

## Words on bathroom walls

In the echoing hallways at school, where the lockers stood like silent sentinels, she moved through the shadows cast by the spotlight of her classmates' judgment. The whispers of derision followed her like ghosts, her backpack full not just with textbooks, but with the weight of relentless bullying that seemed to have found a permanent residence on her slender shoulders. The scent of rebellion lingered in the air as she entered the smoke-filled school bathroom longing for an escape from the whispers in the hallways. She enters the bathroom stall to once again be reminded of the things people say about her. She reads the vulgar words written about her appearance on the stall door as her eyes fill with tears. Suddenly, the whispers stop as a girl knocks on the stall door. She wipes her tears and opens the door to reveal a group of shadows, who greeted her with their inviting smiles and magnetic charm. This kindness was unexpected, and so she found herself bewildered.

The walls seemed to close in, whispering secrets that promised acceptance at the cost of conformity. Under the flickering lights and smoke-filled space of the school bathroom, she found herself at the crossroads of choice. The school bell rang in sync with her pounding heart as a friend offered a hit from her e-cigarette, promising a release from the stress of school. The weight of the decision pressed upon her shoulders; a burden disguised as liberation.

She hesitated, her mind a battlefield of conflicting desires. The rhythmic ringing of the bell echoed the pounding in her chest as she grappled with the decision to succumb or resist. The shadows whispered sweet nothings, urging her to inhale the smoke and plunge into the abyss of addiction.

In that pivotal moment, she glimpsed the faces of her family, remembering the promises she made to them. She promised not to give in and not to develop unhealthy habits. The weight of the promises she made clashed with the intoxicating allure of instant belonging. The room blurred, and, with a deep breath, she chose to step away.

But... The voices didn't stop. Their tones getting more aggressive and persuasive, yearning for her to accept their offer. They insisted that it wasn't as harmful as real cigarettes, and it even tasted good. The once inviting smiles turned into judging frowns as they awaited her to succumb. The voices in her head of fitting in reached her ears, tendrils of influence wrapping around her insecurities, squeezing the air from her lungs even more so than the bathroom filled with flavoured smoke. The allure of acceptance, like a mirage in the desert of teenage angst, blurred her vision and clouded her judgment, so she agreed. She filled her lungs with smoke in hopes that she would finally fit in at school. She didn't care about the repercussions, all that mattered is that the shadows would accept her and talk to her in the school bathroom.

Slowly, she started not to yearn for conversations with the shadows but the comforting release that came from inhaling the smoke. The shadows seemed to get more distant as she was left there, alone, just as before, but this time with the company of her new friend. Just as the shadows got bored of her, so did she of this friend, she decided to try something stronger and more effective in helping her deal with her problems.

This journey is a familiar tale, a narrative etched into the collective experience of students navigating the minefield of peer pressure. The dark side of acceptance reveals itself in the aftermath – addiction and fake friendships. In the shadows of conformity, the light of individuality flickers, its flame delicate yet resilient, waiting to be rekindled by the courage to resist the seductive whispers that echo through the hallowed halls of high school.

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