

i don't understand

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The fact that I was just standing there appeared inexplicably ludicrous to me. The chilliness creeping up my spine carried distant thoughts and doubts rather than much more welcomed goosebumps and forced them up to the surface of my mind, where I had no chance of escaping them, my whole self suddenly longing to be anywhere else but here. I quivered, resisting the urge to wrap my arms around my body as the merciless cold trapped me inside its teeth-chattering embrace, my cheeks and nose flushing red from the extensive stay that apparently was nowhere near its end.

The infinite sky lay motionless above, streams of whistling wind that suddenly came circling around me disrupted its peaceful visage. With their aid, the fallen maple leaves elegantly rose from the muddy ground and all together they left this cursed place, purposely forsaking me and ignoring my desperate eyes, following their trail.

Nevertheless, trying my best not to drown in self-pity, I directed my gaze to the endless abyss of the objective, straightened my posture and squeezed my mouth into the warmest and most welcoming grimace I could.

I didn't see the flash coming. I never do. It caught me by surprise, the white nothingness suddenly clouding over my world, blinding me and confusing my senses. After it disappeared, the air instantaneously became thick with anticipation as everyone around me excitedly rushed to see the final picture. I was abandoned, left standing alone, my muscles still tightened and my posture still held. I did not move. I knew exactly what was coming next and just as my mind began to create the worst case scenarios, my ears detected a high-pitched voice that belongs to no one other than my lovely precious mother. Her attempts of motherly consoling me, for ruining the picture, failed to deceive me, I have known her long enough to understand that behind the plastered polite gestures stands an embarrassed, indignant and ashamed person. The cause of her rage was truly nothing of a great significance, in fact, it was utterly comical and amusing, but also somewhat humiliating. I was well-known for it, people used to refer to it as my most distinctive feature. My infamous smile.

It indeed must appear as the most preposterous and foolish reason for self-loathing, but the feeling was not just self-generated, it crept at me every time I came to contact with someone's eyes, the stifling hate suffocating me until I embraced it as a part of myself. I acknowledged that what people were saying might have been the distressing truth all along, although I was not aware of the explicit motive behind it. Was it the braces? Or the chipped tooth that I got from an extraordinarily harsh fall

during my ballet practice, or perhaps the fact that every time I smiled, or endeavored to do so, my lips were twisted into a dreadful grimace that frightened every child and sickened every adult. Mother used to say that it is a delightful imperfection, but after some time she too grew into one of those people that would divert their eyes to the floor instead of raising them to meet mine.

At first, it did matter. Despite being taught that judgement of others did not hold any importance, that the most significant was how I felt, it still mattered to me more than it should. My flaws emboldened my obsession with public opinion, the inhuman desire for them to think well of me had overcome every other urge, only aggravating the situation more, as I thought it was recovering. But as the time went by, my compulsion was exchanged for the realization that my wishes will remained unfulfilled, the sudden revelation liberating me from the feigned insincere disguise I displayed to the world. I did not have the urge to dissemble anymore as I no longer valued the public opinion as much as I used to. I avoided public places, spent breaks locked behind a bathroom door eating my lunch, accompanied by the hideous hand-drawn caricatures occupying the walls. It was rare for me to leave my shelter and have lunch in the renovated cafeteria as most of the time I either did not get a seat, my fellow students claiming that this particular one was taken, or had a whole table to myself, everyone too frightened of even approaching me, as if I had a deadly disease.

That was why I was by far the only one lacking excitement over the fact that our school will welcome a class of foreign students. I did not bother to learn the country they are coming from, too uninterested in the whole situation to actually care, more significant problems on my mind as I entered my AP Biology course, bracing myself for the embarrassing no-one-wants-to-be-partnered-with-me situation. I paid no attention to the enthusiastic chitchat as I concentrated on soundlessly sliding behind a desk far in the corner of the room, away from the judging eyes of the students as I eagerly awaited the beginning of the lesson.

I was so caught up in my imaginary world that when the door opened and a couple of our temporary classmates entered the room, their appearance earning an amazed silence and a few hushed praises, I still have not paid them any bit of my attention, unlike everybody else in the room, head bowed low and eyes shut tight. It was not that I opened them until I heard a faint cough much closer to me than I would prefer.

She was breathtaking, possibly the most beautiful creature I have ever laid my eyes upon, my mouth going dry as she lazily pushed a strain of her curly amber-colored hair behind her ear, a rosy blush appearing on her cheeks as a result of my intense stare. And in that moment I was staring. I was staring so hard I was frightened that I was going to burn a hole through her head. Thankfully that did not happen, and as minutes have passed, the amazement was replaced by confusion, why was she looking at me? *"Is this seat taken?"* she sang, her voice a music to my ears. *"You... you*

want to sit here?" I whispered in astonishment, pinching myself under the table to confirm that I am not dreaming. *"Yes, I would love to."* She slowly sat down next to me, her hand, purposely or not, brushing against my thigh, my breath hitching in my throat, my eyes darkening a little. She turned to face me, flashing a graceful smile and before I realized what I was doing, I smiled back. And in that moment, I knew that my smile was picture worthy.