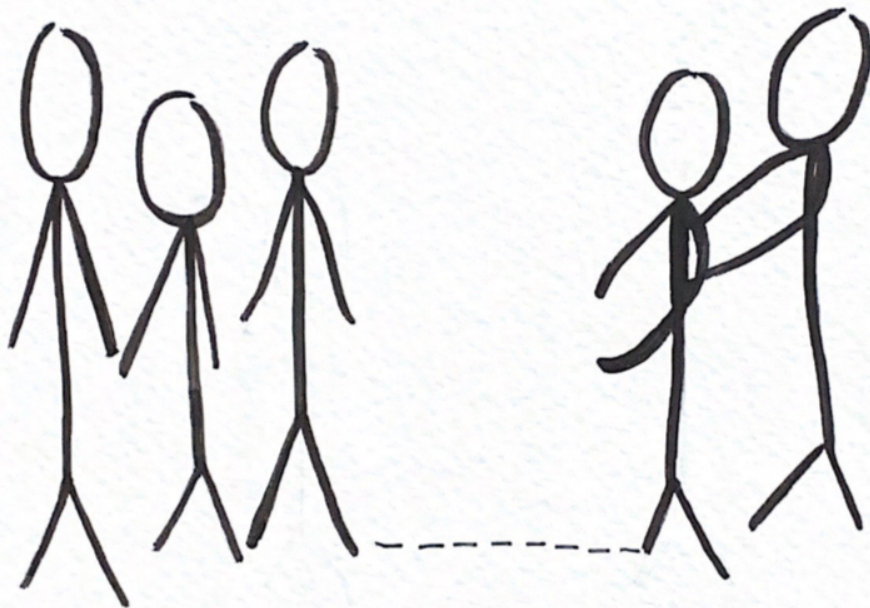


Reach

a collection of
short stories
about mental health



ISABELLA
GORE

Reach: a collection of short stories about mental health

Isabella Gore's Final Independent Project

April 2021

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Authors Note

Welcome to my collection of short stories titled *Reach*. Within this book there are five stories that focus on five different girls: Stella, Dakota, Kelsey, Ellie, and Lucy. These stories are arranged in various formats, as you will find when you read them.

Going back a few years ago, I started getting more interested in mental health and I really wanted to learn more about it. After doing a science project on common mental health disorders, I felt like I had only really learned the basic facts about anxiety and depression. When I decided that I wanted to center my March Madness Project around the topic of mental health, I knew I wanted to look at it in a more personal lens. Therefore, my main sources of research for this project were interviews that I conducted with people who are diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. In the interviews I learned so much more about the everyday struggles that come with having anxiety and depression, which is what my stories focus on. Two of these stories are centered during the pandemic, as I think it is important to portray the effects of the pandemic on individuals' mental health. While this collection focuses on anxiety and depression, as I continue my interests in this field, I hope to expand this narrative to focus on many other forms of mental health. The purpose of these stories is to create a more candid conversation about the topic of mental health.

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I do! I am very excited to share them.

Thank you for reading,

Isabella Gore

Class of 2023

*To those that I interviewed for this project,
I could not have written these stories
without your willingness to share your stories.*

Stella

I will always remember the sound of the bell that rang at the end of each class. It always stung. The reality of walking in the halls. The reality of facing the people whom I disliked with so much passion, yet once deemed to be the closest people to me. Each day I dreaded many things. But the things I believe I dreaded the absolute most were the painful, high pitched, screeching sounds that appeared at the top of every hour. The bell represented more than the sound it made. It represented a shift in where I was at the time, it nearly summoned tears each day, but every time, I pushed them down, locked back in the deepest chambers of my heart, next to most of the things I have felt throughout my life. Even looking back now, in my late twenties, that sound, that feeling, still brings me discomfort. After all the time that has passed, I am still the girl I was when I walked through the halls of middle school- and I abhor myself for that, everyday.

I think about the bell as I sit in the back of an old taxi, driving from the airport, by the streets of my hometown that I used to bike down every day. I push away the old memories. I am twenty-nine and I don't want to reminisce on the days of middle school. The wheels come to a pause as I look out the fogged window, making out blurry figures that await my arrival. It is a holiday break for my work, so I decided to come home- though I feel the nerves already. The brisk air greets me as I step out of the vehicle. I glance at the figures, now clear in my vision. There they stand: my mom, my sister, her husband, and my brother. *What a nice family...nothing that I couldn't utterly mess up the moment I stepped inside.* I mess things up, it is who I am. My family all agrees, but unlike the ones who told me it to my face, they lie.

It began in middle school: the time of the bell. Some may argue that it really started when I came out of the womb. Did my fate decide from the beginning of my life that I would be like this, or did I do this myself? I don't really know and don't really care, either way I am this way in the end. Either way, I noticed it in middle school. Sure I had always been more shy, but that's normal right, or that's what I was told. I had friends in elementary school, and around them I was a free-spirit. My mom would always tell me that I had the brightest soul when I was younger. She would tell me that when I would walk in a room, even though I was smaller than every other person there, I was the light, the brightest thing there. My light was bright when I entered the halls of my new school. I was social, as social as I could be. I have always been able to start fresh, in fact, I love starting fresh. I walked into this new place, not knowing a soul. I branched out, met new people, and created bonds that I believed in my thirteen year old heart would last a lifetime. But time is the killer of all good things, and as it progressed, time slowly killed all the good that I had taken for granted. *Did the universe want me to learn some sort of lesson?*

Friendships are interesting. Maybe in our younger years these friendships are formed by our parents or teachers, but as we get older, we feel this pull to certain people. We spend time with these people, trust them with parts of us we may not even tell our families. In life for some reason, we gravitate towards certain people. There is no specific type of person we feel this pull to. We befriend people whom we hold no common interests with and people that are scarily similar to us. Somehow in life, there is a connection we feel with some people and don't feel with others. When I was in middle school, I don't really think I ever felt this connection with anyone. Does anyone really ever hold that type of connection at that age? If you have... I'm completely and utterly envious of you. One thing that I have learned is that our minds play tricks on us. We are shown picture perfect depictions of friendships in the media from such a young

age. They are the best of friends and just understand each other. A thirteen year old girl watches these films and dreams of that, so our minds make us believe we have found it. **Now we begin my demise: Middle School.**

Sounds pretty pathetic right. Middle school was what made me what I am today, absolutely ridiculous. I've seen movies, you've seen movies. Girl goes to a new school, meets friends, they turn out to be awful, they bully her. Pretty standard. That is my story. I will spare the details, but the betrayal I felt and still feel is indescribable. I told one girl, specifically, a lot about my life. How my father had died in a car accident with my mom when I was six. My mom survived, not without immense trauma and sadness, and has had to take care of us alone for most of my life. It spread like wildfire. I will say one thing: middle schoolers are not dumb, they know enough to know that spreading information like that is just mean. Nevertheless, it spread and I lost the small amount of trust I had before. Once you have been labeled as an outcast, there is a target on your back. People would ask me, "why are you so quiet?" or ask me, "do you even talk?" those stung. It takes a lot of courage to be friends with the girl that has no friends, so I was alone. Not to mention the fact that it would be nearly impossible for me to open up to people when I was in that betrayed state. I didn't choose to be bullied, but I chose to stay alone, I chose to stay sheltered from the world and those around me.

