

We had always found it to be a negative aspect of us. It struck our chest like a hard blow, our heart beating as if it was struggling to escape a tight grip, suffocating behind our layer of skin as if it held a secret we were not ready to hear.

The mere concept of having a romantic preference that differed from most other girls frightened us to the point where the thought alone drove us to a sadness we convinced ourselves we didn't understand. Rude slurs bounced off of walls and heavy laughter embedded itself into the back of our mind, for the harsh words of insignificant peers repeated itself in our ears like a mantra. We weren't meant to belong, nor were we meant to be what seemed most comfortable to accept. At the time, acceptance didn't even appear to be an option. Feeling nothing but hate and fear, we came to realize that those emotions weren't directed at others. The hatred that burned our palms and collapsed on our cheeks as tears was directed at ourselves.

We convinced ourselves that the term was not suitable for us. We couldn't possibly belong to a group that only caused us a deep pain in our stomach and, since we were never open to the idea, pushed the thought aside for years. Seventh grade came around, autumn turned to winter, and when we returned to school one February afternoon, our feet meeting the familiar carpet, our eyes met the lean figure of someone we had never seen before. We recall our immediate thought: *she was beautiful*. Shaming ourselves, we pried our eyes off of her, sitting in silence when all we wanted to do was speak, perhaps even hear her voice. Eventually, we did hear it, and it was the best contradiction of rasp and gentleness we had ever heard. However, each night we took it upon ourselves to writhe in sadness, beating on our body as if it would help to solve whatever it was going on. Though we knew what it was, we refused to believe we were aware of our state. But she never fooled us, we knew that much. We were

infatuated with her and we truly, desperately believed that she radiated with a brightness that was the only thing that made us feel whole and valuable even when she tore us down.

One day, in the middle of May, she had lied to us; however, we did not know this at the time. She told us she liked us. Overwhelmed and nauseous at the thought, our heartbeat rang in our ears and our hands shook with an intensity that scared us. We knew we felt the same, oh, we knew this for *sure*. But how could we possibly accept this? And... how could someone like her like us?

In the end, we did nothing but care for her and only her while all she seemed to do was take the words we wrote to her with such feeling and romance in mind only to laugh it off with her 'friends' as if we were insignificant. And perhaps we were, but we, to this day, can't quite understand why we felt happy even when all she did was bring us to bone rattling, heart wrenching tears each night. Before we knew it, our time with her was over, and she was no longer laughing at our poems and shyly speaking to us as if she felt what we did. After the final day and an abrupt "I love you," the novelty of it all faded and for months afterwards we were shoved away from the one person we had ever been so close to loving, for she harassed us from miles away even after she moved. It all ended when August 2014 retired to its deathbed. But our nights of torment didn't stop just yet.

We were left for months wondering what it had been that kept us so fixated on her being when we wanted nothing but to forget her name. But we knew that it would never be the same, just like the way the sky would never look the way it did before now that we knew that her eyes were the deepest, clearest blue there was. Nighttime became dreaded and it frightened us that the one time of the day that used to comfort us became the time to attack ourselves. Scars appeared on our skin and a seemingly permanent black stain consumed us whole. We were

wrong, always wrong, and we were damaged. Why did we care for someone so emotionally abusive, and why did we wish to vanish? Why couldn't we remember a time before her?

But as time went on and we shared our story, the lines became clear and our heart began to soften after a year and a half of suffocation. We had finally found the word.

I'm gay. And the scars on my wrist are now owned with pride, as if they are war wounds I collected a long time before. I found a place for myself, one in which I could feel what I couldn't help but feel and one where I could smile at the mere fact that I knew I was capable of loving and being loved; however, I wasn't aware until the summer that that place was between my very bones and behind my own skin. After feeling like a stranger in my own home, I finally knew that I had value. I knew that a characteristic that I used to be shamed for before I even realized it, an aspect that I always had convinced myself was never for me, was the one term I could find shelter and familiarity in. Gay.

I truly believe that if my coming out process were to be easier I would not be the person I am today. I know that I am far from the confidence I want, and I know that I'm not all I can be right now. But just as a person is a person until proven otherwise, I am me until I can't be anymore, and thus I shall be until the day I cease to exist. And I hope no one can take this pride I have away from me, not even then.

I never would have thought that the next chapter of this story, after a year and a half of victimizing myself, that the very girl who caused me a visit to a therapist and a forced realization would be my friend as of this October. The moment she reached out and contacted me after my failed attempts in the past truly convinced me that her intentions were good. She came to regret her actions and even thought that I had forgotten her in our time of silence. She never knew I would suffer as much as I did, and I never thought she had the capacity for caring about me. I knew it would never be the way it was with her, for the feeling faded as we spoke. Although the

first few conversations made me incredibly nervous, she now feels like any other friend. In fact, it feels as if we never stopped talking to begin with, as if we never went through what we did. But it continues to bring me sorrow. I can't shake the fact that I had wasted so much time.

But I have no regrets. I have no worries with her. And I will never lose the sense of pride I have, for being gay does not make up the entirety of my being. I am gay. But I'm not the label I chose to identify with. I'm me. And she's her. The past feels more like a story than a collection of memories but I know that I would not change a thing. She was the first girl, but she won't be the last. But the story isn't about her; it's about me.

I am not insignificant. I am not small. I am not wrong.