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Growing Pains

No one tells you about your second puberty, the one that happens in your early twenties. The one that comes with wider hips, as your old middle school friends are flashing wedding rings. The one that constantly makes you question the path you're on. It starts as you take your last glances of your childhood friends in a time that will never return. The pain and sadness are replaced with highs of excitement for the next chapter. You will have to find comfort in strange things and people. For the first year or so, you try to keep in touch with people from high school. Still wishing those happy birthday texts, even when you didn't want to, yet felt like you needed to.

The freedom of not having a curfew or having the responsibilities of buying the food that you want to buy will light your soul. Doing what you feel with your time and feeling independent, while surrounded by the people pushed into the same small space. Learning everyone's stories, while understanding my own for the first time. The connections made during this time feel like the rush of love you felt with your friends on the playground. Though only some of them are as strong as your heart tells you. You follow your heart a lot, so much that it can kill small parts inside of you until you're back to questioning the path you're on, whether you are making the right decisions for your future or making the right choices in relationships. You will do that a lot, constantly question yourself because this is the first time you are required to do so. But this will be broken up by rushes of empowerment by what you're learning and doing. You take pride in your independence and your knowledge in school, even if it is math 101 class, it's a *college* class.

Returning home for the few times will be a heart wrenching experience. This is your home, but it isn't anymore. You were a kid 3 months ago running around your hometown and now you must take a flight to see anyone close to you. You have two homes, but you won't feel comfortable in either one. You will get used to constantly missing the people you love, because no matter where you go no one will be all in the same place like they were at your high school graduation party.

You meet a boy. Your first adult relationship, and it feels like nothing can stop you. For once, you have this mystery partner to the people who knew everything about you for 18 years. It's such a cute story of meeting the first day of college, one you could've told your kids. That is until he takes every inch of your entire being and burns them to ashes. The spell starts to wear off and you watch yourself from above as he tears apart your innocence in the same bed you would have to fall asleep in later. It's as if you are in a steel medal box and every time you try to escape, the walls close in closer. Until you are standing at the edge of the Planetarium staring into the bright blue water thinking, what if. Eventually you will find an escape button of the box, and you will come up for air after holding your breath for months to find clarity, and impurity. The collective sensation of blissful freedom and affliction is enough to drown you again. But you stay afloat, wondering if any of this is worth it. The eyes reflecting to you are soulless, desolate. You notice the dusk light behind you, and you remember. You love nightfall and the colors the sky paints for you every night. And in that moment, for the first time in months you inhale and find solitude within, yourself.

No one tells you that your body will change significantly in your twenties. Female bodies will prepare for birthing through wider hips, and you will be so excited when you move up in bra sizes. But then, you start moving up sizes in everything. Your favorite jean shorts in August will not fit in May and you will be devastated. This will initiate you to start buying more fruit and veggies for snacks, until you realize that will cost your weekly spending limits. So, instead you settle for the same cafeteria food you eat every day. The bigger boobs you have been waiting for finally come, but it brings along stretch marks, a bigger belly, and different hormones.

And you're not even pregnant.

The birth control you have been on since you were 16 starts to weigh on your mental health and make you feel like a robot with no real feelings. After breaking up with your abusive boyfriend, you ditch the birth control because you won't be needing it for a while. Different anti-anxiety and depression meds will cause your arms to flap and your legs cellulite to blossom. You try to keep your confidence up, but it weighs on your heart because, no one else is talking about it.

That is until you meet someone who shares your frustrations and insecurities. She will make you feel validated in your feelings and furious in your memory. And similarly, to her, people will come and go in your life. They will appear like small friendships in your big timeline of life.

You find your group of people. The ones you can clumsily learn how to be adults together.

Whom you can see whenever you want, without your parents' permission. You will have fun planned nights to have game nights, go to new restaurants, and be there for one another's milestones. But you will also have spontaneous nights that will be left in your memory as, "this is college." The ones where you hunker down during a tornado or sit on the steps of your apartment together smoking a joint on a summer night. You finally feel like you have made a life

here, and you will feel at home. The comfort people you never thought you would find here are living in your house, and you can relax at the thought of knowing you made it.

