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I'm told what to think before I can even think for myself. Not like a suggestion. Not like a quiet voice in the back of my mind. It's faster than that. Uncertain. Immediate. Automatic. As if my brain isn't even mine long enough to make my own decisions. I used to think I was the problem. I genuinely believed everyone's brains operated like this. Constant chatter only I can hear, correction, like "don't say that", "that's not good enough", "why would you do that?". I didn't comprehend that sometimes my brain should just be silent or at least quieter. But, she's always present. I don't remember when she showed up for the first time. I don't remember welcoming her into my brain. It's just as if there is a squatter residing in my brain. Moved in one day and over stayed her welcome. Now, she acts as if she is in charge. Well now, that's the worst part. Her words aren't evil. Her intentions don't seem malicious. It doesn't feel as if she is trying to ruin anything. In all honesty, she sounds responsible. Intentional. Smarter than I. It feels as if she knows what's coming before it happens and she is trying to prepare me.

"Don't say that. It is stupid."

"Fix yourself. You don't look good."

"Everyone is going to notice."

That is how she speaks to me. It's always focused around what others think. Always about what could go wrong and how I need to prepare for the hardships. The sad thing, though, is that I listen. I listen to her voice inside my head more than my own intuition. To be honest, I'm not sure there is a version of myself without her now. She is the creative director of my life. She controls

what I say, wear, eat, and even how long I can hold eye contact with another person before it becomes “awkward”. She is the director that sits behind the scenes. You can’t see her, but I sure can hear her critiques and commentary.

“Smile. But not like that.”

“Talk. The silence is awkward.”

“Now stop talking, you’re being annoying.”

It’s a constant noise in my head.

There’s no thoughts that don’t get filtered by her first. If I make a mistake or say the wrong thing at the wrong time, she never fails to dangle it over my head.

She has rules too. They’re not the kind of rules written down in a pamphlet to build a LEGO set, and if I tried to explain them most people wouldn’t understand. But, at least in my brain, they’re present shaping the way I live each day without ever establishing themselves as rules. They show up in the smallest moments like how I sit, speak, how long I pause before answering a question.

Don’t be too loud. Don’t be too quiet. Don’t say the wrong thing. Don’t stare too long. It’s a constant balancing act that I never quite understand. There isn’t actually a version of “right”, just versions of “better”, and I often find myself trying to figure out which space on this spectrum of right and wrong is accurate.

These “rules” are anything but consistent. They alter depending on who I’m surrounded by, where I am, what kind of mood I’m in, what I’m wearing, what I ate that day or honestly anything that can alter how I feel about myself. She adjusts constantly, like I’m being recalibrated to ensure I never fully settle into anything. Just when I start to feel comfortable, she interrupts the moment to point something out, something that needs “fixing”. If I relax, I may

mess up. And by messing up, people will notice and be permitted to criticize. When they criticize, it feels as if my whole world goes back down.

She never really explains what that “something” is. She doesn’t have to. The sensation in my body speaks for itself. It shows up physically, the uneasy feeling down my spine. Then, followed by the tightness in my chest that drops down into my stomach like I’m about to fall while I’m standing still. It doesn’t sprout from a specific fear, but it feels real anyway, like something is always just about to happen. Due to that, it feels easier to just give in to her. Easier to let her take over than to risk finding out what happens if I don’t.

She got louder when my parents got divorced.

It wasn’t all of a sudden, quite frankly, it happened slowly. It wasn’t a single turning point where everything changed rapidly. It was quiet, slow, as if something was gradually embedding itself in my brain. Before, even when things weren’t perfect, there was this idea that everything would fizzle out and go back to normal. Even when they argued, when the tension felt thick, there was still a version in my fantasy land of a future that believed the situation would resolve itself.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the reality. My dad moved out and papers were signed. What once was my normal would never be my lifestyle again.

I grew a hatred for everything involving parents. If it was a moms brunch or a dads barbeque I would have excitement, but anything that rubbed other peoples parents love in my face was hard.

