thank you for being my sister and my friend.

I would like to thank everyone else who is mentioned in this book, even though your name has been changed. I'm sure you know who you are, and I hope you aren't pissed. If you don't know who you are, then enjoy the mystery. I would especially like to thank my English teachers from middle school at St. John's; you helped me discover my love for writing, and I am truly thankful. No jokes here, I am too grateful.

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Finally, I would like to thank my boyfriend. Thank you for encouraging me to major in creative writing, go to graduate school, and achieve my goal of writing a book. Thank you for loving me— made up or bare face, happy or grumpy. Thank you for the last five and a half years, for the next fifty, and beyond.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DEAR LITTLE ME: A RESPONSE TO MY FORMER SELF

by

Carly Steele

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

DEAR LITTLE ME: A RESPONSE TO MY FORMER SELF is a 180-page memoir in which the adult self at age twenty-three responds to the diary entries and writings of the younger version of herself. The original diary entries, which were written from 2001 to 2004, feature the typical troubles of a middle school girl: crushes, cliques, and puberty. However, the diary entries also explore darker events such as September 11, divorce, bullying, and self-image issues. When the adult me re-read these diaries, I felt a strong desire to respond to my former self, offering her advice and encouragement, both serious and humorous.

DEAR LITTLE ME is unique in form, as it combines diary entries and essay. In the same way that Amy Krouse Rosenthal's *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AN ORDINARY LIFE* adopts the well-known format of the encyclopedia to create familiarity for her readers, DEAR LITTLE ME stays true to the diary format. Modeling the new prose on the original form and syntax of diary entries is intended to create pathos by appealing to readers' sense of nostalgia for their own lost childhoods. I intend to help readers remember their challenging pre-teen years and to recognize how many of the challenges of those years are still with us as adults, albeit in different forms.

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Foreword

(Before I write to Little Carly, let me write to you.)

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up my odd little book, for whatever reason you decided to read it. Maybe you liked the pretty cover, or your one of your more bookish friends gave it to you for your birthday or Christmas. If you are “little”, maybe you found it in your older sister’s room or your mom heard from another mom that it was a good book for “girls your age”. If you are “big” (like I am now), maybe you want to understand what is going through your daughter’s head right now. Or maybe you don’t have a daughter, but you have that BuzzFeed-like nostalgia for the good old days of adolescence. Or maybe you know me, and you thought it would be a nice gesture to read this or I made you read it. Well whatever the reason you picked up this book, I’m glad you did. But I’m sure you are wondering, what is this book all about? Why did this woman decide to type up her old diary entries from middle school and respond to them? How crazy! Well, I’ll tell you...

It started when I learned to read at age 4, and I became obsessed with books. Instead of playing with the other kids on the playground after school, I would find a deserted tunnel slide and read. (No joke. My mom came to pick me up, and the teachers couldn’t find me. When they finally did, I was in the tunnel slide reading.) Often instead of playing in my room, I would read. I even enjoyed most my summer reading growing up, except *The Old Man and the Sea*. I was a girl obsessed with books— Roald Dahl, *The Babysitters Club* series, Judy Blume, you name it.

At one point in time, I was especially obsessed with *Dear America*. Each book in the series was a fictional girl’s diary, some of you 90s kids may remember these. They

were always featured prominently at the school's book fair. These diaries took place in important times in America's history, from the Pilgrims' arrival to America to the sinking of the Titanic. I loved these books, and I read them again and again and again. So, it makes sense that at age ten, I decided to write my own diaries.

On my last trip to my mom's house, I found those diaries in the room I lived in from thirteen to seventeen. The diaries were in a collaged shoebox that my mom decorated for me when I was six or so. She put all of my favorite things at the time on the box: Cinderella castle, a lion, ice cream, *Pocahontas* (which I am oddly watching on Netflix right now), American Girl dolls, ducks, and of course, books. There are some odd choices on the box too, like the Taco Bell emblem, a walrus with sunglasses, and a donkey. Maybe my mom knew I would be a Democrat. I'm not sure what the walrus was supposed to represent...

In the box, there were four diaries and a school autobiography project amongst other random trinkets. I found ticket stubs from all the Broadway shows I had seen, a horseshoe from a summer at camp, and a birthday card from my now-deceased grandmother. There was the little yellow pouch where I would put my tooth for the tooth fairy, so it wouldn't get lost under my pillow.

There are only five diaries in existence now, but I remember others. Most of them are purple, which is weird, because that has always been one of my least favorite colors, even as a kid. I knew then that I needed to read them. But why did I feel that way? Well, lately, I have been feeling more and more like an adult, and less and less like a kid. I know. I'm 23 years old. I should be feeling like an adult. But it's scary nonetheless. I recently watched Judd Apatow's *This is 40*, and every time there was a conflict between

the parents and the daughters, I sided with the parents. I didn't understand what was wrong with the preteen daughters. The older one was always on her iPad watching *Lost* and had a lot of emotional meltdowns. The younger one was upset that the older sister wouldn't do kid stuff with her. I was fully with the mom that they should have the Wi-Fi taken away and get outside more. The mom made sense, and the daughters didn't. This freaked me out. It wasn't very long ago I was those girls.

So when I saw those diaries, I knew that this was my chance to remember what it was like before. Before I started to date, before I could vote or drink, and before I went to high school or college. I didn't just want to remember though; I felt like I needed to do more than that. I know, at the time that I wrote them, I always wanted answers and advice. That's why I wrote a diary in the first place— to express my feelings and problems to someone who would listen, even though they couldn't answer back. I always wanted advice from a cool older girl, but I never got any. I guess that is what my diary was to me—a wise young woman who would always listen, but didn't ever respond. The women who were giving me advice, my mom, my aunts, my grandmother, were women who were too old to be cool in my eyes. What did they know? My life was not theirs, and things had changed since they were my age. They didn't seem to understand.

Yes, I'm older now, and maybe if little Carly read this, she might roll her eyes at me, but I think she would listen. So now I am going to get the advice and answers that I wanted in middle school, but I am going to get that response from future me. So I typed up these diary entries, and I am going to respond to the best of them. I did change everyone's names, because I don't want to be sued for libel. I also changed the names of those close to me, to protect their privacy. My mom's name is not really Suzanne and my

sister's name is not Alice. So now no one can look them up on Facebook, although I don't know why someone would. Finally, my boyfriend will be referred to as Bear.

That's not his real name either, but I do call him that.

This mission will probably be embarrassing. If little Carly knew I was publishing her diary for the world to see, she would not be happy. But I think it's the right decision, because I think it will help all the little ones out there in the world. Maybe some of my responses will help them with whatever feels wrong in their lives. It is also for the "adults" out there. For those women who have grown up too fast, and who want to remember what it was like to be that little version of their self.

Best,

Adult Carly



Part 1: The Fifth Grade