

WOMEN'S STORIES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

A collection of art and poetry
about the lives of middle school girls
created by middle school girls



WOMEN'S STORIES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

STORY ORDER:

All stories are presented without author names to protect the privacy and anonymity of the Middle School Storytellers.

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- 3 I'd be the man
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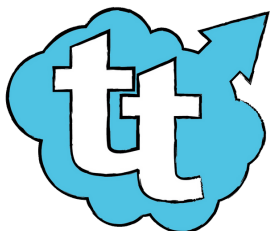
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WOMEN'S STORIES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

**"OWNING OUR STORIES
AND LOVING OURSELVES
THROUGH THAT PROCESS
IS THE BRAVEST THING
THAT WE WILL EVER DO."**

-Brené Brown



**IN THE FUTURE,
I SEE US CHANGING THE WORLD,
MAKING IT BETTER
FOR THE NEXT GIRL
WHO EXPERIENCES
THE THINGS WE DID,
BUT HAS THE SUPPORT
WE NEVER DID.**



1 A middle school girl's life

Looking behind me. "Is someone there?"
I walk home scared.
"Don't be afraid. You will be fine."
But it happens on the daily.
"Could the next body violated be mine?"

Telling my parents what happened that day,
I leave out a few details.
It doesn't matter anyway.
"Baby girl, sugar daddy."
Blocking him now.
Him asking "why?"
I don't answer.
He asks for pictures.
I don't send those.
I am supposed to be learning.
He calls my name,
I turn around to hear his taunting:
"Come on, it will be fun, I won't hurt you."
Moving seats now.

I have four mirrors that say,
"You're not pretty enough."
No one will date you."
The voice in my head is not mine;
It is the stinging words of other people.
I look in the mirror to see what they see.
Turn to the side,
"God. I'm so fat, but I don't know why."
Some days I'm pretty. Some days I try.
Makeup and sweaters will get me by.
A t-shirt and jeans may mean I am tired.
Other days I give up.
No one will notice anyway.

Here we are...
Me and my friends
eating cheese sticks,
making a difference,
talking about the things you don't talk about.
The taboos, the come-ons, the fears.
Me and my friends,
we hope for a better tomorrow.
This is our project.
Holding our hearts,
holding our hope,
we hope for a better tomorrow.
Built by us.
Authentic.
Our feminist project for women's equality.
I see us changing the world
so that we can shine and dance and speak
without fear
for the next girl
who experiences the things we did,
but has the support we never did.



IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.

IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.

IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.

IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.

IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.

IT DOESN'T BOTHER ME.



STRESS

2 It doesn't bother me

Wake up at 6:30.
Get downstairs by 6:35, or you'll be late.
Don't try too many outfits on. You'll take too long.
Remember perfume. You don't want to smell.
Check time. 6:36. Late.
It doesn't bother me.

Walking to first period - walk fast.
Walk next to the kid you carpool with,
Safety in numbers.
Don't walk too close that people will think
you are "a thing."
It doesn't bother me.

1st period - Arrived too early.
Not a lot of friends here.
Talk to a girl on your bus.
She says, "You are the only one
I can tell these things to."
You say nothing.
Don't want to mess this up again.

2nd period - Almost the first person there.
Sit in the back row with the oldest friend you have.
Plan a movie marathon you'll never actually do.

3rd period - Don't sing too loud.
Some days, you sit by the seventh graders and
act like you know what you're doing.
Other days, you sit by the eighth graders and
you make a joke and knock over your binder.

4th period - Group work assignment.
You only like one person here.
They say "She talks bad about you, you know."
You don't say anything.
Listen to music. Turn down the volume.
Keep the brightness low.
Don't let them know what you are listening to.

Lunch - Sit with an ever-changing table.
How many times have people left?
You only see them in this period. Make it count.
They tell you to leave.
It doesn't bother me.
Another bell, pack up quickly, or you'll be late.

6th period - Sit by a friend.
A relationship that was so bad;
now is one of the best you have.
But watch what you say.
Tell a story. Change the words.
Get a mint. Give it to them.
She likes mints. You don't.
Laugh along with that joke that you don't get.

