

THE MAGIC NUMBER  
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES ABOUT OCD

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by

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## Abstract

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (ODC) is often associated with simple acts such as double checking that the stove is off before leaving home or cleaning a messy room. However, many people are not aware of the obsessive thoughts that go along with these types of behaviors. These obsessive, unwanted, thoughts can interrupt the daily lives of people and can cause heavy loads of distress. Compulsive behavior follows these intrusive thoughts and occurs when someone performs a specific behavior or action in order to obtain some sense of comfort and relief. *The Magic Number* is a collection of short stories focused on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. These stories give an insight to the struggles of living with OCD and are an attempt to show people that OCD is more than what meets the eye. These stories are written from an anonymous, first person point of view, but are based on the experiences of real people. These experiences vary in extremity and are written from the point of view of someone who has OCD as well as the point of views of their family, their friends, and even some strangers they have come in contact with in order to show the ways in which this disorder can affect others as well.

## **Acknowledgments**

This collection of short stories is dedicated to all those who live with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. May the weight this disorder puts on their shoulders become lighter over time.

—

This collection of short stories is also dedicated to those who helped me put this collection together, those who have supported me for the past three and a half years at Texas State, and those who are patient enough to deal with me as I continue to face my own OCD challenges.

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# 1

## The Storage Unit

It was five before ten, the rain was about to pour down, and the storage unit facility was twenty-five minutes from home. We were packing up my car with as many of my boyfriend's boxes as possible. He had just picked up the keys for his new one bedroom apartment that weekend and now it was time for the struggle of moving in. This was the last load we could make that night and anything left behind would have to wait until the morning.

"Alright, we got to get going already," I said to my boyfriend. "This place closes in five minutes and if we're still here we'll be locked in overnight."

"Okay this will be the last load, I'll take it to your car and leave the dolly by the door," he replied as he brushed the sweat from his brow and kicked the bottom of the dolly just enough to angle it and get the wheels going.

I pulled the storage unit's door down and glanced back at him with a smile, "Great, I'll lock up and meet you there!"

You see, this is where I made my first mistake though. I should've known better than to think I could lock up the storage unit and meet my boyfriend at the car without experiencing any problems.

The moment we hit the main street of town I felt my stomach sink. Intrusive doubtful thoughts about whether or not I locked the storage unit came flooding through my mind as heavy as when a hurricane finally hits land. I told myself to stay quiet and to stay calm. I turned up the radio and tried to focus my breathing as I continued to drive.

“Did I lock your storage unit? I really don’t think that I did.” The words of doubt blurted out of me anyway. My mind had betrayed me. I had told it to hush and not to make a scene, not tonight.

“Yeah, of course you did,” he looked away from the passenger side window to face me when he said this, “Come on, you know how you are. You always double check everything and in the entire year that I’ve known you, you’ve never once left something unlocked.”

My boyfriend had become used to moments like this happening quite often. He already knew what he needed to say by now, but I of course was not convinced by his attempts to reassure and comfort me.

“I don’t believe you,” I looked at him with such concern in my face as I continued to doubt myself, “I don’t remember if I locked it! I remember shutting the door and I remember coming back to the car but I’m spacing on everything that happened in between!”

I could feel my heart racing and my palms began to clench the steering wheel tighter than necessary. My mind just kept yelling at me, telling me that I hadn’t locked it. I had this gut feeling. But, then again, I always thought that my gut feelings were right in instances like these.

“I want to go back but we can’t because the place is closed now!” I could feel my body getting warmer and warmer as my body continued to tense up.

“Oh my gosh. I can’t believe this, I want to go back! Can we please go back?” I feel like I must’ve been shouting at him by this point.

“There must be a way we can get back in! But I had to have locked it right? Yeah, yeah, I did. Or maybe I didn’t, I honestly can’t remember.” I think I was just blabbing on as the thoughts came to my mind. It was chaos up there, inside my head.

The next thing I knew, I was crying, and I was getting so upset, I just couldn’t help it. I kept trying to reassure myself and believe that I had done what I had to do. My boyfriend continued to try saying all the right things in an effort to calm me down and put me at ease. But of course, nothing being said was working. This wasn’t the everyday case of, “Oh honey did I lock the door,” that many people experience without more than a second thought. No, this was the beginning of a full-blown panic attack. The kind where it gets hard to breathe, yeah that kind.

