



INSIGHT

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Unsolicited advice and all that jazz: A voice note to my younger self

The traffic into Cape Town: brake lights, taxis, ship horns, the mountain holding its usual pose against the sky. I found myself doing what any self-respecting science fiction and fantasy reader does at 07h42: composing a voice note to my 25-year-old self, to be delivered by Mxit on my BlackBerry.

[Voice note begins]

Hi. It's me. Us. Older. Still driving to the office in the Fiesta.

I have been asked to prepare an 800-word article on advice to my younger self. But really, you get a lot of advice. Trust me. You will!

One morning, walking into court, senior counsel will fall into step beside you. Kind, he will mean every word. And he will suggest, with the force of expensive legal argument, that you build a property law practice. It suits a young woman, he'll say, especially once you start a family. You will thank him because he is being thoughtful, and because you were raised well. But a small and persistent seed will be planted: that the place you are earning, and the voice you are developing, carry a faint whiff of the perverse. That you are, at best, out of place.

Much later, you will be wrapped up in a deal that you will work on in three jurisdictions (glamorous London city; Johannesburg; and a breathtaking African desert). A colleague will lean into your doorway around 22h00 (worn thin by his own week) and remind you, with that familiar certainty, that you should have your eggs counted, because "You never know when it's too late."

You will thank him too, though you will wonder what he has been carrying that made him stop at your door. And then, without quite meaning to, you will take some of the gloss off your own excitement for the work. The deals, the influencers, being in the room when African industries are reshaping the tables you dreamed of sitting at. A silly thing, a raw deal in comparison with what everyone else can so clearly see would be in your best interest.

You are not asking for advice. You really want a roadmap.

You have a degree and a title. It is a bit like you have been learning the piano. You have learnt to read the notes and sat every exam. What you want, at 25, is for someone senior and steady to hand you the sheet music with the tempo marked, telling you "play this, like

this, and you will be a perfect dealmaker". But nobody has that page to hand you.

Do you know the Köln Concert? Keith Jarrett, January 1975. Of course you don't; you are 25, and we only hear this story a decade from now. Keith Jarrett arrives at the Cologne Opera House to find the wrong piano on stage. It is tiny, weak in the bass, with pedals that stick. He is talked into playing by a young events organiser, despite the catastrophe. He then performs one of the most celebrated improvisations ever recorded. If this voice note inspires nothing else, put on the record. Listen to the first five minutes. You can hear him testing the instrument, finding which keys ring true, leaning into the keys that work, working the pedals that still respond, and figuring out how to get that piano to reach the back of the concert hall. And slowly, he figures it out, and the music comes together in a way it couldn't on any other piano. You are still figuring out the instrument you have. You are still learning that your career is a lot more like jazz than classical music.

No matter how many people hand you a score and call it a plan. You haven't got the same instrument.

The sheet music people keep politely handing you was written for a different instrument. You haven't lived through the #MeToo movement yet, so you will be shocked by my language. That music was written for a neurotypical male keyboard. One that requires a power cable which has long since been lost. You will exhaust yourself trying to play the way they do, with rules that are made to exclude you. Instead, learn your own broken instrument. Which keys are in tune. Which pedals work. When to push and when to hold back. Some rooms need volume, and some need silence.

One more thing. I don't mean that you should ignore all advice. There are other women who figured this out long ago. Jazz feeds off the energy of the room and, as it turns out, so do you. Take the encouragement when it comes. The opposing legal advisor naming a strength she observed in how you handled a difficult negotiation; a colleague noticing a weakness you have overcome; a friend celebrating a milestone you already walked past without noticing it yourself. They understand that their encouragement is worth the world of advice. You need the encouragement to keep improvising, and to keep finding your own music.

[Green light.]

[End of voice note. Send.] 

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