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### Full Disclosure

#### *My Experiences with Anxiety*

You know those cheesy middle school relationships where the two kids in the fifth or sixth grade are “dating”? They are the coolest kids in the grade if they hold hands at recess or – God forbid – *hug* in front of other people. I am a bit ashamed to say I was in one... well, a few actually, but that’s not the point. The first was Adam David; we were in fifth grade. He was thin, almost frail. His features were always somewhat feminine, pretty in a sense: beautiful, amber colored, almond-shaped eyes, incredible cheekbone structure, and a naturally perfect smile. He had dark skin and darker hair; a tuft of small tight curls sat atop his head, but the sides were always shaved. I’d prefer to leave this part out for the sake of my pride, but I’ll throw it in to complete the mental image you’re forming: he was a full foot shorter than me. And probably twenty pounds lighter. We were... a sight to see. I don’t think I had feelings for him; it’s doubtful I even knew what feelings were at that point in my life. We were only “together” because he was my best friend at the time, and my girlfriends promised me that it only made sense if we were dating, because it’s what you did when you were in a “boy-girl” best friendship in fifth grade. Classic love story, right?

I was twelve. It was the day of our “break-up,” if you could even call it that. We had gotten into an argument. I believe it was over him insulting one of my other close friends, but I’m not positive. Whatever it was, it was seemingly drastic in the eyes of a fifth grade pre-teen with her first “relationship” on the line. I don’t remember much about the argument, but I remember this:

I stood in my basement, leaning against one of the ugly split-colored maroon and mustard yellow walls that have been there since we moved in. Adam and I were texting back and forth, arguing over whatever historically irrelevant statement was made to cause the tension. I was not at all concerned about the fact that he was my so-called boyfriend and that we might breakup, but that he was my best friend and we were at risk of losing the close friendship we had. For months at that point, he was my confidant, my shoulder to cry on, my favorite person to talk to and be around. And all at once, I felt that crashing down around me. I had no understanding of the fact that it was a stupid argument that could have been fixed with a mere, “I’m sorry.”

In that moment, it was so much more. I could not explain it if I tried. I still can’t.

My heart started pounding. There was a feeling in my chest I had never experienced, like someone was squeezing my lungs to see if they would deflate. They burned, but not like they were on fire. It was a dry burn, like they were scraped of all substance. The kind of burn you feel after holding an ice cube or cold metal for too long, then your hands start to feel like your skin is itching off, sharp, crystalizing, like a million prickles of razor sharp needles are piercing you from within. I gasped for air, tears escaped my eyes, and I slid slowly down my basement wall like I was in some shitty overdramatic movie scene, grasping my phone in my hand with all of my strength to try to feel something. I had no idea what was happening. I cried, first silently into my own arms, afraid my family might hear me cry. I couldn’t hold it back for long, and after a few moments, the sobs escaped my lips and erupted around me. I could feel my cries bouncing off the walls and back through me, shaking me to my core, constant reminders of the mental and physical pain I was experiencing.

I was twelve. I never told anyone about it. I didn't know what a panic attack was, and I definitely didn't know that I experienced one. I'm not sure how or when I realized that it was my first panic attack, I just know that at some point, reliving the same feelings, I made the connection.

Adam and I made up. We agreed we were better as friends and our relationship improved. My anxiety did not.

I attended a Catholic grade school (kindergarten through eighth grade), so choosing a high school was a big deal. Unlike public school, where your school is usually decided by the district you're in, the Catholic Grade-School-to-High-School transition process is closer to that of a college decision: tours, open houses, scholarship opportunities, and so on. For an eighth grader, it's an important decision to make. I committed to a small school about fifteen minutes from my home, the same one my older brothers had attended, and the same one my two grade school best friends also chose to attend. I couldn't wait for the three of us to face the next four years together: a brand new school, new opportunities, and new friends ahead of us. We were ready, together, for the new journey.

It was only a few days into our freshman year of high school when we met three other girls in our second period Algebra class and immediately bonded. We were all excited for the next four years together: made plans for every weekend to come, joked about being the bridesmaids in each other's weddings one day. It felt like instant long-term best friendship.

It was only a few months into school when they would giggle and whisper about me as I walked into class, when I would receive texts in our group chats about plans I wasn't invited to. Originally, in the classes we shared, we'd race into every classroom to find a table with six seats so we could all sit together. I don't know exactly when – or more importantly, why – they began to look for ones with only five.

I don't think I'll ever know what went wrong. All I knew at an innocent and unknowing fifteen years old was that my best friends, specifically the two I had spent the last eight years of my life with, now hated me. I wasn't worried about the new three, the ones we had picked up along the way. I was much more hurt by the two I knew, the two I *thought* I knew, who suddenly didn't want me around anymore. In the classes we had together, I was left farther and farther out of conversations, but they always seemed to be about me. I would be seated less than five feet away from them, and they would sit and whisper about me, laughing and poking fun as if I was not right there, a reach away from them – as if we had not spent our lives up to that point being nearly inseparable. It was traumatizing.

At that point, I was still in denial about my general anxiety. But I suddenly became very aware of my social anxiety. I was no longer generally nervous in group settings, I was terrified – of people, of speaking, of voicing my opinions or even having one. I tiptoed my thoughts and words around everyone, so careful and particular never to say the wrong thing at the wrong time or to the wrong person. All I ever thought was that if my two best friends abandoned me, why would anyone else want me around?