My desire to go back to the storage unit to double check just kept itching at me. I felt like I could psychically feel the itch and I just couldn’t calm down. I blamed myself for not double checking enough times, and most of all I blamed my boyfriend for letting me do something that he knew had a history of causing me problems.

The twenty-five-minute drive home felt more like a century. The tears wouldn’t seem to stop rushing down my flushed cheeks, and I knew that I was annoying my boyfriend with my constant nagging and questions of doubt. I mean honestly, I was even annoyed by hearing my own voice by that point, it was just so loud and whiny. I was aware of what I was doing but the thoughts wouldn’t just pack their bags and leave that



easily. Not until they got what they wanted, which was for me to go back and double check that darn lock. I think that I knew deep down that I had locked it, but in moments like this that didn't really matter. The compulsive behavior was a must.

We finally got home, and I laid down as soon as we finished unloading all of the boxes. The obsessive thoughts and the desire, or rather the need, to act on them really had its way of becoming tiring at times. I decided I needed to let my body and my mind get their rest and slowly felt at ease as my muscles loosened and I drifted off to sleep.

The morning finally came around and it was time to try again at this thing we call life. We needed to go back to the storage unit to finish moving everything that we had left behind but I think we knew one thing. . . I would not be in charge of locking up this time.

# 2

## The Store Clerk

I casually walked to the back corner of the store where we sold all the store's household furniture and décor. I climbed a ladder up to the top shelves and got to work. While working, a young girl managed to catch my attention. She had been looking at the same display of full body mirrors for over ten minutes now. She walked over here with her group of friends a while ago and she has yet to leave the endcap even though her friends have moved on to another section of the store already. She takes each mirror out, inspects the framing around it, and then puts each one right back. Doesn't she realize that I just finished fixing that display? All her shifting around is messing up it's appearance and I spent way too long on it to just have some kid come mess it up.

She continues to look intently at each one as she pulls them out as if she's purposely looking for something to be wrong with each one. This isn't surgery. This isn't rocket science. There doesn't need to be this much focus put into buying a mirror. Shoot, those mirrors are like five bucks anyway. Who cares if something teeny tiny is wrong with any of them? You get what you pay for around here. If she truly cares so much about things being perfect, maybe she should just grab herself a ladder and join me up here to clean these nasty, dust-covered shelves. Now that would at least be helpful, geez.

Next thing I know the girl looks up and ends up catching my judgmental glare. She almost seems embarrassed and slowly lowers her head. I can't help but feel slightly bad about my harsh glare. . . She goes right back to looking through the mirrors though! Okay, what is wrong with this girl! She's the typical college age and it's a Saturday night. Shouldn't she be chasing some frat boys or studying for exams until two in the morning instead of spending all of her time looking through the mirrors at our store?

I continue to do my work, but I also continue to steal a glance at the young girl every now and then. She eventually catches my fixed stare once again and has the nerve to give me an ugly look in response as if what she has been doing this whole time doesn't deserve at least a little bit of judgment.

Her friends finally come walking back towards her and I hear her say in an overly irritated tone as she glares back at me out of the corner of her eye (while still fumbling with my display!), "Oh, is the fact that I will suffer from annoying and intrusive thoughts later if I go home with a mirror that has even a single flaw on its frame really bothering you that much? How 'bout you mind your business ma'am." The words were sharp as a knife as they came from her mouth and her friends looked over at me as if they already knew what was going on. I was slightly at a loss for words and the multitude of eyes on me had me thinking that maybe I should just look the other way and get back to my work.

# 3

## The Study Room

I took a deep breath in the hot, muggy study room located on the highest floor of the school's library. The room smelled like the chicken I had brought for dinner, and I couldn't help but feel anxious as students glanced into the room while they walked past the large glass windows. I looked up every now and then just to find my best friend sitting across from me struggling with her own assignments as well. We only spoke occasionally. Only when we thought something from an assignment was worth sharing or when we felt like we needed a small break from studying. Our area was a war zone with papers everywhere, cords from our laptop chargers running along the floor, water bottles scattered. You name it, it was there. We didn't study in the library often the way we used to, but when we did you would've thought we lived there with all the stuff we brought.

