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## I Was a Teenage Misanthrope: Essays

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**I WAS A TEENAGE MISANTHROPE: ESSAYS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Lane Pybas

December 2019

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# **I WAS A TEENAGE MISANTHROPE: ESSAYS**

English

Missouri State University, December 2019

Master of Arts

Lane Pybas

## **ABSTRACT**

The essays in this collection each explore to some extent my experience of mental illness, specifically clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder. In writing these essays, I wanted to experiment with different methods of representing the self as it undergoes an experience of mental illness. In the essay “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope,” for example, I portray myself in a somewhat humorous way, highlighting my antisocial behaviors for comic effect, in order to depict a period of my life that might otherwise have been too difficult to write about. In “Quiet Midwestern Bitch,” an essay about anxiety, I represent multiple selves on the page to look at how one of my selves, written in the first perspective, interacts with another, idealized self. These techniques and others have helped me develop different self-characterizations for writing about mental illness, which in turn allow me to depict complex life experiences. I hope these essays inspire further and more nuanced explorations of self-representation in personal essays of all kinds.

**KEYWORDS:** personal essays, autobiography, illness stories, mental illness, anxiety, depression, self-representation, double perspective

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A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Works Cited	Page 7
I Was a Teenage Misanthrope	Page 8
It Happened to Me	Page 19
Hong Kong in 2014	Page 24
Panic in the Newsroom	Page 33
Quiet Midwestern Bitch	Page 44
My MFA Experience	Page 52

## INTRODUCTION

To varying degrees, the essays in this collection each deal with my experience of mental illness, specifically clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder, both of which I have struggled with on and off for many years. In the essays “Panic in the Newsroom” and “Quiet Midwestern Bitch,” I explore how anxiety affected me when I was a graduate student in journalism and beyond. In other essays, the impact of depression on my life is implied in the narrative but is not entirely explicit, as in “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope” and “Hong Kong in 2014.” I have long understood my desire to write about my depression and anxiety as a way of working out the ways in which they’ve shaped my identity. As such, I agree with the sociologist Arthur Frank when he writes that illness is “an occasion for stories” (53). According to Frank, a major reason illness invokes stories and storytelling is that: “Stories have to *repair* the damage that illness has done to the ill person’s sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations” (53). The idea that illness stories help to reshape the ill person’s “sense of where she is in life,” her sense of self, is what most interests me about narratives of illness, particularly mental illness (53). In this introduction, I explore how I’ve characterized the self in my own illness stories, and whether the stories I’ve told have reconfigured the way I perceive my identity.

The concept of the self has been much theorized by scholars of autobiography. In the article “Character and Self in Autobiography,” David Gordon writes that narrators of autobiography “may be called authorial *selves* but in an ambiguous sense. The writer is both narrator (a being in the text) and author (a person outside it), not exclusively one or the other” (116-117). In “Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject,” Paul Jay calls



this dynamic “the relation between the self-as-author and the self-as-subject” (1045). Thus in autobiography (and sometimes in autobiographical fiction, or autofiction), the writer must attend to the interplay of at least two selves, the self-as-author and the self-as-subject.

In illness stories, the self-as-author tells stories about her illness not “for the sake of description, though description may be the ostensible content. The self is being *formed* in what is told” (Frank 55). The self-as-author, in other words, turns her self-as-subject into a character through the act of storytelling. All types of autobiography involve transforming the self into a character on the page, but in *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*, Carl Klaus suggests that illness stories might especially require the self-as-author to dramatize their self-as-subject. To this point, Klaus quotes Anatole Broyard, who says, “It seems to me that every seriously ill person needs to develop a style for his illness. I think that only by insisting on your style can you keep from falling out of love with yourself as the illness attempts to diminish you” (126).

My self-as-subject is perhaps the most stylized in the essay “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope.” This essay depicts how my misanthropic behavior caused me to have a falling out with my two best friends in high school. While misanthropy isn’t an illness, I now know with hindsight that my behavior toward others was a manifestation of my depression, something I did not understand at the time. I’m quite ashamed of how I acted as a depressed teenager, but in order not to fall out of love with myself, as Broyard puts it, I decided to portray myself in a somewhat comic way.

I thus centered my relationship with Ashley and Kelsey, my two best friends, on our shared aversion to our well-adjusted peers. Although we did share this distaste, in reality our friendship was based on more than such comical dislikes as disgust with our classmates for

posting pictures of themselves on Facebook wearing swimsuits, for example. We were also friends for other, more commonplace reasons, like geography and socioeconomic status, but I chose not to focus on those in the essay. In representing my self-as-subject, I highlighted my antisocial behaviors, or “that pitiful set of quirks, those small differences that seem to set us apart from others,” and I “project[ed] them theatrically” (Lopate 19). I wanted my depressive antics to be entertaining, so I maximized them in the essay, forming my ‘self’ *from* the content of the story, as Frank would say. If I hadn’t dramatized myself in this way, that period of my life might have been too difficult to write about.

Enlarging one aspect of one’s self, as I did with my misanthropy in “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope,” isn’t lying about or fabricating the self. In this essay, I followed Phillip Lopate’s advice for self-characterization when he suggests that writers should place “those [traits] that are already in us under the most clearly focused, sharply defined light” (19). In other essays, I stress different features of my personality. In “Panic in the Newsroom,” for instance, I shine a light on my frazzled, anxious characteristics; in “It Happened to Me,” I emphasize a self that is self-aware, but not self-aware enough to prevent herself from repeating the same mistakes twice. Not one of these selves is more authentic than the other; they each arise from the stories I tell as I become reacquainted with the parts of myself that illness has “damage[d]” (Frank 53). I think the same is also true—that each of the selves I portray are equally authentic—for the essays in which I represent more than one self within the same narrative.

Autobiographers often portray multiple selves in the same work by establishing what Lopate calls a “double perspective” (26). The first perspective permits “the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived,” while the second perspective incorporates “a more mature intelligence to interpret the past” (Lopate 26). The first perspective, that is, describes

events as we experienced them, and the second perspective reflects on those events in retrospect. Even though I focus on depicting a single, misanthropic self in “I Was a Teenage Misanthrope,” I sometimes slip into a double perspective within this essay. When I move from describing an experience in the past to reflecting on it from the perspective of the present day, as I do when I write, “I wish I could say I was right to withdraw from Ashley and Kelsey, but I think even then I knew that doing so was dramatic and extreme when not one of us could fully explain what had gone wrong” (18), a double perspective occurs.

I mention the double perspective because Frank suggests that the plurality of self is another factor to which illness stories attend, writing, “the issue for most ill people seems to be keeping multiple selves available to themselves” (66). I understand Frank’s concept of multiple selves to be slightly different than the double perspective. The double perspective represents one’s past and present self, but someone who has experienced illness might view her self as fragmented within the same moment in time. In narrating her story, she might create a cast of different selves to represent this fragmentation.

Although I mostly spotlight one, central self in my essays, only occasionally incorporating a double perspective, I intentionally portrayed multiple selves in the essay “Quiet Midwestern Bitch.” The first self I depict in this essay is akin to the first perspective. I show myself in a therapy session and represent this meeting as I experienced it at the time it occurred. I then shift to the perspective of “Positive Lane,” who is neither in the first or second perspective. Instead, she is an idealized self, the person I would be if I didn’t have anxiety. I write, “If I were Positive Lane, I wouldn’t have dropped out of grad school or moved back in with my parents at 25. I would maneuver through life with ease, maybe even have a career. Positive Lane wouldn’t stress-eat or go to bed with wet hair” (44). Besides the first perspective

and that of Positive Lane, I also write in the second perspective, where I interject on the narrative of the first perspective to reflect on the root of my anxiety with the knowledge I have in the present day.

My real-life therapist introduced me to the concept of Positive Lane in our sessions together as a way to combat my anxious thoughts. It didn't occur to me, however, that I could write in what I'll call an idealized perspective until I read Lily Hoang's essay "On Catastrophe." Hoang characterizes her idealized self as "Other Lily," the alternative person she would've been if she had behaved as a "better" Vietnamese daughter: "I imagine this Other Lily, wonder if she'd be my size or trimmer or fatter...She would succeed in all the ways I have failed. She would not be a professor. She would not be divorced. She would be a good daughter" (27). Hoang's Other Lily isn't a perspective she uses because illness has caused her sense of self to fragment; instead, the pain of her perceived failures as a daughter produces Other Lily. Representing an idealized self in writing is thus a way to show a fragmented identity caused by illness, pain or hurt.

As Frank predicted, writing about my various experiences of mental illness has helped me to work out who I really am. In attending to the difference between my self-as-author and my self-as-subject, I developed different self-characterizations that helped me write about my illnesses without being self-loathing. I also sometimes wrote my self-as-subject in the first and second perspectives within the same essay, which furthered the way I understand how the events of the past influence me in the present. Depicting a fragmented, idealized third self finally allowed me to embody the visions I have of myself experiencing life without illness. Writing these essays was not easy; however, I no longer see mental illness as a diminishing force in my life. Instead, writing the self has allowed me to evaluate multiple qualities within myself

simultaneously, and to determine that every one of those qualities adds value to my life story,  
lived and written.

