

On my fifth birthday, in 1995, I told my mom that I wasn't quite ready to be five yet. I can imagine how my mom reacted—I was her first kid, and she probably didn't know if age regression was part of a normal childhood or not. I very clearly explained that I just wanted to stay four until I felt ready to turn five. She told me that was fine, kind soul that she is. We celebrated my birthday on that day anyway, and a few weeks later, when I felt I had grown up enough, I quietly turned five. I don't remember it that well, but I guess I had a good measure of how grown-up I had gotten.

It's been roughly thirteen years since then. Physically, I've grown a lot—for one thing, I'm about three feet taller—but sometimes, I feel like I'm still mentally four years old. And I'm fine with it, mostly. I like thinking like a kid. I wonder if this has anything to do with my decision not to turn five way back when. If this is the case—if my mental mindset will stay stuck when I decide to stop aging—then I have a very important announcement to make. Today is December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008. It is my eighteenth birthday. And you know what? I refuse to turn eighteen. No, I'm just going to stay seventeen for now.

I've always been reluctant to turn eighteen. I haven't told many people about that, but when I do, they give me an incredulous stare. “Why? Eighteen is the best age! You're on your own! You can do whatever you

want! No parents!” Due to my decision to commute to college, that concept doesn’t really apply to me. My mom’s told me time and time again that as long as I live under her roof, I live by her rules. I don’t have much of a problem with this, but my friends think I’m crazy. Everyone can’t wait to get away from their families, to leave behind their hometown and childhood. This is one of the reasons I hesitate to turn older- if it means leaving your loved ones in the dust, I’m not interested. The media has warped our view of age—when you’re eighteen, you’re legally an adult. You go to college, you’re on your own, you get a job, get married, pay taxes, have kids, keep working, and then wither away. It’s supposed to sustain you and keep you busy, but where’s the fun? When do you get to play? I’m not going to turn eighteen if I have to fill out W-4 forms with a smile on my face.

I’m completely okay with myself at seventeen, too. I like the way I think. I like the way I act. I have always had some key traits. For instance, the way I see things now—the littlest things excite me. I’ve always been like that. When I was a little kid, my mom kept a box of Crayola colored pencils in our computer room for making quilt designs. I wasn’t allowed to touch them, but I could look. There were all the standard colors, like the ones that come in an 8-pack of crayons, but then I saw a new color, one I’d never seen before. I asked my dad what it was. “Sky blue,” he told me. I couldn’t

believe it—there were more than eight colors in the world. It blew my 3-year-old mind. From then on, I would sneak into the computer room whenever I could and hold the sky blue pencil, marveling at the new color, turning it over and over in my hands. I'm still very much like that, in the way that I'm amazed by the tiniest things; things most people take for granted. I will sit and watch snow fall, astounded by its beauty. I have to sit in a window seat when I travel—be it by bus, plane, or train—so I can press my face to the glass and look in awe at the busy world around me. I don't want to lose that sense of wonder as I get farther away from childhood. That's just another reason not to turn eighteen.

For a good part of my seventeenth year, I tried as hard as I could to keep my kid-ness close and any sort of change far away. I didn't go out on weekends that much—I stayed home and hung out with my little brother. I didn't do anything illegal, like so many teens around me—I want to keep my record clean, like it's always been. I even delayed getting my learner's permit. Logic says I should have gotten it in December 2006, but I made a conscious effort to not get my permit. I was absolutely convinced that learning to drive was the last threshold of my childhood, and I refused to even look at the driver's manual. Some little voice in my head kept telling me that if you could drive, you were officially a grown-up, and I really

didn't want that. When I turned seventeen, my friends asked if I was going to get my license. "What? No," I'd say. "I don't even have my permit." They, again, thought I was completely crazy. There was no use explaining my last-part-of-childhood theory to them, let alone the fact that I couldn't afford a car. I felt ridiculously conflicted, and would complain to my advisor about feeling so pressured to drive. "You gotta at least try it," he'd say. "Just because you can operate a car doesn't mean you're an adult. No one can tell you when you're an adult!" I still balked, but kept his advice close at hand.

After some thought, I came to a few turning points. I may have tried to delay adulthood by staying in and playing Halo with my brother, but in retrospect, I didn't actually have anywhere to go or anyone to go out with. Plus, I liked hanging out with my brother. I've realized that I never actually had any interest in illegal activities, and probably never will. I still didn't want to learn to drive, though. I watched all my friends get their permits and licenses and felt nothing except steadfast sureness that I did not need to learn to drive, at least not for a few years. Other than that, I realized that I was being pretty stupid. My advisor had been right—no one could tell me when I was an adult. I could still be like a kid at any part of my life. Age is just a number. It doesn't classify how you act or how you think. I could always be just as silly and immature as I liked...or as much as was appropriate.

Time goes on. I go out almost every weekend—not because I feel pressured to, but because I want to, and because I have a couple great friends who I can run around with. My police record and conscience continue to be clean. And, with the advice of my advisor in my head and the commands of my parents in my ear, I went to the DMV in July 2008 and got my learner's permit. I can drive now, and I still feel every bit as young as I did before I learned. Not that that's all good—I sometimes get distracted by squirrels by the side of the road.

So, today is my eighteenth birthday. Do I feel old? No. Do I have a crazy urge to run away from my hometown, my family and friends? Nope. Do I have to act any different than I did yesterday, or the days and months and years that came before that? No! Just because I've gained another year doesn't mean I'm changed at the core. I might never change, and I love that idea. I'm comfortable enough with myself to know that I'll still be Beth at any age. So, all right, forget what I said before. I'll turn eighteen. But the only thing that'll change is the number. Not me.