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A Perfect Storm: Nonfiction on the Progression and Regression of Anxiety

Amanda Guindon

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

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Critical Introduction

From the moment I decided to write a creative nonfiction collection of essays for my thesis, I knew that anxiety would be my focus. Mental health awareness is on the uprise as it's estimated by the National Institute of Mental Health that 31.1% of all United States adults will experience any anxiety disorder in their lives. While I knew anxiety would be an important topic to discuss in order to bring awareness to causes and effects of anxiety, I had no concept of the challenges I would face in portraying my mental health to an audience who may know nothing about me, as well as the difficulties of accurately portraying the mental health of family members.

Throughout my life, I never read a lot of material having to do with mental health, or anxiety specifically. Due to this general lack of knowledge on the community, reading different material focusing on mental health became a very prevalent part of this thesis process both to understand how others experience anxiety, and to develop a better concept of how to write my experience for an audience. In reading nonfiction works like *Running With Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, *On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety* by Andrea Peterson, *Notes on a Nervous Planet* by Matt Haig, and *Little Panic: Dispatches from an Anxious Life* by Amanda Stern, I was able to better connect the emotional feelings of anxiety with the methodical process of writing a thesis and portraying these emotions to others.

A prevalent theme throughout this collection of essays is form experimentation as I consistently find that the alternate form allows for distance between myself as the author of my anxieties and the audience. Creating this distance offers greater creative freedom as I didn't have to think about writing as "myself" and I could focus more on the specific experiences and tiny intricacies of anxiety. Other works I referred to during my writing process included *The Shell*

Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Form by Kim Adrian, and different selections of essays from issues of *Brevity*, a publication journal that focuses on concise literary nonfiction. While these selections read differently than the nonfiction works previously mentioned, they focus on craft elements I included throughout my thesis. The five creative nonfiction essays in this thesis bring awareness to mental health advocacy and portray the differences in anxiety through members of my family. The essays inform the audience of the impact of family dynamic and disability on mental health of different members of a family. The goal of this thesis is to explore my own experiences with anxiety and demonstrate the effects of a unique family dynamic on my mom's mental health. As I have a more concrete experience with anxiety, comparing my experience to the nonlinear experience of my mom offers great insight to how people are affected differently from the "same" mental illness.

The first essay in my collection is a flash creative nonfiction essay titled "Into the Depths" meant to introduce the audience to myself as a character, and to immediately develop an understanding of my general experience with anxiety and what it looks like for me. This essay uses a "shell", or a specific form, to tell the story in a more unique way, drawing the reader in and immersing them in my thoughts. The narrator of this essay brings the audience on a theme park ride through the mind of Amanda, and they discuss different parts of the mind in relation to how they are affected by anxiety. Inspiration for the unconventional format of this essay stems from *The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms* by Kim Adrian in which different authors make specific stylistic choices on the format of their essay to better reflect the content and portray their message to the audience. One essay uses the format of an autism screening test to explore their own experiences with autism while another essay uses a series of rejection letters to demonstrate the apparent "failings" of their life. Playing with form quickly became an

important element of this thesis as it allowed for more distance between myself and the audience when discussing my own struggles, and it also allowed me to provide different perspectives on anxiety and mental illness. As the first essay in this collection dives into deep, personal topics, I appreciated the distance that a shell offered. Not only could I talk about the parts of my mind more freely, but I felt more willing to share personal details behind this mask of the form of the essay.

From a Fall 2018 volume of the Riverteeth Reader, the concept of second person was discussed in great detail as many of the essays in this collection were based in second person. The Editor's Note emphasized that the power of second person narratives draws heavily from reader emotion and using too much of the second person narration style can bog down writing. This was important to consider when writing and revising "Into the Depths" as the shell of this essay creates a very direct second person narrative. I didn't want to overuse the "you" character as it could flush out the content too much. This was a balance I had to establish throughout the writing process.

This essay is organized around different parts of the brain and the narrator leads the reader through the state of my mind in dealing with day-to-day anxiety. In the section discussing my eyes, the words align to the left of the page with sporadic spacing between some to emphasize the description of eyes "constantly scanning" a room or looking down for a notification. In another section discussing the "spiraling alleys" of anxiety, the words indent line after line, breaking the sentences to reflect the intrusive thoughts anxiety can create. These creative elements of atypical stylistic choice better demonstrate the daily mental challenges of anxiety and paint a more definitive picture for the audience to understand the main subject of the thesis. As the style and form of this essay is constantly changing, the reader has to adapt quickly

to the text to understand it completely, further emphasizing and paralleling the impact anxiety can have on an individual and their view of the world.

The second essay in this collection, titled “Evidently Anxious”, discusses the progression and adaptation of my anxiety throughout childhood and into adulthood. This essay argues that anxiety is constantly evolving as new circumstances arise. One of the most prevalent themes that I wanted to explore throughout my thesis, but primarily in this self-reflective essay was the concept of developing anxious tendencies as a child that foreshadowed my experience with anxiety as an adult. This commentary on the presence of anxiety all throughout adolescence breaks the stigma that anxiety is a simple problem with simple solutions. Instead, anxiety is constant, ruthless, and adaptive as a person grows older and encounters new things. The first section of the essay details my difficulty staying over for sleepovers at friend’s houses, noting how I could constantly feel my stomach “churning inside as the sun dipped below the horizon”, and the emotional turmoil I felt when asked if I would be staying the night. Gradually, these incidents became more and more common, and throughout the essay I explore different years with worsening situations to describe how my anxiety was shaped through specific circumstances.

Though the subjects for the different sections of “Evidently Anxious” were relatively easy to decide on, I struggled with self-reflection and the ability to write about my anxiety for others to read about and understand the magnitude. In my research, I discovered a novel called *On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety* in which the author, Andrea Petersen, backtracks through her life to explore the foundation of her anxiety and how she has developed as an adult following an official diagnosis of anxiety in early adulthood. Petersen’s characterization of her anxious thoughts and feelings into words, although different feelings from my own, aided in the

development of my own narrative on anxiety growing up through childhood and into early adulthood and the discovery of “anxiety” as a diagnosable concept. While I have never been formally diagnosed, the impact of anxiety on my life extends beyond the need for a diagnosis. The novel *Little Panic: Dispatches from an Anxious Life* by Amanda Stern played a similar role to *On Edge* as I struggled to relay my anxieties through writing. Stern validated my feelings of uncertainty and instability through her writing as she discussed the extreme anxiety that plagued her entire life. After putting down her novel, I felt more comfortable writing about my own experiences and by reading other’s experiences with anxiety, I felt like I was better equipped to describe the feelings I experience.

The alternating of more recent years to years further in the past throughout the essay signifies the idea that anxiety and mental health are nonlinear and the progression or regression of mental health is sometimes entirely independent from the person experiencing it. The section talking about my school trip to Peru focuses on this concept and emphasizes that anxiety can be prevalent even in moments of extreme excitement and happiness. I describe the first moments of a homestay wherein the natives dressed us in their clothes and led us to the dining hall, and I describe how “as suddenly as the sea recedes into a tsunami, my stomach sank into itself”; we were all bright eyed and excited to experience a culture outside our small town in the United States when all of a sudden the floor fell out from under me and the anxiety developed into my first panic attack. However, the essay continues to argue that management of anxiety is possible. With anxiety, your body is constantly working against your conscious mind, trying to prove to you that something is wrong when it is not. Anxiety adapts and changes as circumstances change, and trying to keep up and manage the inescapable emotions and physical feelings of anxiety is exhausting in all ways possible.

The third essay in this thesis collection, titled “Love, Amanda”, reads as a series of letters from a daughter to her mother about observations surrounding her mother’s mental health throughout the years of the daughter’s life. This essay is the first to integrate new people who experience anxiety as they relate to me. One of the goals I had for this thesis was to compare and contrast the experiences, causes, and effects of anxiety between me, my mom, and my younger disabled sister. It was crucial to emphasize the idea that everyone experiences anxiety for different reasons and in different ways. Society has developed a stereotype of what an “anxious person” looks like, and I wanted to combat this to emphasize that everyone experiences anxiety differently. One of the most important factors of this essay is the gradual progression of my mom’s anxiety, and my understanding of it as I grew older and grasped more of our situation as a family. In order to include such an extended period of time, the format of a collection of letters from me to my mom felt the most appropriate.

Writing about another person’s mental health can be a gray area, and the biggest concern was writing something that I perceived as true when it wasn’t necessarily. In order to portray my mom’s anxiety in the most honest way, I conducted research and asked her questions specific to her feelings and what kinds of things bring her anxiety, and how her body reacts to the emotions. I asked clarifying questions like ages during different scenes I discussed, and general timeline questions. But I also asked a lot of questions relating to how she feels anxiety physically as I didn’t want to portray her experience as I thought of it. It needed to be authentic in order for my thesis to mean something more. This coupled with my observations throughout the years complimented each other throughout the essay as I introduced the idea of my mom developing anxiety. The concept of ethics while writing creative nonfiction was something that I considered

highly important, considerably more so in talking about mental health, but especially when talking about someone else's mental health.