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## I WAS A TEENAGE MISANTHROPE

I met Ashley at the beginning of our sophomore year of high school. She was thin and pale and had dark brown hair she straightened religiously with a flat iron, even if she wore it all up in a ponytail. She had a prim way about her that was intimidating but that also sort of made me feel superior to her, as I prided myself on appearing effortlessly disheveled at school. She claimed she never wore “relaxing” clothing such as yoga pants or athletic shorts like most girls our age, even on weekends or after school, and she had perfect posture. If she could regularly refrain from slouching her shoulders, what else was she capable of?

At 15, we both shared a sort of deep-seated misanthropy complicated by an intense desire, which neither of us would ever admit, to be popular. Many of the same things disgusted us: girls in our class who posted pictures of themselves in swimsuits on Facebook, groups of friends who hung out together in hot tubs (this hobby of our peers was doubly aggravating, as it usually ended with swimsuit pictures posted to social media, *ugh*) and classmates who were popular despite our view that they’d done nothing to deserve such high status.

Meanwhile, we had different approaches to dealing with our hunger for popularity. I preferred to associate with one or two friends who shared my scorn for most other people, reasoning that if I wasn’t popular, then everyone who was must be worthy of derision. Together a close friend and I would share each other’s grudges, cultivate exquisite disdain, and wallow in contempt. We would have a great time.

Ashley also enjoyed sneering at popularity and being spiteful, but she believed in acquiring a large group of people with which to do so. Assembling a group of scornful people

seemed to me to defeat the purpose of the scorn itself. If such behavior became popular, who would we have left to scorn but ourselves?



The first step of Ashley's plan to amass a larger friend group was to befriend a trio of classmates who were moderately more social and well adjusted than we were. The trio included Hannah, Tyler, and another guy whose name escapes me, so disinterested was I in expanding my social circle.

The second step was to de-friend my longtime best friend and partner in scoffing, Kelsey. One night at Kelsey's house, Ashley realized that Kelsey often tinged her contempt for others with violence, and Ashley, being prim and wanting to add new members to the group, did not approve.

"Who else should we add to the shank list?" Kelsey asked, referring to a notebook she kept full of the names of everyone she didn't like.

"Let's look at the yearbook instead," Ashley suggested, "and talk about who we hate." I saw no harm in the shank list, both because it included, in addition to the names of people we actually knew written in Magic Marker, the celebrities Kelsey despised, such as Cynthia Nixon (too gay) and, inexplicably, Owen Wilson (nose too crooked). It also demonstrated how we didn't understand that "shank" is not actually a verb meaning "to stab," but rather a noun referring to a makeshift knife, often devised in prisons.

Even so, I sided with Ashley. The movie *Mean Girls* had come out just a few years before, and it did not escape me that the villains in the film are toppled after their burn book containing unflattering comments about their classmates, much like our shank list, is discovered.



It seemed safer to discuss our disgust rather than document it. In my mind, we weren't mean girls. We were simply better than everyone else.



Ashley and I ditched Kelsey by ignoring her at school. At first I felt terrible about it, but Kelsey seemed unfazed whenever I ran into her.

One afternoon I heard her complaining loudly about a teacher in the hallway, determined that her propensity for expressing animus lived on without me, and accepted Ashley's invitation to hang out with Hannah, Tyler, and the other guy, who I'll call Nathan, after school.

We met in Hannah's neighborhood, a nice, established part of southeast Springfield. I parked my car on the curb in front of a random house. I already didn't like the terms of this gathering, meeting out in the open instead of at someone's house for a sleepover or movie night. My socializing habits were stuck in middle school, but I did not yet have the desire to change them.

Ashley called to give me Hannah's address. I wondered why I didn't already know it. When I walked to Hannah's house and saw several cars parked around her driveway, I figured Hannah's parents hadn't wanted another car on their street, but Ashley had more likely withheld the address until the last minute to prevent me from becoming overly familiar with Hannah or from spending time with Hannah on my own (*as if*).

Ashley, Hannah, and Tyler were sitting in lawn chairs on the driveway, seemingly doing nothing.

"Hey Lane," Hannah said. "Where's Kelsey?"

I'd known Hannah for a long time but had never seen her as solid friend potential. She was cheerful and enjoyed running cross-country, two qualities I could hardly have appreciated at that age.

"I don't know," I said, surprised. "I didn't know she was coming."

"Oh, I just thought you would bring her," Hannah said. "You two are always together."

"She's been annoying us," I explained. Why hadn't Ashley told Hannah about our decision to ice out Kelsey? I mean, if they were going to sit in lawn chairs together, Hannah might as well know.

"We've just been growing apart," Ashley said quickly, uncharacteristically averting an opportunity to instigate gossip.

"Whatever," I shrugged. Ashley was being weird.

I sat across from the three of them. Tyler hadn't spoken since I arrived. He was also cheerful and into physical fitness, but he was nerdier than Hannah. I imagined him frequently hosting mock sword fights in his backyard. He had a mop of sandy blond hair and a face full of freckles, both of which added to his sunny demeanor. I didn't like him.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

"Just chilling," Tyler said. "And waiting on Nathan."

"Then what?" I wanted to know. If we weren't going to do anything interesting, like complain about school or bash our peers, then I had better things to do, reading Dostoyevsky and listening to The Clash alone in my room among them.

"Ooh, we can take pictures," Hannah said.

"Ohmygod, yes!" Ashley cried, eyes lighting up. "I brought my camera."

I felt betrayed. I thought Ashley hated taking pictures because they'd inevitably end up on Facebook, ripe for someone like us to mock them.

"What's taking Nathan so long?" I said coldly, in a pathetic attempt to stir up some trash talk.

"He's just finishing up orchestra practice," Hannah said.

"Nerd," I scoffed.

"Nah bro," Tyler said. "He's really good at it."

Where had Ashley found these freaks? These were some of the most well-intentioned, impervious-to-pettiness people I had ever spent time with. They actually enjoyed each other's company and their banter was suspiciously devoid of malice.

Ashley didn't want a crew of scornful pals at all, I suddenly realized. She wanted a normal friend group. In wanting to take pictures with them, it also seemed she required evidence of her new well adjusted friends.



Over the next few weeks, Ashley continued hanging out with Hannah, Tyler, and Nathan, but she didn't invite me again. She didn't tell me about their various exploits, but I knew about them from the pictures she posted to Facebook. There were photos of Ashley, Tyler, and Nathan playing board games, Ashley and Hannah frolicking downtown, and the four of them looking sun burnt in somebody's backyard. Seeing Ashley delight in doing the very things we used to insult agitated me. On the one hand, I was pissed that Ashley wasn't inviting me to stuff. On the other hand, I disliked her new friends and didn't want to spend time with them. It was confusing.

Ashley and I still hung out at school, but now I was mad at her all the time and I didn't know how to productively express my feelings.

One Friday during this period I proudly showed her a charcoal picture I had drawn in art class of a dragon that I'd clearly traced from an image I found online. She reached out to touch it, but I pulled it away and snapped, "Don't fuck it up!"

"Oh," she said.

"So do you want to hang out this weekend?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Actually, I'm going out of town to visit my grandma tonight."

"Oh, okay. Have fun."

That evening I scrolled through Facebook on the bulky aqua-blue iMac my entire family shared. My heart sank when I saw pictures, posted just minutes before, of Ashley at Hannah's house. I'd grown accustomed to not being invited to things, and to not acknowledging that I wasn't invited to things, but Ashley hadn't lied to me about it before.

Looking back, she probably lied to avoid my wrath, which swelled up out of nowhere at the mention of Hannah or Tyler or Nathan, those jerks, but the lie only made me more indignant.



"I have no friends," I cried to my mom sometime after that.

"What happened to Ashley? You two were spending so much time together."

"She's the worst!" I said, but not with admiration. "She only cares about making new friends."

"That doesn't seem so terrible, honey," my mom said. My mom is the sort of person who effortlessly makes friends and whose friendships are rarely characterized by deceit or betrayal. In fact, she seems to genuinely like most of her friends, which is a concept I still sometimes struggle to comprehend. Confiding in her was hopeless.

“But she lied to me!” I countered. “She told me she was going out of town, but she was actually at Hannah’s house. She’s shady and I can’t trust her!”

“Could that be because she knows you don’t like Hannah? Why don’t you try doing something with them again?”

“I would rather die!” I gaped. ‘Doing something with them again’ was out of the question after how tedious I’d found their company the first time and after being excluded so many times subsequently. I had morals and standards.

“Well, what about Kelsey? I never really understood why you both stopped being friends.”

“Hmm, maybe,” I mused.

Until then, I’d been too prideful to make amends with Kelsey, and it seemed like she’d moved on, scorching new paths of animosity with other people. But that at least was something.