Index card, their form, my form, this form, that form, and clip. I was working on making packets out of the papers that were given to me in one of my classes. I had to make the corners of each page fit flush against each other with none of them out of place. I felt the crisp edges of each document as I straightened them out and felt satisfied as they hit on the wooden table each time I attempted to straighten out the stack. I carefully set down the clipped pack of papers in my dark purple, three subject notebook that was

already bulging from all the papers I had managed to stuff into it. I brushed my hair out of my face and pulled it up into a messy bun as I scooted my chair in and sat criss-cross applesauce ready to start on the next packet.

Index card, their form, my form, this form, that form, and clip. The process was happening again and yes, in the exact same order. But this time however, I laid the finished packet in the opposite direction of the one I had just placed down. I had found that when I did it this way, the clips wouldn't sit directly on top of each other and excessively bulge out of the notebook quite as much.

I scattered all of the papers that needed to be clipped on the table in front of me so I could see each one and clip them correctly. I was just about to start on the third packet when I felt a weird gut feeling that someone was watching me. I glanced up and my best friend was sitting there laughing at me. I had become so consumed in perfecting my work that I had all but almost forgotten that she was still sitting across from me at the table. I gave her a puzzled look, unaware of what she could be laughing at.

"I've seen you straighten out those stacks of papers over and over, tons of times. You're such a perfectionist!" She continued to laugh as she continued to explain, "I was trying not to pay attention, but I just couldn't help but see you in the corner of my eye as you sat there fixing each one and stacked them perfectly in your already obnoxiously neat notebook. You're so funny because you don't even realize how distant you look and how focused you get."

I felt like I had been caught red handed committing a crime. I could only imagine how ridiculous I must have looked while I had been sitting there in my zone. I imagined

it must've been painful to watch me take my sweet time on those stacks of papers that any normal person would've just clipped, stuffed in their folder, and been done with. I just couldn't be like that though. I sincerely think that it would drive me crazy if I ever tried being so carefree about things. It would end up bothering me all day if I ever did anything sloppy or less than perfect and I would just constantly feel the urge to fix it.

# 4

## The T-Shirt

“Why is your shirt bunched up like that?” My father always caught on to details. Nothing went unnoticed with him when I came down to visit and in this case he was referring to the shoulder part of my shirt that was rolled up on only one side. It was rolled the way you do in the summer when it’s just so hot you’ll do anything to feel at least a little bit cool. Except in this case it was fall and we were inside, so I went ahead and guessed that I wouldn’t be able to use that as an excuse.

“I don’t know dad, I just keep getting this weird feeling when it’s down. It’s like this, tingling feeling all the time and if I don’t roll my sleeve up it drives me insane.” I looked up at him waiting to see how he would respond. He was just an inch away from being six feet tall and he never missed the gym in his younger days, so it was kind of intimidating to look up at him.

He gave me a confused and judgmental look in return and very blatantly expressed how weird he thought it was. I don’t think he would ever be able to understand the feeling that I had just mentioned. The physical discomfort as well as the thoughts that ran through my mind in all caps were things that I knew I would never be able to explain. People would never understand or if they did, they would probably think that I was some

sort of a freak for it. Either way it was a loss for me, a loss that felt like being pushed face first into the dirt.

I tried to explain anyway. “Dad, you know that nasty feeling you get when someone scratches their nails across a chalkboard?”

“Yeah, it’s awful,” he responded. “What does that have to do with this though?”

“Well Dad, that’s the kind of feeling I get when my sleeve is down and normal. And instead of just brushing that feeling off and leaving my shirt alone, I have to keep pulling it up and tightening it so that my mind and my body can feel at ease.”

My dad looked at me for a few moments and I could’ve sworn I could see the wheels in his mind turning. I figured he was really trying to understand what I was dealing with. But I guess I wasn’t very good at reading his facial expressions.

He finally spoke. “Okay, okay. So, if pulling your sleeve up and looking ridiculous really helps you so much then why don’t you at least roll up both sleeves to make it look a little bit more normal?”

