



A Word About The Art of Letter Writing

I can still remember the little jump inside my heart that happened every time I opened my college mailbox to see a letter inside.

My mama wrote to me faithfully my first year away from home. I also got letters from my dad and my grandmother, who would always tuck a little cash in the envelope. I occasionally even got mail from my sister and brother.

I would read the letters from my family over and over again.

In the last couple of years, I have returned to letter writing as a form of communicating with friends and family who are far away. I know email and texting are way more convenient, but sometimes I still prefer the pace of writing a letter. The time it takes. I like to write it slowly. Send it off. And then if a reply arrives, I read it several times. I tuck it into my journal, and after a few days (or weeks), I read it again and write a reply. I don't digest an email the same way I do a letter, and in these days of having emails hacked, whether it is by Russia or just my children, I don't feel I can pour my heart out in an email the same way I do in a letter. Once I send a letter away, it is gone. A little piece of my heart wrapped up in an envelope.

All of these letters are just exactly that. Little pieces of my heart that I have written to my children or to others. Many of these letters are ones I have actually sent. Others are words I wrote to myself as reminders of things I don't want to forget.

I hope they are fun to read and bring a little light and love into your day when you read them.

Letters from Alison

The Contents of This Little Book of Letters

Letters to My Children

A Letter to My Eighteen Year Old Son Who Left Home One Month Ago

A Letter to My Sixteen Year Old Daughter Who Has Been Accepted To Her Dream Universities in Scotland

A Letter to My Fifteen Year Old Son Who Traveled With Me To Lake Constance

A Letter to My Ten Year Old Son Upon the Occasion of His Baptism

Letters to The World

A Letter to My Nieces and Nephews About Camping

A Letter to My Friend Diane About Trusting My Husband's (Sometimes Crazy) Plans

A Letter to My Neighbors, Upon Moving Away

A Love Letter to Scotland

A Letter to My Le Creuset Pot

Letters to Myself

A Letter to Myself Three Years Ago When I Moved To Scotland

A Letter to Myself Upon Getting Married At The Tender Age of 21

A Letter to Myself On The Days I Don't Want To Get Out of Bed

Part 1:
Letters to My Children

*A Letter to My Eighteen Year Old Son
Who Left Home One Month Ago*

February 2016

Oh Cole,

It's been exactly a month since you got on a plane and flew back to America,

with all my worries and fears

as well as my hopes and dreams.

Today I got to talk to you for the first time. Like really talk. On the phone without awkward pauses and not just to get a little bit of information you need.

You told me about your job. Your apartment. Your friends. Your life.

And it was good.

It was good to hear your voice and to be able to sense the happy.

You are doing your thing and you are on your own. Just like you've wanted to be for a long time. And things seem to be going well. You are working at a job you seem to like. You are going to church and to Bible study in the middle of the week. You are loving on your friends and your cousins and your extended family.

You are driving without a license which makes me nervous, but I kept quiet about that. You are working on getting your license. If you get caught without one and you have to go to jail, well, then I guess you will learn.

But even then, I begin to feel certain, that you will figure it out.

You will probably need a little help, but you will figure it out.

And that's what you've been trying to tell me for a long time.

That you are ready to live on your own. No school. No parents telling you what to do. No Mama fixing your dinner and asking if you're still hungry. No Dad telling you that you need to save your money. Work hard. Plan ahead.

You have wanted this for longer than I can remember. And I was pretty sure that you would be sorry once you had it.

Once you were on your own and you could see that it was just you.

To pay the bills. To buy the food. To cook the food. To clean up. To wash clothes. To get yourself up. To be the adult.

But you are a month in at being just you.

You and your friend. One bedroom. No internet. No car.

And you are managing. And you seem happy to be just you.

And I am sorry that I took so long to let you go.

I still miss you. And I can't quite believe our time of being mama and son in one house, under the same roof, is over. I was not quite ready. I'm not sure I ever will be.

But I am proud.

And I am thankful for your pushing until you got what you wanted. Even if it drove me crazy.

And I know that it's not just you. But it's you and Jesus. And you will make it just fine without me.

But still. I'm glad that every once in a while we get to talk.

And if you ever happened to drop by, I would gladly still make you dinner.

I love you with all my heart,

Mama

*A Letter to My Sixteen Year Old Daughter
Who Has Been Accepted To Her Dream Universities in Scotland*

February 2016

My precious Mary Polly,

When you brought us the acceptance letters from universities and we read them, I felt so many things.

I am so proud of you. Whatever else happens from this moment, you have worked very hard and you have made your way in a system that was brand new to all of us, and I want you to hear me say that I am in awe of the work that you have done. I want to honor the hard road you forged to get to this place.

To get to this day. To hold this pile of letters from universities saying YES!

YES, PLEASE! Dear Marion, come to our university. Here is how much it will cost. Here is the day that it begins. Here is where you can live. Here is the road ahead.

And you looked across the table from us and after we said we were proud, we had very little else to offer.

Where will the money come from for this?

We are asking you that question, and you are asking us that question. And we are all asking that question that has been asked a million times about a million opportunities.

And here is what I want to say about that question.

When I was your age I was asking that same question.

Well, actually that's not true. When I was your age, my biggest concern was whether or not I was going to make the cheerleading squad for senior year, but a year later, when I was a year older than you, I was asking that question.

I was holding my acceptance to John Brown University and I was asking my parents where the money would come from?

And they told the same thing that I am going to tell you.

I do not know where it will come from.

And I know that does not seem very helpful when you are a young girl planning for your future.

But I do know this.

If the great God that we serve purposes for you to be a student at one of the universities you are holding in your hands, then He will make a way.

I do not know how, but I know like I know that the sun will come up tomorrow. He will do it.

How do I know this?

From the moment of my first visit, I had my heart set on attending John Brown University.

It was so much more expensive than the state schools in Arkansas, but it was also smaller. It was just my size.

When I realized that my parents did not have the money to pay for me to attend this smaller, private university, I prayed that there would be a way.

