

千葉県八千代市勝田台
鈴木直江様、
Katsutadai, Yachiyo-shi, Chiba, Japan

February 2, 2022

Dear 13-year-old 直江,

I've never thought of writing you a letter before, but I think of you quite often. Your presence has become stronger in my memory in recent years. So, here I am, writing you a letter that I don't really know how to write, and how this letter gets delivered to you is unknown. Postal services have become not so reliable these days. A holiday package I sent to Japan from the United States by airmail took more than a month to get there, and a letter sent from Japan sometimes takes a couple of weeks to get here. We're also having all sorts of shipping delays. This letter will probably never reach you since it must travel through time forty years back. We don't have that kind of technology yet.

This is a difficult time for you right now. I wish I could make things better for you, but I can't. Nobody can, but you don't expect anyone to perform magic either. You never believed in prince charming in fairy tales. I am your older self, forty-one years older to be precise, and I still don't believe in prince charming.

You are in the seventh grade at the middle school in a suburb of Chiba prefecture in Japan. You were bullied at the elementary school before. That was awful, but this time around it's worse. You have more than a group of bullies to deal with. Your homeroom teacher, Buri. That is not his real name. This is a nickname he was given. Nobody knows why he is called Buri though. Maybe someone thought his face resembled a face of ブリ (amberjack fish)? You know, buri may sound like an English word, "bully" to Japanese people because there's no differentiation in pronouncing R and L in Japanese. I think it was a perfect name of him.

I'm writing you this letter in English. You will not be able to understand much of what I'm writing. I know you'll be perplexed at first, but not even ten years from now, you will be using English a lot more than Japanese. You'll be dreaming in English and writing journals in English too. Your Japanese... Well, people say that if you don't use a language, you will forget. It's partially true.

My memory of middle school is blur after forty years except for the pain and suffering. Surely there must have been some happy memories, but I can't remember them quite well. I don't think much about the painful memories either, but they are there, too. Maybe this letter is my attempt to retrace my memory with you. Just as much as I want to forget, I also don't want to forget entirely. I need to remember them. I don't want them to be forgotten or swept under the rug as Americans say.

I'm getting sidetracked. Let me get back to this amberjack face, Buri (Bully). He is a kind of person who enjoys punishing his pupils. His punishments are cruel and humiliating. You, little Naoe san, are often his target, though you don't quite know why, except that you're not afraid to speak up your mind. You cannot stay quiet when you see unfairness or abuse of power, and you see lots of that with Buri.

Every day at the end of a school day, 反省会 – hanseikai (daily reflection or rather, self-criticism session) is held and students are asked to report on each other's behavior. In this sense, it is not self-criticism but criticism of others. Students mostly report on bad behaviors, rarely on good ones. I don't remember any reports on good behaviors. There's a group of boys who don't like you and target you for bullying. You

take up their bullying and fight back. You don't go hiding, so they keep bullying. At hanseikai, they make up false or exaggerated reports on you. They keep an eye on you for every move and use any opportunities they have to report on you at hanseikai.

You protest against false accusations and report on their bigotry, but only to get them to do more fake reporting. Buri knows this, and you know he knows, but he does nothing. Buri ignores your protest. He sometimes reprimands you for that. One time, a girl, who was a class chair, raised her hand and bravely spoke up about these false reports about you and told him that it's not fair that you receive these fake negative reports. Buri dismissed it. Nothing happened. The girl was very upset, but you were pleasantly surprised, because she stood up for you. You will remember her brave act for many decades, even though you forget her name.

At hanseikai, one negative report counts as a one-round trip of cleaning a long hallway floor with a rag, which must be pushed by hand. The hallway is a length of how many classrooms? Ten? It is a very long hallway. You receive many negative reports, sometimes five, sometimes ten, or even more, and you must clean the hallway floor back and forth for whatever the numbers of negative reports you receive. Five-round, ten-round, or even more. One-round trip is already too long. This punishment is clearly not for the sake of cleaning the hallway. It is meant to humiliate the receiver of this punishment. Some of those bullies get the same punishment, but your negative reports are usually a lot longer than anybody else's. You are simply outnumbered.

Buri created an area he called 少年院 – shoneninn – “juvenile school” in the classroom to confine bad students. Negative reports from hanseikai are tallied up weekly, and students who get over a certain number of negative reports are sent to this “juvenile school” area. This means that desk assignments change weekly. You end up as the only girl who is sent to shoneninn.

Shoneninn consists of the first two vertical rows of desks that are close to the front and back doors. Buri put a tape on the floor around these rows to mark this area as an “open confinement” for bad students who are treated as detainees. Detainees in the shoneninn are not to cross over the tape, which marks as the border between a regular classroom and a wall-less prison. When you're confined in the shoneninn, even if you step onto the border or two centimeters over the border, those bullies will report on you, then you get more negative reports. These bullies act as if they're border patrol or police.