My lessening interactions with them heightened my social anxiety, but it was probably everything else going on in my life that heightened my general anxiety: school, friends, family arguments, any other common mishaps a teenage girl experiences. My panic attacks became more frequent. I found myself having to run out of class to find a safe space in a bathroom stall, balling my fists and squeezing my eyes shut to stop myself from audibly crying as girls would shuffle in and out to gossip or take secret hits of vape pens where they would not be caught by teachers. I learned to censor my anxiety, to calm my panic attacks, so no one ever knew the happy, top-of-her-class, and involved-in-every-possible-activity student would breakdown in the school bathroom.

But there was one day in my junior year English class that my anxiety was worse than usual. It was a brutally hot day outside, so we were using the air-conditioned classroom across the hall from our usual one. I was seated next to my friend John, but avoided conversation and eye contact in hopes that he wouldn't notice I was feeling off. I don't remember if there was a

specific trigger, but I began to feel the icy flame in my chest, the painful itch beneath my skin and within my lungs. Tears started to fill my eyes, but in a whisper with a catch in my throat, I steadied my voice just enough to ask my teacher to go to the bathroom. When she nodded yes, I barely made it outside the door before I lost feeling in my legs and collapsed against the wall next to the doorframe. I had thankfully closed the door behind me – as requested to keep the cold air in the room – and held myself against the wall, shaking and silently crying, staring at the dirty black-and-white-spotted hallway floor in front of me. I remember trying to force myself up off the floor and to the bathroom so I could have a moment of quiet. I wanted more than anything to be out of the open hallway where anyone could walk past and see me. I reassured myself that if someone did, it would be some stranger leaving another class – someone who might walk past like nothing happened, or maybe stop to quietly ask if I was alright. I'd brush them off and tell them I was having a rough day.

But it happened to be one of the two girls, one of my childhood best friends, leaving the same English class I was in, that stepped into the hallway to see me crouched on the floor beside her. We locked eyes for a second; I noticed the instantaneous shock in hers, and I can only imagine she saw the pained desperation in mine. I had so much hope that we would let go of our past, that we would go back to being best friends for just a moment, just enough time that she could help me get back on my feet and away from the vulnerability of the hallway. Then we could go back to being strangers.

She turned back into the classroom. I anticipated she was going to get our teacher for help; it would've been a rational decision made by a once-best-friend trapped in such an uncomfortable position.

Instead, she laughed. She laughed out loud and announced to the class, "Oh my god, Delaney's literally on the floor having a panic attack in the hallway." No one flinched. There was no audible response. I don't think my teacher heard her; I like to think that if she did, she would have come to check on me. But I don't think she did. Or maybe I don't remember if she did. After that moment, hearing the girl I grew up with use my panic attack to ridicule me in front of the entire class, everything was a blur.

I couldn't talk about any of it – about my friends, about my feelings, about my constant panic and racing thoughts – without immediately crying or shutting down. For all of high school I lived like this, thinking it was normal, thinking I could pass life pretending none of it ever happened, pretending I didn't have feelings and they weren't constantly pressing my mind. I thought going to college far away would help, would remove me from my feelings, my anxiety, anything and everything that triggered it. It would all get better and go away.

I set my hopes a bit too high. Full disclosure: my anxiety hasn't improved at all; honestly, it's probably gotten worse. But it's now much easier to talk about, which I think has been the most important step. I've learned to be open about my mental health, and to transform my hardships and pain into laughter and jokes, which, in my opinion, is much better than crying.

It's been eight years since my first panic attack. For so long I convinced myself I was better, convinced myself it was no longer anything to worry about, that my fidgeting fingers and clenching fists, heightened heart rate and sporadic deep breaths, were something everyone experienced every day. I let myself go on pretending everything was fine because I was afraid to acknowledge the fact that I needed help.

Since high school, I have seen the ways that joking about anxiety or my panic attacks – or simply having a genuine conversation about them – makes others more likely to share their experiences. A few weeks ago, I was sitting in my apartment with a few friends when I joked about having a panic attack earlier that week... or maybe even that day. My friend Sean, the most reserved of our loud and obnoxious friend group, caught my attention and asked me in a volume just above a whisper, "Do you ever regret talking about things like that? Like, don't you feel like people will judge you, or use it against you or something?"

If it were anyone else, I would have interpreted the question as though he was asking because he thought I was oversharing. But the warmth and concern in his tone made me understand he was asking for himself – that he was scared others would think that of him. I took a moment to think back on my years in high school. For so long, I was terrified of anyone

knowing anything about my emotional vulnerability. If asked, so many of my peers would tell you they never knew I struggled in the way that I had. And in that moment, I regretted it. I wished I hadn't held back, I wished I was able to recognize that if I was hiding so much, I likely was not the only one.

I wondered if I had ever spoken up, if I had ever let anyone see past the surface, if I could've helped someone to see that it was nothing to be ashamed of.

I looked back at Sean. "Sometimes," I began. "Depending on who I'm around. I'm not going to spill my whole trauma story on a bunch of strangers. But this is something that's important to me, and important to a lot of people. Why should I regret talking about something I have no reason to be embarrassed about?" His response was a nod and a soft, closed-mouth smile, barely showing one of his dimples. He seemed content with the answer, like it made sense and he agreed, but that he wasn't quite ready to discuss further.

I knew part of me was saying it for Sean, but I knew part of me was saying it for myself. It's gotten *easier* to talk about, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

We all went on for quite some time that night to talk about mental health, talk about the stigmas around it, talk about how our emotions are suppressed by the faults and stereotypes in our society. I felt safe, like I was finally surrounded by the people my younger self deserved to know.

I wish I go back to the girl in high school who desperately needed someone to help her. I wish I could tell she should not be afraid, tell her if she accepted her feelings she could attempt to work through them, tell her how important it is to talk about mental health, to talk about her anxiety.

And God, I wish I could tell her how therapeutic it is to write about it.