I sighed, “Dad it’s not about the way it looks. This is about the way I feel and the thoughts that I have. I wish you would at least try to understand. This is a part of me that is really hard for me to explain to people.”

He practically scoffed in my face. “Well look Hun, I get what you’re saying but I just think you should at least try to dress normal because it looks weird if one sleeve is up while the other sleeve is down.”

My eyes began to water but I couldn’t bare to let him see that his lack of concern and effort was getting to me. I turned away from him and decided it was time to wave my white flag. There was just no point. There was no hope. My dad would never understand.



# 5

## The Bedroom

I was plopped on my bed like a sack of potatoes. My little sister was looking up at me with her big brown eyes from the tan colored carpet of my bedroom floor. I had asked her to come to my room because I was super bored at the time. She had already done her homework and I never usually let her in my room, so she was all too willing to come running in as soon as I called her name. We were having a conversation about how our brother's new girlfriend had the nerve to criticize the tapestry I had hung on the big, grossly off white wall behind my bed. I had always thought it looked okay up there but she on the other hand had thought that I needed to get a bigger one, one that fit corner to corner on the wall. She didn't necessarily say it in a rude way, but man was I offended. Who was she to come into MY room in OUR house with MY brother and start criticizing the things that I had hung up since before she was even a thought in my brother's mind?

Needless to say, her words got under my skin. I filled in my little sister on what went down and she reassured me that it looked good. But I just couldn't get my brother's girlfriend's naggy, high pitched voice out of my head. I sat there staring at it for a few minutes and I'm pretty sure my little sister thought I was broken or something because of the way my body had tensed up and my eyes had locked on the wall.

I finally looked down to see the puzzled look she had on her tiny face. “What do you think I should do,” I asked her in a way that implied something just had to be done. She scratched her head a little and put her hand under her chin the way the famous Thinking Man statue does. She was so dramatic. You would’ve thought that I had asked her how to cure cancer or how to end poverty.

She finally responded, “Maybe if you move your bed against that other wall instead and hang the tapestry there it would fit corner to corner because that wall looks a bit smaller. Boom, problem solved!”

I sat there on my bed as I envisioned the layout she was suggesting. “Alright, I can see that. Good thinking sis. Let’s try it. Help me out!”

My little sister and I went straight to work. We pulled my dresser drawers out from under my bed and stacked my boxes full of photos on top of the drawers. We then slid my night stand and mini fridge from their normal corners of the room. After everything that could potentially be in the way was moved, we started to turn the direction of the bed. It took a lot of bickering and some “Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!” moments like from the show *Friends*, but it eventually got done. I sat on the bed to see how it felt from a new perspective and guess what, I hated it!

“No, no, no! This is all wrong. I don’t like this at all! Look at how small my room looks now! Nope, we have to move it all back!” I was freaking out and being overly dramatic. My little sister was forced to be the calm and collected one now.

I eventually chilled out and started moving everything back with her help when the perfectionist in me decided to come out and attack. Everything was back in its original place but I just didn't feel like it was the exact same as it once was.

"This isn't how it was!" I practically yelled at my sister. She looked confused and slightly startled by the angry tone of my voice. "What do you mean? It all looks exactly the same," she asked in return.

"No, no it doesn't!" This time I really was yelling. "It will never be the exact same as it was before! Why would you suggest I move my stuff in the first place?"

My little sister's eyes watered up at the sound of my yelling, but she was doing her "be tough" thing again and refused to let the tears fall. Instead she tried to comfort me. I was the older one, I was supposed to comfort her in life yet somehow the roles had reversed.

I felt my face getting hot and I knew it was probably beginning to turn red. I continued to yell at my sister about the so-called differences I saw in the room. I just knew deep down that my stuff would never be the same. It's not like I would actually know. I hadn't gone and measured out where everything was. I should've though because now I wanted to move everything. I felt that I had to. I kept having these thoughts stream through my head about how different everything was. It got to the point where I started adjusting furniture by fractions of an inch and then stepping back and staring down the room to see if it had helped. It was driving me crazy. I couldn't believe I had let some new girlfriend dictate my life and I couldn't believe I had let my little sister have a say in how I reacted to it.

