

Break the Silence

I wake up to another loud phone call from mom's room.

I yank my blanket over my head to cover my ears. I still hear it clearly, "I am only doing this for Maddie!"

It's still dark outside here in gloomy Seattle. I close my eyes and imagine for a moment that dad didn't leave us, and mom didn't lose her job. I imagine we were still living in sunny California, with all my friends. I feel the tears begin to build up. I hear the call end and footsteps heading towards my room. I quickly wiped them away and put a big smile on my face. I had to be strong for my mom.

The door opens, and there's mom, in old jeans and a faded T-shirt. Smiling as usual, her brown eyes looked like pools of honey and her long brown hair was tied back.

"Hey jellybean," she says. "I'm heading out. Are you ok to get ready by yourself?"

I forced another smile and nodded. I swing my legs over my bed and give mom a hug. I bury my face in her shirt and breathe in the smell of mint and little kids.

I drag myself out of bed and get ready for school. Today is Monday, the worst day of the week. It's the first day of the week, which means a whole entire week of worrying about assignments, and classes, and of course, *Rachel Kennedy*.

Once I'm ready, I hop onto my bike and start pedaling. Biking to school is the only time when I have no worries and it is pure five-minute of bliss. The wind rushes through my hair, a soft drizzle falling onto me.

When I arrive at school, I crouch down I pull my bike lock out of my backpack. As soon as I take my keys out, I feel something snatch it out of my hand roughly. Standing above me is the one and only, Rachel Kennedy.

Green eyes glistening with malice, her shiny, long black hair falling around her face. She's probably the prettiest girl in the school.

"Give it back Rachel." I say as calmly as I can, wishing I could scream at her and push her to the ground. I start breathing faster and I unclench and clench my fists. *Clench. Unclench. Clench. Unclench. Breathe.*

"These are your bike keys?" She says, lightly jiggling them in her fingers, smirking.

"Rachel, stop, I need that." I say a little louder. The bell rings and she jumps.

"Go fetch," she says quickly and throws my keys onto the side of the road.

I gasped and scrambled to the road, grabbed the keys, locked my bike, and ran into the school. I open the door to my homeroom and everyone's staring at me.

What a great way to start off the week. I think. And this is what I mean when I say something bad always happens on Monday. I headed to first period with Kaitlyn. Kaitlyn's my best friend.

“Are you going to the Halloween dance?” Kaitlyn asks me with excitement. I could tell she wanted to go. “Umm... I’ll think about it.” I said awkwardly. The real reason I don’t want to go is because I’m afraid if I wear a costume, people will make fun of me.

Uh oh. Will she go with other friends? Does she hate me now? Will she ever talk to me again?

The day passes in a flash.

Back home, I flop onto my bed and pull out my book. As usual, I get lost in it, and before I know it, it’s 7:00. I stroll to the kitchen to warm some ramen. Mom’s late and she hasn’t texted. I take a deep breath and sit down. The clock keeps ticking ... 7:20. 7:30. 8:00.

My breathing starts getting fast and I’m playing with my fingers like I always do when I’m nervous.

I call her a couple times and she doesn’t pick up. There’s nothing to do but wait.

Is she with someone? Did something terrible happen? Did she get in a car accident? Did she-

I hear the front door open. It’s already 8:45. I ran to mom, my eyes glistening with tears. “Mom!” I yell. “Why weren’t you picking up my calls?”

“Jellybean, I was staying a little late to help.”

A wave of guilt washes over me. For yelling at mom. *I’m the only one who does this. I’m the only one who yells at her own mom, who gets worried all the time.*

I try my best to blend in at school, but it feels like I’m just different, ever since the divorce. Kaitlyn’s my only friend but even she doesn’t know, I have anxiety. She’s normal. She doesn’t overthink stuff. She doesn’t cry for no reason. I’m the only one. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. Why does this happen to me?

