

# CAN JESUS SAVE US NOW?

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## I SAW THE LIGHT

*I Saw the Light* is a sculptural installation that poses the question, "What drives us?" Since a very young age, I have attended a Catholic school and been made aware of the idea of God. I first began to sincerely ponder the existence of a higher power in elementary school; I considered how I felt about the matter, and if I really believed what was being taught to me by teachers, nuns, and priests alike. Learning that other religions existed outside of my own made my search for "Truth" all the more confusing. For years, I swallowed my confusion and curiosity to, instead, ingest my superior's words as truth. What they said seemed right and I was told not to question God. Everything happens for a reason; everything is a part of God's plan. This ideal did not settle with me quite properly when I thought about all of the innocent and helpless children dying of famine and starvation in developing countries, or when I wondered why the best and most admirable people in my life seemed to struggle the most. If we are all stuck to a particular fate, and things happen as they are supposed to, then what is the point in trying to be a good person or improve the world somehow? People die when they are supposed to die; perhaps because God wants them to or because somehow they choose it. They manifest it.

I am interested in the concept of Locus of Control. This idea is usually divided into two categories: internal and external. If a person has an internal locus of control, that person attributes success to his or her own efforts and abilities. A person with an external locus of control attributes his or her success to luck or fate. Reading about this makes me consider what kind of person I am and how I conduct myself. When I previously experienced trauma in my own life, I was prone to letting it bog me down. I felt like there was nothing I could do and I always reacted and never thought first. Now, reevaluating bad occurrences in my life, I realize I have the power to change the way I feel simply by shifting my perspective, regardless of a god or not. Whether a supreme being endows me the right to live or if I just came into existence much more unintentionally, I see that either way, my life matters and has meaning. Now, I try less to let trivial matters consume me and when I am down, I can still come back from whatever brought me to that low place. I am less afraid of life, and even less of death. I am content to live in the unknown, because I feel like that *is* life.

This artwork is intended to be an entity sitting up on a bed, as if awaking from a bad dream and looking to the light (which represents some higher power or the afterlife); unfortunately, their view is blocked by a mirror. In a mirror, one can look at their appearance; the mirror is symbolic here because it shows that bodies are fleeting and mortal. The absence of a tangible body also connects to the idea of mortality and alludes to the existence most humans hope to have in an afterlife.

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*In this paper, I investigate the seemingly impenetrable question: what drives us? I begin my exploration by recalling one of my most recent notable memories where I was in my freshman theology classroom; this encounter was one of the first moments in which I truly questioned my belief system that I previously had firmly and unwaveringly followed. I then progress through the essay in recollection of different moments of trauma in my life and how I successfully moved on to make the best out of these situations, or contrarily, wallowed in self-pity, adamant that I would never see the light again. While at certain moments presently I still feel profound sadness, I now am more adept to coping and understanding that I have the choice to choose how I act and react to things that happen, whether these events are my own manifestations or random and inexplicable phenomenon. The questions of who we are and how we got here often feel mind-boggling and incomprehensible to my teenage mortal mind, and yet, even if I will never be at peace with specific answers, at least I can be okay in knowing my life can and should be enjoyed. Ultimately, I know that if I am not enjoying life, then I am not living.*

My head is nudged down into my folded arm resting on the desk, so that my nose fits into its crevice like a puzzle piece. My sweater is soft, and though the cold air gives the cotton a temporary chill at first touch, the deeper I bury my face, the more I can feel its underlying warmth. More importantly, it protects my face from my hard plastic desk. Hard plastic desk that feels like it has been sitting in the freezer since last night. My hands mirror the temperature and feeling of the desk. I only get like this when I am anxious. My best friend or, who for now is not my best friend because we are in a fight, sits in front of me. Some emotion, or many, are stirring inside of me. I figure there are so many warring emotions trembling inside of my brain that they cancel each other out in a way, which reminds me of the use of PEMDAS in Math. I have never liked math class, especially in fourth grade when Ms. Duicka would make me practice my times tables all of recess while all of the other kids got to run around. My most practiced multiplication problem was simple: seven times eight, and yet I always answered it as fifty-four. But finally, one day, *fifty-six*. Fifty-six feels forever etched into my mind. For one, I do appreciate math for being definitive and fixed in its answers; not up for interpretation. Ironically, I am currently in theology class, the class that bodes the exact opposite traits of any math problem I have encountered. *Where was I again? Where am I?* I have to stop. *Stop thinking about that, Mali; what is the teacher saying?* I will leave my math thoughts on the shelf for now. *My stomach is turning*; I have a lot on my mind.