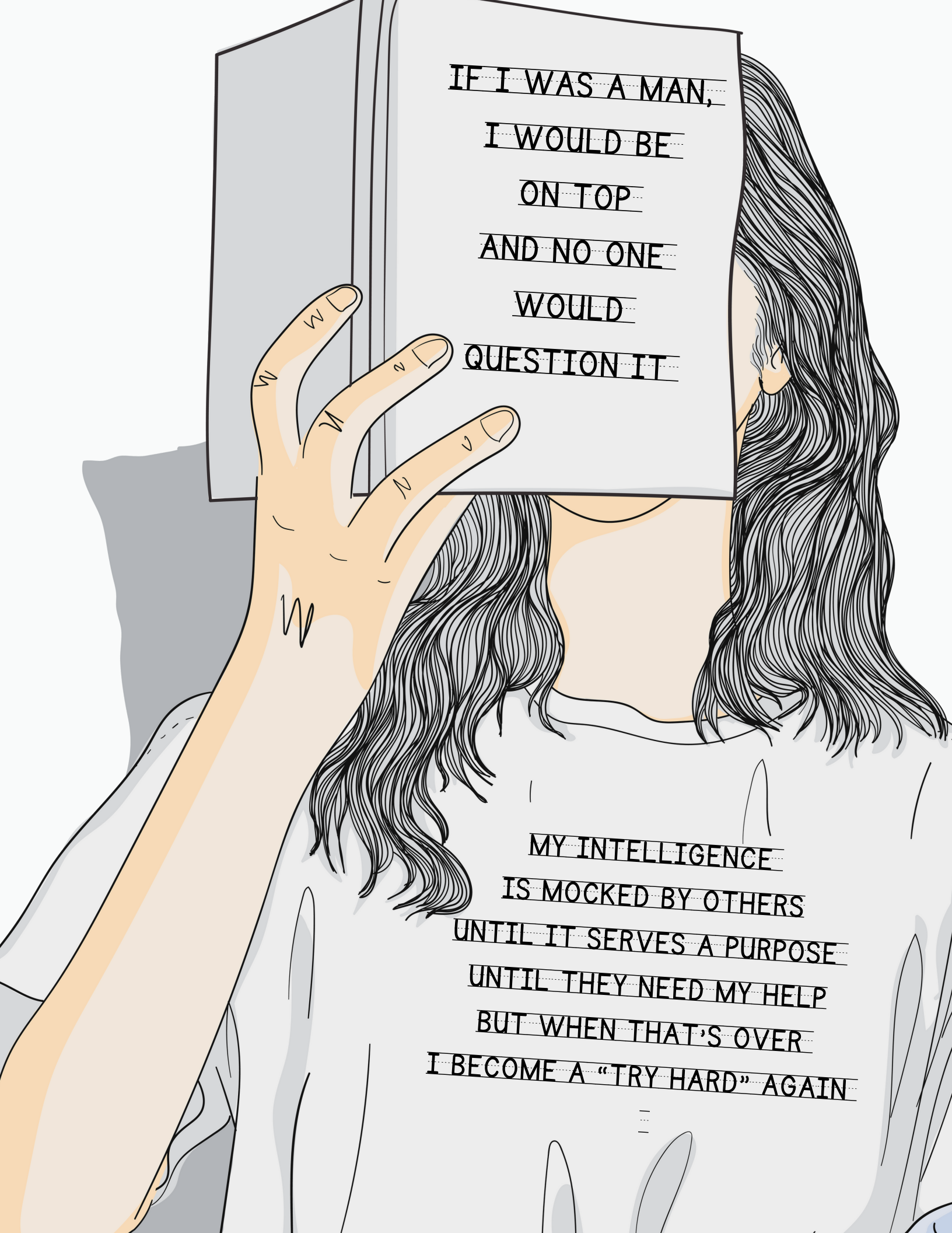
7th period - I don't understand any of it.
"Why do you try so hard?"
You want to make them proud of you.
Start to get the hang of it until words are involved.
I hate this.

8th period - learning about things I'll never use.
Sit near the friend from 2nd period.
Make more plans you'll never do.
She talks about old times and her new friends.
You will never be that close again.
It doesn't bother me.

