

LETTER

Fifty Candles, Four Years Apart

A letter to the sister who was always first

A letter to Maya

Dear Maya,

Fifty. I keep saying it out loud and smiling, because I still half expect you to roll your eyes at me the way you did when we were kids and I was being dramatic about something small. But this isn't small. This is your whole life, and I've been lucky enough to watch most of it from four years behind you, trying to keep up.

I've been thinking a lot about those mornings when Mom was working doubles at the hospital and you were just a kid yourself, really, even if you felt grown to me. You packed my lunches. You walked me to school. You forged Mom's signature on my field-trip forms so I'd never once sit out while everyone else got to go. I don't think I understood then what that cost you - the time, the responsibility, the way you had to be older than you were. I just knew that when you were there, things were okay. You were the first person who ever made me feel safe, and I don't know if I've told you that plainly before now. I'm telling you now.

I also think about the two years we didn't speak. That stupid argument at Dad's funeral, of all places, of all times - grief does strange things to people, makes us say things sideways that we mean straight. I carried my side of it around for a long time, too stubborn to put it down. And then you called me, on my birthday of all days, like you'd been saving it for the one day you knew I couldn't pretend I wasn't there. "I'm done being mad, are you?" Six words, and two years just folded up and disappeared. We picked up like no time had passed, and I think about how rare that is - to lose someone for a while and then just get them back, whole, like nothing happened. Not everyone gets that. I know how lucky I am that we did.

I still have the friendship bracelet you made me at summer camp. It's a little frayed now, the colors not as bright, but I've kept it all this time, moved it from drawer to drawer through every place I've lived, like it mattered - because it does. It's such a small thing, string and knots and whatever colors they had left at the craft table, but it's also not small at all. It's you, deciding I was worth making something for. It's you, all these years later, still being the person who shows up.

I'm sorry it's taken me fifty years of your life and most of mine to say these things out loud instead of just assuming you knew. I think sometimes we save the important sentences for

the big occasions, as if love needs an anniversary to be spoken. So here it is, on this one: thank you for the lunches and the walks to school and the forged signatures, for being the steady one when we were kids, for calling me first when it would have been so easy to just let the silence win. Thank you for being my sister in every sense of a word that gets used too casually for what it actually means.

I hope this year brings you everything easy and good - the kind of good that doesn't ask anything of you for once. You've spent so much of your life taking care of people, starting with me. I hope fifty is the year people start taking care of you back, starting with me too, if you'll let me.

Happy birthday, Maya. I love you more than I've ever been good at saying.

With love,