

*Dear
Alderson*

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

*Dear
Alderson*

a novel

SAMPLE

*Ami
Hendrickson*



LIFE TO PAPER
PUBLISHING

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For Robert. Forever.

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SAMPLE

(Part 1:

Sight Reading

I didn't mean to read her journals.

It's true. I didn't even know what they were. All I wanted was to find real pictures instead of digital ones so Grandma can hold the photo in her hands. So she can touch the people in each one. Keep us close to her. Remember us. Remember me. That's why, when I saw the box of albums on the top shelf of her closet and took one down to look inside, I wasn't snooping. I swear.

Oct. 3 (Wed.)

Dear Alderone,

Life doesn't rot, exactly. But some days are tailor-made to depress you.

Rolfe has the chicken pox and will be out of school for at least a week. Sherelle says I should send him a get-well card or go visit him. Right. I could never do that. If I got up the guts to knock on his door, I'd probably die of ~~mortification~~ mortifica I'd probably die. My palms sweat and my hands shake just writing about it.

Sher laughs at me. Curiosity kills, she says, not fear. Maybe where cats are concerned. All I know is curiosity isn't what makes my heart hurt and my ears ring whenever I think about scary stuff like talking to Rolfe, or standing in front of class to give a speech, or someone abducting me while I'm walking home alone if I miss the bus.

Sher stares like I'm a hopeless case when I try to explain. "What are you afraid of?" she asks.

You name it: Spiders. Cancer. Clowns. Dentists. Sometimes I think I'm afraid of everything, as if she doesn't know.

Maybe Heather will get the pox. It can't hurt to hope.

I snapped the book shut as questions flash-mobbed my brain, clamoring for answers. What did this Heather person ever do to piss GJ off? And who, exactly, is Rolfe? Does PopPop know about him?

Weirdly, all the stress of the last few months faded a bit. It's not like I forgot where Grandma was. I certainly didn't quit worrying about her. But nothing I do can help her now.

I sat on the floor of my grandparents' bedroom with a box of old journals. I realized, of course, these weren't what I'd been looking for. Still ...

Journal 1 lay open in my hand. Curiosity warred with guilt. Curiosity won. I turned back to the first page.

Sept. 17 (Mon.)

I have to keep a journal for Taylor's class. Wonderful. We have to write in it at least three times a week. Taylor's gonna collect it at the end of each grading period and at the end of the year. She wants us to "get in the habit of putting our thoughts down on paper." Except for our writing assignment essays, she says

she won't read it; she's only gonna check off whether we've "made faithful entries" or not. I'll bet.

We're supposed to name our journal and take it seriously. What should I call you? Jim? Madonna? Cookie? Rolfe? Right. This is gonna be a pain. What a stupid assignment—for the whole year!

Taylor said we don't have to use you as a diary. We can, but we're not to "limit ourselves." And we're supposed to be honest and write for ourselves. We're not to show our journals to anybody. Like I'd ever.

Wait till Noog finds out. He'll lie in wait to find you and steal you and embarrass me to death. What a dumb assignment. Are you reading this, Mrs. Taylor?

Writing Assignment 1: My First Day as a Freshman

Don't get me wrong. I know it's uncool to like school, but I don't mind it much. It's not like I hate weekends or anything, and I'm not the world's most incredible brain, but as far as I'm concerned, school's not so bad.

Of course, before school started, you couldn't have gotten me to admit that if you'd paid me. The Jera Fowler of today who doesn't mind coming to class is very different from the Jera Fowler of two weeks ago. Back then—I'll be the first to admit it—I was a case.

I can't speak for anyone else, but the thought of going into ninth grade had me freaked out all through summer vacation. Mike, my brother, had told me millions of horror stories about things that happened here at Rutcliffe High. He warned me the teachers didn't put up with much, joked about my hormones erupting, and pounded into my brain how menial and bug-like freshmen were in the big picture.

And Jennifer backed him up! I think that's what pushed me over the edge from mere paranoia to abject terror. Jen agreed with everything Mike said. (Jennifer Lehigh: Miss Ultra-Perfect. Cheerleader extraordinaire. Honor Society vice president. She's been dating Mike since they were juniors.)

Jennifer said when they were freshmen an eleventh grader slammed Mike's bud Carl down a whole flight of stairs because Carl said something about ninth graders having rights too. Nobody who's anybody goes to the junior varsity games, she swore. Only juniors and seniors have any clout.

I've never known perfect Jen to lie about anything. So I bought everything she sold me. I believed her. I believed both of them. After all, they've both graduated. They should know, right?

Mom told me they were playing with my mind, but I figured it's 1984. Things have changed a lot since she went to school. Anyway, what does my mom know? I had to fight with her all last year to let me carry my lunch to school in a bag instead of a stupid lunch box. She couldn't understand that nobody except the dweebs carry lunch boxes in eighth grade.