I continued to move things but after a while I just couldn't take it anymore. I threw myself on the floor. I was throwing a tantrum, yep a teenage girl throwing a tantrum on her bedroom floor like a child. And it was all over the simple fact that things MIGHT be slightly different than they once were which was of course inevitable and not nearly as important as I was making it out to be. My sister was still standing against my wall looking on. I don't think she knew what to do.

"Sissy, are you okay? You're scaring me." She looked at me as I laid on the floor with my head down in the carpet, practically sobbing.

"Just get out! Go away, this is all your fault. You should've never told me to move my things! Everything was fine where it was. I'm the one that designed it, who cares what everyone else thinks!" I was done with her. I got up and slammed the door behind her. Then I went back to the center of the room and continued to reposition things that didn't even need repositioning. I was working like a robot, like a broken record. But something in me just kept telling me that things were off. I needed everything to be exactly lined up and exactly where they once were.

I eventually confronted my sister and apologized for scaring her like that. I even explained to her what my obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors and tendencies were like so that she could better understand what had happened back there. I'm sure it all went right over her little head but I think the saddest thing about this all is that even til' this day, I still find myself cringing when I look at my room. I don't think I'll ever truly feel at ease again because I just don't think my room will ever look the same to me.

# 6

## The Sanitizer

“Dude, how much hand sanitizer are you going to put on?” I asked my newly hired coworker whose desk was now across from mine. I had seen him press down the pump on his hand sanitizer a good ten times in just the last hour. I didn’t understand what he was doing and why he was using so much of it.

“I’m sorry, what?” He looked up at me completely oblivious of what I had been observing all day.

“You keep pumping that hand sanitizer, I’m just checking to see if you are alright. Did something gross spill on your desk or something?” I knew nothing had spilled though. I could see his perfectly organized desk form here. Everything was in its place and it was clear that nothing was even the slightest bit tampered with. I just didn’t know how to approach something like this.

He took a while before responding, almost like he was rehearsing in his head what he was about to say or maybe even fighting with the thoughts in his head. “There’s just so many germs here. Everything on this desk used to belong to whoever sat here before me and I doubt they wiped it down before I was placed here. Plus, all these people keep shaking my hand to introduce themselves and I don’t even want to think of where their

hands have been. I don't understand why you don't have a sanitizer at your own desk."

The more he explained himself the faster he spoke. "I don't know how everyone around here is content with this constant, wide spread of germs. I'm not taking any chances."

I wasn't sure how to respond at first. I felt like I had just been called out for putting a little trust in my immune system. I finally pushed his rant aside and said something back. "Well do you want to use some of my hand lotion at least? I know every time I use hand sanitizer my hands dry out really bad, plus it's pretty cold outside." I really did have a bad history of my hands over drying every time I used a hand sanitizer, and I figured he might too with the way he had been practically bathing in it all day.

I saw him fidget a little with his hands, and I could hear the slight tapping of his foot under the desk. He looked like he was in the hot seat being interrogated or something, but I was only trying to help. Then I realized that he was probably just trying to assess whether or not germs could be transferred by using someone else's lotion. Thankfully though, he finally gave in and reached out his hands above our desks. I felt a concerned look take over my face as I noticed how dry his hands were. They looked like they were cracking and one of his knuckles appeared to have a little dot of dry blood clotted just above the skin. There was no way his hands had gotten this bad over the course of the day. This must've been some obsessive behavior he practiced all the time.

I left my lotion out just in case he wanted more even though I was pretty sure the thoughts in his head wouldn't let him take that risk twice. Later, I watched as his travel size hand sanitizer swung from the zipper of his back pack as he walked out for the day.

# 7

## The Couch

Girls' night! My friends were all over at mine and my fiancé's new apartment. He and I were excited to be the go-to house for my friends. It was a small one bedroom apartment in a decent looking apartment complex but we had managed to make our little place as homey as could be. We had all the color schemes down: red and white in the kitchen, blue and brown in the living room, and grey in the restroom. And we of course bought all new furniture to match. I tended to be a clean freak so the place was over the top tidy. The rug was vacuumed on a daily basis, the dishes were washed immediately after each use, you know. . . the works.