There are more punishments too. “Glico pose” is another one of Buri's inventions. Glico is a company famous for producing snacks such as famous pocky. The company logo has an athletic man standing on one leg while raising his arms up, like a big victory sign. Glico pose punishment is about copying that pose while standing on the desk until Buri tells you to stop. It usually goes on for long enough so that your leg starts shaking. Not only is it humiliating but it is physically punishing. Another one is putting one's back against the wall and lowering your back until your knees are bent 90 degrees angle as if sitting on an invisible chair. One day, you also receive harsh corporal punishment from Buri. He demands you to come see him after school. He tells you that you have an attitude. What kind of attitude, you ask. He tells you that you have problems. What kind of problems, you ask. He blames you for getting into trouble. What kind of troubles, you ask. He wants you to apologize. Apologize for what, you say. Then, he slaps your face hard. Not just once, but many times. You don't cry until you leave the classroom and go to the bathroom to cry.

I wonder how you keep going to school every day, but you're very determined. Showing up day after day no matter. That is defiance. But it doesn't mean that you're not hurt. Those boys are stupid blockhead jackass mean kids who call you many names and harass you, but they're still just kids. Buri is a teacher,

not a kid. Your teacher has no right to treat his students this way, nor punish you the way he does. Nobody has a right to do that.

Your memory of pain and suffering will lose its vivid colors over the years. They'll fade away, but not completely. You will remember some details for many years like the linoleum floor of the hallway and how you push the rag with your hand on the floor back and forth, or the bathroom stall where you cried your eyes out.

One day you'll decide to become totally silent. You make a conscious decision not to speak to anyone, especially to those bullies and Buri at school for months to come. On some occasions, you speak the minimum words to other kids. In your view, this silence is not the same as being quiet. You try to create "active" silence by being defiant, not answering to any questions, and looking at the person straight in their eyes, which was considered a little rude especially for young women in Japan back then.

You decide to fight back without words. You learn to communicate with the body. Your body will remember this. Body remembers everything even though you don't say anything. No words.

The seventh grade will come to an end eventually. But bigotry doesn't end. Bigotry takes place beyond the classroom and school. Buri is a middle school teacher, but he isn't the President of a country. Imagine this. The President who is a bully and bigot. The President who abuses his power over people. The President who not only believes in false information but endorses it and says untrue things to manipulate people's minds. This happens a lot. It happens in the most powerful countries such as the United States. People create fake news and many believe them too.

Five years from now when you're a high school senior, you'll leave Japan for the United States to be an exchange student. Once you're in the United States, you feel free and comfortable being an outsider at first, because you are an outsider in this country and you already sort of know how that feels. But you will encounter racism you never really knew as a Japanese person growing up in a suburb of Japan in those days. You don't really know about being an Asian (not Japanese) in the West. You make your home in the United States, but there'll be times when you feel not safe being an Asian living in the United States. Your identity shifts from Japanese to Japanese American or Asian American, and you often think about what that means.

The world is complex, and our relationships are complicated, deeply intertwined with our histories. Our lives are interconnected with everything around us—the environment, wildlife, water, air, everything. We are all connected. Yet, we are also very divided on so many levels. Political and ideological divides are threatening not only our democracy, but also public health and even the future of our planet now.

You come to realize that human species have been the biggest bully to the environment. But it takes you three decades to come to this realization. The way humans live, consume, and produce has a huge impact on earth, and humans have been exploiting and damaging the planet for our own needs (or greed) and profits without preserving or conserving for the future generations. You come to realize that by living in the Global North, you have been one of the biggest bullies to many of the poor communities that are mostly in the Global South. When you are at my age, you will think deeply about what it means to be a human species living on this interconnected planet.

People love talking about the weather. Weather is probably the most casually exchanged conversation topic in human history. These days, however, we do it often with alarming sounds. The planet is warming, and weather events such as floods, wildfires, and droughts are becoming severe and more frequent.

The year is 2022. Our home, the planet earth needs much healing. This is a critical time for us and for the planet. This is the time for healing and preserving. Humans need to make a big change on how we live on the systemic level. So far, we're not seeing much significant changes except for the pledges and words. Just words but no significant actions. You still have forty more years to go until 2022. But for us who are living in 2022, we may not even have another forty years. We only have this moment to make changes to save our planet. Not later.

I'll need to write another letter to you explaining about our current situations. This is much too much for you. I'm sorry. I've already written you a long letter that might just sound confusing to you.

I'm afraid that this letter ends up as self-serving. Please forgive me. I originally wanted to tell you that you're doing good. Now I know I had to write this letter for myself. I didn't want you to become alarmed about your future either. I'll say this to you, be kind to everything around you, to the environment, and to yourself. For the next four decades, you will have many wonderful experiences. You will survive and come out even stronger when your life becomes difficult. I assure you that there will be lots of joy and pleasure in your life. You will learn to dance and become an artist. One day, you will be dancing with your parents on what's called Zoom which is like a video call. You get to see each other on a computer screen, and you give your parents a movement class every night except for Sunday. I'll tell you that we just celebrated our one-year anniversary of this moving-together exercise. Your parents are now 85-years old.

I wonder if my 85-year-old self will be able to write me a letter. I hope so. I hope that my 85-year-old self will say that the year 2022 made positive changes for the future of our planet. I hope our future will still be filled with the beauties and joys that this earth provides for us.

I'll write you again.

Thanks for reading, little Naoe-san.

With all my love,
Naoe