I peer my eyes to the white board which transcribes today's daily journal which asks, "How do we know God loves us?" *How do we know God loves us?* I could ask that same question, I think to myself. I have already wasted seven out of ten of the minutes allotted to journal by daydreaming and thinking about Ms. Duicka's torturous tactics in grade four, so I spend my remaining three answering the prompt as quickly and concisely as possible. Instead of answering what I think, I answer what I am told. "We know God loves us because he sent down his only son, Jesus Christ, to die for us to save us from our sins." I hear this daily, nod my head, and do not think to much of it, but upon writing this sentence down I cannot read it twice because of how absurd it sounds even when I have attended Catholic school all of my life. My teacher, Ms. Sherman, one of the kindest and faithful people I have ever met, energetically asks a relatively lethargic class to share our replies. I raise my hand because I love class participation, and my temporarily not-best friend best friend raises hers to raise some eyebrows. "Yes," my teacher's soft voice speaks, "Malachi, then Jade." I, Malachi, speak first and reply with the aforementioned godly response. My teacher nods and smiles and then Jade, my *whatever* for the moment, continues, "Well, I do not believe that God is real, so..." My teacher's head tilts as she squints her eyes. *Oh, Jade*. I roll my eyes as a few hands of some girls in my class dart up, and I am thoroughly unamused. *Here we go again*. My teacher calls on a girl who is named after a flower, though we all might as well call her Mother Mary. She is another one of the dozens of girls in my grade that place biblical quotes in her Instagram biography, yet unlike the rest who seem to put up this "I Am Third" front, she probably knows those verses like the back of her hand from studying them so intensely. I just wonder what her super-catholic retort will be this time. I can hear the anger in her voice as she snaps back, "Of course God is real Jade! How can you-" I stop listening at this point. Back to daydreaming it is, for me. Another girl's voice interrupts my thoughts after more time passes. This girl says, "Well there was this one time that I was having a really bad day and I went to Chick-Fil-A and my chicken in my sandwich was in the shape of a heart! It's hard for me to explain but I just felt like I felt God's love in that moment, and what could explain the fact that my chicken was just in the shape of a heart like

that? It was crazy.” *I am sorry, what? I think the craziest thing in this situation is you.* This claim was a reach if I had ever heard one, and though my facial expressions may have given me away, I was trying my best to keep my judgment to myself. While others chuckled and exchanged a few “Wows” and “Awesomes” I thought about how this story was a prime example of religious people misperceiving coincidence. Are these realizations we should hold to be true because they help us sleep at night? Are we so doubtful in ourselves that we believe we cannot live and work successfully alone without believing in some higher power, however unfounded our beliefs be? Is this faith? These kinds of things do not reassure my faith, but instead make me question it further. How can one person create such an unrelated connection? Why? *If that is faith, I do not want it.* The conclusions in this girl’s story that she is sharing with me and the rest of my classmates seem incredibly absurd to me, and yet all of the other girls around me are actually accepting this girl’s testimony as truth. Is how I am feeling right now how the non-religious feel often?

For sixteen years I have been told to say nightly prayers, to kneel in mass until my knees are sore, to confess my sins with no definite distinction of what a “sin” is or is not, to never think twice about my sexuality, to eat a piece of bread fully believing it is the flesh of a man who lived nearly two-thousand years ago, that this man was the son of God but also God, that I should refer to him as *Him*, that he was born of a teenage virgin, and that virginity is virtuous. Previously, when I had heard stories of how other religions came about (especially Mormonism because my cousins belong to LDS), I felt like they were more than “out there.” I always wondered how people could hold such overtly fictional stories to be true until I looked at the one I had accepted all of my life. It was never my choice whether or whether not I wanted to be a Catholic or attend Catholic schooling, so it was something that I just grew up thinking the things I was told were the norm. We believed words preached from gospel sermons, we participated in the sacraments; we did it all because we didn’t know any better, but then when one *did* know better as they grew older, often they kept doing it out of tradition. In elementary school, I did not ask questions. In middle school, I felt like I really “knew” God--mainly because my teachers told me I *should* be feeling his presence in my life-- and I felt like praying made a real difference in my life. When I entered high school, with an onset of teen angst, I vowed I would start believing in myself first. As I made the shift from habitually nodding my head to instead opening my mouth to ask questions, I started examining my own religion from an almost unbiased point of view. I started finding holes in bible verses and church teachings that I previously would have skipped over. One of the biggest issues that I encountered was upon questioning aspects of my predetermined faith, I would then ask priests, religion teachers at my school, and my faithfully devout peers all of the same questions, and yet they would reply with incredibly divergent answers. I kept thinking, how am I supposed to fully believe in a religion when I do not know how much of it I should fully believe? Where was the line between metaphor vs reality? Oh, so the entire Christian creation story, the beginning of the bible itself, is fictional? It is all one big metaphor, but then miracle stories of God’s son, Jesus, walking on water, turning water into wine, and restoring sight to the blind should be taken as literal? Or are these supposed literal events still up to interpretation? This made my search for truth all the more confusing.