High school brought new opportunities. I thought to myself, *maybe it's a phase, middle school is awkward, high school will be better.* I would say that anything was honestly better than middle school. A new start was good for me. I found friends, I trusted them, but we learn from experience, so I stayed fairly sheltered from them. I stayed away from big school events, they would just make me more anxious. The more unfamiliar faces, the more alone I felt. The hardest part of it all is the fact that I was so cautious. Worried that any moment my friends would turn on

me, I wouldn't get attached to them, and would expect them to leave. High school was a collection of four dull years full of panic attacks, the number too great to even estimate. Then all of a sudden, it was over, and off to college I went. Four more years that were, I would say, a bit more enjoyable. Yet there was still this invisible string pulling me into a cavern of reservation. On the other side of me there was another string pulling me away from my doubts and thoughts, forcing me to be open and confident. I opened up cautiously and carefully, but my version of opening up is likely closer to most people's closed off demeanors. When I enter a new environment I make a few friends, but the relationships never last, I can't sustain them.

I visited my family my sophomore summer in college, and I remember my mom sitting me down to talk to me about...well, me. Scars traced her body, marking her survival and reminding her each day of my father's passing. Since the accident, her life has been for me and my siblings. My mother has always been a woman of fewer words, but she has always asked me how I am doing; on this trip, she did just that. She had observed this light in me dim throughout the years. She knew what I was going through and there was no way I would be able to hide it, so I told her everything: my fears and what had been holding me back. She listened. She has always been good at listening, I wish that I could be there for her, like she has been for me. She urged me to find help, to go to therapy and talk it out, so that next semester, a week into school, I was sitting in an unfamiliar room with blue shiny chairs. I waited for my turn, shaking my leg, stopping, looking around to see if anyone was paying attention to me, continuing, and repeating the cycle. Over a year went on and I saw my therapist once a week. I was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder- she tried to give me tools to help my anxiety, but nothing would work. I have had this negative view of myself since the seventh grade, and everything I try to do to dismantle it has failed.

My adult life has moved slowly. I have a job, I have some friends, but I am still alone. Always have been. I have never met anyone that has complimented me the way I saw in the movies, not a friend like that, not a partner like that.

* * *

I retrieve my bags from the trunk with help from the older man that drove me home. I hand him a tip, thank him, and wish him a good holiday. The morning sun peaks through the clouds. The day is just beginning, yet I feel like it's been an eternity since I woke up right before landing. I prefer to take red-eyes in hopes that less people will be around. While trying to calm myself down as I walk to my family, my thoughts are interrupted by the wheels of my suitcase as they roll up the cobblestone driveway. It has been over two years since I've been home. I have talked to my family, no doubt, but I have certainly been removed.

My mother greets me with tearful eyes and a hug. Her soft voice nearly whispers, "Oh Stella, I'm so happy to see you." I really don't like the attention I have at this moment, and I'd prefer for it to be redirected. I am grateful that they woke up at the crack of dawn just to greet me, but I feel unworthy.

My mom makes a beautiful array of breakfast foods including a fruit spread, eggs, and pancakes. Everything I could dream of eating lies on the table, and I wonder how the hell she does it. Sure my mom now lives alone, but she still works, and she woke up early to see me and make breakfast for all of us. All of my life I have felt like I don't deserve the love I am given, especially from my mother. It feels impossible to let go of this feeling despite all the love that I am shown. I am my own demon. I am the person that made me end up like this.

“So Stella, how is your new job? I would love to hear about it.” My sister’s husband, Oliver’s words shock me and bring me out of my realm of thoughts.

“Good, good. Um-I just started working at a new magazine, no big deal...” I reply in a closed off manner.

“Oh...Okay” I assume that he expected a more detailed response. “Well nice! Sounds cool.” Oliver’s body language shifts, he appears to be more timid than before he spoke. My sister, Katie, comes over to him and rubs his back gently. She has always been the prettiest of the family. Everything has come naturally to her. Despite her being a year younger than me, she’s already married and has a very stable job. Growing up, the attention from an outsider’s eye was automatically drawn towards her. Everything just gravitated to her and it seemed like all of life’s opportunities were handed to her. We have never been all that close. I think that I have always been really envious of her life, afterall we are polar opposites. The Hunter girls could not be more different. She is desirable, I am an afterthought.

I realize that my words may have been a bit harsh. I did not intend for them to make Oliver feel badly, but I believe that I did that very thing. *Should I apologize? What if he isn’t even bothered by it, then it’d be dumb to apologize. Maybe I should leave it... I think that I will leave it for now. What did I say that hurt him? Was I too harsh?* My brain spins in every direction. The over-analyzing begins. I decide to leave it be, after lots of inner dialogue and with great reluctance. Immediately after finishing my breakfast, I excuse myself from the table to “unpack.” I absolutely hate when this happens.

Socially exhausted and anxious about my words, I stay in my room for hours. No questions asked from my family, they know that I need to be alone. I wish that instead of closing myself off and retreating from situations I am uncomfortable in, that I would just talk to

someone. It can't possibly be healthy for me to hold all this in my brain. After a few hours have passed, I hear a knock on my door. A pause follows, I don't say anything, which prompts my mom to walk in. Her eyes look at me with compassion and sadness. It cannot be easy to watch me lose all my connections in my life. She walks to my bed where I sit. As she sits beside me she sighs. I don't quite know what the sigh represents, but I can begin to guess.

She grabs the blanket resting at the bottom of my bed that has been abandoned for so many years. She moves closer to me covering us up with the blanket, and we sit in silence. I don't know for how long, but it is completely silent. As time passes, my eyelids grow heavier and before I know it, my head has fallen onto her shoulder. Tears fall aimlessly down my cheeks, forming a puddle on my chin. It still remains silent, but I feel her breathe heavily. Slowly, her hand appears in my vision wiping away tears I have kept in for too many years.

* * *

I feel my head slowly come in contact with my pillow as my mom slowly exits the room. Memories flood into my foggy brain, still half-asleep. I feel like I'm in my younger years ready for bed, asking my mom to stay until I doze off into sleep. Yet now, I feel as though I am unable to sleep, due to my change in position and the fact that my mind is now no longer quiet. I open my eyes, only to realize it's now dark. I hear voices downstairs belonging to my family. I change into comfortable clothes, realizing that I rested in jeans, and I make my way downstairs to join the rest of my family, but as I approach the kitchen, I hear laughter and loud exclamations that pull me away from the door. They are so at ease, I wish that I could feel what they feel, and I wish I didn't bring so much more sadness into their lives.

I decide it's best to take some time for myself, so I slip out of the back door, taking my mom's car keys. Being behind the wheel was really difficult for me at first- I feared my father's fate could be passed on to me, but as time went on it became my way that I connected with him. It may sound odd, but it has, since my fears passed, felt like a tribute to him. My father would take me for drives, and although I was so young, he would play his favorite rock music from the 70s. Most weekends we would drive around the coast, and then make our way into town to my favorite ice cream shop, which conveniently, happened to be across the street from a record shop he loved. It was a win-win situation- I got one scoop of strawberry ice cream, and he got to look through crates of vintage records.

Driving has made me feel like I am near him, it makes me feel strong, a feeling that I never really experience. I miss him a lot in these moments. I drive without a purpose, and after a few minutes I catch sight of my nightmare. The home of the bell. The home of my downfall. I pull over into the middle of the empty parking lot, and I get out of the car. Here I stand, in front of my middle school, freezing due to my lack of a coat.

