

The pastel green and yellow walls that surrounded Montgomery High School, and seemingly Montgomery itself, have shielded me well from the real problems of the world. Yet everyone here is still susceptible to the complex social infrastructure, the frantic yet familiar thud of Converse and boat shoes against the slick linoleum.

The broader bright glass halls offer some change from the stagnant brick of the middle school, a new start. My mother can wipe her brow for she has finally dragged me to an acceptable academic level, pushing and prodding after my disastrous failures to calculate the right proportion of forest to ponds in the fourth grade word problems. Convinced I would flunk out of elementary school, she magicked mountains of geometry and algebra books into thin air, reforming me throughout the long summers. It wasn't her strictness as much as her disappointment that kept me at work-- her fallen face when she saw the biting red marks slicing the paper haunted my memory. But still I struggled to concentrate in the muggy summer air, my fingers sticky against the pencil and paper and my forehead damp with sweat and frustration.

Despite the improvement academically, none of my mother's teachings could ever improve my social standings. Thus, I never stepped foot out of my house on weekends, and socials were out of the question. This is who I was when I entered the pearly gates of the high school, braces freshly off and a backpack that still had the brand new plastic smell of the store. Then began the greatest tetralogy in my young life.

Me, freshman year: standing outside my classrooms long before any bells rang, my shy shoe scuffling an awkward melody soft within a crescendo of louder footsteps. I lose the beat in the crowd, papers fluttering to the ground and pencils scattering, scurrying as the seniors swaggered down the hallways with booming laughs that shattered speakers.

Mouth dry from silence-- a sullen walk to the lunch table where more silent friends sit with mother-packed lunches since we are too afraid to venture to the cafeteria where the cool kids hang. Stiff conversation detailing in-class injustices and the occasional gasp as someone of a higher social standing walks by, a snarky comment as an outcast passes on the way to the empty hallway to eat. Cliques run deep here, a middle school immaturity engrained.

I refuse to raise my hand in class, much preferring to quell the swelling desire to be right than to risk being wrong. My mother continually presses me about the comments on my report card-- "Needs to improve class participation" frequents the page. I continually ignore her pleas to speak up.

I join the fencing team to calm my mother's fears about not having enough extracurriculars in college, during which I talk to the one other freshman and try to stay quiet and out of the way.

The year ends without much of a fuss, and I'm away to the Caribbean during the summer. The few days I'm at home I avoid people from school, evading glances in the grocery store and chance meetings while walking the dogs.

Sophomore year: undoubtedly a blip in my already shaky high school career. Stubborn, I insist upon taking AP Chemistry without having previous knowledge on the subject. All nighters, highlighted notes, and mnemonic devices only lead to panickedly flipping through test pages, the deep dread coldly clenching my stomach, and then the inevitable failing grade. My mother, a chemical engineer, waves off my concerns but is unable to help.

Moreover, the friends have started worshipping the new teen gods, One Direction, from the prep in their step to the homelands of each and every one of them. The same song isn't playing for me, and so I find myself dancing farther and farther away in a disjointed, confused

fashion. I rekindle a friendship with a childhood friend and roam the halls during lunch, feel a bit freed from the heavy blanketing beat of the all-knowing DJ as we attempt a karate match in the stairwell.

I give in and join marching band as well, hoping to find home, but instead find more alienation. We march to the same drum yet something about my step is inferior, and even here, I am unpopular and lonely.

Grades still plummet, but my mother has moved on to slipping math books into my sister's life, and for the first time I am alone.

The last marking period is fluff grades, and so my spirits are boosted as I wheedle and pull and manage to extract a 78. Summer is mostly in Spain, and I again religiously avoid the school. Even though I'm no longer a freshmen, the school isn't my turf. I'm the lowest on the food chain.

Junior year sees some changes-- perhaps some sort of an accelerando, a hopeful kind of crescendo. Leadership opportunities fly in, and I have somewhat learned from experience how to control the wavering line of grades. I'm closer to the top now-- the freshmen and sophomores are infantile in my wake, and now it is my turn to saunter down the classrooms as the children struggle with school maps. But now, my lunchtime friend has found more exciting pursuits, and I am once again grounded at the lunch table and therefore subjected to the gossip about One Direction.

Although I still stay silent at the lunch table, I have begun speaking in class albeit sporadically and infrequently, only when I believe I have something meaningful to say. It's a little easier to make small talk, the roaring music of the school fading a bit so I can add in my song. It's not exactly harmony, but it's getting there.

Junior year ends and I leave for Belize, still making no effort to maintain the shallow friendships I've made. However, I feel an odd, warm pounding in my chest, almost like anticipation, at the idea of returning to school as top of the school if not to the top of the social ladder.

Then I meet a new group of friends, who seem to understand my groove. Listless days of studying at home are spotted with picnics and car rides with fingers brushing the sky through the sunroof. The new fam is smarter and tighter, a conglomeration of personalities.

Midnights spent on the group chat, days filled with swimming and tubing and bubble tea, and comfort and camaraderie and the sense of belonging.

The last day I see them before college, we sit at a table for hours, words and ideas scattering and converging and harmonizing, minors and majors and arpeggios of equally distributed voices. I realize that I have finally found a song that I love, something that makes me want to tap my foot to the rhythm of laughter. It's a catchy song that'll stay in my head for awhile, hopefully a long while. It's just such a painful irony that I leave as soon as everything falls into place.

The tendrils of friendship are support, yet now a burden, the sweet voices trying to draw me back in like sirens. But I'll find my groove at Hopkins, another different melody that'll make me want to race down the highway with the windows down, a melody no less beautiful. My old friends will always be the original beat, the drums, the backbone, and I'll see them as often as possible, but I'll add in the interweaving countermelodies and keep my ears open always.