But anyway, back to my friends. We used to be a group of nine girls, but as college took its toll and life had plans different than our own, we began to go our separate ways making our group smaller and smaller over time. We all still shared memories that could never be replaced and we understood our choices to go in separate directions were never personal. The group consisted of only me and five other girls by this point. We told each other everything and we always made sure to keep in touch even when life got busy. Today was a special occasion, the season premiere of *Grey's Anatomy*. Yes I know, that doesn't necessarily qualify as a special occasion for most people but to us it was. It was

an annual thing we did, a common interest we couldn't let go of even if we all agreed the show just wasn't what it used to be. We all got comfortable on the couches with our snacks and our blankets and my fiancé left to the gym in an effort to give us our much needed "girl's time."

It all went well and we had a blast like we always did. Even though it had been a while since we had all hung out, we picked up as if we had never spent a single day apart. Thankfully, my friends respected my desire to keep the apartment looking nice. They kept their shoes off the couch, put their drinks on coasters, etc. It was great, and I felt so at ease to see that the apartment was still intact as they walked out the front door.

It wasn't until later that night when I noticed that things were wrong. You see our couches were beautiful in my eyes. They were a dark blue with these gold rustic half spheres outlining the arms and frame. They were also very sturdy. You didn't sink when you sat down and you actually even bounced back up a little. It was kind of like that memory foam stuff. And the material was tough but not in any way rough. You could spill something and clean it up without a stain in sight and your legs wouldn't slip or stick to the seats either. However, we had found one major flaw in the couches. We noticed that if you put your elbow on the arm rest a little too hard, an indentation would form in the foam type stuff inside.

To my surprise, there were indentations all over the arm rests of the loveseat that we had never sat on before that night. I was devastated that my friends had left so many indentations even though I knew they hadn't meant it. I wished that we could have our new, perfect looking couches back. I spent minute after minute trying to push the foam back to its place but it just wasn't budging. My mind ran rampant thinking of ways to fix



it but nothing was working. I felt like I had to do something, but there was nothing that could be done at that point. It drove me nuts that the arm rests were no longer smooth. The bumps that were left just gave me a weird, annoyed feeling and I couldn't bear it. My thoughts wouldn't let me sit on my own couches in peace anymore. I had become restless. I was never my intention to boycott the couches I had spent my hard-earned money on but the obsessive thoughts that surrounded the indentations just wouldn't let me behave otherwise. Needless to say, I think it was extreme, but necessary, for me to call my friends that night and suggest that we meet up at someone else's place next time.

# 8

## The Car Alarm

“Hey, Mom, can you go get my laptop charger from my car? I think I left it on the passenger’s seat. Oh, and make sure you lock it when you’re done please.” I was in the middle of completing a dual credit assignment that was due at 11:59 p.m. It was now 11:32 p.m., and if I didn’t get my laptop charger ASAP my chances of getting an A in this class were done for.

“Of course, just give me your keys. I’ll be right back.” I reached in my backpack and pulled out my lanyard. I tossed the keys to my mom who was already walking towards the front door.

“Thanks, Mom!” I yelled as she walked out, and I immediately turned my chair back to my desk to continue working on my assignment in hopes of pulling off that much desired A.

“Here you go sweetie.” My mom walked back in with the charger in her hand and I could feel my face light up.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re the bomb, Mom. I wouldn’t have had time to run out there myself.” I plugged in the laptop and felt a rush of relaxation flow

through me as I saw the little lightning bolt appear next to the battery icon on my screen. I was going to make this deadline. Everything was going to be okay.

“Oh, and you locked it right?” I had to practically yell now since she was already halfway down the hall.

“Uhhhh, yes I did!” She came back to the room with a smile on her face as if smiling would hide the fact that she had hesitated for a moment before answering me.

“Mom, you know how I am. Can you please go lock it again to be sure?” I needed to focus on this assignment. I didn’t have time for my mom’s uncertainty.

“Sure, but this is the last time sweetie. I need to get some rest for work in the morning. You need to get some rest after that assignment too, okay?” She grabbed my keys once more and yawned as she went outside again.

“There, I’m back. It’s locked. I made sure I locked it. I promise. Now finish up so you can go to bed.” She laid my lanyard across my backpack which was still sitting on my bed and started towards the hall again.

