



Dear Estranged,

EDITED BY: SA'MYA HALL

*A collection of letters from one estranged family
member to another*

I started with a single image that wouldn't leave me alone: an unsent letter in my email drafts. As I reread my letter, I felt like it was, and still is, a thing a person creates when they're sure something needs to be said, but unsure if it's ready to be received. It was a letter I wanted to send to my estranged mother—a bridge I hoped might still be there, even after years of silence and miscommunication. We've all known relationships that drift toward distance, the kind of distance that feels bigger than any conversation can fix. And I know plenty of people who share that ache with family members they were once close to, or that sense of closeness they still crave even when it's dangerous to reach out.

From that moment of quiet reckoning, the project grew into something larger. My photos became slightly more sentimental, mirroring the memories I had or wished I had in my childhood. The cover is a photograph of my grandparents with my daughter walking hand in hand, and the back cover is a photo of my childhood bedroom window. I started looking beyond my own letter and into the messy, beautiful terrain of the internet. Blogs, essays, and my personal favorite, Reddit threads—all places where people are sometimes honest enough to publish letters they may never send, resent receiving, or reluctantly sent already. I didn't want to steal anyone's private moment, so I treated these finds like fragments of a shared memory that could illuminate a pattern rather than a single life story. Some posts were personal confessions in a public space, others were reflections on what it means to grow up in a family that isn't forgiving. The letters I gathered aren't fiction reflecting our complicated realities of what it means to exist in dysfunctional families. They're real voices searching. They echo something many of us recognize and that the desire to connect with family can coexist with the fear of getting hurt again.

In these pages there is a complicated chorus. Some letters arrive with fury, others with tenderness and restraint, and others landing in between. I appreciated reading the honest attempts to name what happened and to imagine what might come after, even if after looks uncertain. They're about the stubborn, hopeful work of seeking belonging in a space and learning to protect yourself in it. They're about trauma and neglect, miscommunication and the stubborn belief that a family can be more than its worst moments. Some of these letters were never sent. Some may never be sent. And that is part of the point. The act of writing can be a way to rehearse, negotiate or even heal. Whether the words ever travel beyond a screen, a page, or private drawer, I appreciated gathering these letters.

This collection reflects a lot of late-night digging and a lot of check ins with ethics. I didn't want to treat it as a simple, random landscape of voices. All of them are quietly hopeful, but defiant, forming a larger map of what it means to be a family in the modern world, and a wish to be heard without turning the moment into a spectacle. My aim isn't to sensationalize pain, but to illuminate how writing letters even in their roughest form can function as a lifeline and a cautious form of connection.

Because these letters aren't polished essays with a thesis, they reflect real-time, truth-telling experiments crafted interestingly. What I felt the most connecting in the letters is their raw self-disclosure in the beginning, and the blunt, conversational tone while explaining their experiences and decisions in their estrangement. A sense of raw hope for a vindicated future post letter is a common thread throughout the collection of letters, demonstrating that the use of the writer's voice is a tool for healing and resilience almost. The road to healing for the writers in these letters is never cut and dry, but complicated and still possible and as vulnerable I am in my letter I felt comradeship in realizing the other letters have also share the complex hope that our

letter recipient will finally understand and embrace us. A friendly reminder that all anyone wants really is connection.

These letters remind me of many aspects of family and what it means to be vulnerable. That family isn't only about proximity or history; it's also about how we choose to speak to each other, how we listen and how we decide who we want to be in relation to those who hurt us. They aren't about anger driving us to seize the last word, but inspirationally about our worthiness in being heard. This type of vulnerability feels risky but it's a risk that's imperative in the road to healing. As you read these letters, you'll find some piece in each that resonate with your inner risk-taker, and I hope you find the same connection in that as I did.

Reddit user IMissCuppas:

My great uncle gave me this letter from my dad nearly 2 years ago. I haven't spoken to him since I was a teenager. For some reason I kept it, though I haven't contacted him. I occasionally reread it, thought I don't know why.