Then out of nowhere, a thought hits me. It’s like a light bulb switched on in my brain. If I’m hiding everything, the way I get emotional easily, how I get so worried, then what if other people were hiding it? What if other people were suffering the same way as me?

I need to find out if other people are feeling this way. I think. I tossed and turned for a while, thinking about how I need to tell them that I feel this way, and get them to tell me that they feel like that too. Then I had an idea. I knew exactly how to do it. All I needed was courage.

On Halloween, I walk into school with a smile on my face, for once. Rachel Kennedy rolls her eyes at me, but that’s probably the worst thing to have happened all day.

“Maddie!” I hear a chirpy voice call. I turn around and see Kaitlyn running towards me.

“Have you decided if you’re coming to the Halloween dance?”

I grinned. “Oh, I’m coming,”

“Alright!” Kaitlyn says, pumping her fist in the air, a huge grin spreading across her face.

The school day seems to drag on forever, and when it finally ends, I rushed home on my bike, excited to find people who could relate to me. I got into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. It was time for the dance.

Mom drops me off. As I walk to the entrance, mom rolls down her window and yells, "Have fun jellybean!"

"I will!" I say, and run inside, hoping no one heard us. My heart starts beating faster and faster, and my grin starts to fade, the what-if questions taking over my mind again.

What if they laugh at me? What if they don't relate to me? What if I become the laughingstock of the school? What if I fall off the stage and break all my bones?

I will myself to shut off the negative thoughts. The what ifs always take over my brain, and I need to think positively and sound confident if I want this to work.

I had already talked to the principal about my plan, and she sided with me completely and was so happy I was doing this. That made me more confident.

Everyone stares at me as I walk inside with no costume. I'm the only one who is just wearing a T-shirt and jeans. I find Kaitlyn among the crowd looking at me with raised eyebrows. And then I find Rachel Kennedy, dressed as an angel, glaring at me. I look straight ahead as if there are no eyes on me, and I make my way towards the stage.

My palms are slippery as I grab the microphone off the stand.

"Uh..." I stutter.

I feel dizzy. I feel like throwing up. I feel like fainting. I feel like I should be doing anything but this right now. Why did I think this was a good idea again?

Deep breaths.

"Hi everybody, my name is Maddie Ettison, and I have anxiety."

Silence.

"I get worried about little things, and I get emotional easily. I also just feel sad all the time. I always try my best to blend in at school, but it never helps. It's like I wear a costume over myself. Like I'm dressing up as something completely different from me. But it doesn't help, because I still get made fun of here."

My eyes find Rachel's in the crowd, and her eyes widen, and she looks down.

"Every day, I go to bed at night and cry, thinking I'm the only one who feels this way. I go to bed asking myself why I'm like this."

Still silence. The whole entire gym is looking at me. Am I talking too fast?

"And then it clicked. If I'm hiding my true self, maybe everyone else is too. Maybe I'm not the only one. So, if you're in the crowd, and you feel anxious at times, please raise your hand."

No one moves. A lump forms in my throat until I see Rachel Kennedy raise her hand. Of all people. I'm so shocked I nearly fell over. Then Kaitlyn raises her hand, and a bunch of other people raise their hand. Eventually, almost every single person in the gym is raising their hand.

I'm so happy it's dizzying. I smiled widely and continued my speech.

“The reason I’m presenting this speech is because I’m saying this for the ones who can’t. After listening to this, they won’t doubt themselves anymore. You don’t need to wear a costume over yourself. You don’t need to hide who you are. I hid who I was, but after this, I won’t anymore. You don’t need to ‘be strong’ for anyone. I felt like I needed to do that for my mom, but she could handle herself.

“I felt something was wrong, so I spoke up. You need to show your voice. Thank you and goodnight.”

The crowd erupts as soon as the last letter leaves my lips. I felt my eyes begin to water, but they’re happy tears this time. “Go Maddie!” I hear someone yell. It’s Kaitlyn, and she’s standing next to my mom. Mom’s crying and smiling.

