

Scaled

By Lydia Shigley

The moment I woke up in the hospital bed, I noticed a pain in my mouth I hadn't felt before. The pain in my stomach wasn't new. The raw feeling in my throat was not new. But this pain in my gums felt sharp and made me more aware of my teeth than ever before. My first thought was that I must've been grinding my teeth in my sleep, that wouldn't be surprising. However, the poking, prodding feeling behind my teeth made me confused, but this was not the most of my worries.

The technicolor glare of the television screen in front of me left me feeling colorless, the blood sucked out of my skin, leaving my skin feeling like paper with nothing written on it. Lifting my hand up to my face to trace over the bumps of acne made me feel human again. I brought my fingertips to my gaze, admiring the oil leftover on my fingertips, leaving me to wonder if I could fit a needle inside my pores and tear holes into my skin, taking control of that other aspect of biological control. My skin felt like I could stretch it off my face, but when I pulled, my fingers slipped, and it stayed put, connected to me. Something inside of me desperately wanted to tear apart every physical aspect of my body and leave me as just an idea that people could look over and put meaning to. Something about the way my skin wrapped tightly over my wrist, like it was purposefully drawing with red pen over the scars on my wrists. The embodiment I was enclosed in was suffocating.

I didn't know how to move, I felt my feet scooting towards the edge of the bed, giving myself the opportunity to slip out if I needed to, however I found myself left at the will of the bed, realizing there was nowhere I could leave easily. I had to wait for people to show up, analyze my body and determine the next step for me. I would follow along with them and continue to follow along meaninglessly until I had decided when I would find meaning myself. I had already sacrificed myself, but was left unsuccessful, left only with marks along my wrist, scars forming under the dried blood that reflected like fish scales against the fluorescent lighting. Something about the appearance of dried blood left an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, so I immediately sat up to relieve it. Without much success, I found my legs moving on their own, forcing my bare feet onto linoleum flooring, where shots of cold slipped in through my feet and up my bloodstream. The soft padding of my feet against the floor lead me to realize I had already walked over to the heavily locked window, revealing a view that was unimpressive. I pressed my nose against the glass, noticing how enclosed I was from the world, not just in the building but in this city that was already unimpressive to begin with. I closed my eyes, imagining what it would feel like to be submerged within a room filled with water. The way the hospital gown would float around my body as I swam, rather than being glued to the sweat on my thighs, that left this cheap cotton feeling imprinted on my body.

Reality struck itself upon me once the door opened to reveal my family. I was quickly ushered back into the bed, legs suddenly working for me. Words that poured from their mouth sounded like an unknown language, because the emotions surrounding it were too intense for me to understand at that moment. I found myself silent, except when they asked direct questions, where words slipped out that were exactly what they wanted to hear. Those words

that were not words of protest, therefore it ended me up in a rehabilitation center for kids dealing with major depression.

I was ushered into a van, like a prisoner with my mother, who picked at her cuticles, which were normally perfectly manicured. Her nails finally matched mine, broken down, uneven, dots of blood surrounding the broken skin. She didn't bother to hold my hand when we walked in, but she never did that anyways. I was placed in front of a woman that was at a counter, contrasting the grey walls with a few dying flowers that were placed delicately in a cheap vase. The woman spoke words that were supposed to provide comfort, but her slow, monotone voice left me the same color of the walls, and I started to notice the bodies of other teenagers whose skin tones matched the colors of the walls, eyes half shut as they sat on couches, waiting to be told what to do.

Once I was shown to a room, my mother gave me a speech about how she loved me like she rehearsed it and I was left alone. The poking sensation that was gnawing at my gums was becoming overwhelming. My fingers prodded at my gums until I noticed that there was another set of teeth behind my own. The shock of something new growing inside of me caused my heart to race and panic set in. I didn't even know what to do about it, I just found myself poking at the new set of teeth I had grown with a strange intimacy towards this new part of me that felt brand new, something I hadn't experienced since I grew breasts. I found this to be a new secret I could keep, since my previous one was exposed.