Unfortunately, living in Chicago and dating is not Sex and the City. And you feel betrayed. You try bars, and apps to have your Carrie or even Samantha moments. Meeting someone for dinner in the city somehow makes you feel empowered, until you get there.

And it becomes a waste of an evening. You may even go to an arcade bar with a guy from Bumble named Mantis. You wear your go-to slutty top to find that he gets mad at you for beating him in Skee-ball. The constant disappointments will weigh on your mind as you look inward for healing. Those two years were meant for you to find the beauty in the world again, and the beauty within yourself. You feel stronger each day and proud of yourself, though you will be met with occasional painful days and nights. You start falling back in love with yourself after being shattered time and time again. You heal. Living for yourself and the joys you encounter daily. Finally, you understand the love you deserve.

You meet a boy. You tread cautiously as history has not treated you kindly in this department. All of that is melted away when you meet his dark brown eyes. The eyes that you will discover home in. His wide smile enforces lines to appear as he laughs at your jokes. You both find each other's laughs contagious, and it becomes your favorite activity to do together. He will cheer you on to eat as much food as you can because he knows you're always hungry even though you try to hide it. When you're sad he will wrap you up in his strong arms and it takes everything in you not to instantly fall asleep. He will be the most respectful and gentle person you have ever been

with, even when he is tickling your feet until you pee. His presence brings you peace, and he will tell you he loves you after having a game night with his family. You fall in love when he starts chatting it up with the Uber driver because you do the same thing. The walls you have spent years building are destroyed by the way he always holds the door for you. You experience a different type of healing, the type where hope surges into your heart as you have found someone that loves you for everything that you are. And you love him for everything he isn't.

The gynecologist. A staple in womanhood where your insides are poked and prodded to make sure you don't have any diseases hiding. If you're lucky, they may even squeeze your boobs as hard as they can. You will end up laying in the doctor's office with your arm stretched out as they pierce your arm with a new form of birth control. With no one there to hold your hand, so you close your eyes and tense your body knowing you got yourself. The weeks following are met with depression and anxiety as your body adapts to the new hormones circulating your body. The comfort of your bed swallows you up making it difficult to crawl out. The anxiety eats you away until you are hollow with nothing holding you up. Christmas, your favorite holiday, will be ripped away by the hands of your mental health. Holding back tears the entire time your family is together laughing and opening presents. But the whole time all you can think of is choking it back and putting on a nice face for pictures. The way home is met with anger and despair, you can't understand how you are feeling, nor can you begin to describe it. So, you pull yourself back into your bed until you go home to Chicago.

Another big transition is coming that you weren't prepared for by a high school class. Where you are about to live on your own for the first time and graduate college. Everyone you know is

going in different directions, but you just want to freeze the moment. The moment of you and your roommates laughing in your college apartment together and watching the movies that make you think of one another. Sitting on the floor in the hall between all our rooms for hours after saying we were going to bed. Soon, all of that will be gone and you will have to get on a train to see them. Jobs will take over lives and you won't have as many spontaneous nights. And your nightly movie nights will turn into weekly or even monthly movie nights. You will be terrified just as you were four years before while taking your last glances around an apartment that defined you and your growth.

You are living in your own apartment and are one week away from graduation. You find yourself at peace. The new apartment is the first home that you feel settled in since your childhood home. You are excited to go home and have never been so cozy in your environment. A little cat joined your home which makes you giggle and smile as he snuggles you every night. When you see your friends, it is even more special and makes your entire week. Your boyfriend will act like your home is his and warms your heart to give him a comfort space as well. The feeling of relief washes over you while submitting your last assignment, and shortly after comes sentiment. For the years that have gone so quickly, and the houses, and friends. Your identity will change from student to...

Adult.

The weight, and tears. The hormones, and boys. The moving, and essays. Everything happened for you to be in this moment. You endured the pains of being a young adult, and you will endure pains of being an adult. But, you healed, and grew flowers from those pains. You love yourself and everything that makes you, you. And who are you?

I am you.