

Just a girl

I'm 10 years old and reading a book on my hotel bed when my mom comes in. "You are literally shaped like a pretzel right now. Keep this going and you'll have scoliosis by the time you're 15," she says in a scolding tone. Instead of correcting my posture I just ask: "Is that what you came here to tell me?" "No," she says, "your dad and I are going to the store, do you want anything?" I tell her that I think I need a bra. This feels weirdly formal. Like I'm making some important announcement, maybe it is. She's taken a bit by surprise. "What, now?" she asks. "No, just when we get back home from vacation I mean," I reply. "I see, are the girls in your grade starting to use bras?" she asks me. I tell her that some of them have. "And have their boobs started to come in like yours?" she asks. I can't quite place it but the way she asks makes the question feel loaded. Like the answer matters for some reason but I don't know why. So I answer truthfully: "Not really." "We'll look into it when we get home ok?" "Ok" I reply carelessly and she leaves the room. I don't realise it now but something in the air has shifted. I continue reading unbothered but later in the future I'll know that this is where it all began.

I'm 13 years old and looking at a text on my phone. It's from my childhood friend. We live in the same neighborhood and were in the same class in kindergarten up to the fourth grade. "Do you send?" I text him back, "no." "pleaseee" he sends back. I take ten screenshots and send them to my friends and we laugh about how desperate he is. I'm laughing and then I'm chuckling and then I'm silent. I realise I don't find it funny anymore. Actually, I'm kind of disgusted by this boy. This boy who learned the alphabet beside me, played hide and seek with me and whose mom comforted me when I fell on the playground in the second grade. This boy who now wants pictures of my body. I don't find it funny anymore.

I'm 14 years old and I'm playing pool at my town's social center. It's 3 am on Friday night and I'm having the time of my life. I'm at this event where 50 kids from all around town stay the whole night at the social center. About half the kids are in my school and half are in other schools. I've been smoking every guy at the pool table so far and the people watching are impressed. I'm laser focused while playing and I feel like I absolutely need to win. Not just for myself but for all the girls that know how it feels to be expected by people to lose just because you're competing against a guy. I hit the balls in the net one by one and the guy I'm playing against keeps looking at his friends that are sitting together on the couch beside the pool table. They're not from my school and some of them are older so I don't know them very well. He's got this weird smirk on his face, probably because his friends are making fun of him for losing to a girl. I turn around to tell the guys to stop disturbing him but they all stop whispering and none of them looks me in the eye. The expressions on their faces look evasive but not regretful. I keep playing but this time I can feel all of them watching me like hawks and they keep giggling but not in a joyful manner. It feels more like malicious sniggering. I keep playing for a while but my balance has been thrown so I'm not doing as well. A girl comes up to me and whispers in my ear: "They're all staring at you when you bend over the table, you know, from behind." Just great. I throw the game and go to my

backpack to change into a noticeably larger t-shirt. While I do feel slightly less uncomfortable, I can't shake this feeling that I've given up somehow. That I've let somebody down. Whom, I don't know. Myself maybe or every female on the planet? I'm aware that I'm being slightly dramatic but I'm just so disappointed in myself. My male friend comes up to me as I'm watching some seniors play ping-pong almost aggressively. "Hey, what happened to your shirt that was like 20 sizes smaller?" he asks me. "I was cold," I answer indifferently without taking my eyes off the white flash in front of me.

I'm 14 years old and I'm holding 7 pills in the palm of my hand. It started with just one, regular birth control to regulate my period. My period that is so heavy that I faint thrice a week from exhaustion. So I've started taking the pill like the doctor told me to, except it hasn't helped so now I've been prescribed even more pills. Cyklocapron is what the extra medication is called and it's supposed to reduce the amount of blood that I bleed out. I need to take 6 of them every day, two in the morning, two at noon and two in the evening along with the estrogen pill. I bleed less now so they do help but there's just something so depressing about needing 7 pills to be able to get through the day. To merely function.

