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## Is it Nothing?

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## Is it Nothing?

Maybe it is nothing. Maybe it is all in my head. Maybe, though, it is something. Moments are connected by a thread that is seemingly invisible, but that doesn't mean that they are not there. Not real. I never knowingly placed myself in any situation that resulted in me being the center of attention. I don't like attention. Attention means that someone is focusing on you. Looking at you. Fixating on you. It has always been safer to be in the background, where if needed, I could fade away to save myself from unwanted attention. Despite these actions, I somehow made a mistake. I know this because I shouldn't feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up every time I walk out of my apartment.

Every day, I follow a strict routine. This routine is essential to the productivity level of my day. Step 1: wake up at 5:45. Step 2: make bed. Step 3: start making coffee. Step 4: measure a cup of oats for oatmeal. These steps continue until I get to my 32 step, which is to close my apartment door behind me and lock it. Step 33 is to make sure that the door is locked. Then finally step 34: double-check to make sure it is locked. 34 steps in 45 minutes. Not following them would have detrimental effects on the rest of my day.

There I am walking to work. It takes me approximately 24 minutes to walk to work, and, as I look at my watch, I am perfectly on schedule. I deeply exhale and the tension in my shoulders fades away as I relax. Every time I pass a window or a building, I gradually slow down so that I can see my reflection in the window. The reason behind this is not narcissistic, I simply need to check that my hair is in order and my clothes have no wrinkles. I don't like attention, and if I had hair sticking up in the back of my head, the consequence would be something that I would not enjoy. As for my outfit, every time I nonchalantly look at myself in the window, I straighten out my blouse, just to make sure that it falls correctly on my body.

The walk to work is something that I enjoy every day. It gives me the time to gather my thoughts. It allows me to completely go through my schedule at least two times before I reach my destination. This allows for maximum productivity for the day, which brings me a moment of relief. The walk is predictable. I never have to worry about whether there will be traffic or the hassle of finding a taxi. I simply walk to work. Additionally, I find a peculiar enjoyment in this walk because I blend into the crowd of people around me. I am no one special; I am simply another person who needs to get to work. I get to my office in exactly 24 minutes. Good, I thought to myself. Now I can go on with the rest of my day.

From an early age, I was no one special. My acute sense of organization can be attributed to the loving guidance of my parents. As an only child, I excel in everything I do, even if it is outside my boundaries. Organization helps me do those things. I need to account for every minute of the day, or failure will surely be the ramification of one of my senseless blunders. My mother was always by my side giving me encouraging words, such as “Always do your best, Anne, and if that is not possible then don’t try at all.” Messing up is not an option, for if I do mess up at all, surely attention will be brought to me. And I don’t like attention. My mother helped me in many ways to make sure that I did not draw any negative attention to her and my father. For example, she would count my daily calorie intake, to keep me at a desirable weight. My mother always said that if I gain even a pound, I will surely draw unwanted attention to myself. She told me that I didn’t want that kind of attention, and I believed her.

So, even though my mom’s harsh words would cause me the occasional anxiety attack, I appreciated them, for I know that she truly wanted me to succeed. And people who succeed aren’t as noticeable as failures. And failures are the equivalent of nothing.

I walk steadily down the street as always, and, as I look at my watch, I can see that I am perfectly on schedule. As I pass the windows of the buildings, I routinely check my hair and straighten my blouse. I do so four or more times as I walk down the streets of Chicago. After I cross a walkway, I begin to get anxious, for it has been three minutes since the last time that I checked my hair and straightened my blouse. Luckily, there is a tall window of a building that I am steadily approaching. Finally, as I casually glance at myself in the window, I see a man looking at me from behind my reflection. That is strange, I thought as I quickly turned around to check, but he was not there. I did not think much of it, though, for it surely is a mistake, for why would he notice me? Well, at least I hope he wasn’t looking at me; I don’t like attention. Though I swept this moment to the back of my mind, I could sense that something was wrong. I feel a growing knot in my stomach and tension in my shoulders that were not there before. Every morning, I follow my routine, and every morning I could sense him lurking behind me in the shadows. I am beginning to become accustomed to it, yet there is still a moment in my day when my heart rate would suddenly increase, and my palms begin to sweat. In those moments, my hands would shake, and I would grasp them so tightly to relinquish my fears. I know I am being watched. I know that someone is paying attention to me, yet there is nothing I can do. Nothing. Is it something or nothing? I simply had to continue with my daily schedule, for if I did not, failure would surely be inevitable.