I ran off the stage into mom's open arms. I didn’t even realize I was crying too. It felt so good to let all of it out.

“I didn’t know you were going through this, Maddie,” her voice cracks. “You should have told me; I would have helped you. You didn’t have to be strong for me.”

“I know, I know.” We hugged in silence for what seemed like a long time. I hadn't even fully let go yet and Kaitlyn crushes me with a hug.

“Kaitlyn!” I yell, “I. Cant. Breathe.” She lets go and says, “Maddie, I could have been there for you if you had told me.” “I know. It was just hard to tell everyone.”

The night goes by, and many people come up to me and tell me how grateful they are for my speech. They thought too that they were the only ones going through anxiety.

I was so proud of myself that night.

“Maddie!” My mom yells.

I’m lying on my bed reading, and I jump up and run to mom, my heart racing.

Moms on her phone on the counter.

“You’re in the paper!”

What? I look at the screen, and in big bold letters the title of the article: **Maddie Ettison, age 12, speaks up about anxiety in middle schoolers.**

“No way!” I scream. We both jump up and down.

“And there's more. They want to interview you!” I scream again and we both jump up and down, holding hands.” My anxiety had calmed down, and I had way more friends now. Kaitlyn would always be my best friend, though.

That speech was worth it, to answer my what-ifs from before.

All I needed to do was show my voice.

DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY



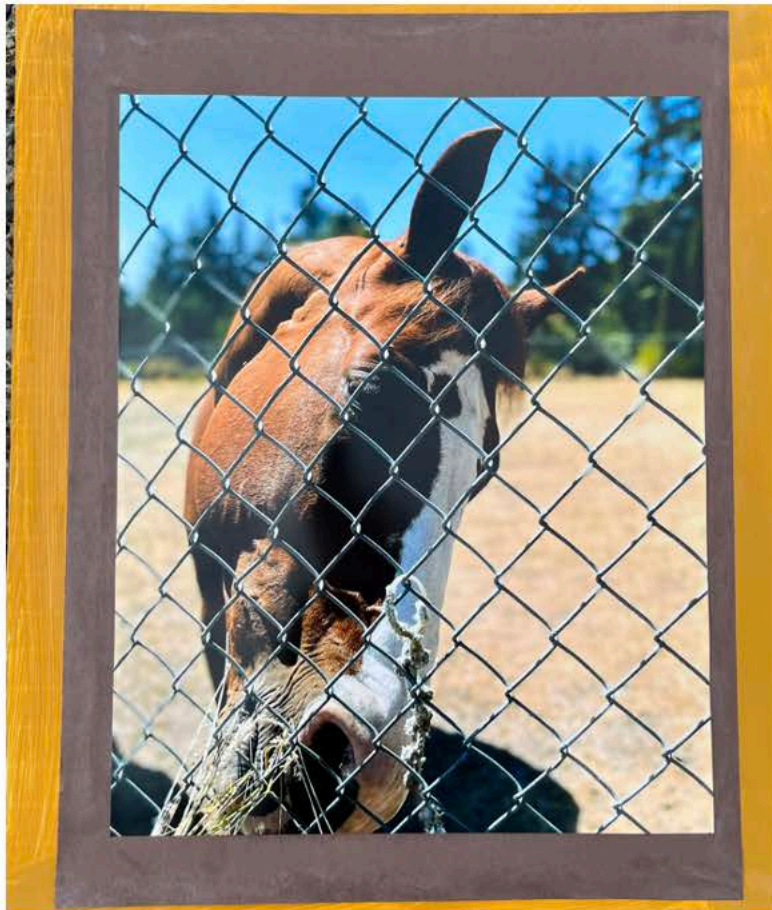
**Ganaraj Rangi Nachato (Classical
Bharatanatyam)**

[Ganaraj Rangi Nachato \(Classical Bharatanatyam\)](#) by Mudra Vishal [Machewad](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY



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