

## When Will My Coming of Age Story End?

Identity is something that can feel binding. We often label parts of ourselves to fit into the world around us and understand our place within it. Sometimes though, it can be easy to get caught up in presenting the right way, choosing the right label, and the right person to be. Trying on new personas, hanging out with new kinds of people is helpful as a young person when figuring out who you actually are. But at what point do you need to let go of other people and find your identity within yourself?

It's in adolescence that this search is strongest. As you grow into yourself, you must begin to figure out who you are, what you want, and what you value. It's a confusing and emotional time, marked by the constant pressure to fit in. The importance of this period in life is obvious, re-emphasized with every new coming of age film and young adult book about a teenager who learns to just be themselves through a quirky set of inconveniences. I can see why people are drawn to these stories. Seeing your own journey in someone else is comforting, and watching the character's happy ending through a filtered lens brings both a sense of nostalgia and mild embarrassment when watching as an adult.

Kate Braverman's short story "O'Hare" is reminiscent of classic coming of age stories in a lot of ways. The main character is thirteen, and she meets quirky friends and worries about seemingly arbitrary things like what language to take or why the girl she was best friends with at summer camp last year won't talk to her. But beyond this, she deals with heavy topics and big decisions. At a pivotal moment in her life, she begins to figure out who she wants to be and what's important in life. Like many others, she's looking for where she belongs in the world, conflicted by all the different places that could be. Wandering around O'Hare airport, she tries on new faces and identities, searching for meaning in the chaos of "variables that can't be

controlled” (7). While everything passes, she “counts everything,” (7) her two-syllable age and the cars and people passing her, trying to make sense of the variables and questions in her own life which are just as chaotic as the ones in O’Hare and just as answerless as the passing people. In stories like this, it’s easy to see yourself in the main character. The nameless girl could easily stand in for any one of us, just another stranger in a crowded airport, another identity to try on as you pass by.

The main character is clearly unsure of who she should be and where she fits in, but she is confident and honest about her confusion. During her time at Camp Hillel, she sits in a circle with her peers as they discuss the three things they would take to another planet. She watches as everyone gives answers she can see right through. Tiffany Gottlieb, for example, would take, “her family, her cat, and her Walkman,” even though, “Tiffany hates her older brother,” (26). Fed up with the dishonesty and lack of authenticity, the main character answers truthfully- she would take O’Hare airport, in all its chaos and independence. The main character is struggling to navigate growing up, and so instead of pretending like she knows what she values, she brings instead the airport that matches her confusion and isolation. Rather than recognizing the bravery in her honesty here, most of her classmates aren’t paying attention- too focused on themselves to relate. In this circle full of insincerity, I can see my younger self, and my childhood best friend takes on the face of the main character.

I’m sitting in a circle on the floor of my 5th grade classroom with the popular girls. My best friend, Sarah, is drawing one of the others while continuously shrugging her shoulders to keep her pink, off-the-shoulder top in the right place. Her shirt was perfectly in style, Justice brand, matching the pink hair tie that clashed with her bright red hair, and only in dresscode because of the grey tank top she wore under it. I sat in the circle quietly, watching with mild

embarrassment as Sarah tried so hard to fit in with this group. It was so obvious to me that she didn't, and I could tell these girls knew that too. She was too loud for them, with her own opinions and bossy manner. I knew this, and I knew these girls liked me better. Sarah and I were lucky to be included, and I wished Sarah could see they were just lending a polite, social favor, nothing more. I was content to be their quiet, background friend; to listen to their gossip and agree with whatever opinion they had which was obviously superior to mine. I played the role well, and Sarah simply did not.

While I followed the thoughts of her peers, cringing at the weird girl who couldn't seem to quite fit in, Sarah reflected the main character. She showed bravery I didn't understand at the time, never pretending to be someone she wasn't. Both girls looked around and made the decision to be honest and bold about who they are instead of lying to gain the appreciation of those around her. For the main character, this bravery is not to be mistaken for confidence or clarity in who she is, but is simply the beginning of her understanding what kind of person she wants to be and what she values. In her search for clarity on her identity and value sets, she looks to her parents and their drastically different lives.

Beginning with her mom, she asks each adult in her life if they steal. Her mom says she doesn't, because, "Of course it's wrong," (35) to steal. She then backtracks when the main character asks about the Millennium lipstick she took from the salon, justifying, "That's called slippage. I'm a regular customer. They expect clientele to take samples," (34). The lack of conviction for what's right or wrong rubs the main character the wrong way, and she can keenly see through the hypocrisy in her mother's answer. Although her mother's life is glamorous, it is fake and full of impressing people, just like the circle of kids from camp. The lack of authenticity and honesty from the adults makes the main character, "suddenly afraid of the pool," (34). The

pool, a representation of this glamorous lifestyle, would drown her in expensive lies and false morals. Her fear of this lifestyle and value system forces her to be honest and vulnerable, even if it ostracizes her like it had at camp.

Quite different from her California life, this set of parents live on a weed farm in Pennsylvania. When she asks them the same question- do you steal?- her step-mom tells her that, “Things you can buy don’t interest me,” (39). Her father reiterates this saying, “There’s nothing I want,” while holding her in a “warm embrace,”(41). The warmth and comfort she feels with them gives her a place to feel comfortable being honest, as her dad and step mom never try to lie or impress her. Their answers are authentic, something she never saw in California. At the end of the story, she chooses to live with her dad. His life is far from perfect, and she is far from figuring out who she is, but with him she has a place to grow into herself without judgement, pressure, or falsities. Instead of isolating her, her honesty is appreciated and mirrored in her father’s life.

I was offered this kind of reprieve from performative identity my junior year of highschool. At this point in my life, I was also at a crossroads, trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted. I’d quit gymnastics- a sport I’d dedicated hours and weekends to throughout my childhood- and joined the color guard, full of a group of people I hadn’t known before. I didn’t expect any of them to be my friends, and without those expectations, I didn’t need to be well liked, and I let myself just exist naturally. It wasn’t until months into this new group, that I realized I’d made friends. No mask, no planning of every word, yet I was closer with these people I’d known for a few months than the people who had been in my class for years. It was a classic coming of age story, just like in O’Hare, full of new experiences, quirky friends, and soul searching. A new place and group offered me independence from the people I had worked so

hard to impress. It reminded me that I had room to be authentically myself more than I believed I did, and showed me the value I had to offer when I didn't shy away from being too loud or too weird or too smart.

This connection was something I never thought I would be able to find until I was older and sure of myself. Whenever I felt trapped in a fake identity, I would dream of my life when I finally was an adult. I dreamt of moving out of my suburban hometown and living in a big city with a high-heel kind of job and important friends who would come visit my skyrise studio. I was convinced that one day I would grow up and everything would be perfect. I would have it all figured out and would live the most glamorous life where I never felt like I had to hide behind a different version of me. As time goes on, however, I'm realizing that this won't ever be quite true. My coming of age story didn't end when I was sixteen and felt more comfortable with myself. It hasn't finished now when I turn twenty and can look around, happy and confident in my life. As we step out of uncertainty of being a teenager, we are able to look at identity in a much calmer way. However, it can be easy to get complacent, and it is necessary to remember that identity is not stagnant. Pretending it is will only lead to a mid-life crisis and holding onto the past that doesn't fit anymore. Just like the 13 year old main character in O'Hare, we need to keep letting ourselves grow by making safe places for ourselves in a group of friends, or in a warm, fatherly hug.