~ ~ ~

I found Kelsey after school as she waited in the parking lot for her grandmother to pick her up. Her face was composed in an artful glare, just like old times, and I felt emboldened to talk to her.

“Hey,” I said.

She directed her glare at me. “What do you want?”

*Oh no, I thought, am I on Kelsey’s shank list?*

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” I said. I didn’t have the wherewithal to address the fact that we hadn’t spoken in months or to apologize for abruptly replacing her with Ashley.

“Bitch, I know you were talking shit about me.”

I wracked my brain, panicking. I probably *had* talked shit about her, but to which time was she referring? When Ashley and I agreed to stop hanging out with Kelsey, we extensively detailed our reasoning to make ourselves feel justified in ignoring her. Neither of us liked the culpability of the shank list, for instance. Ashley didn't like Kelsey's sense of fashion, which was grungy and made her own conventional style seem goody-goody instead of elegant like I think she was going for. Admittedly, I was sick of dealing with Kelsey's emotions. She was always outraged about something, and while I often found this admirable, sometimes her rage lacked focus, seemed random. It had no outward logic, at least not to us. Until Ashley's recent about-face, the boundaries of our dislikes had been clear and consistent.

We talked a lot of shit.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Ashley told me all about it,” Kelsey said, “Why do you think I've been ignoring you this whole time?”

“What did Ashley tell you?” I wasn't sophisticated enough to figure out what was going on. Kelsey thought *she'd* been ignoring *me*?

“She said you went to Hannah's house and talked shit about me to everyone there. You told them I was annoying and that you didn't invite me on purpose.”

I almost sighed in relief. If that's all Kelsey knew, then maybe we could salvage our friendship after all. At our school, talking shit was a serious violation of the social code. But calling someone annoying behind her back was a minor form of shit talk. It could be forgiven.

“So you're ignoring me and not Ashley? She didn't invite you to Hannah's that day either.”

“I don’t hang out with Ashley,” Kelsey sneered. “She just texted me randomly to tell me how annoying you think I am.”

*Lovely*, I thought.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Listen, I have said some shitty things—” I hesitated. I thought I should ask her for forgiveness, but I’d never asked a friend to forgive me before. The words stuck in my throat. Uttering them aloud felt like trying to swallow gravel. Kelsey stared at me nervously, eyes widening. Instead of appeasing her, my half-formed apology seemed to be making her uncomfortable.

Suddenly I didn’t want to apologize. I saw myself groveling at Kelsey’s feet for weeks trying to earn her trust back and become her friend again, only to realize that I didn’t actually care or want to be her friend. It all seemed endless and exhausting.

Kelsey’s grandmother was idling in her old minivan on the street across from where we stood. I gestured toward the car in case Kelsey hadn’t seen her. “I guess I’ll see you around,” I said almost pleadingly, begging her to release me from the conversation I’d initiated.

“Yeah, I guess.”

With that, she turned away and walked across the street. I watched her sling her backpack into the van and climb into the back seat. As the car pulled away my limbs felt heavy and cumbersome, like they belonged to someone much larger than I. I was too weak to move them. I stood there for a long time.

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“Would you ever talk shit about me?” Read the text message Ashley sent me a few days later.

Ashley and I hadn't spoken since she'd lied about going out of town. Instead of confronting her about it, I avoided her fastidiously. It wasn't very difficult to avoid Kelsey and Ashley at school. The halls were crowded and anonymous; it was easy to disappear in them. I invented longer routes to my classes, and took the lesser-used staircases, entries, and exits whenever possible. I started seeing people I'd never seen before, other outcasts and loners who lurked around the periphery of the school like me.

I stared at my phone. I understood that it was meaningless to respond, the question containing its own answer, but I did it anyway.

"No," I typed into my phone, lying. I assumed Kelsey had told Ashley all about our confrontation, and now Ashley wanted to know if I'd incriminated her to Kelsey in any way.

"Okay, thanks," she replied. Moments later a cloying smiley face appeared on my screen.

"Why?"

"No reason." *Smiley face.*

"I doubt that, Ashley."

She didn't reply immediately, maybe she never would. I didn't care.

After 10 minutes or so, a long block of text popped up on my phone. It was an apology. Something about how much she missed me, she shouldn't have asked me if I talked shit about her, she trusted me, she was sorry.

Her apology seemed sincere, but it was too late. I no longer wanted to be her friend, even if I couldn't remember exactly why. I wish I could say I was right to withdraw from Ashley and Kelsey, but I think even then I knew that doing so was dramatic and extreme when not one of us could fully explain what had gone wrong. I understood I was choosing friendlessness for the



foreseeable future. With no immediate friend prospects, I chose a death sentence for my teenage self, but I made no effort to stop it. I think I hated myself more than I ever hated other people.

## IT HAPPENED TO ME

*It happened to me:* I was depressed in college but I still had a pretty good experience overall.

I was depressed in high school, too. I graduated a year early because I couldn't imagine carrying on attending classes called Life Skills or the Basics of Personal Finance for another whole year. After my guidance counselor approved me for early graduation, I applied to three universities—more or less at random—and chose the one with the most scenic campus.

The college sits on 27,000 acres in the sleepy hills of Northwest Georgia, 70 miles north of Atlanta. When I moved there from Missouri, I thought of myself as an invalid in a Jane Austen novel who'd been prescribed four years of fresh air for my nerves. Thanks to the bucolic setting, my college experience was more like an expensive residential therapy program than an endless party. I took a lot of naps.



*It happened to me:* The rural environment alleviated some of my depression, but the air in Georgia was horrible for my allergies.

At some point I started getting allergy shots at the Student Health Center, although it was a real hassle because they only administered the shots in the mornings on Mondays and Wednesdays. Everyone on campus with allergies would flood the waiting room before noon, and then we'd recognize each other later in the day from the round Band-Aids the nurses stuck to our arms.

The college's whole shtick is guaranteeing every student an on-campus job for eight semesters. This appealed to me at the time because I didn't want to have to go out and look for

my own part-time employment. Freshman year, the college assigned me to be some sort of administrative assistant in the Career Center—even though I knew nothing about careers or how to find them.



*It happened to me:* Everyone said I was lucky to be a student-worker in the Career Center because the other employees were always bringing in cake, but nobody ever brought in cake during the two semesters I worked there.

Instead I helped organize the twice-a-year career fair and did my homework when the supervisor wasn't looking. I'd get off work at five on Fridays and go back to my dorm room to find it empty of the three roommates I shared it with—they were all from Georgia and could easily go home on the weekends. The empty room made me feel lonely and happy all at once.

If you told me now to share a single room with three other people, I'd say, Fuck You.

But it wasn't so bad because we all had different schedules and by the end of the year only Samantha and I were still living in the room. Brianna dropped out mid-spring and Danielle transferred to a new room after Brianna confronted her while I was hiding under the blankets of my lofted bed about leaving cereal bowls full of milk all over her desk for days on end. Even though she scared me a little, I was sad to see Brianna go because she and I were the closest and I had hoped to room with her sophomore year.



*It happened to me:* My first-choice roommate dropped out of college so I asked my friend Cassy to room with me instead.

Cassy turned out to be an ideal roommate because her distaste for confrontation equaled if not surpassed mine. We also had similarly misguided preferences for getting around campus.

We agreed that the 15-minute walk from our dorm room to the dining hall was too strenuous, so we drove there every night to have dinner, complaining to anyone who'd listen if we couldn't find parking.

We always took two cars.

I applied for a position as a tutor in the Writing Center because it seemed more relevant to my English major. To become a tutor, I had to take a class called the Pedagogy of Writing Centers in which I had to pretend I planned on adopting a well-thought-out tutoring philosophy. I had no such intentions; I was only trying to "build my resume" like I'd learned to do from working at the Career Center.



*It happened to me:* I didn't like being a writing tutor because the students who sought help were always needy, but building my resume really did "open up doors."

For instance, tutoring at the Writing Center helped me land my first teaching job out of college.

My new supervisor helped me, too: he unintentionally dissuaded me from writing my honor's thesis on Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* after suggesting I relate it to American Transcendentalism, his area of expertise. I never could get through *Leaves of Grass*.

My favorite class was on British Modernism, where we read Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford. Sometimes I felt a bit like a traitor for enjoying English literature more than the American stuff.

My favorite book is still *Wuthering Heights*.

Since the college is a residential campus, we weren't allowed to live in town until our senior year. Cassy and I applied to live off campus with my friend Chelsea, who needed a

roommate. At that time, ranking friends among girls seemed paramount not only for ourselves but also for each other, so everyone knew where they stood. I considered Chelsea to be my best friend and Cassy to be my best roommate, someone who I didn't necessarily hang out with but whose habits and routines I knew intimately.



*It happened to me:* I decided to live with my best friend and my best roommate and it didn't work out like I'd hoped.

