

Counting

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There are 27 steps from my locker to my home room.

I counted them, like I always do. Because it calms me. Because it helps me. With people brushing past me, murmurs filling the hallways, and the lights flickering above creating an inconsistent puddle of dark and light, god knows I needed something calming.

Walking through the crowded hallways and the looming gates had already given me enough anxiety; now that I was at the threshold of my classroom, it was becoming too much. Only 56 steps ago I was at the very front gates, telling myself I was ready. I was old enough, strong enough. Sometimes I'm wrong.

I had always yearned for school. It was something so normal and mundane for other people, but I never got the chance. It seemed like something that I needed to work for, a reward, an exciting experience. I had placed school up on this pedestal, only for me to finally arrive at 16, and for it to be exactly what people had told me it would be like for someone of my 'headspace'.

I wanted to count the floor tiles, the lockers, the people. But it was too loud. I wanted to cry, to scream, to run, to leave. But there were too many people. All I could do was breathe.

In. One, two, three. Out. One, two, three. Repeat.

My parents kept me from school for 10 years, out of concern for bullying. Bullying was what they were worried about? I can handle people insulting my little quirks. The counting I ritualise, the little flick of my pinkie finger when I'm nervous, the tears that escape from my eyes when things get a bit too much. My autistic patterns were the last thing they should've been concerned about. What they should've been concerned about was the noise. The people, the lights, the never-ending pattering of people's feet on dirtied floors. The ever-consistent, high-pitched humming of the flickering light above my head.

Over-stimming was the last thing I needed right now. I'd wanted to come to school for so long, I couldn't let the chance escape me this quickly, especially considering I wanted to have a life above homeschooling. A life of knowledge, filled with education and learning. I couldn't let something like this stop me.

I wanted to take a step forward to peer into my homeroom. I wanted to look and see what my safe-space in school looked like, to see who was in it, to see the whiteboard where I would learn new ideas, complex or otherwise. But I couldn't. I felt something holding me back. Constricting me like a python, wrapping around my back, grasping at my neck and choking me. I glanced to my side and noticed faces passing by, none of them even looking my way, but I knew they wanted to. I knew they were thinking about how foolish I looked. The new guy was standing in front of his classroom, eyes wide and frozen. They'd be thinking about how much they wanted to laugh, but knew it'd be impolite. How much they wanted to say some snarky remark, but knew there was a teacher nearby. You'd think I'd harbour some sort of anger at those people, but I can't exactly blame them. If I were normal, I'd feel the exact same way.

I kept counting my breaths. Flicking my right pinkie finger, and endlessly trying to push the hair out of my face with my left hand. Again and again I ran my fingers through my hair, seeking some form of solace in the action. The faint chime of the school bell rang in the background, but I barely took notice of it. The sound of pattering of feet on granite tiling quickened, creating a deafening sound resonating, echoing from the walls, the floor, the roof, and filling my ears. The cacophony of harsh footsteps smothered my thoughts like a blanket to a fire. In a way, I was glad. My mind had no room for anything but the sound of footsteps, over and over and over.

But it stopped.

It was silent again, aside from the still persisting humming of the light above. I was left alone in the hallway, left in my thoughts again. Again I wanted to take a step into the classroom. To see what I could learn, what I could do. I wanted to go to school more than anything; it's what I've always wanted.

But I can't.

I'll never be able to.

And as I sprinted down the granite-tiled hallway, humming lights above me, dropping my history books, tears streaming down my face, those thoughts repeated again and again. I'll never be able to be normal. It was stupid of me to think otherwise. Ripping open the hallway doors and running through the courtyard, I knew this was too good to be true. Someone like me couldn't do this.

It was 56 steps from the front gates to my classroom. But this time, it was only 37.