

ONE - In a little while, I wake up. My alarm goes off and I don't hear it at first, but then, gradually, the beeping worms its way into my sub-conscious, into my dreams. I open my eyes and make the noise stop. In a little while, I don't remember this. Now, my wrists burn and I feel like everything inside me is leaving, like my organs and my soul are being pulled from my body and it's so real that my heart rate - the actual pulse of my sleeping body - increases and I break into a small sweat. But the beeping, the alarm, wipes my memory clean. My pillow will be damp, I'll feel anxious, and I won't remember why. This dream. The one I've had three times a week for almost two years, the one in which the pain is like a bad habit, the one that's become so familiar it's like coming home. I never remember it when I open my eyes.

TWO - I sit here, with my friends, and I laugh at the jokes. I make a comment or two. It's really comfortable. But... No one ever asks me anything. And no one really reacts to what I say. Like, they're nice and they listen, but it's like my comments don't matter. They don't change the conversation or... Like, if I wasn't here at all, would anything be different? Would anyone notice? Halfway through the conversations, I usually just stop talking. I still smile and laugh and whatever, but I just drop out because I'm out of ideas for how to... talk. But maybe that's okay. They're my friends, right? Maybe it's enough that I'm just here. With people.

THREE - At the end of every day, I walk out of here, and I'm finally able to exhale. Like, I've been holding my breath all day long, through every class. Through every interaction. And I don't even realize I'm doing it, holding my breath. But when I walk out of the building, I feel this sudden: (*He exhales.*) This huge relief, like I survived one more day. I can breath again and I can 'X' out one more box on the calendar. One box closer to summer. One box closer to graduation. My mom and my aunt say I should enjoy my life. Because I'm young. Because life only gets harder. But I think they're lying. I mean, they have to be, right? How can it possibly get harder?

FOUR - You know that moment where you feel like you've changed, but no one around you notices? Like, you feel... not so much new. But maybe older? Or just... different. Like you've leveled up. Like you've figured something out about yourself. But everyone around you is still treating you like "old you." Like you should enjoy the same food. Be happy with the same things. Or around the same people. And you stand in this... dissonance. Who you are versus who they see you as.

FIVE - When I got home that afternoon, my mom grabbed me. Just grabbed me and squeezed. It wasn't even a hug, it was... like she was claiming me. Holding me here. And I was numb. That whole night, just numb. Doing homework, eating dinner. My little brother started watching one of his stupid action shows where the hero had to save... something. The world, probably. I don't know. And he breaks into this warehouse and twenty guys jump out to fight him. So he takes them all out. You know, punches, ducks, shoots, whatever. Until they're all on the ground, dead. And the hero, after, just walks into the next room. Like nothing happened. Like this was just a speed bump on his road. Twenty people.

SIX - Two years ago, I cut my hair. My grandfather was always saying how much of a mess my hair was. So right before his funeral, I chopped it all off. And I became a different sort of mess. It was too short to meet the, uh, the "standard." There's a perfect length, right? Like, too long and you're kind of a hippie. But too short, they called me a lesbian. I don't wear make-up. And it's... None of us used to, right? Then, middle school, and some of us started, and now... there are the girls who wear too much, everyone calls them fake. And there's me who wears none, so they call me plain. Or ugly. Or... or a... I know I fall short, but who's the person who gets to set the standard? Who gets to say what's "just right"?

SEVEN - I had this camp counselor when I was kid. Maybe seven or eight. His name was Larry - which, I know - but he was the coolest guy. Like, we all worshipped him. Just looked up to him like he was a g-d. And he was so nice and easy going and he had it all figured out. You know? But he was, like, fifteen. I'm older now than he was then. And, like, I have nothing figured out. It's like, that perspective of looking up, looking at someone older than you and thinking: "When I'm their age I'll be good. I'll be smooth and things will be easy going cause I'll know everything." It's like this giant, toxic lie. No one has anything figured out.