

Letters to Aly

Surviving My BFF's Suicide

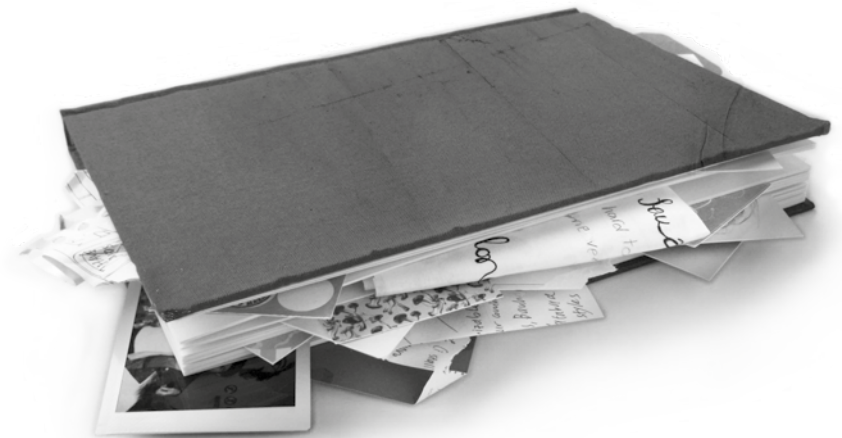


Lee-Ann

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.
www.epigrambooks.sg

Cover design by Lydia Wong

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Lee-Ann, author.

Letters to Aly : surviving my BFF's suicide /
Lee-Ann. – Singapore : Epigram Books, 2013.
pages cm

ISBN : 978-981-07-6811-9 (paperback)

ISBN : 978-981-07-6812-6 (ebook)

1. Bereavement in adolescence - Personal narratives.
2. Grief in adolescence - Personal narratives.
3. Teenagers - Suicidal behavior.
4. Teenagers and death. I. Title.

BF724.3.G73

155.9370835 -- dc23 OCN855728567

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

It has been more than two years since 30 April 2009, when my best friend and schoolmate Alyessa jumped to her death. She was just 16.

I have always kept diaries of some sort. Writing has always been my release whenever thoughts get too jumbled up in my head. When Aly died, I started writing to her whenever the feelings got too intense.

More often than not, I would plug in and listen to a list of songs as I wrote. The lyrics of the songs inspired the titles in my letters. Sometimes it was the song title.

As I look through all the pieces and letters, I am taken aback at how sad I was then—so, so sad. The person writing them seems like a stranger to me now. But I am glad I managed to pen my thoughts because reading these letters has helped me remember her much better. I would not want to forget a single part of the tough journey. I was six feet under my mountain of emotions. Writing everything down made things seem more real.

I had known Aly all my life. We were childhood friends. She was like a sister to me and I loved her. She was like my personal diary. When she was around, my diaries were full of the fun times we had together. There were no sad

entries because I poured my heart out to her in person or through texting. She was my confidante and best friend. She always knew how to make me feel better. When she left, I felt like she took a part of me.

In my letters I had written over and over again that I wanted to be happy but I did not know how. Actually I was chasing something abstract. There is no key ingredient to being happy; we've just got to adjust our perspective.

I still flounder sometimes whenever I think about the long months without Aly. I feel guilty for being okay on most days and missing her only when times are bad. But I've also learnt to keep her in a special place that I can visit.

This book is precious to me because all these letters were written when I missed Aly. Most were written in tears. I feel exposed and naked at the thought of publishing them. So why do I still want to do this? Maybe it is a bit ambitious but I want to reach out to people who are going through the same pain. It feels like something I need to do. It is ironic how angry I was with my mum for invading my privacy when she read some of my letters before. Yet here I am, offering to bare myself to strangers.

Looking back now, I can see why Mum was behaving 'unreasonably'. She was just trying to protect me; she was afraid of losing me. We've always had a love-hate relationship. She tried hard to discipline me during my rebellious phase as an adolescent. We were trying to change and build a more trusting relationship when Aly's death happened. Whatever we had built disintegrated and I felt suffocated when she became more protective.

She started letting go a little when I went for regular counselling sessions at the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS). Maybe she took some comfort in knowing that I was getting professional help in coping with my grief. I am in no position to dish out advice for other parents, but I do hope that they will bear in mind that every child is different. It is tough to know when to let go and when to hold your child close for comfort. Sometimes the survivors of a suicide do not even know themselves. I think the best that one can do is to give the constant assurance that one will not feel bad or too tired to listen.