The novel *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs aided in the process of writing about another person's mental illness as Burroughs discussed much of his obscure childhood. He spent a decent amount of his childhood being raised by his mentally ill mother's psychiatrist and family, and he explored the meanings of family and mental health. His discussion of his mom and her struggles humanized her and normalized the concept of mental illness while still maintaining humility and compassion. He describes her in one moment before he moved in with her psychiatrist, and he mentions how "her eyes looked different. Wider, somehow. Not her own. They scared me," which describes the change he was seeing in his mother without putting her in a compromising position or painting her as unfit in any capacity (Burroughs 49). And while my own experience with my mom doesn't reflect the experience that Burroughs had with his mother, there is value in reading how others describe those close to them. He knew how his mom looked to him, and he was able to recognize change as it came.

In a September 2020 issue of *Brevity*, one essay in particular caught my attention and I have since read it multiple times. The nonfiction essay is titled "Last Words", and the author, Amie McGraham, details her experience dealing with her mom's apparent progression of Alzheimer's. In this essay, McGraham dives deep into disability, and counters her mother's experience with Alzheimer's with her own experiences with alcoholism. Reading the altruistic writing of McGraham propelled my writing forward, especially in terms of writing about my own mom and her experiences with mental illness. The simplicity of McGraham's writing inspired elements of poetic simplicity in my own writing.

After introducing the progression of anxiety in my mom, the fourth essay in this collection focuses on specific experiences where my mom's anxiety was displayed in order to highlight the theme of differing experiences with anxiety. This fourth essay, titled "Time Bomb", demonstrates the relationship between my mom and my disabled younger sister and takes a closer look at the causes of my mom's anxiety. This essay specifically uses the extended metaphor of a time bomb to establish a sense of impending doom throughout each different section as each section talks about a different anxiety-driven experience. I chose this metaphor in particular because it is something I have heard my mom refer to my sister as before, and the intensity of waiting for the bomb to explode mimics the intensity of the emotions when dealing with anxiety. As my sister is nonverbal, the unknown of when she might explode causes extreme feelings of anxiety. In one section, I write "She knows she shouldn't go, she knows Jamie's behavior is changing in ways destructive to herself and to her sister, and quite frankly to Kelsey. But *god* does she want to go to work so badly. A touch of freedom is just in reach," which both exemplifies my sister and mom's relationship, and hints at some of the source of anxiety for my mom. Everyone has a different experience with anxiety, and although my mom and I are similar in personality and have a close relationship, our anxiety stems from very different sources and manifests differently as well.

While "Love, Amanda" uses an outside perspective on my mom's anxiety, "Time Bomb" examines her relationship with anxiety closely, focusing on the causes and effects of certain situations. By showing these differing scenarios to the audience, like how losing Wi-Fi can lead to hours of instability or leaving for work causes extreme emotional turmoil, I was able to demonstrate the adverse effect of anxiety on a mother. While reading *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel, I was surprised by the way she described her parents' lives. Her crude

remarks about their marriage and her upbringing elicited uncomfortable emotion as I read more about her journey with depression and finally medication after years of suffering from depression. Wurtzel's impression of her parents sparked interest on how I wanted to present my mom through the lens of a young narrator. Throughout the course of writing "Love, Amanda", I knew I needed to paint my mom in an honest light, and *Prozac Nation* aided in my understanding of writing about difficult topics. While my experience with anxiety differs greatly from Wurtzel's experience with depression, our understanding of nonfiction craft elements can only improve when reading the works of others, and this is the case with *Prozac Nation*.

The final essay in this collection is titled "Reclamation" and focuses on acceptance and reclaiming anxiety as your own, learning how to work with your body and it's emotions rather than fighting it or succumbing to the overwhelming feelings. While there isn't a lot of creative nonfiction writing on mental health available, the vast majority of people deal with mental health issues whether big or small. Growing up, I read very little about anxiety and I almost felt silly for feeling emotions in the way that I did, and still do; I would ask myself if it was real or if I was just being dramatic, and it took a long time to realize that this is a very common thing and others feel emotions in the same way. Reading *On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety* further established these ideas and much of what Petersen was saying about anxiety resonated with me greatly. She consistently referred to the definition of anxiety as the fear of the future or the unknown, and this develops into her other anxieties and tendencies as well.

The purpose of the final essay in this collection was to reclaim the thoughts associated with anxiety, as the title suggests. So many of my personality traits relate to the better parts of anxiety, and learning to reclaim these traits and learning to work with my body was, and continues to be, a huge step towards acceptance. In one section, I write "Anxiety is that slight

tick in the back of your brain, telling you that those jeans don't feel right even if you wore them just fine yesterday. Nothing looks right, and nothing will look right until that anxiety subsides," demonstrating my claim that anxiety is relentless and constant. However, I continue on to focus on the positives, writing "I already feel the sirens dimming, their song muffled by the sound of my partner's voice. The thoughts become whispers in a crowd, barely audible above the sounds of our conversation as I start the whirring of the popcorn machine". The final essay establishes a hopeful tone without misrepresenting the idea of "recovery" from anxiety as the journey is long and harrowing, and "recovery" is not an accurate representation. This essay also discussed how I deal with anxiety in everyday life, and this reminded me slightly of reading *Notes on a Nervous Planet* by Matt Haig. In his memoir, Haig talks about his diagnosis of different mental illnesses in adulthood and how he had to balance the advancements of society and his mental health. He mentions how the distractions of everyday life and the constant updates from social media platforms caused more distress which is interesting in comparison to my own experiences with mental health. Reading other accounts of people dealing with mental illness solidifies the idea that each journey is different, and this final essay explores this in connection with the idea of reclaiming what is lost to mental illness.

Upon completing the majority of my thesis, I felt an immense amount of pride as writing a cohesive collection of essays felt incredibly different from any writing I had done in the past. While I previously had experience with creative nonfiction in the form of multiple workshop classes, I never really had the creative freedom to write the stories that I wanted to tell without any additional expectations. I learned so much about my personal skills as well as the importance of planning, and accepting when something just isn't working. Writing something you don't like feels discouraging until it develops into something you are infinitely prouder to share. However,

this pride does nothing to negate the difficulty of the thesis process. Writing and reading about anxiety constantly throughout this past year was difficult on my own anxiety, and at times I had to step away from the process, cancel meetings, and throw out essays to start again fresh. As is reflected in this thesis, anxiety is exhausting, and I certainly felt the exhaustion weighing heavily on my shoulders throughout this entire process. While I am proud of my accomplishments, I wonder what effects the writing process had on my anxiety.

Reading different nonfiction works and memoirs about other's experiences with anxiety propelled me forward and instilled a certain amount of confidence in my writing; this was the type of collection that I wish I could have read when I was growing up. Developing a unique writing voice and style became an important aspect of the thesis process, and researching elements of craft and different writing formats gave me the creative freedom to feel comfortable sharing my stories.

My expectations for this project were definitely met; it was extremely difficult yet incredibly rewarding. At the completion of this project, I hope to continue on to publication of these essays as individuals or together in some way as I feel the message behind each essay can be appreciated separately for different audiences. Some of the potential journals for this route of publication could include *The Bridge*, *Mochila Review*, and *Emerson Review* amongst other potential journals seeking publication of mental health essays.

Into the Depths

Welcome to Map of the Mind, where we explore the inner workings of a slightly chaotic mind! You have to be at least 5'2" to enjoy this ride. Please remember to keep all hands and feet inside the moving vehicle at all times, and try to enjoy the twisting turns and dark tunnels. We move quickly around here, so if you can't keep up, don't worry about it. We can't either.

Mind your heads as we pass through the pink passages and around gray matter, curling right and left. There's no telling where Amanda will take us. Her brain works wonders on math equations and analytical essays, as you can see by the size of the front of her brain, usually referred to as different parts of the cortex. Her boyfriend just jokingly says she has a big forehead.

Regardless, she wanders, sometimes thinking about the puzzle she wants to complete at the end of the day, and we end up being tugged in that direction. Sometimes she's thinking about her future and what's coming next. There's lots of empty space we have reserved for those times ahead, don't you worry. Wherever Amanda takes us, it's bound to be an intriguing and unpredictable thought process.

We start this journey directly behind the eyes. If you look to your left, you can see exactly what she sees. Notice how she's constantly scanning

back and forth

across the room or looking down at her phone the moment it buzzes? We haven't

quite figured out the wiring up here that makes her do that, but it's something we're working on.

Her eyes are very tired at the end of the day.

