

Grooves and Fractures

My world first split in two when my mom and dad stopped loving each other. I didn't understand *why*—I just knew that I still loved them both. Suddenly, I was living in two homes: weekdays with my mom, and every other weekend with my dad. Love was split between homes, and I learned to pack my bags—*and pieces of myself*—for every trip.

Then, one day my dad was missing. He made a choice and had to serve time. I knew why, but I didn't have words to explain my feelings.

Everything shifted again, quietly but completely. Weekends with him stopped, and in their place came an emptiness I didn't know how to explain. But, even in his absence, he found a way to reach me.

My grandma handed me a card he'd drawn—just for me. It had Spongebob drawn on the front. Simple and childlike, but it meant a lot. It reminded me that he still loved me, even when he couldn't be there in-person.

My grandparents stepped in, filling the space the best they could. They picked me up every other weekend, just like he used to. We baked cookies, solved puzzles, and created new routines—ones that made life feel steady again.

I was accustomed to those patterns. Patterns that began to create grooves I felt comfortable in.

Then my dad came back.

I remember the first time I spoke to him again. My mom handed me her phone and told me Dad was on the line. Hearing his mellow voice again was like stepping into an old room. It was familiar, but strange after so long.

Everything seemed to resume like it never stopped. Holidays, birthdays, and weekends were all split between them again. I was back to packing the baggage I carried before. Everything was back to our normal. *At least I thought.*

Then, my parents began dating other people. It was no longer just me and Mom or just me and Dad. It was me and Mom *and her boyfriend*, or me and Dad *and his girlfriend*. Everything felt different again.

Their houses were different, too. Mom liked all the lights off, so I followed her lead. To Dad, that was proof I was turning into a vampire. With Dad, money was

never a concern. And with Mom, it became my new normal. *We weren't poor*, but there was a definite difference between households.

I learned to shape myself around whoever I was with. I became the qualities they liked—the jester in two different courts.

That act didn't stop with just them, I carried it throughout my life—in school, with friends, with *everyone*.

I juggled the unspoken demands of others, slipping into mannerisms I thought they wanted most. At first, I barely noticed; it felt natural, even safe. I wasn't a leader—I was a reflection, distorted like a mirror maze.

I liked the music they liked, played the games they did, and chose school subjects they were interested in, because sameness meant safety.

It meant they could like me.

Disappointing people was my greatest fear, even strangers. Pleasing them became second nature to me. Somewhere along the way, I blurred the lines between who I was and who I pretended to be. I was creating my doppelgänger.

It felt like my world split all over again, but this time, inside me. Each piece belonged to someone different, and I wasn't sure which one was mine.

Becoming self-aware meant facing that fracture, gathering those pieces, and figuring out what belonged.

It started in middle school, that realization. Someone asked me something that stopped me cold. “Why do you change who you are with each new person?”

I didn’t have an answer. I hadn’t asked myself that in years.

But someone else calling me out—understanding it was an act, that made me question everything.

“Who am I?” was a mantra living rent-free in my head, it became as normal as my own heartbeat.

It wasn’t until high school, when I started counseling, that I really began looking inward. Session by session, I pulled back the layers I had built for everyone else.

That’s when I was diagnosed with ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder. The words felt heavy and light at the same time—like the last puzzle piece snapping into place. Suddenly, so many things made sense—why I worked so hard to fit into every space, why sameness felt like safety.

For the first time I didn’t just feel different—I felt understood.

With that understanding, I discovered the music I liked—not just what other people played. I figured out what subjects I wanted to study, even when no one cared. I noticed the little things I did just because they were *me*.

Piece by piece, I found what belonged to me—my own tastes, my own voice, my own identity.

And though I'm still putting myself together, I finally know I'm building someone real.