I worked and saved my money, but it was pennies compared to what I would actually need when the tuition payments would come due. I had no idea how I would go there, but I knew that I wanted to, so I moved forward until it was time to let go.

My parents came up with what they could without going into debt. I ended up getting a scholarship. I received gifts of money at graduation. My aunt and uncle decided to match my scholarship. I ended up with a summer job that paid more money than most other kids' jobs.

In September, I went to John Brown University with enough money to go there for one year.

And I loved every minute of it.

And then the next year, I had a new challenge. I wanted to go and study abroad.

Again, I asked my parents. *How will we do this?*

They reminded me to ask instead, *How will God do this?*

In September I left on a plane to study abroad.

The next year I made the decision not to return to John Brown University because it was going to take me three more years to finish there and I wanted to be done in the usual four years. For me it was a stewardship issue of both time and money. I could finish at UCA in three more semesters and I would need six at JBU to get the same degree.

UCA was much less expensive than John Brown, but every semester still brought new financial challenges for me. I needed a car. I needed an

apartment instead of a dorm room. I needed car insurance. And I still needed to pay tuition.

Those financial challenges were huge to me and every one of them drove me to my knees.

But a few years after I asked my parents how I would go to university, I was holding a university degree and I did not owe one penny of student loan debt.

This is not something I accomplished. This is the very grace of God. Not only did He provide for me every year of my university days, but He also protected me from decisions that would have been disastrous for me. I was very young and foolish, but I served a very big and very wise God.

Whenever I was facing something I did not know how to handle, I would get out my notebook and write long (often whiny) prayers to God. Or I would get on my knees with my face in my hands. Or I would call and ask others to pray.

Now I am so grateful that God gave me the opportunity to face things that were bigger than me when I was young.

Because I learned at a young age that I could never do life on my own.

I learned in the years of going to university that God is my provider.

It is a lesson that has gotten me through a lot of hard times.

It is a lesson I carried into my marriage.

It is a lesson your father and I have learned over many years of having ideas and taking them to God to say,

Will you provide the money for this thing we think we are supposed to do?

When we wanted to have children. When we decided that I would be a stay-at-home mom. When Dad wanted to get another degree. When we wanted to travel and camp for an entire summer. When we wanted to buy a house.

And as we have asked, I believe that God has shown us what to do.

Sometimes the answer is clear. Sometimes we have to wait. Sometimes we mess up. Sometimes we make a bad decision without waiting and we need grace.

But in everything, God has been so good to us.

And oh, how He has provided!

The gifts are too numerous to count!

But it is important to try.

A roof over our heads, whether it was a pop up camper or a bigger home for less money in Scotland.

Food on our table every single day, three times a day.

Clothes to put on, whether it is cold outside and raining or warm and sunny.

A car to take us to new places and to the same old places we love.

Phones, computers, screens to watch and text and communicate and send love.

Books to read and couches to sit on.

And that's just material possessions. But there is also this:

Visits from dear friends when we are lonely.

Groups of sweet folk to stand alongside as we worship our God.

Legs to carry us where we need to walk.

Minds to learn and to understand just a bit more of our great God.

Music to ease and to remind us to dance and sing.

And so as I look at you across the table and there are questions in your eyes about the future and you are holding so much promise and so many dreams within that beautiful heart of yours, I want you to hear me say:

When there is something that you want to do, and you do not know where the money will come from to do it, then get down on your knees and ask our God to make a way. If it is in His will, He will do it. And you will get a front row seat on the epic journey of seeing His hands work all things together for your good.

And when you look back, you will actually be grateful that you had a problem that was bigger than you. You will be grateful that God brought you to your knees so that He could show you more of Himself.

It is a great privilege to see God.

And already having the money for what we want to do is just one small way we sometimes miss out on the privilege of knowing God intimately as our provider.

This thing you are about to do, Marion...

It is amazing.

And you are amazing.

And you are going to be amazing at whatever you do.

But dear one, nothing compares to knowing Jesus. And when you look back at this next season that is stretching out in front of you now, you will be most thankful for the moments, the struggles, the joys and the people who helped you know Jesus more.

I love you so very much.

With all my heart,

Mama

*A Letter to My Fifteen Year Old Son
Who Traveled With Me To Lake Constance*



December 2016

Dear Ben,

I am sorry that I give you such a hard time for cracking eggs all over the counter in the kitchen.

And for throwing your clothes on the floor. And your backpack. And your shoes.

I am sorry for the way I respond when you've been on the computer for one hundred and sixteen hours and your eyes are bloodshot from staring at little dots moving around the screen.

I am sorry for the way I focus on the clothes and the computer and the eggs when I should be saying how grateful I am for you.

Because you, my son, are the most wonderful company.

I am so thankful for how you embrace the adventures we have together.

I am so thankful that nine times out of ten, when someone says, "Who wants to go with me to do X?" that your answer is, "I will!"

Who wants to go with me to the store to help carry groceries?

I will.

Who wants to go for a walk with me in the woods?

I will.

Who wants to try this strange new gingerbread?

I do.

Who wants to walk down to the chocolate market and try all the samples again?

I do.



So when I asked you if you wanted to go with me for a few days to Lake Constance, for a little mother-son adventure by ourselves, I was not surprised that you were game.

And I just love that about you.

That you are game.

I think we're going to take a bus.

Game.

I think we're going to stay in hostels.

Game.

What do you think about going to this classical musical concert in the big cathedral in Constance?

Game.

Coffee?

Game.

Donor Kebab?

Game.

Pretty much any food?

Game.

You are a wonderful travel partner. You make everything more fun by being enthusiastic.

It's unusual for you to complain. You're super flexible. You can walk for ages and carry the heavy stuff, and if we happen to find ourselves in the woods after the sun sets or in a dark part of town, I kind of appreciate that all of a sudden you are becoming a young man, a fact I usually lament.

Thank you for going with me to this new place. For walking all over Constance and Meersburg and Lindau.

For sitting in the sun and reading together.

For long talks about language and living in Germany.



For longer walks along the lake and through the woods.

For sitting through a concert that was not so interesting to you.

For riding the ferry and looking for coffee shops.