“And you made sure the alarm beeped three times, right?” I looked over my shoulder when I asked this time to see if she was going to hesitate again.

“Um, no. I pushed the lock button twice like you’re supposed to, once to lock and the second time to set the alarm.” She now looked both tired and confused.

“Mom! How many times do I have to tell you this? It HAS to beep three times! You have to push the button three times not just twice! That’s the only way I’ll feel secure. You absolutely have to make sure it beeps THREE times!”

“You’re being ridiculous. I am not going back out there again. It’s cold, I’m tired, and I had already told you when I went out before that it would be the last time.” She began to walk away from my room, but I wasn’t done shouting about the alarm.

“What the heck, Mom, please! You know it’ll drive me crazy if I don’t do things a certain amount of times. Please!”

“Sweetie, no. It’ll be okay. I always beep my car twice and nothing bad has ever happened to it. Yours will be safe too. Don’t worry.”

I let out a deep sigh and pushed my chair back with the attitude of a rebellious teenager. “Fine! I’ll just go do it myself!” I snatched the keys from my bed and stomped my way outside. I beeped the car three times and then beeped it another three times before slamming the door shut. I immediately felt the internal pressure release as my obsessive thoughts were pushed farther and farther away with each beep.

“Geez, Mom, was that so hard?” She was already in her room by then, but I couldn’t help but mumble through my anger.

I rushed back to my room and chunked my keys at the bed. I moved the mouse of my computer to wake it and to my horror it was 12:00 a.m. I couldn’t believe it. How was it already midnight? Why couldn’t my mom have just listened to me? All I needed to do was finish proofreading and hit the submit button. But all that didn’t matter anymore. It was too late. My professor had a strict late submission policy. Anything past the deadline, even one single minute past the deadline, was automatically docked a letter grade for each day it was late. My chances for an A disintegrated in front of my very own eyes.

I knew my mom wasn't the only one to blame here. My own mind was at fault as well. If I hadn't been so pushy about the three beep rule that I had stupidly made up in my head to stop my anxiety, none of this would have happened. I hit submit two minutes pass the deadline, closed my laptop, wrapped the cord, and dragged myself to bed like a zombie. I felt utterly defeated but hey, at least I had heard the car alarm beep three times.

# 9

## The Gym

“What did you want to hit today? I hit arms yesterday so I was thinking maybe legs today.” My lifting partner was kneeling on the floor tightening her shoe laces as she looked up at me awaiting my response.

“Legs sounds good to me!” I replied with a huge smile on my face. “I’m so glad we’re lifting together again! It’s been a long month of having to work out on my own.” Our schedules hadn’t lined up with each other’s for quite some time because of work so this was our first time getting in a workout together again. I had made a lot of progress up to now and I had finally found a routine that was really working for me.

After her shoes were tied nice and tight, my partner stood up, nodded at me, and said, “Okay, I’m good to go. Let’s go kill this workout.”

We walked out of the girl’s locker room and made our way to the other side of the gym where the free weights and machines were located. I had come up with an effective routine and I couldn’t wait to share it with my partner.

“Wanna hit abs first as a warm up? No one is using the machine we like.” My partner pointed over to the machine she was talking about and it was like we were two

peas in a pod because that was the exact same machine that I always started off with in my routine as well.

“Yeah, that’s perfect! Let’s hurry over there before someone takes it.” I took off towards the machine as soon as I finished my sentence and my partner followed right behind with no hesitation whatsoever.

We had gotten to the machine and had finished our reps. It came time for us to decide what we were going to do next. I already knew in my head that I wanted to work on my quads and my hamstrings first which worked out well because the two machines for those muscles were right next to each other. So I turned to her and suggested just that.

“How about we do quads and hamstrings next? We can each do one machine and then switch between them or we could both focus on one and then the other. What do you think?” I was still hyped that I had finally gotten my partner back that I hadn’t even thought that my suggestion had the potential to get shot down.

“Eh, I was kind of thinking we use the hip abduction machine first actually.” My partner once again pointed over to what she was suggesting which just so happened to be on the opposite side of the gym from where we were standing.

