

My dear Jagiyah,

It hasn't been so long that we've known each other has it? Three years last December if my memory is correct. Even for someone as young as I, that's not a very great amount of time, yet here I am getting so nostalgic-- even I laugh at myself. No, actually, I take that back. When I think through all of the change you've inspired, I feel my nostalgia is valid. Being arguably so artless and profit-driven, it seems silly that you, Korean pop music, would be the one to change my world around. But your credibility in the music world is no matter to me, I can only ever love you. You know that already though; I've told you plenty of times. Now I think it's time I tell you exactly why.

Do you remember my high school friend Taylor? Probably not, since you two never really got to know each other, and you and I didn't get well acquainted until college. She's the one who introduced us. During our last year of high school she was babysitting some Korean kids who showed her a music video that immediately made her think of me. It was the perennial Girl's Generation's "Gee." There was nothing in that video I didn't like; it was all rainbow-bright colors and cutesy hand gestures and easy-to-follow dancing. I had that video on repeat for weeks. I studied it. The design of the video was so new and fascinating to me. It was nothing like American music videos that I generally found pretentious, dull, or distasteful. Instead, the girls in the video looked like they were happy and having fun, and the song and dance beckoned me to join in with its cheerful simplicity and sing-along chorus. I was hooked.

And yet, for a whole summer that was the only song of yours I could stand. I loved "Gee" so much I went searching for the rest of Girl's Generation's music on iTunes and watched the other music videos that YouTube recommended, but none of them caught me like "Gee" did. I know, I know-- this must be shocking considering how much I adore you now-- but at the time you were still too foreign. Not only was the music not in the band style I had grown accustomed to, I simply felt weird listening to music I couldn't understand. Plus the language, when sung, had a different tone than English that I

didn't immediately like. But that was all a matter of exposure, I just needed some time to get to know you better.

My freshman year in college supplied that time. The close-knit group of friends I'd been lucky enough to find in high school made me forget how hard it was for me to make friends. I left behind my life in California for school in Wisconsin, filled to the brim with fantasies of how college life would be. I was going to go to parties and dance every weekend, and host spontaneous Disney movie marathons with all my new dorm friends, and be that funny, cute and cool girl that every guy wanted to date. My college life was going to be like the movies because I would finally get the chance to reinvent myself into the vision of perfection I'd groomed while growing tired of the confining routines of high school. However, within the first two weeks of school it became clear that some part of my plan had gone wrong and I was spending more time alone than I ever thought I would. You were the one I turned to. I watched more cheerful, colorful music videos to distract myself from the sad reality of my social life. What could have gone wrong? I had introduced myself to everyone on my floor and went to all the welcome-week events to meet people from the other floors and dorms, but it seemed I had missed something. People weren't inviting me out, and I started being the only person going to some of the events my dorm put on. Obviously there was some problem with me; my plan was perfect, but my execution was not.

But what was the issue? To me the answer was as clear as day: I was too unattractive for people to want me around. My friends at home had given me enough confidence in my personality to not think that was a problem, so this was the only other option. I began dieting. When losing weight didn't win me any friends, I was forced to question the personality that had won me such good friends in high school, and which I never had to doubt before. There must have been something fundamentally wrong with me that I was almost halfway through my first semester and hadn't come anywhere close to fulfilling my

college fantasy. My diet started to become my obsession. I treated my eating as a reflection of my character: if could I eat perfectly then I would be perfect and I would have my perfect college dream. But this high standard was impossible to maintain. I would make mistakes and feel such a sense of shame and self loathing, I can't even describe it to you. Because I wasn't perfect I, I wasn't worthy of friends or happiness.

Yet I still retained a sense of hope. Sure, I messed up this time, but I knew that all I had to do was employ a different diet trick so that next time I would reach perfection. The tricks never worked for long, though, and I became more obsessive and restrictive, which led to frequent binge eating. With every binge I saw the perfection I desired falling further away, so I would double down on what I was allowed to eat and how much and what exercise I had to do to burn it all off. This made me so hungry I was forced to binge again in a constant cycle. But I didn't have an eating disorder. What a ridiculous notion. This was solely about my health. It was obvious from all these recent, late-night eating extravaganzas that I had a sugar problem and a snacking problem and an all around eating-too-much problem. Besides, perfect people don't have eating disorders, so I could at least be sure I would never wander that way; it would defeat the whole purpose.