I want to tell him how much he hurt me, by repeatedly abandoning me and making me a scapegoat. But from the letter I really don't think he's going to listen. The whole letter is about what he wants and himself.

I don't know why I am posting now, my mental health has been shite recently and maybe I just want someone to tell me why I won't just throw this damn letter away!

Hi.

I should start by saying that this is from _____. You can decide for yourself whether to read on or not.

So if you are reading on... Firstly, I am sorry that this is typed, I hope it doesn't feel really impersonal—this is very personal for me. I did try to free write it but I couldn't read my own writing so you'd have zero chance, and I don't want anything to be ambiguous or miscommunicated.

Ok, so maybe this is something you thought would happen one day, maybe not. Maybe you hoped, maybe not. I don't know anything about you, and that's kind of the point I guess. Where do I start?

Sorry Lauren. I mean I know that 'sorry' at this point is like a grain of sand in a desert sandstorm, drop of rain in a tsunami (and assorted other predictably cliched similes), to the point of being almost pointless, but I am sorry. Desperately so. Our lack of relationship has been a constant source of regret and pain for me and (to get right to the heart of the matter) I would like some kind of relationship with you. I don't know how that would look like. Obviously I don't expect you to welcome me into your life as your dad I have rarely been that, and even when I was, in your formative years, I was awful at it. I offer no excuses, It is my failing and mine to bear. It is also mine to try and start to do something about, and take responsibility for, and that's why I'm writing you.

I'm not trying to be anything. I'm not trying to deny anything. I'm not trying to cover up anything. I just want to get to know you. In any way at all.

I cannot make any assumptions about you, and nor will I try. You might detest the thought of me, or you might think about talking with me often, or somewhere in between. I wouldn't know. But I'm reaching out to you (horrible saccharin phrase I know - sorry again) in the hope that you would at least have some kind of contact with me, even if it just so I can offer an explanation as to why it has taken me so long to try will offer no excuses, no justifications, no self-pitying tales of 'it wasn't easy or similar. I will listen and answer your questions candidly and honestly. I miss you in a way that is so unlike anything else I have ever experienced in my life. To miss someone

you don't even know is the weirdest feeling, and whilst I've no intention of making this about me, I do want you to know that I think about you constantly and wish I knew you. It's important to me that you are aware of this. I know what I have not done to support your wonderful mum and family. How they always supported me in ways that my family did not support yours, and I am forever grateful for them all, and I wish I could make things better.

I could write pages and pages of apologies, describing how I have let you down, decrying myself and hoping that some kind of declaration of self-loathing might in some way make you forgive me, but ! see no profit in that. I know how I feel about myself when it comes to you and it's a pretty bleak place to be. I would rather look in a different direction, something more hopeful, constructive, fruitful and personal. I can't change what's been done, but I can offer my hand. If you have any interest in speaking with me then get in touch, even if it's just to tell me to leave you alone.

I love you. You probably can't understand that as a concept (I said I wouldn't make at you I know... but it's hard for me to believe anything other than this).

If you do want any kind of contact / explanation / conversation then let me know

Signed,

YouTube user @lettersapplications: Goodbye Letter to Estranged Son

Dear Sam,

As I sit down to write this letter, my heart is heavy with emotions that have been buried deep for far too long. It pains me to acknowledge that our relationship has been strained and distant for quite some time now.

I want you to know, my dear son, that my love for you knows no bounds. Regardless of the circumstances that have driven us apart, you have always held a special place in my heart—a place reserved solely for you.

As I bid you farewell, I do so with a heavy heart but also with a glimmer of hope. Hope that someday, perhaps, we may find our way back to each other. Until then, I will hold onto the memo.

James Di Fiore:A Father's Day Letter To My Estranged Dad

I resented the man you became, Dad. I truly resent you, even to this day. But I will use your failures as a way of guiding myself through fatherhood. Consider it your contribution to my life, years after you had given up on me, that I will never end up alone and away from the people I love.

Dear Dad,

Father's Day is coming up, and I wanted to tell you a few things I never had the chance to say before you died.