Perhaps someone may find comfort in reading my letters because they are as real as real can get. It's not like some self-help book; I won't be offering you seven great

steps to heal yourself or get over your grief. I am handing you my diary and maybe after being in my shoes for a bit, you may discover something about yourself. Or maybe it may make you laugh.

To those who still feel the raw pain, I hope you will find some hope and peace in knowing that after two, three years or more, you will feel better. Not over it, not completely healed, but different. I do.

x

Lee-Ann

PS. I apologise for the coarse language used. I was not brought up that way. Often I resorted to swearing on paper because I could not do it face-to-face. Reading through the letters and seeing the frequent use of expletives makes me feel quite ashamed of myself. But it was how I felt and I left them in because that was the real me then. I hope that parents and teachers will understand.

30 April 2009

Aly,

I was on my way to school for our E. Maths exam when RJ called. I didn't know what to think. He told me you tried to find him last night to say your last goodbye?! My heart dropped. RJ told me that you probably did it. Did you?

I can't remember what else he said, it was all a blur... I don't even know what I said to him.

Then John texted, asking if I knew what had happened to you. I started panicking. It didn't feel right. I called your sister. Alexis told me that you were gone. That was when I broke down in the MRT. All I could think of was that time in Jan when you tried jumping. I had flashbacks of myself running around trying to find you, to stop you from jumping, and then the police came and you freaked out. It was a mess...

Why did you have to go? I don't believe this!

You're my best friend...the closest I've got to someone and now you're gone! Impossible! I don't believe it! I refuse to believe it.

What the fuck?! How can you just drop everything and leave? It does not make sense. I was so scared I couldn't fucking focus on my E. Maths exam.

I need to know now that you aren't gone. I need to talk to you now!

My mum picked me up from school after the exams. As soon as I got into the car, I could see that she was very anxious. When I asked her what was wrong, she just shook her head and said, "I'm going to bring you to see Aly." I should have felt relieved but instead my heart sank. I was going to see you but everything was not okay. I had a bad feeling in my gut.

When we reached home, Mum parked the car, took a deep breath and leaned over to hug me. "Aly's gone!" she said softly. Nothing sank in. But I was so scared. She told me to change into jeans and a plain shirt and we drove silently to your house.

Everyone was there. Alexis showed me the letters you wrote. My eyes quickly scanned the letters...lines of apologies and how it was something you had to do...a calling...peace. You included a goodbye to me. Nothing made sense. Everyone looked too bewildered and confused, some crying, others not. I asked to see your mum. I went up the stairs to your room. Your bed was left unmade. Your mum got off the phone after talking to someone from your school. She called your name before bursting into tears. Then she hugged your pillow and wailed with so much anguish I fled the room.

1 May 2009

I was in a daze. I barely remember the car ride to the place where your funeral was held. But when we all reached the place, RJ called me and I stayed in the car park and talked to him. He was frantic; he told me he saw you that night. He told me about how he sent you home and then you ran away again because you did not want to go home. He gave up chasing you because he didn't know what else to do.

I have no idea how I managed to stay so calm during the phone call. After hanging up, I braced myself and walked in. I could hear people crying even before I reached the door. A small crowd had gathered around something. There was a blown-up picture of you, lots of flowers everywhere and there was a huge cross in the background.

Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces, grandmother and grandfather, godma, cousins, friends—they all cried for you, Aly.

Everyone was hugging someone. As I approached the white coffin, I felt my whole body shaking. My legs were going to give way any minute. I embraced Gwen because she was there and she was alone. We held onto each other and cried and cried.

2 May 2009

Dearest Aly,

The day went by in a blur. Your mum fell in and out of consciousness. All sorts of people streamed in to see you—friends, our entire cohort, our trainer, RJ and Aaron came and broke down.

I had been by your side from the time I got to your house. I begged my mum to let me stay through the night and skip school the next day because it was the last night to be with you. I couldn't leave you. Alexis and I spent the entire night reading letters which your friends had left you.

I talked to you in my head. It felt unreal. The white coffin looked so fake, I wanted to lift it and shake you awake. You looked so unreal. You had makeup on; you never wear makeup! Never!

Yet you looked so peaceful.

I finally had a two-hour nap before dawn.

Time flew by and before I knew it, the pastor had conducted a last service and asked everyone to gather around. I don't remember what he said; I couldn't listen. I just didn't want to go through this. I didn't want him to go on because it would all be over and it couldn't be over because it just couldn't. I didn't want to hear what God wanted. I wanted God to give you back. Instead they pushed you into a van that was going to send you to the cremation place and we all started wailing.

