

## Ode to the College Kid: Is This What They Meant by ‘Youth’?

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### *Freshman Year*

A girl walks into a freshman level photography class. Her skirt, purple and flowing, follows dutifully behind her, tangles around her legs. The fluorescent lights up above catch the shining sequins sewn here and there along the fabric, a glossy turquoise thread leading like a path to nowhere between each one. On her neck, crystals hang from suede Walmart string, each lovingly wrapped in copper wire with care by her own hands. Rings clink softly as she moves her fingers; a nervous twitch. She adjusts her jacket which has become more pins than denim, a roadmap of all the places she’s been and the things she’s loved. Her sandals slap against the beige, tiled floor. At first glance, they appear to be the expensive brand, but they’re really knock-offs. She’d never waste money on something like that.

She takes a seat at the back corner of the classroom. She places a yellow backpack beside her desk. From here, she can see the class, the professor, the board, and the door without having to turn her head; anxious and untrusting. But she is hopeful and bright and creative. She moves with an air of confidence, both in who she is and in her abilities.

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### *Sophomore Year*

The girl walks into her sophomore year Literary Theory class. She is wearing black leggings, a sweatshirt, and dark bags under her eyes. She has convinced herself that exhaustion and hunger look good on her. It is 1 o’clock in the afternoon.

Earlier this morning, she mixed a protein shake into her coffee and called it both breakfast and lunch. Gone are her necklaces and rings and pins. Gone is whatever sunlight she once glowed bright and blinding with, but she is still wearing knock-off shoes. She carries a yellow water bottle to match her backpack. She takes a seat in the back corner of the room because some things never change, but some do. Stress stretches her thin and anxiety makes her insides quake, looking like a rubber band pulled to its limit.

She checks her Google Calendar. Everything is now ruled by a deadline, a planner, a calendar; every moment of her day squeezed into time slots and color-coded. She has learned to appreciate syllabi and note-taking.

When asked how she is doing, she laughs manically. She feels programmed, conditioned, cog-in-the-machine. She feels herself losing every beautiful thing she was in love with a year ago. Her books and poetry and flowing skirts are fog in the distance, barely visible and never to be held. She is perpetually staring out windows at dead grass and grey skies.

This is the year that she becomes control. Where group projects are concerned, she is either the best person to work with, or the worst. No one has the balls to tell her which one, yet. She doesn't know how to tell them she knows no other way to exist.

She was raised to stack responsibilities atop her shoulders like bricks and no one ever told her that some people are not worth building houses for.

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### *Junior Year*

Each morning, a girl rises with the sun. It is her beloved companion, though she hisses through her teeth as it streams in between the cracks in the broken blinds. Later, she will love it. She will stand in its rays like a flower, begging to be warm, to be anything.

She stands and begins the long process of becoming a person, of becoming *her*. Picking up the pieces of herself as she makes her way around the room. Her armor is in the closet. Her mind in the pill bottle. Her undiluted rage is laying in the sink. Her loudness is tucked under her pillow, waiting. Her perfectionist complex is coiled around the strap of her backpack. She collects them...and becomes.

She is running late on time. She is always running late on time. Some days she is only a quarter of a person. Other days, she picks up someone else's pieces and is too much.

She opens the blinds, ensuring her many plants are well taken care of, even if she cannot care for herself.

Her roommate has been awake for hours, busy overachieving, busy being the perfect contrast to the girl's ordered chaos.

Dirty dishes are piled atop the mini fridge. She has not been able to bring herself to wash them for weeks. They are hard to wash in the bathroom sink and she is not yet out of forks.

Her closet is stuffed full of clothes she'll never wear. She glares at them as she pulls on the same variation of outfit she's worn for months. She is like a cartoon character; stagnant, never changing, stuck in one outfit for dozens of episodes.

The room is too cold in the morning and too hot at night. She had to rip the window guards out to open them. No one will keep her from the outside.

The girl pours decaf coffee and a protein shake into a large cup and calls it breakfast and lunch, because some things never change, but some do. She washes down her Adderall with it. Soon, she will be normal again, functioning again; person, being, *become*.

It is snowing outside, though yesterday it was 70 degrees.

Spring means her roommate is coming into a manic episode. It won't last long, but in that short time, she will end her three-year relationship and get a \$700 tattoo. The girl will love her through this. She will approve of every decision. She will stay her hand when she can.

