

The Real Me

To me, shelter is not found under the roof of my home. It's not found in my family, nor in the constant yelling. Instead, my true shelter is found within the walls of my school, though it is not the brick walls or the physical building that protects me. My real shelter is built from the warmth of the people inside, the moments of care, and the safe memories we create together. My school is not a place of hostility, but a space where I can escape and be myself. When I walk through the school doors each morning, it feels like crossing an invisible border into a completely different country. The heavy weight on my shoulders suddenly lifts. It is a place where I can completely separate from the girl who cries every night at home. At school, I don't have to walk on eggshells or brace myself for the next sudden burst of anger. Here, my voice actually matters. When a teacher asks how my day is going, they look me in the eye and genuinely listen to the answer. When my friends wave at me from down the hall, their smiles act like a shield, pushing away the bad memories from the night before. These small, everyday interactions might seem ordinary to anyone else, but to me, they are life-saving. That is what my shelter looks like, a quiet conversation, a shared laugh at the lunch table, or a friend offering half their snack just to make me smile. Because of this, my school is not a place of dread, stress, or academic pressure. It is a sacred space where I can escape the chaos and finally figure out who I actually am. In the classroom, I am allowed to be curious, to laugh out loud, and to speak up without fear of starting an argument. I can be clumsy, I can make mistakes, and I can just be a normal kid. The contrast between my two worlds is sharp, but it has taught me a lesson about life. I have learned that a true home isn't something you are automatically given by birth or defined by a legal address. True shelter is something you discover, and sometimes, it is something you have to build for yourself out of the kindness of people who start out as strangers. The girl who sits at the kitchen table at home, wishing she could disappear, is not the real me. The real me is the girl who stands in the school hallway, surrounded by friends, laughing until her stomach hurts. School gave me the room to breathe, the safety to grow, and the shelter I desperately needed to survive. However, this sanctuary is bound by time, and a quiet reluctance begins to settle over me as the afternoon wanes. Every day, I watch the clock face with an impending sense of doom, counting down the minutes to the final 3:16 bell. While my classmates pack their bags with excitement, eager to rush out into their afternoons, that sharp ringing sound signals a temporary exile for me. It is the moment my shield must be lowered. Yet, as I walk back out through those doors, I realize the shelter hasn't truly left me. The joy of my academic wins and the warmth of my friends stay locked inside me, protecting me through the night until the morning doors open once again.