

An ode to agony aunts

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When I was 13, I'd anxiously await the moment that the new teen magazines would drop on the newsstands, scurrying from school to the newsagents, the unopened plastic winking at me from the shelves. A new month heralded the promise of advice in those pages, a respite from the constant worries whirring around my brain. Were my eyebrows too bushy? I haven't had my first kiss yet. Am I normal? Forget the celebrity interviews, the questionable early noughties sartorial advice (hello DIY tie-dye T-shirts and invisible bra straps) – the real delight came in desperately examining the contents so I could flick straight to the problem page.

Common parlance dictated that problems were better left to yourself but it was agony aunts – the Cathys, the Louises, the Melanies – with their warm, unpatronising tone, who understood that worries about facial hair, boys and friendships weren't frivolous.

I was never able to pluck up the courage to write in but to my surprise, girls from far-flung places I'd never even heard of (*Anxious, 15, Coventry* and *Scared, 14, Leighton Buzzard*) unwittingly became my soul sisters, united by our common problems, no matter how different we looked or where we lived. I'd relish each titbit of advice, re-reading it several times just to double check I hadn't missed a word.

When I outgrew *Sugar*, *Bliss*, *Mizz* and the other teen magazines that conjured up images of cotton candy soon folded, I graduated to the online world. But I was distraught to discover that Google lacked the warmth of these agony aunts I had known so intimately, the blue tint from the computer and the informal tone only for company.

I resigned myself to a life where I'd write imaginary letters to the Cathys that had long since drifted, the postman returning them, undelivered stamped on the back. Yet in a surprise twist, during my adult life, I collected friends who soon became the confidantes I had spent my entire childhood waiting for.

From boyfriend woes, unsatisfying jobs and undesirable flatshares, these women became the real living embodiment of agony aunts. Among well-thumbed books, half-empty wine bottles leaving rings on the living room table, morsels of gossip were traded and tears shed.

So, while the agony aunts may have disappeared in written form and the problems have become far more grown-up, they exist now in the form of my best female pals where no subject is deemed too much, an empathetic ear always on hand.

I hope Cathy would have been pleased to know that *Worried, 13, London* had discovered that the real agony aunts were the women in her life. ♦

