

OCD  
By Aneesha Sharma

OCD.

People think they know it.

You organize like crazy.

You're obsessed with every little thing that you do.

You do stuff. Then you redo, and redo it, till you just collapse from the effort.  
Homework is *not* fun when you have OCD.

It's even harder when you're a closet OCD. My parents just think I'm just a perfectionist. Takes after her maternal grandma, Dad jokes. But by the time I was 8, I knew I was different. Then, at nine, I self-diagnosed myself (with the help of 43 medical websites and 18 peer-reviewed publications). I haven't told anyone. Most of the time, I can hide it. The side effects are mostly a very very symmetric looking home and perfect marks. Sometimes I break down, but I've been controlling it pretty well. I hardly ever sleep more than 3 or 4 hours a night because I keep redoing things till they're perfect. My dad tells me to relax, not be such a perfectionist all the time. But I can't help it. I'm ashamed of my OCD, but I don't have any other choice.

In elementary, my teachers know me well and my classmates basically leave me alone. But now, I was going to be attending a new middle school.

My OCD gets worse in new places and when I'm near new people. I had to plan this well.

I walked down the halls of Stratford Joseph Callingham Perfunctory Middle School. Students lounged around, chatting away about this and that and how their summer had gone. I looked around for a familiar face from my elementary school, but I didn't know anyone. I had definitely imagined something different, but even if it wasn't my dream school, I wasn't going to mess this up. I had practiced this in my head millions of times. Failure was *not* an option.

I had Science first thing. Second floor, fourth door on the right, twenty six steps from the elevator. I would get there seven minutes early and would sit in the second row to the front, where I could be an active learner without looking like I was trying too hard. I would sit on the left-most seat, closest to the door in the back, and lots of cover. I wouldn't answer any questions; I would get to get my reputation with my teachers and everyone else would leave me alone. It was the perfect plan, what could possibly go wrong?

Turns out, a lot.

I spent too long putting my backpack away in my locker. The locker wasn't wide enough for my bag. So, I had to push the backpack in sideways. But of course that wouldn't do. So I rearranged it and checked, rearranged and checked and a good twelve tries later it was perfect. I shut the locker. But then, I saw the strap peeping out of the locker, which meant I had to restart. Finally, after fifteen other fruitless attempts, it was right, and I could leave my locker in peace.

Sadly, this meant that I was just in time for class. I rushed in, but my dream spot was already taken. I tried to decide which of the remaining seats to take...but they were all wrong. The angles were wrong, and the distance between the seats were wrong, and of course, they were all surrounded by people. Talking, chatting, blah-blahing away. Was I the only one who was new in this school?

I must have stood around looking for too long. The teacher was already in the room and she had to ask me to sit down. The only seat left was front-row center. Where the whole class could see me.

Suddenly I felt a zap.

Oh no.

Not now.

Not here.

But I couldn't stop it. Nothing could. I grabbed sanitizer out of the pocket of my jacket, squeezed out the right amount and started scrubbing my hands. I scrubbed and scrubbed as fast as I could. Germs were going to take over. I was going to die from one of the 219 contagious diseases known to mankind. I should've been taking a shower in sanitizer right then.

And with my luck, it was no surprise that everyone in the class saw this.

I don't know what we covered in class that first day. But I do know that that was one of the bravest times in my life: when I had to pretend not to hear the snickers, not to see the malicious grins and messages being telegraphed in the eyes of the kids around me.

I went on with my plan for the rest of the morning and it went decently well. I got the seats I wanted in the rest of the classes and avoided all human contact. But at lunch, it was raining! This meant lunch would be in the cafeteria. And I hadn't checked out the cafeteria beforehand. So, I couldn't plan it. I wouldn't know where to sit! The morning's event replayed before my eyes again and again. And there would be no teacher this time to shield me from the mean comments and taunts I knew would be coming this time.

So, I went to the girls room. Took up the farthest away stall, next to the wall. Cried a little, but very quietly so no one could overhear. Took out my PBJ sandwich. And sat on the toilet to spend the rest of my lunch.

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Back in my room that night, I couldn't sleep. I lay scrunched up in a tight ball. I cried for how long, I don't know. The school day was over and now I would replay the whole morning over and over in my mind, trying to find how I could have done something differently. And now, it was time for the breakdown.