She raises her breakfast and lunch in a salute to the sky: *to bipolar states and bipolar roommates*.

Semicolons are her favorite form of punctuation. She wonders if it has something to do with codependency, or being afraid of being alone, or only being half of a whole.

The world is loud; slamming doors, the howling voices begging to matter, to be seen. She will be louder. She has been howling her whole life.

As a child, she didn't understand keeping things to yourself. Didn't understand holding your thoughts and feelings hidden for others. Didn't understand choking down your words when it was something that needed to be said. As an adult, she still doesn't understand self-imposed silence, or how she is supposed to become it.

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### *Nostalgia*

She remembers she was young and beautiful. Ode to their youth; a sorrow.

She remembers all the boys who have tried to divine the meaning of life from her existence. All the boys falling in love with the girl in the back of the classroom scribbling poetry into a textbook without ever realizing she has never written a love poem.

She remembers what it was to love for the first time, but only just. The knowledge that she will never again have a 'first,' that life will be an endless stream of feelings already felt, twinges somewhere inside her, a place she faithfully ignores.

She dreamt that he loved her the way he was supposed to, back when they were young, and she was still waiting. It's been so many years, but some days she wakes up and her chest aches with the hurt and the loneliness of 16-year-olds in love with the wrong person.

She has been having these dreams where they meet again, all of them, together. They are there and they are laughing and crying and hating and loving and it feels like they are young again, like no time has passed. Other times, it feels like all the time has passed.

The return of the Prodigal Drug Addict, the Manic Pixie Valedictorian, the Meth-head Pre-law Major.

The truth is, she misses pieces of them. She is dreaming of a world in which things didn't end like they did; in a last hug, in a busted down bathroom door, in a sad smile, in a final shared cigarette, or maybe didn't end at all.

Because some things never change, but some do.

Some days, the sadness swallows her. No amount of schooling has ever educated her in dealing with grief.

She watches the new film version of *Little Women* and sobs for three hours. She remembers a freshman-level course in which she learned the definition of a ‘cathartic experience,’ but the textbook didn’t know how to describe the cracking in her chest, didn’t account for dead friends and young love and youthful dreams. Neither did the film.

She knows that gravestones cannot offer forgiveness, but she has not stopped asking. Once a year, she writes a poem for her dead friends and leaves it atop their graves, hoping they know.

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*Senior Year: First Semester*

The girl enters a freshmen level media course the first day of her senior year.

She arrives, the scent of cigarettes and vanilla and retribution wafting in alongside her.

Everyone loves the girl smoking cigarettes until they realize she’s just trying to reach the grave quicker, until they realize they could never give her the burn that it does. She’s never been committed to anything so much as her addictions. Just ask anyone who’s ever loved her and wanted to be loved back.

She takes a seat in the back corner of the room at the only desk not burdened by the wide expanse of screen. There is nothing she cannot see, and she has no interest in staring into the glossy black of her reflection for an hour. Because some things never change.

Every year, she watches hundreds of ‘teenagers-yesterday-adults-today’ descend on this place. The space bulges with the mass of their hopes and dreams. By winter, the seams are no longer strained.

They look at her, wide-eyed and arrogant and howling.

Do they note the bags under her eyes? The way her backpack is black instead of yellow? Do they know what it means? Do they know that some things never change, but some do?

They are all sure they are the best thing to have walked through these doors since before the hinges were on them, just as she was. She watches them, these Pretenders to the Throne, becomes overwhelmed with her own sense of mortality, looks away.

When she speaks, they all turn to look at her and she has the sudden sense that whatever she says must be profound, that they must hear God in her voice. She is the Golden Child, the Department Favorite, the best this Hall has to offer, or so they keep telling her; as she has tried to become.

She does not meet their eyes, lest they see the girl in the purple skirt and yellow backpack she has stepped on to get here, ground to dust beneath knock-off shoes.

She accepts project after project after project in some pitiful attempt to latch onto this fleeting importance, to leave something behind, to feign immortality in these beige-painted walls. They will remember her, when she was young and beautiful.

Eldest-daughter Syndrome meets Control Freak meets Perfectionist Complex meets Budding Narcissism meets Anything to Make Them Proud in her body and they fistfight like they're at the only bar in town.

