

Fifteen, five, twenty, and ten... Can I return?

I remember that bathroom exactly how it was. The pale blue walls with the four pictures of a beach, the white bath in the corner underneath the window, the toilet in the corner hidden behind the sink with the mirror and light above it, the cupboard across from the sink with perfumes and shampoos covering the top. That was the only time I was in there, every time after that I would refuse to go in, go downstairs instead, anywhere that didn't remind me of the events that had occurred.

The first time it happened I was caught unaware, unsure of what was happening. I was at a friend's house; six of us hiding under piles of blankets surrounded by popcorn watching a selection of films. The feelings of not being safe, not secure, started to rise. The need to leave and to get back to the safety of my room began to take over. It was the first time they had taken such a strong grasp of me. The first time I felt as if they would not let go. I ran upstairs. The next hour was spent hiding in the upstairs bathroom.

The first fifteen minutes were spent crying leaning against the door, then five minutes thinking it was over, the next twenty falling to the ground, lying on the floor unable to get up, and finally ten minutes preparing to go back downstairs. Slowly I picked myself off the ground, slid the lock, opened the door and began the descent down the stairs. Three deep breaths at the door, slowly creaking it open and looking round the corner to see five faces looking up in wonder. Silence fell in the room, all that could be heard was the film, continuing on with no awareness of what was happening. I couldn't take another step into the room before it started again. The tears, the tightening of my throat, the loss of breath, the inability to regain normal breathing. And there I was back in the bathroom.

For the majority of my high school life, anxiety and feelings of panic have affected my every day. It has affected every decision the decisions to go out and meet friends, whether to travel to a busy place, to go to a concert and even to just go to school. It affects my ability to complete the simplest task. And worse, it is something that is not visible, that to someone unaware of its existence would go completely unnoticed or misunderstood. You are just viewed as shy and quiet, everyone unaware that the stopping force is the looming threat of running out in tears, unable to breathe.

The first time was four years ago. At least once a month they reappear. Some months are easier than others. But they are all filled with questions. When am I going to be able to sit in class next without having to run out? When am I next going to be able to turn up for class, to face the work I have missed, to face the disappointed teacher? Or when am I actually going to be able to do the work that I have not been able to? When will the next assignment, next essay, next draft be done. The worst ones continue for hours, for days, for weeks, with no knowledge of the ending. When will I next be able to sit with it in front of me and not want to throw everything at a wall, not have to leave because it got too much? When will the feelings of not being able to cope stop?

Each day is filled with these questions, the questions of whether I will get through it, get through the day. Will this day be a good day or a bad day? Will I leave home unable to face the mundane tasks that school life contains or will I have to remain closed to the outside? Each day these questions. Each day the outside moves on. Each day I struggle to break out. And that has surrounded every hour of every day of my life for the past four years.

The smiling faces of my closest friends surround me, the free, easy nature of their voices circulated around the room, sat around facing one another. And I am expected to be happy, settled, relaxed. But inside my mind darts around, focusing on random words, the noises growing, getting louder and louder, and overwhelming any rational thoughts of safety, of normality. As the panic grows, the grip

on reality weakens. The sense of anticipation that the world will crumble and fall and I will be left standing alone, humiliated surrounds every decision, every action, and every sound.

Each time a different trigger, a different cause, a different reason to panic. A different place and a different length: 5 minutes in class, 20 minutes at home, 30 minutes hiding in a corridor, or hours upon hours of being unable to leave a room. Being in certain places around certain people doing certain things are always triggers. Before the day begins just knowing that I will be in that position means it will be a bad day, I will be unable to cope. It is always the same. Being put in a situation which is uncomfortable, which I know has previously caused panic will always lead me to run as far away as I can. Certain events are the reasons, speaking to new people, speaking in class, giving a presentation, all standard expected things.

But then there are the others. Speaking to a new teacher on my own, seeing a new person, and being left alone to deal with vast numbers of people, being put in a situation which wasn't my choice. Even occasionally having to work one on one with a teacher that I know going through my own work which I know isn't up to scratch; sitting there knowing that I could have done so much better if it weren't for having to leave to solve the issue of having to breathe. The simple tasks that nobody has a problem with, that nobody expects there to be a problem with, the tasks that are impossible to describe why there is a problem doing.

As the panic rises, taking over every corner of me, destroying any thoughts that this state might disappear soon, the desire to run sets in. As soon as it does you know the final enclosure of panic bringing with it the inability to breath, the tears, the onslaught of thoughts, the reluctance to face normal events and the desire to avoid every other person on the planet will not be far away. Everything gets dropped, every conversation abruptly ended and the quest to be alone begins.

Through the day escaping to the quiet is my only relief. The wooden floor rooting me to the ground, stopping my mind floating away. The glass windows creating a sense of warmth, of safety preventing the danger circulating through me. The large room is the space I need, stopping the sense of entrapment, the sense of confinement. The piano calls out, beginning to play louder with each step closer before finally falling silent as I sit down in front of it. The sounds, the shouting, the voices finally stop as the first note sounds. As the notes pour out filling the room the feelings of panic, the inability to cope disappears. Each note consumes every corner of the room, every corner of me, bringing me back to this moment, only this moment. The need to run flees. I can return. I can go back. I can finish the day. And until next time I leave through the blue doors stopping them before they slam shut. And through the four little windows I look back at the piano, sat all alone in the middle of the room, unaware of the relief it has created.

The safety of the quiet staircase or empty auditorium or the peace a road brings the relief that has so far escaped. The silence of an un-played piano calling out to break the torment and find relief in the beauty of music offers the only solace in the pain. Focusing on the notes playing out is the relaxation that I spend so long looking for, searching for.

The emptiness felt standing alone in the middle of a field, looking out across the landscape begins to take a hold and root me back to the earth, to the here and now. The feeling of being at home, at peace in the countryside, escaping chaos to find calm in the organisation of nature, the patterns, the system that gives it complete control. That is where I am safe.