Moving swiftly along, if you look to your right, you will see all the tears we're saving for *exactly* the right moment. Hell, it may even be during this tour. Usually, we reserve those tears for things like

an overly stressful day,

funerals,

when someone says something in a slightly different tone than what she's

used to,

anxiety attacks,

incredibly cute dogs,

normally cute dogs,

funny tik toks,

and intense moments of uncertainty, (among a multitude of other things).

The best thing about those tears is that you never know when they'll start running. If we're lucky, we'll get to witness the thought train barreling through above our heads, and sometimes it has something to do with those tears. It's always a sight to see!

Next up on our tour... memory lane. As you can see, we have at least a million filing cabinets, an impressive collection in our opinion.

Just over there is her freshman year of college move-in day. Her smile shone brightly then, like a golden sunrise after a long week of rain, so we love to keep that memory front and center.

Way in the back is her senior year prom. We don't think about that very often, except when we want to shit talk her ex. Sometimes that can be fun, sometimes we find that we can hear her heart in her mind, so we back off on that memory.

Now, we know there are papers scattered on the ground, and falling from the ceiling, busting out of the drawers, and stacked on top of the cabinets. That was done on purpose, we think. We catalogue everything that has ever happened in the history of her for future reference. For example, she loves the look of the tiny light blue or yellow cape-style houses when her family ventures out to the fresh salty air on the coast. And one time she smashed her car mirror on a mailbox. Now she drives more centered on the road on smaller side streets. That's fine, we catalogue those memories as well. Some things are duplicates because she

can't remember if she's told a story before, or sent someone a funny picture, so she just does it again. We're not very organized up here, but that's okay, we'll figure it out eventually. Half the time these things don't see the light of day, both a blessing and a curse. Honestly, we don't think she's greatly affected by it. Although the disorganization may explain the stutter she has when telling other people stories...

Here comes the thought train! If you turn your attention upwards, you'll see one of the most unpredictable parts of her mind. Right up above us, this little train barrels around, creating new tracks out of any and all thoughts that pop into Amanda's brain. Anywhere from 3 to 300 times a day this train rattles around the unsteady tracks, bumping into walls, dropping cars, picking up cars, and occasionally crashing straight into her eyes, causing those tears that we love to drip out. The thoughts it comes up with lead her down spiraling alleys of anxiety, wondering whether her friends hate her because they left her snapchat open.

Were they answering other people?

Did she say something stupid, or something that might have upset them in any way, shape, or form?

Are they talking about it in a group chat right now?

Do they even want to be friends with her, or is she just the odd one out to them?

Or wondering if she's a terrible person because she forgot to water her succulent

and the succulent needs water every two weeks

and is that a new leaf or did the old ones fall off?

Is her treatment of this plant indicative of how she
treats people?

Just a few of the thoughts she might have. Half the time they have no basis, because of course she's not a terrible person for forgetting to water her succulent. But that's what the thought train does. It's slightly irrational, very emotional, and always looking to cause trouble.

Our last stop on this tour is her love box. We *love* her love box. Sometimes it's more simple love like her favorite energy drink (that she probably shouldn't drink because it always makes her jittery, but what can you do). Or sometimes it's more complex love like that she shares with her parents who get on her nerves and drive her crazy, but also listen to her wants, needs, and desires like they are their own.

Her love box is sectioned into many different parts, some as big as a whale and some as small as a pea. She adores penguins and elephants and the cute little videos and pictures she sees of them, and they obviously hold a special place in that love box of hers. But there's also little sections for forehead kisses from her love, or Sunday afternoons lazy in bed. She holds people close to her heart, like her frail grandmother who always ends up sending you home from her house with some sort of treat. Or even for the person passing her on the street, giving her a smile as they walk by. Anyone she lets in close to her heart we save a special place for right here in her love box.

Our favorite part about Amanda is that she always has space to add more without taking away from anyone else. She's wholesome, she's sincere, she has more love than she can handle. And that's why we do what we do; we manage the rest of this crazy mess to keep that love box

expanding. We keep that thought train on its tracks, and the memory lane is as neat and messy as it needs to be for her mind to function properly. We appreciate her for what she has and help her where she lacks. And we take great pride in that.

With that, our lovely tour is over. Thank you greatly for coming, we hope you enjoyed the organized chaos you experienced today. Please come back if you'd like, we're always looking for visitors, except when we're closed, so be mindful of us introverts. (No seriously, try to come back and check in otherwise she'll probably think about what she did wrong for the next 5, 10, 15 years at least).

Evidently Anxious

2006

While my belly had previously felt full of popcorn and happy memories, and the fire in my heart burned bright from being with my elementary school best friend, now I only felt churning inside as the sun dipped below the horizon.

“Is everything okay?” I heard my friend ask, looking away slightly from the movie that had been playing on the screen, our 7-year-old brains only capable of paying attention to one thing at a time. We were watching *Happy Feet*, a classic fan favorite. She pulled the blankets up higher on her chest as a cool breeze moved through the unfinished basement.

Everything around me felt familiar, as if it was my own home. Upstairs, I could hear footsteps on the hardwood floor and then pounding up the stairs. The usual clutter of board games and unfinished laundry was the same as it had always been. Yet I couldn’t focus, and the endless night stood in front of me, daunting, intimidating.

“Y-yeah. I’m okay.” I mustered a response, turning away and focusing my wavering gaze on the movie. That was also familiar.

“Are you *actually* going to stay the night tonight? You have to stay! You never do.” My stared directly at me, completely ignoring the movie she had only been half-heartedly watching anyway. Just outside the air had cooled from the heat of the day, and things were settling in for the night. Nothing stirred amidst the sudden chill.

I just looked ahead at the screen; my heart deflated. “I’m going to try,” I said finally and definitively, signaling an end to the conversation. “I never mean to leave.”

“It’s still a little annoying when you can’t stay.”

As if that had never crossed my mind.

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2013

My eyes watered slightly as I stared at the words on the page in front of me, my bed soft under my shaking legs. I knew them by heart, there was no question about that. It's what I would have to do with them tomorrow morning that made my stomach rise and fall like the unruly tides. While my 7th grade ELA teacher insisted that giving speeches in front of the class would only be helpful in life, I was not as easily convinced.

Everyone says public speaking makes them nervous, how can it not? But the thought of standing in front of a class, even when it's full of students that I've known my entire life, triggers something deep inside me. It's the anticipation of having everyone's attention on me that reacts negatively with my body and my hands and voice shake uncontrollably. There is no preparation for the anxiety.

And so here I was, salty tears dripped onto the paper, and a world of uncertainty ahead of me. *Maybe I'll just clean my room, get my mind off of it...* I thought to myself, eager to take on any responsibility that took away from the stagnant position I held myself in for so long.

While my room wasn't *messy* per say, it wasn't exactly clean either. Clothes sat in piles waiting to either be worn again or tossed into the hamper three feet across the room. Papers littered my bureau from miscellaneous classes and functions collecting dust amongst all my trinkets and favorite movie disks. Blankets slid off my twin sized bed, piling up at the base as the sheets appeared twisted, like even in my sleep my body mimicked the unrest my brain experiences daily. A messy room could often reflect a messy mind, at least that how I experience it.

With a deep breath and a YouTube video playing in the background, I began my systematic cleaning process, starting with the piles and moving onwards from there. The knots in my stomach slowly settled, and my mind focused on the mundane activity presented to me.

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2017

The bus rumbled up the rock-filled road, dust flying upwards as the tires cut through the loose dirt. Out the window were rolling hills as far as the eye could see, luscious green trees and flowers indigenous to the beautiful country of Peru. My stomach leaped and lunged as we twisted around near impossible bends, traversing higher and higher up to our next destination on this high school trip of a lifetime. No way could I have thought that my junior year spring break would be spent in another country entirely.

“Are you excited?” Yasmine asked me, coming out of her seat slightly to look out the front of the bus. I took a deep breath, barely able to comprehend what I was seeing.

“Oh, I’m excited alright, I’m curious what the place is going to look like, though,” I answered, glancing upwards to see one of the teachers coming out of her seat and turning around to look at us. Her eyes sparkled, clearly excited to show this bus full of high schoolers a culture outside of our small town back home.

The teacher up front gave us slight instructions and background for what to expect as the bus rolled to a stop. Just outside the windows, people of short stature wearing ornate, handmade hats and colorful dresses layered together stood waiting for our arrival.

A slight breeze passed through the aisles of the packed bus as the front doors opened and the first of the students began filing out of their seats. Yasmine and I grabbed our bags, tossed them over our shoulders, and followed everyone else out into the brisk mountain air.

In an instant we were greeted with smiling faces of small-statured women, each holding necklaces of soft pink flowers and long green chains, placing them over the necks of the students as we passed through the gates to their home village. The women spoke in their native tongue, grinning widely with mismatched teeth and soft eyes, the wrinkles framing their faces.