#### FAILING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ASSIMILATION

מַלְאָכִי. My parents named me to be *someone*. From Hebrew, pronounced MAL-ə-kiel, meaning “my messenger” or “my angel,” spelled Malachi.

When I introduce myself to people for the first time, still, they either begin to tell my anecdotes about their family member or friend of a friend who also happens to coincidentally share my name, or take a moment to marvel in its exoticism. *Some things never change, I guess.* In meeting the small and select group of strangers who had heard my name before and recognized it as traditionally masculine name, my younger self felt insecure because I did not want to have a boy's name. It was especially annoying when all of my other friends had names like Sophia, or Grace, or Emily, or even just a name that did not furrow any eyebrows upon its enunciation. Though, I will admit that this name began to instill a slight superiority complex in me at seven or eight, as it was one of my fondest memories to read the bible at school while a classmate poked or nudged me as we flipped past the book of Malachi. I felt special. No one else in my class had a book in the bible named after them after all.

My mother grew up telling me I truly was her messenger from God, which was funny because she was not all that religious. And the older I got, the worse I felt having the name "Malachi" as I began to move away from organized religion. At this point, I was starting to resent the fact that I went to a Catholic school that mandated weekly mass attendance and morning prayer. I thought about how people perceived my family or me because of my name. *"We are really not fanatically religious,"* I wanted to assure every substitute teacher who read my name aloud during roll call, and every superior who I wanted to make a good impression on. *See me for me, not my name, please!* Luckily, I was able to more often introduce myself by my nickname "Mali" that I ironically also despised. *Yes, my name is Mali, but not after the country, and actually, my name is Malachi, but not because my parents want me to be the next greatest prophet. It is also pronounced "Mal-ee," not "Maui" or "Molly."* Honestly, just forget it. So by sophomore year, when meeting strangers, it was always Malachi, and never Mali. However ironic it may have been I started to think maybe my name was cool after all. Even if it was because all other nicknames seemed worse. After all, those with rare names cannot just end up becoming another forgotten face working a 9-5 desk job. That was another thing my mom told me. I knew I was special and that I mattered from a young age. So that year, tenth grade, I started to accept this part of myself. I started to accept my identity, but simultaneously, began to reject my appearance entirely. My parents raised me to feel loved and cherished, and my mother especially, was always there to console me and reassure me in moments I felt different from other kids my age. I felt loved, I felt cherished, so what happened?

I cannot pinpoint exactly when I first began to dislike myself, or what first caused it all, but I believe it began around age five. Pre-K. I can only imagine how disheartening it would be to tell your child that they are beautiful and loved every day before school, only to wait for them to come home from school and tell you how all of the kids said the exact opposite.

By age five, I was a chubby, front-toothless wannabe ballerina who rocked frizzy, messy curly hair and found comfort in a McDonald's happy meal. At this time, I was confident, or at least, I was not super aware of my appearance so none of these things really mattered to me. Who cared if I got a hamburger at Mickey D's after ballet practice even if it made my leotard a little more than snug? Then, my self-esteem took a one-eighty.

Her name was simple: Bella. It probably still is, but I wish she no longer existed, or at least not in my memory. Prior to this encounter, I had never thought about what I ate or how I looked too much. If my Mom said I was beautiful, I believed it, and because she did, I really was. But when Bella looked at me with wide, menacing eyes before spitting out that I "should try a diet," or when she followed by suggesting the consumption of paper for weight loss because

her “mother always did that,” neither the daily notes Mom left for me in my lunch nor all the fairy barbies in the world could fill the gaping void Bella had just created in me.