Cassy and Chelsea hardly knew each other before we rented the apartment, but less than three weeks after moving in they'd already bonded over all the commonalities they shared with each other but not with me. They both loved country music, the GOP, alarming neon-pink-colored clothing, and margaritas. On an individual level these qualities were merely quirks, sometimes even lovable, but manifested in two people with whom I shared housing, these characteristics quickly became unbearable to me.

It didn't help that Cassy and Chelsea viewed my distaste for some of their interests as personal attacks or that I also felt attacked by their impatience for my own hobbies. They didn't understand why I enjoyed reading for fun, insisted that we recycle, or often woke up early on the weekends to exercise, and they seemed offended that I wanted to continue pursuing pastimes they had no interest in.

I started evading them by working extra hours in the Writing Center, but this strategy likely only made matters worse.

I knew my friendship with the two of them was over the weekend Chelsea broke one of the lids of my storage containers by using it as a sled on one of the rare days it snowed in Georgia. I texted her on my way out of town to visit my mom requesting that she replace the lid.

I wasn't even mad about the broken lid.

But Chelsea was.



*It happened to me:* I pissed off my best friend by asking her via text to replace the plastic storage container lid she broke instead of asking her in person.

When I returned from dropping my mom off at the airport in Atlanta, she and Cassy ambushed me with an intervention because of my “insensitive behavior.” They said texting Chelsea about the lid made me a coward. I wanted to laugh in their faces about the absurdity of it all, but I just went into my room and cried.

Eventually I forgave Chelsea, but I never quite forgave Cassy for condoning Chelsea's behavior. Cassy had sat there with dull, downcast eyes, saying nothing, as Chelsea lectured me about being a better friend. It was as if she'd forgotten all the good times we'd shared as we searched for parking behind the dining hall.

But maybe Danielle felt the same way—betrayed—when I hid under my covers while Brianna yelled at her about the sour milk-filled cereal bowls. In that moment my loyalty had been to Brianna, and over time Cassy's allegiance had shifted to Chelsea.

I don't blame either of them now.

I don't even blame myself.

Like I said, I was depressed in college but I still had a pretty good experience overall.

## HONG KONG IN 2014

### 1.

In Hong Kong, I'll rent a 16th floor studio on the main island. A doorman will hold the elevator open as I slide in with the day's shopping, fruit I've never seen before—black-flecked ovals of white flesh enveloped in pink skin—and little gadgets I never knew I needed: chargers for my portable chargers. My bed will face a wall of windows. I'll lie back and glimpse the swelling grey-blue of the South China Sea just past the looming skyscrapers. I won't know what lies beyond the murky water, but the unknown will excite me.

No more Southern liberal arts colleges, no more dormitories, no more prefabricated apartment complexes, no more tenuous roommates. No more weekends in the stuffy library. No more Walmart Supercenters. No more small towns, no more backwoods drives, no more mundane, no more boring.

On weekends and evenings I'll explore Chungking Mansions, peer into the guesthouses and daydream about the former occupants. I'll frequent Hong Kong-style cafes, admire the 1950's décor, order condensed milk and butter toast with lemon tea, and take pictures of the shop's exterior, its neon sign flooding the street with brilliant colors. I'll sit in the Shun Tak Centre late at night and read free copies of the *South China Morning Post* while I watch the ticket line for the ferry to Macau ebb and flow. I'll devour one bizarre headline after the other—Japanese man arrested for fathering 100th child—things like that.

I'll be an English teacher in Hong Kong, but I can be anything I want to be, too. I can freelance for English-language magazines, intern at a fancy expat-only law firm, work under the table at a British pub, figure out what opium is. I can be invisible in Hong Kong even as a

foreigner, mistaken as a local from the back for my dark hair. Or I can be eccentric in Hong Kong, dye my hair Halloween-orange and wear candy-colored jumpsuits with combat boots in the heat of summer—and still be invisible, thanks to the locals’ superb sense of fashion. Invisible in a large city—the optimal condition for reinvention.

I can be a Causeway Bay office worker. A Lamma Island hippie. A creepy Wan Chai gweilo. A Mong Kok punk. A Sai Kung stay-at-home mom from Australia (harder to accomplish, but I can try). What matters is that I’ll be reborn in Hong Kong. I’ll cast aside the old me, the variations of myself I find unappealing: fearful Lane, forlorn Lane, timid and anxious Lane, irritable and misunderstood Lane.

My Hong Kong won’t be Wong Kar-wai’s Hong Kong, even though his films introduced me to the city. My cousin Lauren showed me *Chungking Express* the summer before my final year of college. Afterward, I feverishly consumed the majority of his oeuvre. *As Tears Go By*, *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together*, *2046*. Of all Wong Kar-wai’s films, *In the Mood for Love* is my favorite. It’s about two neighbors who slowly realize their respective spouses are cheating on them. In it, Maggie Cheung is frequently shown walking up and down abysmal-looking flights of stairs to obtain takeaway noodles while heartbreaking orchestral music plays in the background, with cuts of Tony Leung looking handsome and forlorn in the rain, every scene awash in a sensual red. There’s hardly any romance, only stifling tension and despair. I couldn’t resist the allure of Hong Kong after that.

“You moved to Hong Kong because you liked a bunch of random movies?” a professor in graduate school will ask me, long after I’ll move back to the U.S., his voice betraying jealousy or perhaps scorn. Of course it’s absurd to move abroad based on the strength of one director’s movies, but the dreamscapes created by Hollywood inspire people to come to the United States



all the time. Besides, moving somewhere new to experience a different culture is the kind of thing wayfaring people do. And I will do it.

## 2.

I moved to Hong Kong from my hometown in Missouri a few months after I finished my undergraduate degree at the college I attended in Georgia. It was 2014. I was 21 years old. At first, I loved the swarms of people, which, besides the stifling humidity, are the first thing anyone notices about Hong Kong. People everywhere. People on escalators, people smashed into subway cars, people clogging up sidewalks, people milling around shopping malls. I found it strangely comforting to walk outside at 10 p.m. and see the streets humming with activity: parents picking up groceries with their children after work, teenagers walking home from cram schools.

What's more, the city was an introvert's paradise. This feature of my personality—introversion—was one I didn't necessarily want to change. I understood that if harnessed correctly, introversion could be one of my biggest assets, which is not how I viewed my proclivity for being afraid and morose; those tendencies could scam. For most of my life, I've been the kind of person for whom outward measures of wellbeing, like getting good grades in school and making friends, have come quite easily, but for whom inward contentment, for reasons I still don't fully understand, has been an elusive dream.

Here in Hong Kong I felt that an introvert could really flourish. People walked alone, ate alone, shopped alone. Even grade schoolers seemed to eat meals alone happily in restaurants. Alone, but always surrounded by people, encased in the relentless energy of the city. In Missouri such behavior would elicit pity or concern, and for children spotted out in public unsupervised, a

phone call to the police. I felt free with the possibilities for adventure—alone or with other people, if I wanted—that the city afforded me.

When school started, however, I began to realize that reinventing myself in a place I barely understood would not be as simple as trying out different clothes or attitudes. I was constantly bewildered at the high school, not only because of its formal culture—from the way students bowed at the start and end of each lesson to the unintuitive British-influenced curriculum—but also because of the students’ singular preoccupations, with which I was unfamiliar. I feared I wouldn’t be able to remake myself into a shiny, new Lane when even basic conversations with students and other teachers were often beyond my comprehension.

The first week, I stood in front of seas of crisp white uniforms, introducing myself to each class as the school’s new English conversation teacher. I ended each introduction by asking the students for advice on how I should spend my time in Hong Kong.

“What do you guys think I should do on the weekends? Err, at the weekend?” I asked the first class, remembering that every conversation teacher before me had been British.

“You should go shopping!”

“Go to Ocean Park.”

“You have to try some fish balls.”

“Okay, great,” I said. “I can’t wait to be your teacher this year.”

I moved to the computer to close out my PowerPoint presentation and end the lesson, but the sound of giggling made me pause. The regular classroom teacher, Amy, ever present during my lessons, quickly identified the giggler.

“Do you have anything you’d like to share, Nathan?” she asked.

“Nothing,” the boy named Nathan said, smirking. “Just...she should go to Central.”

“Oh, why should I go to Central—” I began to ask, excited that someone had suggested something other than shopping or visiting the night markets in a discussion initiated only to encourage the students to practice speaking English. My question, however, was quickly drowned out by the laughter of the other students, who were smiling and glancing at each other guiltily. Amy crossed her arms and frowned.

“That’s enough. Let’s thank Miss Lane for today’s lesson.”

The students rose to bow to Amy and me as we exited the classroom to make way for the next teacher. Amy disappeared down the hall before I could ask her what was so funny about Nathan’s recommendation that I visit Central, the main business and financial district on Hong Kong Island. I’d been to the district several times and seen many businesses and banks, but nothing amusing or out of the ordinary.

After that, I continued asking each class what I should see and do in Hong Kong. In Margaret’s class, someone immediately suggested I go to Central; in Samantha’s class, the suggestion came after several standard responses, much as it had in Amy’s.

