

## **Brooks Wright - 10th Grade**

*Springfield Township High School; Erdenheim, PA*

I heard her call my name in the darkness. “Brooks,” she says, “Brooks,” she sings, actually, “Up and at ‘em!” I squeeze my eyes shut and cringe. She knows that creeps me out. But what about Cortland, I thought. She needs to get up, too, because she takes much longer to get herself ready for our first day of school photos, even if we have to wear masks.

“Brooks, when you’re ready, we can FaceTime Cort. It’s early, and she’s still sleeping up at college,” Mom laughed. I heard a slight sadness in Mom’s voice; me and her both needed just a bit more time to get used to it, only being the two of us in the house. Not having Cortland in the first day of school photos is like only being able to find one Airpod; it’s just wrong.

So this is what it’s like to grow up with your best friend, and she leaves for college during a pandemic. I am not sure how I feel about today at this point. I am ready to see my friends and teachers, smile behind masks, and walk the halls as a sophomore. But right now? Mom is getting ready for work, and she is still remote. Mom will start playing loud 80’s music (or, as I like to call it, “old people music”) to annoy me enough to get out of bed. I reluctantly put my socks on and get ready to go to school.

I thought I would never get used to school without Cortland, let alone the anxiety I had about students and teachers not wearing masks properly and complaining about the mandate. For my entire life, I was part of a twosome where my sister was always there to listen, to stand by me when I was worried, to make fun of my ridiculously-heavy backpack full of gum wrappers, and to eye-roll within situations that had to be labeled “memorable,” like the first day of school. But I did. And I did it with a sense of pride because it came naturally.

Even my mom noticed I was more involved in school activities, actively sought out opportunities to meet new people, and felt more confident about my homework. I feel happier. And I don’t think it is because Cortland is not here, but because this new space lets me figure out that my voice is essential. What’s remarkable is that the school clubs allow me to contribute and help others in our community. The transition was, at first, a place where I felt like a part of me was missing, and masks sparked anxiety.

Reflecting on my experience, I learned I have actually stepped out and moved forward, and not only have I found my voice, but I am supporting others who still need someone to stand with them. While I have had many days and nights learning about my feelings and actions since this school year began, I also know my experience is not weird, and it will have transformed me for the better. Cortland is home on winter break, and it’s funny how she’s kind of in my space now

(literally and figuratively; we share a room). We are constantly transitioning, I think. I could get used to this.