

Womankind

Where I'm from, men are a myth. Or that's what it seems like. We're told that beyond the wall that ends our safe town, there are others like us. They are called men. They are like us but also very different. We're told that these people are dangerous, aggressive, and cruel. We don't know why we have never seen them, but we're taught to be scared so nobody bothers to ask. When I was younger, my mom told me stories about a day in the past when there was no wall and everybody was together. I used to gaze up at her, my eyes twinkling with curiosity as she told me of these men, who seemed like foreign creatures like me. I would ask her eager questions, wondering what had happened and why one day everything had changed. She never told me and I'm not even sure she knew the answer.

I wake up to Gwen Stefani's vibrato voice belting the song "Just a Girl" and drowsily reach my hand over, smacking my alarm clock until it stops making noise. I've never really understood the lyrics of Stefani's song, but I like the guitar part and it wakes me up, so I don't mind. I climb out of bed, bopping my head to the beat of the song. Peeking in the mirror, my thick brown hair seems to be defying gravity, sticking out in all directions from the tossing and turning I do in my sleep. I open my dresser and grab a pair of tight blue jeans and a fitted brown cardigan, pulling them on before forcing a brush through the nest on my head. Looking in the mirror, I see an expression of disgust take over my face. I don't like how the jeans accentuate my curvy hips or how the cardigan clings to my chest, emphasizing my shape. My mom tells me that I'm beautiful and I agree, because when I see other girls that look like me I think they're pretty, but I just don't feel like it suits *me*. I never tell Mom that though because I think she's secretly proud that I look like her.

Unwilling to spend any more time staring at my reflection, I grab the doorknob, yank the door open, and head downstairs. Before walking into the kitchen, I force a smile onto my face, trying my best to look like the “pretty girl” my mom always claims I am.

“Hi Mom!” I force an expression of bubbly excitement onto my face, my cheeks flushing and my eyebrows raised.

“Hey, aren’t you a beautiful young lady!” She kisses my head and runs her hand through my hair, untangling it with her long nails. Her hands are soft and my nose scrunches as I take in the sickly sweet scent of her floral perfume. I look up at her pointed face, her feminine cheekbones accentuated with layers of blush and highlighter. She’s beautiful. People always tell me I should be grateful to have inherited her *beautiful* facial structure, but in all honesty, sometimes I wish I could donate my features to somebody who actually wants them.

“Thanks.” I walk past my Mom, slip my feet into a pair of old, worn out boots, grab my backpack, and head out the door.

“Bye Mom, see you later!” I don’t look back at her before walking out the door.

I usually walk straight to school, but today I left a little early so I have time to take a longer route. Since I live on the edge of town, I head towards the wall which separates our world from the men’s. It’s not somewhere I go often because my mom thinks it’s pointless, but it’s a nice peaceful spot for me to think without interruption.

Despite it being winter, it’s a pretty nice day out. The air is crisp and my face stings as the cool breeze beats against it. Dead leaves scatter the empty street I walk on, the trees bare and ready for winter. In front of me lies a dead end and beyond that, some trees, and of course, the wall. I walk past a rusty sign spray painted with inappropriate words and symbols I won’t repeat

and then briefly walk along a dirt path that's barely visible in the pool of leaves. The path inclines upwards and I lean my hand on a tree near me as I carefully climb up onto a small patch of grass at the top of a hill. Sliding my boots off, I approach a sturdy tree to my left and begin to climb it. My hands sting from the sharpness of the bark and my jeans become covered in a dusting of dirt. I don't care though.

Finally, I reach my favorite nook near the top of the tree. There is a spot between two branches just large enough for someone small like me to fit, so I can sit there and gaze into the unknown. The government must have not realized someone could get so high up because I can see all the way over the wall from here. I've been here a few times and looked in wonder over the wall, hoping to see some sort of excitement, but I've never seen anything other than moving cars and lights going on and off in the distance.

I'm not expecting to see anything today, but I always have a twinkle of hope and I feel like maybe today could be special... Just as I begin to remind myself not to get my hopes up, something sharp hits me on the arm. Ow. Looking up, I don't see anything that could've fallen on me. Probably just an acorn or something.

"Hey you!" Something hits me in the other arm as I jerk my head up in the direction of the voice.

Something, or *someone*, seems to be on top of the wall. It sounds crazy, but unless my eyes are deceiving me or I'm delusional, there is definitely someone sitting on top of the wall, their feet hanging 100 feet above the ground.

"You know, it's not very polite to ignore people when they say hi." Its voice was so deep that I'm surprised it could even get words out of its mouth.

I don't respond. Maybe it's because I'm confused, or maybe because they're supposed to be dangerous. Or maybe a bit of both, although this creature doesn't seem to be very dangerous.

Turns out where I'm from, men are real. I once learned in school that men are referred to as "he", not "she" like us, so I guess I should refer to *him* as that. As I gaze at this *man*, I notice that his features differ from mine. He wears no shirt and a pair of tan khaki shorts. His chest is flat and covered in hair. I wonder what the hair is for, maybe it's colder over there? His arms are twice the size of mine and incredibly sturdy, unlike mine, which are slender and weak. Even his legs look different from mine. Rather than being protected in a layer of fat and soft skin, his legs are muscular and tanned from the sun. And his face is the most incredible. He doesn't have the high cheekbones my mom and I have, but instead his bone structure emphasizes his jawline. His eyes sit shallower in his face than mine and his nose is bigger than mine - his face in general is less "pretty" than mine but more striking.

