

“Untitled”

Rolling rocks across a table. That’s how Grace and I had chosen to spend one of the first recesses of the school year. It was a game born of boredom that closely resembled bocce. Neither of us was too invested in it. There was somehow nothing better to do – we had gazed across a playground complete with swingsets and tetherball poles and of all things, we were drawn to the dusty round pebbles that covered the ground. The sun beat down on little eight-year-old fingers pinching stones and flinging them across a picnic table.

“Wait, pause,” Grace dropped her rock next to mine. “I’m going to the bathroom, be right back.”

I nodded and took to practicing while she was gone, sending pebbles across the rotting wooden panels and trying not to swat at yellowjackets. They seemed to spawn from the wood. A lunch monitor hollered a five minute warning that snapped me out of my absentminded rock rolling. Where was Grace? Her pebble was still where she’d left it at the edge of the table. I swept my eyes across the playground. It was teeming with children, desperately climbing, swinging, kicking, making the most of the last few minutes of recess. They landed on Grace. She was standing about twenty feet from me, locked in a conversation with a girl I’d never seen before – she ditched me!

I got up and started towards her, crunching through dusty pebbles. As I got closer, neutral faces seemed to distort into frowns. I noticed crossed arms, fidgeting feet digging into the ground. The girl spat at Grace and my frustration shifted to her instead. I planted myself at Grace’s side and asked the girl her name. She turned towards me, for just a moment.

“It’s Taylor.” She responded shortly before looking back to Grace with a stony scowl, and resumed their conversation as if I wasn’t there at all.

I’d heard about Taylor – I think everyone had. She was new here and according to the rumors, she was a bully, though my parents told me not to listen to those. This one seemed true. I took a sharp breath.

“You can’t talk to her like that,” I snapped. I stood as straight as I could. If I was lucky, I was four feet tall. Taylor and I bickered in front of Grace until the end of recess, when we were called by each of our teachers to stand in line.

When I told them about what had happened that night, my parents were astonished. This behavior was incredibly uncharacteristic of me. As a young child, I was diagnosed with a severe social anxiety disorder called selective mutism, which can make it difficult to speak in certain situations...though I always found the title “selective” to be strange, as it didn’t feel anything like a choice. This is considered a childhood disorder, although if not treated quickly and effectively, it carries over into adulthood. The catch is that even when it’s caught early, it’s difficult to treat, since people often exhibit symptoms at too young an age to put a conscious effort into personal growth. Various specialized therapists had tried and failed to help me but like any internal issue, this is not something another person can fix. Because of that, my parents had given up on outside help and it was incredibly shocking that I had spoken to someone I wasn’t already comfortable with. It became apparent that day to my parents that selective mutism was something I *could* push past, should the circumstances demand it.

To my own surprise, Taylor approached me in class a few months later, and asked me to play at recess with her. I accepted her offer, and she ended up becoming a close friend and my fiercest defender. When others overreacted to hearing me speak, she wasted no time with her

response. A classmate gasped obnoxiously at the sound of my voice one afternoon as our fourth grade class filed out of the room at the end of the day.

“You can *talk*?” He’d said, and I had frozen.

“Yeah, obviously,” Taylor retorted without missing a beat and then to my relief, she continued our conversation as if nothing had happened.

I learned to do the same for myself, and kept preloaded responses folded under my tongue. If somebody commented on my speaking, I snapped at them. I knew that if I just spoke and kept speaking, the gap between me and everyone else would close, but it felt like all eyes were on me. Teachers were always trying to get me to talk, parents whispered, and school counselors were constantly scheming different ways to adjust the classroom environment for me. They once suggested to my parents and I that they tell my class ahead of time that I would be raising my hand one day, so that everyone would be prepared. My mom had glanced at me.

“How does that sound?” She asked.

“I’m not doing that,” I scoffed. I was appalled.

Plans like these were meant to make me comfortable, but could only serve to embarrass me further. A deep, stubborn fear of change and perceptibility far outweighed the foregrounded one of my own voice. And so for most of my childhood, I was complacent to the disorder. I found people who would speak for me, and a way to navigate life without a voice. I figured that one day I would be, almost magically, able to laugh with my classmates and speak to my friends’ parents – little powers that everyone else seemed to be born with.

In middle school, I decided that I couldn’t be like this anymore. I was tired of waiting, and beginning to realize this wasn’t something that was just going to come to me. I made it a

goal to speak, full volume, every day – no matter how people responded. It was an exhausting process. Even as people grew used to my voice, it was still how they knew me.

My classmate Christopher leaned in towards me during gym class once to say, “remember when you didn’t talk?”

I was thrown right back into defense. I shot him a glare, and scooped away. But by the end of high school, my muteness was a thing of the past. Though I wasn’t by any means a loud person, people hardly reacted anymore when I spoke and comments or jokes about my quietness were sparse, often landing flat. When it came time to apply for colleges, my aunt suggested I write about selective mutism as something I had overcome.

“What’s that?” I asked her.

She looked confused. “You don’t remember?”

“Selective mutism” was a foreign term to me. Nobody had ever actually informed me of this diagnosis. I’d always known it was something, I just never expected it to have a name. The whole discovery sent me into a spiral. I began researching the disorder, and spoke to family and friends about it for the first time. It had been such a shameful, nameless topic that I had let it slip my mind entirely, but this was an opportunity to turn that around. So I wrote about selective mutism, what it was, how I’d changed and ultimately overcome it, how it was gone now, it was a thing of the past.

It was believable enough to the schools I applied to, but halfway through sophomore year of college, I got a call from my parents. A friend of a friend wanted to know how I had overcome selective mutism, because their son had it too. He was going to college, and was still pretty bogged down by it.

“How did you do it?” They asked, as if I’d cracked some code.

I didn't have anything unique to say – I explained that I'd pushed myself out of my comfort zone on a daily basis – that I still did. They thanked me for the advice, and applauded me on my strength and persistence before hanging up the phone and leaving me alone in my dorm with an unshakeable feeling of fraudulence. It was like I had fooled everyone with some sort of facade that I had “beat” an anxiety disorder. Sure, I forced myself out of my comfort zone, but I had never actually gotten comfortable there. Pushing myself had simply become a routine. It took me a long time to realize that this was how it was going to be – there was no “curing” these things.

Just a year later, I transferred and started over at a new school. One of my classes required us to do presentations – something that had always been a problem for me. Two volunteers would give their presentations in a lecture hall rather than the classroom. I thought to myself, *when is the next time I'll get a chance to stand at a podium?* – and raised my hand. Standing up there I was anxious, sweating, reliving every bad presentation I'd ever given. When I spoke, it got no better. I desperately fumbled over words and tried to reach the end of it as quickly as possible. I hurried back to my seat, both proud and ashamed. I realized there might never be a day when I am not afraid to stand up at a podium and give a speech, or just to speak to people I don't know, but that does not mean I haven't overcome selective mutism.