A brief welcoming ceremony commenced with colorful garments being tossed around and thrown over the shoulders of students; We were immersed fully in the culture, the clothing providing warmth against the unfamiliar conditions. The women of the village were excited to dress us in their workings, and the few men wandered among us strangers, sizing us up as visitors in their land.

Soon we were led into what must have been a sort of mess hall, and we sat on the smooth benches like a family joining together for a celebratory meal. And as suddenly as the sea recedes into a tsunami, my stomach sank into itself. I looked around at the smiling faces of everyone eager for the first course to come out to experience this in full and wondered why my smile didn't match theirs. Why my heart felt like it was going to burst at the seams in fear instead of amazement. Why suddenly I felt like I couldn't breathe, and tears pricked the corners of my eyes, threatening to unleash like the forces of the deep.

I had to get out.

"Can I just go outside for a second?" I asked one of my teachers, her barely responding before I reached the door and stepped back out into the brightness of the day, my breath not fully filling my chest. She followed me out the doors.

"What's the matter, honey?" she asked me, pulling me into her as the tears flowed down my cheeks, myself completely oblivious to their presence. My chest constricted more and I couldn't form the words, not that I had anything to even say. Not that I even knew what was

going on. I gasped in and out for air, looking desperately into her eyes for help as she pulled me down onto a bench, my legs thankful for the relief.

“Just breathe, you’re okay,” she said, trying to console me like a mother helping her daughter, another teacher walked out the door. I just pulled air in and out. Barely even holding it in my chest. My stomach hurt, and my hands shook.

Minutes felt like hours as the second teacher pulled me onto the ground with my back to the cold dirt and my feet stretched onto the bench above me, trying anything to slow my breathing as the thin mountain air passed through the vacant halls of my body like a ghost.

The second teacher sat with me, holding my head in her lap, speaking softly to try and lead me back to sanity, stroking my hair. The minutes ticked past as I tried to control my breathing, my heart returning to a normal pace, my hands unsteadily holding a napkin to my nose with something to smell, forcing my jumbled brain to focus on one task. The feelings passed eventually, and I could breathe. But what had just happened, thousands of miles away from home, for the first time, scared me.

It really scared me.

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(2008)

The thought of the next day loomed in my mind as I curled deep into the couch, hoping maybe to completely disappear inside of it. My stomach twisted, eyes watered.

“Honey, what do you mean you don’t want to start Girl Scouts tomorrow? You have friends from your class in it, and some from last year’s second grade class too. You’re going to be fine,” my mom hollered from the next room over as she prepared dinner for that night.

The prospect of starting something new terrified me to the core, and while it seemed like a good idea when I talked to my friends about it a few months ago, now that it was just around the corner, I wanted to take back everything I had ever said about the subject.

“I just don’t want to, okay?” I responded irritably, turning away from the room and facing the couch instead, trying to keep from crying. The frustration I felt was building in my throat, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead crushed my chest like the weight of the ocean above my head.

“I don’t understand why you don’t want to anymore. You were just talking about it the other day,” my mom’s voice rang from the kitchen, and instantly the water unleashed, and tears were rolling down my cheeks. Just hours ago we talked excitedly about this new opportunity, and her mom loved the idea of her introverted daughter getting out with her friends.

“I don’t know why I don’t want to!” I finally yelled, tears blurring my vision and my cheeks warm to the touch. I was overwhelmed, and unsure of exactly what was making me feel this way. I had been excited to start Girl Scouts and get to hang out with my friends and do cool things, but now all I saw was the things I did not know and experiences I had never had before, and the opportunity seemed more daunting than exciting.

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(2019)

As I opened my eyes against the bright light of the early morning of junior year of college, the bed springs squeaked underneath me, the comfort of my bed slightly soothing as I grabbed my phone and sent a brief good morning text to my love along with a small message.

I’m feeling kind of anxious today.

The day awaited ahead as I climbed out of my comfort zone and into the cool air of the morning, my college roommate still enjoying the warmth of her covers as she snored slightly on the other side of the cramped dorm room. I silently crawled into my desk chair and grabbed my mirror to prepare myself for the rest of the day, stacking that on top of the open books and unfinished homework that could be the source of this pit, but may not be.

My phone chimed, and I quickly silenced it in the hopes that I wouldn't wake my roommate; she just snored again and shifted slightly in her cocoon.

What's on your mind?

What a question, honestly. What wasn't on my mind? The homework that sat before me, the thought of breakfast before class, was it hot out? Or maybe it was cold enough for a sweatshirt. But I didn't want to be too hot in class, it was a long walk across campus. Maybe I'd just put a t-shirt on. Or a long sleeve? I didn't want to look weird if everyone else had a sweatshirt.

I'm not too sure. I replied and turned my attention back to my witch hazel and deodorant. Following my quick morning routine, I picked out the comfiest outfit I could and hoped that it would feel okay for the rest of the day. Maybe it would be warm in the building as this one in particular was usually warm. But the walk across campus...

I grabbed whatever textbooks were relevant for the day, leaving the others open and sprawled across my desk as a problem for when I got back later that day. Textbooks in hand, I grabbed my notebook, my backpack, and the remaining essentials and tiptoed to the common room, and the monstrous door clicked shut behind me.

In the common room, one of my suitemates shuffled across the room, towel in hand.

“Morning! Sleep good?” she asked. She was one of my first friends at school and living together along with our other two really good friends felt like a party every night.

“Eh, just okay. Feeling kind of anxious this morning but I have class soon so,” I said, shrugging slightly as I packed my things into my backpack. She made a face of understanding and continued on with slight conversation before heading into the shower to prepare herself for her own day. I quickly filled my water bottle and packed that into my backpack as an essential to a good day, grabbed some apple sauce from the fridge, and headed out the door for my busy day, the pit still wallowing in my stomach.

I shoved those feelings aside, unable to decipher what was causing the pit, but deciding to work past it as I had things to accomplish, and I refused to let the pit take hold of my entire day. The pit could wait.

Love, Amanda

Dear Mommy,

2005

I think you had a bad day today, but I don't really know. You seem really stressed, like when I can't get one of my sisters to let me use the markers or when you say I can't have a snack before dinner. Your forehead wrinkles, and the corners of your mouth turn down in a small frown. It's okay, mommy. I get frustrated too, so maybe I can help. Why are you frustrated?

Jamie seemed frustrated today too, but you always tell us how she can't talk about what's making her mad like you and me. I don't really understand that, she just gets frustrated and starts kicking and screaming. I don't really like it, but maybe she's just frustrated like you and me.

Love, Amanda

Dear Mommy,

2008

I came home from school today, and I was excited to show you the grade I got on my spelling test. It's always really good, so I really like showing you and Dad. But when I got home from school, you were on the phone with Dad, and you seemed frustrated again with your thin smile and sparkle missing from your eyes. Your shoulders slumped down like you were folding into yourself. I could hear you talking about Jamie, but it seems like you always walk in the other room when talking about something that made you frustrated. Why do you do that, Mommy?

I think I heard you tell Dad that Jamie had a meltdown at school, and do you mean like how she throws her feet and tries to bite me? I understand why she gets frustrated and why she can't tell us, but I really wish others would learn too. It makes it hard to tell my friends why she won't talk or why she's doing certain things like walking upstairs really slowly and only saying hi when we tell her to.

Love your concerned daughter, Amanda

Dear Mom,

2012

You told me about how Jamie took off running down the high school hall today, and how one of her classroom helpers had to run after her and grab her because the teachers couldn't. I'm sorry that happened to Jamie, and I'm sorry another student had to chase after her to make sure she didn't hurt herself or put herself in danger. She runs when she gets frustrated, and I'm sure that scares you and Dad. It scares me a little bit too.

Sometimes I worry about Jamie and how she can't really talk to us about her feelings, and how it makes you and Dad feel. I feel like it's hard enough having 4 daughters, and one with special needs must be even harder. We can see it in the few extra minutes it takes to pick us up from softball practice because Jamie needed more time getting ready to leave, or when we had to leave early from that family vacation from Massachusetts to New Hampshire because she couldn't handle the break from routine. She stayed up all night because she didn't understand why she wasn't home in bed, and you stayed up with her. I know you and Dad feel guilty, and it hurts my heart in more ways than you know that you feel this guilt, especially as I grow older. It's okay, you are doing, and have always done, the best that you can with the hand we were dealt.

I wanted to tell you about how I felt really nervous before my presentation at the science fair, but I could tell you weren't feeling great, and I didn't want to bother you. I understand though, it can be really hard when you have something scary on your mind, and you want to make sure others are okay. I'll tell you about my science fair project tonight, and how my belly hurt because I was so nervous. My hands wouldn't stop shaking even though I only had a few

people ask me questions. It was really weird, and I know people always talk about how they're afraid of public speaking, but this felt different. It felt worse than fear, but I'm not sure what that means.

Anyways, I'll tell you about my day in a little bit, after you've had time to calm down and make sure Jamie is all settled in.