As I gaze upon his features, jealousy envelops me. My fingers graze my nonexistent jawline and petite nose, wondering what I would look like if I was more like him. I'm not sure what it is, but something about this man feels familiar. In some way, I wish I could live in his shoes for a moment. Feel what it's like to release the burden of my shape and take on the gifts he carries. Maybe I wouldn't feel quite so wrong when I looked in the mirror every morning if I looked more like him.

"You know it's not nice to stare!" His baritone voice startles me.

Realizing I'm not sure how much time I've spent up here, I begin to scramble down the tree, scraping up my tender thighs.

“Sorry.” I cringe at the sound of my voice. Compared to his beautiful deep tone, I sound like a shrieking donkey. I jump down from the tree, slide my boots on, and begin to run down the hill and towards school. I see him grinning as I run off in a panic. Maybe men *are* cruel after all.

I arrive at school just in time to sign in at the main office, out of breath and panting - I was running faster than I realized although I’m not really sure what I was running from.

I have a free first period, so I head towards the library to look for some information. The librarian is out today and nobody seems to be around, so I climb around a barrier blocking off the librarian’s desk from the rest of the library. Under the desk sits a stack of brown books, their covers dusty from years without use. I’ve seen the books here before and asked about them, but the librarian told me that they were only for teachers.

My nose tickles as I grab the top book, a layer of dust flying into my face. The title is printed in gold: *The World of Gender and its Demise*. I open the book and my eyes widen as I’m greeted by a photo of a woman next to a man. They don’t seem awkward or surprised to be together, but like it’s just another day for them. I guess that’s how the world used to be. Sneaking the book into my backpack, I leave the library and head to the bathroom to spend my free period reading.

The book is full of valuable information. It turns out that about a century ago, men and women lived together. The book’s pages are full of photographs of men, women, and people that don’t look like either. I flip through the pages in awe, taking in information about how and why the world changed one day. An image of an individual whose gender I can’t figure out standing with a fist in the air and a rainbow flag on their back is printed next to a body of text. I learn that people began to consider themselves “transgender”, meaning someone who was born a man felt

like they were actually a woman. Many didn't understand or approve of this, causing violence and debates. The person in this image was one of these people and the image depicts them protesting for their freedom. Eventually, the violence got to a point where these "transgender" people were in serious danger and the norms that society relied upon began to fracture. In order to preserve society and peace, the government took a drastic action. They separated the sexes, hoping that if they didn't know about the other, being "transgender" wouldn't be possible. It's been that way ever since. And so far, it seems to have worked because nobody knows we really have another option.

After flipping through a couple of chapters, I put the book down. My gaze is blank as I stare at the bathroom door, sitting on the cool tile floor. I'm confused. They say there are different genders but what's the difference between them other than our anatomy? Although I guess I'm a hypocrite for saying anatomy doesn't matter because I secretly grin at the thought of looking more like the men do. I'm not sure why though - is this how transgender people felt? Like their brain and their body were puzzle pieces that didn't fit together? Did they also cringe every time somebody called them a lady or a girl? I just wish I could see what it was like for a second to be one of the men... maybe then I would feel less out of place.

I don't go to second period like I'm supposed to since my absence won't matter soon enough anyways and instead, I walk home, check that my mom's car isn't home, and go inside. Heading straight to my room, I open the drawer with my favorite clothes - the comfortable ones. I rip my cardigan and jeans off, feeling vulnerable and even more disgusted with the image of my body in the mirror. I grab a black hoodie and a pair of baggy gray sweatpants that I wear at home to lounge around and pull them on. Looking in the mirror, I feel a weight lifted off my

shoulders. My feminine body is hidden under a bundle of fabric and that's how I like it best. I pull my hood over my head and tuck my hair under it, mimicking the messy short style of the boy I met's hair. I still don't look anything like him though. My cheekbones and full lips still linger as a constant reminder that I can't look like him, no matter how hard I try. And however much I try to escape my feeling of discomfort with my appearance, my distinct features will always be there. Always.

Frustrated, I rip the hood off from my head and force my fingers through my hair, pulling out strands in the process. On the nightstand next to me lies a pair of scissors. I frantically grab them before beginning to cut chunks of my hair out. The hair that my mother always calls "beautiful" falls in messy pieces onto my carpet. Once my hair is about ear length, I shakily put the scissors down and look at what I've done. Scraps of hair cover my shoulders, and I look like a child that got a hold of scissors and decided to give myself a haircut. In the mirror, I don't see the "girl" I saw this morning, but a mess, looking back at me. But at least I look better as a mess than I look put together.

I head out the door and begin my second trek of the day to the wall. I walk down the same empty street, see the same spray-painted sign, mount the same hill, and climb the same tree. But this time, instead of stopping at the same nook in the tree, I keep climbing. I find a long branch that extends almost all the way to the wall and begin to crawl on it. My hands shake as I tighten my grip around the sharp bark and I wince in pain as my knees scrape the branch I crawl on. Finally, I reach the end of the branch, which reaches just about 2 feet short of the top of the wall. Looking past the wall, I take a shaky breath and touch my cheekbones with my delicate fingers.

As I jump over the wall, I will leave everything behind. I'll leave behind my clothes, and my hair, and the words "pretty" and "beautiful" and "lady". I'll even leave behind my name. The name that didn't fit me at all. Actually, I think I want to go by something else now. Something cool and rough and fitting. Something that makes me feel like I belong. Something like Ash.

And finally, I promise myself that I'll come back some day for my mom, take one last breath as a girl, and jump towards a new life.