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Level III Third Place Winner

Letter to author Ned Vizzini concerning his book, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*

Dear Ned Vizzini:

I sat waiting for the light in the tunnel to come along, when you taught me that I am my own light. It is a funny story how we are all sitting here our whole lives waiting for something extraordinary to come along when we ourselves are something extraordinary. I wasted thirteen years of my life by constantly worrying about life rather than actually living it. As humans, we continue to worry about the next part of our lives instead of enjoying what is happening at the moment. We never seem to realize the mistake we make by living life with ANXIETY breathing down our backs.

The day anxiety latched onto me the first time, I encountered someone who would change my life. The feeling of compulsive worry set in, and he was not going down without a fight. Anxiety took special interest in my academics, and started to challenge my better judgment. I was always hard on myself when it came to my grades, but this was something I never felt before. I fell over the edge. My head was consumed with thoughts of failure. I remember people telling me that it was just one test grade and that it would not ruin my life. Yet, my schoolwork was no longer a learning experience, but a fear of failure. It started with pop quizzes, then moved to tests. I remember the day a test dropped onto my desk with its score; the score seared my brain with failure. I ran to the bathroom and locked the stall door. The dark tunnel I walked into did not have a smiling teacher, a friend's laughter, or the embrace of family—it engulfed me in its darkness. Anxiety whispered in my ear, "no one can help you now." I shook with fear in the bathroom stall until my strength was spent. I breathed in his darkness, and wiped off my tears. I thought I have traveled so far into that grim tunnel of hopelessness that I thought that there was no turning back.

The weeks went on, and the demon inside me did not slow down. On the outside, I had a promising future and positive outlook, but on the inside I was surrounded by lies. A locked door or a barricade can't keep anxiety out, for he is cunning and will sneak through. He barges in at night with no care for privacy and keeps me wide awake by attacking my thoughts. He fills my soul with worry and fear. The filth of him covers me like a blanket, but my body is still cold. The terror of his presence makes me shake uncontrollably. The panic he kindles within me makes me sob like a lost child. He told me the pain I was going through was for a promising future. Somehow, the unrelenting pressure I put on myself would be worth it in the end. I was choking from the pressure that he put on me. He wrapped me in his cloak and whisked away my old life. Anxiety is a kidnapper of the mind. He is the monster at night young children fear, but parents comfort them and promise them that nothing will hurt them. No one possibly imagines that he is real, until it seems too late.

The first day of high school I realized that this was not simply a phase. At the time, I believed my only real option was to accept anxiety and travel through the winding, dark tunnel. My mind did not care about anything other than success. I was not driven, but obsessed. Anxiety and depression took over my humanity. I was artificial intelligence walking around in an empty soul. I walked into school every day with the same routine because I had no other option. I started to grow fond of the idea of dying. I remember how appealing thoughts about it seemed to be. In my life, death was the only thing that seemed clear. I was never afraid of dying, but I was simply afraid of failing. The girl who had hitherto been so successful was in a downward spiral.

While my life seemed headed in a horrible direction, I stumbled along *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. On a brisk September morning, I walked into school, and I realized that I forgot my book for weekly reading. I silently chastised myself on the way to class. I walked up to the teacher's shelf and carefully looked over the multitude of books. As I looked through them, none aroused my interest, until my eyes noticed one on the uppermost shelf that I had never heard of. I reached up for it and brought it down; it was entitled *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. Feeling somehow connected to it, I decided that it was worth a

shot and took it back to my desk. Each page that I read made me want to finally overcome and slay anxiety. Your words started to inspire me to change. It took months, but I finally wanted to live.

“Tell your story. Volunteer … Help people … Travel. Fly. Swim. Meet. Love. Dance. Win. Smile. Run. Run. Run home. Run home and enjoy. Enjoy. Take these verbs and enjoy them. They’re yours … You deserve them because you chose them. You could have left them all behind but you chose to stay here. So now live life for real …”

This quote specifically made me desire the essence of living life like a child craves chocolate. I remember how badly I wanted to get dressed and go out with friends, go for a run, or simply pack a bag and travel the world. These are not merely words on a page, but a philosophy to live by. Craig gave me an odd realization that there is a difference between accepting your troubles and pushing through them. Life is not merely one single battle, but numerous trials in which you must battle the demons that haunt you. Craig gave me the inspiration to suit up in my battle armor. I put on my cloak of strength, ready to battle whatever opponent came my way. I wielded my sword of light, ready to slay the darkness. I strapped on my boots of determination, ready to walk in the dark without fear. I put on my helmet of wisdom, ready to protect my mind from anxiety’s lies. With this armor, I was ready to take the battle into my own hands. I sought help from a counselor at school, took every chance of extra study help to remind myself I could do it, and I walked into school every day with the confidence I needed to get through the day. Craig taught me to live. Live for the happiness, sadness, school days, holidays, and all of it because not even your mind can catch you when you appreciate this life. You taught me that. I was able to learn that anxiety does not define who I am. I learned how to walk out of the tunnel of darkness as my own hero. My mind was right about one thing, no one can help you but yourself. You do not find the way out with someone holding your hand, but by being your own inspiration because you do not live for another’s approval. You live to be yourself. You live to make your own mark on the world.

I want to use my words to make an impact on others. I want to make sure people know that it is time we start addressing mental illnesses, instead of pushing them away. Society loves to think that the people who live with this everyday are broken and different from the rest of the world. Once you start categorizing us into another life form, you are the one who damages us. That is where society is wrong. We are not some other category, but living beings. We want others to be interested in what we say and do and not to look at us like we are aliens. I hope to teach others through my writing that you can be your own light. Through my words, I can help teach others that they deserve to live just as much as the person beside them.

Through the months of darkness I thought that being a teenager would be the worst, absolutely most horrible time in my entire life, but I was wrong. Not one point of your life is the “best,” but every single day. Every day, week, month, year is the best day of your life because you are alive. You can make a difference in the world every day that you are living and breathing on it. I feel so idiotic that I missed out on the beauty of life for almost fourteen years, but never again. I want to take every opportunity I can get because I am different. I am not some robot among others with the same programming as the next, but Rachel Russo, the girl who enjoys her faith, government, writing, swimming, reading, rugby, and so much more. I am not at all like the person next to me. I am not broken or messed up, but just taking on my challenges one day at a time in the armor that I have fought so many other battles in. In the words of Craig Gilner, “Live. Live. Live Live. Live.”

Sincerely,
Rachel Russo