

**DIARY OF AN ANXIOUS SOUL AND HOW POLE DANCING  
SAVED ME: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

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## Abstract

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In this thesis, I use narrative reflection from an evocative autoethnographic standpoint to explore the multifaceted interaction between stereotypes, norms and values and their effect on my perception of my own worth, my battle with generalized anxiety disorder and with my cognitive dissonance fused frustration related to discovering and enjoying a highly stigmatized recreational activity – recreational pole dancing. The text features analysis of important events in my life in a loosely based chronological fashion where the demands of society and my inextinguishable need to please conflict with my ever-stronger love for a heavily scrutinized sport. The analysis dives into character definition through anxiety, impostor syndrome (Clance, 1985) and feminist theory (Bennett, 2006; Bruckert, 2002; Gill, 2007; Jarrett, 1999) as I struggle to define myself within a patriarchal society. The story highlights how pole dancing, a stigmatized exercise activity, has made me able to gradually discover, appreciate and accept my true strengths and take the necessary steps towards self-acceptance. The paper begins with a literature review of topics relevant to the analysis and continues with a narrative reflection in the form of an evocative account of my lived experiences.

*Keywords:* Autoethnography; evocative; generalized anxiety disorder; impostor phenomenon; recreational pole dancing; feminism

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## **Introduction**

When I began studying sport- and exercise psychology at the University of Jyväskylä, I was interested in doing a research on recreational pole dancing. Considering how young and stigmatized the sport is, I knew research on the topic was scarce and therefore, I was sure I could not make it into the topic of my master’s thesis. However, my thesis advisors thought otherwise and suggested I would do a qualitative study. This led me to look at existing research on recreational pole dancing (Donaghue et al., 2011; Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Since a lot of the research available focuses on the stigma of pole dancing, the connection the sport has to the sex industry and debates whether or not pole dancing, in itself, is degrading towards the women participating, I wanted to bring a new dialogue into the conversation; mainly, how pole dancing has helped me become better at managing my generalized anxiety disorder.

As I learned about evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 1997; 2001; 2004) I was sure this was the format I wanted to use in my thesis. Evocative autoethnography is perfect in situations where you want the reader to come into your own experience. I feel this autoethnography, on my experience as a recreational pole dancer who suffers from generalized anxiety disorder and how this type of exercise has helped me, is a perfect addition to the existing research literature where the focus is taken away from stigma and questions regarding sexualization, and moved towards the ability recreational pole dancing has to positively influence feelings of mastery, strength building, enjoyment, acceptance and social support (Cury et al., 1996; Greenleaf, 2005; Segar, Spruijt-Metz & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006; Segar et al., 2008; Strelan et al., 2003; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge & Fredrickson, 2006; Quinn, Chaudoir & Kallen, 2011).

This autoethnography is written in the first-person voice, and is about the life of the author. The thesis begins with a literature review on the most important topics covered in the story, then I move into explaining autoethnography as a method within both narrative analysis and qualitative research, before I end the thesis by connecting the topics in my story to existing literature and suggest how I can further contribute to it in the future.

*“We humans have lost the wisdom of genuinely resting and relaxing. We worry too much. We don't allow our bodies to heal, and we don't allow our minds and hearts to heal”*

-Thich Nhat Hanh

## **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a term familiar to every human being. It is a term used to describe an uncomfortable emotional and physiological state most humans experience quite frequently throughout their life. Professionals distinguish between two types of anxiety. The first one is called state anxiety, which is a normal reaction to stressful stimuli, for example when you oversleep or miss the bus. You might experience uncomfortable sensations in response to those stressors, but when the situation is not stressful anymore, your anxiety diminishes. Everyone experiences state anxiety, sometimes a few times a day. The other type is called trait anxiety, and in contrast to state anxiety it is more persistent and is more a reflection of the person's character. A person with high trait anxiety would then be thought of as being prone to anxiety (Spielberger, 1985). Specialists have long known that people with abnormal levels of anxiety seem to have more 'anxiety-prone' personalities. They seem to be more psychologically vulnerable. That is, they tend to 'catastrophize' when faced with stressors, think in black and white and always see the worst scenario folding in their mind (Uhlenhuth, 2002). Anxiety disorders are clustered together because they share many common core features. Phobias, for example, are anxious reactions to specific stimuli in the environment, while generalized anxiety disorder is more pervasive (Gauthier & Nuss, 2015). Although most people view anxiety primarily as a mental disorder, it is also highly physiological and neurobiological. Researchers have found over activity in brain areas involved in processing emotional stimuli in people with anxiety, such as the amygdala and insula. Electrical stimulation to the amygdala induces feelings of fear and anxiety, and a person with lesions in this area has trouble recognising negative emotions in other people's facial expressions (Adolphs et al., 1999; Lanteaume et al., 2007). There also seems to be deviance in functional connectivity between those overactive areas and inhibitory areas of the brain, such as the medial prefrontal cortex (Fonzo et al., 2015; Etkin & Wagner, 2007; Stein, Simmons, Feinstein & Paulus, 2007). Gauthier & Nuss (2015) said: "...Anxiety disorders arise not from a hardwired defect in the brain but rather from a dysfunction in the modulation of brain

circuits that regulate the emotional response to potentially threatening stimuli”. Studies have found evidence for neurological disruptions in various central nervous system functions in people with anxiety, for example with GABA, serotonin, opioid receptors, the endocannabinoid system, neuropeptide Y, prolidase and corticotropin-releasing hormone (Durant, Christmas & Nutt, 2009; Ercan et al., 2017; Gauthier & Nuss 2015; Gordon & Hen, 2004; Lydiard, 2003; Thorsell, 2010; Veer & Carlezon, 2013; Wu et al., 2011) Studies have also found evidence of altered cytokine balance in people with certain types of anxiety, which causes an increased pro-inflammatory response and a suppressed anti-inflammatory response (Hou et al., 2017). Over activity in the amygdala could create overactive bottom-up processing in people with anxiety, which could lead the brain to register the relevant stimuli as threatening. There could also be a dysfunction in control of top-down processing performed by the prefrontal cortex in people suffering from anxiety, which could lead the brain to process stimuli with more emotion than in those who are not as affected by anxiety (Gauthier & Nuss, 2015). Allelic variation in certain receptor expressions also seem to contribute to development and modulation of anxiety- and depression-related personality traits (Strobel et al., 2003). The success of pharmacological treatment in lessening anxiety symptoms further supports the notion that anxiety disorders stem from physiological roots (Zareifopoulos & Dylja, 2017). As Craske & Stein (2016) and Bandelow et al. (2012) mention, depression medication is the first-line of treatment for most anxiety disorders, primarily selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-noradrenaline-reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). According to classical learning theory, anxiety disorders may be learned via paired association. John B. Watson and his assistant Rosalie Rayner (1920) demonstrated this with their infamous “little Albert” experiment, where the child learned to associate a neutral stimulus with fear through classical conditioning. They further showcased that the feared response generalized to other similar stimuli, which supports the notion that anxiety reactions can form as a response to neutral situations and these reactions can then generalize to other similar situations. With Skinner (1963) and his research on the principles of operant conditioning, scientists began realizing that certain coping techniques are rewarding and can therefore continue anxiety disorders. The coping techniques are avoidance and escape. A person suffering from anxiety might try to avoid fear-provoking situations, or escape from them. Mowrer’s (1973) two-factor theory of avoidance combines the principles of classical and operant conditioning and explains the development and continued maintenance of phobias. Succeeding in avoiding or escaping offers temporary relief from the anxiety, which further reinforces the continued use of these maladaptive coping strategies.



The avoidance becomes a reward in itself, through negative reinforcement, which increases the likelihood of this behaviour being repeated in similar situations in the future. Most professionals of today agree that in addition to having strong biophysiological roots and symptoms, anxiety disorders also manifest through cognitive symptoms. In social cognitive theory, Bandura (1989) posits that lack of self-efficacy leads to substantial distress, autonomic arousal and self-doubts, which contribute to negative experiences that reinforce anxiety thoughts and subsequent maladaptive coping behaviour.

The main point all theorists agree on, is the anxiety itself and the debilitating effect it has, on a personal-, inter-personal-, organizational and social level. Anxiety disorders also effectively lower sufferer's quality of life (Rapaport et al., 2005). Therefore, most modern theories on anxiety combine information from classical, operant and social cognitive theories to offer a multimodal treatment.

### **Cognitive behavioural therapy**

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is the most widely researched form of psychotherapy, has been consistently shown to have strong positive effects on anxiety sufferers. The therapy has been found to be highly effective on the main symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, namely, worrying, anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hofmann et al., 2012; Mitte, 2005). Cognitive behavioural therapy seems to be more effective in the long run than therapies utilising applied relaxation. It might have more longer lasting effects than usual care, as well, in addition to improving quality of life (Cuijpers et al., 2014; Mitte, 2005). A recent meta-analysis by Hanrahan et al. (2013) found cognitive therapies to be effective in reducing the cornerstone feeling of generalized anxiety disorder, worrying. They also found the positive effect to remain almost intact at follow-up. Studies indicate CBT is easier to tolerate than pharmacotherapy, which makes it a great therapy option for most people, since it does not involve any side effects (Mitte, 2005). Kishita & Laidlaw (2017) found cognitive behavioural therapy to be effective on adults of working age and older adults. Therefore, this treatment seems a suitable option for most groups. Even though different anxiety disorders manifest through various neural circuitry, cognitive behavioural therapy seems to have positive effect on all types. One speculated reason is that CBT increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, which then becomes better equipped to regulate subcortical structures (Brooks & Stein, 2015).

