

## The Shrinking Room

--For some reason, the room didn't feel very big. It had a comfortable feel to it, though. It was quiet, and calm. It's nice to be in a place like that. I sat myself on a soft, beige chair that was nearly centered in the room. My feet rested on the bottom as a short figure slowly waddles through the doorway with a binder tucked under his arms. He was an older gentleman, with a balding head of gray hair and a set of squared prescription glasses. The man sported a green plaid button-down, tucked into a light pair of khaki pants and topped off with black dress shoes. As he sat himself firmly in his chair across from me, a sting of uncertainty overtook me. It felt like my day was about to turn into an interrogation. *Was this the right choice? Do I even need this? I'm not some messed up kid that has to be talked to in order to feel good about myself. Maybe I should go.* My train of thought was interrupted by a coarse, yet content voice coming from the other side of the room. As he spoke, I felt his vocals climb into my ear drums, sort of like how the smell of a delicious pie reaches through a nostril in those old cartoons.

*"It's great to finally meet you in person."*, he says. His greeting felt sincere from the outside, but I knew it was his job to sound that way.

*"My name is Wayne. Let's break down what's going on here and see if we can't figure out how to make this whole situation better. I want you to know that I'm here as your friend, not just a face to talk to. Feel free to tell me anything. This will all be kept confidential. Now why don't you start by telling me a little bit about yourself. I'd love to get to know you."*--

There's a sort of peaceful bliss to being an ordinary guy. I've never had much of a drive to be overly-excellent, so having a lack of attention was never my problem. Growing up in a small town catered to that vision in that nothing much really happened. I've always had great parents, as well as two lovely sisters. With that, there were also a lot of boys my age living in my development, so they quickly became my best friends. We formed brother-like bonds, even from a young age, that seemed unbreakable. Because of this, most of my time was spent with the same group of people. Due to the fact that our neighborhood was large, we would ride our bikes around for hours until we figured out what we wanted to do that day. It was actually a lot more fun than it sounds. Those memories don't deserve to be forgotten, and I hope they never will be. Like any friend group naturally would, we met more kids similar to us that blended in with the type of people we were. There's no better feeling than meeting people that are so similar to you that you click instantly. The room always felt big, no matter how many of us were stuffed in it.

As time went by and we got to middle school, things became different. The friend group started to change, and those who I thought would be at my side forever seemed to vanish into the crowd of peers. The ones who remained, while still my best friends, began treating me differently. I wasn't as athletic as them, or nearly as smart. I knew it, too. That was never something that bothered me, though. The killer was that they reminded me of these facts constantly, and they spoke to me in a condescending way. My own best friends got some form of entertainment from making fun of me. I felt like a child compared to them. My self esteem was butchered like a hunted animal. The room always felt so small, like I had no space to move. I didn't understand it at first, but I concluded that it was just a part of growing up. Teasing is just something kids do. I hated it, of course, but I never said anything. It gave them something to

laugh about and kept them happy. I tolerated it for the sake of keeping the friend group together. After so many of my closest buddies became forgotten memories, I desired more and more to keep everyone around. I guess I'm not very comfortable with change. It's hard to explain in an elementary way. Some people are just like that.

--**He adjusted his collar** and wrote a few things down in his binder. His legs crossed as he stroked his chin, displaying that he was deep in thought. After a short silence, he lifted his finger and spoke.

*"I think it's amazing how you put such a high value on friendship. That's a quality that could bring you great things in life. The best kinds of things, in my opinion. However, sacrificing pieces of yourself in exchange for friendship is a very unhealthy habit. So, to clarify, you stayed close with these people through most of your life regardless of this treatment?"*

He paused for a second as I nodded my head, then continued.

*"The way I see it... if you want friends that you can really trust, you should reconsider who you surround yourself with. If you don't mind me asking, have they ever physically hurt you in any way?"--*

It was never my belief that my friends purposely wanted me to feel this way. They didn't always make it physical. It *did* happen sometimes. There were instances where they'd throw balls at me while I rode my bike so I fell off and hurt myself, and they'd pelt things at me that left me with a few nasty bruises. On one horrifying occasion, they abused my gullible judgement to prank me. I sat in a chair unsuspectingly, and so, naturally, they duct taped me to it while I struggled against their force. My mouth was taped shut, and a paper bag was put over my head. My feet were immobilized, as well as my hands. The tape around my neck was particularly tight,

I recall. It felt like I was being choked to death. Rendered defenseless and unable to move, my only option was to sit there and watch as my childhood tortured me and laughed about it. They beat me with rolls of wrapping paper until my skin turned a bright red. One of them had the genius idea of removing a lamp shade and burning my wrists and arms with the scorching hot light bulb beneath it. They put thumbtacks in the front of those fun little foam nerf bullets and shot my arms so that they bled. To wrap it up, they chucked me into a small closet, still strapped to the old wooden chair. After a few kicks for good measure, I was left alone in there. The light bulb, still dimly lit on the ground, sparked a bit before dying out. As the light quickly faded, the walls started moving closer to me. I could still hear their echoed laughter outside the door. I knew the darkness was my only companion at that point. My self-respect died with that light bulb, I think. Since then, I've always been that sobbing child, held down with little wiggle room. That room felt so small. I have always hoped it would just become a forgotten memory.