It was one in the morning by the time I tried to force myself to sleep. But there was something off with the lamp, when I reached out to turn it off. Too much to the left. Not centered. Need to rotate it. I couldn't sleep with the lamp in the wrong position now, could I?

Finally my lamp was in the right place. But now the curtains didn't seem right. By the time I went to bed it was five.

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It was the last day of the first week of school and I'd made no friends. And because of the sanitizer incident on the first day of school, I was pretty sure I was branded for life. Life in Middle school was going to be pretty lonely.

The only good thing was that today we'd have music class.

For as long as I can remember, music has been my savior. It always stumped me why so many Greek kings and heroes wasted their life trying to get to some paradise, when heaven was right in their reach. All they needed to do was play music. My first memory in life is hearing a street performer playing a violin. It sounded so different, so perfect. That was the time I announced that I would learn how to play music. And since then, I haven't stopped.

I'd kept my resolve and had learnt well. But I didn't play in front of anyone. Music was just my sanctuary, my only escape from OCD. When I'm playing my violin, there are no zaps, no seizures, no meltdowns. I do practice endlessly, but some things just can't be avoided.

So, there I was, heading to music class. Technically running to music class, because the bell had already rang, and I'd missed 23 seconds of the best thing in the world. But even before I entered the room, the sound of jumbled up violins, cellos and trombones rang in my ear. It sounded that most people hadn't touched anything like an instrument before. It was pure horror. I cringed and thought about hiding in the girls' room again. But I couldn't miss the only class I had looked forward to the whole week.

Our teacher, Mr. Mellie, told us we were going to play the second minuet by J.S Bach. But what Mr. Mellie didn't seem to see was that this class wasn't ready for Twinkle Twinkle, let alone the second minuet. He kept giving out general directions and incredibly fake compliments, even though no one was seeming to pay any attention to him.

Suddenly, a short Chinese girl in the class got up and marched up to the cello players. She must have been in my grade though height-wise she could've been in fourth grade.

"No! Not like that," she spoke in a business-like manner, "just move your fourth finger up. How long have you played the cello? Ah . . . I see. No, the cello is not like the Ukulele," she added, then moving on to the next girl "and you, what's your name? Celia? Well Celia, your bowing is all wrong. You're too close to the bridge." Mr. Mellie stood to the side making supportive noises while that girl went around bossing everyone around till the class knew what was expected of them. It was definitely not perfect. But at least, it wouldn't kill anyone.

For the next few weeks, it was like that short little girl kept popping up everywhere. Her name was May and she pretty much hung out by herself except in music class, where she became some sort of diva.

One day after music class, May came up to me and said, "You play well. I want to enter the South Carolina Duet Competition with you." I don't think this girl even knew my name, but all she cared about was that I played well. When I was quiet, she must have understood she'd been rude. "Wanna try out?" she added, "I haven't been able to find a partner." *I wonder why*, I thought. But from what I'd seen, I knew she wouldn't stop bothering me if I didn't say yes. "It'll be a first for our school, heck for our whole state. A perfect chance to rub it in to those sniggers." She added in a sing-song voice.

I looked at her. We had never talked about that first day. We had never talked to each other at all. I had thought maybe she was not even present the first day of classes. But she'd been there. And she'd noticed. "How will they..." I started

"You leave that to me. Just know that they'll regret ever looking at you, trust me."

"Sure," I mumbled. I loved my music and would said yes anyways. But the thought of showing those teasers who was boss how sealed the deal.

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The competition was a duet and I suggested a piece from Mozart, but May would have none of it. It was like she had this whole thing planned out.

"As you know, we're going to be the youngest players there. So, Mozart shomarzt is not gonna cut it, we gotta blow 'em away! If you ask me," she paused dramatically, "Ready for it? Paganini, twenty-four Caprice."

My jaw dropped and I almost dropped my instrument. Paganini is one of the *hardest* pieces of music ever composed. I'd been learning it for two years, so technically I knew it. And yet, I knew it was the hardest piece in this world! But apparently, no one had informed May.

"So, you can play it on the violin, right? And I can do guitar, cello and viola with you," she continued nonchalantly while taking out the music she'd already brought.

"Wait, wait, wait..." I finally interrupted May. "What did you just say because I didn't get it right? Paganini? Are you out of your mind? You know even aficionados don't play that stuff? And...and...you want to play three different instruments, is that like, even legal?" at this point, I wouldn't have been surprised if she wanted me to juggle bunnies while playing. Who did this girl think she was?