## **Prevalence of anxiety disorders**

Andlin-Sobocki and Wittchen (2005) ranked anxiety disorders as the most frequent mental disorders to pester Europeans. The one year prevalence was 12% of the adult population within the EU. Anxiety disorders have also been estimated as most prevalent in studies done internationally with the World Health Organization (2017) and as Craske & Stein (2016) point out, one in 14 persons in the world suffers from an anxiety disorder at any given time and one in nine will have an anxiety disorder in any given year. Furthermore, they highlight that prevalence of anxiety is higher in European countries and in the United states of America than in other countries of the world. They further speculate that it is possible that anxiety prevalence is rising, possibly because of increased stressors in the environment, for example the rise of the internet, social media and the like. These speculations find some support in a systematic review of reviews by Remes, Brayne & Lafortune (2015). In their review, Remes and her colleagues found anxiety disorders to affect people in high-income countries much more than people from other countries. One might speculate stressors related to the fast pace of life, high living standards, pressure to have it all and oversharing on social media are contributing factors. Especially interesting is the fact that anxiety disorders seem to disproportionately affect women (Remes et al., 2015), in fact, almost twice as many women suffer from anxiety disorders compared to men (Craske & Stein, 2016). Anxiety disorders might also be more debilitating for women than men (McLean, Asnaani & Hofmann, 2011).

Anxiety disorders, if left untreated, can significantly interfere with the daily life of the suffering person, possibly interrupting regular work schedule, family life or social interactions. People who suffer from anxiety disorders also often experience depression and comorbidity between anxiety disorders is quite common (American Psychological Association, 2010; Remes et al., 2014). Besides being a heavy psychosocial burden, mental disorders of this kind are a considerable economic burden. A conservative estimate, due to lack of data, of the economic cost of anxiety disorders was 41 billion Euros (Andlin-Sobocki & Wittchen, 2005). Kessler et al. (2009) further concluded that anxiety disorders, among other mental disorders, are very common throughout the world and stress how debilitating they are. In a systematic review and meta-regression by Baxter et al. in 2013 the global prevalence of anxiety disorders was found to be 7.3%, when adjustments due to methodological differences in studies had been made. Furthermore, the average prevalence

was 10.4% in Euro/Anglo cultures. A review by Wittchen et al. (2011) done in all member states of the EU and Switzerland, Iceland and Norway found anxiety disorders to be the most frequent, the prevalence amounting to 14%. Moreover, they found mental disorders to contribute 26.6% to the total all cause burden in the countries tested, which means that at any given year, over a third of the population studied suffers from mental disorders. Therefore, there clearly is a growing need globally to curb anxiety disorders (WHO, 2012).

### **Manifestation of anxiety**

Anxiety disorders all have the same core features which are anxiety reactions and avoidance behaviour (Andlin-Sobocki & Wittchen, 2005). Craske & Stein (2016) emphasize that anxiety is a dimensional construct rather than a categorical one, and therefore it is important for health professionals to look at each person on a case-to-case basis and estimate how normal or abnormal their client's anxiety is, for example by judging how impairing and distressing the symptoms are to said person, how frequently she experiences them and for how long she has been experiencing them. Although diagnostic criteria are helpful, they are no more than a supplement the health official can use as a tool for guidance (Craske & Stein, 2016). Mild anxiety is a natural emotion for humans and it helps a person become more alert and focused when facing challenges. However, A diagnosis of a disorder might be made when a person feels extreme anxiety and extreme worry which does not subside when difficulties have passed. People suffering from anxiety often feel as if something bad is going to happen, and they cannot seem to shake this feeling of dread. Their extreme feelings are very real to them and often interfere with their daily life and relationships (American Psychological Association, 2010). The American Psychiatric Association (2013, p.189) has a good definition of these types of disorders:

Anxiety disorders include disorders that share features of excessive fear and anxiety and related behavioral disturbances. *Fear* is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas *anxiety* is anticipation of future threat. Obviously, these two states overlap, but they also differ, with fear more often associated with surges of autonomic arousal necessary for fight or flight, thoughts of immediate danger, and escape behaviors, and anxiety more often associated with muscle tension and vigilance in preparation for future danger and cautious or avoidant behaviors. Sometimes the

level of fear or anxiety is reduced by pervasive avoidance behaviors.  
(p.189)

### **Generalized anxiety disorder**

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), like other anxiety disorders, is characterised by both neurophysiological symptoms as well as cognitive and behavioural symptoms. It has been estimated by the World Health Organization (2017) to generally begin to affect sufferers in their late teens or early adulthood. It has been theorized that interventions aimed at early detection and treatment might be helpful in decreasing the prevalence of these disorders, further, it might prevent the development of secondary disorders (Kessler et. al., 2007). When GAD manifests, it is associated with less productivity at work and increased health care costs (Greenberg et al., 1999). GAD is a mental disorder with excessive and uncontrollable worry being the cornerstone. GAD is characterized by an excessive amount of anxiety and worries occurring most days of the week. The worries involve several different events, responsibilities and activities in the person's life, for example his or her performance at work or in school, relationships, athletic abilities and so on. The person has difficulty with suppressing their anxiety, even though they know it is unnecessary and excessive. The person frequently experiences one or more symptoms such as; restlessness, fatigue, irritation, insomnia, difficulty concentrating or muscle tension (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). He or she often experiences upsetting intrusive thoughts and usually also worries about worrying so much. Additionally, the person has trouble suppressing worry thoughts. A GAD sufferer therefore often has trouble concentrating on daily tasks (American Psychological Association, 2010). Fortunately, cognitive behavioral therapy has turned out to help decrease worry thoughts (Reinecke et al, 2013).

Wang et al. (2017) theorized from their study that there seems to be hyperactivity in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis in people with generalized anxiety disorder and that this hyperactivity is the root of episodes of generalized anxiety disorder. Makovak et al. (2016) report disruption within the amygdala-prefrontal cortex and amygdala-paracingulate networks in people with GAD. Studies have found evidence of altered cytokine balance in people with generalized anxiety disorder, which causes an increased pro-inflammatory response and a suppressed anti-inflammatory response (Hou et al., 2017).

An interesting area of research has to do with how people cope with uncertain situations. Studies have found sufferers of generalized anxiety disorders to have low tolerance

to uncertainty (Buhr & Dugas, 2012; Carleton et al., 2012; Dugas, Gosselin & Ladouceur, 2001; Ladouceur, Talbot & Dugas, 1997) and Counsell et al. (2017) concluded this happens especially when people perceive the uncertainty to be unfair, for example when they have to confront stressful situations in their day-to-day life and cannot avoid them. A meta-analysis by Gentes and Ruscio (2011) supported these findings and recommend GAD interventions that address intolerance to uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty and worry seem to be closely associated, as Buhr & Dugas (2006) concluded in their study on university students. Intolerance to uncertainty predicted worry more than other processes also thought to be related to generalized anxiety disorder, namely perfectionism and perceived control. It seems as sufferers of GAD fear and therefore seek to avoid emotional responding, which might influence the persistent, problematic worrying that characterises this disorder. Dugas et al. (1997) and Grenier & Ladouceur (2004) have found that worries increase with rising levels of intolerance of uncertainty and decrease with lowered levels of intolerance to uncertainty. Hong (2007) has found worrying to predict anxiety in a non-clinical sample. Levine et al. (2016) further concluded GAD to correlate with deficits in emotion regulation. It therefore seems highly uncomfortable for generalized anxiety sufferers to experience uncertainty.

Unfortunately, despite numerous studies on the topic, Bruce and colleagues have found GAD to be particularly insidious, with the lowest remission rates after treatment compared to other anxiety disorders (Bruce et al., 2005). Kinney, Boffa & Amir (2016) theorize the reason to be poor understanding in the cognitive mechanisms underlying GAD, which then leads to poor treatment development. For example, in cognitive models of GAD it is considered that people with GAD have an attentional bias toward emotional stimuli, however studies show very conflicting results (Bradley et al., 1999; Mogg, Millar & Bradley, 2000; Mathews & MacLeod, 2002; Mogg & Bradley, 2005; Yiend et al., 2014). In a review article, MacLead and Crafton (2016) concluded people with anxiety seem to have an attentional bias towards threatening stimuli. Although the research findings within their review article are interesting, support the theory that people with GAD have an emotional bias, and offer a new insight into how anxiety sufferers experience the world differently than others, efforts to use this information in practice have not proven quite as useful as one would hope. As many as half of patients do not reach a clinically significant improvement after CBT, which is the most widespread treatment option available (Chambless et al., 1998).