Busses are here. Time to leave.
Sit with people I will never talk to.
Watch them say and do the craziest things.
They're all so much better than I'll ever be.
They're all so much more confident than me.
I want them to like me.
It doesn't bother me.

Walk home.
Go fast.
Go to your room.
Sit in your chair and think.
Remember your mistakes.
You could have fixed them.
You should have raised your hand.
You should have done better.
You should have talked to them.
It bothers me.

It bothers me that I have a clock in my head telling
me to go faster.
It bothers me that I can't speak my mind.
It bothers me when I can't raise my hand
It bothers me that I can't talk to people.
It bothers me when I let them walk all over me.
It bothers me that I can't tell them the truth
because I want to keep everyone happy.
It bothers me.

An illustration of a woman with long, wavy, black hair. She is holding a white rectangular sign in front of her face. Her right hand is visible, holding the sign. The sign contains text. The woman is wearing a white t-shirt with text on it. The background is a simple grey and white gradient.

IF I WAS A MAN,
I WOULD BE
ON TOP
AND NO ONE
WOULD
QUESTION IT

MY INTELLIGENCE
IS MOCKED BY OTHERS
UNTIL IT SERVES A PURPOSE
UNTIL THEY NEED MY HELP
BUT WHEN THAT'S OVER
I BECOME A "TRY HARD" AGAIN

3 I'd be the man

When you're a man,
it's all good if you're bad
and it's cool if you're mad.
Men who are rude when they lose
are called leaders.
I'm not a man so when
I scream the right answers
No one hears me.
I show that I am strong. They call me bitchy.
I tell them my goals.
They tell me to stop.
I tell them my dreams.
They tell me enough is enough.
If I were a man, then I'd be the man.
This is fact. This isn't fiction.
This isn't in my imagination,
I live it. I see it. I feel it.
Me and him sitting,
ice cream dripping
with friends listening.
He shares his goals, his dreams.
They nod and agree.
I share my goals, my dreams.
They laugh at me.
If I were a man, then I'd be respected
This is fact. This isn't fiction.
This isn't in my imagination,
I live it. I see it. I noticed
that my intelligence is mocked
until it serves a purpose
When you need my help then I am your friend.
When the assignment is turned in
you call me a "try hard" again.
If I were a man, I'd be on top
and no one would question.
I am going to climb. I won't be stopped.
I am going to achieve my goals, you can watch.
I'll be dignified
because I am a woman.
I will be something in this world.
I will make a difference.
I will be damned
if I let anyone else
keep me from being the man.

*"I'm so sick of running as fast as I can
Wondering if I'd get there quicker
If I was a man.
And I'm so sick of them coming at me again
'Cause if I was a man
Then I'd be the man."
-Taylor Swift*

** Excerpts in quotation marks are taken from Taylor Swift and Joel Little's song, "The Man," recorded on the album, Lover, © 2019, Republic Records.*

LISTEN TO 'THE MAN' BY TAYLOR SWIFT





**HER STOMACH SO FLAT
BUT SHE COULDN'T SEE THAT
80 ON THE SCALE
BUT SHE STILL FELT TOO FAT**

4 On the scale

Her stomach so flat,
but she couldn't see that.
80 on the scale,
but still too fat.
She wanted to be thinner
by diet, exercise, and skipping dinner.
Her hair so thin from
the deficit killing her body
She couldn't see clearly.
Everyone points out
her imperfections:
"Need more makeup."
"Not pretty."
"Too heavy."
"Too skinny."
"Hair too messy."
"Too much makeup."
On the scale,
she thinks about ending it all,
leaving her body forever.
But then she stands up tall,
fights the tears,
finds herself,
steps off the scale,
and then she becomes a beautiful girl again.

The fox and the bunny
chatted and chatted
for hours on end.

The fox starts to see
the bunny as gullible.

If only the bunny knew,
the bunny would have stopped.

As the conversation gets more

vulgar,

the fox gets a little

bolder

The bunny wonders

"who's really behind the screen"?

I was the bunny,
but I am no one's prey.