* * *

For some reason, my heart knew this is exactly where I need to be, yet I hate myself for it. I stand in front of the place that I have always associated with the beginning of my bad days. I think my heart brings me here for closure- I think that I need closure. I need to say goodbye to the place that ignited so much pain. I know that while it has been nice to be with my family, being home without everything figured out in my life, without knowing that I could handle the memories and hurt they bring, is not healthy. I have to say goodbye to the town that I have

always resented. As I think and process my feelings, I see, out of the corner of my eye, a blue car drive up to my right. I recognize the car, confirming that I can stay where I am- if this car had been unrecognizable, it would have been my cue to leave.

The door opens revealing my mother. Though it is my brother's car that is beside me, for some reason, I knew that it wouldn't be him here with me. We stand in silence, yet again. There are no words to be said, I think that she knew, since I arrived, that I was not going to be here for long. She knew that Christmas and New Years parties, unlike the rest of the family, were at the bottom of my list of things I wanted to do. She pulls me in for a hug, and whispers to me, "Stella, promise that when you get home you will seek help. I can't watch you wallow in this feeling forever. I know that you can rise above this, I know you can." A pause follows as I take in her words, recognizing the similarity to the same conversation that we had almost a decade ago.

"I will Mom." I reply and rest my head on her shoulder.

Dakota

May 11th, 2020- Life in Lockdown

My phone rings promptly at 8:30 making my body jolt up in reaction to my Backstreet Boys ringtone. *Great, I forgot.* It's Monday, meaning I have my call with my mom, right now. I lie in my bed, my eyes still tired from my lack of sleep and the lack of light in my room, courtesy of my curtains. I groan. Day fifty-nine. And not a thing has changed.

She can wait five minutes, I think to myself. With hesitation, I silence my phone, attempting to get out of bed in my pitch black room. My hands trace the walls, as I search for the light switch, still in a morning haze. A sigh of relief leaves my body as I find it and my room is filled with light. I walk into my bathroom, turning on the light, but attempting to avoid the mirror at all costs. Though that tactic never seems to quite work. I quickly gather my hair into a twist, and grab the large claw clip on my counter. Rushing to my closet, I turn the light on, facing the same dilemma I am left with each day: What to wear with nothing to do... I go for a random sweatshirt I took from a friend and head into the living room.

Grabbing my computer, I open facetime and choose my mother's contact. She insists on doing face to face calls, though sometimes I wish we didn't, so I could physically react to her comments. But after more than twenty video chats in the past two months, I have improved at containing my reactions. Her face pops up bringing me ease, yet irking me in every way.

"Hi Darling! Oh it is great to see you, Dakota. I must tell of all that has happened! I have so much to catch you up on." I scoff. It's been two days since I last spoke to her, her life could not possibly be that interesting.

“Hi Mom.” I reply exaggerating my tiredness, in hopes of her canceling the call, maybe she will see that I need more sleep. She doesn’t, though it was worth a try.

“So I have to tell you about Lisa and her husband, John, remember I told you they were having some issues- well quarantine got the best of them, they are going to get a divorce and....” with no further interest, I zone out for the rest of her drama recap.

The call goes on as it always does. She asks how I am doing, I say fine, even if I’m not, but while she asks me that, I notice her fixing her hair on the screen- almost out of boredom. The contrast of her interest while she is talking about her life to asking about mine is quite clear. She asks me if I have found a therapist, I say not yet. We do these calls so that she can see how I’m doing, yet every call she spends more time speaking of her failing marriage and middle-aged friend’s drama than she does asking me how I am. I suppose maybe if I was truthful and actually told her how I was she would ask me more, but how can I possibly feel comfortable talking to her about my depression when she tells me I’m fine before I can even explain what I’m feeling. She says, “Oh darling, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine Mom, I mean obviously this sucks I-” I begin to reply, but she cuts me off.

“Dakota, everyone is struggling right now. I am sad too, but we suck it up, that's what we do in this family. Pull it together, I don’t want to see you ruin your whole life over this.” My face burns with anger. Of course, I love my mom, but she really knows how to irritate me. I want to talk to her sometimes, but every other day feels like too much. However, because my parents support me so much financially right now, I would feel too guilty not calling her.

After about forty-five minutes of pointless conversations and gaps filled with uncomfortable silence, we hang up. It is silent, but a good kind of silent. A silence I longed to hear for the past forty-five minutes. I walk over to the window glancing down at the Manhattan

street ten floors below me. The streets below me are abandoned. I remember all the memories I experienced just a few months ago, right there. Every walk home, every late night out when I stumbled into my apartment, every morning rushing out the door to the subway. It all feels so distant now. I fall back onto my couch furloughed, alone, and tired. This constant cycle of nothingness continues on. Yet another day. I close my eyes tight and everything is dark. I feel a rush go through my body. I feel so peaceful at this moment, but it's short lived, and moments later I am snapped out of this trance by the sound of sirens echoing through my eardrums. I open my eyes quickly and look outside to see an ambulance drive past my building, ten stories down. Sirens are as common as a car honking now. They rush past in a hurry. So many lives have been lost, so many sirens. We clap each day at 7pm. Sometimes when I feel up for it, I even walk by the hospital near my house at 7pm to clap for the healthcare workers that work there.

It is day fifty-nine.

I get up, abandoning my thoughts by the window. I pick up my phone, to see what is going on in the world. Nothing new. No notifications. Nothing. I mindlessly open Instagram scrolling through various posts. I see friends on zoom calls with their companies and I see friends working tirelessly in hospitals. I feel so disgusted by my lack of motivation and work. My life and career as a photographer are completely on pause. You can't photograph other people in a pandemic, it's just not possible. Besides, nothing is uplifting, nothing is motivating. My roommate, Alex, left thirteen days ago, leaving me here, alone. I understand why. Nobody wants to be quarantined with their depressed friend for months. Believe me if I could change it, I would too.

Deciding I should probably eat, I get up, walk to my kitchen, and open the fridge. I grab an egg, a piece of bread, and an avocado. As I make my breakfast, I put music on my speakers in an attempt to boost my already dim morning. It's almost ten, and I feel like I have done nothing yet: a repetitive feeling recently. I listen to my favorite music that I remember my dad playing when he would cook dinner. He influenced so many parts of my life as a child, but I feel like I never talk to him anymore. I feel so disconnected from the people I used to lean on most.

For the past year I have lived in this two bedroom apartment in Murray Hill. Before the world closed, I walked around with drive and passion. Everything I moved to New York to be and do has been put on pause, and I can't help but regret not cherishing everything I once had before. People think that just because I was diagnosed with depression in college, that I'm constantly sad. But before, I had something to distract myself with. Now, I spend my entire day in a 750 square foot apartment with absolutely nothing to do, leaving me alone with every thought I could once distract.

After eating, watching hours of TV, and doing nothing, I get up from my couch, adjusting to the light and the weight of my body on my legs. Glancing out the window, I see little motion. It's almost as if no time has passed. Someone could tell me it was a Sunday morning at 7am and I would believe them, but instead, it is Monday at 2pm.

Day fifty-nine.

It's getting to be nicer weather, meaning walks are somewhat enjoyable, so out of complete boredom I walk to my room to get dressed and go on a walk. As much as I hate getting motivated right now and doing actual activities, as it feels like such a distant obligation, I know

the only way I will enjoy this day in the slightest is if I go outside and do things that make me feel content. As I walk out of the building I am met with a cool, but nice breeze. It's been about a week since I have gone outside. Aside from the fact that I am terrified to do anything right now in fear of getting sick, I have nothing to do, so I am left with no incentive to go out. But I am proud of myself, because today, I am outside. And I may have no purpose, but at least I'm here.