Studies also suggest gender differences in the manifestation of GAD, although research on the topic is lacking. Kinney et al. (2016) found difference in cognitive bias involved in GAD across the two genders. Women also seem to have an earlier age of onset

and feel more somatic anxiety symptoms (Steiner et al., 2005). Women suffer greater disability with GAD than men (Vesga-López et al., 2008) and are two times as likely to develop GAD than men (Steiner et al., 2005; Vesga-López et al., 2008). A study by Doruk et al. (2015) found uncertainty to impact females more negatively than males.

Kinney et al. (2016) found women to have a larger attentional bias for positive words than men and advised that treatments might have increased retention if gender differences are taken into account. In one study, females also seemed to use more productive coping styles such as planning more, reinterpreting situations, seeking emotional support, venting about their problems or disengaging mentally while males used drugs or alcohol, denial and humour to cope (Doruk et al., 2015). Kinney et al (2016) suggest that poor remission rates of GAD treatments stem from the fact they lack gender specificity. Focusing on gender differences and different coping styles might have a positive influence on treatment outcomes. Further studies are needed, but this topic of research is hopefully gaining momentum and will enrich suggestions for appropriate treatment paths in the future.

### **The impostor phenomenon and social cognitive theory**

Clance & Imes (1978) worked with successful women in psychotherapy, college classes and international groups and got weather of what Clance (1985) would later coin as the ‘Impostor phenomenon’. The impostor phenomenon refers to the fact that, according to Clance & Imes (1978) many women, even though they are highly intelligent, accomplished and respected they do not feel they are. Furthermore, these women believe they are ‘fakers’, that they have managed to con their way to success and that they constantly fear and expect they will be found out sooner rather than later. Clance & Imes (1978) further state they find the phenomenon to be a lot more common among women rather than men, and that in their clinical experience, if a man is found to exhibit the impostor phenomenon, it is of less intensity. However, a recent review by Sakulku & Alexander (2011) challenges this notion as different studies throughout the years have found the impostor phenomenon to affect a wide range of people of both genders and different occupations. It is, however, interesting to speculate if gender stereotypes and traditional views towards gender roles affect the frequency distribution of the impostor phenomenon according to gender.

Clance & Imes (1978) found through their research that women who seem to have the impostor syndrome suffer from a multitude of psychological problems often related to

generalized anxiety, little or no self-confidence and lack of self-efficacy, inability to meet their own standards of achievement and the lingering frustration and self-doubt that closely follows. As a result, an impostor has a very hard time accepting compliments and vehemently denies she deserves praise for her achievements, which usually she views as brought on by pure luck or a mistake (Clance, 1985). As Bandura (1977) would say, the impostor lacks self-efficacy. She truly believes she is not worthy enough, and therefore this phenomenon is not a showcase of false modesty (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

Within social cognitive theory, Bandura (1989) poses a model of triadic reciprocal determinism, where it is postulated that a person is shaped through the reciprocal relationship between his or her behaviour, cognition and the environment and that all three factors influence each other interchangeably, albeit with a variable degree of intensity. This view is upheld in Clance & Imes (1978) theorizations on the social-cognitive source behind women's impostor beliefs. Their findings are that female impostors often fall into one of two groups when looking at their family histories; the first group being women in a family where another member has been designated as the intelligent one and future-imposter is told, explicitly, and or implicitly by both members of her family and others that she will never reach the same level as the intelligent one of the family, no matter what she does. Continued feedback from the environment gradually weakens her efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977). She therefore struggles to both accept the fact she will never be the best, and at the same time she wants to disprove it. She continues to stand in the shadow of the intelligent family member and so she finds a continued need for validation for her intelligence but at the same time she is crippled by self-doubt regarding her own capabilities and intelligence. It is interesting to look at the impostor phenomenon considering social cognitive theory, since Bandura (1977; 1989) postulates people fear to be in over their head, that is, they tend to avoid situations they feel are too advanced for them to handle. It seems that impostors go through many situations they originally deem too much for themselves, most with flying colours. Despite successful performances, they persist in believing they are not capable and continue to find situations they are a match for, as intimidating beyond words. They never seem to gain self-efficacy. The other group includes women who have always been highly praised by their family members and they are continually told they can do anything they want. As time goes on, however, the impostor finds herself in situations where she does have trouble. The enormous pressure put on her by her parents causes her to begin doubting herself but at the same time she feels she cannot let her family down. There is a distinct reciprocal relationship between immediate environment, cognition and behaviour at work (Bandura, 1989). Especially

interesting is the fact that, according to Bandura (1977) weak efficacy expectations are easily destroyed when a person experiences difficult obstacles, and a person who possesses strong efficacy beliefs persists through repeated failure. How then, is a person who seems to have lingering negative efficacy views despite repeated success? She is an impostor. As Clance (1985) observed, and Thompson, Foreman & Martin (2000) found support for in their research, an impostor is never happy with her efforts, she sets incredibly high standards and criticizes herself harshly for not reaching her own demands. As Sakulku & Alexander (2011) brilliantly put it: “For impostors, success does not mean happiness. Impostors often experience fear, stress, self-doubt and feel uncomfortable with their achievements. Impostor fears interfere with a person’s ability to accept and enjoy their abilities and achievements, and have a negative impact on their psychological well-being” (p. 86). No matter how good her performance is, the impostor always feels she should have done better. As noted in the review by Sakulku & Alexander (2011) there might be a relationship between feeling like an impostor and being a perfectionist. In both conditions, the person often overworks because she needs to feel she is the best and she needs to feel she is performing flawlessly. Interestingly, there is a large difference between perfectionists and impostors when it comes to admitting fault. Impostors openly discuss where and how they are lacking, even though they do everything in their power to appear perfect and do not want to portray themselves as failures, whereas perfectionists will not disclose their mistakes to others. Other personality factors that could possibly be related to impostors are neuroticism, trait anxiety and conscientiousness (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

There is an interesting ground for speculation that cultural stereotypes and societal norms on how women ‘really’ are come into play to create the cognitive dissonance women seem to often feel about their own competence as based on their gender (Clance & Imes, 1978; Festinger, 1965).

### **How are women, ‘really’?**

“Gender” is generally a concept used to particularise men and women and is usually based on dissimilarities believed to exist between the two genders (Leinbach, Hort & Fagot, 1997) although research in the area is continually developing and experts have recently begun challenging the notion of only two genders existing (Fontanella, Maretti & Sarra, 2013; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Junger et. al., 2014). Theorists have long claimed gender is a social construct (Deux & Major, 1987) and there are different ideas regarding roles of the



male and female gender in all societies of the world (Leinbach et al., 1997). In typical westernized cultures, gender formalization begins at birth when females are clad in pink and males in blue. The socialization of gender continues throughout childhood as children learn to identify objects, items and organisms as either male or female. Further, children learn to associate certain behaviours with masculinity and femininity (Bandura, 1989). Attitudes towards the dichotomy of gender heavily shape people's self-perceptions, especially those of children, since they are in the midst of developing their own identity (Deux & Major, 1987). Society stereotypes women as fragile and elegant souls and men as powerful and assertive (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Studies show the enormous effect societal norms have on young children's perceptions towards their own ability, where girls find themselves suited for service jobs, teaching jobs or jobs related to arts, but boys believe they qualify for jobs related to science, technology or computer science (Pastorelli et. al., 2001). This becomes increasingly alarming as women age, enter the working field and are then penalized both because of stereotypical views regarding how women are and how they should behave, and for not fulfilling feminine stereotypes (Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001). It is safe to say that explicit and implicit gender roles have shaped every man and woman in the world in one way or another and that they have more bearing on us than we can imagine.

### **Impostor phenomenon and anxiety**

Inferring an association between the imposter phenomenon and generalized anxiety is smooth when diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and the characteristics of impostor phenomenon are compared. A woman suffering from GAD worries excessively about many things in her life and has difficulty suppressing her anxiety, even though she knows it is unnecessary. She is often restless, irritated, fearful and tense (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). She worries about being 'outed' as an impostor; that people will soon realize she is not who she has been portrayed as, so she works hard to prevent that from ever happening. Her hard work pays off well, for example by good grades, appreciation of coworkers or supervisors and so on. Society praises her, in turn she feels momentary relief. This fleeting instant of release is incredibly reinforcing, making it hard for her to give up the behaviour (Clance & Imes, 1978). Another display of the interplay between cognition, behaviour and the environment is that many impostors are great teachers 'pets', in that they are skilful at delivering the type of work each supervisor or professor most likes, with less emphasis on their own ideas. The professor's admiration and praise further suppresses their

will to challenge, to show their true thoughts, as their most important goal is to do well. They learn they do best when agreeing with their supervisor, when they accentuate their professors' ideas and downplay their own. They fear they will not receive the same praise if they stay true to themselves, especially if they do not fully agree with the supervisor or professor. They therefore seek to please everyone but themselves. Without positive reinforcement from their professor they do not feel they have done well (Bandura, 1989; Clance & Imes, 1978). The person is therefore trapped in a self-inflicted vicious cycle of constant fear, need for reassurance, temporary relief followed by lingering self-doubt and subsequent self-criticism.