5 Predator and prey

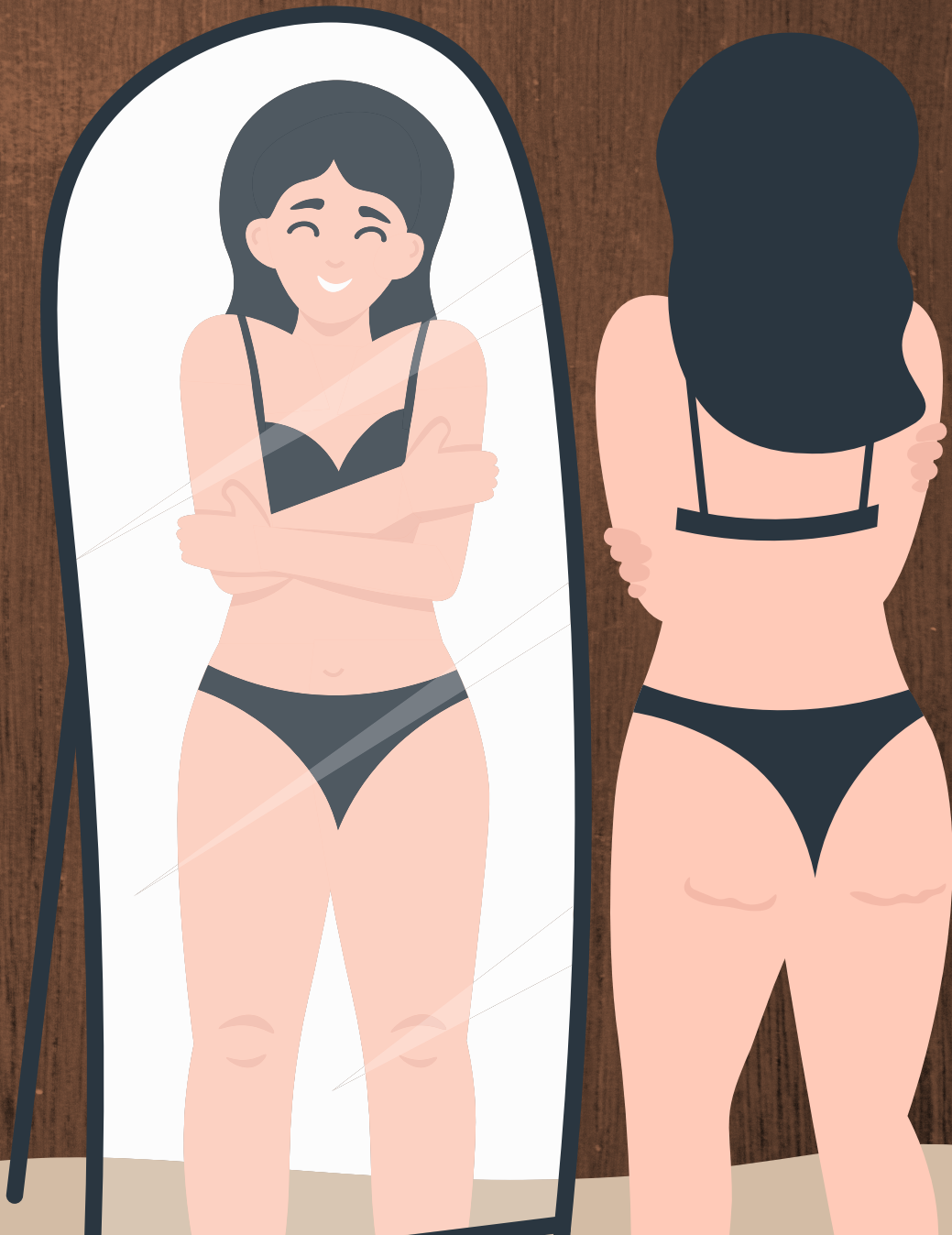
A little bunny heading to its home,
after a long day of friends and work,
hopping on her own.
Lurking in the shadows
is someone much bigger and older,
looking for someone alone.
The fox: tall, skinny, voice filled with honey.
As he peeks through the window, his smirk flashes
as he calculated his moves.

The little bunny sits comfortably upon arrival,
chilling and texting, everything normal,
calling and laughing with her friends, all in their own bubbles.
Until the phone buzzes and an anonymous name pops up.
Confused, the bunny has a weird feeling in her gut;
If only the bunny knew, the bunny would stop.
They chat and chat for hours
and the fox starts perceiving the bunny as gullible.
The conversation soon grows vulgar,
And the fox becomes bolder.
The bunny wonders who is really behind the screen?
Is it someone pretending to be younger?