Love your incredibly aware daughter, Amanda

Dear Mom,

2015

I had a bad day today, and I couldn't really figure out why. Maybe it had something to do with how my friends were trying to make plans, but nobody could really decide what they wanted to do.

We were all texting in our group chat, but I only heard a message come through every few minutes. Juli said she could maybe hang out, and Julia said she'd be ready after 5. Marie said we could hang out at her house if we wanted, and Kaley said she would need a ride. I told her I could pick her up, and I asked Marie what time. She didn't answer, and then Juli said she couldn't hang out anymore, and nobody answered after that.

I don't know why, but my stomach knotted and my brain wouldn't slow down. All I could think about was that they were making excuses not to hang out, and my arms felt heavy and my lips were all chewed up. The skin is open and raw, and it hurts even to lick. The pain is constant.

I'm sure they wanted to hang out, and I'm sure it's normal that our plans fell through. It's crazy for me to be thinking this way—why would my friends lie for no reason. It just didn't work out today, and I have to accept that. But my brain won't stop telling me otherwise...

I know what you're going to say. I can almost picture you standing in my doorway, worn L.L. Bean slippers on your feet and a snack in hand for Jamie. You're going to tell me it's okay and that we'll just hang out another day. You're going to tell me that it's better to be mad than be sad, valuable advice that annoys me in the moment but makes more sense rationally and that I appreciate more so after the fact.

I know that, I really do, I *know* that things are fine. But they don't feel it, and I don't like it.

Did you have a good day today? The rugs smell like that powder you use when you vacuum. I love the house all clean, even if my room becomes a mess after a few days. Maybe I should just clean my room, and it will clear my head. Doesn't hurt to try.

Thanks Mom, you help even when you don't know it. But I'm starting to feel this way a lot, and I'm not sure where it's coming from.

Love your confused daughter, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2015

I know Jamie had a bad day, I can see it in your eyes and the way your smile doesn't quite reach them when I told you about my day in the car ride home from school. The windows were down, and the cold air felt fresh on my face. I can hear it in your voice when you trail off at the end of your sentences, and you sighed in relief when Dad walked in the door tonight. I'm sure he helps, it's important to have a person you can lean on.

I'm sure it was scary all those years ago when Jamie was diagnosed with her chromosome deletion, Phelan McDermid Syndrome, and even scarier when you found out just how rare the syndrome actually was. Her developmental delays and inability to communicate as

an adult or regulate her feelings has posed many challenges beyond the obvious. And people say they understand, but do they really? An analogy often used is traveling to an unknown land without any preparation or expectations. While this is accurate to an extent, it does no justice to the time and dedication it takes to learn the new normal, and trying to raise three other children at the same time. You landed in an unexpected place, but the turbulence almost took down your flight, you forgot your luggage and your wallet, none of the stores are open, the locals speak another language, and you have three young kids in tow. But you do what you have to do to keep your family afloat, and that's what you and Dad have done.

I've been having bad days recently too, but I think it's totally unrelated to Jamie. Lately, my stomach drops at random moments, and I feel like I can't focus my thoughts on one specific thing, especially at night. I've started listening to YouTube videos when the night is quiet and my thoughts are loud, but the video can be louder. It helps soften the swell that builds in my mind. I've started biting the inner corners of my lips, and the skin is raw and thin, and sometimes I taste blood if I bite hard enough. I only do when my stomach churns like the waves of an ocean, swelling super big and dropping even further.

I wish there was more you could do to help. I wish there was more I could do to help.

Love always, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2017

I'm pretty sure I had my first panic attack today, and what a story it is. I know I'm in another country, another time zone entirely, and that's why I think I'm going to wait to tell you. You and Dad worked so hard to make this school trip possible for me, and I don't want you to worry, because I know you will. It was so scary though, Mom, and I wish you could have been there with me.

My chest tightened, and I felt like I couldn't breathe in the thin mountain air. Mrs. Fitz let me lay my head in her lap, and she sat with me the whole time, soothing me while I couldn't do that for myself. It helped, but anxiety almost feels like a personal battle. Nobody can *really* help you escape your mind; you just have to do it yourself. It sucks.

Despite all that I'm still over the moon about being in Peru, experiencing all the sights and sounds that we were never able to when I was younger in family vacations. I don't blame you or Dad, the situation was different, and I understand that now. Jamie's life revolves around routine. Breaking that routine, like we tried once before, results in a sleepless night and endless tears until her routine is reestablished. Any potential positive memories are not worth the inevitable pain for Jamie, and in turn for you. Not to mention the financial burden a family vacation for six people would ensue. Dad would never say, but we know, and it's okay. We made memories at home, and those are more worth it than any vacation. I like being at home, anyways.

Still, going on a plane for the first time and seeing the clouds up close against the rain-stained windows was as magical as I always thought it would be.

Love your world traveler, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2018

It's always sounded so cliché hearing stories of how going to college and leaving your hometown changes you as a person, but now I think I understand it. It was a shit summer, and I don't think I've ever felt so lonely, even if I'm better off now anyways. I had to turn my phone on *Do Not Disturb* to break the habit of constantly texting someone. I think you could see how hard it was for me, and I just want you to know that I feel okay. Actually, I feel more than okay.

Family has told me that I'm glowing from this newfound happiness, and I feel that, too. My days feel brighter and I'm excited to hang out with my new friends at this busy school where, unlike high school, there is so much to explore and discover as I pass new faces and new buildings and new rooms every single day.

There are moments where I'm walking the length of the park in the middle of campus, the sun is warm on my cheeks, my friends following closely behind me. The constantly shifting tides have settled, and the corners of my lips are healing. I can't thank you and Dad enough for trusting me to do this, and to do it right.

Love your college student, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2019

You called me today and I could tell that something was off. You didn't want to worry me, which is exactly your personality, but you felt your heart racing and you couldn't control it. You called Dad, and he took you to the hospital, just in case. You probably sat in the front seat, your hands fiddling with the gold necklaces that you never take off, your eyes trained out the window as if that would ease the uneasiness.

But I know what caused these feelings, and I think you know too, but it scares you regardless.

Anxiety attacks are scary, and raw, and you feel like your chest is caving in. Like the water is rising above your head and your lungs are screaming for air but you just can't break the surface. I know you were having some form of an anxiety attack. I know because I've felt this myself, and the signs are all there.

I came to the realization long enough ago that I know, or at least kinda know, what causes my anxiety. New situations, uncertainty, and being an extreme people pleaser are all things that I've had to learn to overcome, and I'm still working on it. But your anxiety is different, as it is for all people who experience anxiety. A lot of your anxiety seems situational, especially in terms of Jamie and her comfort and stability in life. It's normal to worry about your children. But when this child relies on you for every aspect of life like eating, bathing, transportation, entertainment, and so on, the worry becomes something more. You're not to blame, anxiety is to blame, and I'm sorry this has become another obstacle in your path. But you'll work through it, you always do. Find that silver lining, it may be thin, but it's there. Just like you always tell me.

Love your anxious daughter, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2020

What a world we live in right now. Amongst all the uncertainty and stay at home orders, I feel oddly okay. While this would normally create mountains of anxiety for me, I think the stress of the semester has forced me into acceptance, so that's where I stand. It's clear, though, that Jamie isn't so lucky.

How do you explain to a nonverbal child that we are in the middle of a pandemic, and she can't go to school because there's the risk of getting sick? You can't, you just can't. You keep her home, try to distract her from the break in routine with lots of walks around the neighborhood and trips to Dad's worksite to give him a snack or two. But she knows she's supposed to be in school, she's not dumb.

I can see the anxiety when she opens 16 tabs on her iPad, not really intending to go to any website—she doesn't know how—but she doesn't know what else to do. I can hear the anxiety in her heavy steps down the hall after walking down to the kitchen with no purpose. I can feel the anxiety when I talk to her, normally able to prompt for a response, but instead receiving a blank stare, her face developing slight tics associated with the anxiety she's holding. I know how she's feeling, and I know how you're feeling as a result. Recently you've started calling her a ticking time bomb, and there's never been a more accurate description for a nonverbal child experiencing emotions that she can't communicate. Sometimes I wish there was more I could do to help but please understand that I know how you both feel. We are in this together.

Love your understanding daughter, Amanda

Dear Ma,

2020

If these past few months have proven anything to you, it's that anxiety is ruthless and demanding of your attention even when you're pulled in fifteen different directions and don't have the time to dedicate to the anxiety. Anxiety shoves its way to the top of the priority list, and sets up camp for a little while until you force it out. But you can kick it and shut the door, I've done it countless times. It's a learning process.

I know you're living day to day, thinking ahead is just out of the question when Jamie's behavior is so unpredictable. If that's what works, then that's what's best for the moment. You don't overcome anxiety, you learn how to cope.

