

The Pause Between

I used to think silence meant abandonment.

Now, sitting on the edge of my bed, the glow of my phone spilling across the floor, I know that isn't true. Some silences aren't empty. Some are watchful. Some protect you without you noticing. That tightness in my chest rises again—the pause I once ignored—and I hold it there, curious this time, instead of scared.

I was fourteen the first time I ignored the pause completely.

She was my best friend. I can still see her sitting cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom, twirling her hair absentmindedly while I spilled a secret I shouldn't have shared. Secrets were currency between us, proof that we were chosen, that we belonged somewhere. I trusted her because I wanted to. I needed to.

The pause came in the quiet between her questions, a slight tremor in my chest, a whisper I brushed aside. *This feels wrong*, it said, just enough to make me hesitate. I told myself I was overthinking. That fear had made me cautious. That love required openness. And so, I spoke.

We had spent the whole morning planning our weekend, joking about the boys in our class, trading little confessions. I had shown her my notebook full of doodles and little lists of thoughts I didn't even share with my diary. She had laughed at the appropriate times, said the right things, and made me feel understood. That was why I ignored the pause—because everything about her felt safe.

The betrayal didn't hit all at once. It crept in, sideways. At first, it was the way she looked at me across the cafeteria with a flicker I couldn't name. Then came the whispered jokes, the shared glances, the way words I had trusted her with came back to me, twisted and carried by other voices. My own secrets became gossip, and my own trust became amusement for others.

I remember the first real sting. I was walking home, backpack heavy on one shoulder, when I saw her across the street, laughing with someone else, the words I'd shared spilling between her teeth. My stomach knotted. I froze. Part of me wanted to turn and pretend I didn't see, but another part of me couldn't. I felt the pause then, sharp and insistent, and I had no choice but to step back and let it settle around me like a shadow.

In the days that followed, I replayed every conversation in my head. If I had been stronger. If I had stayed quiet. If I had listened. I blamed myself, even though part of me knew she had chosen to twist my words. Even so, a small part of me recognized that I had survived by paying attention, even if too late, and that sometimes survival meant learning the pause.

At home, I sat on my bed for hours, notebook open, scribbling lines of anger and confusion. My room smelled faintly of the vanilla candle I burned to mask the lingering humidity from the morning rain. Outside, a neighbor's dog barked intermittently, the sound sharp and unexpected. I wondered if my chest would ever feel light again, or if every word I spoke would be measured, weighed, and held against me.

The pause returned after that, more often. It showed up when people asked too much too fast, in conversations that drifted toward edges I wasn't ready to stand near. Sometimes I listened. Sometimes I didn't. Sometimes I ignored it completely, and the sting came back in full force.

I remember the whispers on the playground, the laughter that felt pointed. I remember my chest tightening when I realized that some people's kindness was performative. I remember the afternoons when I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, tracing the curve of my jaw and the slope of my shoulders, wondering if I would always feel exposed.

But I also started noticing small signals of protection. The subtle hesitation before someone asked me to share more than I wanted. The quiet glance of my mother from the kitchen doorway as I hesitated to answer a question. The way the sunlight fell through the blinds in the afternoon, painting my room with stripes that seemed to slow time.

I think back to the girl I was, handing pieces of herself away because she thought love was something earned by exposure. I think of how much strength it took to gather those pieces back—not perfectly, not all at once, but honestly. I think of the times I survived by mistake, and the moments I was quietly spared from, without realizing it.

Now, at seventeen, the pause is different. It's familiar, like a friend I'm still learning to trust. A text pings from someone new—a friendly, curious message that brushes just past my comfort. The pause settles in my chest, and I feel it not as an alarm but as a reminder. A moment to breathe, to notice, to consider before I step.

The room is quiet. My chest rises and falls. The glow of the phone illuminates the edge of my desk, the scattered notebooks, the half-finished sketches I'll probably never finish. I feel the fabric of my hoodie, the faint scent of my shampoo, the cool air on my wrists. The pause is here, steady and patient. I hold my breath just a little, letting it keep me in return. I let it linger, knowing that some protection doesn't come with alarms or explanations. It comes quietly, unseen, shaping me through moments I couldn't yet understand.

I close my eyes, remembering the girl I was—the one who spoke when she shouldn't have, the one who fell through shadows she didn't understand. I see her mistakes, her fear, and her heart, tender and raw. And I realize that she is not gone. She is part of the person I am becoming.

What I once feared as silence, I now know as the pause between. I stay there a moment longer, letting it hold me.