* * *

I walk by storefronts with their lights off and empty displays. I feel like a big, dark cloud has swallowed the whole world. A gray overcast that has not left in the past two months consumes the emerging summer sun. After an hour of walking aimlessly around my neighborhood enamored by the rare silence of the city, yet missing signs of life, I reenter my building. *That was nice*, I think to myself. As I crawl back in my unmade bed, from my frantic wakeup, I pull out my phone. With so many hours left in the day, I sit unable to think of one good thing to do. I sink into my bed, throwing my phone onto my chair, and pulling the covers up to just below my chin.

Just as I drift off into a sleep I hear a loud ring. *This feels too similar to this morning. Did I sleep for two days? Is my mom calling again? Is it Wednesday?!* I think to myself as my feet hit the floor. Picking up my phone, I see Georgie's contact pop up on my screen. We have barely spoken in over two years. Yet, just as I see her name, I immediately answer the call. It's almost like my heart knows it's exactly what I need. Her face fills the screen. A friend I once told everything to, calling me.

“Dakota!!!!” her familiar voice exclaims.

“Hi! Umm what’s up?”

“Sorry! Oh my gosh you’re probably confused. I’ve been at my parent’s house for the past few months, and I was just going through some old photos of us at college. I know that this sounds so dumb ‘cause it’s been forever since we talked, but I just really wanted to show you some of these.” I smile.

“No, no problem I was so surprised to see you calling. I thought it was maybe a mistake.”

“No, no, no” awkward silence follows, as I rack my brain for what to say.

She fills the gap, “Here let me show you the photos, one second, I just have to go downstairs.”

We stay on facetime for hours, laughing, reconnecting, and reminiscing. It feels as though the two and a half years we barely talked, had never happened. Turns out she was living in New York before the pandemic, but is planning to move to San Francisco, near her parents. I tell her about my life, though there’s not much to fill her in about. Despite missing so much time in our lives together, I tell her the entirety of my thoughts and feelings. She understands me and listens. I ask her to tell me that I’ll be okay and she does. The same words she says coming out of my mom’s mouth make my blood boil, but when I hear them from Georgie, I feel more at ease. We promised to talk more often before hanging up; I believe us when we say that. Even if I won’t admit it to her, I need to talk to people, and right now she feels like the only person who truly listens.

Realizing I completely skipped out on lunch and feeling a pit in my empty stomach, I opened my computer to order food. It arrives by 6:30 and I eat and relax for yet another boring evening, but tonight I feel more at ease. As time passes, I grow tired of my phone. Walking over

to the side of my credenza, I pick up a large box, one I haven't touched in almost two months, containing photographs.

Almost every printed photo I have taken in the last year in one box. I haven't been able to bring myself to look at these photos for so long because I feel like my passion has left. I also know that I can't handle the emotions they will conjure up. So many memories, a life that feels so distant from the one I live now. I see photos of architecture around the world, photos from huge shoots I did that I forgot all about, and photos of me and my friends. It all comes back to me. Slowly savoring each photo, I remember their significance, the moment in which each photo was taken. Bittersweet sadness fills me, as I cry and smile. I see hope for life to be like this again one day, but now I look back on the memories with immense sadness. As I sit on the floor of my tenth story apartment alone, but privileged to be healthy and safe, I accept the sadness I feel. It's valid. I can feel this way, and I know it won't last forever.

Kelsey

The Bartender

When the lights stop flashing for a moment, when there is a momentary pause in the music, when everyone looks to the side, making eye contact with their friends- she is still. She doesn't stay still for long, only in that moment. I have been doing my job long enough to be able to spot those who are lost, and behind her facade of smiles and slurred words, I can see how broken this girl is, though the cause of this brokenness is something I will probably never know.

I have seen her a few times before. I never forget a face, especially the memorable ones. She is memorable. She enters through the door, already intoxicated. Laughing, and screaming, she attempts to blend in with the crowd of friends that surround her. Yet, after a few minutes, I see her, out of the corner of my eye, make her way over to the bar. I always keep my eye on drunk girls, as a girl myself, I am aware of the dangers that lurk in bars that prey on the weak. She sits down and stretches her neck, moving it around in a circle, letting out a sigh as she does so. I watch her rub the small layer of sweat formed on her forehead courtesy of the humid New York summer air. I continue on with my job while she continues to sit in silence. "Excuse me" I turn my head around and see her speaking to me. "Hi, could I have another?" She holds up her empty glass.

"Yep." I reply shortly while I begin to make her a new drink. I place it in front of her, but her head is resting on the bar- not the first place I would put my head, considering its sticky residue and smell. The sound of the glass being placed on the wood makes her head jolt up, nearly spilling the drink.

“Thank you.” She replies coldly.

“No problem! What’s your name?” I ask, hoping to help her perk up a bit.

“Kelsey.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Cassie. Let me know if there is anything else you need!” She smiles softly. I move over to the next guests, attempting to give her some space. In the next few minutes, she’s onto another drink, made by my coworker. She still sits alone, looking straight down at the bar. She doesn’t move her gaze like many would, she isn’t distracted by the noise. She is different, she is somber, nothing can draw her out of the trance she lies in. She looks lonely, and sad, and lost.

After time passes, she pulls her phone out of her pocket and her expression is filled with disgust and exhaustion. All of the sudden, she gets up, approaching her crowd of friends. I see her put her hair up in a ponytail and finish off her drink before her friend pulls her onto the dance floor. It is beginning to hit her. Liquid courage is what many call it, but really it's just a distraction- a mask. I try to lose sight of her, accepting that she is probably fine without my patrol on her. But something is so enticing about her- I want to know what is holding her back. I see a younger version of myself in her and I wish I could tell her everything to avoid, so she doesn’t end up like me. For someone who is a recovered addict, working in a bar is not the first job people would guess I have, but for some reason being in this environment while working creates a division between me and alcohol. It no longer appeals to me, and if I feel it coming back to me- I am quickly reminded of the destruction it had to my life. I wouldn’t wish that upon even the cruelest soul, and for some reason I do not see it ending well for Kelsey, so the least I can do is keep an eye on her while I can.

A bit later, the group approaches the bar, clearly more intoxicated than before. A friend

leans over the bar, shouting over the music and asks for a round of shots. I see Kelsey's face light up with both regret and excitement. She knows the cruel hangover that will follow, but for some reason she seems to be excited for that moment, as if it numbs her. The group stays around for some more time, different men approach the girls in an attempt to bring them home, but do not succeed. By about midnight they stumble out of the bar.

The Friend

The night started with a text. This is routine. We have unspoken plans every weekend, and they are not actually confirmed until the night of, but we just know it will happen. Many things are unspoken in our friendship and I honestly could not describe this to anyone, we just both understand it. We may not be the closest friends ever, but I can read her like an open book. I do not know if it's a mutual feeling, perhaps I am not as easy to read, perhaps I am just better at reading people, or perhaps she is just bad at hiding it. I have known Kelsey for over two years and have probably had three real conversations with her. Three deep conversations where we talked about real things. Three in over two years. She is different than most people I know.

I texted her to ask if she wanted to come to a small concert with our friends and then do our usual weekend night routine, which translates to getting absolutely wasted. If I hadn't included that in my text I would say that she probably would not come, or if she did, she would have brought some alcohol with her.

I stood in the venue, wondering where she was, but my questions were answered as my phone rang. It was Kelsey, I answered. "Kels! Hey are you here!"

"Hey, um-I'm here." She speaks with hesitation. I heard the murmur of voices through

my right ear and through the speakers on her end of the call.

