

*I can't do this.* I was walking up to the podium, dragging my feet. Prolonging this moment that I knew would either be the best or worst moment of my life. The audience was full and \*11cheering. I shuffled behind the stand and looked at the crowd. Encouragement thundered from every direction, their cheers blending into a pounding chorus that matched my heartbeat. I grabbed the microphone to adjust it. Without warning, the room fell nearly silent. The rhythmic pounding that lingered in my ears reminded me of a poem by Edgar Allen Poe that I read in the eighth grade. The one where the main character hears the heartbeat of the dead man under the floorboards, and he worries the police can hear it too. I was that main character at that moment. The rows of people were the policemen, and my heartbeat steadily echoed through the room just like the dead man's. I cleared my throat and opened my mouth to speak, and tightened the grip of my shaking hand around the microphone. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "I can't do a frickin' speech."

Cries of reassurance rang from the watchers. They didn't know that was part of my speech. I smiled and straightened my back. "Success doesn't always look like a straight line." This speech meant more to me than anybody knew. It was my chance to share my story and inspire someone else. Every sentence I spoke carried pieces of the battles I had fought, and standing there to tell them was a victory in itself. Few people knew what it took for me to be there. The years of struggling I went through to stand there and give that speech.

When I was in the ninth grade, I tried to end my own life. And as unfortunate as it is to say, I got pretty close. I had such poor mental health. Everyday weighed me down like a sack of bricks was over my shoulder. I would do nothing but the bare minimum, and often even less than that. I remember my first therapy appointment. It was about a week after my suicide attempt. "So, tell me about yourself." Tell her about myself? What was there to even say? *Hi, Lady. I just tried to kill myself.* I looked at the floor, bouncing my leg. "You know this will only work if you talk to me, right?" She was staring at me. I didn't dare meet her gaze. I decided that day that I was never going to be fully honest with this woman. I didn't want her to know me. I

didn't want her to help me. The next six months were exactly the same. Therapy every week, more lies, more school grades tanking, and a girl sinking deeper into an abyss that's slowly killing her.

After six months of therapy, it happened again. I became overwhelmed entirely and attempted to take my life. Again. My family was distraught. They had hidden anything I could use to harm myself and I still found a way. When my therapist found out, she gave me a look I'll never forget. She looked at me like I betrayed her. "I can't believe you lied to me this whole time," She said. I could hear the pain in her voice. I stared at the floor, just like in our first meeting. But, this time it was different. I stared at the floor in shame. I was too ashamed to look her in the eye. I felt my cheeks burning and my palms sweating. I was guilty. That session was an unusually quiet one. The air felt heavier, as if my guilt were hanging around me like a dense cloud.

After this second attempt, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Receiving that diagnosis felt like my own hell. I thought it meant I would feel this terrible way forever. I cried myself to sleep for weeks afterwards. I had lost almost all hope. I was convinced it could only get worse, until I started taking medicine for it. The medicine gradually helped me change my mindset. It didn't work miracles, but it gave me the strength to take control of my own brain. It made me realize that I didn't have to feel this way. That everyday didn't have to be a constant struggle. That I wanted to live.

From that point on, and for the next three years, I started trying. Trying to do better for myself. I stopped lying in therapy, and became very close to my therapist. I started talking to people when things got hard for me. The only thing I still struggled with was school. I was still failing classes and had many previous courses I had failed. By the beginning of my senior year, I was told my chances of graduating were slim. The school counselor called me into her office one morning. I already knew it was about grades. She smiled a warm, yet distant smile. The kind of smile she gives before telling you bad news. The kind of smile I knew all too well. "So

Lizzy... we're thinking maybe you should go to an alternative school," she said, that smile still plastered on her face. My heart dropped. I looked at the floor. My leg started bouncing. I gripped my jeans in my fists and smiled. "I see.." I tried not to sound disappointed. She knew I was anyway. I left her office feeling defeated. When I got home, my dad set up an appointment at the alternative school.

I went to that school for the remainder of my senior year. I was drowning in school work still, but their system had made it easier to complete it. For six months I worked harder than I ever have before to get those classes finished. I sat with the assistant principal everyday to work on math with her. She was the only person in the building with the patience to teach it to me. The months of dedication paid off, and I was told I would graduate with my class. I felt as if a weight was lifted off my shoulders. Like I had unpacked the bricks from my sack, one by one.

Near the end of the year, the principal called me into her office. She told me to sit down and smiled at me. Her smile was genuine. It always was. I could tell she was about to ask me something. "I want you to give the speech at graduation" she chewed on the leg of her glasses while she talked. My eyes widened. I immediately told her no. There was no way I could write, let alone *give* a speech. Her smile didn't falter. She expected me to say that. "Take some time to think about it." and with that, I went back to class. A few days later I talked to the assistant principal in her office during one of our math sessions. "I just don't think I can do it." I confessed. "I think it's above my capabilities." I stared down at my hands that were fidgeting around in my lap. She looked at me and leaned in closer "Lizzy you're the only one who can do it," she said quietly. I realized she was right. I had an opportunity to speak to my classmates, and possibly resonate with them deeply. I had a chance to change someone's life, just as mine had. I had a chance to save someone. That day, I started working on my speech.

"Success doesn't always look like a straight line. Sometimes, it looks like transfer papers to an alternative school. And sometimes it looks like this moment right here" I looked into the audience with pride. The nervousness leaving my body with each word I spoke. I had

learned so much in those four years. I learned that healing from my issues was not something that could be handed to me, but rather something that I'd have to reach for myself. Something I'd have to work on. And now, it was all something I had to share. Something to encourage and inspire my peers. And as stated in my speech, "We made it. Not because our journeys were perfect, but because we kept going even when they weren't." I finished my speech with tears in my eyes. The crowd clapped and cheered from their seats. Family and friends in the audience shouted my name out. I turned around to face my vice principal, who looked just as emotional as I was. "Where do you want me to go to get back to my seat?" I had to speak up to be heard over the shouting. She looked at me with such pride in her expression. She pulled me into a hug. An embrace that was so desperately welcome. She leaned in toward my ear and said, "You can go anywhere you want to go," and I knew at that moment that she wasn't just talking about me going to my seat.