For being willing to eat in restaurants and hostel kitchens and on park benches.

For all the ways you make life fun and point out the beauty of the world.

I love seeing it through your eyes.



And I'm grateful for many more days ahead of sharing new experiences with you.

I'm grateful that you are still with us. And that we are getting days together that are different from ones we have had before, because it is so often just the two of us, carrying apples and milk, stomping through the woods or exploring yet another Christmas market.

Thank you for being willing to say "Yes," and for how you are teaching me to say it too.

Yes, you can build a gingerbread house.

Yes, you can play that game.

Yes, you can put that candle out with your fingers.

Yes, you can put that punch in the grocery basket.

Yes, you can order the pastry that is as big as your head.

Yes, we can stop and sit for a while.

Yes, I will play that game, go to that store, cook that meal with you.

Yes, we will keep doing life together. It's so much better that way.

Love you so much.

Mama

*A Letter to My Ten Year Old Son
On the Occasion of His Baptism*

Summer 2016

Dear Simon,

Today I took you to church to tell your story.

The story of how God has been calling you since before you knew His Name.

The story of how you love Jesus.

The story of how you are loved by God no matter what you have done or what you will ever do.

You went right in with Miss Donna and you told your story. You went with her to see the hidden entrance to the baptismal, high above the church stage. You listened as she told you where to put your towel and where to stand when it is your turn.

And this Sunday, you will stand up in this sacred place, this home we love so much. You will stand with your dad and he will baptize you in front of our family and friends. All eight of your cousins will be there. Some of us will be singing in the choir and some of us will be in the audience and we will all be swelling with joy to celebrate this moment with you.

For even though this moment does not mark the time in your life when you found God (or when God found you), it will be an important memory in the story of your life.

On the day of your baptism, we will hear you tell the story of your love for God, but when you look back at your baptism, I want you to remember the story of how God never forgets you.

He was with you before you were born, shaping your very being when you were a tiny embryo.

He breathed His very life into your body and He gave you the incredible privilege of bearing His image. Our God is a Creator, a Maker of wonderful things, an Artist. And you already reflect all these special stamps of our God in your young life.

He called you to know Him at a young age. To ask questions and to read the stories about Jesus over and over. He placed your curiosity within your heart.

He put people around you to show you what His love looks like. People who love you with a big love that imperfectly mirrors His perfect love.

He went with you to Scotland and He was with you in the night when you wept for the people you left behind in Arkansas.

He walked with you to places even your dad and I could not go.

He was with you at school and at church.

He is always with you.

He is with you during the day and during the night.

He is with you when we walk along the sea, and He is with you when you climb up mountains.

He calls to you every Sunday through people who teach you about Him, and He calls to you when we read His words together.

He calls to you when you are all alone, and He is teaching you to hear His voice.

I know that sometimes you worry that there will be a day that He is not with you. I know that you worry about this, because you and I share a heart of worry.

But I want you to know that you can always trust God. He will never leave you. He will never forget you.

Some days you might not remember that He is there, but He has not forgotten you.

There is nowhere that you can go where He cannot see you.

Sometimes that might feel scary, like maybe God is going to catch you doing something you shouldn't be doing.

And while it is true that God can always see what you are doing, even if you are trying to hide, it is also true that He loves you no matter what.

For me, it has been hard to hold those truths side by side: that God is always with me AND that God always loves me, but I think maybe it's easier to just remember that God is always good.

There are days when it will be hard to believe that, but it is always true.

Always.

So when you remember standing up in the baptismal in front of lots of people, and you remember your dad dunking you in the water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I hope you also remember that this special day is part of the story of how God never forgets you.

I'm super proud of you and I love you so much,

Mama

Part 2:
Letters to The World



A Letter to My Nieces and Nephews about Camping

November 2016

Dear Grace, Emily, Wilson, Campbell and Phineas,

Now that some months have passed since we all went camping together in Colorado, I have almost forgotten about the rain and the mosquitos.

I almost don't remember the days of washing and drying a gajillion wet tents and sleeping bags that had mildewed from a week of rainy camping.

Today I am well rested because I slept in a real bed last night, so the mornings of waking up all stiff from sleeping on the ground are far, far away.

And now I can look back at pictures of our week together in the mountains and remember why our family loves to go camping with you.

In a world where we spend more and more of each day inside and on screens, camping forces us into a total re-boot.

You have to be outside. There is no other option. Even if you hide in the car for a while, you can not stay there forever. Eventually, you have to get out. And when you are outside, for days and days strung together, you begin to do things naturally that in your regular life are not normal.

You run and shout and play with rocks and sticks and pinecones.

You are not just connecting to the earth. You are merging with it. You have it under your fingernails and between your toes and even in your food.

You are dirty with the earth and you do not mind too much.

You recognize and live within the rhythms of nature when you are outside all day. You notice when the sun comes up and when it sets, you come closer to rising and sleeping by it.

You play with fire. You find the wood, you build the fire, you tend the fire, you eat things you stick in the fire. You warm your dirty toes by the fire. You sit around it and listen to your Grandpapa tell you old, old stories.

Sometimes when you are camping in the mountains, especially with your Grandpapa and your Uncle Taido, you push your body further than you ever thought it could go.

You climb and climb and just when you think you cannot possibly go another step, you catch your breath and take a few more. You do this over and over until all of a sudden you are standing on top of a mountain and never in your life has the world ever been quite as beautiful as it is right in

that moment. That moment, hard won with today's sweat and tomorrow's aches and pains, is only possible because you came on this camping trip.

You will carry that moment with you for far longer than the mildew smell of your wet tent or the itchy red bites on your skin.

I hope you will carry it for so long that it will compel you to go camping again one day.

I hope you will grow up and take your own children camping and carry on these wild traditions of spending your vacation days being outside together, telling the old, old story around the campfire and getting dirt under your fingernails.

