

# Only Clean, Dear

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Chai Turner**, Grade 12, Abington High School, Abington, MA. Erin Slayton, *Educator*; The School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Flaunt It Award**

*If I don't pick up that book that just fell, my heart is going to stop tonight while I'm asleep.*

I am frozen in fear. Absolute certainty bites into my flesh and shoots ice into my stomach. I stare, unblinking, at the library book I have accidentally sent toppling onto the floor with my unsteady gait. In my hurry to answer my dad's impatient call to go home, seven-year-old me is now pushed head first into an existential crisis. Every muscle in me screams to keep going, to keep running. But I cannot take the chance of some form of divine punishment or retribution later.

*One. Two. Three- jump!- Four. Five.*

Always jump after three. Always click my tongue when opening doors. Always think two steps ahead, but never look back. My world is divided into rules, into numbers. They make sense to me. And it is only today, after I have carefully held my breath until the library book is slotted back onto the cold, grey shelf and counted to seventeen (so that we won't crash on the way home), that I stare out of the car window and wonder if everyone's minds work like this.

*"But I don't want to put the medicine on! It stings and makes my skin hurt!"*

*"I know, honey, but this cream is the only way your hands will heal. Remember how you came home yesterday and they were bleeding? You can only be so clean, dear."*

Every winter, since before I can remember, my hands decay to an irritated red, spiderwebbed

with cracks and dots of blood. It is always from overwhelming them. When I was little, I was too clean a kid. Never one for the rough and tumble sandbox (a cesspool of young kid cooties) or the cool clear water of a lake (who knows what kind of bacteria are in there). Always feeling fidgety after I touched something another kid had touched, always anxious to anoint myself with sinfully scalding water and mountains of soap.

I'd stand at the sink during school in thirs grade and wait to feel Clean. It was not a temporary state of being, something that was reset daily through proper hygiene. It was a state of Existence, something I hungrily sought after in every aspect of in nine-year-old me's body. A desperation to escape the crawling of my skin and the panicked flutter of my heartbeat.

*"Oh my god. Are you, like, actually okay? That's so weird."*

*"I can't even believe she wore that today."*

I am thirteen and too terrified to move. Listening to conversations around me and jumping to the wild, teenage hormone-fueled belief they must be about me. I have not moved the entire class, and I need to pee. But I am convinced if I stand up, I will end up vomiting across the floor. I don't feel nauseous, and I haven't thrown up since I had a stomach bug in the sixth grade. There is no valid evidence to support the idea I will hurl. I, using logic, can determine the risk of puking is near 0- but when has logic ever won against anxiety? The shadow that follows me, the one that is so familiar I would feel incomplete

without it, is pulling at my mind once again. I hunch over at my desk, mind buzzing too loud to pick up the teacher's lecture.

*Wouldn't it be so embarrassing to throw up? Everyone would stare, would judge. If you get up now, your mother is going to die before she gets home from work.*

A shiver goes up my spine, tears starting to prick. I pause my neat stacking of markers, sorting them not by color but by size.

*Go away. Go away. Go away. That's not true.*

I go to the bathroom. I wash my hands.

I can only be so clean.

*"What, now you can't touch the fridge door?"*

My father's voice is frustrated. I don't blame him. But every bone in my fifteen-year-old body is steeling against having to touch the door with my bare hands. I wrap a paper towel around my skin before grasping the handle, paper on smooth metal. The familiar pangs of shame, humiliation, and self hatred are growing, twisting, burning. I have never felt dirtier and more impure than now. My freak show is on display.

*"Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Have you ever heard of it?"*

*"A little. But I can't have that, I'm terrible at keeping my room clean."*

*"That's not what it means. Let's look into it at your next appointment, alright?"*

And there it was. A word. A term. An answer. Only a few months after I blow out the sixteen candles on my cake, there is a word for what I am, given by a young, tired therapist on my computer screen.

So, (like every anxious teen wishing for accurate medical information), I turn towards the internet.

Hours of research pass, the long hours of night stretching on.

It turns out my feelings of shame and nights wondering why I was like This are mirrored by thousands of other people. The hand washing, the fidgeting, the constant anxiety over getting sick or feeling contaminated, the chronic asking of reassurance, the horrible intrusive thoughts- the fundamental layout of my brain. It all stems from a condition. It isn't because I am weak, or lazy, or dumb. It isn't something intrinsically and irreparably broken within. My brain is simply wired differently. And knowing what I have means I can actually start getting better.

*I can only be so clean.*

*"WHY CAN'T YOU JUST DO THIS?"*

*"I'm sorry- I'm- I'm trying, Mama, I swear, I'm not trying to be a burden- my OCD makes touching the family's dirty clothes really hard. But I swear, I can do this, just please- give me a moment. I'm not trying to be a burden!"*

*"Your OCD makes things difficult for everyone in the family. I'm SICK of it."*

*I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean. I can only be so clean.*

I know I walk a fine line, at all times. To my left, a burning need for support, an aching exhaustion that comes from a constant background white noise of intrusive thoughts and repressed compulsions. To my right, the fear of "showing too much" of my OCD and having my friend or family member grow annoyed or tired from dealing with me. For all the accommodations and patience, even my mother is not immune to the inherent exhaustion of existing in proximity to seventeen year old me.

*“Have I washed the garden’s basil enough?”*

*“Y-yeah. Thanks for asking.”*

And there it is. Unflinching kindness. Unyielding patience. Brought by the steady, warm reassurance of my girlfriend as we make dinner together. I don’t even have to ask her, she can guess where my OCD will flare up and support me before I even realize a trigger is present.

*“Hey! Wanna check the expiration date?”*

*“Will it mess with your OCD if I drop your books here?”*

My parents are trying to support eighteen-year-old me, we all are trying to heal our relationship after we grew more distant. Some days I forgive them. Some days I do not. But there are more forgiving days than there are not, and we are taking small steps in the right direction. Familial love can be complicated.

*It’s okay. I don’t need to get up, that is just a compulsion. Breathe in for 4... 3... 2... 1... Hold. 2... 1... Out for 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...*

On Fridays I call my therapist. She is not the one who diagnosed me, she’s new, and she is compassionate and caring. We discuss the status of my OCD, and devise new strategies to calm myself when I am distressed. Today I order a book on how to work through my OCD, with the intent to go over it with my therapist next week. The Amazon logo flashes on my phone, the screen reflecting my Christmas tree’s lights as the December night descends.

Winter has brought with it, once again, the biting winds and coughing classmates that flood my body with anxiety, causing my skin to crawl and eyes to dart to the bathroom. I wash my hands, letting the warm wash over my chunky silver rings. But my skin right now is smooth, tight, normal. I have been working to repair it. I know tonight I will brace myself for the sting of hand cream, be lulled to sleep

and feel my hands aching with remnants of tangible anxiety.

But I also know I am better than I used to be. I cannot wash away my OCD, I will never be clean enough for its standards. I’ve made peace with that, I’m working to relax its grip on me. It is not an easy process, but it will be alright. I will push up my sleeves, I will get dirty and messy in the process of healing. I can, after all, only be so clean. ■