### LIFE IS DIFFICULT, DIFFICULT, LEMON DIFFICULT

When I look back at my life moving forward from that point, I can only seem to remember traumatic or upsetting things that happened to me. One researcher named Christa McIntyre at UC Irvine suggests that "Emotionally neutral events generally are not stored as long-term memories, while on the other hand, emotionally arousing events tend to be well-remembered after a single experience because they activate the amygdala." This theory was tested in a study of rats; McIntyre and her colleagues put rats in a bright compartment with access to a dark one. Rats are biologically nocturnal and prefer the dark. As they went into the dark compartment, they were shocked mildly on the feet in what was considered *not* to be a strong emotional experience. When put in the light again, these rats headed for the dark. Another group of rats had their amygdala chemically stimulated as they got the foot shock. These rats, when placed in the light again, chose not to go back to the dark -- they remembered the foot shock. These rats also had more Arc protein in the hippocampus. "In a separate experiment, we chemically inactivated the amygdala in rats very soon after they received a strong foot-shock," McIntyre said. "We found the increase in Arc was reduced and these rats showed poor memory for the foot shock despite its high intensity. This also shows that the amygdala is involved in forming a long-term memory." The results of the study concluded that emotionally arousing events triggered activity in the amygdala, an almond-shaped part of the brain known to be involved in emotional learning and memory and then trigger production of a protein called Arc in neurons in the hippocampus, a brain region involved in processing long-term memory. Thus, traumatic events are often stored in long-term memory, making us more easily able to recall bad memories over neutral ones.

In this way, I guess after I first became aware that I was different, or at least that I was viewed differently, I became a rat in an experiment that was my life. Exposing myself and being vulnerable meant I would get shocked. So I stopped opening up. I stopped drawing attention to myself. I did not feel very special anymore - just unwanted. Was I choosing this? I hope I was not. It kind of just happened. It felt like these kinds of things just kind of happened.

When my parents decided to divorce, these feelings of rejection only seemed to intensify. There were already so many problems stirring that I feared adding to the mix. I made myself useful and became background noise. For much of this time, I would say I did not feel incredibly engaged in my life. The four years it took to finalize my parents' separation seem like an eternity and the blink of an eye all at once. I associate feelings of sureness and confidence with these four years though it was a time period of total confusion. I suppose this is because I was going through the motions. I can say I felt like a bystander in my own life. I have memories that I think happened around this time, but I am still unsure, but every emotion I felt at that time seems to be able to be muddled into one big knot in my stomach.

My memories of the year prior, still some of my fondest, are composed of eating string cheese with my grandmother in our old strawberry garden back home, the smell of her No. 5 Chanel perfume still clear as day, and the image of my mom and dad's gleaming smiles paired with the reflection of the water on each of their sunglasses on a cloudless afternoon at the lake. After *Bella*, I only seemed to remember the painful feelings I had associated with situations. There was no more perfume, no more dewy grass on my toes, no more sun streaming through the gaps of my fingers, but instead the smell of cigarettes that Chanel No. 5 masked, the icky, sticky

humidity in the air that I could slice through, and the burning feeling that accompanied lying on the leather seats of our boat as the sun stared down at us.

### THE DEVIL DONNS GAP TEETH AND BRACES

Transferring schools in first grade was supposed to be a fresh start, but it only seemed to open a new door to insecurity. Being the new kid is hard; I learned that after spending weeks sitting alone at the lunch table and coming home only to tell my Mom things seemed worse, if anything, at this new place. At least at my old school, people bothered to acknowledge my existence. When I prayed at night, I prayed that God would make people like me. This request seemed fruitless for some time, until one day, a girl with long, pulled-back curly hair, tan skin, and a gap in between her two front teeth sat down in front of me. I had a feeling we were going to be friends.

I introduced myself and asked her what her name was. “Jade” she replied between sips of chocolate milk, “Kyle.” My middle name was Jade! Excitedly I asked, “Were you named after the character in Jackie Chan too?!” “I don’t really know,” she said looking up at the ceiling. I kept thinking that maybe this really was God’s work; it felt eerie that we shared a name. What were the odds?