Love you each so much,

Aunt Alison

*A Letter to My Friend Diane
About Trusting My Husband's (Sometimes Crazy) Plans*

June 2016

Dear Diane,

A few weeks ago we were chatting about the future and all its unknowns. This season of letting go is hard to navigate. It does not come as naturally to me to come alongside adult children as it did to mother-hen toddlers like little baby chicks. Trusting that they are no longer vulnerable to every passing hawk or fox, I know that our big kids are ready to negotiate risk on their own without us. And even if they are not, it is time to let them try and fail and get up again.

Compounding the unknowns in my children's futures is the upcoming move at our house. I told you that Taido will complete his PhD this summer and we will say goodbye to Aberdeen, Scotland.

However, we still do not know exactly where we are going.

Then we talked about how the hardest part for me is that instead of all this unknown, we could just move back home to Arkansas. But for reasons I don't quite understand, Taido isn't ready to come back yet. He keeps thinking he has more to do on this journey that has taken us far away.

You told me that you miss having Taido as a partner in ministry. And as a friend.

Then you said these words:

“Oh, what I miss most about Taido is his resolve.”

“He just knows what he is going to do, and he marches forward even if he is the only one. Whatever it is he has resolved to do, you know he is going to do it. Alison, you can trust his resolve.”

Trust his resolve.

Those words have remained with me, guiding me through many weeks and conversations where I don't have understanding or even a feeling for how things will work out.

As a direct result of your speaking that truth to me, I have grown in my heart a choice to trust Taido's resolve.

As he has worked long hours in the last few months to complete this thesis, I have seen how his energizer bunny forward motion has made the finish line come into view.

Also, Taido has spent the last three years trying to learn German for reasons that have seemed vague and intangible. I just put a language learning app on my phone because I'm not sure that Taido's resolve to learn German isn't actually contributing to leading us to Germany.

Trust his resolve.

As I have focused on trusting, I remembered a time almost twenty years ago when Taido was graduating from seminary and looking for his first full-time ministry position.

He had just returned from a long weekend of interviewing at a church in St. Louis. We were living in a tiny apartment in Chicago at the time and Cole

was just a few weeks old. We did not even have a crib, and we had no idea where we were going.

Taido had taken a job painting houses in Chicago in order to make ends meet. Everything felt so fragile and tentative. I felt vulnerable the way you only feel the first time you have a baby and you get in touch with the overwhelming reality that there is now another human being in the world depending on you.

St. Louis is halfway between Chicago and Little Rock. Between my home and my sister's home. So many details about moving there seemed perfect. But when the church in St. Louis offered Taido the job, he did not take it. He just did not feel right about it. We did not have any other offers on the table and he could not give me any clear reason for his choosing not to go there. But he was resolved. It was not the next step for him.

Three months later we moved to Seattle for a job he was very excited about, and it turned out to be a beautiful season for our family.

A few weeks ago, Taido went to London for an interview at a school for a job that would begin in September. I was thrilled that he got an interview somewhere in the United Kingdom. Every time I visit London, I think about how lovely it would be to live there for a season. Staying in the UK feels like a less of a leap somehow, especially with Mary Polly and Ben hoping to go to university in Scotland. Just like St. Louis, a lot of details about this possibility seemed perfect.

As soon as I spoke to Taido after the interview, I had the feeling that we would not be going there. I had the sinking feeling that even if they offered him the job, that he might not actually take it. He already seemed resolved that it was not the right place for him. So when the job was not offered to him, we both felt the relief of not having to face the argument that might ensue about his turning down what seemed like the perfect opportunity.

And now, in a few days, I am heading back to Arkansas while Taido remains to finish his thesis and try to sort out what is next. Many times this year I

have prayed that by the time I went home for the summer that I would know where we are moving in the autumn. But now we are parting with the question still hanging in the air.

But, Diane, your words come back to me again. I am grateful for your wisdom in reminding me that I can choose to trust Taido's resolve.

And even when I can't, or when it does not make any sense to me, I can trust that just like He has done over and over before now, God will lead our family along the path He has marked out for us.

Thank you for the way you quietly and faithfully remind me to follow on, even when it seems (and feels) crazy.

Thank you for being a sounding board when I feel like I am unravelling. Thank you for listening to my crazy and not making me feel crazy, but ever so gently holding up truth.

I am so grateful for you and your words of wisdom to me. I believe that they have more than once, saved my marriage, if not my life.

Always in love,

Alison

A Letter to My Neighbors, Upon Moving Away

Summer 2013

Dear Neighbor,

My family and I have moved everything out of our house on Cedar Street to embark on a new adventure halfway around the world. We're moving to Scotland for three years.

As we have packed up and let go of so many things this summer, I have asked God for the strength to leave a place we love so dearly, and a place where we have been so dearly loved.

Since I don't know when I will have the opportunity again, I want to thank you.

Thank you for your gracious understanding as cars lined the street and people poured in and out of our house. Thank you for being a part of a safe place for our kids to play outside, to walk to and from school and church. Thank you for slowing down when our little ones were learning to ride their bikes and tossed footballs to one another in the street. Thank you for every kind wave, for every hello, and especially for every time you looked the other way from our eye sore of a front yard.

As I leave, I cannot help but be struck by all the ways I have failed to be a good neighbor.

It's not my lack of grass that I regret. It's my lack of kindness.

I am sorry for the way I have flown by without a moment to spare for you. I am sorry for all the joys and sorrows in your life that I have missed by not being brave enough to get to know you better. I am sorry for forgetting

even your names. And I am sorry for the times you've had to listen to me yell at my kids.

I hope you will forgive me.

I am especially sorry, because when I look back at our move to Cedar Street eleven years ago, I remember that I longed to be a source of light and love and everything that is good. I prayed that this house, which was a blessing to us, would also be used to bless.

When we moved back to North Little Rock after a season away, we were determined to live in this neighborhood. We wanted to send our kids to school right across the street from Fellowship North, where Taïdo was working. We wanted to be able to walk or ride our bikes to school and church.

We wanted God to use us to bring light and love to this little corner of the world.

And neighbor, our house has been filled with love. Prayers have been heard and answered. We have shared laughter and tears in this place. We have broken bread and played silly games with many friends in this house.

But still, I wish I had invited you into this house we have loved so much.