When I finally finished going through the rounds of teaching my introductory lesson, I cornered Deborah, the only other foreigner employed by the school. She was an experienced teacher from Australia and my main source of information about the ins and outs of the English department.

“Why does everyone keep telling me to go to Central?” I asked, hoping my ignorance didn’t make me seem too pathetic.

“That’s where the students go to protest. They’re not supposed to,” she said. “But they do. Don’t you pay attention to the news?”

I frequently read the *South China Morning Post*, but almost exclusively to learn about local scandals, like feuds between Cantopop stars and British expats' elaborate money laundering schemes. I tended to skip the articles about politics because I didn't understand Hong Kong's government system, or the authority mainland Chinese law sought to have upon it.

After speaking with Deborah, I learned that the Chinese legislature had proposed reforms to Hong Kong's electoral system on August 31, making it so that the Chinese Communist Party could pre-screen candidates for Hong Kong's 2017 election for Chief Executive. This overturned a decision the Chinese legislature had made in 2007 that had opened up the possibility for universal suffrage in the 2017 election. Earlier that summer, growing discontent with the Chinese government led Hong Kong's annual July 1 protests for universal suffrage to end in an overnight sit-in in Central, where over 500 people were arrested. A civil disobedience campaign called Occupy Central with Love and Peace planned to demonstrate in Central on October 1, but the campaign began early due to a mass student presence. The students Deborah mentioned likely referred to these students, members of Scholarism, a pro-democracy student activist group who had been involved in the overnight sit-in.

I don't remember the exact date the students began telling me, half-joking, to go to Central, but it was sometime in early September, right before the Occupy Movement fully took off. The students, most of whom had traditional parents who forbade them from participating in protests or speaking out against the government, were likely amused by the thought of a foreigner like me unwittingly arriving at the scene of a sit-in. I sensed that they found relief, also, in making light of a troubling political situation.

The more I apprehended about the Chinese government's proposed reforms and the implications the reforms had for Hong Kong citizens, the more the feeling I harbored that life at

the school was beyond my understanding deepened. With each passing day, I felt with amplifying intensity that I had walked in on a city on the brink of something great, something so immense I did not, as a newcomer, deserve to witness it.

### 3.

And yet I couldn't stay away from Central when the Occupy Movement exploded on September 26. Demonstrators gathered around the Central Government Complex and increased in number by the day, provoked into action by the riot police's use of tear gas on the peaceful crowds. Protestors poured from Central into neighboring districts, including Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mongkok, near where I lived in Yau Ma Tei. They occupied these districts day and night, setting up camps and closing down major roads. At any given time there were between 80,000 and sometimes more than 100,000 people occupying the streets.

Members of Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students called for a school boycott just before the demonstrations were officially underway, and a few students at my school elected to participate. By October, lessons had resumed as usual, but the mood was tense. Not everyone agreed with the protestors, and my English conversations lessons, which included such topics as American holidays and teenage culture, seemed frivolous and tone deaf when democracy was at stake. Some students wore yellow ribbons to symbolize their support for the demonstrators, and I joined them, fastening a little ribbon to my backpack.

Many of the expectations and pre-conceived notions I had of Hong Kong before I moved there turned out to be false. I didn't rent a 16th floor studio on the main island. My bed didn't face a wall of windows; in fact, the room I rented in Yau Ma Tei had no windows at all. I often very much missed the ease and familiarity of small town living, even the one-stop convenience

of Walmart. I found I didn't really enjoy the daily reality of stomping through mobs of people to buy simple necessities or a bite to eat, despite the cover the crowds provided for my introversion.

On weekends and evenings, from the end of September to mid-December, when the protests ended, I didn't explore Chungking Mansions or visit Hong Kong-style cafes. Instead, I went to Central, Admiralty, Causeway Bay. I prowled the streets, weaving in and out of the occupiers' camps. I admired the political art cropping up between encampments (a favorite was a vivid orange banner slung across a footbridge with the words Do U Hear The People Sing? scrawled on it, a nod to the eponymous *Les Misérables* song which has become a sort of protest anthem in Hong Kong), watched supporters unload carts of water bottles and journalists interview protestors, regular people who had put their lives on hold to endure rain and shine, the threat of tear gas, and the possibility of arrest, in the name of democracy.

Although I wore a yellow ribbon and visited the sit-ins, I didn't participate in them. Somehow, it didn't seem right for a foreigner, as new to the city as I was, to pitch my own tent and join in. My students seemed to approve of the ribbon on my backpack, but I don't know what they would've thought if they'd seen me camping out with locals. Would they think I was overstepping the boundaries of their cause? I can say with complete certainty, however, that the Occupy Movement is one of the most beautiful sights I've ever witnessed. I'll never forget walking among the encampments at night, the seas of yellow tents and umbrellas glowing beneath imposing skyscrapers, the sight of people so small assembling against the Chinese government, a power so great. I didn't become a different person in Hong Kong; I wasn't reborn or made anew. But I think I beheld real courage for the first time.

I carried the knowledge of that courage with me when the school year ended and I moved to Taiwan for a new adventure. I was still an apprehensive person, shy and prone to fretting, but I

didn't have the same expectations for Taiwan that I had of Hong Kong; I had none at all. In Taiwan, the conditions for reinvention were just as favorable as they had been in Hong Kong, but I forgot about self-renewal, figuring the most courageous thing I could do was be myself.

Since I left Hong Kong in 2015, I've returned two times, and each time I'm struck by the beauty and horror that coexists in the frenetic, chaotic city. In 2017 I was following the news back home in the U.S. when a committee controlled by pro-Beijing elites chose Carrie Lam to be the new Chief Executive, ignoring the entreaties for universal suffrage that pro-democracy demonstrators spearheaded during the Umbrella Revolution. Now in 2019, I watch with sadness as citizens of Hong Kong protest yet another impediment to democracy, a bill that would allow the government to extradite people in Hong Kong who are wanted in territories with whom Hong Kong does not have an extradition agreement, such as China and Taiwan.

The 2019 protests, ongoing as of this writing, are much more violent than the Occupy Movement was in 2014. This time, the stakes are higher, and the riot police have embraced the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, even in residential neighborhoods and sometimes on elderly bystanders and journalists. Though I fear very much for the future of Hong Kong, I find comfort in having witnessed the extraordinary bravery exhibited by Hong Kong's pro-democracy demonstrators. This awareness reminds me to be courageous in my own small life, even if that merely means having the nerve to embrace myself for who I am, racing thoughts and all.

## PANIC IN THE NEWSROOM

For the second time that Saturday, I hoisted my backpack over my shoulder, slammed the driver's door of my car shut, and hiked from the parking garage on University Avenue to Excellence and Discovery Halls. These were two of the three vacant dormitories the University of Missouri had made available for the public to book for \$120 a night that semester because student enrollment was down. I was sweating when I arrived at Excellence, both from the glare of the mid-afternoon sun and from nerves, which made my heart feel as if it was about to beat straight out of my chest.

I stopped in front of a bench and dumped the contents of my backpack onto it. Squinting, I examined my supplies: my battered iPhone in case I needed to record an interview, a miniature legal pad for taking notes, and a pencil. I flipped through the shabby pages of the legal pad until I found the schedule I was following. I noticed my hands trembling as my gaze fell down the page to the second line of the schedule.

*3:00 p.m. Return to campus and obtain second interview. Reward self with nap.*

Deep breaths. Just take deep breaths. Interview one person and then get the hell out of here, I told myself, shoving my phone back into my bag. Heeding the schedule, I'd procured one interview that morning, then rewarded myself with a trip to Smoothie King just like the psychology doctoral intern at the Counseling Center on campus had suggested. Now I was back on campus for more self-inflicted torment. I found a clean page in the legal pad. I'd get another interview.

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I had my first panic attack at Mizzou before the semester even started. During a two-week introductory reporting course, a prerequisite for students entering the graduate program in journalism without prior reporting experience, I sat in the front row of a basement-level classroom in Lee Hills Hall and catapulted from hour-to-hour like a crazed yo-yo between feeling mild boredom and wild panic.

Two one-time reporters, Instructors Scott and Mark, led the course. Instructor Scott was a no-nonsense former daily reporter with a familiar good-ole-boy Missouri accent just like the main sports broadcaster on the local news station in my hometown. Meanwhile, Instructor Mark was a hard-hitting former investigative journalist from Texas with expertise in scouring the backends of people's Facebook accounts for story ideas or for the occasional piece of incriminating evidence. Nothing about either of them invited panic, but their lessons made me feel a creeping sort of terror.

"Listen up everyone," Instructor Scott said on the first day of the prerequisite course, which everyone but me seemed to knowingly call Boot Camp. "You all have an important choice to make while you're here. Writing and reporting are not the same thing. You have to choose: are you going to be a writer or are you going to be a reporter?"

I gulped and surveyed the classroom. We'd all introduced ourselves at the beginning of the lecture, so I knew I wasn't the only aspiring writer in the bunch, and yet no one else seemed fazed by the question Instructor Scott posed.

