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# JUST SAY NO

MILLER KRESS

For my classmates, it was a day to escape from the monotony of seventh grade, a respite from standardized test prep, history projects, and math exams. They sat at cold, stiff desks- the kind that never offer any comfort, and require near-constant shifting and readjusting to avoid losing feeling in one's body. But that day my peers didn't move an inch. Only the sound of the overworked air conditioning, struggling to combat the Texan heat, broke the silence. Officer Miller was an enormous man with an even larger voice- a voice that commanded attention. He was the type of man who would be preaching emphatically about gun violence one moment and making fun of himself for sweating at room temperature the next. The perfect combination of sincerity and humor, for gaining both the respect and adoration of middle schoolers. Today, he had come to speak to the class about the dangers of drug and alcohol use- and he'd come with visual aids.

For almost two hours, not one of my classmates removed their wide, horrified eyes from Officer Miller as he narrated the shocking images on the screen- women just a shell of who they used to be, their faces hollowed out by years of meth use; cars wrapped around poles; needles sticking out of lifeless bodies. I sat with them, tucked as far back into the room as I could be, shifting nervously every few seconds, my leg tapping the floor as if keeping tempo. If you'd taken one look at me- donning a mouth full of braces, a head full of braids, and my new mint-colored converse shoes- you'd never guess how connected I felt to these nameless victims. Neither Officer Miller nor my peers knew that the week prior I had received a diagnosis that had knocked my stable, happy seventh grade existence to the ground. The events of the week before still ran on loop in my head- the jarring swiftness with which they pushed me to the top of a usually 6-month long pediatric rheumatology waiting list. The way my doctor's cold, freshly sanitized hands felt as they delicately traced the marks on my body as if reading braille. The sadness in her eyes and overuse of the word "sweetie" that contrasted with the blunt reality she was revealing to me- that the disease they had thought was just a dermatological condition was in fact an autoimmune disease ravaging my connective tissue. That it was called linear scleroderma. That I would need to start a course of chemotherapy and steroids the next day.

As Officer Miller finished up his presentation, he left us with this closing remark- "When it comes to drugs and alcohol, you always have a choice. Just say no". My mouth tasted of metal and my stomach ached, inescapable reminders that in that very moment I had drugs coursing through my body. Drugs so potent my mom had to wear gloves when administering my pills and even nurses cringed at the sight of the fluorescent yellow fluid as it wound its way down the IV and into my young body. I was a competitive gymnast at the time, putting in upwards of 8 hours of gym time a week, and coming home to fulfill my mother's doctrine of eating at least one "green vegetable" a day. I was also an avid rule-follower. A week earlier, Officer Miller's speech would have been a redundant (but welcome) waste of my time- a reminder to continue doing what I had always planned to do.

Soon, my fidgeting wasn't enough to keep the tears away. The harsh overhead lights became a lone spotlight- any second, it seemed, my secret would be exposed. I cried not because I was nauseated or scared for my future or embarrassed of the skin markings taking more of my body from me each day- although these things were certainly true. In that moment, I cried because I wanted so badly to "just say no". I wanted so badly to spare my body from the fates of the people on the screen. I hadn't shot up in an alleyway the way the woman being displayed in front of me had and yet here we were, sisters in the toxic chemicals flowing through our blood-streams.

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# MY QUEEN

CAMERON FISHER

