

Lately I've been thinking a lot about what safety means, and the more I sit and think on it, the more I realize that the safest places in my life have almost never been physical places. They aren't rooms with doors or houses with locks or any other kind of structure that can be measured or touched. Instead, they're moments, people, and feelings that arrive quietly, almost shyly really, like they already know I need them before I do. It really is strange how I want that kind of safety, the emotional kind, the kind that makes my chest loosen and thoughts soften when I'm around the people and things I know can help. I don't think I'm running from anything; it's more like I'm searching for places where I don't have to pretend, places where I can be unapologetically myself. There are people that make me feel that way, even if they don't know it. It's in the way they listen without rushing me, or the way they don't make me feel like I'm being over dramatic for having emotions that run deeper than I care to explain. Some people just carry a kind of gentleness with them, not a weakness, but a softness that feels like sunlight through a window on a cold morning. Not bright enough to blind me, but just warm enough to remind me I'm not alone. I think about those moments a lot, the ones that stay with me long after they're over. The late night conversations where everything feels so honest in a way that daylight would never allow. The laughter that breaks tension I didn't even realize I was carrying with me. The silence that feels warm instead of awkward, the kind where I don't feel the need to fill it, and I can just sit and enjoy it, because the presence alone is enough. Those moments feel like shelter, not the kind you walk into, but the kind that wraps around you from the inside out, like a warm fuzzy blanket in your soul, it's just so comforting. They remind me of what belonging feels like, what it means to be seen without having to explain every corner of myself. They remind me that I'm not too much, not invisible, not impossible to understand. They remind me that connection doesn't have to be loud or dramatic or even physically intimate; sometimes it's just someone noticing that I'm standing in the corner of the group quietly and caring enough to ask me why.

But there's a different kind of shelter I'm learning to build, the one inside of myself. It's slower, harder, and messier, but it's mine and mine alone. I used to think safety was something other people gave me, something I had to find outside of myself. And yes, people matter deeply, but I'm starting to understand that I can't rely on others to hold my hand all the time. I'm learning to trust my own voice, even when it shakes and I get self conscious, that's part of learning to build myself up into a better more confident person. I'm learning to let myself feel things fully instead of pushing them away because the feelings are inconvenient or overwhelming. I'm learning to stop apologizing for existing, for taking up space, for having a heart that feels everything so intensely compared to other teenagers my age, I've learned to stop apologizing for being human. Some days I feel strong and grounded, like I'm finally building something solid inside of myself. Other days I feel like I'm made of glass, transparent, fragile, way too easy to break. But even on those bad down days, I'm trying, and maybe, just maybe I'm enough. I think belonging is a combination of all these things: the people who see me for me, the moments that soften me, and the strength I'm slowly learning to carry. It's not one thing, not one place, not even constant. It's something that grows in layers, something that shifts and expands as I do.

Sometimes I imagine my inner world like a house I'm slowly building. Not a perfect one, not the kind with straight lines and flawless walls, but one that feels lived in and warm. A place where I

can sit with myself without feeling judged, A place where my emotions aren't "too much", they're just part of the furniture. A place where I can rest. And maybe that's the point, maybe shelter isn't supposed to be "perfect"; maybe it's just supposed to be a safe space for people to be able to be themselves and be surrounded by walls so that they aren't affected negatively by the storm on the outside. I think about the people who've made me feel safe, even just for a moment. The ones who didn't do anything to try to fix me or cheer me up, they just stayed there for me. The ones who didn't make me feel like I needed to earn their kindness, they just gave it up. I don't think that they realize how much that matters, and how much it stayed with me. There is something so wonderful about the idea that safety can come from something as simple as being seen. Not in a dramatic spotlight kinda way, but in a quiet, steady way, the kind of seeing that feels like someone saying, "You don't have to hide, I'm here for you I promise."

I want to be that kind of shelter for others too, not someone who fixes things for people, but the person that makes the world feel less heavy, to be a safe place for people in need. I want to be someone to someone, someone who listens, who notices, who doesn't make the person feel like they have to shrink, but rather help them grow. But I also want to be that for myself. I want to be the person I can come home to. I'm learning slowly but surely that belonging isn't something I have to chase; it's just something I can create. It's in the choices I make, and honestly, to be gentle with myself, to let myself feel, to allow myself to rest. It's in the way I talk to myself when no one else is around. It's in the way I allow myself to exist without constantly trying to prove something and just allowing myself to go on living without questioning everything about myself and feeling bad about myself. A lot of the time I wonder what my future self will think when she looks back at this version of me, the one who's still figuring things out, still learning how to build her own shelter. I hope she's proud. She sees how hard I'm trying, trying my best to stay alive and keep going, trying not to relapse and to grow as a person no matter how bad it gets. I hope she understands that even on the days I feel lost, I'm still moving forward. Maybe that's what growth really is. It's not big, dramatic changes, but small quiet ones. The kind that happens slowly, almost invisible, until one day I realize I'm stronger than I think. Softer, too, but in a weird way that feels like strength, not weakness.

I don't know exactly where I'm going, but I know what I want. I want a life where I feel safe, a life where I feel seen and heard, a life where I belong, and not because I fit perfectly, but because I'm allowed to be myself. And maybe that's enough for now. Maybe that's the beginning of everything. None of it has walls, but it all feels like home.