"Writers use adjectives and adverbs," he continued. "Not reporters. We get straight to the point."

Oh, that's all he means, I thought, feeling relieved. My mind had been racing trying to figure out the dichotomy between writing and reporting for print. Had he meant that journalists

hired ghostwriters to do their writing for them? Or that reporting was antithetical to the act of writing? But no worries, I could write sentences without adjectives and adverbs, totally. I could get to the point.

Just as my breathing steadied, Instructor Mark began a spiel about the lengths of graphs, and my heart rate quickened again. I hadn't brought any graph paper to Boot Camp.

"When you turn a story," Instructor Mark said, "it's essential that your graphs be short and concise. Your 'lede' is also crucial. Does it capture the reader's attention? Does it contain all of the necessary information? The clips you file while you're a student here will determine your job prospects when you graduate. And remember, don't get scooped by the *Trib*, it's embarrassing."

I was gasping for air by the time class broke for a 15-minute break. I rushed to the nearest restroom and sealed myself in the stall, then closed my eyes and took heavy, measured breaths. What was happening to me? I felt like I was suffocating, pressed down by a terrible sense of doom I knew was disproportionate to the situation. Intellectually, I understood that nothing was wrong—class was going well, I was fine—but my body was rebelling, urging me to leave the building and retreat home to safety.

I felt out of place, rattled by the language of journalism. Turning and filing stories, graphs, ledes, clips, getting scooped. The words thudded empty in my brain, meaningless. So what if I don't know who or what the *Trib* is? I'm not an idiot, I reasoned, even if I'd begun to feel like one for starting a master's degree in a discipline whose basic vocabulary seemed to trigger in me a freewheeling panic response.

I'd studied literature as an undergraduate, not journalism, but the Missouri School of Journalism's shiny-looking program in magazine writing had appealed to me when I applied in

2016, after several years of post-college meandering maintaining precarious employment as an English teacher in Asia. The program's mix of practical and theoretical classes in magazine writing, editing, and design, along with the proximity of Mizzou to Springfield, Missouri, where I grew up, compelled me to move to Columbia in the fall of 2017 for grad school. I reminded myself of this reasoning in the bathroom stall until my breathing stabilized enough for me to return to class. I hadn't screwed up by deciding to study journalism, I reassured myself. I'd get used to the culture. I'd be okay once I got through this newspaper reporting stuff and jumped into my magazine writing courses.



Legal pad in hand, I paced back and forth in front of Excellence and Discovery, slowly snaking around the residence halls in a loop, taking the same path I'd prowled that morning. The southeastern edge of campus where I lurked seemed deserted, everyone gone south to Faurot Field for the football game, making me feel like I was doing something illicit by lingering there. But my assignment was to find out why members of the community were booking rooms in empty residence halls for football weekends instead of opting for hotel rooms or Airbnbs.

After a period that felt like hours but which was probably only thirty minutes, a car pulled up to the sidewalk. From where I stood leaning against one of the columns supporting Excellence's front facade some fifty feet away, I saw an older woman emerge from the driver's seat. A second woman waited in the passenger's seat while the older woman lifted the trunk of the car.

Relieved that the car only contained two potential interviewees instead of a family of four or five, I pushed myself off the column and all but loped toward the woman unloading the car, afraid I would lose my nerve if I hesitated for even a second.

“Excuse me, ma’am—” I called. My voice caught in my throat, but I persisted, quickly uttering the words I’d rehearsed. “I’m a journalism student here and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your decision to stay in a dormitory this weekend?”

The woman’s eyes bolted up from her suitcase on the pavement, startled by my sudden appearance. She surveyed my attire, my sweat-soaked t-shirt and jean shorts, then nodded, apparently finding my perspiring countenance unthreatening.

“Oh, sure, honey, no problem,” she said. “What would you like to know?”



Before I became a graduate student in journalism, I could’ve counted the total number of panic attacks I’d ever experienced on one hand. I’ve always been a nervous, worried person, someone who has battled several prolonged bouts of depression since adolescence, but my anxiety had never before reared its head with such frequency and vigor as it did at Mizzou.

When the two-week Boot Camp course ended and the regular semester started, I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I was always on edge, even at home in my apartment, as if I was waiting for a bomb to explode, the entirety of my energy expended by willing it not to detonate. I could barely focus on basic tasks, and I completely lost my appetite; everything I could think to eat tasted bitter or metallic. I was fearful all the time, but also confused by the severity of my fear. It made no sense to me; I’d been through more difficult experiences than grad school—teaching English in Hong Kong and Taiwan among them—without suffering such debilitating anxiety.

Still, I remained hopeful that my symptoms would go away once I settled into a routine and adjusted to my classes. I even looked forward to being a teaching assistant for the distraction it promised from the newsroom, in which I unhappily found myself working as part of a

semester-long news reporting class—yet another impediment to the magazine writing curriculum and the prevailing bane of my existence.

My assistantship, however, proved to be its own source of anxiety. The professor for whom I worked coordinated a large undergraduate reporting course with multiple sections, and I needed to write weekly news quizzes for each section. My assistantship was supposed to be a ten-hour per week gig, but the quizzes took hours to write on top of other duties, including teaching grammar lessons to students from all sections of the course.

I spent entire evenings and weekends scouring through daily editions of the *Missourian*, the student-run newspaper operated by the School of Journalism, the *Columbia Daily Tribune* (incidentally, the *Trib*), and *The New York Times*, searching for information I could frame as questions obvious enough for undergrads to answer but not so obvious that it appeared I was only skimming the headlines. The professor, it seemed, was rarely satisfied with the quizzes I wrote, no matter how much time I spent crafting the right questions. She'd admonish me for not writing the questions in perfect AP style, but wouldn't indicate where I'd erred. She once copied me on a mass email she sent to all of the instructors of the course, many of whom I knew personally from working in the newsroom, to apologize for some minor inaccuracy of one question or another I'd written, but then she never mentioned the email or the mistake to me in person.

When we planned an afternoon meeting to prepare for my first grammar lesson, I should've known that the meeting would be less about introducing me to the content I was to teach than it was about testing my prior knowledge of the material, to which I had not yet been privy. The professor sat across from me at a table in her office looking bored while I struggled to explain the rules of complex grammar concepts illustrated on a worksheet she'd pulled out of a

dusty grammar book. With preparation, I could have explained the concepts deftly, but I'd been caught off guard.

After a particularly strained period of silence where I paused to study the worksheet, my cheeks burning hot with the shame of being made to look like a fool, she sighed, slowly batted her eyelids, which were smudged flawlessly with eyeliner, and asked, “Did you *really* teach English in Asia?”

*Yes, I wanted to say, but in teaching it's common practice to prepare for a lesson before being interrogated about it.*



What would I like to know? The woman's question was a loaded one. I wanted to know if I would ever overcome my fear of cold interviews—walking up to people unannounced to ask them questions; if one day soon I'd be able to more efficiently acquire the three interviews required by the *Missourian* to write a story, ideally in under an hour. Wasting an entire day trying to build up the courage to approach people was not only unsustainable, it was bad reporting. Bad reporting was also being uninvested in the story at hand, and I couldn't care less why people were booking empty dorm rooms instead of pricier hotel suites to attend Mizzou football games. Shamefully, I couldn't even dream up a scenario in which this would be of interest to me.

But I knew my indifference was my own problem, likely a manifestation of my anxiety and not an inherent flaw with the assignment, given to me by the community beat editor as my sixth story for the *Missourian*. I stammered, “Are you, uh, staying in Excellence or Discovery Hall this weekend?”

“Oh, my friend and I,” she nodded toward the woman still sitting in the passenger’s seat of the car, “we’re staying in Excellence.”

“And what made you want to stay in Excellence?”

The woman’s face lit up. “Cheryl and I are old roommates. We attended Mizzou back in the 70s. When I heard them advertising on the radio about the empty dorms, I knew we had to take a trip down here. It’s cheaper than a hotel, too.”

“Neat,” I said. I paused to take notes in my legal pad. When I looked up I noticed her waiting on me expectantly. She seemed eager to reminisce about her college days, but I felt my face flush and that nonsensical panic rising in my chest, as though the woman was poised to attack me instead of share some pleasant memories. I wanted our interaction to end, so I hastily jotted down her name and phone number and made my escape.

Encased in the safety of my car, I reread the schedule I’d been adhering to all day. Now that I’d technically gotten a second interview, even though the interview was so skeletal I knew I’d have to call the woman back later to ask the follow-up questions I’d failed to request in the moment, I could permit myself to relax until completing the last step of the schedule.

*7:00 p.m. Return to campus and obtain final interview. Reward self with a movie or favorite book.*

The schedule had been created by the psychology doctoral intern to help me cope with anxiety, and it was working insofar as I had two interviews and needed only one more, but I still felt sick at the thought of returning to campus that evening, reliving the same irrational panic and fear for the third time in so few hours. I didn’t know if I could.