Actually that's a lie. I had several chances to tell you lots of things, but we hardly ever spoke to each other for nearly twenty years. Jesus, twenty years. That's half my life. When I moved out of the house to go to college I didn't realize I was saying goodbye to you. If I did I might have thought twice before asking you for fifty bucks. Hell, let's be honest; the way I was back then I may have asked for a hundred.

I wasn't the easiest son, Dad. I know that. I won't pretend to know why I was such a troublemaker. Maybe it was because you and Mom seemed so unhappy. Not to be an ass, but we all knew you two were headed for divorce years before you finally pulled the trigger. Having two older sisters taught me to read the signals in people, and all three of us could read the situation with our eyes closed. It's OK, by the way. None of us were bitter about it. We knew it was for the best.

I don't really think my behavior was your fault. I'm pretty stubborn, always have been. There's a part of me that wants to blame you for my struggles as a youngster. Every suspension, every detention, every ejection from a baseball game, every rejection from a female classmate; all of those would have been easier if I could just blame my old man I guess.

But then you just stopped. I don't know if I did something that made you stop, but you stopped. You stopped being a father and became an estranged parent.

The truth is I always blamed myself, even as I pointed my fingers at principals, at teachers, at girls, at umpires and whoever else rightly called me on my bullshit. I always heard that voice in my head telling me that I was the problem. It's quieted some, but I still hear that voice.

It makes me think. It makes me miss you. It makes me wish I didn't follow your lead and become your non-communicative son. I have so many regrets, so many questions.

I wish I knew what made you tick, Dad. I try to remember the real you and all I get are these flashes of your bearded face taking a draw off a cigarette, rubbing your forehead or swearing during a Habs game. In other words, I feel like my version of you is sadly but honestly incomplete. Twenty years is a long time not to talk to your son. Twenty years is an eternity not to talk to your dad.

I sometimes want to hold the urn that holds your ashes and just scream at you, but when you died I told my partner to stash the urn out of sight, and I'm not sure I'm ready to ask her where she put you. In a way your ashes have become your phone number. I know it is there somewhere, but I just can't be bothered.

You quit on me. Not just me but your own daughters too.

It's not your fault, Dad. Both of us let each other down. Both of us never picked up the phone. Neither of us seemed to know what to say. Your father was a drunk, so who knows what kind of stitching danced across your heart as a young man? Who knows what your scars had to say?

But let's be clear on one thing. Your grandson, who you never bothered to meet, who will be two years old this coming August, will never write a letter like this. You had a life that shaped the man you became, and I have no right to tell you that you fucked up. You put a roof over my head, coached my baseball team, and taught me how to cook a Sunday sauce.

But then you just stopped. I don't know if I did something that made you stop, but you stopped. You stopped being a father and became an estranged parent.

Maybe you were depressed. Maybe you weren't equipped with the kind of emotions that allowed a long-term dad to shine through. I've spent countless hours rewinding my childhood in my mind, trying to capture a beautiful moment or two, desperately trying to convince myself that I'm just not seeing the full picture of who you were. But I can't keep lying to myself. You quit on me. Not just me but your own daughters too.

I will use your failures as a way of guiding myself through fatherhood. Consider it your contribution to my life, years after you had given up on me, that I will never end up alone and away from the people I love.

My daughter is due to be born weeks from now. I swear, if I ever get to a point in my life where she will be forced to wonder why her father won't call her, I will remind myself of the space you carved inside my heart, and then fill that space with an unconditional love you should have instilled inside your son.

I began this letter wanting to cut you some slack, and whether it is my aforementioned stubbornness or merely an urge to break the familial chain rather than add a link, I need to tell you something I never had the chance to say when you were alive.

I resented the man you became, Dad. I truly resent you, even to this day. But I will use your failures as a way of guiding myself through fatherhood. Consider it your contribution to my life, years after you had given up on me, that I will never end up alone and away from the people I love.