I'm 15 and sitting in a car full of boys completely squashed. We're all in the same grade and I had met them by coincidence in the mountains while skiing and joined them. Now we're driving back into town and I'm chatting with the guy to my left. We're not exactly friends but you could say we're well acquainted. His name is Mac and he's the biggest guy in our grade. He's literally huge. He used to be chubby but lost a lot of weight and got muscular last summer impressively fast. So fast that I've heard rumors about him being on steroids. We're talking about something insignificant and suddenly he says: "You're basically a man." I look at him dumbfounded. "What?" I reply with a slightly annoyed but intrigued tone. "Because you're good at everything," he says casually, not realising how genuinely fucked up that was. "Oh, how lucky I am to be as worthy as the mighty male," I declare sarcastically. He doesn't seem too bothered and simply says "Come on, I didn't mean it like that." But he did, he did mean it like that. I'm angry, mostly at him but also at myself. Because deep down I feel a little proud over what he said and I hate myself for it.

I'm 16 and roaming the candy section in the store with my friends during lunch. I decide to buy myself a chocolate bar as a little treat for myself before our chemistry test. As we're walking back to school, I'm leading the group and we're about to pass a group of grown men on the street corner holding beer bottles. I can feel all of their eyes on me but there's one of them in particular that's the worst. His eyes trace my body from top to bottom and he's glaring at me like a piece of meat. I want to take that bottle from his hands and smash it into his smug face. Instead I keep walking and after a couple of meters I glance back, he has walked past the corner and is subtly following us. Even my male friends notice it. I want to scream at him that he's a pervert and a pedophile and to fuck off back into the sewage drain he came from. Instead I walk slightly faster and we enter the school. He doesn't follow us inside but rather watches me walk up the stairs until we're out of view. I'm furious at myself for not doing anything. So I make a vow to myself that next time I'll without doubt take some sort of action. We arrive into the classroom and everybody is using the final 20 minutes we have to prepare for the exam. Not me though. I watch the clock slowly tick on the wall and my mind feels completely empty. I watch the minute hand creep inch by inch.

11:50.....11:57..... 12:04.....12:09. The door opens and the teacher walks in. Suddenly there's a white test sheet on my desk and then just as suddenly has the sheet been filled.

“Lost in thought?” I’m 16 years old and sitting in a small room across from a nurse. I’ve probably been staring silently into space for a while now. “Sorry, I was actually thinking about a chemistry test I took recently,” I say to her apologetically. “Oh, did you do well?” she asks and seems genuinely interested. “I got 93%,” I answer coolly. She tells me that’s well done and I flash her a forced smile. “Pardon, can you repeat what the exact question was?” I ask her. “What word would you use to describe your adolescence?” she repeats. “Um.. puberty?” I say. “I’m looking for something a bit more descriptive, sweetie.” She says it with a smile but I can tell that she's getting impatient. The question is simple enough but it feels oddly personal, especially for some mandatory interview with the school nurse. I didn't even know we had a nurse until yesterday and now I'm supposed to tell some woman about this whole ordeal that feels innately private. Should I use a negative word since my worst experiences all stem from being a girl, from being a teenager, from being a teenage girl in this body that puberty has given me? But then again I like the person I've become and in a way is every one of those experiences part of me. I would never describe something that's part of me in a negative way. “There's no right or wrong answer,” I know I'm being difficult, she's just doing her job and she's not asking for much. Literally only one word. I need to answer now. Just one word. “Well, it definitely had its ups and downs and...” I trail off deep in thought, trying to convey my thoughts into words. A word. “And?...” she says encouragingly. “And I feel like I was or I am just wandering around really. Everything around me just happens and I observe it but I have no idea where I’m going. Like there's no real destination,” I reply. It's plainly worded, maybe even a bit childishly but at least it's the truth. It seems to have peaked her interest because she leans forward and says: “No destination? You mean like a journey?” “Yeah,” I respond after a split second of consideration, “I guess like a journey.”