Endless love, Amanda

Time Bomb

5

A time bomb is described as something that is designed to explode at a predetermined time, or something with potentially dangerous or detrimental delayed reaction. What they fail to mention is that those individuals around a ticking time bomb don't know when that predetermined time is. They brace themselves against its inevitable destruction.

The lights flicker, flicker, and finally turn off completely, embracing the room in a blanket of darkness that is amplified by the sound of the heavy rain smacking the windows. Kelsey looks up, and her chest stops moving for a split second. Down the hall, the ticking has started.

Kelsey's forehead wrinkles after decades and decades of raising 4 girls into adulthood, and the laugh lines typically present around her smile are invisible in this moment as her mouth forms a thin line across her face. She rests her phone in her lap for a moment, the screen open to a text conversation with her husband, David.

lost power...

She takes a deep breath and wipes her hands over her face and across her forehead, the wrinkles exaggerated in the dim light. Finally, she stands.

Just down the hall, Jamie sits alone in the dark room, her legs covered lightly by the soft quilt on her mother's bed. In her lap sits her iPad frozen on a buffering screen from the video she must have been watching, the hard case sporting cracks and broken silicone edges from the years of protecting the precious technology from the destruction of pure emotions. Staring straight ahead, Jamie's face is still like that of a glass doll.

Kelsey walks crookedly down the hall, her knee stiff from neglect of a past injury, or more accurately from the absence of time and resources. The floorboards of the well-loved home creak against each other, showing their age in years of children, dogs, and loved ones stomping.

Her hand is steady as she reaches to take the iPad out of Jamie's hand, her breath even. But her mind ran wild with thoughts, barely able to focus on one thought before frantically moving on to the next. A silent countdown materializes in her mind, although she can't quite tell how long till the blast kicks off.

"C'mon, Jamie. Time to get up," she says. Jamie's lips simply purse in and out, her stare blank, her eyes wide.

Kelsey encourages Jamie to stand up, and prompts her through getting dressed to leave the house. Jamie can't do so on her own, she relies on Kelsey. Her disability, Phelan-McDermid Syndrome, leaves her nonverbal and developmentally delayed. At 19 years old, she is mentally no older than 10. The rain bursts against the window panes. Kelsey grits her teeth and settles her out of control mind.

Seconds stretch out as long as they can as Kelsey grips Jamie's hand walking out to the silver minivan in the rocky driveway, Jamie's steps strong but reluctant. This isn't part of her routine. The time after dinner is meant to be dedicated to her iPad, religiously watching her cartoons and eccentric characters as she is slowly pulled away to sleep, starting all over the next morning. Routine provides structure to her life that is otherwise confusing and nonlinear, and the colorful, enticing characters from her cartoons make her laugh with their antics, brightening her day as she sits and watches them.

As Kelsey backs out of the driveway, she catches Jamie's eyes in the rearview mirror. Her face is illuminated by the light of her useless iPad.

The streets are empty as she glides over the expanding puddles and dips into the exposed potholes. As each minute passes Jamie opens another tab on her iPad, diving deeper and deeper

into the void of destinationless Google searches. She wants her videos to play. They won't without the presence of Wi-Fi. Kelsey drives faster.

Miles and miles away, another one of Kelsey's daughters desperately searches the websites of power companies and national weather stations, urgently trying to help her mother with the simplest task of finding out when the power will come back on. The websites are useless.

"We'll stop here," Kelsey says as she pulls into a random parking lot. Jamie has resorted to holding her iPad up to the window, seconds away from banging it on the window as well, unable to control the frustration that's inevitably building in her chest. Kelsey sees this and steadies her breath, and focuses her discombobulated brain.

"Jamie, give me the iPad." She says, turning around in the driver's seat to take the iPad from her flustered daughter. Jamie whips it further away, furiously pursing her lips in and out, a tic she developed recently. Her body's way of letting emotion out. Kelsey holds her hand out, her eyes serious, her hand still steady as she scrambles mentally on what to do next.

Anxiety feeds off of a person's fear of the future, taking one thought and sending it twisting and turning in the person's brain. For Kelsey, the panic is constant as she tries to predict what Jamie's reaction is going to be to everything. But Jamie is unpredictable and the irony of Kelsey and Jamie's relationship fuels the anxiety even more.

Jamie finally releases, heaving her iPad forward, scrunching her face as tightly as she can as she forces air out between her lips, an explosive sound. The seatbelt that usually holds her in place fails as Jamie slumps downwards in her seat, her long legs tangled together as they struggle to fill the limited space she has created for them. She yelps once, twice, and finally breaks down into heavy sobs, the snot running freely down her nose onto her chapped lips. She is defeated,

frustrated, ticking away until her next outburst of emotion. Kelsey breathes deeply struggling to maintain her own composure, straightens her thoughts, and begins the difficult process of getting a heavily emotional, disabled, tall and lanky child back into their seat safely from the front seat.

The storm rages on outside the car.

4

At the core of any time bomb is an explosive charge, making up the majority of the size and weight of the time bomb. The actual timing mechanism of the bomb can be constructed using simple household technology like a wrist watch or a kitchen timer. Finally, the bomb uses a detonator to be set off, releasing all the chaotic, pent up energy in the form of a destructive wave leveling the immediate vicinity.

“So, I already gave Jamie dinner, and there’s food in the fridge for the others when they get hungry. Really whatever they want is fine,” Kelsey explains as her sister walks into the kitchen with her. Her daughters sit in the living room, watching some cartoon on the tv, excited for their aunt to stay the night with them.

“Sounds good to me!” Her sister's voice dances through the door, the smile evident in her voice. “Don’t worry about us, seriously. You and your husband deserve this.” She looks at Kelsey with a stern eye, a glint of happiness sends the corners of her mouth upwards. “You guys haven’t gotten to go out by yourself in *years*. Jamie’s four now, she can handle this! Seriously, don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine!”

Kelsey breathes deeply as she hands her bag to her husband to take out to the car. It was true, when was the last time the couple had gone out together alone? *Since Jamie was born...* she thought to herself, guilty even thinking that way. It had been years and years she finally decided, and instead focused her thoughts towards the current moment. Jamie was just down the hall,

content in her own world, ignorant to the potential change in her routine that was bound to happen any moment. Kelsey ignores the hallway and instead walks slowly towards the door.

“I don’t want Jamie to know I’m leaving, she might get mad so it’s better to just avoid it,” she says, her eyes darting between her daughters and the looming hallway. Her husband was already out the door, just as worried but more stoic in the moment.

Ever so slowly she steps out the door and almost tiptoes to the car already running in the driveway, the headlights illuminating their backyard. Her husband sits in the driver’s seat, ready to head out as soon as Kelsey slumps into the passenger seat with a deep sigh and a look towards her bedroom window.

“She’ll be fine,” he says, taking her hand for a moment before turning back to his task at hand driving them away from the house. “She’s all set up with her tv shows and movies, and she already ate dinner. Your sister just has to get her to go to the bathroom once and then she’ll fall asleep in our bed, really, I’m sure it’ll be okay.” He shares her feelings of uneasiness, but he held strong for her, knowing how important these few hours alone together were to the both of them.

“I guess you’re right...” Kelsey finally admits, although she’s not fully convinced. They take off down the road through the dark of the night, ready for their date night and stay in a local hotel.

But Kelsey never fully stops thinking about Jamie. The couple sits down for a nice dinner, Kelsey’s phone right on the table face up. The pair order a few drinks, maybe some appetizers, and try to enjoy their first evening alone in who knows how long.

Throughout their dinner Kelsey tries to relax. After all, her husband is right. If things don’t work out the way they planned, at least they are trying.

And unfortunately, her husband was absolutely right, but not really in the way they could have hoped. Kelsey's phone screen lights up and vibrates on the table, startling them out of their conversation.

"Hello?" She says, already knowing what her sister is going to say on the other line.

"I'm so sorry, but we need you to come home. Jamie's crying and won't come to the bathroom, I tried to get her up to go before she fell asleep but she just wasn't okay with me helping her and burst out when I tried to get her up. I'm sorry, Kels."

Her heart drops and her smile dips.

3

While the time bomb has been popularized in fiction-based action or thriller films, the history of time bombs is lengthy and infamous as the death toll rises with each use.

It was a quiet day, the sun may have been shining and the breeze slightly on their backs as they descended towards the trail, the ground uneven beneath their feet. Just ahead, a dock cut into the bog, and turtles lay lazily on the rocks scattered on the surface of the still water. The smile on Jamie's face was immediate, and the group knew they made the right decision.

Jamie loved the cranberry bog at the Bass Pro Shop even at just 10 years old.

Her steps were cautious on the dock; unsteady ground made her nervous. But as Kelsey, Jamie, and Amanda moved further and further ahead, Jamie stepped with more confidence. Kelsey visibly relaxed. Her shoulders slumped, her eyebrows unfurled, her lips traced into a small smile, gazing over at Jamie who trailed between herself and her other daughter.