I enjoyed the social setting at school for the most-part. Though I got into childish arguments with friends, I did feel like I had belonged. Though, my teachers, the notorious and aforementioned Ms. Duicka, for one, was one of the reasons that pushed me over the edge, resulting in me begging and pleading for my mother to send me anywhere else.

When I moved schools again in grade four, I was excited and eager to have a fresh start. I could be anyone. Mostly though, I wanted to be Malachi. But maybe just a cooler version. At this newer new school, it was mainly smooth sailing socially and academically, and I had almost forgotten about the Bella incident. Then, fifth grade hit. While the year in general seems a blur, I can vividly recall the exact moment walking up the beige steps in the auditorium while fighting over a game of foursquare with one of my classmates. *Bernardo*. Tall, lanky, and surprisingly bold. His words shattered my heart as he barked at me through his braced teeth, “Shut up, *Fat Girl*.”

I could not be big, and I could *not* be Fat Girl. Bernardo said these words so casually, as if it was understood that I was the fat girl at school. If he could say this to my face, I only could imagine what other kids said behind my back. Before this, I was oblivious to the notion that I was still noticeably big. This comment led me to type “how to get skinny” into the google browser. I knew there was something to be done, this was some sickness to cure. It plagued my mind.

After this point, the lines between good and bad days are blurred. I began to obsess compulsively about what I was eating, how much I was eating, and how I looked. Then for a while, since no one had seemed to care much about my appearance, I stopped caring too. It seemed like I was just waiting for the next person or thing to tear me down.

### WORDS LIKE GROWINGLY LARGE KNIVES

Grade nine. I liked a boy and thought maybe he liked me too. Then he told me best friend at the time that I would be prettier if I “lost a couple pounds.” What I ended up losing was my appetite, for a whole week. At this point, I should have been desensitized to the insults, but this comment particularly felt like salt thrown on my unknowingly gaping wound. After this

comment, I vowed to make a change, so I did. I ended up losing thirty pounds. Still after, I was not happy.

My sophomore year 2017 was a year of asking myself why God hated me. At fifteen, I had fallen into one of the deepest depressions of my life. I wanted to crawl out of my skin. No matter how much weight I lost, I did not feel happy, nor pretty, nor skinny. Seeing the numbers decrease on the scale appeased me temporarily, but the cycle continued. I was hungry and sad. I could not juggle the stress of school with the constant feeling of failure because of my hunger. If I ate breakfast, it automatically meant the day would be awful. I was fighting a losing battle between my brain and body. Eventually, I cracked under the pressure. It was at this point that I began turning to my long-time abandoned old friend, God.

As I was battling with the concept of God's realness or if we were truly all alone in this world, I recalled my father, a once hopeless alcoholic, telling me that he believed in God because God gave him the power to do things and make changes in his life that he was not emotionally strong enough to do for himself alone. I tried to mimic his actions in hopes that I would experience the same result, so I began praying. My prayers always started with, "I am sorry God, I know that I have ignored you for so long but..." I wanted and needed someone to save me. God seemed like my best option. I then thought about the most common conversion stories I hear, where the desire to turn to God comes at a time when there seems to be no better choice. At their lowest points, people turn to God to "do" the saving. But is it not true that what goes down must also then come up?

I felt this realization to be especially true during the Spring of 2017. With each morning, I felt my sanity diminishing more and more. Each day I would wake up and try to mentally prepare myself for the day ahead. Every hour consisted of a warring argument in my head about if I should or should not eat, how much I had eaten, and how much I would have to exercise once home to burn off what I had eaten. If I succumbed to my hunger at breakfast time, the day was ruined. If I did not eat, I was irritable and could only think of food, making me an unenjoyable person to be around. These arguments accompanied with the high stress of a college preparatory school were often too much for me to handle. I prioritized calorie-counting over studying and exercise over sleep. My routine after last class dismissed would be: be picked up by my Mom, get into a fight on the car-ride home, storm inside of our house, proceed to lock myself in my room, and come out two hours later to uncontrollably eat almonds and pretzels, foods that I considered "safe." Though, my eating patterns became nonsensical as during these almond-and-pretzel binges, I would often eat as much or way more than my recommended daily intake. My mindset was always, "I will eat this much today because tomorrow things will be different. Tomorrow, I will actually fast." At this time, I was not weighing myself, which made it easier to deny the reality of what I was doing to myself. Finally, one day, I decided to step on the scale, and of course, this habit had in fact began to catch up to me. I gained fifteen pounds. I never had felt more defeated in my life. The sinking feeling in my stomach was stronger than ever.