### **Effects of physical activity on anxiety symptoms**

Researchers have long known physical activity is beneficial for the body (e. g., Berlin & Colditz, 2013; Blair, Kampert & Kohl, 1996; Kohl, 2001; Lee & Paffenbarger, 2000; Oguma, 2002) but more recently, researchers have turned their attention towards the beneficial effects physical activity has on mental factors. Although there is still quite a lot of work left on the details, that is, what exercise is most beneficial for the mind, how much exercise is required and how to motivate people to be more active, physical and mental health benefits from exercise have been consistently found in every age group (e. g., Das et al., 2016; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2015; Steinmo, Hagger-Johnson & Shahab, 2014; Johnson, Robertson, Towey, Stewart-Brown & Clarke, 2017). Heidary et al. (2011) and (2011) have in two different studies found aerobic exercise and both aerobic and anaerobic exercise reduced anxiety in anxious high school students. Herring, Jacob, Suveg, Dishman and O'Connor (2012) concluded that resistance- and aerobic training could possibly lower worry symptoms in people with GAD. They further concluded that exercise might be an effective addition to traditional therapy. In another study, physical therapy administered jointly with psychotherapy was shown to give better results in people suffering from generalized anxiety disorder. The physical activity seemed to increase the participants' well-being (Mircea, 2014). As discussed before, gender is also an interesting variable to view considering physical activity participation. In Lapa's (2015) study where physical activity levels and psychological well-being were looked at, men were found more likely to be highly physically active than women. Men were also found to score higher on a scale measuring self-acceptance. Furthermore, well-being was positively correlated with physical activity level. These findings are interesting, since anxiety disorders seem to affect women more than men (World Health Organization, 2017). This study highlights a problem well known to professionals, the fact

that women are less physically active than men in general (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2007, Skidmore-Edwards & Sackett, 2016). These lower physical activity levels directly impact women's health, for it makes women more at risk of suffering from lifestyle related diseases in their adult life. There is also a possibility, as was showcased in Lapa (2015) that lower levels of physical activity contribute to lower mental well-being and perhaps, even, psychological problems in women. In a review by Skidmore-Edwards and Sackett (2016) women were found to see greater barriers to exercise and feel they had less social support to exercise from friends and family than men. This echoes the findings from a longitudinal study by Telford, Telford, Olive, Cochrane and Davey (2016) where data was gathered from 555 children from 29 schools at ages 8 and 12. Girls were 19% less active than boys in general and participated less in extracurricular sport. Researchers found the school environment as well as the family environment offered less encouragement for girls to participate in physical activity. It seems as if girls are socialised into sedentary habits from an early age, which continues into adult life.

Exercise and physical activity is obviously very important for mental and physical health and it can help a person battle their anxiety. Women are less physically active and also suffer more from anxiety than men. It is, therefore, highly important to explore various exercise options that engage women to be more physically active, which makes them stronger and healthier, both physically and mentally.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Significance of study**

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders to affect modern humans, as Craske & Stein (2016) mentioned, systematic reviews have suggested that one in 14 people around the world has an anxiety disorder at any given time. Anxiety further seems to cripple young women in larger groups as the years go on. The imposter phenomenon has an interesting connection to anxiety disorders and despite the concept being defined more than 30 years ago, research on the topic is still lacking. Pole dancing is a relatively new sport in a recreational setting, although pole dancing in strip club culture has been alive and well in western societies for the last 40 to 50 years. Since the topic is new, only a handful of research on the effects of recreational pole dancing on physiological and psychological outcomes exists. This thesis therefore is meant to answer the demand for studies on women crippled with anxiety and ideas of being impostors in their own lives and the benefits of recreational pole dancing on the psyche, power and self-acceptance. It is further aimed to challenge preconceived notions of how women are and how they should act. This study is important for it is an unexamined area, both within sport psychology, clinical psychology and feminist theory. It is important for practitioners, academics and the general public alike to empathize with an honest account of a person's lived experiences.

## **Methods**

### **Qualitative research**

Qualitative research methods propel the researcher to focus on the social world by looking at the experiences of people and how people make sense of those experiences (Liamputtong, 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) say that “. . . qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p.3). Silverman (2016) describes the notability of this method by mentioning that “qualitative research rarely follows a smooth trajectory from hypothesis to findings” (p.13). A qualitative researcher therefore needs to be open, flexible and not afraid of ambiguity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These qualities allow participants freedom to make

sense of their feelings and experiences by using their own words (Liamputtong, 2013). Qualitative researchers also not only recognize, but champion, the connection between their research data and themselves and often draw on their own experiences when interpreting data. The cornerstone of qualitative research therefore is this flexibility, for both researcher as well as participants, to understand themselves and others within their own social, cultural and political context (Liamputtong, 2013). Silverman (2010) mentions how important qualitative research is for the academic community, policy makers as well as the general public. Bloor (2016) further highlights the importance of qualitative methods by emphasising that “the general public wants ideas for reform, suggestions on how to manage better and get better services, and assurances that others have shared similar experiences and problems to their own” (p.17). It is obvious that qualitative methods supply the demand researchers, authorities and the general public have of moving closer to the psyche of the person.

### **From modernist to postmodernist methods**

Qualitative research methods have evolved throughout the years (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the early 1900s, which is known as the traditional period, researchers wanted to present an objective account of their experiences in the field. The first and second world wars brought on a change in the demands made of qualitative research. During this modernist period, researchers wanted their methods to become more rigorous and thus comparable to quantitative methods. The notion at the time was that this would make qualitative research more reliable and therefore valid. Researchers committed to the modernist view that lived experiences of people should be studied in the real world (Denzin, 1996). As Denzin (1996) said “the modernist ethnographic text must be read as a photograph. It offers up fixed representations of things that have happened in a stable, external world” (p. 44). The 1970s and into the mid-1980s saw a break from this traditionalist academism, researchers used more variable formats and explored more diverse research strategies in their qualitative work (Méndez, 2013). The circumstances at the time gave way for pioneers to forge the way for novelty in this era of postmodernist ideas. Narrative reflection, and later, autoethnography was a fresh breeze into the plethora of available research, a new way to view the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘society’, where the narrator does not need to assume the objective position of the observer (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

## **Narrative reflection**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative writing as a method that grants the researcher freedom to evaluate both external conditions in the environment as well as internal conditions like emotions and feelings. As Freeman (2010) feels, narrative reflection is “the process of looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing 'connections' ... that could not possibly be drawn during the course of ongoing moments but only in retrospect” (p. 4). As Freeman points out, intentionally looking back on our life is a key to developing self-understanding. Our future depends on us looking back and seeing patterns in our life. Self-reflection of this kind helps us see our life as a story with a beginning, middle, and one day; an end. Ellis (2004) further highlights the importance of reflective analysis in research by pointing out how all research is, from the very start, driven by the subjective. The subjective being the researcher’s own interest in the topic at hand. Often this interest is originally sparked from personal experience. Therefore, including the researcher's personal experience might enrich research findings in ways not otherwise possible. Personal narrative is supposed to help writers understand themselves better, or understand better how living in a certain aspect of a culture is+ (Ellis, 2004).

Humans have been narrating their lives since they could communicate. For example, *Íslendingasögur* (e. Icelanders sagas) are well known narratives about people and events that happened in Iceland in the 9th, 10th and early 11th centuries. The stories were told from person to person, from one generation to the next, until they were written down by unknown writers in the 13th and 14th centuries (Íslendingabók, n. d.). We know a lot about our own history because of human’s inherent nature of sharing stories. Everywhere people connect with others through storytelling (Ellis, 2004; 2007) and as Dahlstrom (2014) rightfully said, narratives even help scientists connect with the general audience. As Denzin (1997) pointed out, people tell each other stories about matters close to them. These stories represent multiple versions of the truth, for truth is a socially constructed phenomenon and people create their stories around their own meaning of what truth is. Stories are needed to help people understand, resonate and empathize with each other. As Ellis (2004) so brilliantly said “stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography. Stories are to focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales. Given their importance, I argue

that stories should be a social subject and a method of social science research.”. This is where autoethnography comes into play.

### **Autoethnography**

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define the term *autoethnography* as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). As Reed-Danahay (1997) affirms, the autoethnographer views his or her own experiences within a larger social context. In that way, the story of the self, or auto, is put within the larger story of the culture, or ethno, through analysis, or graphy (Ellis, 2004). A story has some special characteristics, such as: the people in it are characters in the story and it is written in a chronological fashion, it revolves around some crisis which provides dramatic tension and a moral that gives meaning and value to the crisis in the story (Bochner, 2002).

Autoethnography is based on what the story of a person’s experience does, that is, how people can use it, understand it and respond to it (Bochner, 1994,2002; Ellis, 2004). The reliability of an autoethnography is evaluated in terms of credibility of the narrator. The reader appraises how truthful the story is, that is, if the events in the story could have happened as the narrator describes them. The reader does this by comparing the story to available factual evidence. The reader also evaluates the truthfulness of the story based on the authenticity of it, that is, how much the narrator really believes he or she experienced the events as they are written (Bochner, 2002). The validity of an autoethnography is embodied in its ability to elicit a feeling of veracity, making the reader feel the story being told is vivid and believable. The story needs to prompt the reader to see the world through the eyes of the narrator (Plummer, 2001). An autoethnography is generalizable if the reader feels he or she can gain insight into the experiences described. Hopefully, the reader will become better aware of the lived experiences of others, for the beauty of autoethnography is that no matter how distant your own experience is from the narrator’s, you will compare the two. Making comparisons between yourself and others is the human condition, and autoethnography is the bridge that facilitates mutual understanding (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; 2007). The autoethnographic method is valued by many because it offers the person the freedom to tell their own truth as it was experienced (Méndes, 2013). Therefore, this method is quite informal in structure, as the meaning of the story is the main concern, not the methodology.