It was the little things that amused Jamie, the simplicity of day-to-day activities kept her stable.

But Jamie was going to be upset when they had to leave.

She was happy. She was content. She was comfortable in the situation that she was in, and like anyone having a good time, she did not want to leave. However, the sun had begun to dip, and all those who were once wandering the docks as we were began to disappear back into the store. Few words passed between Kelsey and her daughter, Amanda, they didn't need words to communicate these feelings. They just knew.

Amanda had always been a big help with Jamie, and just about everything in general. Her empathic personality meant she cared an extreme amount for her family, maybe even too much sometimes. She got that from her mom, though, they were one in the same in personality.

"Come on Jamie, it's time to go. Let's go find dad," Kelsey started to say, reaching her hand towards Jamie's. A slight twitch in her face, no tears yet but her stomach dropped, and she knew this would be more difficult than they would have hoped.

"Jamie, c'mon," Kelsey started again, this time gripping Jamie's hand in hers, leading her back towards the store. Jamie stepped heavily, her cheeks quickly heating up and her mouth twitching slightly. Her other daughter followed closely behind.

They made it back up to the store with minimal damage, but a storm was brewing behind Jamie's eyes, and Kelsey could sense the wheels in Jamie's mind turning. The rain threatening to fall, likely to drench them in a matter of seconds.

But before they could make it inside the store, Jamie had made up her mind. Jamie kicked her long legs and took off ahead of them, alongside the outside of Bass Pro. Immediately, a pit formed in Amanda's stomach as she watched Kelsey try to chase after her, almost paralyzed in shock. But Jamie's legs are long, and there was no slowing this kid down.

“Amanda!” Kelsey might have yelled, panic laced in her voice as Jamie neared the parking lot just ahead of them, unwilling to stop as she simply didn’t understand the dangers behind her actions.

What was probably just seconds felt like hours as Kelsey’s eyes followed Jamie and Amanda, begging her to stop as quickly as she started. Mere moments later, Amanda grabbed her forearm and gripped it hard, her heart pumping, her thoughts racing. Jamie just flopped to the ground, she was probably crying, or screaming. Neither of them remembers. All they remember is the surrender, and the panic they had just felt as they realized even more so the magnitude of Jamie’s frustration.

2

The explosive charge of a time bomb in combination with the casing and projectiles used in production create lethal fragments upon detonation.

Kelsey sat at the top of the stairs, her beat up work shoes in one hand and a boring uniform shirt in the other. Her mind wouldn’t stop moving a mile a minute, and it wasn’t even eight in the morning yet. Jamie sat in Kelsey’s bed down the hall, unable to follow her typical routine of going to high school that morning with her friends.

Kelsey was supposed to leave for work any moment now, her body already up and ready for the day like she had been doing for a few years now. While she had only started working part time at the local grocery store just a few years prior, going to work in the morning meant something more than what it could typically mean for a parent. All her children’s lives, Kelsey had been at home with them, taking them to softball practice in her silver minivan, stopping for groceries in between doctor and dentist appointments, and making trips to their school in the

middle of the day when one of her daughters forgot their cleats or a textbook. Nothing was off limits because Kelsey had the time, except that became a problem when she eventually had too much time.

Outside of the daily activities of three typical daughters and their extracurricular activities, Kelsey had to make herself available day in and day out in case her daughter Jamie required her attention. Jamie required more attention and more flexibility from Kelsey to pick her up from school if she seemed like she wasn't feeling well. Since Jamie is nonverbal, any sniffly nose or refusal to eat her snack meant an early release from school in case she actually ended up being sick. If Jamie was overwhelmed for any reason, her natural response was to act out, typically leading to her going home from school. Hot days meant trouble regulating her temperature, meaning she was sent home. Kelsey was constantly on call while each of her kids grew older and more independent. Unfortunately, Jamie will never have the independence her siblings learned over time, she will rely heavily on others to support her daily life.

With most of her daughters of driving age and older, two even had moved out at this point, Kelsey needed something more to occupy her time, and it never hurt bringing in some extra income to pay for gas without asking her overworked and underpaid husband. She started working the day shift at a grocery store, providing her with enough freedom to do as she pleased and fulfill her abundance of time while her daughters were at school, but it also allowed her the flexibility of leaving abruptly if ever Jamie needed extra care. Getting out of the house on her own meant something more to Kelsey than it may have meant to others her age. It meant a life of her own for the few hours she was without immediate responsibility. It meant more financial stability. It meant freedom.

Except due to recent events and the COVID-19 pandemic, Jamie was home all the time, her school let out indefinitely. And now Kelsey was faced with the dilemma of leaving Jamie at home in the care of her older sister for a few hours, or staying home and losing that freedom and extra income. She was stuck and she knew it.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Amanda says as she comes up the stairs, a yawn on the tip of her tongue. She was home from school indefinitely as well, providing extra help for her mom when needed.

Jamie doesn’t like breaks in her routine, and not going to school was as big of a break from routine as you can create. Kelsey was anxious.

“She hasn’t been fine the past few days, though. She doesn’t like staying home and she doesn’t like when other people try to help her and she’s just even more irritated now that she’s home all the time,” Kelsey grumbles as she tossed her shoes on the step below her and rubbed her hands across her forehead. She knows she shouldn’t go. She knows Jamie’s behavior is changing in ways destructive to herself and to her sister, and quite frankly to Kelsey. But *god* does she want to go to work so badly. A touch of freedom is just in reach.

“I’ll go, but text me as soon as something changes. I don’t need her throwing her iPad across the room because a video won’t load or undressing from her pajamas because her mind can’t process the break in routine. Just promise you’ll call me, okay?” she finally says, her thoughts already racing to the rest of the day, unable to focus on one particular moment.

“Of course I’ll call you. It’ll be fine I know it.” And so, Kelsey grabs her shoes and tosses her shirt onto her shoulder, stepping as carefully down the creaky stairs as she can, easing the door shut behind her. The sun shines on her face as the early days of May creep ahead, the warmth of the spring months barely available to her and many others.

Her thoughts are on Jamie even as she takes the simple drive to work, easing around the potholes and cruising down the all-familiar main road of their small town. Her thoughts are on Jamie as she pulls her non-slip shoes on in the parking lot of the grocery store. Her thoughts are on Jamie as she clocks in and begins the routine of a typical day. And her thoughts are on Jamie as she feels the vibration of her phone in her back pocket, barely an hour after she arrived at her work station for the day.

“You need to come home.”

She knew like she knew each time before. She knew.

1

People can be time bombs, even if it's out of their control.

The group of four had already made it through the line to rent their mini golf clubs, they had already picked out the color of ball they would each use, and they had already practiced on the starter grass and proceeded through the first hole, trying to make a fun summer afternoon after a hell of a 2020 summer dictated by the pandemic. But as Kelsey stepped forward to the first hole, Jamie's hand clasped tightly in her own, Amanda and her husband David trailing slightly behind, Kelsey grit her teeth and furrowed her brow.

“We just have to wait one minute,” she said lightly to Jamie, a nervous smile tugging her lips upwards even though she knew it was little to no use. She noticed her daughter standing slightly behind Jamie, feet apart and eyes trained on Jamie like a hawk. Her husband stood just behind them, stoic as always and wiggling back and forth on the heels of his feet like he used to do at all his girls' softball games out in the crowd.

Jamie already seemed uneasy, her lips pursing in and out and her cheeks flushed deep red in the hot summer air. In Kelsey's mind, a faint ticking could be heard.

The group ahead of them had finally finished their turn on the second hole, freeing the space for Kelsey's group to take their turn. As Kelsey stepped ahead, her hands occupied with both her and Jamie's clubs and brightly colored golf balls, Jamie stepped backwards. It was a single step at first, one might even think it harmless if they never met Jamie, but it was enough.

Kelsey barely had the chance to turn around to the rest of her family before Jamie was long stride sprinting back down the path just barely making it past her sister and her dad. In a split second, she was out of their sight, their quick instincts no match for her long legs and determination to remove herself from the situation.

Kelsey's heart dropped, and it must have only been a second before her daughter bolted just behind Jamie, arms outstretched in an anticipated grab.

"Jamie!" she must have yelled, although she's not even sure, the moment was a split-second blur. An outward explosion after minimal buildup.

In a second, Amanda grabbed Jamie's upper arm as Jamie flopped almost to the ground, becoming dead weight in an instant. She knew she had been caught, there was no use running after that. Kelsey and her husband flew down the path just barely behind her two daughters, who were now holding hands tightly, one of them crying openly and profusely, the other stone faced for a moment before accepting what had happened and making eye contact with both of her parents. She shrugged slightly.

Amanda knew as well as her parents that Jamie was struggling. Her meltdown during an attempt at a fun activity is reflective of her anxiety; Jamie is overwhelmed with emotion as her

routine is broken every day for reasons out of her knowledge or understanding. Amanda gets it. Just one day at a time in her mind.