The new development within my mouth was something that got me through rehabilitation. I would look at people and wonder if they ever started growing a second pair of teeth when they were fifteen. Maybe it was something that secretly happened when you were about to turn sixteen, something they didn't tell you about, like periods. Maybe I'd lose my original teeth and let the teeth behind my own shine through, straighter than my old rows of teeth. I spent those days being told how to cope with sadness and given pamphlets with cartoon children underneath each step of advice, giving oversized smiles because smiling was the solution for everything. I watched a movie about suicide with other teenagers who were staring at the screen with emotionless stares, a few pressing their fingers to their thighs, counting seconds until the movie was over because if they cried they'd be asked to speak about it. David sat beside me picking at the dried blood on his wrists, listening to the movie with an inattentive attitude. He glanced at me every once in a while and at one point he moved closer to me, admiring the scars on my arm as well in silence, we both had a tinge of jealousy, which I felt strongly within the crevices of my neck. I accidentally reached up and felt the thin skin, wondering if I could pull it off and check why my heart beat was softer than usual. I looked at David and he looked at me and we both looked away, but turning our heads back to the screen slowly, since we knew what we were doing.

I spent a lot of time with him, and when he spoke I looked into his mouth to search for a second layer of teeth I could not find. I didn't speak much, but he had a lot to say that didn't have much substance to it. It was nice having attention, but my mind was feeling heavy, like my own head was being weighed down. The skin on my face was slightly swollen, and when I pressed on my pores like I used to, my skin felt like there was another layer of bone behind it, like my skin was stretching underneath my skull, forcing my features to be exaggerated. Once

David touched my palm with scaly fingertips, but it was just to get a look at the scars that imprinted themselves upon skin that was slightly trembling, as it rested on the sofa's armrest. He didn't talk about the shaking. He didn't talk about the silent gaze I gave him every time he spoke. He slipped a slip of his paper with his number scribbled in crayon, since we weren't allowed to have pens, into the pocket of my jacket. The childish rendition of the numbers on the paper ripped out of a coloring book provided me with a sense of freedom I hadn't felt since arriving here. It was the last day there and he finally told me that he was impressed by the deepness of my scars. I told him it felt like fish scales. He smiled exaggeratedly like the kids on the depression pamphlets. My lips curved upwards in a smile that pursed my lips slightly, so they weren't as small as usual. He smiled, showing off his crooked teeth that he must not be proud of, since he had to hate his body like me. We hugged each other, awkward arms wrapping around one another in a genuine moment that looked awkward to everyone around each other.

And that became it for David's physical presence in my real life.

My parents picked me up, telling me how proud they were of me, when the only thing that had changed were the teeth in my mouth. I was taken home, given affectionate gazes, with fear laced between their brows. Once they asked me direct questions, I spoke to them with a shaky voice that I desperately tried to hide, but the issue was I hadn't changed. I needed something to happen to completely change my outlook because there was no way I was going to be allowed to try and die again.

I was going to school the next day, and the jacket with David's number was laid out on my bed to wear the next day with a pair of jeans I bought in clearance. I was staring at my eyes, noticing a second pupil pricking at the round brown color. I heard a voice in the back of my mind, reminding me that it was time to finally change. I stared at my wrist, reminded that David didn't think they looked like scales. I wanted him to see me now, but he never let me do that. He didn't want to see me change like my parents wanted to see it.

I slipped into my bathroom, quietly locking the door so they wouldn't worry. I opened my mouth wide and noticed the second pair of teeth that I had grown affection towards. The second uvula in the back of my throat reminded me that I was forced to let go of the original one. The acne covered pores were swelling up, my skin inflating itself so it would be easy to slip off. I grabbed the skin of my lips, slowly tearing it off my body, to reveal a second layer underneath. The old teeth gripped onto my old gums, sliding off easily with the skin that started to shrivel up as it lost contact with the new skin that had grown underneath. The strange sensation of pulling a layer of skin off of my body felt chilling, since a wet layer of fluid was surrounding this new body. I took off the skin on my torso and arms like I was taking off a body suit. My scars stayed attached to the baby-soft skin that had been growing inside of me.

Something was poking at the top of my mouth. I reached inside my mouth with ease, something I had never done before. I reached inside, the new teeth prodding at the soft skin on my hands and I felt a slight hole in the top of my mouth with a vessel of skin nestled at the top. A new instinct had developed inside of me, and I immediately grabbed onto it, pulling it out from my skull. I didn't want to throw up as vessel of flesh was slowly being pulled out of my

mouth. I looked in the mirror as a pair of cold eyes I now owned stared at the long, spongey flesh that was being pulled out like a clown pulling out scarves.

Finally, the flesh was pulled out, plopped on the floor, with an unsettling sticky noise. I felt my original voice being pushed out of my body with this strange of my brain that I had yanked out. I was slowly losing my old self, so I looked down at my wrist one more time as my sight began to disappear, noticing that the scars were shining blue like fish tails. I enjoyed the fact that I was right as I heard the prodding of my own feet disappear, so I was left on the floor of the bathroom.