“Oh okay great!” I looked down onto the floor of the venue and spotted her. She was wearing her typical uniform of black bottoms which was a skirt due to the summer heat, a black sweater, and to contrast the dark colors, red converse. “Oh wait! I see you, look up!” I responded, waving my hands to make it easier to spot me. She struggled to find me, so I decided it would be better to just get her myself. “Okay! I’m coming down now, stay right there.”

I hurried down the stairs and lunged onto her with excitement. Despite our, what many would call odd friendship, I was really excited to see her. We always have fun on Fridays even though I usually can’t remember what exactly we do.

She moved through our group of friends gracefully, saying hello to those she knows and nodding to those she doesn’t. Anyone else could act the way Kelsey does and be labeled as impolite, but for some reason, it just works when she does it. The lights went down, and the show began. I glanced over towards her at times during the show and watched her look in awe of the performance. She looked so content, not in the fake way that she presents to us, but in a real way, like she finally felt like she had escaped from reality. After the lights came back up, I approached her hoping to keep that mood in her alive. “That was amazing! I knew you would love it.” I shouted over the hundreds of voices. She nodded her head and smiled softly.

“So, what are the plans for the rest of the night?” She asked.

“Kelsey, would I ever bring you just to a concert. You know me...” Her face lit up with excitement for what would be in store for the rest of the night.

After dinner and stopping in a few bars, we ventured into a bar I had been in a few times. I have always liked it due to the female bartender. She has always been quite friendly to me and I think I can trust her with my drink. Unfortunately, that's something I think a lot about.

We danced around and talked for a while and after realizing that I didn't see Kelsey with us I looked around to find her sitting at the bar alone. This is a frequent occurrence that we have all learned to just ignore honestly. She just needs her alone time for a second and so we give her space. Sometimes she gets in these moods and nobody really knows what to do to help her. I don't even know if she wants help- I wouldn't want to disturb or annoy her. Honestly, at a certain point it just gets really annoying. It's like she can never have fun, like she uses us for alcohol and fun- but then leaves once she gets what she wants, and sulks. She doesn't even talk about this though- it's as though she is this happy, bubbly girl and then all the sudden for a few moments she just turns into this dull, sad person, but then snaps out of it and returns to her old self. I don't know what she could possibly be sad about, it seems like she has it all. Friends, a stable job, and a large paycheck. Besides, if I even tried to talk to her about it, which I haven't, she would probably get angry with me. In the end, it's not my job to help her, if she wants it, she should just talk to me- I am told I am quite trustworthy.

My head turned hoping to get the image of her sad posture out of my brain. Eventually my thoughts of the sad girl at the bar disappeared, but not long before she was back in our crowd of friends, acting as though she had never left. Wanting to move on, I grabbed her hand and dragged her to the bar in hopes of both of us loosening up. We took a few shots- something I knew we would regret the next day. We wandered around the bar, laughing with our friends and making tipsy small talk. A few friends, including Kelsey and I, squeezed into a cab to go home. We all live in the same area, so my roommate and I walked Kelsey to her building and then went to our building. I fell asleep quickly after arriving home with exhaustion from the night's activities.

Kelsey

If someone asked me to recall the events of last night, I couldn't even try. The morning after is always a rude awakening. My stomach ache woke me up at 7:00 A.M: a great start to my morning if I'd say so. I faintly remember emptying my stomach full of alcohol late the night before, but clearly my attempt to avoid a hangover royally failed.

I tend to dread Friday or Saturday nights, yet I continue to go to them for a reason I cannot quite explain. Maybe it's because I remember so little, that it's impossible to find a compelling reason to stop. Maybe it's that, and the fact that I probably wouldn't have any friends if I didn't. Without really knowing or paying any attention, I have placed myself in a trap. If I leave or bail out on the fun, what's left in my life? If I go, what purpose does my life have? Besides, I like the way that these nights make me feel. I crave the euphoria. I enjoy losing control and forgetting. I like being numb.

The progression of the evening was poor and it all ended quite blurry. I arrived at the venue barely on time the night before and enjoyed the music- it all felt like a momentary escape from every thought in my brain. Then we went to dinner and a few bars, only to end up at a familiar bar that I remember going to a few times. I had hit a limit on my social battery and energy, so I headed to the bar and sat there for a while alone. I noticed a bartender looking at me a lot, almost in a judgemental way, but I disregarded it, I'm used to it honestly. So many people always have so much to say about other people, but when it's returned they defend and deny. I don't know why people waste their time obsessing over other people or observing them, like I couldn't notice or something... I could though. I asked her for another drink and she attempted to make small talk, asking me what my name was, but I was not in need of a new friend. I sat on the small stool for a while, thinking about everything: my mess of a life, the mess of emotions I feel,

and the mess of a night I was experiencing. I finished my drink quicker than I expected, and as I began to feel a larger buzz kick in, I ordered another. My eyes focused on the wooden bar covered in a clear glaze, sticky to the touch from the layers of residue from various drinks.

My phone beeped from a notification I did not expect, sending me into a spiral for the rest of the night. A missed call and text from my brother that read: *Hope you are doing good, sis. It's been a year since Dad's been gone today. I know it's hard for all of us, so call me if you need to talk. Always here.* I scoffed and pushed back the tears. I forgot. I didn't even think twice about the significance of that day before that moment. Even after he's dead, the world still seems to revolve around my dad. He was an alcoholic. I don't know if there is even a spectrum of good and bad drunks, but if he was on the scale, he may be one of the worst: absent, no fun, and in fact the opposite of fun, a real pain. The fact that he lived for as long as he did amazes me. Since he died, it only got worse. Sure I drank, but never as much as I began to after he was gone. There was only enough room for one disappointment in the family at the time, but once he was gone, I took the title. I tried my hardest to forget about him in the first year of him being gone. I drowned out the sound of his shouting in my mind. Even though I managed to get the thought of him away, I think he was actually constantly in my head, so much that I didn't even notice: he was there encouraging me to take a sip, encouraging me to let loose- to lose control.

I grabbed the new drink on the bar I had not even noticed was present, bringing it to my mouth, and finishing it off. With newfound anger and a strange sense of confidence, I got up from the bar and made it to my friends. The night blurred more after that moment. It's hard to recall the rest, but I remember the constant feeling in my mind that he was trying to talk to me. Almost as if he was trying to say something, but I don't know what it was.

I got home late after nearly passing out and went right to bed. I woke up to random texts

and missed calls from my mom and brother. *Why would they call me*, I thought to myself.

The Brother

I was sitting down for dinner that night when I was interrupted by a phone call. I grabbed the phone to see that it was Kelsey, a call I was not expecting to see. She has been distant for years, but especially after our dad's death. I had texted her, but did not expect her to actually call me. I answered the phone and was immediately greeted with loud background noises and the blaring voice of my drunk sister. I sat back in my chair knowing the conversation would not be one I would enjoy.

“ASHTONNNNNNN!” Her words slurred as she spoke with great volume.

“Hi Kelsey. What's going on?” I replied calmly.

“Can I not just call my big brother to say hello? Can I not just call to say hi? Why are you even surprised when you called me first...” I rolled my eyes. I never believed Kelsey, she thought she hid everything, thought she was sly, but she was the opposite. I could read her like an open book even after barely talking for a year.

“Kelsey, you know you can, but you haven't called in nearly a year. I didn't even expect you to call me back, but if you were going to, I'd at least hope you wouldn't be drunk in a bar. What's really going on?”

“Why do you care? I won't tell you ha!” She replied, sounding like a toddler- but a very drunk toddler.

“Kels. How much have you had to drink?”

“I don't really know...” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “Probably a lot,” she

chuckled.