Reddit user: FearlessCheesecake45: For my fellow adoptees

Since you legally purchased me our relationship was transactional. You wanted to start from scratch if you legally purchased a newborn. Wanted a blank slate to try and force us to be how you wanted us to be.

When you saw us trying to be our own people/selves with what many times is in our genetics, you decide to punish us and are not okay with it not going as you had planned.

We aren't just going to sit by and let you treat us how you see fit. Trying to ensure we stay forever to take care of you when you are old and cannot take care of yourselves. Wanting us to be dependent on you and forced into a life revolving around you.

No, thank you. We have rights to our own lives and don't owe you anything. We never asked for this.

So we leave you. To be left alone with yourselves, which is definitely a punishment. We've met you and you offer no redeeming qualities.

So good luck in taking care of yourselves, just like we have had to do our entire lives. When you end up in horrible nursing homes, you have yourselves to blame. These are the consequences of your actions.

Waiting to breathe the biggest sigh of relief for our bullies/monsters to leave this world and never hurt anyone else,

Scapegoated Adoptees.

Essence Embers:

To my parents,

I know you're sitting there talking about me.

You'll tell everyone you don't know why I struggle so much. You'll treat it as a mystery. I know at least one of you runs away; I know because she told me. I can see her battling herself, anyway.

But I wonder if the other one runs from his guilt, or if he revels in his destruction.

Then I get to the point where I don't care anymore; I can't. It hurts too much, and both of you took enough from me already.

You'll tell everyone how shitty I am, and you'll make fun of me. I know, but please keep lying about it.

Anything to justify what you did, right?

It's about you, not me.

You literally had a chance to give me up... twice, in a way. (My aunt offered to adopt me. AND um... Well... my mother's husband [at the time] signed away his parental rights for me because my mom was married to him. It doesn't make sense, I'm aware.)

And you both chose to keep me... *For what?*

So you could do what you did... to your own goddamned *child*? (I think?) Well, no. *Children*. Plural. For both of you. You both deeply hurt all your children. You can't run from that anymore.

Nothing can justify the evil things you did, as parents.

I don't care that you were hurt, that does not justify harming me, or my siblings.

You can't write away hurting your own kids- so you can keep running from yourself. But keep trying, I guess.

Growing up, I gave you (tried to) all of me. I made your decisions, and tried to keep up with your mess. I listened as you cried, and tried so hard to 'earn' your love.

You had my heart. And you gave away my body- through silence and denial- or straight up delivering me, "daddy."

Both of you, mom *and* dad, raised me to be a fucking victim. Like, on purpose-somewhere within you. Maybe not consciously.

Do you know what you've done?

Your job was to aid my developing mind. And instead, you put me through living hell. Constantly.

In as many ways as you could squeeze in, it seems. Okay. You did manage not to beat me, mostly. (My dad never hit me. My mom did occasionally- and I literally have no idea if it was abuse or discipline.) Thanks for that much.

Either way, **I am the evidence of how pathetic you are.**

And so much more, but you already know that. Don't you? Are you threatened by me? Is that why?

"Mommy" and "daddy," the shame isn't mine to carry, by the way. It's yours. And you both can have it back.

No matter how hard you tried, you didn't get my fucking soul. And you can't have it. Any of it [anymore.] It's mine.

And I'm taking "me" back.

This is the day I *know* you've feared.

Deal with it- because you don't have a choice.

Mommy

I know you were hurting. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry you have so much pain. I wish you had clarity; I know what it's like to be so confused and alone.

I hope you find peace.

But you'll have to do that without me.

Because I can't have peace around you. And that's too much of a price to keep paying.

Love,

Your daughter.

"Daddy"

You're not worth giving my voice to.

From,

Your daughter.

The end.

