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Mr. Greco

English III

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### Not Alone

“I’m a superhuman. I defied death,” Mia spoke with both a hint of pride and shame as she recalled the time she went without food and water for five days. She had read that dry fasting would lead to faster weight loss than just a “basic” water fast. Ironically, while she was dry fasting, Mia was also taking a required high school summer health class which taught the importance of having a balanced and healthy lifestyle, and yet, she was actively doing the opposite by putting her life in danger. At the time, she did not recognize the irrationality of her behavior and was solely focused on her body image and losing weight.

Mia is a sophomore in high school who suffers from social anxiety disorder and eating disorders which cause her to be detached from reality and trapped in a cycle of self-imposed misery. Many teenagers believe they are alone in their struggles and feel lost and hopeless. The reality is that many teenagers are going through similar experiences and there are professionals and loved ones ready to help them. An estimated 49.5% of adolescents have had a mental health disorder (Office of Population Affairs), around 31.9% of adolescents have had some kind of anxiety disorder (National Institute of Mental Health) and around 30 million Americans struggle with eating disorders (National Eating Disorders Association). There is extensive research done on mental illnesses (Wortzel,) and many effective treatments (Mental Health America). Everyone should hold onto the hope of recovery. No one has to suffer alone.

“Don’t judge me. This is gonna sound really weird and messed up to you,” was Mia’s reply when I asked her to give me a rundown of a typical day in her life. In the morning, Mia peels herself out of bed at the last possible minute, skips breakfast, and frantically bikes to school, a place where she strives to be invisible. Throughout the day, she barely utters a word. Lunch break is when she catches up on her sleep in the library. It is the perfect place to hide the fact that she has no friends. She doesn’t eat lunch so she can keep her face hidden behind a covid mask. When school ends, Mia rushes home, looking forward to the one small joy in her life: savoring her first and only meal of the day. Unfortunately, there is an obstacle that stands between her and her meal, Mia hates eating with other people: “I just can’t do it. It gives me severe anxiety. I know people watch and judge me while I eat.” Mia’s meal time is an hour-and-a-half-long process that she repeats everyday. She takes out a bowl from the drawer, the same bowl, completely white, that doesn’t have any patterns or marks on it because psychologically it looks like there is more in the bowl than there actually is. Then she takes two scoops of non-fat yogurt and flattens it out perfectly on the bottom of the bowl. At this point, the bowl still looks empty because the bowl and yogurt are both white. Then Mia cuts up a quarter of an apple and places it horizontally onto the yogurt in a straight line. The second horizontal line is a sprinkle of chia seeds, then almond slivers, then one tablespoon of granola with all the raisins taken out, then exactly seven walnut halves. Altogether, there are five stripes of different toppings. It was all so meticulously controlled into her own type of art. I must have been staring at Mia with an expression of bafflement because she suddenly stopped describing her ritual and became self conscious, “I know what you’re thinking. It’s just... it’s complicated.” Mia was all too familiar with that baffled stare. That’s why the kitchen has to be empty when she goes in to prepare her food. If it isn’t empty when she comes home from school, Mia will fight her starvation and head

straight to her room where she'll try to distract herself from the hunger with entertainment and wait for people to leave the kitchen. Usually, it isn't empty until late at night around 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Because of this, "I eat my meal late, then I start on my homework late, then I go to sleep late, then I wake up late, and then I get to school late. I usually go to bed at around 4:30 in the morning and wake up at 7:40 am to get to school which starts at 8:00, so I get around three hours of sleep a night. Five hours on a good night. No sleep on a bad night." She goes to sleep knowing that she will be a zombie the next morning and will have to peel herself out of bed once again.

Mia doesn't interact with her family at all. "At this point, it's just awkward between us, like, I'm just a guest using a room and kitchen at their house... I just really don't want to face my family, especially my parents... I really don't want to hear them tell me how disappointed in me they are and I don't want to deal with the awkwardness." I asked Mia's mother what she thought of her daughter's evasion of her family. This was her response: "It is so frustrating. I don't know how to reach her. I want to help her but she is so stubborn in her own ways. I wish she could see how much harm she is causing herself."

"When Mia was in elementary school, she was loud and extroverted and had many friends," recalled her mother, "She had perfect grades all throughout elementary school and was invited to every birthday party." Mia's mother paused for a moment. She went on to confess that she wished she had intervened in Mia's life regarding one situation. Mia had a neon green fleece jacket in fourth grade. She wore that jacket everyday to school for the next three years. Even when the weather was over a hundred degrees, she refused to take it off. "Perhaps it was like a security blanket for her," acknowledged her mother, "I thought that this was strange at the time and I wondered if Mia was going through some emotional or psychological stress or issues."

Mia's mom, in her busyness and work stress, never really pursued her ominous intuition. Mia stopped eating lunch at school when she began junior high. Her mother noticed that the lunches she packed for her always came back untouched. At first, she thought that Mia was just too busy to eat but eventually found out that she was spending her lunch time cooped up in the bathroom. "I can see how you'd be embarrassed to eat alone when you're in junior high. I should have caught that as the first sign of her social anxiety." When Mia's family attended the awards ceremony at her school, no one clapped when she won an award—she was becoming invisible. During a parent teacher conference, her mother found out that her grades were dropping because she never spoke in class discussions. Looking back, Mia's earlier years were marked with hints of the onset of social anxiety and eating disorders.

Mia's parents tried to intervene and help her with her social anxiety but their attempts often backfired. One of these attempts failed miserably and scarred the whole family. Near the end of eighth grade, Mia's junior high held a celebration party for all the graduating eighth graders. Mia's parents felt that Mia would later regret not having attended the party, so they strongly encouraged her to go even though she heavily protested against it. During the party, Mia had never felt so alone, despite being surrounded by many peers. No one approached her and she couldn't find a single welcoming face. She didn't belong anywhere. Remaining in the party room was not an option, else everyone would figure out sooner or later that she was a friendless loser. She ran to the nearest bathroom to escape the nightmare and hid herself from the world in one of the stalls. When the stench of the stall became too much for her to bear, she returned to the party and walked around by herself in the shadows of the room. When the loneliness began to hurt and tears stung her eyes, she went back to the bathroom stall. After what felt like an hour of switching between the two, she finally evaded the volunteer parent chaperones, "ninja'd" her way

out of the school, and walked home alone in the dark, barefoot, with tear-stained cheeks, her heels in her hand and her dress dragging against the ground behind her. “It was one of the worst days of my life, like, it was literally a living nightmare. I really wish my parents hadn’t forced me to go, ‘cause like, I absolutely hated it” (M. Brown). Feeling helpless and upset that their intervention had caused Mia such a painful experience, Mia’s parents decided to seek professional help. They found a therapist for her.

Mia still struggles with social anxiety and eating disorders but hopes that with time, she will be able to overcome them: “I really hope that I’m just going through an awkward phase in my life and that this is all just part of being a teenager and going through puberty.” Mia hopes that she can rebuild her confidence and be as social as she was in elementary school. At her high school, she is putting more effort into talking to her classmates and participating in class discussions. At home, she is trying her best to eat with the rest of her family. Mia’s parents are realizing the severity of her mental illnesses and have made it a priority for them to check up on her everyday. Her mother even quit her job to spend more quality time with her and they are slowly repairing their relationship.

Today, Mia is seeing a therapist regularly and believes that she is making progress in her recovery of her mental illnesses: “I mean like, I’m doing this interview with you right now aren’t I?”

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