Obviously I was upset, but I couldn't bring myself to feel animosity towards them. I know it was just a prank to make them laugh. The actions were a little extreme, but after I broke free, the day went on as it usually did. I loved these guys like brothers, and I know that they'd look out for me when I needed them. We had our first beers together, and we always used to talk about the girls from school. We'd watch funny movies and play with lacrosse sticks in a backyard. We'd ride bikes across town, until we reached the pizza place that had those \$2.50 slices. People don't just do those things for no reason, or to pass time. That's what friendships are for. Real ones, at least. I'm not stupid; I know that it's wrongful treatment. It's just not so simple in the moment. I never expected anybody to understand. That's why I never opened up to

my parents about it. They probably would've made it worse. It wasn't their problem, anyway. It wasn't really a problem at all.

--**Wayne sat there** with a skeptical expression covering his face. He nodded slowly as he sipped his coffee. His advice started to sound like a broken record.

*"The pain you've been caused isn't worth the friendship you desire. I understand what this all feels like for you, but you're a person capable of making better friends. Ones who will honestly treat you like a human being. This sounds more like torture than friendship to me. If that's not what you want, though, and you really see these friends as family...you have to say something. The only way to truly come to peace with all of this is to tell them. Are these people still present in your life?"--*

As middle school turned into high school, the environment and the intensity of everything kind of evolved. All the trash talk stopped, and the inconsistently harsh behavior discontinued. They had grown up and matured. I no longer felt unsafe when just spending time with others. It was weird. Toward the end of my junior year going into my senior year, I remained friends with a pretty large group of kids, many of which being those same ones from middle school. While most of us had jobs during the week, the weekends were a time for us to enjoy ourselves. I don't have too many bad recollections of this time period. Some of my best memories came from last year, goofing around with a bunch of kids as stupid as me. It's all been better since then, but I'm just not satisfied. We never thought back to those times, and nobody ever reflected on the torture I endured. They never realized what they had done, and I still have not opened up to anyone involved about it. I just never forgave them, I guess. Maybe if I talked to them when it mattered, and told them how I truly felt, I would have grown up to be a different person; a better person. I

don't think it would change anything now if I were to come clean to them. They would probably treat me like a child then and force sympathy on me. Sympathy isn't what I need. Maybe it is. I don't think I would know what I need right now. I'm just at constant conflict with everything. It eats away at my mind. The headaches have gotten worse, and I can't make heads or tails of anything at this point. I feel so pressured, like the room is so small that it can only fit me. Just my squirming, suffering soul.

**--He folded his binder** and set it aside. His eyes then locked with mine. It felt like he was aiming a gun at me. His hands locked together between his fingers and he sighed. What he told me in that moment stuck with me to this day. Not because I understood it, but because I didn't.

*"At the end of all of this, they chose to treat you that way, and you chose to accept it, no matter what you lost in exchange. You're still in control of your own mind. You always have two hands on the wheel. It's important that you understand this. This isn't about them, I don't think. After hearing everything, I think your conflict is with yourself."*

My understanding of the complications regarding my own personality and values has always been so vague. I always relied on others to evaluate myself, never considering my own thoughts on the matter. It was always such a hassle to break down my feelings into reasoning and expression, so I didn't do it. And when my friends grew up and I stopped suffering that pain, it all felt so wrong. I had gotten so used to the life I lived that I was afraid of moving on to better things. I realize now that I became the memories I so desperately wanted to forget. My mind has gone everywhere and back without finding any answers. I've stumbled into a state of emptiness, confusion and irritation that still haunts me. Somehow this is worse than a beating. I still feel like

I'm in that chair, being burned and scarred. Everytime sadness overcomes me, my mind takes me back there. I see that light burn out, bringing the darkness in, and making the room so small. I guess it's a different kind of beating. There's no easy way to explain that. I think this is all temporary, though. I'm just not fully grown up yet. I'm not sad or anything. This is a confusing age for most people. Everyone has something they're wrestling with. It's not just me that is accompanied by the dark, I know that now. And, if there's a possibility that I can recover from this position and become the person that I was meant to be, I think that it will be soon. It gives me hope to think that someday, the darkness will fade, and **the room will feel a just a little bit bigger.**