Autoethnographic narrative is usually either analytic (Anderson, 2006) or evocative, the latter being more widespread (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004). Anderson (2006) describes analytic autoethnography as “seeking to understand the topic under study by placing it within a social analytic context” (p. 378) as all other forms of autoethnography do. However, he adds that analytic autoethnography “demonstrates that deeply personal and self-observant ethnography can rise above idiographic particularity to address broader theoretical issues” (p. 379). Analytic autoethnography, therefore, is focused on “objective writing and analysis of a particular group” (p. 281) as Méndez (2013) declared. Evocative autoethnography, is, on the other hand, as the name implies, concerned with eliciting emotion (Ellis, 2004). Evocative autoethnography is written through the narrator's’ introspection on a topic, and the narrator’s main concern is that readers connect with his or her feelings and experiences (Méndez, 2013). As Bochner and Ellis (1996) predicate “...Autoethnographers don’t want you to sit back as spectators: they want readers to feel and care and desire” (p. 24). The text should, as Denzin mentions (1997) have the power to move the reader to feel the feelings of the narrator and at the same time allow the reader to discover themselves through reading.

Autoethnography can take on many forms. The story can be told through various mediums, such as theatrics, novels, fiction, poetry, photography and more (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I have chosen the method of text for my thesis, which Ellis & Bochner (2000) describe as personal essays written with emotion and self-consciousness. My desire is to connect with the reader on an emotional level, to move, to inspire, to awaken sensations previously unknown. Therefore, my autoethnography is evocative. My thesis is what Saldana (2003) characterises as “a monologue . . . Solo narrative(s)” (p. 224) where I retell events from my life and reveal what I have discovered about myself and the world around me. Throughout this process, I wish to showcase the added value for autoethnographic reflection in research. As Humphreys (2005) so brilliantly put it: “I am attempting to construct a window through which the reader can view some of the pleasure and pain associated with...” (p. 842) in my case, the pleasure and pain associated with having generalized anxiety disorder.

### **Advantages and limitations**

Autoethnography has many advantages, such as connecting the personal to culture, exploring personal experiences or comparing the narrator’s lived experiences to those the narrator chooses to interview and include in their story (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It allows the writer to gather their thoughts, put experiences into perspective, analyse their behaviour and feelings



and come to understand themselves better as a result (Ellis, 2004). However, the most important advantage of autoethnography, is, as Méndez (2013) said “The potential of autoethnography to contribute to others’ lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narrative presented. Through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before” (p. 282).

The main difficulties with autoethnography as a research method are ethical. First and foremost, an autoethnography requires the narrator to be honest and willing to self-disclose, which might often be challenging (Méndez, 2013). Since the researcher is actively involved in the autoethnography, by being the source of data, the data collector and at the same time the data interpreter and constructor of the results, he or she must be well aware of personal assumptions, biases, opinions and frames of mind. If the researcher is not actively questioning themselves throughout the process of creating the autoethnography then the integrity of the research is compromised (Cooper & White, 2012). One of the biggest ethical consideration is consent. Since autoethnography is about writing a personal narrative, the narrator is sharing a story from their own point of view. The story includes a larger context and people interacting with the narrator, people who usually are real people, and the stories told are often ones that happened in real life. The narrator then faces an ethical dilemma, should a person be included in the text without their consent (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; 2007)? Often, an autoethnography is centred around a difficult period in the narrator’s life, such as the sickness and deaths of loved ones (Ellis, 1995; Ellis, 2001) or sensitive issues, like domestic violence (Hayes & Jeffries, 2015), illness or disability (Richards, 2008). This is because usually, the negative things are those we need to get over, not the positive ones. An autoethnographer writes about difficult experiences for he or she can learn the most from that. Other people can learn most from that as well. People do not stop to write about being happy, they are too busy being happy (Ellis, 2004). The narrator might have trouble reliving the moments he or she is writing about, and disclosing thoughts, discussions and behaviour of both the person and the people interacting with the person. The narrator must decide how true he or she will stay to the actual events, keeping anonymity of the people involved, but without straying too far away from the truth. Above all, the narrator must know this specific portrayal of the events is the narrator’s truth of how they happened. Nothing more, nothing less.

## **Procedures**

### **Data collection**

I was the source of data for this autoethnography. I used the same methods as Ellis (1991, 2004) by looking at my life, noticing my feelings, my thoughts and emotions. Ellis (1991) uses ‘systematic sociological introspection’ and ‘emotional recall’ to understand experiences she has lived through, and this I have tried to honour as well. Studying emotions is difficult because every person has a complicated relationship with situations and emotions, so much that the language used to describe this relationship differs from person to person. This is why autoethnography is an important research tool. People have difficulty exploring or admitting to their emotions unless they are in a safe place. Autoethnography, being alone with your own thoughts, exploring and admitting is crucial to understand lived emotions (Ellis, 1991). I decided to write about events in my life I strongly remember. Since my memories come to me in a flash of vivid images, colours and sounds, I try to recreate that sensation in my writing. Writing evocatively (Ellis, 2004) was my main concern. Writing so that the reader would get closer to how I felt during the moments I portray. My hope is that my reader would experience some of the sensations I felt. I began with events I feel were very important for my story. The data collection and write up of the stories took a few months. The process of writing some of the stories brought up memories of others, which led to their inclusion in the story.

### **Writing the narrative**

Recalling a memory strengthens it in comparison to other memories. Therefore, we can impact our past, that is, the parts of our past we remember. We can create ourselves by choosing which memories to recall (Bjork & Benjamin, 2011). As an anxiety prone person, I have constructed my past to consist of painful and worrisome memories. Writing is a process well known to me and something I enjoy doing. Even so, I had difficulties.

In the beginning, I did not know where to begin. Where does the story start? I have felt anxious since I can remember and so beginning the story in my childhood felt appropriate. The next issues I faced were ethical. How much should I reveal about my conversations with other people, are any of the things I am sharing in any way embarrassing for the person included in the text, and, does that matter? Before I began writing, as I was reading about how autoethnographies are made, I tended to feel that ethical concerns were

minimal in reality and that the story should be written just as it happened. My mindset changed when the writing process began. I immediately understood what Ellis (2004) meant when she highlighted the difficulties with ethical concerns in this type of research. I resolved my troubles by not using identifiable descriptions and even changing the gender of a person if I felt that was necessary. This way I limited the possibility of readers identifying the persons I wrote about, without compromising the content of the story. Since the story is about my anxiety and my battle with it, my resolution was to focus on that aspect, rather than conversations or people that touched my life at any given time. That focus brought me to my biggest challenge:

“Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubt and emotional pain. Just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore that’s when the real work begins. Then there is the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret your story.” (Ellis, 2004, p.35)

Anxiety is characterized by fear and worry. Sharing stories that capture those feelings means I have to share something I am ashamed of. I wish I was better at handling things, I wish I was more outspoken, more determined and more confrontational. I am not. I am vulnerable. Everyone hates showing others their vulnerabilities. This autoethnography highlights mine. I worried I would not be able to catch the feelings I felt in each moment, and I worried people would interpret my story differently. That people would see me as crazy. Irrational. Childish. I know my behaviour often is. Even as I am in a difficult situation, I know my feelings are exaggerated, yet I cannot help feeling the way I do. You cannot argue with feelings.

Whenever I began fearing what people would think about the stories, I thought about the times I had written honestly about mental illness on my website and how many people had shown interest, thanked me for being so open, and praised me. Mental illness is very common in the world, more common than any person can imagine. Open discussions are needed so people can get the help they need. So people know they are not alone struggling. I therefore saw the benefits for others reading what I have been writing as outweighing my temporary feelings of discomfort. Therefore, I decided to share every moment as truthfully and honest as I could without worrying too much about who might read it and what they might think.

## **When is it ‘too’ much?**

I began my writing process with the idea to write as much as came to mind, with the thought of going over the text and omitting some parts if they did not bring any further clarity to the story.

My original idea was to challenge existing research literature on pole dancing for I found most articles about this sport to be quite negative in nature. I wanted to show a positive side of pole dancing for all I ever hear are stories similar to mine; women who have gotten out of bad relationships, difficult jobs, had health scares and so on, who have turned their life around with pole dancing. Pole dancing has helped them increase strength, flexibility, happiness and well-being. I wanted this narrative to be included in the research literature. As I was reading Ellis (2004) I saw that autoethnographic writing is often focused on some kind of hurt. I therefore felt that I would need that kind of flavour in order to write a more gripping text. I turned to my generalized anxiety disorder, which has accompanied me since childhood and had a label since I was around 20 years old. The process of writing led me on a journey of self-discovery and I absolutely experienced what Ellis (2004) talks about a lot in her work, that writing about experiences helps me focus, gain information yet allows me to distance and perhaps, even find closure on matters that have subtly been bothering me all my life.

