

Childhood

Childhood is Disney movies and juice boxes. It's getting picked up from school by Maddy's mom, Linda. It's doing homework with Maddy while eating goldfish until it's time to watch Wishbone. Childhood is the excitement of starting third grade with Mrs. Baker, mixed with the sadness of leaving second grade with Mrs. White. Childhood is camping out in the tent in Emma's backyard, laughing until the wee hours of the morning. It's having a Best Friends Club that you exclude Kim from because she's a little weird and annoying. Childhood is playing twelve-square during recess with fifth-grade buddies. It's the ecstasy of making it to A square with your buddy as she hands you the ball and says you can make the rules.

Childhood is having a crush on a boy and having no clue how to deal with it. It's the agony of pure, unadulterated infatuation without an end in sight. It's doodles on notebook paper with your initials surrounded by hearts. It's trying out your crush's last name to see if you two should get married. It's finding out some other kid you never knew existed now has a crush on you but refuses to talk to you. It's the mix of horror and wonder you feel as your body takes new shape. New curves. New angles. It's taking the longer bus route to school, so you and Alyssa can laugh and gossip longer. It's having an unrequited crush on Nick, who will never know you exist. You'll love him forever and this will be your heart's eternal agony. You'll grow up, get married to someone else, maybe an accountant named Tim, and have a few kids, but your heart will always burn deeply for Nick.

Childhood is forgetting about Nick and dating Kyle the following year. It's starting high school with a boyfriend, which is a Big Deal. Childhood is your first real boyfriend kissing you on the cheek, but you are afraid to kiss him on the lips. Childhood is sitting behind Ella in math class, and every time Mrs. O'Brian gives you time to work on homework, you finish three problems and spend the rest of the class chatting about Ella's newest love interest. Childhood is breaking up with Kyle before your one-year anniversary because he's taking this whole thing Way Too Seriously. Childhood is hating the popular kids on principle. Childhood is church youth retreats and ropes courses. It's testing your limits. It's

forging bonds with the other kids. It's working as a team and then returning to the safety and comfort of your cliques.

Childhood is wearing heart earrings for Valentine's Day. You have a new boyfriend now. His name is Chase, and he's the new kid. He's got shaggy hair and he's from California. It was love at first sight. Childhood is receiving a teddy bear from Chase and knowing that this is a declaration of his undying love. You sail through first period on a cloud of incandescent joy because you and Chase are meant to be.

Childhood is sitting in math during second period and hearing firecrackers in the hallway. It's trying to understand why there are firecrackers inside the building. Childhood is an ashen look that comes over Mrs. O'Brian's face as she shakily asks everyone to get under their desks as she locks the door and turns the lights out. Childhood is the sound of the firecrackers getting louder. You know it's not firecrackers by now but you're afraid if you name the thing it will make it real. Childhood is grabbing the teddy bear and your phone off your desk as you get on the floor to hide under it. You don't care that you look like a child clinging to a stuffed animal. You are a child.

Childhood is watching three kids filming the noise and panic on their phones. It's texting your mom that you love her. Childhood is the shattering noise of the window in the classroom door. It's the burnt, acrid scent of Sulphur. Everything is flashing and blurry and moving too fast and too slow at the same time and there are screams and pops and crashes. Childhood is closing your eyes and hugging your bear and praying out loud and knowing that you are going to die.

Childhood is not knowing how long your eyes were closed, but you hear voices. It's a SWAT team bursting into the room and asking if anyone is hurt, but you have forgotten how to speak. Childhood is the eerie gray dust that is illuminated in the beams of the police flashlights. They are telling everyone to get up. Childhood is looking over at Ella and telling her to get up and come with you. She doesn't move.

Childhood is the feeling that something isn't right but nothing is right and you don't know what to do to put together the pieces of what has happened and Ella isn't getting up and there's dark liquid on the floor around her and it can't be what you think it is and you're screaming her name because she didn't even finish telling you about making out with Tom and now she's not moving and you're still screaming and the SWAT team is dragging you out of the room as someone asks where Mrs. O'Brian is. There's no movement from behind her desk.

Childhood is running outside with the other kids across the football field to the parking lot of the pharmacy across the street. Your hands and feet are numb. Childhood is feeling a buzz in your pocket. It's a text from your mom, "Love you too honey. Have a good day!" And somehow this makes you unable to breathe and it feels like something is pressing on your chest and there are sirens and ambulances and police cars and helicopters and news crews.

Childhood is realizing someone is hugging you and her hot tears are soaking your shirt. It's Maddy. She's found you and she's saying something about how she's so glad you're alive, but her voice sounds far away, like she's in a tunnel. You still can't breathe. Childhood is not knowing how long it's been but when you look down at your phone you have four new text messages from your mom. "Oh my god." "Are you ok?!" "WHAT IS GOING ON" "WHERE ARE YOU??" Autopilot kicks in and you quickly type back, "I'm ok" but you're not ok and nothing's ok and people are dead and dying and you are scared but you don't know what to do and you still can't breathe, and you are too hot and too cold all at the same time and you realize you're still hugging the teddy bear from Chase.

Chase.

Childhood is the abject terror that comes with the realization that you don't know where your boyfriend is or whether he's still alive. You ask everyone around you. No one knows anything. They're all as useless as you. Maddy has disappeared. You can't breathe.

Childhood is a stranger wrapping a blanket around you and telling you to sit down and you are screaming to anyone who can hear to find Chase. Childhood is not knowing. Childhood is not understanding. Childhood is still clinging to the dusty teddy bear because it may be the only part of Chase that's left. You still can't breathe.

Childhood is the innate sense that you need your mom and if only she were here, she could wrap her arms around you and keep you safe from the world and her warm familiar scent could banish the darkness and make you feel warm inside before the tears have even dried. Childhood is being alone and scared and numb and covered in a strange dust and still clinging to your teddy bear and you still can't breathe.

Childhood is full of lists. A list is being compiled. You don't want to read it, but you can't ignore it. Ella is dead. Mrs. O'Brian is dead. Alyssa's brother, Chris, is dead. Nick has been taken away in an ambulance. Mrs. Baker's son, Alex, is dead. Maddy is alive. You don't know about Emma. Childhood is hoping and praying that this list is complete. But it's not. They are still counting.

Childhood is death. Childhood is loss and chaos. It is hurt. It is pain. Childhood is gone.

You still can't breathe.