

The willows whistle around me as a gentle breeze blows through, the soft rustling of leaves bringing a soothing aura. The forest had always been a place of sanctuary for me, a place where I could feel calmed and carefree, even if I still had a thin metal collar around my neck. The quiet of the trees leave me to my thoughts, allowing me to explore them in peace and introspect myself. I was different, or rather, my *body* was different. It's hard for me to explain it to others as they'd usually assume it was something minute, like an extra finger or a missing body part but it's something much stranger than anything they'd ever assumed. My body was ever changing.

I could still remember the day it'd first happened, a moment in my life that seemed to have seared itself into my mind. What I was doing before it happened was obscured, but I knew it was a day spent frolicking in a meadow, a day of innocence for my eight year-old self. Returning home, however, my parents noticed that I'd brought small patches of grass along with me, the blades of which stuck to my arms and legs. To our shock, however, they couldn't get it off, the greenery seemingly stuck on me as if it were a part of me. Little did I know how close that statement was to the truth.

The next few hours had been a mad rush between doctors, hospitals and emergency rooms, all of which had no answer as to what was happening to me. Afternoon became evening and evening became night as we went from town to town, looking for someone who may know the answer to our mystery, each one we visit left more clueless than the last. What we didn't notice was that in the hours that'd passed, the grass growing out of my body had faded away, one or two stray blades remaining. This was mostly due to the peppered fur that'd grown on my body instead, resembling that of my dog, Toast, who'd been with us since the start of our outing. Whatever panic we were in before was only exacerbated as what was happening was seemingly getting worse and we had no idea who to go to or what to do.

Eventually, I found myself sitting on a cold metal table in a room that was white and sterile, the strong medical smell still vivid. Several men and women in long coats surrounded me, continually examining me and observing me as if I was a labrat. It's funny, because now that I think about it, that's probably what I was to them. As agonizing as sitting motionless was, I remained glued on the table, my curiosity burning, albeit tantalized by the waiting. The answer we got was one that we couldn't even begin to comprehend.

We were told that I was 'genetically unstable'. The big and sciency words obviously scared my younger self and to an extent, my family, but we were reassured it wasn't as bad as it sounded. According to them, my body was extremely volatile, mimicking and replicating any organism's DNA. Basically, any living thing I touched, my body would react accordingly and change my body. At first, I thought it was really cool since I could basically be *anything*, but I guess everything's good when you look at it through rose-tinted glasses. The scientists wanted to keep me around for longer and look at me through their microscopes for longer, but I don't think we were fans of me being a labrat for any longer. I'd left with a plucky attitude, almost *happy* that I was 'different', but little did I know, it'd be more trouble than it was worth.

Having such malleable DNA made it...hard for me to live my life as I did. Over the years, I'd grow to hate my 'gift'. It was more a nuisance than anything, occasionally changing my skin's texture or something trivial. The real problem came when people started to get involved. Not

everyone was ready to be awed by my quirks, some even using it to ridicule me as a freak, though it was easy to ignore. It seemed that my condition grew with me, shifts becoming more pronounced and frequent as I aged. I don't know why I never realised it, but my body reacted to *people* as well, something that became very noticeable once I became a teenager. Sometimes I'd have someone's long blonde hair, sometimes I'd have their short buzz cut or sometimes I'd even have nothing at all. Unfortunately for me, it wasn't just superficial details like hair that changed, it was my entire body.

Explaining it to others was always hard, especially when you slowly started to become their lookalike the more time you spent with them. Sure it wore off within a couple of hours, but I don't think the shock of seeing someone become you wears off in that same timeframe. I guess that was one of the reasons why high school was a lonely time for me, given no one wanted to associate with someone whose body wasn't 'normal' by their standards. It felt odd, having all eyes on you, watching you as if you were a circus act just for being who you were. To say it led to many insecurities would be an understatement, as what'd felt like something 'cool' to my younger self now felt dehumanising to me, a curse more than a gift.

The worst thing to come out of all of it was how uncomfortable I started to feel in my own skin. My thoughts were relentless, never letting me feel at peace with myself and my body. With my body constantly changing state and distancing itself from my 'original' form, it felt like I wasn't myself. I'd lost my sense of self, essentially, always in a body that didn't feel like it was mine, even if my consciousness always remained unaltered. With a body always in flux, a body never felt like it was mine, I'd never felt more lost and broken in my life.

Eventually, after I guess I couldn't take it anymore, I'd found myself back in the same sterile environment I was brought into as a child when I'd first discovered my curse. It was just as tedious as I remember, lots of blood sampling, lots of tubes stuck into me, the whole deal. It came as a shock to them that I wanted them to strip me of my affliction and 'fix' me in a sense. Their solution was simple, a collar that inhibited and regulated my DNA, making it less susceptible to change. It was my chance to be normal and till this day, I wear it religiously, never wanting to go back to the shapeshifter I was before.

But now, the mask feels as though it's slipping off, uncertainty beginning to well in me. It's what brought me to the serenity of the forest, a place that can host my raw thoughts and emotions with nothing to intervene. Reflecting on the past may have opened old wounds and painful memories, but it also opened my eyes to a perspective I was too pained to see. Maybe my younger self was right all along. Maybe it was because of how others viewed me that caused my view on myself to become twisted or maybe it was my own doing, but all I knew now was that I was wrong to see myself as someone without individuality. In reality, my individuality *came* from my gift, my ability to take the form of those around me.

Before I knew it, my fingers were already underneath the inhibitor collar, shimmying it as I look for the button to release its grip. It makes a clipping sound as it falls to the ground, sensations so foreign but so familiar filling my body. A leaf brushes past my face, a light tickle that causes me to feel my cheek, pleasantly surprised at the rustic texture. Unable to contain my excitement, I press my hand on a tree, rapidly transforming my skin into a rough bark-like coating. Holding it up to my face, I chuckle, happy at what was happening to my body, the childlike innocence of old coming back to just as my gift had. I'd once rejected my

body for what it was, fearful of being shunned and shamed for being in a body that 'wasn't mine', but now I felt free and fleeting. Just as the winds changed, I changed, given a refreshed perspective on myself, on my identity. For the first time in years, I could accept my body for what it was and myself for who I am and will be.