Everyone was silent in the bus. It was like some foreign place; huge, white and serious. We stopped outside the entrance while the pastor completed the service. Then your coffin was brought out. I felt some relief because you weren't gone. I had to fight the urge to run up just to hold your hand for one last time. Then we were instructed to pile into one of the halls for the memorial service. Leaflets were handed out entitled "Remembered in Love". I felt so sick. How was it that everything was so efficient? Did they want you to leave so soon? What was the meaning of this?

The service was held in a hall that was huge, with a high ceiling and lit by orangey lights to make everything look softer. The hall was filled with people—your schoolmates and everyone else so they had to keep the doors open for the people standing outside. It was so draggy and sombre. But then again, what did I expect? Hardly anyone sang along with the pastor. Your godpa went up to the podium to give a speech because no one else was composed enough. I will always remember what he said—perfect child, best friend, dream child of many, got your work done without prompting, phenomenal results...did your chores while others tried to get out of theirs...exceeded expectations and never ever let anyone down. "Till now that is," I thought to myself and cringed.

Finally the coffin lid was removed and we were invited to drop flowers into your coffin. Your mum dropped piles of clothes for you to take to your afterlife. Everyone started

crying. I didn't want to leave you but the wall started lifting and the coffin automatically moved through the opening. I was clutching the edge of the coffin till someone pulled me away. Then we were ushered to the viewing platform. The coffin moved into the furnace and we had to watch the entire process, all of us screaming. We were reaching out with our hands...pounding against the glass of the viewing hall.

And when the wall closed after the coffin went into the furnace, I fell apart. I didn't know what I was doing any more. I wasn't in control. I can't even describe the pain, the hurt, the shock.

Dad had to hold onto my waist to keep me from falling. My vision was blurred because I couldn't stop crying. We were being directed to wait to board the bus but I just kept crying. Your mum fainted, your sister became hysterical. I didn't know what to do. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nate. But I couldn't even move. I didn't believe it. What just happened?????

I love you, Aly. I really do.

XOXO

12 May 2009

Watch you spin around

Dear Aly,

It's been 12 days since you left the world. I'm still not used to you not being around. I cried so much! Miss you like shit.

On 9 May, I went to the top of my block and I nearly jumped off. I couldn't help it. For a few moments, I just thought of joining you! Nothing else mattered. But I guess the rational side of me took over. Besides, my legs had turned to jelly and I knew I could not go through with it. I was afraid of heights. Plus the thought of my parents falling apart like yours did had a sobering effect on me.

I'm really sick of school. I'm not in the mood. Damn sick. Suddenly I feel kinda lost. IDK what to do. As in, like, how to spend my weekends now.

Oh guess what, Nate wanted to accompany me to watch a movie today, so sweet, right?? The plans fell through because of school but it's the thought that counts.

Sam is a darling classmate! She came to my house specially to study with me! She did not want me to be alone. We studied in silence. We did not talk about you. I can't...not yet. But every day, like a smack in my face, I am reminded that you are gone.

Yeah I guess I really gotta let go of you. Wish you were still here. Well, I'll update you soon.

Love,
Lee-Ann

15 May 2009

Hanging by the moment

Hey Aly,

Today I went for counselling at SOS. I was nervous about going. Mum picked me up from school. She said that she had spoken to the counsellor so I did not even have to talk about you. But I did talk to Ophelia—she's very awesome, man. Truly, she listened and she totally did not judge. I'm glad I talked about my feelings! I feel so much better.

Guess what, Aly? I talked to God today! And I told him if Nate loves me or anything like that, just drop me a sign. AND Nate SMSed me!

I guess you must know this as you are beside God or you probably knew the answer way before me. Like maybe God told you. But I still wanna share my joy with you! For you are my confidante. :)

All right, I'm gonna study a bit of maths. Sleep tight in heaven. Give God a huge hug for me!

XOXO

22 May 2009

Hey there,

Right now I'm missing you so much. I feel horrible. Why is this overwhelming feeling coming back? I need a hug. You were my best friend, my diary. I don't want to hang in there any more! I don't want to study any more.

I dreamt of you last night. You came into the room and you told me you were not dead. And you showed me SMSs from your handphone to prove it. What does it mean? What are you trying to tell me?

People keep telling me I gotta let you go. I know that. But, like hello? You're the closest person in my life! It is not easy. I really don't know how to let you go. I'm afraid I'll forget you.

I want to move on with my life. But it is so hard to imagine life without you. It seems like there is no meaning any more!