Reddit user shibbynibs:

Mum,

Since well before you 'joked' about me being your walking retirement plan I thought I knew who you were as much as you can from observing someone's behavior and words. Except when you kicked Dad out (totally deserved, good job) you then proceeded to turn into him but more successful at being a terrible person. Society gave you breathing room and unquestioning support to do your job as you saw fit and still we struggled. Not because we needed to, but because the extra support you got to then sort that strife allowed you more resources to drink as much as you wanted so long as the troubles of the day warranted it. And so you made me your live-in scapegoat, drank to your heart's content and just kept blaming me. Because you were believed you made me a multi-purpose excuse for why you didn't need to do better, that I must be up to something if I wasn't actively being a drain on you and even that the distance you put there made you sad whilst inexorably being my fault and down to me to fix. On top of that you protecting yourself from someone with your abuser's features means that on every level the only person I know you to be is a manic victim, occupying all sides of a conversation to control the narrative that always points blame away from the one person you trust as an authority, super positioning so as to suck all air out of the room that isn't you being faultless, then justified, then sorry I feel that way, all the way down to what do you want from me and finally what can I do about it?

Even you trying to apologize has to be on me to fix for you when I'm not the idiot that had to be so clever as to create baroque problems that don't have any kind of road map to resolve from. You don't resolve, you justified in refusing us food until I had counselled your drunken inadequate ass just enough to get burnt chips and nuggets, you jail the sick fuck perpetrating the abuse of human rights. And because you simply can't be seen that way we can never satisfactorily resolve this. All because you had to lie and manipulate towards getting what you 'deserved' after removing the one person with any initial intent to stop you.

You once told me I'd understand when I was older and after I lost everything I did agree for a moment, right up until I remembered nobody was going to prop me up while I abused them this way and that in the name of reclaiming my power. And then I got on with my day choosing to be the difference I wanted to see instead of floundering for someone to see I'm worth propping up as I villainize them into obedient servants, a blatant and disgusting projection of the issues in your relationship with my father. You are a tragedy, just not so helpless as you felt. I gave you 20 years of caring enough to hope beyond daily failures that you would want to be that change for yourself and after all of it the only person I know you for is rampantly pathetic. Even now the societal conditioning makes me feel bad for thinking it, let alone writing it, and yet that's not because it's untrue. The moment you became the power and authority you railed against you slopped your way into being a pig from a certain allegorical farm and all I've known you for since is bad bacon, too mired in its own shit to work out yours isn't the only way to live life. You could have done anything differently and we might not be here. But we are. And I know I did everything I could short of calling CPS and destroying our family further to stop it so maybe I get to choose to be past fixing things for you. Maybe you owe me peace enough from failing at a job you chose and then bullied me into that you can go find your own.

Sa'Mya Hall:

Dear Mom,

I have always looked up to you. Growing up I always thought you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and I hated that I didn't look more like you. You were always so mysterious to me, so unreachable. I know now your silence was anger and it enforced a distance between us that may never be salvaged. The more I learned about the traumas you have been through and all that you managed to overcome the more pride I felt in having you as a mother. But I know you see me as one of the traumas you have been through, and I have always known you resent me for it. The weekends you spent locked in your room, unwilling to speak to me and leaving me to fend for myself has created a loneliness so deep in me I struggle to escape.

Since having a daughter of my own, I see myself reflexively doing the same things you did. Our closeness is foreign and uncomfortable at times. So much so I feel an itch to run from her and hide until our bond softens. I'm assuming that's how you felt. I thought I was past all of that, but my child has mirrored all of my insecurities and lensed my past back onto me so vividly. I hope to reach you someday.

Sincerely,

Mya

Mary Thoma:

Dear Sisters,

I come to you today with an unguarded heart.

Sometimes when my mind and heart wander, like when I am in the shower, or folding laundry, or when something in particular reminds me of you, I think of you and wonder if you are well and happy. I sincerely pray that you are. Sometimes I think of you and I am filled with warmth, other times sadness, due to the fallout of our relationship and the loss of so many years.

I know that each of us experienced our childhood uniquely.

Each of us endured different and difficult experiences, some shared and some not. We have each ascribed meaning to those experiences; we decided what it meant about ourselves, our parents, each other, and what it meant about life. We see through different lenses.

