Who am I?

Looking back on my life, fifth grade me and sixth grade me are two different people. The person I was leading up to sixth grade would not recognize the same girl a few days later. September of sixth grade was the beginning of my long, long journey with mental health. It is a journey that I still struggle with to this day; I’ve lost a portion of my life to it, and have yet to get the help I need.

Sixth grade, middle school! I never actually went; I had to get tutored outside of school. The first day of sixth grade was just like the rest of the first days of school I’ve done many times before; I got on to the bus with my new school shirt and even a little bit of mascara that my mom finally let me wear. Next thing I know, I’m in homeroom, corner of the room, sobbing, knees to my chest, having what I now know as a full-blown panic attack. I could feel the eyes of 28 other sixth graders looking at me, judging me, worrying for me, thinking, “what is wrong with this girl.” They called my mom about it, and all just figured it had something to do with being nervous about it being the first day of middle school, in a new place, with new kids, and let it go. It was so easy for them to sweep it under the rug.

That same night I went to Verizon to get my sister a new phone for her birthday, still crying, dreading going back, with my mom was desperately trying to figure out what was so wrong with me. I begged her for hours not to make me go back. “I can’t go back there, please mom, I can’t, don’t make me” I can still smell the new carpet they had just installed and hear the
original ringtone of the iPhone 4, it replays in my mind when I think about that day. My mom was utterly clueless as to what to do in this situation. What was wrong with her kid? She sent me back for another week, where the same thing happened over and over again; it was a torturous cycle. Having soul-crushing panic attacks every day for the entire day and then carrying them home with me solely because I knew I’d have to go back.

Having my mom drawing hearts in the palm of my hand, bringing cold washcloths to school, breathing exercises, and teachers continually asking if I’m okay was how my days played out. It never got better. Finally, my mom decided enough was enough and took me out of school and brought me straight to the first therapist she could find. And then the next one. And the next one. I can’t count on my fingers how many therapists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts I saw that year, but I can remember the ridiculously mean nicknames my mind would create about the ones I didn’t like. I was given medicine to take, which I refused to accept. Suicidal thoughts and self-harm led to me almost being put into an inpatient facility. I was barely passing any of the classes I was getting tutored for. I was out of regular school. Life as I knew it was utterly changed and my mental health was getting worse by the day. It didn’t get better.

Where was the happy little 5th grader that was there two months ago? I would soon be diagnosed with severe depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder within months of each other. Why was going to middle school such a big trigger that it could do all of this? Despite the many people I’ve talked to about it, professional or not, I still have no answers. I wish I could say that this only lasted my sixth-grade year, but it was only the beginning of many hard years to come. My depression and anxiety only got worse as I got older. Eventually, I slowly started to go back to school, one class at a time but was not there for a full day until the
beginning of 8th grade. Looking back at it, how childish and helpless of me. Why couldn’t I go
to school like a normal kid? What was so wrong with me?

This would be something I never wish anyone to go through. I lost all my friends that I once had, my family had never felt so disconnected with me, and in all honesty, I’ve never felt more disconnected from myself. It began the ongoing question of “Who am I? Why am I like this? and Why me?” I face those same questions to this day, and I still have so much trouble figuring out who I am. To others, I know I make them laugh and smile, and I can give good advice to a friend in need; my parents know I love them, and they love me. While those are all great qualities to have and things to notice, it’s so hard to have to wake up every day, look at me in the mirror, and not know the person who’s staring back. As Philip Lopate said, “If however, the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition - equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror - which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward (Lopate, pg. XXV-XXVI).” Lopate here states how when writing a personal essay, if you do it with 100% open honesty, you tend to help yourself “look in the mirror” and get an idea of who you are or figure out what you feel. Throughout this essay, I have sugar-coated nothing and therefore have helped myself take a more in-depth look at the things I could have done differently and the reason I reacted in the ways I did.

I’ve realized that there once was a point in my life where I was just about the happiest kid on earth, getting upset now and then when I wasn’t allowed to do something, but that didn’t last for more than a few hours; when the colors of the world were a little bit brighter than they are now. I’d give anything to have one day where I’d get to live like that again. I ruined my family; I took all the spotlight off my sister, struggling with mental illness on her own, and changed my
parents’ direction of their already rough marriage. I ruined myself. I lost myself and have yet to find myself. Eight years later, I still view myself as the little girl sitting in a chair in a psych ward, scared out of her mind, wondering when things were going to get better. Eight years later and they still aren’t. The thing with having a personality disorder on top of other mental illnesses is that its effortless to lose yourself. Sadness can last for days on end, and then one day you wake up, and it seems like nothing’s wrong in the world. It’s a tiring disease. It’s suffocating. It’s isolating. I disappointed my family. I disappointed my friends. And most importantly, I disappointed twelve year old me, and that weighs heavily on my mind.

The world is a little grayer, a lot sadder, the numbness sets in a bit more prolonged, and the darkness doesn’t seem to go away. “I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky(Alexie, Sherman, pg.2).” This is a quote from Sherman Alexie; I think this is a firm quote to read, write, and believe in. The confidence you have in yourself will always radiate off of you; I could have used this in sixth grade, to know that there’s someone out there who feels similar to you, yet shows how they persevere through it with confidence and strength would have been an excellent driving source for my sixth-grade self to see. I always have and will forever remain hopeful that things will get better. I have done a lot of growing since sixth grade, but I’ve also had many setbacks. I struggle with different things, but I’ve also healed from many things, which counts more than anything.

Citation Sheet

Alexie, Sherman. *The Joy of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me*, Los Angeles Times, April

XXV-XXVI.