"What's the problem?" May asked, looking up from her bag, "You know it, right?"

"Yes, um I mean, of course I know it. But not like that, not in front of all those people!"

"Oh, that," she waved my concerns off. "That's not a problem. You'll be fine."

"Fine? Oh, thank you for letting me know! I suddenly feel so much better! I almost feel fine!" I blurted out. I swear, I'd never talked to anyone in my life like this before, but this I was getting too much.

I took a long breath and started counting to 127, my lucky number. That usually calms me down, but I doubted it would today. Paganini consists of left-hand pizzicato, rapid string crossing and some of the fastest scales of all time, and May just says "oh, don't worry you'll be fine."

“I know. You just see, follow my lead and you’ll see.”

I still couldn't believe it. Why didn't May see that there are such things as limits? I paused my counting to blurt out, “If you are so sure, why don't you do it solo? And what is it with your multi-instrument fantasy. Has that, like, ever worked out for you?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I would, but I don't play the violin,” she coolly admitted, while starting to shuffle stuff around the music room. “Don't worry about it. We still have 35 days until the competition. Tons of time to practice. And tell me, why are you counting?”

“It's what I do when I get stressed out.”

“Oh, ok. No problem. While you're counting, why don't you start counting the notes?” and with that she handed me the music sheets to Paganini. “You ok with practicing over lunch? I checked with Mr. Mellie, he's cool with us using the music room.”

So with that, we started practicing what the music world knows and respects as one of the toughest pieces of music. I would play the violin, and May would alternate between the guitar, viola and cello. Paganini can be played on either Viola and Guitar, but I hadn't seen many performers younger than forty play it publicly and I had never even heard of the same player switching instruments. But, I think the sheer craziness of May's plan helped me forget to worry about myself. Afterall, you can only worry about one thing at a time. Paganini included.

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The next month, my life was pretty much music practice. School was the same, I stayed by myself. My classmates shunned me and the cool kids made mocking hand-wringing motions if I ever accidentally looked towards them. But nothing really was real, except for the practice after school. I lived for the practice.

May let me do my thing, but when I started to get caught up in a piece, she would help me. She would play the piece on her phone till I could see what it was that was not perfect, and help me try improve. Her music level was so much higher than mine. She did start learning when she was not even three.

We had decided that the guitar would play the chorus, and the viola. Except in the seventh variation. Then, I would play the higher parts with the violin and May, playing the viola, would play the lower parts. This meant rapid playing, while being cohesive at the same time. As well as during the ninth variation where May would do the pizzicato. And of course, the finale, where we would both play. I had no idea how we would do it. This would be my first time playing in public, let alone in a competition. Any time I thought about it, I started counting again.

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And then, it was the day of the concert. Our parents, teachers and entire seventh grade class were sitting in the audience. Our teachers were apparently super proud of us competing with the high-school kids, and our entire class had been bussed to the arena. I could also see the cool kids who'd rolled their eyes when I passed them and everyone else who'd sniggered at me in class. They were all there in the audience, trying to look non-chalant. Secretly though, I knew they were like jello jealous.

I went backstage and looked around at the competition. Most all the competitors were eleventh or twelfth graders. Then the competition started.

First, there was the pop category. Lots of Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift songs. Lots of cooing and ahhing from the audience. Then the rap—the only piece I

recognized was a 24KGoldn song, but the audience loved it, chanting along. And then finally, Classical. A Beethoven sonata done very well, a piano concerto by Mozart with an average performance, a minuet played almost professionally and a solo violin performance of Winter from the four seasons by Vivaldi that got the audience to its feet applauding.

“And lastly, Beatrice Catharidge and May Lee playing,” the announcer paused to double check his sheet with something else on his desk, “Umm, lastly, we have Caprice No.24 by Paganini,” he finally announced. May and I walked up to the stage. The three judges sat on a bench forty-three steps away from us. Two of them smiled at us with benign amusement. The other just shook his head, as if readying himself mentally for a waste of his time.

I should have been anxious. I should have started hand wringing or at least counting. But we had practiced so much that I think kinda forgot. When we’d started our rehearsals, May admitted that she’d been checking out this competition for the last three years and had researched the heck out of it. She’d sketched out the whole concert placement, timing, and everything else!

