

"Stigma" by Dakota Empfield

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Conformity was a concept foreign to Robin's thinking...

So why did it bother him?

Inhale.

Breathe.

Exhale.

Five. Maroon shoes. Grey stall walls. Graffiti in no less than fifty hands. A
black toilet paper dispenser. White floor tiles.

Inhale.

Four. The toilet seat. The smooth wall. His hairy legs. Soft shirt.

Exhale.

Three. Buzzing lights. The door squeaking shut.

Everything...

Two. Urine. Soap.

Is...

One. A chicken sandwich.

Fine. Robin is okay. His breathing returns to a normal pace. The feeling of
sudden doom recedes.

One week as a sophomore and Mr. Russo had already broken him with
a single question. Typically a loud, overbearing man, Mr. Russo's suddenly soft
voice had added a terrifyingly empathetic tone as he said, "Why are you so
afraid to be wrong?"

NO! The question wasn't important, Robin thought, Focus on what's important.

Robin wasn't afraid to be wrong.

He shouldn't have freaked out that much.

He *will not* freak out during class again.

Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

Robin goes home and has a normal night.

He doesn't say anything.

He eats a microwave dinner before his parents return.

He waits for his parents until eleven, finishes his homework, turns out his light, and goes to sleep alone.

Beep

Nothingness.

Beep

Nothingness.

Beep

Nothingness.

Robin rolls over and turns off the alarm. **Nothing matters.**

Nicole would never love him. On sunny days, her soul blazes brighter than the summer day. On rainy days, her eyes bring the rainbow straight from heaven itself. On any day, she deserves better than someone too paralyzed to move.

He tries to drag himself to the bathroom.

Ken would always be an acquaintance at best. How can he be a friend when Robin always keeps him at arm's length? They never made a

real connection. Robin can't hope to understand Ken and whenever Ken tries to know Robin, Robin just hurts him.

A tingling feeling. Robin stares at a monster in the half light from the hallway. **Ugly. Empty. Unloveable. Unloving.** It's eyes show **no** intelligence, **no** connection to him. It was obviously incapable of human compassion.

The monster's eyes seem to suck the life from Robin. Its very presence angered him. He wanted to **punch it, chop it, kick it, hit it**, fight it until it was gone. He wanted **it to die**, to watch its final breaths fleeing its **oozing, hideous** body--the eyes no more empty than in life. He wanted it to leave him alone.

The green eyes watched on. A mocking form watches as he brushes his teeth. He starts a shower and undresses. Naked, he looks back to see the monstrosity in its brutish fullness. **Obese. Pestilent. Disgusting.**

Warmth. Cleanness. The dirtiness of life slips down the drain. The shower exists separate from worldly responsibilities. Finally, he can have a breath free from any monsters or friends or parents. Newness. Freedom. Happiness.

His phone buzzes. He begrudgingly leaves the shower as quickly as he can. **The green eyes meet his gaze.**

Nicole texted him, "Hey, Robin! I'll make this fast. Can't go to movies tonight. Jackson asked me to go on a date. Tell Ken, please."

He laughs. "Great. Now I can go to the movies with Ken and pretend I didn't just want to spend time with Nicole. Ken is just as good, though. Whatever. Nicole will never love me anyways."

He dresses quickly and leaves the monster in the mirror.

Brooklyn catches him at school. She chirps toward him with her typical attitude. He plasters on a happy face. She talks, he nods. Apparently, her guy friend came onto her and wanted to “start talking.” Only Brooklyn didn’t know how to tell her friend that she’s a lesbian. Robin tells her to just be honest **like you never have been** and reassure her friend that he’ll find someone else **unlike you**. She smiles and flits back to another group of friends.

Young love. He thinks back to his middle school crush on Maddie Jensen. Her rejection hurt **You weren’t good enough, anyways. You would’ve ruined her**, but he was entirely over it.

He hurries to American Lit. After fighting through a group of emos to get through the door, he sits down by Liam. They nod to each other and class begins.

Ms. Anniston asks five questions and Robin raises his hand to answer each of them. She calls on him three times and he answers correctly twice **You gave the wrong answer. Wrong. Wrong! WRONG!**

Robin follows the traffic from American Lit to History. Mr. Largo gave a longer lecture than usual. He asked if anyone had questions **and you did** but nobody raised their hand.

After History, Robin goes to lunch. He gets his usual lunch **too much food** and tries to find a seat. He sees Jackson **who you hate**, Ken **who you will hurt**, Nicole **who you can’t love**, and Liam **who will never love you**. Robin decides to sit alone **like you deserve**. Ken leaves his **REAL** friends to sit with Robin.

“Hey, Robin.”

“Hey.” **Get him away.**

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.” Get. AWAY!

“That’s cool... You doing okay?”

"I'm **fine...** How are you?"

"Well, I was eating next to Ethan, but he spilled literally his entire carton of milk on his tray all over his sandwich."

Robin laughs **despite himself**.

Ken continues, "The weirdest part is that he's lactose intolerant to begin with."

Robin laughs loudly and Ken joins in the chorus.

"Why did he even have the milk to begin with?" Robin gasps.

"None of us could figure it out, even Ethan!"

They laugh harder together.

Robin thinks to himself, *how funny!* **Get him away. You're going to hurt him.** *Maybe, but today I laughed with him and that made his life better even for a little while.*

Robin looks back at Kennedy who is suddenly watching him silently.

Stupid. Embarrassed, Robin asks, "What?"

"Are you okay, man?"

"Yes." Get him away.

"You just don't seem so great today. I'm just worried. Maybe you should see someone."

"NO! I mean, maybe, I've thought about it. I think I might be depressed."

"God damn. I mean, I'm here for you if you, like, need anything."

"No, it's fine. I just... please don't tell anybody?"

"Of course not. Why, though?"

"It's just embarrassing."

"Why?"

"Because"

"Because why?"

“Because I don’t want people to think I’m a freak, okay?”

The words hung in the air of the crowded cafeteria.

“Okay. I won’t.”

Ken walks away, but Robin sits with his sudden revelation.

Conformity had been a concept foreign to Robin’s thinking, but now he understood it fully.