As we leave, I pray the spirit of our home will continue to flow from within it, that whoever lives there next will bless this sweet neighborhood. I know that they, like us, will have their own journey of life, love and learning on Cedar Street.

Thank you so much for being my neighbor.

With so much love,

Alison

A Love Letter to Scotland



February 2016

Dearest Scotland,

Three years ago, we were preparing to move from our home in Arkansas to your misty shores.

Daily I searched and clicked through pictures of your fairest isles, your ancient ruins, and your heathered hills.

Mystified with wonder, we spun the globe and pointed to the tiny northern corner of the planet, closer to the North Pole than we had ever before traveled, much less lived.

We arrived in August, touching our toes in the cold North Sea and watching the waves. I zipped up layers to hide from the wind that summer day, chilled at a temperature I would later consider warm for Aberdeen.

I stood by the sea whispering prayers and letting the breeze carry them out across the expanse, all my questions rolling out with the surf. *What will our life be like in this strange new land? How will this season mark our family?*

Three winters later, the answers are just beginning to make their way back to me, riding on the tops of the waves as I return again and again to the North Sea. Like sea glass from the sand, I collect the treasures of our expat life in Aberdeen.

Oh Scotland, I knew you would enchant me with your castles.

I expected to be smitten by your scenery.

I wondered if I would learn a bit about your history. About whisky. About the differences in our versions of English.

I hoped I would make a friend. Or two.

And in all these things, you have far exceeded our expectations. Mountains and sweet friends and new tastes and trips to places drenched in old story.

But some of the greatest lessons from our time on Scottish soil are actually much more mundane than the adventures I originally anticipated.

I think that the lesson I most hope to carry away at the end of our expat days is this:

A life made simpler, slower and more delightful by *walking*.

The pace of [daily walks to the store](#) to buy only what I can carry home for dinner.

Our whole family [walking to school](#), to church, to work, and [to the city](#).

Only buying shoes in which we can comfortably go two or three miles.

Walking in all sorts of weather.

Seeing the world in slow motion. Just one step at a time.

In forty years of living in America, I learned how to ride a bike, I learned how to drive, I learned how to fly. I would even say I learned how to dream and how to soar.

But Scotland, you taught me how [to walk](#).

And I'll always be grateful.

With much love,

Alison

A Letter To My Yellow Le Creuset Pot.

January 2017

Dear 7 ¼ Quart Yellow Le Creuset Pot,

I am deeply grieved that after only seven years, I am going to have to tell you goodbye.

I spent about 15 years wanting a Le Creuset like you before I finally took the plunge.

But as you know, I make soup about three nights every week for dinner. I have four children. My husband has worked with kids and teenagers for many years. Our dinner table is always very full. I love filling up a big soup pot because it seems like you never run out of food even if the crowd is big.

I used to make soup in two pots because I did not have one pot that would hold all the soup I wanted to make. I needed a bigger pot. I also needed a heavier bottomed pot because when you make a large amount, it's easier for part of it to burn on the bottom.

I loved the idea of having a pot I could put into the oven for roasting vegetables and chickens, which would later become part of the soup.

I knew I needed a bigger pot and I wanted a fancier pot, but I was not sure I could drop such a large amount of money for you, Le Creuset.

I would wander into Williams-Sonoma or Le Creuset shops and just look at all the colors. I wondered if I would ever be able to choose a color even if I did decide to buy one. I wondered if I would love a Le Creuset as much as I love my cast iron skillet.

I asked around about you, Le Creuset. Are you really as wonderful as you are marketed to be? I asked cooks if they would rank the Le Creuset as one of the top ten items to have in a kitchen.

One spring I found you on sale for about \$100 less than I was used to seeing your kind for. It was still really high for me, but it was just the sort of chip in my spending armor that I needed in order to consider you. I called my husband and told him. He knew I had been looking at these pots for the whole fifteen years we had been married and he said that yes, I should buy you. It could be my anniversary present.

From the moment I brought you home and started using you, I was in love. Really and truly. You cooked so evenly. Your 7 1/4 quarts held the perfect amount for our family! I filled you up every other night. I made [our favorite mushroom and wild rice soup](#). I made [chili](#). I made [poached eggs in minestrone](#). I even took you camping and made [beef stew](#).

It was a true love affair. You and I were inseparable.

So when the time came for us to move to Scotland, I left clothes and books behind to make room for you in a suitcase. You flew all the way to Scotland and made your home on a shelf in [my Scottish kitchen](#), where I continued to fill you up again and again. The next summer we went away for a month and I missed you so much that I decided I would take you with me on my next two holidays. I took you to the Lake District and then to the Scottish Highlands. I didn't want to cook in another pot!

Only you, 7 1/4 Quart Yellow Le Creuset Pot, would do!

This fall we moved to Germany, where Taïdo has a one year teaching post in Tübingen. It has been a challenge for the kids and me, as we are struggling to learn German and feel increasingly far away from home. We are missing our friends and family. Every night we gather around the table and process the day, telling what new words we learned and which parts of our day were

the most frustrating. We try to share things we can be grateful for in the midst of this new place.

Of course most nights we are ladling food out of you, Le Creuset. It is a bit of home to me just to see you on the counter. It makes me smile to carry you to the table and set you down in the middle of our family for dinner.

Over Christmas, we were trying a new German dish that we had eaten at a Christmas market, Schumpfnudeln. I had seen it at the store so I looked up a recipe and we were cooking it in a couple of skillets on the stove. The pieces of noodle were falling out of the skillets, so Taido grabbed you and threw all the hot pasta in you to finish cooking it since the noodles were overflowing the skillets. I was concerned that the burner was already hot but he really just tossed the pasta for a couple more minutes and then we turned it off and filled the bowls with the pasta.

It was not until he was cleaning up from dinner that he realized that the enamel coating had rubbed off of a section of your bottom. He brought you in to show to me and I gasped, shocked to see your smooth surface worn through, rendering you no longer able to cook for us.

But I remained relatively calm considering that I was staring at one of my few prized possessions now destroyed. I did not panic because I thought that it would be ok. Le Creuset pots are lifetime heirlooms.