“Kelsey, you can’t keep doing this.” I felt my hands start to sweat.

“You’ve never been all that fun Ash, loosen up! It’s a weekend, do I get a gold star for that?” Her snarky attitude began to make an appearance.

“Kelsey, you are calling me blackout drunk in a bar on the one year anniversary of Dad’s death. You don’t bother to ask me how I am doing, instead you are acting like a toddler. Did you call the therapist’s number I gave you? Why did you even call me in the first place? What do you want from me?” I was so fed up. I felt like she didn’t care about me in the slightest. Sometimes I wish that she could have coped with Dad’s death like I did. I went to therapy, I went to Al-Anon, and I talked it out- it feels like she has kept it all in.

“Woah, calm down.”

“Kelsey, I won’t *calm down*. Do you realize how terrified you make me and Mom? You show up to your father’s funeral drunk and expect us to say nothing. You used to say that Dad always made everything about him, that he was selfish, but you seem to not realize that you managed to make that day about you. Everyone was talking about you.”

“Ashton I-”

“Nope, I’m not done yet. Then you don’t call us for a year after because you’re supposedly hurt that we confronted you. What did you expect Kelsey? Did you even think about what that was like for us? Don’t forget though that I see you all over social media drunk every night. I can only imagine what you don’t post. Whether you want to admit it or not, you are twenty-five and are more similar to Dad than ever.”

“Woah- you did not just compare me to him. I am not a drunk.”

“How are you the judge of that? How can I even trust what you say-”

The line went silent. Everything was always on her terms. She calls you, she hangs up when she doesn't want to hear it anymore. I was so scared at that very moment- scared I would never know my little sister who used to beat me in races even though I was bigger and older than her, scared I would never know my sister who would perform concerts for our family every night in the living room, scared I would never know the sister she was before she met the cruel world.

Ellie

I like routines. I like stability. I would say that my life has been fairly stable, for as long as I can remember. I am organized. I am punctual. I am the friend that everyone says is so independent. All my life I have heard people say “Ellie is so together,” “Ellie is so organized,” “Her life is so stable and she’s only twenty-four,” when in reality, under my stable job, under my stable relationship, and under my routines- I feel the opposite.

My day starts the same as it does most mornings. I feel the most anxious in the morning. I open my eyes, feeling jittery and almost nervous for everything the day could bring. It’s as though my body is trying to send me a sign to stay home and be alone- but I never follow that sign. Sometimes I probably should. I do know how to self soothe and how to feel better when I am feeling very anxious in the morning. One thing that helps is creating a stable and relaxing morning routine. I meditate, do my skincare routine, write down my intentions for the day, and do affirmations. People may think this routine is dumb and just trendy, but it actually helps and as I have started to do it, I have seen improvements in my mood each day. One thing I get anxious about most days is feeling unproductive, and feeling like my life is going nowhere. Doing a routine in the morning is at least something, so even if I feel like I did nothing one day, I can still say I did my routine and that helps.

I get a coffee at the same shop everyday in Downtown Los Angeles, right across the street from work. The barista Ben practically knows everything about me at this point. With no intention of it all, Ben has overtime become a checkpoint of comfort in my day. Seeing him

ensures that my day should go the way it's supposed to go. Though seeing Ben has no concrete effect on the following events of each day, it gives me a strange and momentary peace of mind.

Many may hear a description of my life and think I sound astoundingly boring, but I can assure you I am not, not to sound full of myself in any way. I have fun. I have friends. I have an amazing girlfriend named Andie, and a very supportive family. My life is probably what people my age dream of. Yet something feels missing. I seem to have everything figured out; yet my life is constantly filled with various anxieties, that the more I think about it, I actually have nothing figured out. A problem I seem to have is feeling anxious almost all the time, whether it be in the back of my mind or the only thing I am thinking about. But I feel like I can never really figure out why I am feeling the way I am feeling. This is not a new feeling. I have had these feelings since I was young. It has always been a part of my life. Therapy has always been a part of my life, but something I struggle with is understanding why I feel this way. My life feels like everything I wanted it to be at this age, so why is my anxiety a part of this stage of my life?

When I get to work I feel the best in my day. It is a distraction from everything else. There is always something going on in an exciting and intriguing way. Sometimes my life feels so standard and boring. I can't help but compare myself to other people on social media and think their lives are filled with more experiences like traveling and taking all these crazy risks. But everyday when I go to work I am met with good chaos, and I am reminded that my life is indeed, not boring. I work at a record label doing art for the marketing team. I forget the cool things I do in my life, such as going to concerts almost every week, because I am busy comparing my life to others, but when I take a step back, I realize how lucky I am. I am constantly meeting new creative people and am given unique jobs- it is thrilling. From about nine

to five I am in the zone with so much going on that no time is left for my anxiety to consume my thoughts.

I get my second coffee on a short break and catch Ben up on the past couple hours of my day. Usually, I try to get lunch with a co-worker or my girlfriend if she is available so that I can keep my mind off of my anxieties until the workday is over. When I am alone I spiral into anxieties and thoughts about everything, especially about the people close to me and about my job. When I'm alone at lunch I think to myself things like *am I worthy of this job* or even spiral into thoughts about my relationship like *am I being too clingy to Andie*, so being alone is what I avoid because when I am with people these thoughts usually go away.

In therapy we work a lot on my attachment issues. I do not like to be alone and have barely been alone in my life. I have grown up in a close-knit family, courtesy of my mother for the most part. Growing up she lost her parents at a young age, so she always wanted to feel the close family dynamic she missed while she was young. Therefore, my older brother, my younger sister, my mom, my dad, and I are all very close and have always been. I stayed in close proximity to my family by going to college in Los Angeles, which is two hours away from my hometown in Santa Barbara. When I went to college in Los Angeles, I would visit my family on any break I had, even if it was a long weekend. People would ask me why, but I felt like I couldn't really explain why. I have always felt so close to my family, but with my sister still at home, it feels like they have formed a new family without me and my brother. Although my brother is living his own life in Boston and is not bothered by this, I am. I feel like I am being replaced or forgotten in the midst of their newer life, so being around as much as possible makes this feeling less extreme.

As I have gotten older I have learned to deal with this attachment more, or in other words conceal it. When I was in elementary school I would be terrified to go to school. I would cry before we walked in and was nervous to leave my mom. I also hated when my Dad would go on trips because I didn't like that he left. I remember one specific time when my Dad left for a two day trip. We drove him to the airport and when we pulled over at the drop-off station he picked me up and hugged me goodbye. He told me, "I will be back before you know it Ellie! I'll miss you lots!" I said something along the lines of, "Don't leave," but it would never work. I cried all the way home in the car with my mom. The thought of my dad leaving for even two days terrified me. Even now, I still feel anxiety and discomfort when I am at a distance from my family, but I don't show it in the physical ways I used to. Since college I have called or at least texted my family every day. For the first two years of college I remember calling my family two or three times a day just to *ask* how they were doing, when in reality I wanted to hear their voices and feel like I was near them since I was not physically there with them.

While I still feel this attachment to my family, I now feel that this affects my relationship most with Andie. Unlike my family that can't leave me or really choose to never see me again, Andie can, and that terrifies me. We can be in a really good place in our relationship, but I can still be terrified that she is going to leave. Andie has talked to me about this and we have addressed it because I trust and love her, so I feel comfortable talking about this. One of the first times she talked to me about it, I started crying, immediately scared she would break up with me or that she was angry, but she said "I am not mad at you Ellie. We are going to help you work through this, but you have to understand that if I am feeling the way you fear I am feeling, I would talk to you." I think that this all comes from a fear of abandonment. I am scared she will

leave me, I am scared that I will be alone. It is a constant fear in my mind, similar to the fears I have about my friends.

