Dear William Ernest Henley,

A ballerina. A gymnast. A librarian. Those are the answers I gave when my teachers asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. My young mind could never have fathomed that I’d come to add ‘survivor’ to my list of occupations. I never thought that the world could be so cruel as to put me in a situation that caused me to reconsider the worth of my life, but it did. And if it hadn’t had been for your poem, Invictus, I wouldn’t be writing this letter to you today. Your poem saved my life.

Just like any young child, I was oblivious to most tragedy that existed beyond my own personal bubble of happiness. So oblivious, in fact, that I never even noticed the large crack that had begun to slice through my life. It was caused by one devastating addiction: alcohol.

My dad has been an alcoholic since before I was even born, yet he mastered the art of hiding his addiction. He’d drink frequently and profusely away from home and come back from work in the evenings, pushing me away and claiming that he was “tired.” His insistence of me not being near him made my six year old mind come to the devastating conclusion that he didn’t love me- that I had done something wrong. I tried everything that I could possibly think of to be worthy of even a portion of his love. But to no avail, I didn’t feel any love in return. The crack kept getting bigger and bigger until I couldn’t ignore it any longer.

My sweet mom did everything she could to shield me from seeing the alcoholic side of my father. Whether it was sending me to a neighbor’s house when she got in an argument with him, or telling me that he was away on a business trip when he was actually spending a few weeks in jail. For the most part she was able to protect me and I am so grateful for her sacrifice. But as much as she wished she could block me from any pain that I might feel, she couldn’t keep it a secret forever.

Everything was revealed when I was twelve years old. One night the phone rang and my mom answered it. Curious, I went into her room to see who she was talking to. Tears were streaming down her face as
she got up and started getting ready. She didn’t need to say much to me, because I already had had a sinking feeling in my gut that told me my father had been arrested. I later came to find out that that he had been arrested for his sixth DUI. That night, after she bailed him out of jail, I just sat there feeling numb. I felt like I was a thousand miles away from that dad that I loved.

Soon after, I found out that we were moving away from my childhood home. I could feel the strain of the crack almost ready to explode.

The grand explosion though, waited for a time when I was at my weakest. I was heading into my teenage years full of uncertainty and doubt, in a new town where I knew absolutely no one. I was insecure about every move I made and still couldn’t understand how alcohol could stop my dad from loving me. After a few more dealings with the law, my mother couldn’t handle it anymore. She had to divorce my dad.

That was all that the crack needed to burst open like a dam. No warning. No preparation. Just one big flood that attacked every aspect of my life. There seemed to be only two ultimatums at that point. I could either find the strength to swim above the surface, or slowly let my body drown.

I can’t tell you how much I wanted to drown at that moment. So I made that choice.

It sounded easier.

Slowly, I became isolated from everyone; too nervous to even talk about the weather, nonetheless the heartbreak I was feeling. Wave after wave of depression kept pushing me further under the black abyss of water. I didn’t tell anyone that I was drowning, but you could see it in my eyes. I looked scared and desperate for some sort of relief from reality. After a year of feeling the weight of the water on my body, I felt weak. I felt tired. I’d go to sleep every night just hoping that maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t wake up in the morning. In my mind, it was almost time to finally surrender to the pull of the water and drown.
But, my dear Mr. Henley, this is where you and your magnificent poem came into my life.

I was sitting in my eighth grade English class one morning, feeling lonely and anxious. My nails were bitten down to the nail bed and I sat hunched over, just wishing I could sink into my chair and disappear. Suddenly my teacher put a piece of paper on my desk with a poem on it. She told us that we'd be reading and analyzing it. I'm sorry to say, but analyzing a poem that was published 138 years ago was the last thing I wanted to do at that moment. But since it was required, I picked up the paper and began to read.

Instead of reading a confusing, no-connection piece of literature, I found myself reading an answer to my prayers. Never has there been a time where I loved poetry as much as I did in that very moment. I read your beautiful words over and over and over again, until I felt like I was going to cry with joy. For the first time in nearly two years, I didn't feel hopeless. Your words stirred something to change within me, and I was determined to live again.

The swim out of depression wasn't a fast one for me. At times I felt strong enough to push myself up to the surface, but at others I couldn't stop myself from sinking a few feet down. Your poem kept me moving, kept me swimming. As I progressed upwards, I finally was able to come to the conclusion that no matter what I did, the alcohol will always come out the winner with my father. I realized that he loved me, but just not enough to put the bottle down. And surprisingly, I was willing to accept that. When I finally broke the surface, I couldn't stop wondering how I ever made it through. But no matter how I did it, I am so glad that I didn't throw my life away.

That crack is still present in my life today and I know that it will probably stay there forever, but it's not there just waiting to burst again. Instead, it stays there as a constant reminder that this life is too precious to let go of. It's there to remind me that I am a survivor.

I cannot thank you enough for writing that poem. You'll never know how much I treasure up
those words in my heart.

With much gratitude,

Cassidee Hackley

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