

“I can keep you near”

Filled with memories on a New York subway, Anna Funder pens a letter to her late mother.

Hi Mum,
Did you know that here in New York, the subway sings a song? I'm not crazy – at least, not crazier than when you knew me, I don't think – but really, it sings a three-note, metal-on-metal dirge: high-low-higher. Or maybe it's a love song from the train to each station as it leaves: I-love-you. I-won't-forget. It's the sort of thing we would have smiled to each other about.

Now, 15 years after you took your leave of us, I'm listening to the subway's love song of leave-taking. I have to write this on the train because in the cafe I keep weeping and having to flee, and I need to be able to go back there without the baristas worried that the woman who can't tell the dimes from the nickels will lose it again over her Grande Americano. Though maybe they wouldn't notice. I'm in good company there with the other crazy people washed up in Starbucks: the painted lady like Elvis' risen sister; the madman scrawling flamboyant nothings over page after certifiable page. We would have smiled about them, too, our hearts open to the florid fantasies of self, flourishing publicly in a place without much healthcare. Perhaps, sweetheart, I hear you say, the weeping will help you fit in. I see your wicked, raised-eyebrow smile. And though I am not crazy, not yet, suddenly you are right here with me, on the F train. I can conjure you, and I can keep you near.

Around the house I have small things of yours tucked into secret places; a hidden constellation of you. Inconsequential, embarrassing things, I can hear you say, utterly ridiculous. But by some miraculous, tacit dispensation from the universe, this miscellany of memory has made it over the years from Melbourne to Sydney to New York. Your 1998 season's ticket to the City Baths, valid



for four more swims, rests unnoticed in a green glass dish. The printed United Airlines suitcase tag, “Dr Kate Funder”, sits in a resin bowl of hair barrettes on my mantelpiece, next to the miniature carved animals you brought back from Africa. And, in my recipe book, a fax from America.

You were so funny about America. You faxed me from the same city where you were later diagnosed with the cancer that killed you. I'd needed a recipe. “Never let it be said,” you wrote, “that your mother abandoned you in your hour of need. Here with my best attempt at the chocolate cake...”

I would never let it be said, Mum, that you abandoned me in my hour of need. What I would say to you is that when I look into my children's faces – these funny and philosophical, innocent and wise creatures you would have taken such pleasure in – it is the loss to you that undoes me.

But to write of you is to conjure up my own loss, something I generally avoid. I live – the boys, too – in your light, like that from a star that died long ago, but whose beams still reach us. To write of you is to break the spell; to remind myself that it is cold and dark back at the source. Hence all the weeping and fleeing.

At Broadway-Lafayette, a woman moves down the carriage and sits by me. She's wearing a trenchcoat and lilac scarf and – you won't believe it – your perfume, Calvin Klein's Eternity. I'm sure the irony's not lost on you, either.



“
I live in your light, like that from a star that died long ago, but whose beams still reach us.
”

All that she is: (clockwise from top) Anna Funder's mother with Anna's brother; her parents' wedding day in 1964; Anna (at right) with her mother and brother.

One of your friends called me not long ago; she'd found a letter from you. “And Anna will be a writer,” you wrote, “and it will be hard.” Well, yes and no; it could be worse. But there is the writer's Big Problem. Once you write about something, you contain it – making, despite your best efforts, a poor copy, which then threatens to become all there is, to drain the vast pool of memory, which might otherwise at some future time throw up more, new memories. Just as memories of childhood holidays become confined to the Polaroids we have of them.

Mostly, in my professional life, this doesn't bother me; but with you, it's a different ask. I am still lit and warmed from your source, and I am not about to crawl all over a dark star. My art is not enough, what could ever be enough?

The only way forward, I think, Mum, is to hear your own voice, so funny and acute, and so quietly revealing of how much I owe you.

Under the recipe, you sent a slice of news from the psychology conference.

“Meanwhile,” you wrote, “I am surrounded by Mormons and socio-babble. The wagons are circled and sweet reason about to be scalped. The subway is 85 per cent black, some of whom make good repartee: Me: ‘Could you tell me where the bus stop is?’ He (grizzled old man): ‘Sorry ma’am, I don’t speak English.’ Lots of love, Mum xxx”

I have to get off this train, or kind people will start asking if I'm okay. I'm fine Mum, lit and warmed still. But I have to tell you that my hour of need is now. And now – and now.

A

PS. Speaking of eternity, right at the end, when you – lapsed Catholic, or unbeliever, or both – whispered to Dad, “I'm going to miss you”, did you know where it was you were going? And are you still there? **GW**

Edited extract from the anthology *Dear Mum*, published last month by William Heinemann.

THE QUIZ



COMPILED BY
STEPHEN SAMUELSON

1. Who commissioned the construction of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris?

2. In the geological time scale which is longer – an eon, epoch or era?

3. Which two countries share borders solely with India and China?

4. Name the two films for which Taiwanese-born Ang Lee (left) has won the Academy Award for Best Director.

5. What name is given to a word whose spelling is the same forwards or backwards?

6. Who was the only Roman emperor to voluntarily abdicate his position?

7. How many VFL/AFL grand finals did Michael Tuck play in for Hawthorn?

8. What is the primary ingredient of pilaf?

9. Which regulating device in a car's engine was made redundant by the introduction of fuel injection systems in the 1980s?

10. Which is the most abundant metal found in the Earth's crust?

11. With which Italian city would you associate the House of Medici?

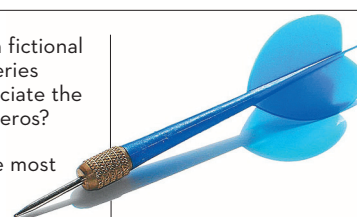
12. With which fictional TV and book series would you associate the continent Westeros?

13. What is the most points you can score with a single throw in darts?

14. How many states in the United States start with the letter “I”?

15. What do the initials of the federal government agency ASIS stand for?

16. Which word beginning with “T” is derived from the Old French word for “private teacher” and Latin for “guardian”?



17. Which Australian band was known as Flowers before changing its name in 1981?

18. Which Dutch explorer was the first European to record a sighting of New Zealand?

19. In which two Jules Verne novels does Captain Nemo appear?

20. The Simpson Desert lies in which three Australian states or territories?

GET IT?

BY BOB PICKERING

Use the sequence of pictures to guess the answer

DUGONG MUNCHIES



FOR SUDOKU, QUIZ ANSWERS AND GET IT? SOLUTION, SEE PAGE 45

COURTESY OF ANNA FUNDER

Wind power originates from which other energy source?



Answer on wrapper 8.