Of course people don't pay your sticker price for something that doesn't last forever. "It's ok," I thought, "Don't worry 7 1/4 Quart Yellow Le Creuset Pot, I'm sure the company will fix you."

I really believed it. I think if I had let myself think (on Christmas week) that you were forever ruined, after you had come with me to so many places and served so many meals, I think I would have been devastated. So I just kept thinking that I was sure it would all work out.

But while I was waiting to hear from the company, I would wonder what was going to happen to you. I felt a twinge of angst every time I missed

cooking in you or every time I reached for you but then had to find something else to cook in. I avoided making some of the stews and dinners that only you can cook. Instead I made salads and baked casseroles while waiting for news from your makers.

Then, all of a sudden, we heard from Le Creuset that they were not going to repair you.

I felt like I had been punched. I had a moment of being super angry at the abrupt reply that the company would not be able to help us with you, but then I just became very sad.

I think I had not let myself mourn your end because I was so sure that such a big company with this massive reputation for pots that last forever would sweep in and take care of my poor little 7 1/4 Quart Yellow Pot.

I guess I was wrong.

So I now I am in mourning for you, Yellow Pot.

I am sad that I can't use you anymore. I am sad that when I see Le Creuset pots on display, that instead of warm feelings about you, I feel loss and disappointment.

But maybe when I see the beautiful rainbow of Le Creuset pots on display, I should remember that that is where they are meant to be: on display.

But you would never have just sat on a shelf in my house, Yellow Pot.

You are pretty, but but you were not bought to be a showgirl.

You were used almost daily, for all kinds of recipes and in every season. I thought I would have you forever. That my daughter would have you in her own kitchen one day. Maybe even my granddaughter.

I am sad I was wrong, and I am not sure where you will go with your worn-away enamel. But since I will not ever again buy another one like you, I suppose my suitcase will be a good bit lighter the next time we move.

Regretfully,
Alison

Part 3:
Letters to Myself

A Letter to Myself Upon Moving to Scotland Three Years Ago

Hello, my new little expat friend, about to survive your first great northern winter.

I know right now the next three years are stretching out in front of you like forever and ever amen.

But just like the old lady that sees you at the grocery store when you are struggling with two toddlers, I am here to tell you that it will be over before you know it.

This is just a season. A blink.

And you are wondering why you are here and what is the purpose of this move and and where is God leading you. And I can't answer those questions.

And maybe those are not even the questions you should be asking.

But I do have a few little bits of advice. A few words that might make your footsteps just a little lighter on the journey ahead. Take them with grace and a grain of salt, friend.

I know you are doing the best that you can.

So here goes.

Regarding walking and the Scottish weather.

Pretty soon it is going to be very dark. It will be dark when the kids walk to school and it will be dark when they come home from school. And some days, when the clouds do not lift, it will seem like the light never quite arrived.

Get yourself outside every day anyway. I know it's raining. I know it's windy. Yes, it is cold. Buy a big coat and commit. Every day. Or you will go crazy.

If you go a week without walking or going outside, you will sink like a big rock to the bottom of a pit called "I want to sleep forever." Don't go there sweetie. Just put on your coat and head for the woods, the beach, the parks. This will save you.

In the spring and summer, when the daylight stretches into unimaginably long days, praise the Lord for every moment of light. Go for longer walks and stretch your time outside as much as possible. Of course, you will still need your coat.

Don't worry. You'll get used to not feeling the hot sun on your face.

Regarding education.

Trying to make sense of the education system in Scotland is going to make you a little bonkers. That's because you are going to use the only frame of reference you have: the education you grew up with.

It's ok to run everything through the filter of, *this is not how we do it in America* (this applies to lots of areas), but then try to go one step further.

Ask yourself what can be learned from this new way of doing school.

Here are a few more helpful ideas to bring to the (education) table:

Learning a thing exercises your brain. So no knowledge is useless as long as you are using your brain to accumulate said knowledge.

Learning and adjusting to new systems is carving adaptability in your children (and yourself), a quality that is not measurable by any exam.

And speaking of exams. They are a whole different ballgame in Britain. In fact the whole school year is really just about the exam result. The autumn term is when regular school is happening but since you won't receive any "grades" for your children, you won't really know until after Christmas whether or not they are thriving academically.

After Christmas there are preliminary examinations (prelims) which everyone tries to say do not matter, but actually they matter quite a lot, because they are your first indicator of the year of how things are going in school for your older kids. When these prelims happen for the first time, you will realize that the whole autumn term was supposed to have been spent preparing for those exams. Like when you thought your kids just didn't have any homework or that it was interesting that there weren't big projects or papers due, actually your children were supposed to be spending all the time that American kids spend on homework, independently studying the class material for the upcoming examinations. The reason you maybe don't know anything about this (besides the fact that you are not British) is that it is really up to them. Children in the upper years of secondary school are practically considered adults in the UK. If they choose not to spend their year studying for these exams, they can make other arrangements besides continuing a traditional path through school and university. Or they can try again the next year. But mainly, the information that would be helpful for you to know on the front end when you are signing your kids up for classes is this: Whatever subjects they sign up to take will be what exams they take next year, and they will need to work at studying for the exams like most people work at a 9-to-5 job, and mostly they will need to do this on their own. So in order to set them up for success, you should *probably* let them choose subjects they enjoy instead of subjects you think they should take because they "sound like American subjects."

Also, you need to give yourself and your kids BIG doses of grace for navigating this system where at the end of the year, they get an exam result which is their grade for the entire year. The sum total of all their weeks in a classroom is not the homework and the tests they take along the way. It is the grade that comes back on one exam. So if they fail, it looks like they never even took the class. No credit. It's a lot of pressure, and so people talk about exams and preparing for exams and the release of exam results all year long like it is everything that matters. This will seem strange to you and you will not like it and you will wish your children did not have to take exams. And when they are at home for exam leave (which lasts for like two months) you will wish they were in school, attending class and learning things instead of sleeping late and making you feel like you are supposed to nag them to study. But at the end of the day. Go back to what I said at the beginning. They are not here just for knowledge. Their worlds are being expanding just by being here. Doing this new thing is carving adaptability within each of your children. You don't have to feel like a failure every time you can't make sense of something.