Over time, the fox's true intentions shine through.
But little does he know, the innocent bunny is on to his plan.
And the bunny has a plan of her own.
The bunny walks towards him, each step filled with confidence and power,
Fixing her crown, the bunny sees she is one step higher, one step ahead.
The bunny waits for the moment to strike,
and just like that, the fox is taken away into the night.

"You were right about one thing," the bunny says as she touches each individual cold, metal bar.
"I'm very smart, too smart for you and your games."
I am the bunny, but I am no one's prey.

I AM ABLE TO SAY
TO THE MIRROR,
WITHOUT ANY LIES BEHIND IT
"I LOOK AMAZING TODAY"



6 Insecure

I was only nine-years-old
when I started hating the thing I should be grateful for -
my body.

I sat on my bathroom floor, tears falling to my knees,
thoughts filled with fake scenarios:
you cheating,
you having fun,
you forgetting about me.
And the first thing I blamed it on was my looks.

No matter how hard I tried or how much I cried,
I could never look like that "other girl."
I resorted to things that caused me so much pain.
Beauty is pain, right?
Marking barcodes on my arms.
Beauty is worth it, right?
Saying, "Oh no, I'm not hungry," at each meal.
Beauty is worth it, right?
Trying to get closer to my goal-to *your* beauty standard.
It all left me hopeless and wondering to the gods above,
"Why don't I just look like her?"

Four years later, I'm here, more confident than ever.
Now, my beauty is me.
I am able to say to the mirror, "I look amazing today" without any lies behind it,
I wish I could talk to my past self and tell her,
"You don't have to go through all that suffering,
because you, in fact, are already the most beautiful girl in class."

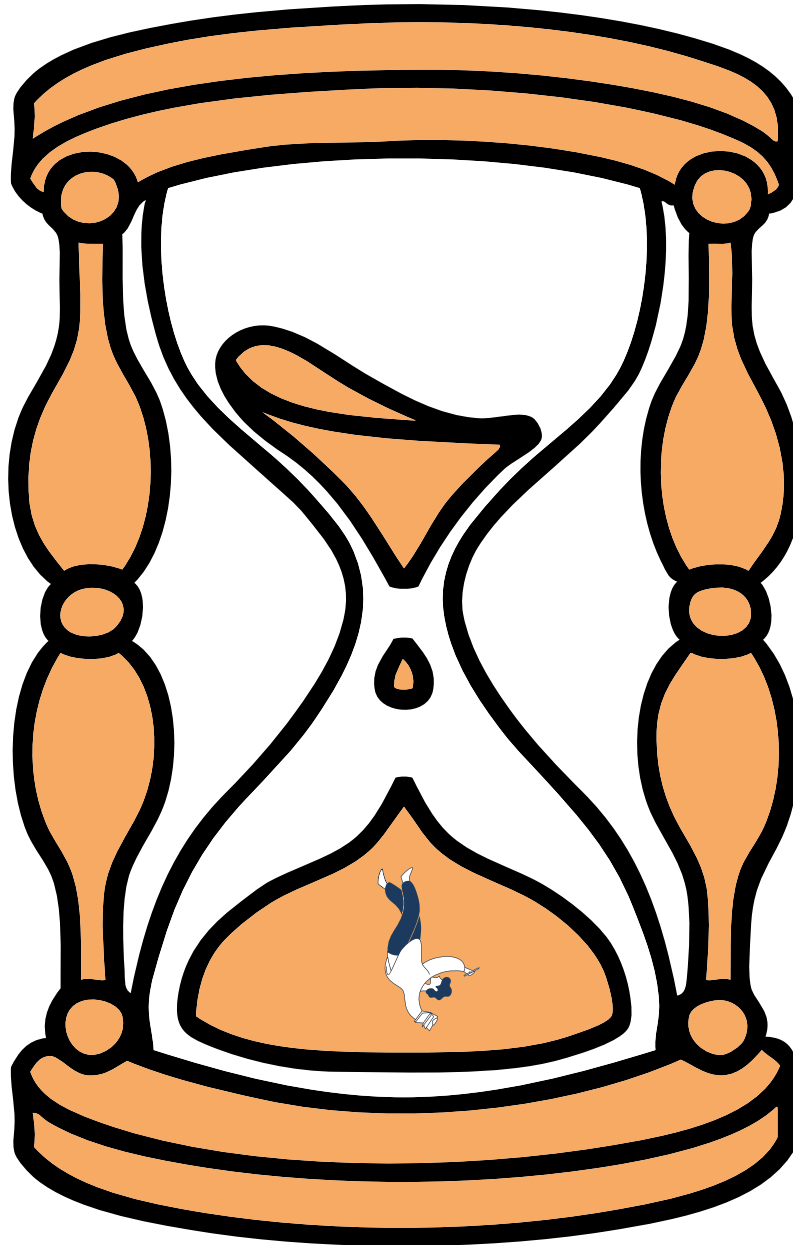
MY HAIR IS ME,
MY HAIR IS MY SOUL,
MY HAIR IS MY ANCESTORS,
MY HAIR IS MY HISTORY,
MY HERITAGE.
MY HAIR.