The most difficult thing, for me, therefore is not to write. It is to limit my writing. By closer inspection and discussion with my thesis advisor it was apparent that my story had three large themes: self-worth, battle with generalized anxiety disorder, and the stigmatization of pole dancing. With three large themes, which all can stand alone in a book on their own, there is a large risk of the story becoming too complex. My will to get my point across as carefully as possible could result in too much thrown at the reader, making it difficult for the reader to separate the important matters from those of less importance. As Robert Browning so eloquently wrote in the poem *Andrea del Sarto* in 1855, “less is more”. As it turned out, I feel the main story I was telling throughout the text was that of life with generalized anxiety. I want people to understand this disease better, I want people to feel a little closer to it than they were before. So much of my life has been dominated by this disease, yet I am a normal human being, as we all are. I wanted that to be the main theme. This led me on the daunting task of critically reviewing my writing and omitting those stories that did not enrich the main theme. Stigmatization of pole dancing, as important of a subject as that is, needs another space to shine brightly, for example in a book series, blog posts or online talk shows. In the end, this autoethnography has 27 excerpts or various length in a

loose chronological order, from moments in my life that I feel represent the raw nature of the thought patterns, behaviours and feelings associated with having generalized anxiety disorder.

Although the story has had to be limited for the sake of this thesis, it does not automatically mean that the findings left out are absent in the final narrative. They come to light in more subtle ways, as a person can never omit any experience completely from their mind, heart and soul.

## Diary of an anxious soul

“Pole dancing is actually really hard, you know”. She says. “What do you mean?” wide-eyed, 15-year-old me asks my sister, 12 years my senior, looking up at her as we walk together in the sun. She is smiling, her blonde-dyed hair fluctuating in the Icelandic breeze. “Yeah, you know, it’s exercise done on poles. Like the stripper poles, but it is actually a sport. It’s so hard. I tried it with my girlfriends last weekend for my friend’s bachelorette party and my arms almost tore off.” lifting up her thin arms, she starts laughing. The unique sounds of her laughter fill the air, making the atmosphere lighter and warmer. I laugh with her, my small boyish frame dressed in jeans and a shirt with a logo from a rock band written across the chest. I have never heard of a stripper pole being used for exercise before, I think to myself, as we keep walking, chatting about life, the wind creating life in our hair, colouring our cheeks red.

I am five years old. “Hey little kitty!” We all gather around the little fluffy hairball. I love cats. We have a cat ourselves, a black one. It is not as little as the red tiger one we are taking turns holding right now, but still I love it to bits. My whole family is obsessed with cats, and that is how I know life to be. That is how it was, that is how it will be. Nothing will change that. I only associate positive feelings with cats. That is how it is, and that is how it should be. That is exactly how we all feel right now, caressing this little exemplar of a cat. We, the kids of the neighbourhood. All packed in a tight knot of colourful arms on a bright spring day. Our little boot clad feet warming the green grass in the one of the neighbour’s yards. The little kitty wriggles in our soft hands. It wants to escape our love. We laugh hysterically. The air is calm. The sun has decided to grace us with her glowing presence. A few white clouds accompany her, as to tell us they have not left us. The cat is warm and soft. As are our smiles. A brief moment of carelessness and the little hairball wriggles free. It escapes our captivity. “Hey! Don’t run away, little kitty!” “Come back, little fella!” “Hey kitty kitty kitty” We all shout as one, instantly in predatory parent mode. The cat runs away, jumping over the little bushes that separate the adjacent lying gardens of our neighbours. Of course, we all run after it like a big cluster of laughter and colours. The fluffy red kitten sees an opportunity in an open door that belongs to one of the apartments of the gardens we are occupying at the moment. On a beautiful weekend day like this, sunny and clear with a calm breeze, people want to air out a little. The cat is in luck. It sprints inside. We all come to a halting stop at the entrance. It is a lightly coloured bedroom, with a carefully made queen size bed. The cat is hiding under it. We catch a glimpse of its eyes glaring at us from under the thin crevice

between the floor and the burgundy coloured blanket which hangs heavy over the bedside. “What should we do? We can’t leave my cat there!” One of the kids cries out. “My mom will be so angry” She says, kicking the grass below her feet. I bite my nails. It is a nasty habit I have. My mom and dad keep telling me to stop, but I just cannot seem to do it. I bite the nails down to the bone and do not stop there. I chew the skin around, rip the cuticles and create wounds. My fingers used to bleed. A while ago they stopped. Such resilience of the body, even the fingers get used to the abuse. Putting on pants is painful. Washing hands or taking warm baths sends prickles through my fingertips and up my arms. It burns. I keep biting. Ripping tiny pieces of collagen off my fingers with my teeth. I look at the other kids. “Ok, we have to get it!” One of us yells out. “Before we get caught!” Everyone is nervous, yet determined. We must finish the task at hand. “I’ll go!” I say. Prepared to take on the responsibility of the task. I know the lady who lives here. She is a good friend of my mom’s. My childish reasoning therefore thinks it is natural for me to enter her home unauthorized. After all, the cat belonging to my friend is in there. We have to get it out. There is only one way, my little brain tells me. One of my friends joins me. Hearts booming in our 5-year-old chests. Feeling brave. We tiptoe inside. The room is small. Painted in a light pink colour. It resembles my skin after a few minutes in direct sunlight. I do not get tanned easily. I only get pink. We inch further and further inside. Silently stepping on the white carpet in our small boots. Careful not to disturb the cat. My friend trailing closely behind me. “Hey kitty kitty” I whisper, as I get down to the floor next to the white metal bed. Slowly, carefully, lifting the burgundy blanket that covers the cat’s hiding spot. I lay down on the floor to get a better look. In the darkness under the bed, the cat has sought refuge in the innermost corner. It looks at me with large eyes. Quivering so lightly it is almost indiscernible. “Shhhh, it’s ok” I whisper lightly. I slowly crawl further under the bed. Closer to the cat. My friend behind me whispers “Quick, get it!”. All the others are clustered together at the entrance, barely breathing. The tension is almost tangible. “It’s all ok” I keep on whispering to the cat. It does not blink nor lose sight of me. It follows my every movement. I start reaching my small hand towards it as slowly as I can, trying not to flutter. Everyone, including the cat, is holding their breath. GRAB. I try to snag it. I fail. The cat uses the opportunity of momentary confusion and moves with lightning speed. It sprints past me. “Noooo!” I yell out. “IT’S GETTING AWAY! GET IT” My friend screams behind me. After that, everything happens very fast. Suddenly I feel someone snatching my left ankle, the only part of my body not hidden under the bed. With great strength, I am being pulled from under the bed, like a sack of potatoes. I am still realizing what is happening, my little mind confused by all the stimuli. My

courageous friend has run outside. Leaving me behind. “WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!” An angry, adult voice shouts at me. I quickly realize the hand that grabbed me belongs to the shouting voice. The voice belongs to the resident of this apartment. My mother’s friend. In the split-second I manage to glance at her face I am startled by her expression. She is obviously angry. Her eyes piercing through me. Her lips pursed together. “Get out!!” She mutters through gritted teeth, as she forcefully jerks my shoulder and shoves me out the door towards the other children, who have already started backing away in silence. Shock frozen on everyone’s faces. I join the group. We slowly turn our backs to the apartment and walk away from the apartment. No one utters a word. Not anyone is smiling anymore. No laughter is heard. Everyone has completely forgotten about the cat. The sun shines bright on the backs of our heads, as if it is telling us to relax, everything is ok. I do not feel it will ever be, though. My facial expression neutral, carefully hiding the whirlwind of emotion blazing in my body. My stomach hurts horribly. My heart violently beating, as if it wants to climb up my oesophagus and jump out of my mouth. My hands quietly shaking. Every muscle in my body tense. I gather the courage to glance back as we increase the distance between us and the apartment. She is standing in the doorway of her apartment. My mother’s dear friend. Short and curvy with frizzled light brown hair. Her hands resting on her hips. Her eyes still burning with anger. She sees me peeking back at her. “Don’t you DARE doing that, ever again!!” She yells. I look ahead again. My eyes watering. A huge lump is forming in my throat. I battle my body. Determined not to cry in front of the others. We keep walking. I feel her eyes still on me. Like laser beams, burning shame and guilt into my back. Into my body. This moment forever frozen into my memory. I do not know it at this time, but this moment will forever haunt me. With each passing year of my life, whenever I feel ashamed and guilty, I feel her eyes on my back. I feel someone watching me. Someone judging me. Someone shaming me. It works. Every time. I feel ashamed.

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The day before the big day. The first day of school. I am becoming a schoolkid. No more kindergarten for me. Finally, I can join the big kids. My mother already got me a backpack. It is colourful, shaped like a box, with hard edges and clips with red reflectors that look like eyes. I stare at the backpack, where it is standing in the middle of my blue painted bedroom. I chose the colour myself. Blue is my favourite colour. I grab the backpack and run downstairs with it on my back, excited for the coming day. A new school day. Everyone is sitting around



the square table in our small kitchen. My mom is smoking as she always does. Dad is the only one standing beside the kitchen cabinets, eating a sandwich. My brother and sister sitting beside each other by the table. He is reading a comic book and she is writing in a notebook. "Look! Look!" I exclaim. They all watch as I open it and pull out various things. A book. Colouring pens. White paper. "What are all those things?" my mom asks me. "Oh, those are just things I am taking with me so I don't feel bored at school." I answer her. They all start laughing. Smiling. I feel embarrassed. "You won't be bored in school, not at all!" my mom assures me. I realize I have no idea what school is all about. 6-year-old me feels startled. Like my stomach is jumping off a 5-m high cliff straight into the sea. "What if I don't know what to do at school?" I ask my parents. My little heart automatically beating a little faster. Primal fear. "Don't you worry, you will know." my parents smile. I do not believe them.