We had so many plans—move out and get our own flat, travel together, go for movie marathons, go clubbing... where are you now?! I want to join you. Really! We were so close, you have taken away a part of me. This really, really sucks.

Mum's been really great to the extent that I'm very touched. She has not been asking too many questions. And that's really an effort for her.

Do you miss me too? Do you think about me?

XOXO

Lee-Ann

28 May 2009

Hello Aly,

I'm in maths class now and obviously I'm bored and restless, that's why I'm writing to you. I hope my teacher doesn't catch me.

Zhi Wei and Cassie and I have been talking a lot over these past weeks. And I told them about our whole history. About how we became so tight. I felt better when I was talking to them about you. It felt like you were not gone.

I'm feeling tears welling up now. It's been 28 days since you left. And I feel empty. I am kinda half expecting you to come back. Where are you now???????????????

I think of you so often. Remember when we first sneaked out of your house to go to East Coast Park at night? You had to cover up your skimpy outfit with a huge shirt in case you got caught by your parents. It was fun just walking, talking and eating fries from McDonald's. It was your first successful sneak out. We haven't even tried sneaking into the pubs yet. We were gonna have the best times ever just hanging out. Aly, my confidante, my friend, where did you go?

XoXo

31 May 2009

So hard to say

Aly,

It's the last day of May. Just realised I am alone again and this is the fifth Sunday I am spending in a daze. Although I'm around people, it gets really lonely on the inside.

You know, I'm grateful to everyone. Like my parents especially for trying to accommodate me. They leave me alone. They don't make me talk about you, which is good, 'cause I don't think I could bear it.

Today I felt mixed emotions. On the one hand I would love to have company. On the other hand, I was so afraid I'd forget how Sundays used to be with you! And that I'd get used to Sundays without you. That really freaked me out.

I know it's not good, but I'd rather be all weepy and draggy. At least I get to keep all the memories and I won't forget you. At least I'd have something to hold on to.

I still can't believe it's over. Deep down I keep thinking that you're just away for a bit. Deep down in my heart, I'm still waiting for you to come back.

I really miss you.

It hurts REALLY bad.

XoXo

About SOS

Established on 1 December 1969, Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) is a non-profit and non-religious suicide prevention agency. Its mission is to be an available lifeline to anyone in crisis.

All information shared with SOS is treated as confidential and people can choose to remain anonymous.

People who need a listening ear can call the 24-hour SOS hotline at 1800-221-4444. It is available round the clock, all year round. Calls are taken by trained volunteers who are guided by qualified and experienced professional staff. For those who prefer to write, pat@samaritans.org.sg offers an alternative platform to receive emotional support. Anyone can email Pat and will receive a reply within 48 hours.

Some people might need professional help to guide them through a crisis. SOS counsellors are available to meet them in person for face-to-face counselling. These sessions take place at the SOS centre.

Despite our best effort, casualties from suicide remain a stark reality. The grief journey of the loved ones left behind may last several years. These suicide survivors struggle with the trauma and loss, and experience a rollercoaster of emotions that can be overwhelming. Research has shown

that they are themselves at higher risk of suicide after they have been exposed to the suicide of someone close.

The Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors (LOSS) programme was set up in collaboration with the Singapore Police and the Coroner's Court to help family members cope with the aftermath of a suicide. Survivors can also join the Healing Bridge, a support group where they can talk about their feelings and share their experience with other survivors. SOS professional staff and experienced facilitators guide these sessions to help survivors work through their grief.

SOS is also actively involved in community outreach projects and in training professionals and the community in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.

Something on your mind?

Contact SOS.

Call 1800-221-4444 or email pat@samaritans.org.sg

About the Author

Lee-Ann is currently in her final year of junior college.

She still thinks of Aly and once in a while smiles when she does so. The sadness has been compartmentalised inside a 'chest box' in her memory that she can visit when she wants to. The hole in her heart has not fully healed but she feels different now and is looking forward to life and what it has to offer next.

How do you survive your best friend's suicide?

Alyessa jumps to her death two days after her 16th birthday. Her best friend Lee-Ann blames the tragedy on her failure to answer Aly's last phone call. Haunted by what-ifs, stressed out by the looming 'O' Levels, and troubled by fraught relationships with her parents and on-off boyfriend Nate, Lee-Ann begins to contemplate suicide too.

In Lee-Ann's searingly honest diary entries, she exposes the wound of having a loved one gone too soon. This true account of a teenager's journey reveals anger and despair at its most raw, and eventually hope as she begins the slow and painful recovery to live again.



ISBN-13: 978-981-07-6811-9



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