7 **My hair**

My hair. My hair, not yours. My hair curls and coils, but no you cannot touch. You cannot put your hands on my head out of curiosity, because that simply is not how that works. My hair grows towards the sun, defying gravity, unlike anything else. The styles that root in my ancestors that would tell the stories of who they were and where they came from. That as an elder gently puts these styles in my beautiful soft coily hair that defies gravity, I feel a soul connection with my ancestors. A connection so deep, unlike no other. My hair. My hair has been degraded and disrespected, but no one can convince me that my hair is not beautiful. Because my hair is me. My hair is my soul. My hair is my ancestors. My hair is my history. My heritage. My hair.

**SAND FALLS TO THE GROUND
DRIFTING AIMLESSLY
PILING UP INTO A MOUND**



**DROWNING IN THE PRESSURE I'M BOUND
WAITING FOR SOMEBODY TO SAVE ME
AS TIME, KEEPS ON TICKING ENDLESSLY.**

8 Endless Pressure

Sand falling to the ground
Drifting aimlessly
Constantly
Piling up into a mound
Under it, I am bound
Drowning under the pressure slowly
Waiting for somebody to save me
As the time keeps on ticking endlessly
Until the next time around.

A MASK, A SIMPLE THING
AND A MIRACLE FOR MILLIONS OF GIRLS.

The mask covers half of my face.

I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT BREAKING OUT,
GETTING A PIMPLE OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT.

It should just be an annoying piece of paper.

It should be a health safety precaution, but

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS, IT'S A MIRACLE.



9 Masks: a girl's best friend

A mask, a simple thing,
Designed to keep diseases and viruses from reaching our lungs.
A miracle that has saved millions of people from Covid-19
And a miracle for millions of girls.

You might be confused; I get it.
The thing is a mask covers half of your face
That's a half that I don't have to worry about breaking out,
Getting a pimple or braces or a scar
A mask *should* just be an annoying piece of paper,
A safety precaution
But for middle school girls, it's a miracle

Beauty standards have ruined the confidence of so many girls
We pick at our cheeks
We spend hundreds on makeup
Waste hours styling our hair
When we are already beautiful.

The Mask - The coverup we didn't think we needed
The Mask - The freedom I didn't know I wanted
My Mask - The confidence to be me.
Without the mask, I feel a little weird
We've been wearing one for two years now.
But now we are back to being exposed.
Mask or no mask
I guess we must make ourselves good enough for us.

Don't hide behind your mask;
you are beautiful even if you don't see it yourself.
A key to being content with yourself is confidence:
Don't slouch while walking around the school halls - Strut
Don't look down when your crush walks by - Look them in the eyes and ask them out.
You may not think that you are the prettiest girl
But there is someone out there who is going to fall head over heels
for who you are on the inside.