We each went through a war of sorts and we dealt with the fallout of those years in our own ways, too. Some memories we share are wonderful, of course, but it isn't the love that drives us apart, it's the injuries.

I have no desire to challenge or change your perceptions of the personal battles you endured. We each, really, have no idea what the others endured. We may have witnessed some events, shared others, and even talked about others, but no one knows what it felt like inside of us. How could we? Yet we carried the pain of those experiences into adulthood, and we each did the best we could to bear that weight.

There was a long time, a very long time, when I felt responsible for you and for your happiness. Since childhood, I often felt that you were not only Mama's girls, but mine. I had a lot of responsibility for you at a very early age. I wanted to protect you from suffering. And ironically, some of your sufferings have come through me, because I too was a child and later a wounded adult, and I too was hurting. We often acted out our inherited pain on each other as children, and into adulthood.

Growing up in our family, with all its chaos and confusion, manipulation and misinformation, abuse and abandonment, it is no surprise that we carried battle scars. Those were difficult days for all of us, each with our own burdens to bear. I had no idea then about boundaries, emotional sobriety, generational trauma, how to discern truth from lies, or how to make my way toward healing from growing up in a dysfunctional family. But now, by the grace of God, the 12 Steps, and lots of committed healing work in community, I do.

It's true that we will never have the relationships we once had. And like me, I'm sure you don't want that old way of relating anymore either.

For a long time, I was terrified of falling back into those old patterns and roles of our relationship. Some of our history was romanticized, some traumatized, and some of it over-

dramatized. We were lost in the roles we learned to play. We were lost in a dance we didn't design. We don't have to be any longer.

Should we ever meet in person again, or speak on the phone after all these years, it will not be the same. We are not the same people we were 10 or 20 years ago. Life has taught us many things during our separation. I'm sure much of which we couldn't have possibly learned had we stayed stuck in the old family patterns of hurt and the roles we felt we must replay from the past and act out upon each other.

I now know that I am not responsible for you and your happiness. Perhaps you have always known that, but I didn't.

I now know I have no desire nor energy to hash out the hurts of the past, prove myself right or wrong, or mold myself into a shape that suits others. I know what I know and no longer have a need for you to know it, too. You have your own truths, experiences, hopes, and dreams that have absolutely nothing to do with me or my perceptions.

It's hard to convey all I hope to say here in a short letter. Too many times in my life with you, I have overcompensated by going too far with my feelings and trying too hard to mend things between us. Looking back, it wasn't emotionally clean communication and still had lots of sticky needs attached to it. I release myself and you from old expectations and needing anything from each other. I send you only love.

If nothing else comes through this writing, hear this:

I do love you. I care about your happiness and your family, cheer on your good fortune when I hear of it, pray for you, and wish you nothing but your heart's desires. Life is clearly too short for anything else and the weight of old injuries is just too heavy for me to carry around any longer. The days of holding hurt, anger, and resentment are long gone, softened by the many years gone by and the work of owning my part in our story and taking responsibility for it, and moving forward. Those details don't belong here in this public forum. But if you ever want to hear the amends I would give you, I am here to share them from my heart.

And if we never meet or talk again, I will still smile and wish you well in my heart when I hear of you. It is entirely possible that remaining separate from each other's lives might have just allowed us to each, in our own way, and in our own little families, to create our own version of happy, healthy lives.

I no longer want to force anything. I trust in the slow work of God. Whenever we meet again, in this life or the next, I will greet you with open arms and an unguarded heart.

xo Mary

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Sa'Mya Hall is a 26 and a senior at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS), earning a BA in English with a concentration in Rhetoric in May 2026. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, running and eating sourdough bread. Under the mentorship of Dr. Amicucci and Regina Mingo, she found the inspiration to assemble this collection of letters aligned with her passion for mental health advocacy. Throughout this collection gathers letters written to estranged family members but never sent, exploring the ache of fractured relationships and the possibility of repair. Through intimate, unfiltered voices, the book invites readers who share similar longing to consider the costs of silence and the potential for connection within families/