In a few years, what all of you will remember is not an exam result, but the time you spent as a family in a strange and wonderful place.

Regarding affectionate greetings.

Here's my advice to you, sweetie, about greeting people in the UK.

Just go all in with your hugs from the very beginning.

As far as I can tell after three years of living there, British people do not have a standard greeting like the rest of Western Europe. If you spend time in Italy, France or Spain, you soon grow accustomed to the two kiss greeting and you are able to walk into social settings and just own it.

Bisou. Bisou. Kiss. Kiss. Bacio. Bacio. Beso. Beso.

But in Britain, everyone does greetings differently. Some people don't bother with greeting at all. Not even a hello or a cool kid nod. This is the

hardest for you, because you will be forever awkwardly trying to make eye contact and say hello.

Then there is the matter of greeting people that you know. Some people just say Hi, nice to see you, and use their body language to prevent a physical greeting of any kind. Other people are happy with a simple handshake, which will be strange to you when you have only ever used the handshake for meeting people for the first time.

At first, I went with my vibe that British people don't like to touch. A lot of folks in the UK seem happy to not ever touch anyone. And they would prefer that you not ever invade that physical space.

There is a warmer set of folk who do a sort of half-hearted side hug, or front hug with a little pat, pat on the back that is supposed to make up for the lack of your front bodies touching. I try to to return this when it's happening to me but I am forever doing it wrong.

Oh and also there is a sort of air kiss greeting that some men do where you are just supposed to sort of offer your cheek but nothing ever touches. In this greeting, no contact actually occurs between lips and cheek unless there has been a lot of drinking. Also, there is only ever one kiss. I tried many times to just receive this greeting gracefully but I was either trying to do a continental double kiss-kiss or putting my cheek in the totally wrong place because I was looking for a little more than air.

If you find that the mixed greeting bag in the UK is making you want to hide when it is time to say hello or goodbye, that is because it is exhausting to try to read what is coming and mimic others in the process.

After about a year, there will be some people that you genuinely love with your whole heart. And as an American and a Southerner, you are a huggy, touchy feely person, so you will start to go all in and full on squeeze-hug a person whenever you feel like it.

If you watch closely, you will begin to see people bracing for it when they see you.

Like, *Oh dear God, here she comes.*

But it feels so much more natural to go about greeting people the way you want instead of with the tepid, polite greetings that are the norm.

Pretty soon some of the folks who are afraid when they see you coming will deep down like being practically knocked to the ground with your obnoxious hug.

Last year, I met a gal from Italy who had been here just a few weeks and the same day we met, she said goodbye to me with her Italian kiss-kiss. I thought it was so smart of her to have already learned to just bring her own *Ciao* version to the UK greeting table.

Sometimes abroad you have to practice "when in Rome..." but sometimes you just have to lean in to your Americanness and go for it.

Regarding making friends.

Like I said, it will take you a little while to love the people who live in Scotland. Thankfully you will become fast friends with the folks who arrived as expats in the same month as you. Do not feel guilty for spending time with fellow expats instead of "bonding with locals." In fact, this time three years from now, you will wish you had spent more time with those fellow expats. You will look back on this time and it will seem as though your boats just barely passed in the night. So hold them more tightly if you can.

But on making friends in Scotland, here is what I want to tell you in order to encourage you to dive in a little quicker. On your last few weekends in Scotland you will have a picnic and go on a hike and go to a pub with many of the folks you met while you lived here, and you will wish for more time with each of those faces. You will wonder why you wasted all those months at the beginning of your stay, missing your friends and family in Arkansas

when you could have been breaking bread with these people to whom you now have to say goodbye.

When you move to your new house and your sweet eighty-year-old neighbor brings you muffins, she will tell you to come over any time for a cup of tea. Don't wait six months to go by her house for tea. Go right away the very next week, because she is so dear and you will want more time with her.

On your very last Sunday in church, a precious woman will come up to you and say that she was sorry that you had only first had a conversation a few weeks ago, because by the time she realized that you could have been dear friends, she knew you were leaving and she didn't want to get too close. What she didn't understand is that you were already all in. Your heart will break when she says this to you and you will cry and so I'm telling you that right now when you meet someone, go ahead and ask them out for coffee the next week. Don't wait because your time is going to be up so fast. And actually this is true not just of your time in Scotland, but of your whole life.

There are so many more things I wish I could say to you, but of course you will have to figure them all out on your own, and speaking from the other side, I do believe that you are the better for every ounce of struggle you will put into carving out a life as an expat in Scotland.

I wish you every grace on the journey,

Alison

A Letter to Myself Upon Getting Married At The Tender Age of 21

Dear 21-year-old self,

Let's just get this on the table right away.

You are awfully young to be getting married.

But since I know you are fairly stubborn (ahem) and will not listen to me, here are a few things you should know.

Number 1: How to fight fair.

It's going to take you like ten years to figure out how to fight fair. By fighting fair, I mean "not calling your husband names, not bringing up that time he hurt your feelings on Valentine's Day by buying you the new Sting CD, which was really a present for him, and not locking yourself in the bathroom for three days and refusing to talk."

Fighting fair is a rational conversation where people (namely you) do not throw shoes.

It's being able to hear that you might be doing something wrong and not being all, "What? Are you kidding me. That. Never. Happened."

I know you love some drama, but life could have fewer knock-down drag-outs if you would learn that fighting fair thing a little earlier. I'm just saying.

Number 2: This man, this wonderful man, well, he is just a man.

That guy you're pretty infatuated with at the moment, well to be honest, you barely even know him.

Right this minute you are amazed by all the ways he is not like every other guy you know and you think he is pretty special.

Hold onto that thought, honey.

Because he is special.

And he's going to make a wonderful husband. (And in a few years, an incredible father to your children.)

But he's never, ever going to be able to be your everything. He can't fulfill your every dream and desire. He cannot be the one to right all the wrongs in your universe.

