

The Dogwood

Last night, I watched my fingernails slowly turn yellow, growing into small buds and folding out into thin, pink petals. The fingers beneath fluttered as a thin coating of blotchy bark emerged, encasing my skin and sliding down toward my forearms.

Last night, I became a dogwood sapling. The night before that, I was a fern, and the night before that, an acorn. I don't know how to stop it.

"At this age, your body is changing in ways you might not understand." The school nurse typed slowly as she watched her desktop monitor, her eyes never blinking away from the screen. "It's perfectly normal," she droned. The speech was clearly rehearsed, and brought me no comfort.

I had seen my older brother grow into a man, as my parents called it. I don't remember ever seeing him become a plant. But I am a girl—at least, that's what I'm told. So maybe it is different for me.

On the bus home from school, I hide my bark beneath my backpack and watch my classmates' eyes. I pray they haven't noticed, but no one even looks up from their phones.

They tell me how normal this all is, but I look around me, and everyone still seems to be flesh. They are taller, maybe, with curves and deeper voices. But I am unrecognizable.

I hop off the bus and walk toward my house at the end of the street, ducking my head down. With each step, the sidewalk seems a foot further away, like a camera lens slowly zooming out. I am growing taller. I lift my arms and see thicker, darker bark. The dogwood's scabs sunk into long, jagged grooves snaking downwards. My petals are replaced by a collection of papery, wine-red leaves.

Reaching the threshold of my home, I run toward the bathroom mirror. I am a maple tree.

"Honey, you're getting older," she murmurs. "You've become a woman." My mom shares a loving glance with my father.

Her words drop stones into my stomach. She looks at my new form with pride. I don't get it. I feel slimy. Beneath the bark, my body is swallowed in maple sap.

Two nights pass, and I am still a maple. I thought it would be comforting, but I wish I were still changing. In a small Moleskine, I have been listing the types of trees I could become next. I hoped the next would be a redwood.

I am in math class when, finally, I cannot take it. "Don't you see what's happening to me?" I scream, leaves shaking. My classmates turn away from me and back to their worksheets. My bewildered teacher sends me to the guidance counselor for disrupting class.

"What kind of tree did you say?"

"Maple," I mutter.

She scribbles on her paper. The guidance office is warm and smells like coffee. Motivational posters adorn the walls.

She stares at her notes for a second before reclining. "It's perfectly normal to feel awkward at this time in your life," she starts. "Your body is changing, and-"

"This isn't normal! I'm a tree!" I rest my face in my hands, rubbing my temples.

"Ok, ok!" She hesitates. "Maybe you need to try and immerse yourself in a more natural environment. Do you think that would make you more comfortable?"

I pause. "Maybe."

"I think it's worth a try," she smiles.

That afternoon, I find a forest of maples. They are beautiful like this, standing together under the soft orange lens of autumn. I stand next to them all night, waiting for roots to grow.

Cicadas chirp, and I shake my tree-legs in frustration. I try to dig myself into the ground, hoping the soil will coax new roots.