I think that for some reason people hate me at random times, when they really don't. My minds' immediate reaction to this feeling is to attach myself to the person I am scared *hates* me, but then that just ends up overwhelming that person. I have been working on how to find other tools to help me with this feeling, but I'm not fully there yet. My therapist and I have been talking about small situations that I can start trying to be alone in, so I decided I would start trying to have lunches alone. Something like having lunch alone is a thing that people do often and seems like a small detail in the day, but for me it is a big hurdle. So, instead of going to lunch with a friend, today I am going alone.

I walk into a nearby cafe that I frequent often, noticing the large wood beams that support the ceilings. I notice the twinkling lights that hang around the register symbolizing the holiday season. I notice things I never paid attention to in this space. I am only used to being here with other people, too immersed in my own world to observe the space I am in. However, now I am alone, with nobody to talk to, just with the thoughts in my head that I intend on ignoring. I order another coffee and a caprese sandwich, pay, and find a small table tucked in the far right corner to sit at for a while. My phone buzzes which causes me to pick it up. Deep down, I am hoping that it's someone calling to ask for plans so I can get out of this experiment, or even someone calling to talk, but it's a text from Andie that reads: *I'm so proud of you for doing this*. My breath is released from my body slowly. I breathe in, repeating the soft movements for a moment. At this moment I understand why I am doing this, why I am taking this step. It is not only for myself to exist on my own and be comfortable being alone, but for her, for my family, for my friends. While I can look at this moment as nearly impossible I think about the way this affects those

around me. I may dial the phone as a result of my anxieties, but the person who receives the call is impacted by this feeling as well. I am not saying that I am this awful person, making everyone else's day inconvenient, but I think I spend too much time thinking about how this affects me versus how the people around me are impacted by it.

I sit at the cafe alone, with a sketchbook I brought to pass some time and keep myself busy. I feel my leg shaking at different moments and find myself looking around the room a lot. I stop thoughts from coming into my mind too often by distracting myself and sketching the setting of the cafe. Before I really even know it, the time has passed and it's nearly been an hour. I exchange thank you's with the staff at the cafe before leaving, and make it back to work on time.

The rest of the day breezes by- full of various meetings and tasks I need to complete. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the clock turn to six on my computer meaning it is time to leave. As I walk out of the office, my phone rings from Andie, probably calling to check in as she knows I am done with work around this time. I answer and am met with her warming voice greeting me.

“Hi El! How are you?”

“I am doing surprisingly well. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed from today, but proud.”

“How did lunch go?”

“It wasn't easy, but it went surprisingly well. I drew and actually lost track of time. I got to work right on time, and if I hadn't realized, I probably would have stayed past my break without knowing.” I chuckle with an undertone of happiness.

“I am so glad to hear that. I am really proud of you El. Do you want to celebrate and get some dinner?”

“Yes!” I reply quickly without hesitation, but after thinking about it more I decide to propose a new idea. “Wait- what if I had you over with a few friends? A larger celebration!” I ask with hesitation. She may not like the idea. “We don’t even have to celebrate. I just am in a big friend mood today, I think it’d be fun to all be together.” I exhale audibly.

“Ellie, you don’t have to justify your feelings. Yes, that sounds awesome. I would love to hang out with everyone. Can I come over soon?” She replies kindly.

“Yes, I am going to go call a few people to invite over, and Luca will obviously be there too.”

“Okay! Sounds good! Love you, see you soon.”

“Love you too. Bye!” I hang up.

* * *

I call a few friends and ask if they could come over, and by the time I am home my friends are on their way. I hear the door open a few minutes after I arrive home and glance at the entry-way to see Andie, with a gift bag in her hand. I gasp. “What is this?” I ask excitedly.

“Just a little gift for you.” She hands me the bag and I open it up to reveal a card and a slice of my favorite cake from a bakery I used to go to all the time during college.

“Andie! Thank you so much. This is the sweetest thing ever. You know how much I love this cake. Let’s eat it right now- I do not want to share when everyone gets here.” We both laugh, knowing this is part of my character.

We devour the cake and finish setting up. Minutes later, Luca comes out of his room, picks me right up, and spins me around. “Good job Ellieeee!” He shouts jokingly. We talk for a

few minutes before the doorbell rings. As I open the door I am greeted by the faces of two of my best friends from college, Camille and Avery. They congratulate me on my progress today at lunch and we all spend the evening laughing, talking, and dancing around. After dinner, we gather in the kitchen and eat pints of ice cream. Suddenly, Luca stands up and shushes everyone. He looks up at us like he is ready to give a dramatic speech. “Guys, look at me!” He pauses to assure he has the attention. “I want everyone here, even though it's just the five of us, to congratulate Ellie today. I know it's small to us and we may go to lunch all the time alone, but for her it's not- and that's okay. But I'm so proud of you today and you deserve another congratulations, even though I know you have already gotten them from us here.” I look at him and smile. I hug him and am met with even more congratulations from the people around me.

In this moment I see the community around me and how much I am loved. It sounds so corny, but it's true. I didn't do what I did today to receive all this love, I did it for myself, but the fact that I have friends that support me and understand how hard it was for me to do what I did, is all I could really ask for. So while I am not the most independent person and I have my problems, I am working them out. And while I work them out, I have the best support system that I could need, right beside me.

Lucy

Lucy is beginning therapy. This is Lucy's sixth therapy session. Lucy is 20 years old, she is a Junior in college, but is spending the summer at home. Lucy has been diagnosed with anxiety. Lockdown due to COVID-19 began in March, and it is now June. This is a transcription of Lucy and her therapist's zoom meeting.

[Lucy logs in]

Sheila (*Lucy's Therapist*): Hi Lucy, how are you?

Lucy: Hi... I'm fine... I mean, not great, but fine, I guess. How are you?

Sheila: Good! So I assume that you are still at your parent's house. Am I correct?

Lucy: Yes [sighs]. I am at home with my parents and my little brother.

Sheila: Alright. How have you been doing this week? How has this shift to summer been going?

Lucy: It hasn't been easy. I thought that once summer started I would be excited to have this free time, but the problem is that I already had so much free time because of quarantine- and now I have absolutely nothing to do. I feel like I don't really have a purpose. This week I've been

trying to connect with my friends. I have friends here from high school and we have stayed in touch. I don't know if I told you about my friend Justin, we've been friends since middle school, and Sage, she's my best friend from high school. We've all been a friend group since around tenth grade. So, this week I was like *"Lucy you have to make an effort to see people,"* but the problem is that this time is just not normal, and my anxiety is just amplifying everything.

Sheila: So can you tell me more about your anxiety and how that feels?

Lucy: You know my parents... you don't know them, but I've told you about them [sighs]. So I love them so much, but it's just really hard with COVID and everything. I understand how important it is to be safe, but being in an environment where my parents are also so anxious about COVID really doesn't help my anxiety at all. I feel like when I am around this environment it makes me spiral and it only affects me more and more, negatively, as time goes on. So if I take time to do something that is maybe a little bit out of my comfort zone, such as seeing friends, I am just immediately thinking about everything my family has ingrained into my head about the pandemic. I think there is a fine line between being safe, and cautious, and actually letting this control our entire lives, and I think that at this point, my family and I are at the second stage.