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I am a happy child. My 10-year-old birthday party is held in the facilities of the local scout club in my small town. It has a nice, salmon coloured hall, two glass cabinets with very old scout uniforms and various ancient scout memorabilia. I invite all of the girls in my class for a fun, big party filled with laughter and games. A few days before party, while we are having our lunch break at school, one of my classmates proudly announces to me she might have decided what to give me as a birthday present. Intrigued, I want to know what it is. She leans in close, a big smile on her face, cupping my ear with both her hands. "A thong" She whispers excitedly and starts giggling. I join her, not sure what to think of the present idea. It does excite me, as it is something previously unknown. Something the child I am has not up until now had the age to know of. My classmate, a little ahead of the rest of us in the class on grown up matters, has a few of them. She wears them and shows the rest of us. She says they are comfortable, that you just have to get used to them at first. I do not know how they possibly might be, but it is all new and exciting. A way to feel more mature. After all, we have now finally become old enough to spell our age with two digits. After school, in the darkness and cold of the winter season I run to my home as I always do. It is only about 3 minutes away. I meet my mom on the inside, taking off my winter clothes and boots in the safety of the warmth. She had just come home and is about to start cooking dinner. I tell her about my classmate's idea regarding my gift, half excited, half worried what my mother will think about it. To my horror, my mom obviously is annoyed. Angry, even. "That is NOT a gift for a child your age! I ban it, and I will throw anyone who brings a thong as a gift out of

the party immediately!” She snaps. Horrified, I instantly become scared my classmate will follow through, hoping it is just something she said rather than something she actually intended on giving me. The thought of the forbidden underwear and my friend being thrown out of my birthday celebration too much to bear.

I have trouble sleeping the nights leading up to my party. At the day of the birthday party, we have balloons, colourful plates and glasses set up in the lovely salmon colored hall. We had gone in the night before and lined up the tables to create a long table in the middle of the room. My seat is at the end of the table, where I am sat like a queen during her fanciest dinner parties. We all eat merrily. Each of us devouring a few too many cake slices, just like what happens at every 10-year old’s birthday party. After everyone has gotten more than they needed, my family helps supervise games while the sun kisses the glass of the windows. We laugh and joke and try to bend backwards like candy canes under the limbo stick. I have been ignoring my gifts on purpose. Having a lot of fun yet feeling a constant dread. Like something negative is hanging over me. Something bad is about to happen. Scared to open my presents. Frightened by the thought of what they might be hiding. Because of all this, I am not excited to open my presents, as a child at their own birthday party usually is. I am desperately hoping I can open them after everyone has left. Afraid one of the gifts contains something ultimately leading to one of my friends getting kicked out of the party. Mortified at the thought. I do not want my mom to have to be angry at my friend. I do not want to have a disturbance at my party. I do not want to be alienated from the other kids. I do not understand. It is all about underwear. Why so much angst over underwear? My 10-year-old childish heart feels responsible, feels anxious, feels guilty, and it does not really know why. Trying to shake off the feeling of overwhelming dread, I join my friends in playful games. Time flies.

Just as I thought everyone had forgot, someone starts encouraging me to open my presents. What a great idea, everyone thinks. Everyone but me. I begin going through the pile while everyone watches on. Hesitantly threading through them like a soldier in a minefield. Knowing exactly which gift might contain the forsaken garment. It is a small, silver grey box. I slowly begin to unwrap the other presents first. One by one. Avoiding the unthinkable. My sister and her boyfriend give me drawing equipment. A charcoal pen. A drawer’s eraser that looks like light grey poster putty. Some fancy looking pens I have no idea how to use. I feel so professional. This is a gift beyond my wildest dreams. The others follow suite. Golden earrings, drawing pad, football. The unopened gift pile steadily shrinks. I finally cannot avoid the little, silver box. I look around at everyone. They are smiling. Closely watching my every movement. Laughing and chatting. Admiring my gifts. My heart is racing beyond control. It

feels like it will melt down into my legs. Heat rushes through my body. My throat is dry. No one seems to notice. It seems as if I am in luck, though, for my family members have turned to other matters, cleaning tables and washing dishes, and are no longer paying attention to the gift ceremony. Only the children watching me. My heart beats faster as I reach for the box with trembling fingers. It looks so small. I hope and believe it is not enough to contain the scariest garment I have ever known about. It is too much for my small heart. I open the box. Something colourful is on the inside. Out it falls. Hair clips! The feeling of relief washes over me. The built-up tension comes bursting out of me like steam off an old ship. I am so thankful I start to sigh with a huge grin. My heart still racing. I almost laugh hysterically. How could I ever worry so much, all for nothing. Of course, she was not going to give me the garment of death. How could this little thing, this idea of a thing, cause so much trouble. My party was safe. No one will become upset today. No one will be thrown out in shame. For a moment, everything is perfect. Suddenly, "That's not all that's in there!" the gift-giver exclaims with a huge grin. Her eyes twinkle at me, her eyelashes coated in mascara. My heart skips a beat. Everyone is still looking at me, mouths widened with smiles. Waiting. Not realizing I could start crying any moment. Not seeing my quiet desperation. I look in the box again. A turquoise fabric is looking up at me from the inside. I reach inside with two fingers and pull out a thong. It has the words "Aquarius" written again and again on the waistband. The girls let out big sighs of appreciation. Complementing the colour. Saying how perfect the text is, as it is my zodiac sign. I hardly notice all that though. My eyes wide open, my mouth frozen in a smile. Holding my own nightmare in my hand. A few seconds go by. Immediately feeling guilt and a harsh gush of shame, I quickly mumble something under my breath and scoop the thong under a few other opened birthday gifts. Hiding it completely. Mom does not have to know. I encourage everyone to join me playing.

I have mostly gotten over it, mostly regained my composure and started to feel normal again when my sister calls me to come talk to them. Again, my heart briefly stops beating. It is harder to breathe. I walk towards my family. They are standing next to the gift table. With each step, my heart seems to beat faster. Almost as if it wants out of my chest. Everyone follows me to the gift pile. The sea green Aquarius lays there, spread out, on top of all of the gifts, like a mermaid on the rocks, sunbathing in our gaze. Enjoying every moment of it. I look at it in horror. Burning sensation pinches from deep within my stomach. My heart starts racing. I feel as if I will faint. To my surprise, my mom does not throw the thong-bearing friend out of my party. She does not scold me either, as I in some unreasonable fear had imagined would happen, even though I have no say in what people give me as presents. I still

feel responsible. I do not know why, but I do. All the time, for everything. Worry and fear are two feelings I know all too well. After the party has finished, my guests have left, full of candy and happiness, my mom calmly talks to me. Assuring me she never would have actually thrown a child out of a children's birthday party. It seems so silly now, to have believed it so strongly. Of course, she would not. "However, this is not a gift for a child, you are way too young for this. I forbid you to use it." She added. I feel both relieved and annoyed. How can underwear spark such heated emotions? Why do I feel guilty?

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"WOW! Sveindís that's so cool!" One of my classmates exclaims and leans over the white painted school table across me, elongating her neck so she can better see the picture I am drawing. It is a portrait of Christina Aguilera. I am wildly proud of it, heart beating heavy in my chest. I can almost feel it in my throat. Outside, the raindrops fall heavy. Unlike most Icelandic rain, this one falls straight down to the ground rather than fly sideways, as it usually does. Iceland is windy. This kind of rain is so uncommon, I call it foreign rain. The day is grey, cold and sulky. Our art classroom is, in contrast, bright and warm, full of children's prattle. The assignments for the day are done and everyone is drawing or painting what they want to do. "What?" "What is it?" "Let me see!" The other kids yell, everyone talking at once, rushing to my table. They exchange a few OOHs and WOWs. I quietly blush. Careful not to smile. Face completely neutral. Not to show any weakness. No sign of complacency. That is not allowed. It is ok to know you are talented only if you do not say it out loud. Never agree with anyone who tells you that, either. "This is so amazing! I wish I could draw like that." One of my friends says, letting out a sigh. Everyone looks impressed. Some kids look at me with disdain, though, as if I had brought the attention upon myself. I learned a long time ago you should not draw attention to yourself. Always dismiss compliments. Never accept them. Certainly never, ever agree with them. I am nervous. It is hard to know how to react to such blatant attention, because all I want is to not be perceived as full of myself. I do not want anyone to exclude me or judge me. I need to be like everyone. Living in a small town, you do not want to be different. You want to blend into the shadows of everyone else. You never agree with positive words from others. Every human being has a need to be accepted. Every person feels a need for belonging somewhere. We all want approval. We all crave compliments. I am no different. We all want it, yet we all know never to ask for it. Never give it to yourself. Especially not publicly. You do not want to be full of yourself. You do not want