### SLIPPING THROUGH (THE CRACKS)

After my weight-gain, things got even worse. Food became all I could think about. Even while I was eating, I would think about what I would be eating next. I had never been so emotionally exhausted. Class and studying was the worst because it felt like I was attempting to put something in front of my eating disorder that always needed to be number one. I vividly remember the day my world shifted.

Spanish class. My head, heavy and a mess, lay flat on my desk. Cold. Like my hands. Warm sweater. Freezing classroom. Anxiety. My heart, pounding, and my stomach, empty though it makes no noise. My teacher is asking the class questions. I cannot think straight. She asks me a question, and I stand up abruptly, my knees buckling. "Senora, may I please go to the personal counseling office?" Water forms underneath my eyelids and I try to hold back the tears. My teacher, blatantly concerned, tells me I can, so I run the familiar, squeaky plastic steps to see my counselor. Tears are trickling down my face and splattering onto the carpeted floors. I tell my counselor it is urgent and I must speak to her now. I cannot sit silent for a moment longer. She closes the door behind me and asks me to take a seat to tell her what is wrong. I tell her I keep thinking about leaving school to kill myself. I tell her I feel like I am suffocating. I tell her it feels like no one cares. Little do I know, these confessions would be enough to have me temporarily removed from school until I underwent a psychiatric evaluation that deemed me stable enough to return. Before I know it, my mom is called up to the school to come and pick me up and talk with my counselor and me and my counselor sends someone to go collect my belongings from class.

I met Dr. Rezai and told her everything. I held nothing back. I told her if I went on like this, I was not sure for how much longer I could do it. By now, it was the beginning of May and she decided that it would be best if I did not return back to school. After back-and-forth emails and phone conversations with my mother, school administration decided to comply with my psychiatrists orders.

I left school. Rumors spread about me. "I heard she is depressed," "Yeah, well, it's not fair that she gets to be exempt from finals!" At first I cared, but soon, I stopped caring altogether. Then, spring turned into summer and summer turned into back-to-back therapy appointments and trying to make myself feel better again. That summer though, I did not feel much of anything.

Fall came around and it was time to start school again. While I dreaded the idea of returning, I was ecstatic to have something to do in the daytime. Without a license, all I did was sit at home until my next therapy session from June to August. I was tired of the same old routine. Throughout the semester, I realized that school was not so bad after all. Finally, life was improving. My mood improved, my grades were good. Sure I was stressed, but my appearance and what I was eating no longer completely occupied my thoughts. Life was actually improving. I did not know who to accredit this improvement to. A Christian would have told me to give my thanks to God, while an atheist would tell me that this improvement was done by my own achievement and strength only. As someone who already had serious doubt in my faith, I began to consider the idea of believing in myself first before believing in any god. I started to think "I am human, I am living, I am capable of creating change."

Here I started to hypothesize; If you are at your lowest point in life, at some point, even if it be years down the road, life will improve for you if you just keep moving. Asking my mother and father for help made me realize I was not alone after all. After considering the level of doubt many people have in themselves, myself included, I started to consider that maybe we choose demise in underestimating our abilities. Maybe humans are a lot stronger than we think. Maybe, that is just life. And there is no explanation that could truly satiate all of these questions because, no one has been able to come back from the dead to tell the rest of us.

### I AM NOT SPECIAL

It was a hard pill to swallow. While I preached equality, I boasted internally about my individuality and my extraordinary resilience. I did not have a picture-perfect childhood, and

despite it all, I came through it a somewhat normal and happy child. I thought I had done the impossible. When I was younger, I was envious of the lives of my peers that seemed a worlds different and far better. I felt they had taken the easy way out and like the world was out to get me. It was not really until high school hit, when my eyes began to open and I saw that the world around me was not all sunshine and rainbows. Everyone struggled; my life was not an isolated incident. I witnessed my friend's parents file for and go through with divorce. I called 911 when my best friend tried to kill herself and I saw her spend a week in a mental hospital. When my friend's dog died, I cried too. The stories I heard of girls I had not known well were proof enough that quite frankly, we all go through shit. We all experience traumatic events that shape us, and bottom line, it is our choice if we want to come back from them and let these events foster our growth into better human beings. Previously I had been taught that just God's chosen people suffered. They suffered because God loved them. "What an awful god that is," I used to think. But I swallowed these words as truth. I thought only God could be my refuge. After all of these years of creating connections and attributing them to being God's doing, I began to think maybe a lot of these things happened to be coincidence that I had previously thought were done and created with utter intention. I think that just helped me sleep at night. Maybe the world I was living in was mostly created out of my own choosing and doing. I started to think maybe the world was not so black and white after all. Maybe I had to accept that.

