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As Seen on TV

Deijenne Burris

Winner of Writers' Bloc Competition

I would spend most afternoons at home, locking the world away where it could not touch me. My agoraphobia was intense, to say the very least. My Friday nights consisted of me leaving an indent in

the plush carpeting of my mother's apartment, hunched over a screen of some sort; the light from my laptop being the only mildly-warm light that would ever shine on my face. I'd watch a variety of campy dramas and telenovelas until I fell to sleep. That was my routine; it was how all my days had gone. Eventually, my mother had had enough. She'd pushed her misconceptions aside, if it meant I would stop waking her every night in a panic. She sent me to therapy, despite her mixed feelings about it all. I would spend every other Tuesday afternoon there.

I thought there would be more lying on couches and talking at an unresponsive, old man with thick glasses that would scrutinize my every word in a notebook. I've come to believe now that that was just what TV taught me. The doctor wasn't an old man. In reality, she was very young. Maybe she was even a little too young to have been a doctor. I wasn't quite sure what to call her. She had no coke-bottle glasses perched upon her nose. She was just a woman, doing a job. Just a person.

I'd sit on her gigantic couch, and it would swallow me as I attempted to make myself as small as I could be. Tense and frigid, I would wait for the hour to end. She'd sit across from me, casual and confident. She'd wait. I'd wait. The silence felt persecuting, ringing in my ears. I would rush to find a way to break through it, starting off with my first line:

"I don't know what to say."

That's how the scene played out every week, for several weeks. She would bring me into her office, a manufactured home-like space full of small trinkets. She had blankets for comforting, toys for fidgeting, stones for someone's worries - things I'd never touch, in fear that my therapist might find me too nervous of a person. She would smile, scan her notes, and prompt me for a continuation of what I'd forgotten I'd said the weeks before. That's how therapy usually worked. I made a profession of dancing on eggshells as I talked, careful to only share so much. She'd listen and scribble down notes now and again, leaving me worrying what odd thing I'd said that was so noteworthy. At least I'd gotten that part right.

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The sessions started the same every time, and I had grown adjusted to the repetition of it all. She, of course, had taken notice of my reserved nature. She'd ask about the things I'd stress over. She'd ask about why I was worried about how people thought of me, or why I was so afraid to share. She expressed concern over my obsession in relation to people's thoughts of me, one of the few fears I'd expressed often.

"Have you always assumed that people were focused on you?" She'd inquire as I tried to parse out if her tone was one of caring or of judgement. I didn't know how to respond. My cheeks stung as I'd realized how much information I had let slip over the weeks I had been seeing her. I wasn't as sly as I'd hoped. The answer was, well, yes, but I wasn't sure how deep into this I was truly willing to go.

Since I was a child, for as long as I could remember, I'd feel the judgmental stares of an audience that was not watching me. Most times, they hadn't even noticed me. I'd perfected the act of being unsuspecting and plain, a social sort-of chameleon. If I didn't stand out, no one could target me. I feared more than anything becoming the girl on TV who was shamed into being someone other than herself. The Cady Herons, sweet girls who lost themselves in attempts to survive in their unforgiving worlds. That's what people got when they wanted to be somebody. When someone wanted to have the starring role in their own life. I aimed to be an extra in the background, maybe getting a line or two in, if I was lucky.

"I know it's just my anxiety. I tell myself it's my anxiety," I said, picking at my fingernails.

She smiled.

"That's a good way to understand mental illness. Telling yourself it's just thoughts or your OCD; that's the first step."

OCD. That was a step outside of our usual script. I'd never really shown any signs of something like that, to my knowledge. OCD was usually something people made fun of, wasn't it? A disorder often characterized as silly, obsessive,

quirky, sometimes even romanticized. Even I'd made a little joke about it here and there. OCD was the thing people jokingly said they had when they felt uncomfortable because a picture frame was mildly crooked or when they liked to color code notes for school. OCD was the subject of little one-liners people would make about how they like their rooms to meet the bare minimum of cleanliness.

I certainly didn't feel like the shrill women on television, scrubbing tirelessly at every dirty surface, their emotional distress minimized for a throwaway joke in a sitcom. I didn't see myself as the "quirky" side characters, flickering light switches and touching doorknobs a perfect number of times before I could rest. The Emma Pillsburys and Adrian Monks, they were nothing like me. My troubles weren't a joke to me.

