

Letter to my Younger Self - Lady Suzanne Heywood

Each issue we ask a well-known person to write a letter to their 16-year-old self. This issue, Lady Heywood of Whitehall (54) who overcame a deeply traumatic childhood, enduring years of psychological torment and physical dangers, has a word with her teenage self. Suzanne, despite lacking formal secondary education attended Oxford University and forged a successful career.

Right now, aged 16, you are living in a small shack – or bach as they are known – in New Zealand. I know it’s tough. You are living with your younger brother far from the nearest town and your parents are about to sail away on Wavewalker, the boat on which you have grown up, and the only home you know.

I’m afraid I have more bad news for you – your parents won’t return for many months. You will have little money and they will expect you to run their business for them and to look after your brother. Winter will come and it’s going to get cold. That little rusty stove in the bach will be critical. Yes – I know it belches as much smoke as heat – but unless you figure out how to use it, you will struggle.

You are going to spend many days alone in the bach in the coming months trying to teach



yourself by correspondence, while cooking and cleaning for yourself and brother.

There won’t be anyone looking out for you, so you will need to keep yourself safe. But what I really want you to know is that this is the last difficult part of your childhood. I know you’ve already been through a lot.

You set sail from England on Wavewalker when you were only 7-years-old. You

were shipwrecked half-way across the southern Indian Ocean and had

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your head operated on multiple times without anaesthetic when you at last found land. It has been almost impossible for you to have friends during your time at sea and you’ve barely been

to school. Your relationship with your mother has deteriorated and she has treated you badly, often not speaking to you for weeks at a time. Your father promised your voyage would only take three years but he has kept extending it, and you have now been at sea for nine, without going home.

It is going to get worse before it gets better.

In the next few months, you will break down and

ring Childline. But you will get through it. Somewhere inside of you is the determination that you will need to escape. And when you do, the feeling of freedom will be overwhelming.

I want to tell you some things about your future because that may help you now.

You will find that you are lovable (though sadly you will never win your mother's love – she is unable to give you that). You will meet a man who loves you unconditionally and, when you become a mother, you will learn how to return that love to a child (in fact to three).

You will also find – when this is all far behind you – that alongside the scars from your childhood, you have also gained strengths. Your resilience will take you far – even when things are tough. Many of the skills you have gained at sea will be less useful – you won't ever need to shoot a gun, change the oil in an engine or build a mast. But you will value your understanding

of the different people you have met – from carpenters in boatyards, to drug addicts and kings.



Suzanne (8) with her brother Jonathan (7) with their parents Gordon and Mary Cook. The family retraced the route taken by Captain James Cook in their schooner, Wavewalker

Above all you will never lose your love of the sea. You will also take into your future, alongside memories of whales and flying fish and sunrises and sunsets out on the ocean. Those images will sustain you, and you will often revisit them in your dreams.

Suzanne, I want to leave you with one final thought.

You are about to face challenges that no 16-year-old should face alone. This is not your fault. It's going to be tough, but you will get through it. Many things in your future will be easier – and the food is certainly going to get better (you

will never have to eat powdered egg or Spam again)! And one day, long after you escape, you will find the courage to write your story.

Please make sure you don't let your parents stop you doing that, because it will spur on a conversation about the rights of children and the power of education to change a life.

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Wavewalker, The Sunday Times best-selling true-story is available in all good bookshops & online (William Collins)