My obsession extended into your realm and I started watching music videos for hours, Girl's Generation in particular. They became my image of perfection: beautiful and popular, but also kind, and silly in a way that everyone understood and found adorable. I still studied the videos, but this time it wasn't out of curiosity at the cultural difference; it was to imprint in my mind what I needed to become in order to be worthy of the happiness and love I was lacking. I started studying the comments section under the videos as well. They gave me proof that my journey would be fruitful; thousands of people fawned over these girls and would do the same for me when I became like them.

I treated these girls terribly. I removed their humanity and put them on a pedestal. They became dolls to me, with no flaws or feelings. I turned them, and every one of your people, into a tool, a mere goal for me to aspire to. It never occurred to me that they could be acting, or that parts of their lives were unhappy.

This went on for nearly a year and a half. I became so tired. My plan was not working and I lacked the enthusiasm of the first few months. The dream had become more a matter of pride than anything else. I was going to get this right or so help me, I would live like this the rest of my life because completely giving up would be more shameful than continuing on, even though mistakes were inevitable. The only possible way for me to hate myself even more than I already did would be to stop trying. Keeping on meant that I at least wasn't a complete failure who had given into laziness and complacency, no matter how far from perfection I was. That's when you gave me Super Junior. Ever since I met you I had stayed away from the boy groups; they looked too feminine and strange to me, in their heavy makeup and outlandish clothes. I couldn't watch any of their videos without feeling second hand embarrassment. But one night when I was feeling particularly adventurous, or perhaps bored would be a better word, I decided to give boy groups another chance. After all, I had gotten used to Girl's Generation over time so it could be the same for them. I watched Super Junior's "It's You" video and was hooked just like I was for "Gee." The concept was simple, without any of the weird outfits and makeup that had turned me away before. There was one member of the group, Kyuhyun, who stood out to me for his beautiful, clear, low notes.

I can't thank you enough for introducing me to this boy, it's almost entirely to his credit that I became healthy again. He has mastered your art of fanservice; always sending little heart signs to crowds at concerts and making earnest speeches about how much he loves his fans and is thankful for them. This is a fantastic practice. It makes people feel cared for and essential. When I became a fan of

Kyuhyun, it was my first time feeling again that I could be loved without being perfect. I don't mean to sound melodramatic when I say this; it's honestly what I felt. The simple act of being his fan was enough for him to care about me. That such a declaration came from someone whom I so respected and adored, someone whom I saw as perfect, was a revelation. If I was worthy of love from this perfect person, how could I not be worthy of love from the people around me, as well as myself, who are so flawed?

Realizing this was medicine. I was finally able to gain the strength and humility to admit to family and friends I had an eating disorder and get help.

And as if doing that for me wasn't enough to make me love you forever, you continued to help me grow as an individual once I got healthy. You excited my curiosity again, effectively preventing any future relapse. I began to learn about your culture, and all of Korea's. Instead of staying up late watching music videos I had already seen a million times over, now I stayed up reading history books and social commentaries. Learning about you and your country has taught me what it's like to feel passionate about knowledge again and has helped to refocus my school career.

With this new mind that can now extend beyond my dinner plate, I am able to be creative again. Listening to music in a language I don't understand gives me the chance to really hear the sounds without worrying about their meaning, which enables me to create my own meaning for the songs, based solely on how I feel listening to it. I can also express these feelings through dance, which you've inspired me to pick up again too. First I only learned the routines in your videos, but now I take the same songs and create my own choreography.

I've also found communities online where fellow k-poppers get together and talk, not only about their favorite groups, songs and dances, but about their lives. Meeting these people has given me more confidence in making friends in person, and also, strangely enough, not making them. I no longer see it as a reflection on my worthiness as a human being if I simply don't connect with someone. There are

plenty of good people in my life now, and there will surely be more as I get older, and these good people are like me: imperfect. Because really, nobody is perfect, not even Kyuhyun or Girl's Generation.

So that's the reasoning behind it all, in case you were ever curious as to the *why* of my affection. Just thinking now of how much happier I am because of you, happier than I can ever remember being, makes me sigh with contentment. Making you aware of all the good you've done for me, and I'm sure for many others, is about the only gift I can give back, along with my continued support.

사랑합니다,

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