I didn't defy her diagnosis. I didn't question it. "Sure," I thought to myself, "That makes sense. I've always known I was pretty weird. Didn't think I was that weird though." She must have just seen it on my face. She explained to me how OCD had many ways of manifesting itself. Sometimes, with debilitating intrusive thoughts that can take weeks to let go of. Other times, it can be paranoia and anxiety. Often, it was both. It wasn't always what first came to mind when you'd hear it in passing, those with repetitive routines, but that was very possible too, and it was something to be taken seriously. It wasn't being a perfectionist or liking to alphabetize your books. It wasn't something that trivial, and it wasn't a quirky little adjective.

A thought that I had chewed on in that moment was this: a lot of people don't often realize that there's nothing funny about OCD. Those people don't often consider obsession isn't as eccentric and sweet as it is on TV. They don't think about the nights I've stressed about finding a small, non-existent thing I'd done wrong to a person I didn't know because the delivery woman didn't smile and didn't talk much, so surely, I'd wronged her. I couldn't say my constant discomfort was something I had found funny. They had no

idea. They didn't know of rainy evenings full of time wasted crying to my girlfriend on the phone because today is the day I was sure to be hurt by someone who had had enough of me. I don't remember ever laughing about it.

As I sat nestled into the suffocating couch, I had only felt confusion. For many, a diagnosis was usually freeing. A therapist-approved diagnosis would provide the answers for a question you didn't know how to ask.

Getting a diagnosis was supposed to be something comforting; a diagnosis told you that you weren't alone. For me, however, it had validated something I'd been debating my whole life. My worst nightmares had been confirmed. The world, even if it didn't notice me, was always laughing at me. They all found my behavior strange, even before I knew it was strange. I fought back explaining to her how it gnawed at me in that instant. I tried not to tell her about how the thought of truly being different – having OCD – made my heart sink into my stomach, knowing that there were people who would never truly take me seriously.

It was in that moment that I became aware of just how I had already lost myself in an effort to make sure that no one else would make me lose myself first, shielding the interesting things about myself in fear that a world that was already laughing at me, at all of us with OCD, would laugh even harder. I tried, despite my reservations, to open myself up just a little more that afternoon. If my disorder was a laughing stock, it seemed pointless to continue putting myself in this bubble anyways. I voiced my concern, catching the doctor by surprise. We spent the remaining thirty minutes discussing the things that made me nervous, as I learned how to cope with the battle with my own brain, my one true critic.

The hour came and went, as I freed myself from the hold of the couch that swallowed me whole. I'd set another appointment for the next session, which I'd always later debate about cancelling before going back again anyways.

I flagged down my mother's car, it was easily recognizable by its matte blue hood, more oxidation than there was paint. As we drove away, she'd ask me how it was, if I'd learned anything new. "Yes," I'd say, often forgetting whatever I'd talked about as soon as I left the threshold of the clinically comfortable space. I'd try to recount the things I'd been told, usually receiving dashes of commentary from her between silences. This time, however, it was a little different. "I have OCD. I know it's weird, but I'm going to cope with it how I can." I stated plainly, running my thumbs over my phone's cracked screen as I relayed the same news to my girlfriend – who was supportive and prepared herself with research and coping mechanisms to present me with as I drove home.

My mother – equally as supportive – disclosed to me that our OCD was genetic. Plenty of the women on her side of the family had it; it had just been invisible to me. We had generations of cleanly great-aunts with plastic-wrapped couches and distrusting grandmothers with nervous dispositions, she explained. Even my mother, herself, had it. She consoled me in her usual quiet and calming tone, "OCD is just something you have to work with, not work away."

Since that day, I decided to make my best effort to work with the frustrating mess OCD could be. I would be a little friendlier or even try to make small talk with the women in the neighborhood about sweet and trivial things like their shoes or their happy anecdotes about their children. I'd even travel outside of my hometown and into another to visit my girlfriend and try not to analyze the movements of every bystander. I would no longer actively hold myself back from my own freedom, though the obsessions stuck around. They always would; there is no cure for mental illness. There would be, and still are, days and settings where it will best me. I was still the shy girl who preferred to keep to herself, but now more so on my own terms. My diagnosis had freed me. I no longer had to keep up the act. Now, I was the star.