Kelsey tugged Jamie up and silently began walking to the parking lot, passing a few people and barely stopping to wait for her husband and daughter, although they were already following closely behind.

By the time they were at the car, Jamie had already stopped crying, her eyes still wet, her cheeks blotchy. Kelsey and her husband share a knowing glance as Kelsey buckles Jamie tightly into her seat and pulls the side door shut. They don't even have to say anything to each other, after all these years they just know.

Reclamation

“Do you really think it’s anxiety?” Mom turned her head to me, away from the quiet road ahead. We had just picked up Jamie from school and she now sat neatly behind my mom, her eyes scanning the landscape as we passed.

“Yeah, I’d say so,” I replied earnestly; there was no denying it at this point. Her eyes had turned back to the road and she nodded, seemingly unconcerned at the moment. Her silence felt like acceptance, and I just turned my head straight again. That was kind of my mentality, too.

Anxiety made itself known in me very early on in my life. From the earliest moment I can remember, it felt like every second was just a little bit more worrisome than it should have been. A riptide settles in the water, waiting for the next unassuming swimmer to come into their grasp. The tide pulls the swimmer further and further away from land and into the unknown of the deep.

Even now at 21 years old, I can feel a ghost of the dip in my stomach every time the sun set at sleepovers or when there was even the slightest mention of group work and presentations in school. I can feel the exhaustion of my brain when, even at the end of the day, the light from my phone lit up the closest walls of my dark bedroom, playing a random video that I just needed to fall asleep to. It’s always there.

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10 years old with anxiety feels much different than 15 years old with anxiety. And 15 years old with anxiety feels much different than 20 years old with anxiety. As your body grows and adjusts to the life it’s living, as does anxiety. It is as constant as the tides in the ocean; inching closer as the day wears on, reaching its peak at the dunes before slowly drifting back out, only to come back the next day just as reliable as the day before.

What is there to do when the tide comes in high and it feels like there's nowhere left to go? In the simplest terms, you adjust, and continue on with your day.

For someone like myself who struggles with anxiety on a very irregular schedule, adjusting to the ever-changing moments of life feels like a daunting, daily task. I can remember days in high school where I would wake up in the morning and try on 16 different outfits, tossing the worn jeans to the side when they just didn't look right with my trusty windbreaker, even though I had worn that specific outfit at least once a week for every week that year. After several more attempts and the time slowly ticking away from me, I would pick those same jeans back up off the ground and tug them on, hopping up and down all over my shoebox sized room, the floor entirely enveloped with leggings and sweatpants and other jeans that just didn't feel right that day. This outfit didn't either, but time was up, and I'd feel the effects of my indecisiveness all day. The only relief was coming home and stripping those jeans off, throwing the same pajamas back on again because they felt familiar and comfortable and safe. Indecisiveness can be directly linked to anxiety.

Anxiety is that slight tick in the back of your brain, telling you that those jeans don't feel right even if you wore them just fine yesterday. Nothing looks right, and nothing will look right until that anxiety subsides.

Making decisions is absolutely something I still struggle with, although it no longer feels like a major source of anxiety. It is just indecisiveness. More recently, I've found myself dealing with an anxious belly, flipping upside down and all around, not entirely sure of the root of it all. If I knew the cause of the anxiety, I'd sure as hell try to combat it, but it isn't always that easy unfortunately.

“What’s going on inside your mind?” my partner had asked me, trying to pick apart my brain even further than I am capable on my own. The twists and turns of the inner workings of the mind can be a difficult place to navigate. The disorder and chaos can only make sense to the individual, and sometimes not even them.

“I can’t really put my finger on it, I just don’t know,” I would reply for weeks and weeks. And in that moment, that was the truth. *Why* I am feeling the things I’m feeling, I could never quite figure out. My brain and my anxiety seemed to be on different schedules, oblivious to each other. I’d just grab my laptop, plop onto my partner’s side of the bed under the comfy blankets and watch him play video games for hours and hours, getting lost in the fast-paced matches and character selection of an online world. It would make for a great distraction.

But not being able to figure out the cause does not mean I succumb to the anxiety; not being able to figure out the source simply means for me that I have to grit my teeth and face the anxiety head on. What *is* making my stomach flip upside down and inside out. The answer is there somewhere, deep in the inner workings of your brain, nestled tightly between memory lane and the love box. Finding it doesn’t make it rational, but it does make it visible, which makes the drifting of the tide easier to predict, and that’s all I can ask for when it feels like too much to handle.

For someone like my mom, anxiety is almost perpetual as the source is a little unconventional. Not only does she have to manage her own day to day life as a middle-aged woman, married, with four kids who have grown into adults themselves, but she bears the weight of raising a child with special needs who is entirely dependent on her to live. Jamie needs far outweigh that of a typical 19-year-old daughter.

While high school me tossed the entire contents of my drawers onto the floor, the weight of the day ahead heavy on my shoulders, my mom was in the bathroom with Jamie, brushing Jamie's teeth for her as Jamie peeked into the mirror in front, curious and delighted to see herself staring right back. The foam from the toothpaste dripped slowly down Jamie's chin and sometimes onto her shirt that my mom had also picked out for her that day.

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The anxiety my mom feels on a day-to-day basis depends entirely on the situation. Is Jamie happy at the moment? Is there something in her routine that is new? Is there anything that could go wrong today? What could go wrong? When will it go wrong? It hounds at her, nipping at her heels and only staying at bay while Jamie remains happy in her routine. The flood gate drops quickly and suddenly, though, when it does drop.

Anxiety is personal, the shape entirely dependent on the person and the circumstance. I suppose that's what makes it so scary, huh? Isn't the concept of anxiety the imminent fear of the unknown? So anxiety is exactly what it fears. Isn't that funny how that works.

My mom knows where her anxiety stems from, and she works every second of every day to fight against it. A captain stares down a storm, deciding whether to brave the uncontrollable swells. They have studied the shifting of the tides and the directions and locations of the stars in relation to the destination. They understand the knicks and dents in the wood of the ship, picking out any weak spot and potential for leakage. She knows what she's doing.

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What's left to do when your thoughts race around themselves? Or when your teeth clench so tightly against your inner lips that you taste blood? Anxiety is a constant battle, and you never

stop fighting. But if there's anything my mom has taught me throughout the years, it is that there is always a silver lining when the clouds seem endlessly dark and gray.

"What's going on inside your mind?" he asked me again. My eyes felt like glazing over, my brain unable to dig deep enough into itself to find the root and pluck it straight from the source. But I push back harder.

"I'm not sure, it has to do with this time of night, though." The waves pull back, retreating deep into the night, almost unnaturally. The tide retreats all the way to low tide, exposing the copious amounts of shells, seaweed, and creatures of the deep. But it doesn't stop there. The tide keeps pulling back, past the expected tide line.

*That feels kind of odd*, I think to myself, the anxiety rushing back and forth across my eyes and down my spine. *Tsunami*. The ocean has swallowed itself just to prepare to spit it right back out. The weight on my chest deepens as my hands begin to shake, *think this though*.

"Maybe it has to do with this semester in some way," I thought quickly, racing against the clock as the tsunami sirens blare in my ears, "Too little to do? Not ready to start another week? I'm not sure, those reasons feel kind of right." I rubbed my belly, soothing the swells as they rock back and forth.

"Let's do something to get your mind off it. Want to watch a movie?" In an instant, I already felt the sirens dimming, their song muffled by the sound of my partner's voice. The thoughts become muffled under the weight of the ocean water, barely audible above the sounds of our conversation as I start the whirring of the popcorn machine.

They drown themselves trying to get to the surface. I'll never succumb to the power of their swell.

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Anxiety is the reason I worry about even the smallest of things. It is the reason I have a hard time trying new foods and the reason I need to plan ahead for different things. It is the reason I worry about random people on the street if they're walking alone. *Why are they walking alone? Did their spouse die? Gosh I hope they're feeling okay and not too sad. Wait maybe they're just going to meet someone. Do you think they have friends? I hope they're going to meet a friend; wait is that a frown...* It is the reason my body constantly fights itself, ripping itself to shreds against the harsh winds that threaten even the most experienced sailor.

But anxiety is also the reason I empathize with all those I meet, and it's the reason people come to me for advice and for someone to listen to them. It is the reason I love so hard and so deeply for the ones closest to me. It is the reason I work tediously on assignments that should have taken 10 minutes, tops. There's no mistaking it, anxiety is the reason I am who I am. The good, the bad, and all in between.

Warning signs of a tsunami are easy to spot if you've experienced one before. The upset stomach, the shaking hands, the clenched teeth. All these signs point in the direction of anxiety. I could sit back and wait for the tide to pull me down, but honestly? I think I stand a pretty good chance. I mean, I've been doing it this long. From one storm to the next.