The big questions in my life became, "How does one move forward after experiencing traumatic events? Can one move forward? Can *I*?" Of course, I turned to the internet to find answers. A concept I stumbled upon that correlates with the aforementioned ideas is the idea of internal versus external locus of control. Locus of control is a perspective that guides a person to act or adversely, react to life events. A person with an *internal locus of control* believes that he or she can influence events and their outcomes, while someone with an *external locus of control* blames outside forces for everything. Finally, I had finally found a term that pinpointed what I had been struggling to grasp. I did not know how to construct or phrase such a concept. Yet, finding the term for what I was confused about did not make the matter any less confusing. Topics like what happens to us after we die, how we got here, and how we exist now are ones that evoke feelings of ambivalence in me. Perhaps this is because they all seem to be intrinsically connected, as well as concepts that certain philosophers spend their entire lives trying to find answers to. Even if I ever feel extremely sure at a point in my life (a point I have not even reached yet) of the conclusions I have drawn, I will never be completely sure because I am constantly changing and growing as a person, at every stage of my life. I go back and forth on my feelings here and I do not know if I will find the answers I am looking for in this lifetime, if even after. I am not as well versed in the teachings of other faiths as I would like to be, but, at this point in time, my words here are my own truth. Again, I can not choose just one side on this topic, as I can see the matter from both sides, though the sole fact that those with an internal LOC often keep a better mental health standing and overall diminished sense of helplessness makes me think maybe these are the types of people who are succeeding in life, and just maybe, I should follow them.

Today I would say that though I cannot say I fully believe I have freely chosen for every incident that has happened to me to happen. I think things start smaller than that and tend to become a ripple effect. As a general rule of thumb, I would say that most "freak accidents" and natural disasters would build a good argument for guiding oneself by an external LOC lens. For example, I could hear about an earthquake that happened in Haiti on the news, and though I do not think anybody would have wished for it to happen, it does not change the fact that it

happened, and as hard as it may be, people have to deal with and accept this reality in order to move forward. Though, I could later meet someone in my life who survived the earthquake or a position helping Haitian communities to recover could be offered to me. I could see these kinds of events and think that they were God-sent, or I could see them as mere coincidence. After all, the general monotheistic belief in God is that we are allowed to choose him with our own free will. Choosing God is a choice, and coincidence is purely in the eye of the beholder.

### MANIPULATE YOUR WORLD AND SAVE YOURSELF

Today I am just less than four months shy of my seventeenth birthday, and not much has changed throughout my life in terms of my indecisiveness. This trait does not help me when it comes to my search for whatever the “truth” may be. I also continue to ask myself what drives me.

Most recently, one of the hardest decisions I have to make in my life was ending my friendship with the very same girl who once sat across from me at a lunch table ten years ago. Yes, the same girl who I thought was god-sent, an answer to my prayers. The same Jade Kyle. Though I later schools in grade five, at the end of eighth grade we re-kindled our friendship because we knew we were attending the same high school. We were insecure. We bonded over being outspoken. We needed each other. I knew her before, so why not keep knowing her? That is how things continued on for quite some time. This meant that even when she degraded me, or refused to apologize to me or ever own up to her actions, I excused her behavior because of our history. It felt pointless to try and search for a new best friend. There was already so much time, money, and effort invested into our friendship and I felt like the way we understood one another could never be matched in another companion. Throughout freshman and sophomore year we got into fight after fight but always found our way back to each other. Our joked about how inseparable of a duo we were. That was, until, junior year came around. After I had just spent a summer of working to improve my mental health, I was no longer okay with being torn down and pushing aside my feelings for the sake of agreeability. Finally, I told Jade I could no longer be friends with her. And this time was far different because this time, I meant it. I no longer cared what she thought of me. I wanted nothing to do with her. Finally, I felt free to move on with my life. But then, just when thoughts of her had faded from my mind, I started hearing and seeing things that reminded me of her everywhere. Whether it was her favorite song playing when I pressed shuffle on one of my music playlists, to seeing her favorite number, 47, everywhere I turned, I felt like I would never be able to fully escape this girl and the memories I shared with her. I felt out of control of my life, so I decided to do some research.

