

On Being a Girl in College

I've been a girl all my life, but I'm still not sure exactly what that word means. Growing up, I often imagined the day I would become a woman. Maybe it would be when I turned 16 and finally learned how to drive the Nissan Pathfinder that had been sitting in the driveway for years. Or maybe it would be when I turned 18 and was allowed to vote and buy lottery tickets and tell my parents, "I'm 18, you can't tell me what to do." Or maybe, and this was always my favorite "maybe" to imagine, it would be when I moved away to college and "found myself."

But when I finally crammed into that Nissan Pathfinder and drove the 13 hours to the University of Michigan, I felt more like a little kid than I did in my actual adolescence. At college, I was free from the roof of my parents. I no longer had a curfew of 11 p.m. I never had to ask "what's for dinner?" because I was the one making it. This freedom was a gift, but it also transformed me back into the person I was at seven, and 10, and 16. It reminded me of the first time I was allowed to walk to the bus stop without a chaperone. The first time I drove myself to soccer practice instead of waiting for my mom to start up the car. The first time I kissed a boy (at least, the first time I knew what I was doing). Excitement, but fear and longing and nostalgia, too.

So I still define myself as a girl instead of a woman, even as a 22-year-old who has a LinkedIn and can legally drink and cooks her own meals — if frozen orange chicken from Trader Joe's counts. But what really is the life of a girl in college? Is it possible for these four years to turn us into the "women" we believed we would be at this age?

I don't know everything, but I do know a lot about college life. So sit down, grab some popcorn, and enjoy the, at times shit, show of my college experience.

The Confusion Stage:

Let's start at the beginning. I got into the University of Michigan on December 19, 2019. I remember the day well. I was in room 512 at Shawnee Mission East High School in Prairie Village, Kansas. I was editing the school yearbook on one of the Mac desktops that were sprinkled around the classroom when the email popped up in the top right corner of my screen. Three sophomores were crowded around me as I showed them our latest cover on InDesign, and all three let out a collective "oh shit."

"Are you going to open it?"

Am I going to open it? My dream school, my reach school, the school my dad generously took me on a tour of in the dead of winter when the snow was falling like boulders and I had to buy a parka at Bivouac because my stylish pea coat definitely wasn't going to cut it in Michigan temperatures. Am I going to open it?

I did.

A stupid decision looking back, as I would've been horrified if the entire yearbook staff found out I got rejected at the same time I did, but I did it all the same. And it worked out in my favor. But for the next few months, I lived in a constant state of confusion. Should I post on the Freshmen 2020 Facebook page to find a roommate? How do I fill out the FAFSA without both of my parents running around the house, trying to locate their tax returns? Where am I going to put all of my clothes in a 9x9 dorm room?

The New Phase:

Despite my confusion, the day eventually came. I moved into college on August 26, 2020 in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. I wore a mask as I carried my entire life up to room

214 in Mary Markley Residence Hall. I waved goodbye to my family. I waved goodbye to my past (but not really, since I stayed with my high school boyfriend, and I called my mom at least once a day). I walked into my new home — one I shared with a stranger.

“So, what should we do on our first night?”

Freshman year of college is, decidedly, new. Not only was I adjusting to being away from my family, my friends, my queen-sized bed, but I was also spending 24/7 in my dorm room with some girl named Abby. I was walking into a 300-person lecture hall alone when I used to sit next to my best friends in a 25-person AP English class. I was going out to Brown Jug with my fake ID when I used to steal my parents’ old whiskey from the liquor cabinet in the kitchen.

New is fun — but it’s also scary and confusing. I felt like I was 12 again (see, I’m just a girl!). Boys were asking for my Snapchat; girls were knocking on my door at midnight to try and make friends; I was walking all the way to the Big House just to get a glimpse of the “M” on the back of the jumbotron.

Everything felt like a grand adventure, even just strolling through the Diag, listening to motivational podcasts in my headphones. It was almost like I could feel myself maturing, becoming someone different than the small-town girl from Fairway, Kansas. I had hope. Maybe, just maybe, I was finally beginning to feel like the adult I had decided I needed to be.