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I sought relief from anxiety everywhere I turned. I had first met the doctoral intern when I went to the campus Counseling Center after realizing that my miserable assistantship wouldn't save me from my reporting class. She'd come to Mizzou from a prestigious university in California, a kind young woman my age with patchily-dyed red hair and an exotic Northeastern accent. She furiously scribbled down my laments and made me various schedules to break up my reporting assignments into less intense, more anxiety-friendly chunks of time. With her, I felt a renewed sense of optimism, a blind determination to barrel onward with the semester and ignore the myriad physiological responses to panic pinning me down and bowling me over nearly every day.

My optimism didn't last long, however. During the third week of the semester, I had a panic attack in the middle of my media law class, the first of all my attacks to occur in front of people, right out in the open. Until that point, I'd managed to find seclusion when I was panicking, either by hiding in a restroom or fleeing to my apartment to wait out the panic. This time, the terror paralyzed me, bound me to my desk where I sat in a semi-circle with my classmates facing our professor.

That day the topic of discussion was first amendment theory, and I'd felt fine at first. I listened respectfully as my peers chimed in one after the other, making bland remarks about freedom of speech. I didn't contribute anything; it was the Monday after the tortured Saturday I'd spent lugging myself back and forth to campus to report the dorm-story, and I longed for a reprieve from pretending I was a journalist, aspiring or otherwise.

I wanted instead to bask in the atmosphere of what was by far my most academic class, soak in an environment where people discussed ideas instead of reciting journalistic platitudes and mantras—"the role of the journalist is to inform the public!"—as in the reporting lectures I



hated attending. And yet, I remember thinking it odd that the impassive-looking professor sat at the head of the circle barely speaking, even when someone's questionable comment ("journalism speaks truth to power more than any other profession!") seemed to warrant it.

Perhaps the disparity between my expectations for media law and the reality of the class triggered the attack; even now, I'm not certain. As the class period neared its midpoint, the room around me started to blur. My classmates suddenly seemed like robots programmed to participate in a farce, helmed by the professor. We aren't discussing *ideas*, I thought, as the words I heard spoken out loud became garbled, sounding like a nonsense made-up language.

The room was lopsided and washed out, emptied of reason and color. I closed my eyes and fought to breathe. Every labored breath curdled in my throat and came out harsh and grating. My cheeks seared with the knowledge that everyone around me could witness me hyperventilating. Still, I couldn't move to escape. I gripped the edge of my desk and gave into the panic; let it seep out of my body and into the room. I kept my eyes closed and rasped away, breathing, breathing, breathing for about 10 minutes until I heard the professor dismiss the class for a break.

Blinking my eyes open, I avoided making eye contact with the professor or my classmates as I gathered my things and hurried out the door. If anyone tried to ask if I was okay, I knew I'd start crying but I wouldn't be able to explain why. I couldn't explain it, but I knew I wasn't coming back to class, not after the break, not ever.



The panic attack in media law occurred on a Monday, and by Friday I'd signed the paperwork to officially withdraw from classes. Including the two weeks I spent participating in the pre-semester Boot Camp, I attended classes at Mizzou for five weeks—a laughably short

period of time. But for me, the decision to quit the program was unequivocal. In some ways, it didn't feel like a decision at all; my body demanded it.

After the panic attack in media law, I felt like I physically couldn't go to class or fulfill my reporting duties anymore. I don't know if it was the embarrassment of experiencing the anxiety attack in such a public setting that caused me to give up, even though no one ever brought it up to me, or if the exhaustion of having so many attacks in such a short period had simply caught up with me.

I never finished writing the dorm-story for which I'd wrangled only two interviews. I never got through the news reporting classes to see if I'd be better suited to the magazine writing coursework. I probably could have handled everything better, perhaps chosen not to study journalism in the first place given that I've always been somewhat antisocial and a worrier. But when I dropped out and felt nothing but relief, I knew I'd made the right decision. I don't regret leaving, though I certainly could have done without the panic attacks. Or would have done without them, if I could have.

## QUIET MIDWESTERN BITCH

My therapist says my irrational thoughts cause my anxiety. One afternoon in his office, he guides me through an exercise: I sit in a pilling armchair facing a stool he pulled from the hallway while he hovers to the side.

“You have the power to change your irrational thinking,” he says. “Voice your anxieties and fears out loud when you’re sitting in the armchair, then move to the stool and refute them. Everyone is capable of holding two opposing qualities simultaneously. What do you want to call your rational and irrational selves?”

“I don’t know,” I say, playing along. “Normal Lane and Neurotic Lane?”

“No. Normal Lane might always be slightly neurotic. Choose opposites. How about Positive Lane and Negative Lane? Positive Lane is your rational self and Negative Lane is your irrational self. You need to practice letting Positive Lane have the last word.”

“But I’ve always thought of negativity as the more rational option.”

“You know,” he sighs. “That’s very disturbing.”

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If I were Positive Lane, I wouldn’t have dropped out of grad school or moved back in with my parents at 25. I would maneuver through life with ease, maybe even have a career. Positive Lane wouldn’t stress-eat or go to bed with wet hair. She’d be 30 lbs lighter and nimble with a blow dryer. She’d have money in her savings account. She’d enjoy all the right things: football games, Taco Tuesdays, and Marvel movies. She wouldn’t err on the side of caution.

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I became cautious in middle school as a defense mechanism against my enemies, even though I didn't have any. I'd heard middle school was the worst so I braced myself for a disaster. I had reason to worry because even in the fifth grade my interests had already started to diverge from those of my peers. I turned inward to solitary hobbies and they, outward to participate in the social world.

Nowhere did I feel more out of place than on the basketball court. I played for my middle school and on a club team with girls from other schools. I'd been an okay player until I began journeying into my inner world, becoming acquainted with myself beyond outside influence. I got worse and worse at basketball; I lacked the drive and a competitive edge. Lost in my thoughts at a club game, I fumbled the ball over to the opposing team and overheard one of my teammates, a lean point guard with waxy blond hair and a facial tic, groan to our coach, "Never let anyone pass the ball to *her*."

It felt strange to be the source of my teammate's ire, like being jerked into a scene I'd been watching from afar. It wasn't the disaster I'd been anticipating—far from it; but I guess you could call what happens when you prepare for the worst and nothing really transpires *generalized anxiety disorder*.

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I don't know why I default to negativity. Somehow, positivity seems riskier, more irrational.

"Let's start the exercise," my therapist says. "Negative Lane doesn't have to control your life anymore. Express some of the anxious thoughts you've been having lately. Then switch to the stool and counter those thoughts as Positive Lane."

“Most of my thoughts have been about living here,” I say, gripping the arms of the chair.

“In Missouri.”

“Okay, tell that to Positive Lane.”

I look at the empty space above the stool. My anxieties are embarrassing, too trivial to mention, but I want freedom from them.

“I’ve been obsessing a lot about moving back home, about the implications. I worry that I’m a failure, not just for living with my parents, but for living in Springfield again, too. I spent so many years trying to get out of Springfield, and yet here I am. I have really dark thoughts about it, completely irrational ones. Like I’ll be walking in my neighborhood and all of a sudden the houses will look monstrous, hideously mundane and sinister. I know a normal person would think the houses are nice, just normal ranch houses, but they freak me out. I try to tell myself, *they’re just houses.*”



Positive Lane would have waited to leave Springfield until the time was right. She wouldn’t have rushed to go to college out of state before she could even figure out when to have the oil in her car changed. She would have been more sensible. She would have used her dad’s tuition waver at the university where he teaches and taken classes with people she knew from grade school. She’d have maintained close ties with her old friends instead of ditching them the second she finished high school. She’d have saved a lot of money this way.



Someone named Sharp called me the weekend I moved back to Springfield and left a message about arranging an interview for a position at Target. I didn’t want to work at Target, but I’d hastily applied to a bunch of seasonal jobs after I quit my graduate program so my parents

wouldn't worry about me. I thought that if I slid seamlessly into a job, even a part-time one, they wouldn't notice I'd just withdrawn from school because of crippling anxiety.

The job opening was for a beauty consultant position. It wasn't clear what this entailed, if it involved haunting the cosmetics aisles and matching people's skin tones to the right foundation or if it called for something else. When I called Sharp back, he asked if I had any experience working in beauty. Determined to get the job, I told Sharp that beauty is my "hobby;" a bald lie, one of countless lies I've told when a job is on the line. Other lies: I'm outgoing, I love working with kids, library science is my calling, etc.



Now I'm Positive Lane. I sit on the stool thinking about how I can reassure Negative Lane.

"You're not a failure for living in Springfield," I say weakly. "Springfield is fine, it's okay to like it here."

I glance at my therapist for validation. Am I doing this right? Do I really believe that all Negative Lane needs is permission to like living in Missouri before she stops feeling inferior about it? He nods for me to continue.

"You think you need to live in a big city to have a worthwhile life? That's crazy. You think Springfield is a mediocre place? But you know there are mediocre people in California and New York, right? They have depressing houses there too, millions of them. If you lived in New York, you'd have the same problems, anxiety and apathy and drifting and all that. Being from the Midwest doesn't make you a lesser person."