I didn’t want to disagree with her, so I played along and said that I wanted to use the hip abduction machine as well. The moment we got to the machine I felt on edge. I knew this wasn’t following my routine and it was already bothering me.

My partner seemed to have caught on that something was off with me. “Are you alright Girl,” she asked. I smiled and played it cool without saying anything that could’ve

hinted towards how I was really feeling. I figured I'd be okay if I just didn't think too much about it.

We went on to decide the next workout. Once again we had different ideas and once again I agreed in an effort to be a team player. But the lack of comfortability and the aggravated feeling I got from going against my routine only grew stronger. I needed to follow my specific order or exercises that I had become so used to. I knew that I couldn't stray away from my routine much further.

This pattern of disagreeing continued for the next half hour and I couldn't help but get more and more obsessive with following my routine. I had become physically tense as well as emotionally and mentally distant.

I eventually reached my end and needed a way out. If I kept on going against my set in stone, rock solid plan I was going to lash out and I knew no one would've benefitted from that. So I did the only thing I could think of and faked a phone call.

"Hey, I need to step away for just a moment, my roommate keeps calling me. I'll be right back." I walked away from my partner and pretended to get some upsetting news from my roommate.

I returned to my partner and continued on with the lie, "I'm really sorry but my roommate locked herself out of our apartment and she needs to get in before she goes to work. I have to go, sorry!"

"Oh, that's okay!" She completely understood. "Do what you have to do. I'll wrap up here and just catch you next time." I forced a soft smile and waved goodbye as I sprinted out of there.



I immediately felt my body unwind and my mind began to slow down and stop racing. I had to promise that I would never allow myself to go through something like that again and to just speak up next time instead of going with the flow. But if I'm being honest, I've been making excuses to get out of working out with her ever since that day.

# 10

## The Floor Tile

1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . I had counted to four countless times.

“Mija, are you even listening to me?” That was probably the third time I had heard my grandma ask me if I was listening to her. Don’t get me wrong: I was trying to listen. But first, I needed to finish counting the lines of the dining room’s tiled floor. She could wait a little bit. I was her one and only grandbaby, she could never get mad at me.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m listening grandma.” I mumbled as quickly as I could in an effort to return to my counting. I was determined to find a number that would be the perfect rule of the pattern on the floor that I had managed to form in my head. I couldn’t stop counting until I had finally found that number.

“Okay. So Mija, the story goes . . .” I began to drift off again as the sound of the numbers in my head overpowered the sound of my grandmother’s soft voice.

1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . I was getting to the last corner of the room finally. I heard footsteps approaching but I didn’t bother looking up to see who had walked in. The footsteps got louder and within seconds they were in front of me. I tilted my head ever so slightly to look past the boots that I now recognized as my mother’s.

“Oh no no no! You are not doing this counting nonsense to your grandmother. You do this too me all the time at home; you aren’t doing this here, too!” I often got caught dazing off to count when my mom talked to me too so she was pretty familiar with this by now. Probably more annoyed than familiarized actually.

1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3, 4 . . . 1, 2, 3 . . . “Dang it!” I was off! Four was not the right number. I had been left at 3. I had counted all of that in 4’s for nothing.

“Excuse me, little girl. What did you just say to me?” I hadn’t realized I had yelled the words “dang it” out loud. My mom must’ve thought they were directed at her.

“That wasn’t to you Mom, geez.” I looked at her with an apologetic, but also slightly agitated, look on my face.

“Mah, don’t let your granddaughter ignore you just so she can count in her head the way she always does!” My mom was standing there telling my grandma to make me stop, as if that was possible. I couldn’t even stop myself, my grandma didn’t stand a chance against the number addicted mind of mine.

“Okay Mija, listen to your mother.” My grandma was trying to pull me back in and regain my attention.

I looked over at my mom and her stern stance. I looked over at my grandma and the soft yet disappointed expression that took over her face. I then looked back at my mom one last time before finally deciding to start the whole counting bit all over again.

It didn’t matter what my mom had said to me and it really didn’t even matter what my grandma had said to me either. I was determined to figure this out. I was going to find the pattern’s magic number. And so I decided, this time I’d try the number 5 instead. . . .