The Fun Stage:

Then, I entered sophomore year, and all that “maturing” went straight out my sorority house window.

“You’re saying we should break up?”

That was exactly what I was saying to my boyfriend of three years on November 22, 2022. You see, all this “new” changed my perspective on a lot of things. I felt like I was missing out by letting myself be held back by my past. I’m not saying it wasn’t a good idea to break up with Jack (spoiler alert, it definitely was), but I could feel myself wanting something more, something better, something different. If I’m being honest, I really just wanted to have fun.

That’s what sophomore year is all about: fun. I could finally say yes when boys asked for my number. I could go out to Gar Bar on Tuesday night, and again on Thursday, and again on Saturday. I could drink lukewarm Natty Lights at fraternity tailgates while dancing to “Doses and Mimosas.”

Maybe I wasn’t exactly paying attention during my Friday classes or spending as many hours in the UGLI as I should’ve been, but that was okay. I mean, did I really *need* to be a woman when my parents still bought me groceries and filled up my gas when they visited for Parents Weekend? Did I *have* to be mature when it was still socially acceptable to wear a tank top and jeans on a night out in the middle of December? The future felt like background noise.

The “Figure It Out” Stage:

But eventually, that background noise becomes a full-fledged, heavy metal pounding in your head. This happens during junior year.

“Well, we need at least five writing samples if you want to be considered for this internship.”

This horrible, terrible, very bad sentence was said to me on February 25, 2023, while I was studying abroad in Florence, Italy. I was 21. I had completed more college than I had left.

I'd even had an internship the summer before, but that had basically felt like I was roleplaying being a grown up.

In actuality, I was a grown up, in the legal definition of the word, and that question pulled me out of the "online shopping through class, wearing my clothes from the night before to my 9 a.m. lecture" haze that I'd been in for the past year. It was time to get my shit together. Junior year is still fun, don't get me wrong, but it wasn't the same kind of fun as freshman and sophomore year. Let me explain.

Junior year fun is spending 10 hours in a Ross study room, blasting music, drinking four cups of coffee, and taking 20-minute power naps on the carpet. Junior year fun is stalking LinkedIn and making fun of the job postings that offer \$2 an hour for 80-hour work weeks. Junior year fun is having a full mental breakdown, and then crying laughing with your friends over how meaningless college is, while digging into a pint of Ben & Jerry's.

I still didn't feel like a woman. Women wear heels to work and curl their hair every morning and eat salads for lunch. At least, in my mind they do. But I was figuring out what I wanted my career to be after college. I was completing my skincare routine before bed, even when I really, *really* didn't want to. I was even vacuuming. Take that, adulthood.

The Confusion Stage:

But before long, it hits again. Senior year feels exactly like freshman year, but in reverse. Now, I am doing everything for the last time, so every activity is a little adventure. Just driving to Dairy Queen with my friends makes me tear up at times. Walking to Mason Hall for class sometimes gives me such a sense of nostalgia that my stomach starts to hurt. Everything's the same, but it feels new. Just like freshman year.

I wish I could make this section as descriptive and interesting as the previous three, but I haven't made it through this stage yet. It's only December — who knows what this year has in store for me. Or for you. Or for anyone.

What I do know is that at the end of this year, I'll be moving away from the home I've created these last four years. My friends will be spread out across the country: Austin, New York, Miami, Boston. We'll be working 9-5's, going to graduate school, taking a gap year to study for the LSAT. Once again, everything will be new. Once again, everything will be an adventure.

We'll be adults. I'll finally be a "woman."

Maybe.

Maybe I'll never get to the point where I feel secure and stable and adult enough to call myself that. Maybe my mom still sees herself as the girl she was at 12, or 16, or 25. Maybe my sister isn't really as put together as she seems from an outside perspective. And maybe that's okay. If staying a girl means I get to go through the confusion, the new, the fun, and the "figure it out" stages all over again, I'll take it.