WEAR THE SHORTS THAT BARELY EXIST
WEAR THE CLOTHES THAT NEVER QUITE FIT
ADULTS DESIGN CLOTHES FOR MODELS
THEN BEG US TO WEAR THEM
AND VIEW US FOR THEIR ENJOYMENT



10 Dress Code

Wear the shorts that barely exist.
Wear the clothes that never quite fit.
If it isn't baggy, boys will bark in the halls.
If it is too dark, boys will yell and call.
Adults design clothes for models
then beg us to wear them
and view us for their enjoyment.
We can't wear midriffs and cut-offs outside the house;
then why did you make them?
The second we wear them to school
The adults-in-charge act like fools!
"It's distracting," they say.
"You're asking for it," they think.
"It's all your fault for wearing that," they imply.
These so-called mentors around me are supposed
teach us not to make the world worse.
But the only thing the school dress code has taught me is
that my body is my worth.

Sometimes I wonder
how we would get along,
what things we'd do.
I wonder
what if I had my mom.



11 A daughter without a mother

A daughter without a mother
In the hospital, when my mom couldn't speak,
because of the tube in her throat,
she couldn't say "I love you".
I didn't need her to
because I already knew.
My dad bought a video camera
to capture our memories together.
My brother and I made home videos for my mom,
I remember my brother and me
wiggling our butts and making jokes,
I remember saying "I love you, mama."
I didn't understand I was saying goodbye.
I was 5 when my mom died from breast cancer.

I still remember the day I was told that she died.
I didn't believe it.
Then I saw the sadness wash over my family's faces,
tears rolling down their cheeks,
I saw my dad cry for the first time.
That's how I knew.
I was five. I was sad.
I didn't understand what death was.

I remember playing Super Mario
to make sure Mario wouldn't die.
When Mario did die,
he always came back,
But Mom didn't come back.
I didn't understand what death was.

My Grandma told me,
"God can take people whenever he chooses
and he chose to take my mom."
I was scared.
and thought that everyone I loved would die.
afraid to go to sleep.
I was five when I had my first panic attack.
driving in the car,
begging my dad to tell me what happens when you die,
he didn't have an answer.

When I was six, I was still sad.
At Kindergarten, I would cry.
A classroom aide, Ms. Dot,
would take me on walks in the hallways to calm me down.
I didn't know how to stop crying.
In 3rd grade, I was 8. I was still sad.
I had more panic attacks.
I could never go to sleep.
I would force myself to stay up
until I physically couldn't stay awake anymore.
In 4th grade, I was nine. I was still sad.
I had the worst panic attacks that year.
I had more panic attacks when I was 10, 11, 12, 13
I was still sad.

Now I'm 14. I am still sad.
Nine years with sadness.
Nine years with panic attacks.
Nine years without a mom.
Nine years of First Days of School without my mom
Nine years not having a mom I could talk to about girl things.
I had my first crush without my mom.
I tried on my first set of acrylic nails without my mom.
Soon, I'll graduate without my mom,
go to college without my mom,
get a job without my mom,
get engaged and married without my mom.

I'm 14. I am still sad.
I have found ways to deal with it.
Sometimes I wonder "What if I had my mom?"
I wonder how we would get along,
I wonder what things we'd do together.
I know you would say "I love you".

WOMEN'S STORIES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

Women's Stories for a Better Tomorrow is a collection of art and poetry about the lives of middle school girls created by middle school girls.

This collection was created by 8th-grade girls from Oakwood Middle School - Arterina, Charlie, Johari, Jezlyn, Kiera, Lilly, Mikayla, and Sophia. These incredible young women hope that their stories will start conversations about the things young women experience every day but rarely get talked about.

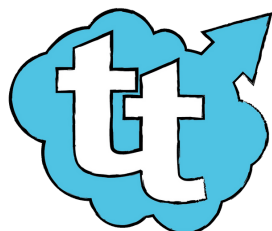
"We hope these stories spark conversations filled with empathy.

We hope these stories inspire other girls to share their stories.

We hope these stories create a better tomorrow for women today."

- Arterina, Charlie, Johari, Jezlyn, Kiera, Lilly, Mikayla, and Sophia

WOMEN'S STORIES FOR A BETTER TOMORROW IS A COLLABORATION OF:



THE AULTMAN FOUNDATION

**SPECIAL THANKS TO THE AULTMAN FOUNDATION
FOR GENEROUSLY PRINTING THIS COLLECTION.**

