

Letter to Myself at Age Twenty-One

by John Olson

First off, don't worry about the marriage. It ain't gonna last. But don't worry. People will drive you nuts with that tiresome old chestnut, "there's more than one fish in the sea." Thing is, they're right. Listen. I'm not talking salmon and sea bream either, I'm talking hot tuna. These people are right. But really, it's not that important. Fucking is great fun and romance is intense and rejection is painful. Make no mistake. Abandonment hurts. And every time you fall for someone there is that specter of rejection hovering close, always. Knife at your romantic throat. Until you get into your 40s romance and its close cousin lust will be the driving forces of your life on what will be a very rocky and heavily abused road. But here's the important part, so listen up: learn to be cool on your own. Learn to enjoy your own company. Do that, and you've got everything.

Same with poverty, my friend. Get used to it. Thanks to your glorious ambitions to become the next Richard Brautigan, it ain't gonna happen. Didn't happen for Richard. By the 80s, he's pretty much forgotten. Outdated. This will be the Reagan years. People aren't into eccentricity and psychedelic drugs anymore. They're into cocaine and exclusion. Big boats and bigger personalities. Richard Brautigan will be found dead of a self-inflicted .44 Magnum gunshot wound to the head in his house in Bolinas, California. It will take approximately a month before his body is discovered. "All of us have a place in history," Richard once wrote, "mine is clouds."

Writing is a passion, just like romance, but she is a tough and exacting mistress. If you want fame to go with the writing life, if you want financial compensation and invitations to give commencement addresses to prestigious universities, you will be making yourself much more vulnerable to the slings and arrows of a highly volatile and capricious career. A career, I must remind you, based on nothing

but subjectivity. Here is another truism: writing is its own reward. You will hear this repeated by friends and colleagues and you will want to bash them over the head with a garbage can lid each time you hear those syllables. But it's true. Writing is its own reward. I can't explain why it's so fulfilling, or dilating, or exciting, or deeply pleasurable, but it is. Especially when you write for no one but yourself. That's the writing career at its best. The best judge of your writing is yourself. When you write something great, you will know it. It won't matter what anyone else says or how anyone else responds or what editor takes your work and what editor sends it back. When you know you've written something truly wonderful, there is nothing like it. The feeling will lead you to riskier and riskier experiments. It will lead you to spectacular failures. Because although language is fundamentally a social medium, the truest writing occurs outside of the social arena. It's a fantastic paradox. As soon as you enter language as the true wilderness that it is, and enter it alone, with a keen eye and a will for adventure, you will discover miracles of words, whole Yellowstones of myriad color and steaming predication.

Money will always be a problem. Here I would advise you to learn how to rob banks. Seriously, dude, you're going to need money. If you're dreaming of living a life like a Shoshone out in the Nevada desert in some kind of makeshift yurt with all kinds of survival gear and deerskins and colorful Burning Man attire, or just waddle around nude all the time with your dick swinging in those hot Nevada breezes, forget it. It ain't a good choice. You will long for books and running water and electricity and especially (it bears repeating) books. You are a book hound. You will need shelter for all the books you will gather during your life. You will need plenty of shelves. You will enter the new millennium fantasizing a life with a little handheld electronic device in which to house all your literary needs, but don't kid yourself. Reading words on an electronic screen is not the same as reading words on paper, bound between two covers, with possibly an appendix and an index. Words in print, words made of ink instead of ephemeral little algorithmic pixels,

carry far more authority and are much more easily absorbed. So ditch the yurt, the Nevada Shoshone Burning Man fantasies, and try to find a job that pays reasonably well and that you can stomach for a minimum of four hours a day. Ok, eight, if need be. Just make sure the job doesn't kill your soul. It can deaden your brain. You can always resuscitate a brain, given enough time and rest and possibly martinis, but it's hard to redeem a lost soul. Whatever you do, make sure you don't get a job in finance, advertising, or politics.

What will become of you? Am I famous? Do I become famous? Still harping on that are you. You weren't listening. Seriously, I'm not kidding, just write. Write your pants off. I know you've picked up a guitar a couple of times and wondered if there might be some opportunity there. I know you don't believe in talent, and I agree. I mean, any endeavor is possible provided you do the work. But I do believe in aptitude. Some people have an aptitude for music, some for math, some for language. You, you got stuck the language genes, my friend. Music is not for you. And really, it's a harder life than you can imagine. Playing music night after night with people you come to hate because you've been with them day and night for months at a time.

And no, I can't give you winning lottery numbers or the results of sports games or tell you what companies to invest in. That would be fundamentally unethical and upset the balance of the universe. Did I just say "balance of the universe?" Shit, I don't know if this universe is balanced at all. Who does? I do know this: predestination sucks. Life is far richer not knowing the outcome. Trust me.