I pause. The exercise is working; hearing myself squelch my irrational thoughts makes my thinking seem crazier than I ever realized. I always knew my worldview was different from most other people's, but I hadn't considered that it might be self-destructive.

"That's a good start," my therapist exhales from the corner of the room.



On my second day working in the beauty department, the guy who's supposed to train me doesn't show up. An HR person gives me a walkie-talkie and tells me to go look for a manager out in the store. The khaki pants I bought to go with my crimson sweater are too big; after I shove the walkie-talkie into my pocket I have to walk around with one hand lodged in my belt loop, holding up the waistband. I decide to rearrange a shelf of jumbled moisturizers instead of finding a manager.

Sometime later an employee I've never seen before appears and asks if I'm the new beauty consultant. Yes, I say, and then he barks, "Where's your walkie-talkie? We've been trying to get a hold of you for five minutes. Someone needs help on aisle 12!"

Forefinger and thumb in belt loop, I rush to aisle 12, where an elderly woman is searching for denture adhesives. She's standing among rows of toothpaste and floss, inches from the denture adhesives, so I pull a pack off the hook and hand it to her. As she shuffles away, I can feel the haughty presence of that employee, most likely a manager, steaming behind me.



Positive Lane wouldn't have anxiety in the first place. She'd be a fountain of rational thinking, always bursting with well-reasoned opinions and points of view. She wouldn't shrink from most social interactions. She would stand up for herself.



“I wonder why you have such a negative view of Springfield.”

“It’s the Midwest in general, the flyover states. I feel like a nobody. But like I said, if I lived somewhere else, somewhere more glamorous or cultural or whatever, I’d probably feel the same way.”

“You certainly would,” my therapist nods. “You perceive yourself as a failure for leaving school and for staying in the Midwest, but Lane, self-acceptance, not status or prestige, is the key to personal contentment.”

I swallow slowly.



The employee-manager lectures me about never, ever leaving the walkie-talkie turned off inside my pocket again. I nod, thinking that at least I can scratch finding a manager off the day’s to-do list, assuming he is one. Next on the list: nothing. For the following seven hours, I roam the beauty department, my new prison, the one for which I apparently traded grad school, and organize displays of facemasks and body creams, shampoos and acne solutions—the cinderblocks of my prison cell.

Someone radios me once to inform me about a guest requiring assistance, but my walkie-talkie is otherwise silent. I feel dumb and empty with boredom, and my eyes hurt from the store’s harsh florescent lighting. When my shift finally ends, I vow never to return. I call in sick the next morning, and then I fail to turn up for the shift after that. In a matter of weeks, I’ve quit two things.



If I’m being honest, Positive Lane would have quit being a beauty consultant at Target after a few days, too.





In graduate school upstate, I met a lot of people from outside of Missouri. I moved to Missouri when I was ten, but grad school was the first time I'd encountered such a concentrated number of non-Missourians in the state. If I'd have studied in Missouri as an undergraduate, no doubt I would've had such an encounter much sooner, universities sometimes being more diverse than the towns or cities they're in.

There were people from California, Colorado, Massachusetts, China, and Russia in my cohort—all of them attending the University of Missouri for its journalism program. One evening we all went out for drinks and the discussion revolved around everyone's distaste for Missouri, their disappointment at finding themselves there for the first time. They couldn't afford or hadn't been accepted into Berkeley, Northwestern, NYU, or Columbia, all the bigwig journalism schools. As much as I wanted to get out of Missouri, I only applied to Mizzou—it was affordable and close to family. I can be practical, on occasion.

And even though I'm not a huge fan of Missouri, I couldn't help but get defensive. They talked about the white trash Uber drivers and marveled at all the redneck townies. One girl even asked me if I'd ever had Vietnamese food. *Of course I have*, I wanted to say, *I mean, I've been to Vietnam for Christ's sake*. She must have thought I'd never seen a plane before.

But I just clamped up. I didn't want to be a bitch. I let them have their Middle American wet dream. We're all farmers and racists. Who knows, their perspective might be valid. I hated the redneck townies too.



“Let's finish the session. I think we're on to something here. You're still Positive Lane,” my therapist gestures at me, my spine curved as I lean forward on the stool. “What else does

Positive Lane need to tell Negative Lane to help her dispel the irrational thoughts she clings to? Positive Lane's words need to win the day."



Positive Lane would've told her friends at Mizzou to be rational. She'd have said, think about the plus sides. We can afford to rent our charming bungalows on graduate assistant wages. Unlike our old studio apartments, we can afford to have units with windows and laundry facilities. Pets are allowed. We can walk to class, to the bank, to restaurants. Public transportation sucks, but long commutes don't exist in town. We'd like to have a vegan Thai place here, sure, but what about the clean air and starry skies? Positive Lane would've taken them by the shoulders and shaken them until they admitted the Midwest isn't the armpit of the earth. She would've been a real bitch.



"I'm not sure," I say, "maybe she'd remind Negative Lane that I have more control over my life than I think I do."

I'm breaking out of character, but he doesn't seem to mind. In this moment, I'm not positive or negative; I'm just me.

## MY MFA EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have never been accepted, nor have I ever applied, to an MFA program.

<sup>2</sup> If I were to do so, I would apply to a combination of full and low-residency programs of varying prestige, not the six full-residency programs I listed above with acceptance rates of 1-2 percent.

<sup>3</sup> My first choice was actually Washington University in St. Louis, because it's closer to family and friends, and not the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But Wisconsin was the highest ranking program to admit me, so.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> I was not accepted, nor did I apply, to Washington University in St. Louis or the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<sup>4</sup> I won't disclose whether the other four programs accepted me, I hope you understand why.

<sup>5</sup> It's true the stipend for teaching Intro to Creative Writing and Freshman Composition at Wisconsin is better than at most MFA programs, but I still had to live with a roommate, which kind of took away from the whole "time<sup>b</sup> and space<sup>c</sup> to write" thing.

<sup>b</sup> I explain where my time went in the following paragraph.

<sup>c</sup> I actually had plenty of space to write after my roommate decided to become a Sister of Mercy during our second semester. I took out student loans to pay for her share of the rent<sup>i</sup>.

<sup>i</sup> Worth it!

<sup>6</sup> Madison is a lovely city, but my god is it cold<sup>d</sup>.

<sup>d</sup> I've never been to Wisconsin in my life<sup>ii</sup>.

<sup>ii</sup> I hear Madison has nice bike trails though.

<sup>7</sup> As for how I spent my time, I whittled the majority of it away doing homework for at least one of the three classes I took every semester and, you guessed it, preparing to teach my own classes.

<sup>8</sup> I should say that despite how much time my coursework ferreted away from my writing, I loved all my classes<sup>e</sup>, especially linguistics. Speaking of which, maybe I should pursue a second graduate degree in that, seeing as I need a job<sup>f</sup>.

<sup>e</sup> On second thought, I didn't enjoy my workshop classes. I omitted this sentiment from the body of the essay, as I felt it was too taboo. My workshops were led by some fantastic writers and instructors, but jeez were they humiliating. They crushed my spirit, as well as

the novella-length short story I wrote about a young girl's quest to find affordable birth control without health insurance.

<sup>f</sup> If anyone knows of any entry-level jobs that require a master's degree in applied linguistics, hit me up on Twitter. I could use some more followers too.

<sup>9</sup> I also omitted my true feelings toward teaching. I write in the essay that I found teaching rewarding and inspiring, thought provoking and gratifying. And I did, sort of, but I also despised some of those illiterate whelps<sup>g</sup>. (See why I didn't include the honest truth in my essay?)

<sup>g</sup> I despised them because they hardly ever read novels and yet they aspired to write them, yes, but also because they reminded me of my lost youth, the youth I was whiling away before their very eyes as a graduate student <sup>iii</sup>.

<sup>iii</sup> Perhaps I should've joined my former roommate in becoming a Sister of Mercy to preserve my sanity (and my good looks).

<sup>10</sup> Workshops and teaching aside, the best thing to happen to me during my MFA was meeting my now-husband<sup>h</sup>, the aspiring poet R. He refuses to let me write about him, though, unless I relegate him to a footnote and only refer to him by his first initial. Poets.

<sup>h</sup> I don't have a husband, and if I did he sure as hell wouldn't be a poet<sup>iv</sup>.

<sup>iv</sup> I have nothing against poets, I swear. It's just that they can be so smug sometimes (see footnote 10).

<sup>11</sup> I didn't mention this at the end of the essay, but I suspect you might be wondering about my post-MFA writing life, about whether or not I managed to snag a six-figure book deal

immediately upon graduation. I didn't<sup>i</sup>.

<sup>i</sup> I mean I didn't get a book deal, let alone a six-figure one. Thanks for rubbing it in.

<sup>12</sup>But let's not forget that I don't have an MFA, nor have I ever applied to one<sup>j</sup>.

<sup>j</sup>This just might be the year I apply.