He will be your partner and he will walk alongside you, but he cannot be God for you. He will fail. (And so will you.) And you will learn to love him anyway.

But don't forget that you fell in love with him. Just as he is right now:

Unassuming and not gushy romantic. His nose stuck in a book or a computer screen. Oblivious to most of your whims. Steady and unmoved by your wild ranting.

You already know now that he is the level edge to your mountains and valleys, so don't become disillusioned by trying to make him swing. Or by trying to make him be anything other than who he is.

One day you will realize that he has afforded you the grace to be who you are without trying to change you. Maybe you could tune into that a little sooner so you can return the kindness.

Number 3: You, just you, are a person.

You have a self. An individual soul.

You are a creative, lovely person who is not just Taido's wife or Craig and Julie's daughter (or later, Cole's mom, Mary Polly's mom, Ben's mom, Simon's mom...you get the point).

You should try to nurture this self a little more while you are still being mom/wife/sister/daughter because when you turn forty and all your kids are in school, you are going to be like,

“Wait a second. Who am I?”

When that happens, don't panic. You'll figure it out.

But here's a clue. You are a writer. Own that right now, while you are scribbling in journals and writing long letters and reading, reading, reading into the wee hours of the night. You are already a writer. Nurture that piece of yourself the best that you can. You are allowed to give time to being this person, even if it means all the laundry is not done.

The laundry will always still be there tomorrow, but the sentence that's trying to make its way out of your head and onto the page is elusive. So forget the laundry. Grab your pen.

Those are the three main things I wish I could tell you and that you could hear with your whole heart, but I see you beaming on your wedding day, tears of joy streaming down your face and I can gratefully tell you from the

other side of twenty-two years, that you will still be in love with the man standing across the aisle from you.

Whatever you are thinking that it will be like, you are pretty much wrong. Your happily-ever-after will be full of tears and heartbreak and struggle, but it will still be a fairy tale. It will be the gritty kind of fairy tale that include the bits where people bleed from their heels from trying to wear shoes that don't fit. But don't worry, there will also be castles. Lots of them.

With big love from the other side of 22 years,

Alison

A Letter to Myself on The Days I Don't Want to Get Out of Bed

Dear Alison,

Oh hon. I'm so sorry.

These are the weary days.

They come out of nowhere or they build up over time or they grow into weeks and months and it is just too much.

Too much pain in the world. Too much injustice.

Too many hateful words. Too many deaths. Too many starving children.

And then there is the too much in your own life. And I know you think it is ridiculous that the too much in your own life can unsettle you when the too much in the world is all kinds of worse. But this kind of comparing between your small trials and the whole earth's suffering do not help you see the slivers of light that you need in order to keep the faith.

So look to the light.

The dawn always breaks through when all hope seems lost. Whether it is dramatic like Gandalf coming over the hill on Shadowfax or Aslan rising from the dead, or it is seemingly mundane, like the beep of your friend's text message remembering you today or the just right words on the pages of a book.

Either way, the sun will rise and hope will be found.

I know you don't want a to-do list. And to-do's will not help when everything seems awful, but I know you very well and there are some things

you could do that have helped you before. And they might help again, and even if they do not, they cannot hurt.

Perhaps you could think of them as small acts of resistance against the evil forces in this world rather than to-dos.

Defying evil one small grace step at a time.

Little ways to let the light back into your heart.

Of course, I want to tell you to get up and write and paint and make music and bring beauty to the earth from the deep places in your soul, but I know you will tell me that it is too much. That you have nothing of worth to write, no work of art to bring that has not already been made and no thing of beauty that will make the world a brighter place.

Will it help if I tell you that the process of creation brings light to the world and when you participate you are joining into a sacred act that keeps the world beautiful? Will it help if I tell you that the end result is irrelevant, but the making is the bit that matters? It is the creating in being creative that saves you, not the thing you created when you are done.

I hear you telling me to stop and that I am only making it worse. But if joining into creating is too much, could you put on your shoes and go for a walk? Can you get outside into creation? Just for twenty minutes. You don't even have to shower. Just go. Be. Breathe some air.

I know it's cold, but you have lots of warm clothes. Put them on.

I know it's wet, but you will not melt.

You don't have to go the store or carry anything to the recycling center or any other task. Just walk for the sake of walking.

Remember that Soren Kierkegaard said:

Above all, do not lose your desire to walk; every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it...the more one sits still, the closer one comes to feeling ill...thus if one just keeps on walking everything will be all right.

And remember that you have found these words to be true.

And if you cannot walk, if you cannot go outside. Sing a song. Turn on the list of songs you have that remind you of good things you need to know.

Put your hands in the air and sing along if you can.

And if you cannot sing, maybe you are hungry. Perhaps you could eat a piece of fruit. Splurge on a basket of berries and eat them slowly.

Think about how wild it is that there are so many different kinds of fruits and vegetables in the world.

And if you cannot eat and you cannot sing and you cannot go outside, read the Psalms. Start with this one. And this one.

And if you cannot make art and you cannot go outside and you cannot sing and you cannot eat fruit and you cannot read, fall out of that bed and onto your knees.

Roll if you have to. You can use a yoga mat if the floor is too hard, and face to the floor, pray.

Pray a small prayer that has rescued you over and over.

It will rescue you again, I promise.

Help!

Save me Jesus.

Over and over.

And when you are able to lift your face from the floor,

perhaps you can manage this small bit of gratitude in your journal:

Thank you for making me the kind of person who sometimes cannot get out of bed without your help, Jesus.

It keeps me from forgetting for too long that I need you.

Write those words for the thousandth time, and do not regret that you are here again. Every time you write words of lament or beg for grace again in your journal or in tears on your yoga mat, you are affirming the Spirit within you.

Call out to the Holy Spirit with or without words.

You are not alone.

With big love from the other side of sadness,

Alison

A Letter to You My Reader

Dear Reader,

I am super grateful to you for reading my small book of letters.

You can read more of my writing on my website:

alisonchino.com

You can also connect with me via email (alison@alisonchino.com)

Or maybe you want to go and write someone you love a long letter!

XO,

Alison