The concept of coincidence is not new; it has been around for far longer than I have. Professor David Spiegelhalter, who collects and studies coincidences, is of the view that, “A coincidence itself is in the eye of the beholder, the amazing thing is not that these things occur, it’s that we notice them.” So why is it exactly that people notice certain coincidences and ignore the others? Apparently, for example, when meeting someone who shares one’s birthday, one would call this a “coincidence,” yet by studying probability and common sense, given our population size, it shouldn’t come as a surprise. But it still seems like a coincidence to people, because they don’t stop to think about it objectively in their everyday lives. In my own life, I was creating links where I formerly would not have. Because probability is based off of statistics, it alone is not enough to explain coincidences. That’s why Carl Jung came up with an alternative explanation, called “synchronicity,” meaning temporally coincident occurrences of acausal events. According to him, the structure of reality included an acausal connection of psycho-

physic phenomena which manifested itself in the form of meaningful coincidences. Put simply, the concept states that whatever you believe in will be reflected back at you, like a giant mirror of sorts. When one connects more deeply with their subconscious, they start to see and feel what others can't. By tuning into their universe, they create coincidences in their favor. This meant that my own subconscious was paying extra attention to specific factors that made me think coincidences were happening when they were not. I had the power to turn this off. I was in control; it was nothing external. When I made this realization, I felt overall more in control of my life. This reality also made it easier to get over any regret I had in regards to ending the friendship. These strange occurrences were not signs from the universe, but just signs of paranoia.

Yet now, even after ending our friendship, I cannot say I regret any time spent with her. Never being her friend would mean my life would be totally different from the way it is now. I think about all of the good in my life and think that if that the previous sequence of events in my life had not happened exactly how they happened, would I be at the point I am at today? Without her friendship, as awful as it was at times, what would life be like in present day? Would the people who are in my life be in my life at all presently? Things could be close to how they are, but I do not know for sure. Things could be dramatically different. At this current moment in time, I have areas in my life I am content with. People I love, hobbies I enjoy, passions I never want to stop pursuing. On the converse, I have areas of my life that could stand a great deal of improvement. The best thing in my life at the moment is that I feel in control of the path I am on. While I do not have an explanation for everything that happens in life, I do my best to make mindful choices for my own benefit. And sometimes, I make conscious choices out of selflessness to put others before me. I feel in control for now, and that is what matters. I never want to be a supporting character in the movie that is my life. Right now, I have the lead role. Still, in times of desperation, I turn to my faith. With all of the conclusions I have made, it seems confusing and hypocritical to do this, but even while I realize faith may be a placebo effect after all, as placebo effects do, it makes me feel better to think my prayers and pleas are being heard. I hope that I find more answers and I can make more sense of things as I gather more life experience and thus become wiser. Maybe knowing these answers would be debilitating. Maybe the ignorance here really is bliss. It seems to me that most religions preach the same thing, which is to go and be good, do good, and give good. Copious amounts of people fail to recognize that life itself is beautiful, however cliché it may seem. The idea that there must be an end goal for us, where we can all live happily and eternally, sounds slightly selfish and even more so detrimental to our capability of enjoying life. In order to appreciate living, we must actually live, not spend our days pondering the future or reliving the past. I want to live *here* until my last minute. I do not want to envision heaven or nirvana because sometimes, life feels as good as any idealistic alternate world. Then, one day if I die and find some means of consciousness in an afterlife, it will be a bonus. I just hope I would have made the right choices in order to spend my forever happily. But if one day, I close my eyes, take my last breath, and never wake up again, I hope I will be content in knowing that this was all there was for me, because my life was as *me* as possible. Yet, as I type this, I wonder how, if ever, can I be okay with not knowing? How can we be okay? How can we accept that we can only know so much, and that we will have to suffice in this lifetime? And in the end, does what we believe in really matter if we all end up in the same place anyway? Perhaps a mere human could never truly know. Perhaps, indecisiveness and confusion *is* the human experience. What I know is that, until I die, I will never stop asking questions.

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