She filled me in, using a sketch she’d made of the arena’s inside, “The audience is going to be over here, here and here. And the judges are going to be most likely over here, forty-three to forty-four steps away from us. The judges this year are Arnold Davidson, from the orchestra next town, Ms. Kris Holland, a local music store owner and Dr. Kristoff, from the Uni Music department. If one of them can’t make it though, the reserve judge is Mrs. Lola Potts, the retired music teacher. All classical aficionados. Total music snobs. So, most important thing is stay to the classic. No variations. Oh, and I almost forgot. They hear these same songs over and over again everywhere they go. So, that’s why I chose the Paganini. Not a single Caprice by Paganini though. They’ve never seen that one done at one of these concerts. That’s why I chose it” Not a single Caprice by Paganini. Hmm, I wonder why?

I don't know if May does this much research for all her projects. I had a sudden thought about her. Was she OCD too? She could be. She was so demanding of perfection; it drove *me* crazy sometimes at rehearsals. But even if she was, she handled it so much differently than me. I just worried and worried, while she went out and attacked her worry, one step at a time. She was tough and didn't see how her no-nonsense attitude affected everyone she talked to. *Just a collaboration*, I reminded myself.

We practiced together every minute we could spare after school, either in the music room or at one of our homes. We played non-stop. We weren't very good at first. But we kept on listening to the productions and practicing. May helped me, and I helped her, where I could.

I met her parents one day while I was leaving. "This is Beatrice," May introduced me, "She is OCD." And May's parents didn't bat an eye. "Oh," her mom said, "What is your favorite coping strategy?"

I started wondering if I should come clean to my parents too. Or maybe, I should get them to hang out with May's parents first, just to mentally prep them a bit.

Two weeks before the competition, May somehow got us into the hall where we would play. She'd apparently had a long-lost friendship with the janitor and had decided to put it back into action. He was a nice, old Chinese man who sat in the front row and listened to us every night, clapping and shouting to us in Chinese. To me, it was all blabber. But to May it was important advice.

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The audience clapped as we walked onto the stage. I could make out my mom and dad in the audience waving encouragingly to me. As the lights shone onto

the stage, May and I started. The world faded out of my vision. First variation, you could hear the guitar playing an accompaniment. The soft viola, slowly building its speed and power. Fifth variation, Rapid string crossing. May, who was on the viola, played the same melody, but used such low notes you would've thought she was playing a cello. Seventh Variation. More string crossing. May playing the viola once again, with such perfect flow it sounded like we were one instrument. And then the Finale. May was able to play *both* guitar and viola, switching rapidly and seamlessly. But the ending was in viola. So many chords, sometimes high and sometimes low. May's fingers flew across the viola like she wasn't even touching the string before they shot up again. Viola was her specialty.

Then finally it clicked. As we played our last note, and took our bows, the room broke out into clapping, May turned to hug me. She was not being very professional but was instead jumping up and down.

"You were très magnifique! Qui quoi blah blah in French." I didn't know May spoke French, but I shouldn't have been surprised. Looking back, I realize that this was a perfect meltdown moment. I should also have been anxious about doing something wrong in the spotlight as the audience kept clapping. But I was too busy thinking. I had just realized, this thing between May and I wasn't just a *collaboration*. This was something different.

I remember thinking that though I'd been so scared of messing up, I didn't remember now if I did or if I had, it didn't seem to matter. It didn't even matter if we won or lost. Because this was a different game. I'd always had such a hard time fitting in that I'd never expected this. The unaccounted variable I'd never thought of even trying for. This was friendship. And as I stood on the stage, surrounded by people, for the first time in my life it didn't matter how I did or what people thought of me or if something would go wrong. It just didn't. All that

mattered was that we had fun. I hugged May back as hard as I could and actually did her jig with her.

We did win. The judges were apparently gob smacked by our performance (Not to brag, but obviously). But what they didn't see were the two most finicky local teenagers practicing like maniacs each night, first together and then by ourselves, night after night after night. Being OCD is a tough gig, but it makes you pretty good when you find something that you like. Our school, cool kids included, were pretty impressed. The school honored us at the assembly and people pretty much leave me alone again, but in a good way now.

I also recently told my parents about my self-diagnosed condition. They took it better than I had hoped. Mom wants to take me to a psychologist, but I've asked her to hold off on it. I'm doing okay right now. I do not feel so left out at school. I've actually started talking in class a bit. And I take music lessons with May's teacher. It's even been thirty-three days, and two hours since I counted anything. Well, you know what I mean.