Two of everything. Two homes, two vastly different opinions, and two completely different environments depending on where I was and who I was with. Being seventeen years old during this, it felt like my childhood came to a close. Some days felt heavier than others, but no one could explain why. It felt like an expectation as an older sibling to just adjust and figure it out on my own. That's when she came in strong. “You can’t break down in front of your brother” and

“be strong for your mom” were constant thoughts circling through my head. I remember the exact thoughts that circulated through my head. I thought that if I acted “right” things wouldn’t get worse. I wouldn’t add to the tension, stay quiet, and maybe everything around me would be stable. Possibly I could prevent things from falling apart more than they already had.

She liked that. I was giving into what she wanted.

Her words in my head only got louder. Her voice blended in with my own thoughts and made managing daily life just a bit more difficult. Don’t upset anyone. Don’t make this about you. Be good. At the time, I was out of control towards my own mind. It felt as if I was doing the right thing by keeping myself small, by not adding any extra weight to something that already felt so heavy. But, things continued to fall apart. They crumbled in front of my very eyes, but she didn’t allow me to take control and fix it. She manipulated me into thinking she was stronger than myself, which then I believed. When I gave in, she stayed there. If anything, I felt addicted to her approval. She felt necessary, more convincing, because now it felt like the only thing I could control was myself.

This feeling in my gut dragged me down, made me feel smaller than I actually was. The small things were constantly amplified. In school the scratching of pencils, calculating how many times my classmates erased their work, and the clock. That became my greatest enemy. Why? Because each time the teacher passed an exam, the clock went by faster than usual. It felt as if time went at 2x speed. I would write my name down and answer a few questions, but once I started getting through the exam, the bell rang. I had spent half the test just focusing on the clock, how fast the hands were moving. Staring at the first question, I knew I could do it, but the clock was too intimidating. I can’t even settle into the exam without her pesty voice in my head:

“You don’t actually know this”.

“Time is ticking”.

“Everyone else is starting to hand it in, hurry it up”.

I find myself gripping my pencil tighter, like that’s the force bringing the answer out of my brain.

I read the question over and over again. And again. The words lose their meaning, becoming a mumble jumble of information running through my head. Suddenly all the concepts on the page feel distant, as if I never learned them in the first place.

“You’re wasting time.”

“You’re already behind.”

When the exam ends, I don’t feel relieved. The chatter amongst my classmates provokes stress as everyone is comparing answers or even laughing at how hard the exam was. I can’t join into this conversation, as my brain has yet to exit emergency mode as if I was rescuing someone from a fire, not just a simple math test. She is in my head. Replaying every question, answer, every hesitation.

“That one was probably incorrect.”

“I shouldn’t have changed that answer.”

“What if what I chose was right the first time.”

These thoughts go on replay through my head. In retrospect, it doesn’t even matter what the score winds up being, she already decided how it went. She puts the negative idea of failure in the back of my mind, and now I can’t get it out.

The mirror is a place of pure terror. There's nothing else to focus on besides myself. No distractions, no one to talk to, no external noise to distract me. Just me, and her filling in every gap of thought I can process. I stare at my reflection, trying to see what she sees, even though I

know it's bad for me. We see two different people in the mirror which creates a challenge for my brain to comprehend.

“You look off.”

“Your face looks puffy.”

I step closer to the mirror and investigate why these thoughts are protruding through my head. I start to examine my skin searching for blemishes. My hair looks greasy. And did I gain any weight? Everything feels off, despite not being able to describe the feeling. I catch myself repositioning my feet forcing a thigh gap in between my legs. I put my hands above my hips to “snatch” my waist. Nothing will ever be good enough for her, that's why she never goes away. I know this doesn't make sense to anyone outside of my brain. Realistically, I'm aware this doesn't really make sense. No one is truly analyzing me as much as her. But when her voice is present in my head, logic doesn't matter. When I look away, I can still feel her presence, her critiquing me, making sure I understand what she sees.

I used to believe the goal was to silence her voice to gain my own control again. Now I have come to realize that maybe it's not about making her go away. Maybe it's about recognizing her for what she is, a voice that confuses control with safety and fear with preparation. She still is present, interrupting daily thoughts, but she is no longer the beast taking over my brain. There are many moments when I hear her and now I don't always obey. I pause, question, and choose when to let her affect my emotions. I'm not perfect, but strong enough to know that I'm still in control of myself, separate from her, and capable of making my own decisions. For the first time, it doesn't feel like she is the one in control, but I am. I've finally learned to take my life back from her.