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*Senior Year: Second Semester*

It is the last semester of her senior year. She attends a class she feels she has taken a dozen times over. She has signed up for every project offered to her, again. Because some things never change.

She orders another meaningless thing she doesn't need because it is less time-consuming than therapy, and marginally cheaper.

She returns home to a leaning house with fireplaces covered in cardboard and duct tape; a foundation so cracked the whole thing threatens to slide across the yard, or break in half.

She pulls open a door that doesn't close; none of them do. She hasn't heard the bats in the walls for weeks now and she is suddenly overwhelmed with the guilt that they have frozen somewhere amongst the insulation. She watches the cardboard for a long time; a pitiful barrier in a plea for a goodnight's sleep, as if she's ever known such a thing.

She cleans the house when no one is there to get in her way. She wipes down a sticky counter because no one else can seem to bother to do so. She wonders if they notice. No one noticed when she took out the trash for four months straight, alone. They probably don't notice when she wipes down the counter or organizes the shoes or picks up the living room or locks all the doors and shuts off all the lights at night or collects all the trash from the little trash cans or organizes the fridge and the pantry and the dishes and the pots and pans or when she picks up all the dog's toys and cleans her bowls. She knows they wouldn't notice if she stopped, either.

So, she keeps doing it. She is sure one day someone will tell her 'thank you' or 'good job' or 'I'll do it next time' or 'it looks nice' or 'I'm impressed you managed to do that under the crushing weight of all your other responsibilities, on a perpetually empty stomach, while sobbing.'

She is sure one day someone will be grateful instead of thinking she is just too uptight with too high of standards.

But some things never change, least of all, people.

After work, class, three meetings, several projects, and emotionally catering to two different people, she is disappointed in her inability to feed herself. She is losing weight again and everyone treats it like a failure, and she can't help seeing it that way too.

Her roommate tells her she is high maintenance, with standards in the clouds. She does not know how to show her the skyscrapers built atop her shoulders.

*My father came from nothing. He just wanted to give me everything he never had. He didn't consider the way his story would make me feel guilty for the privilege of being his daughter.*

She can't explain that she doesn't know how to make him proud, but at least she folds the towels the way he taught her. She was raised in the ivory tower, dressed in privilege, and she did not get an engineering degree with it. She will not be a housewife, but she can rinse the dishes before loading them into the dishwasher, and hope her mother knows.

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### *Some Things Never Change, but Some Do*

When she started this journey, she was sunflowers and the gentle edge of beautiful madness. Her madness is no longer beautiful, it is concerning, or annoying; a thing no one has time to be fascinated by.

She was cheap shampoo and even cheaper vodka. She drinks wine now and it makes her sleepy. She was the arrogance of youth, the surety of beauty and love that doesn't last, the carefreeness of having no responsibility and not realizing it.

She was all their hopes and dreams carefully stacked atop collarbones and shoulder blades.

*If a heart breaks and no one is there to hear the sound, do the tears that fall still count? In a sea of broken hearts and bending spines and sleepless nights and flashcards and navy blue, do the raindrops of my struggle make a ripple? Is it selfish to hurt when everyone else is hurting too? Is it selfish to ask someone to notice?*

Smoking is no longer a phase. Day-drinking is no longer reckless in a way that can still be funny. She leaves the option to blame it on 'youth' behind her and stares into the broken pieces of her reflection.

At the end of the next three months, there is a stage, a piece of paper held in a hand that does not know her name, only the dollar signs she left behind, the promotional videos, the recruitment materials.

The legacy she didn't get to put her name on.

She will smile. She will hope that it was enough, that the youth and beauty and heartache that she gave to those beige-painted walls will mean something. She will thank them, and it will taste like ash in her mouth for so many reasons.

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*Each of these sections was written at a different time in my college experience, usually at the low points. It really has been beautiful, growing up with all of you. I didn't expect to find anything at college, let alone a family, or myself.*

*Thank you for being there on the days I was less sunflower and more storm cloud, for trying to show me that I didn't have to build houses atop my shoulders, or be disappointed in myself when I picked up smoking again because things were difficult. Thank you for letting me howl on the days I needed to, and for trying to teach me how to cook on the days I couldn't bring myself to do it. Thank you for reminding me to take my space when I need to, and to read and write the things that mattered to me. I won't forget.*