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A Search for A Self and Myself

I entered third grade innocent, in one piece, unbroken. I left a shell of myself, afraid, and forever changed. Sure I had faced my stressors at school in the past, but I got through, I managed. But it was different then. The pressure of third grade was astronomical to me, long division, cursive, weekly poem recitations, long term projects; we had reached a whole new world here. It all started with the expectation that I would always be the first student in the class to perfectly recite the weekly poem from memory. After the first couple of weeks when I always volunteered to go first and did the recitation well, there was this unspoken assumption from my parents, my teacher, and me that I would recite the poem the day after it was given to us. This alone was innocent enough, but it escalated into my need to be the best at long division, writing, cursive, have the best projects and highest test scores. At first, not much was different because I was used to being the best in the class without really trying too much but it soon turned into obsession. I was plagued by the constant wonder of what would happen if I weren't the smartest. I was sure my parents would be disappointed and even worse, something horrific would happen to me. What that "horrific" thing was I could not really tell you for sure, but I knew it would be crippling.

I was convinced I was going to die. Or at least, if I didn't die I would be doomed for all eternity, beginning with my ultimate failure in school. I was only nine and yet I knew these things to be true, certain. My one and only goal was to prevent my utter damnation, and each day was simply another day to try and prevent the inevitable. I was alive, but I wasn't living. I had never questioned that this was, and would be my only reality. I was on a search for my own invincibility. I created my shell of safety giving me an escape from the reality of my life at the

time. Deep down, as much as I knew it was impossible, I always wondered if it could happen, if I could with certainty, prevent the danger.

There is a very specific moment from third grade that seemed to set off the worst of it. My mom was in the classroom that day helping out, I think she was a room parent, and we were supposed to be writing the third grade equivalent of an essay. We had just talked about introductory sentences and their importance in our writing. I sat at my desk, unsure where to begin. I figured I would write the body of my essay first, since that would be easier. I went back to the top of the page when I was done and tried to think of the perfect opening sentence. I was stuck and I panicked. I honestly felt my world come crashing down on me. I started crying and ran over to my mother yelling, "It needs to be perfect" over and over while she tried to get me to calm down and understand that it was just a sentence, it wasn't the end of the world. She was wrong. It was the end, here it was and my horrible damnation was coming. I would be thrown out of school and then my family would disown me and I would die. I don't remember how it ended, or if ultimately my introductory sentence was as perfect as I wanted, but that was the first of many times I felt my life fly completely out of my control.

From then on every night was pure torture. I started getting really anxious before bed, feeling really sick and I would stand on the top of the stairs crying and pleading with my parents not to make me go to school the next day. When I finally got into bed I would ask my mom over and over "Do you promise?" to ensure that I would survive the next day. My mom got me a plain keychain a couple years later with the word promise engraved so that I could carry it around with me at all times, and I still keep my keys on that keychain. Tattooed on my foot is "I promise" in Elvish because to this day, such a simple phrase carries such strong meaning for me.

For seven minutes after she left my room at night I would repeat sentences over and over with the same wording every night for further protection. I didn't sleep much, half of my nights were spent crying and asking my mom to promise, and the other half was me worrying that I would never fall asleep and I would be so tired the next day that I would surely get a question wrong if I was called on. When I did wake up in the morning there was no relief. My days were structured, and precise down to the minute. I left for school at 7:13 every day, and if someone tried to change that, if the security of my schedule was in jeopardy, I was lost. No matter how much I have changed these things still slip into my daily life without me even realizing it. I didn't really understand what was different at the time, but I knew things had changed. Third grade had cracked me.

Three seemingly harmless letters defined most of my childhood from then on. I didn't realize it at the time and it was only years later that the pieces started to fit together and I saw their impact on me. My parents ignored my idiosyncrasies because to the outside world, I was still perfect. Ultimately I learned how to hide from even my parents because that was easier than trying to explain. And so my childhood was placed in a box, locked and shoved away while the three letters took over, dictating every thing about me until I no longer could really remember who I was before them. But I lived, I powered through, because that was what was expected of me.

I believe to this point my life does have a theme. The theme that resonates strongly throughout my life and this retelling is living trapped inside my mind and dealing with my mental health. This theme has crept into all aspects of my life, even when completely unwelcome. Without a doubt, the majority of my life is plagued by anxiety and depression but this is not the only thing in my life. It is purely the theme, not the main character, and I decided

how much it influences my story. So while it is clear that this is my theme, there is more to how I shape my day-to-day life and the self that I have found.

Throughout elementary school I was still involved in everything, and my “nervous quirks” seemed to spread to all areas of my life. I hated piano recitals because of the possibility of publicly failing. Same for soccer and basketball, and I tried to make sure my parents never saw me play because I didn’t want to disappoint them if I were to make a mistake. I also became increasingly scared of things that could kill me, like my ski lessons every Saturday, which would probably lead to death. Or even worse, imperfection. Looking back now, I remember piano, skiing, basketball, and soccer as some of my favorite things, activities I wish I did more of now. But throughout elementary and high school I purposefully sabotaged myself so that I would fail on my own terms. To me it was better to just not do anything to face the possibility of messing up and letting everyone down. I was not happy and I hated that I was doing these things but I felt like I had no choice or say in these matters. In every activity I did, when I reached the point of being really good, could be great if I put in more practice and effort, I choked and ran. As much as I wanted perfection in my life, there was nothing worse than obtaining it.

It wasn’t until this year that I was able to say the words “I have OCD” to someone. It’s something I have known my entire life, but have never been able to say. Each time it’s a little easier, but still I wonder what people envision when they hear me say that. Do they think I’m really organized (which, fine, they would be correct)? Do they think I just like things to be clean and I wash my hands more than the average person (OK got me again!)? It frustrates me that those are the popular perceptions. Because yes, it’s part of it, but that is not everything. People always say “Oh my god I’m so OCD!” any time they do anything a little quirky. I think that’s one of the most hurtful things you could ever say around me. Because I don’t find that funny.

Would you like to trade and have my terrible intrusive thoughts and constant fear of death and rape? I'd be cool with that. Do you think OCD is funny now? I would hope not. Just think of being a slave to yourself. I have to do everything I am told by my OCD. If I don't do it, I'm punished. I have hope that this won't always be the case. But for now I remain trapped in the scariest place of all. My mind. Just like that moment in third grade when I felt my world fall apart, I wait for the moment when it starts to be pieced back together.