Yeah, I believed what Mike and Jennifer said. I think they pretty much believed themselves, too. Anyway, when the first day of school came, I didn't take any chances. I got sick.

Really—I did. I had a fever, a headache, and I puked all day long. Dad said it was scaredy-cat nerves, but Mom told him nerves or no nerves I couldn't go to school and throw up on everybody. Dad saw the wisdom in her argument and I got to stay home.

I watched TV when I wasn't barfing. *The Addams Family*, *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Gilligan*, *Jeannie*, *Bewitched*. Nothing I hadn't seen before. At 3:30 on the dot, Sherelle called.

“How was school?” I asked her.

Silence on the other end. How bad could it be? I braced myself for the worst. When Sherelle finally answered me, I could hardly understand her. She was cracking up.

“You mean you didn’t go either?” she said.

“No, genius. I was sick.”

“Yeah, right. Me too.”

I don’t think she believed me.

“Oh no! What will we do about tomorrow?” Sher said. “My mom won’t fall for me being sick another day. Maybe I can get hit by a car tonight! There’s still time.”

Sherelle’s crazy. She’s got a sick sense of humor, but she can always make me laugh. She’s one of my best friends. She and her mom moved from Chicago to Rutcliffe two years ago when her parents got divorced. We sat next to each other in Mr. Fry’s seventh-grade health class, where she used to say the most outrageous things. We’d all die laughing at her jokes and questions. Apparently they start teaching “health” earlier in Chicago than they do here.

Well, contrary to Sher’s wish, she did not get hit by a car that night. Neither did I. I crawled out of bed at six the next morning, showered, dressed and messed with my hair until Mom yelled up the stairs and ordered me down for breakfast.

When she saw me, she gave me her “I highly disapprove” look.

Of course, she didn’t say that. Instead I got, “Are you sure that’s what you want to wear on your first day?”

I knew it. I wore a black sweatshirt with the sleeves and collar torn off, my super-wide red leather belt, and my most comfortable stonewashed jeans. I thought I looked okay. My hair hadn’t done exactly what I wanted it to—there isn’t enough

Aqua Net in the world—but I was satisfied with it. I knew Mom wanted me to wear a skirt or pants or something “more dressy.” She hates that she can’t dress me anymore. Tough.

“Yes, Mother. This is exactly what I want to wear.”

The look stayed on her face. She shook her head and sighed.

I picked my way through breakfast, but didn’t eat much. I was too afraid to. When I couldn’t put it off any longer, I went and waited at the end of our driveway for the bus.

Our driver has been driving school busses for about a million years. He once told me he remembers driving my dad to school. He doesn’t care what we do as long as we don’t walk while the bus is moving, shoot spitballs, or throw things out the windows.

He’s pretty cool, for a bus driver. We don’t have assigned seats or anything, like on Linda’s bus.

Linda’s bus driver acts like an army commander. Everyone has assigned seats, you can’t play a radio, and if you have to ride her bus to go home with a friend or something, you have to have a note from your parents saying you have their permission. Spare me.

Sherelle doesn’t ride a bus. She can sleep in until seven and walk to school. She’s lucky.

Sherelle and Linda were already at school when my bus arrived.

“You going to puke?” was the first thing Sher said.

My heart was pounding and I felt like an idiot, but at least I kept breakfast down.

Mike was right about a few things. High school is different than junior high. The classes have more students in them and the days are a little more hectic. And it seems Mike was right

about freshmen being smaller than everyone else. But school's more fun, too. We've got regular study halls, and elective classes and pep rallies and things. Like I said, I really don't mind it.

I wasn't too upset with Mike and Jennifer for scaring me like they did. It's been five years since they were freshmen. It's hard for me to remember much of fourth grade, so I bet they're kind of fuzzy on ninth.

That's okay. I'm just glad they were wrong.

P.S. My hand hurts from all this writing. Was that your goal, Mrs. Taylor?

My hand hurts, too. It's been sore ever since I slipped on the ice when we left the house at oh-dark-thirty this morning. It's not swollen or anything. And it's hardly on a par with GJ's pain. It's only a little bruised, but every time I put on my coat or shift positions, it reminds me I fell on it. I bet it's going to hurt like crazy when I play.

Rubbing my wrist, I looked up from my reading and glimpsed myself in the closet mirror. Purple ombre hair. Navy yoga pants, a Detroit Lions sweatshirt the same blue as my eyes, oversized fuzzy slippers. I'm not a slob; I'm comfortable.

I didn't go to school the first day of my freshman year, either. GJ and I may not have much in common, but we've got that. It's not that I was afraid, though.

Actually, that's not true. I spent the whole day terrified—but not, of school. I'd have given anything to be able to worry about what to wear and how to find my classes and who I'd eat lunch with. Instead, I was in Ann Arbor with GJ and PopPop and Cory, while the doctors ran test after test and tried vainly to say things to keep us calm.