Comfort. I want comfort. I wake up in the middle of the night because I see a shadow in my doorway, yet when I turn on the lights, nothing is there. I see him every day on my walk to work. I can feel his presence behind as well as across the street; sadly, everywhere. I know he is around me, and I know that if I look into the window of a building, he will be there; he will be watching me. Every single time I pass a window, my lips begin to tremble. I yell and scream at myself, internally, not to turn my head. Yet every single time, I must, for I need to make sure that my hair is not messed up, and so I can adjust my blouse. Every single time, I slightly turn my head, and as I look at my reflection the first thing that I always see is my eyes. These big, brown, innocent eyes look back at me, pleading for me to look away, but I am unable. I must look back at those pleading eyes, for I am a prisoner of my own body. The next thing I see is a man behind me, in the distance, looking at me; fixating on me. In those few seconds, I am trapped as his captive. But those moments of terror are temporary, lasting only as long as it takes me to make sure my hair is in order and to straighten my blouse.

I yearn to change something in my daily routine, but no matter what effort I put forth, I cannot help leaving my apartment at the exact time every day and walking down the same streets. I have to. There is a voice in my head that narrates everything that I do, and if I stray even the slightest bit from my normal routine, its haunting voice fills my mind with words that should never be said to a human being. I cannot change who I am; or what I am. I don't know what to do anymore. All I know now is that I can't be a failure, I need to succeed. I can't have attention drawn toward me. I don't like attention.

I can't focus on anything. At work, my trail of thoughts is interrupted by a cool breeze of air that brushes across the back of my neck.

That means, he is here. He is with me. I clench my throat and continue typing, but the knot in my stomach grows and my hands begin to shake. The shaking increases, until I am unable to type, and I grasp my hands tightly together and hold them close to my chest. As I try to comfort myself, my fist hits my chest repeatedly. The pounding is as irregular as my current heartbeat. The pain of those subtle blows brings my mind back to me, giving me the ability to take hold of what is mine. Eventually, the hard blows to my body steadily decrease, until at last, I can move my hands away from my chest. I deliberately run my finger over my palms, massaging out the stress and tension until the only thing that remains is my hands. The set of hands that I used to be able to control, is now only used as tools that enable my fear and anxiety.

The knot in my stomach grew until at last, it surpassed the space that is meant for food. The anxiety his presence gave me slowly ate away at my body. I could see the pounds being gnawed off my bones by the unwanted evil that lived in my shadows, but I did nothing. I am no longer hungry. Food used to be a source of entertainment and enjoyment in my life. Now it is a chain wrapped around my ankle, dragging me back down to earth. I am a logical person; you must eat to live. But in my mind, the life I had is not worth living. So, I gave in to the voices in my head. The voice that used to screech hurtful words into my ear transformed into a tender murmur that would whisper words of understatement and reassurance. When I feel anxious, or see the man's image behind my reflection, that voice is there to comfort me. Every day on my walk to work, I begin to see less and less of myself in my reflection. When my hallowed brown eyes stare back at my lifeless figure, the man is always just a few steps behind me.

Tiredness. Oh, how I would give anything to sleep soundly through the night without waking myself from my blood-curdling screams. Instances such as that left me on the hard, wooden floor of my bedroom, grasping my hands close to my chest and my head resting on my knees. I look up at the mirror directly in front of me. My sunken eyes enclose the hallowed cries of help, yet I know that there is no one here to listen. My fingers, once delicate and youthful, now are cold, withered, and dead. I place my head on my boney knees and begin to cry. I closed my eyes to keep tears from falling, but to no avail, my efforts failed. My hands rest close to my heart, and I can feel myself fading away. My hands could feel the heartbeat through my bones and skin. Gradually the pound became farther apart. I try my best to hold myself tightly to comfort myself, but I am tired, and I merely drop my lifeless hands to the sides of my body.

My alarm begins to ring. It takes all the energy I have to look up at my alarm clock. Step 1: wake up at 5:45. I must complete step one if I want to succeed today. I must succeed. Failure is not an option. I place my hands on the floor and try to push myself up, but I cannot. Go back to bed, Anne, the voice whispers in my ear. I feel a warm embrace; an embrace that I am no longer able to give myself. I smile slightly. Now you will never fail, I say to myself. I can hear sirens from below my apartment. I block out the noise, deciding that whoever needs that ambulance surely wants attention; the attention that I do not want to have. As I look at myself in the mirror, I hear footsteps in the hallway leading to my room. Just as I am about to close my eyes, I see him in my reflection, running towards me. Well, maybe it is him, or maybe it is nothing.