As I speak I notice the bright red glasses that frame her face, that interrupt my focus. Her hair is a light grey, that she has styled in perfect curls. She wants you to know that she may have grey hair, but that doesn't restrict her. She chose that, instead of aiming for artificial color. Various photos with her loving family surround her though they are

blurred a bit, as a result of their distance from the screen. I sit in front of a blank white wall. She sits in front of memories and photographs of those she loves. I think one could easily tell which one of us is the therapist.

Sheila: Well-I certainly understand what you're saying. Are there any specific things you did this week that you feel made it any better? Any highlights?

Lucy: Well I was sort of saying it, but I think I got sidetracked, but I saw some friends this week. It was Sage's birthday, and her family really doesn't really adhere to the COVID rules, so she had some friends from college over, because she goes to Boulder, so they're pretty close to us. Justin was there too and a few friends from high school. It was probably seven people in total, which I was super nervous about, I mean I have probably seen at most- two people in one place in the past four months. But I decided, *you know what I'm going to go, and I'm going to be safe, I can wear a mask if I feel uncomfortable.* It was outside, which I guess helped. I showed up, it was kind of fine at first, but as more people started to come, I was getting really nervous. My parents had said it's fine if I was going, but I still had this voice in my head saying, *leave, it's too many people.* I mean cases aren't that bad here right now, so I think ultimately, yes it was safe. But after about an hour of being there, my anxiety got really really bad. I've had an anxiety attack before, it wasn't as bad as they've been before... I kind of started feeling shaky, and when people were talking to me, I just wasn't really comprehending it. I felt like I had almost left my body, I was just really not feeling good. So... I just kind of left. I mean I said goodbye, but I didn't want to spiral out of control in front of everyone, especially the people I don't know- that's embarrassing. I have always been this very social person, I love being with my friends and

meeting new people. But being away from people for so long has, I think, changed my behavior. So, I was nervous about COVID maybe- but I don't really know if that was the root of what I felt. I think that something else was bothering me.

Sheila: Do you have any guesses to what that might be?

Lucy: I think being in the environment I am in has made me so nervous about everything. It's like isolation has made me not want to be around people, just because of this massive cloud of thoughts always hanging over my head. It feels as though isolation and the pandemic has tarnished so many of my relationships, and I know that it's partly my fault. I am the one losing touch, I am the one leaving these parties, I am the one that doesn't make the plans. But, it can't just be me. This whole experience has played a role in it, and I know I shouldn't blame my family, but sometimes I want to. 'Cause in these situations- I think about everything my parents would feel or think. Overall, I am just less comfortable in the places I used to feel so comfortable in.

I feel a tear roll down my cheek, unaware that I had even begun to cry. I see her eyes soften. This is exactly why I hate crying, this is why I don't talk to other people about my emotions. I hate sympathy.

Sheila: Environments play large roles in our emotions. This time has made many people's comfort levels shift. I am really sorry about that experience. If you don't mind sharing, what did you do after leaving? Were you able to find more peace or comfort?

Lucy: I drove there by myself, so I went in my car and drove away. I didn't go straight home, I just kind of went around my neighborhood. I kind of know what to do when I'm feeling this really bad anxiety, so I do that.

Sheila: And what is it that you do?

Lucy: I listen to music, I journal, and sometimes I have tried to meditate, but sometimes I just don't feel that that is something I can do at that moment. I think that when I am feeling this heightened feeling of anxiety I can really turn to unhealthy patterns, sometimes I find it really hard to eat, I mean I've kind of talked about that a little bit. I really try to stay away from any unhealthy patterns that I can kind of go into if I am feeling this way, but for me talking to other people doesn't really help me with that. I feel that I need a space to be alone with my thoughts. I don't know, maybe that's not normal, but I think talking about it is kind of overwhelming for me.

Sheila: There is no "norm" [makes hand quotes] when it comes to anxiety. Try not to discredit the way that you are feeling. Everything that you are feeling is entirely justified. Everyone has different limits right now which is completely okay. Maybe next time when you are feeling uncomfortable in a social situation like this- especially due to COVID, if you feel like ultimately it's safe, like you said you felt this event was- you could try to practice some exercises before you leave. Instead of leaving the event- you could excuse yourself to a private place and take some time to be alone. You said that you find being alone with your thoughts to be helpful, so taking some deep breaths and maybe even trying to meditate in a space alone would help you to

calm your nerves. Pushing these feelings away and leaving the situation can be a temporary fix and sometimes helps a lot, but I can see that you are still struggling with what you have just told me. Recognizing these feelings as you are doing now is so important. Maybe paying attention to the feelings in the moment is something you can do next time.

Lucy: Yes, I think in the moment I can push this away. It may help me to move on at first, but it doesn't feel resolved. I just want to be able to get better and not have to worry about my anxiety constantly coming into the moments I used to enjoy so much.

Sheila: It is really hard to look at your mental health as something to "fix" because in reality we can't change the way we feel. But we can help you to get through these situations that you faced, and give you more tools for when these things do happen. [pause] [Lucy nods her head] Do you think that there was someone there at the gathering that you would have felt comfortable speaking to, about this experience?

Lucy: Yes, and no. I process stuff better in the moment when I am alone. I mean maybe I am wrong, and I haven't been processing it correctly the whole time. I don't really think about talking to people about my anxiety because I don't think they'll ever understand.

Sheila: That is very understandable. There is no right or wrong way to cope with your anxiety, remember that.

Lucy: I think that I could have possibly talked to Justin, but I get nervous opening up like that to someone even though we've been friends for so long. I don't want them to just say to me "oh don't worry this is safe, we won't get sick" because that doesn't help me. I just fear that conversation would only worsen things for me at the moment.

Sheila: Well, maybe next time you feel this way, if you do feel comfortable, talk to someone. I know it can be really scary, but try to think less about what someone may say. That can deter you from having the conversation, and people may surprise you. If you have really been friends with someone for so long, they should support you no matter what.

Lucy: I have a hard time getting over the fear, but I think it helps to hear that from you. Thank you.

Honestly I don't think I am telling the whole truth when I say that, but it feels too complicated saying anything different. I don't think it actually helped to hear that, but I want to please people so I tell them what they want to hear.

Sheila: You are welcome. You can shoot me a text if you are feeling these nerves. I urge you to ease into this new stage of quarantine. You are starting to see people, and that can be uncomfortable. This all takes so much adjustment to get used to, so it won't always be easy. [pauses] You could also try seeing some friends in a safer way if you are nervous about the safety side of things. Isolating yourself completely, as an extroverted person is going to be really hard, so find ways to see your friends in a way that you feel keeps you at a healthy level of ease.

Lucy: I will do that. Sometimes I rule out the opportunities such as a walk outside, because it feels so weird. I don't want to live like this. I don't want to see my friends in this way, but I just have to sort of accept it, you know.

Sheila: [smiles] Yes, and it will certainly take time.

Lucy: Well thank you again. I am feeling a little better. I think I have a base I can start with this week.

Sheila: You are welcome. I will see you in a week! I hope you have a good week.

Lucy: Thank you, you too! Bye!

I smile through the screen, as I leave the meeting. I always feel a sense of comfortable discomfort after these sessions. It's something I have begun to recognize. I keep my schedule free following therapy sessions, allowing myself time to decompress- to really take in what Sheila and I have been talking about. I don't really cry often. It's just something I tend not to do, especially with people I've just met, but I felt something come over me. Feeling anxious and overwhelmed from my conversation for the last hour and my newly released emotions, I take a deep breath. I take out my journal and I write how I am feeling. A step up from keeping it all in I guess.

Thank you so much for reading!