to brag. Everyone knows the only safe way towards stimulating others to give you compliments is to be negative. Trash. Shame. Down talk. Downplay. Tell others you are not good enough. You are not talented. You are not funny. You are not pretty. Oh, dear god, never tell anyone you are pretty. That is the worst sin of them all. “It’s not that good...” The words leave my lips without so much as a thought. It is like a reflex. Just like you do when you subconsciously flick away a fly trying to sit on your nose when you are trying to read a book. I feel compelled by implicit social rules to say these kinds of things. Even if I do not agree with them. Or, do I? Repeat something often enough, and you will for sure start to believe it. You do not possess any worthy skills. You are not smart enough. You are not pretty enough. You are not friendly enough. It becomes your truth. Compliments crash on you like waves on a ship. Landing on you with loudness, yet quickly fading away. Leaving no impact on you whatsoever. They complement you. Silently you want to believe them. Openly telling yourself otherwise. After a while, the voices in your head outweigh whatever anyone else tries to tell you. “Yeah, right, like you don’t think it looks awesome!” One of my classmates’ snorts. She is calling me out. Before I can awkwardly begin to form a rebuttal, as is expected of me, the teacher comes walking. She is a warm and welcoming woman. She wears colourful clothes and doesn’t use make up. Her hair is sandy blonde and she has a funky haircut. She looks at me with such warmth in her eyes, behind her brightly coloured glasses. She is a little different than the other teachers. I really like her. “Yes” she says. “This is one hell of a drawing.” she quietly adds, carefully picking up the drawing for closer inspection. At the end of the class she hangs the photo on the wall in the classroom. “If Sveindís works hard and keeps practicing, she very well will become a more skilled artist than I am.” She tells the other children. My face flushes. Heat is bursting through my cheeks. Heart beating heavy.

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“Mom, can we not go to the capital right now and get the brace for my knee so I can compete in the game today?” 15-year-old me pleads, not wanting to disappoint my coach later on in the day. My team had a home game coming up with a team from out of town. It was a friendly match but nevertheless, my coach was expecting all of us to take it seriously. I had earned my place on the starting team and I had no interest in giving it up by not competing in that game. My coach had already told me I was needed for the match. If I did not participate, he would think I was not dedicated enough. My mom does not understand the gravity of the

situation. “You know what I think. Your knees are more important than this game. Your knee has already been bothering you for a year now, and you won’t slow down your practices. We have been to see this specialist and he recommended that brace for you to try out. Not for the first time during competition. You don’t need this brace right now, you need to not participate in this game. I know what the coach said, but I also know I care about your knee a lot more than he does. He just needs players for this game. You need your knees for the rest of your life. If they get injured, then the coach won’t care. You would drop out of football, and he would find a new girl for the team. The sport really does not care about you or your injuries. The sport will not take care of you in the future. That is what you, and I, need to do”. I do not agree with her at all. Of course, my coach, whom I have been trained by for the last few years, cares about me. Of course, he thinks I am capable, of course he needs me for this game. I am indispensable, he already told me. I beg my mom until she caves, drives me the 40km to the capital, goes with me to the shop and buys the ridiculously expensive brace, and drives me back. With the brace in my bag, I cheerfully run down to the football field. For some reason, our match is at the big football field in town. We have never competed on that field. Only the professional team plays there. The goals are lined up on half of the field, still it is a lot bigger than any field we have competed on so far. In the locker room, I put my brace on and I cannot help but feel a little cool with it. It is bright blue, has a silicone circle around the kneecap and vertical metal braces inside on each side to support the knee while the leg bends and straightens. I feel like a pro. Like I belong. After a quick warm-up with my team mates, where we laugh through our rising adrenaline rush, I take my place at the right side of the midfield. The day is beautiful, still, a hint of sun peeking through the clouds. Not often do we get a day like this, living in a small Icelandic fishing town right on the south-west coast. The game begins. It is going well. My knee is not hurting me as much as usual. For the first 20 minutes, I am doing good. We score a goal, and soon after the other team matches our goal. It all goes downhill from there. As I am running, rushing back and forth up and down the enormous field, receiving and shooting, battling members of the other team, racing to receive passes, my knee starts to bother me. The pain becomes stronger with each passing step. The opposing team scores another goal. I can no longer run as fast, and I start to have a pulsing sensation of pain running up and down my right leg, starting at the silicone circle around the kneecap. I progressively begin to walk and limp, trying to protect my knee. They add yet another goal. Everyone is tense, agitated and desperate. At recess, I walk out of the field and kick the bench in anger at the pain in my knee, and my coach is visibly annoyed with us. He yells at us, tells us our heads are not in the game. He throws his folder on the ground. I feel

ashamed and angry. My teammates do not look happy. No one is satisfied with the game so far. “You need to get your head back in the game, girls! They are slaughtering us! You are not working together! You need to pass the ball to each other, and take the headers! Stop shying away, stop letting them get all the passes!” For the next 15 minutes, he keeps ranting angrily, while a seemingly gloomier group of girls listens. His face turns pale red as the back of his head takes in the dim sunlight. His whistle swings back and forth around his thin neck, lightly touching the front of his chest as he talks. After recess, we are irritated and determined to even the score. Coach again makes me take starting position on the field. I can barely run. I cannot think about anything else than the pain in my knee. The brace is killing me. The pain is so much worse with it than it ever was without. I thought the brace was supposed to make me feel better, and it is not, and I am angry. I wait for my coach to take me off the field and put a substitute player on the field instead of me. It does not happen. After a while, I yell at my coach to bench me. He refuses. He yells at me to keep going. I am starting to feel a burning sensation running up and down my leg, piercing right at the knee, as if someone was holding a small knife and picking into my kneecap every time I my knee flexes. The little fight we had in us after the recess is fading out fast. The other team scores yet another goal. Everyone feels frustrated, irritable and hopeless. I stopped caring about the game a while ago, as the only thought able to pierce through my mind is the unbearable pain in my right knee. I do my best to slowly move around the field, trying hard not to cry from the pain, anger and disappointment rushing through my body. As the game runs through its last few minutes, I have resigned to walking. I feel hopeless and irritated. I am frustrated with my coach and he is frustrated with me.

“Well, of course a brand-new knee-brace hurts the first time it is used, you should have known that!” He says in a raised voice to 16-year-old me, who never in my life have had any experience with knee braces up until now. After the game, that seems obvious to him, yet he did not put me on the bench during the game. Did he not realize I had never worn the brace before? I clench my jaw and fists, trying hard not to cry in front of him. We are wearing the same type of jacket, our navy-blue team jackets with our team logo on the chest. However, I could not feel more disconnected to him at this point. I am so disappointed with myself and I am angry at my coach for not benching me when he could clearly see how much pain I was in. He makes it sound like it is all my fault, and right now, it feels like it is.

Back in the safety of my home, my mom is everything but happy. “I told you so, he just needed you on the field because he did not have anyone else available. He clearly does not care one bit about your health, or he would have benched you, seeing as you were visibly

in a lot of pain. This is what happens in sport” she says in a controlled, irritated voice. “They slave-drive the kids until their limbs give in and then the kids are tossed like trash.” I say nothing. I do not want to agree with her, I do not want to believe her, but it is hard not to feel a little concerned over coach’s behaviour towards me today. I feel guilty, for some reason. There is that dreaded feeling again. Him scolding me after the game increased my guilt. I feel like I let him down, I let myself down and I let my mom down.

In the coming weeks, I get flashbacks of that game, and I relive the pain, the shame, how he scolded me. When the thoughts and feelings pop into my mind, I quickly try to think about something else. I want to suppress it. The feelings cause my stomach to turn, like someone is twisting it. I feel like I did something wrong, but I am not sure what it is.

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The computer room is dry and stuffy. Curtains made from some kind of soft rubber decorate the otherwise empty, large windows. I softly follow the bland pattern on them with my eyes before my gaze comes to a stop on the basketball field outside. A few kids are playing on it, passing an orange basketball between them, running, laughing and shouting. The sun is peeking from behind a few white clouds. I wish I was outside with them. Instead I am currently forced to attend a course on life skills in school. My teenage mind does not like it one bit. We have had a few classes already, all equally uninteresting and unhelpful. The course focuses mainly on us deciding what subject we should major in in college and what jobs we are fit for in the future. What our future career should be. What we should be. Most of us have no clue what to do with our time in the weekends or what next summer will bring, but the teachers are expecting us to make decisions for our whole life right here, in this life skill course. Right now, we are filling out a long personality test. It takes an hour to do. The results are supposed to tell us what job we will be perfect for. What field of study we should aim at in University. It brings me anxiety and stress. It makes me uncomfortable. I start to think. Then, I overthink. Should I have thought about this already? Should I have a “plan” right now? Am I too late? “Why the hell are we made to do this right now? We are 16 years old for crying out loud, we don’t give a crap about what to study in the future! It’s so many years away!” A boy in my class groans. I immediately hear a few kids mumbling agreeing words. No one of my classmates is interested in this test. The guidance counsellor, the instigator of this whole course, instantly starts to shush the negative voices. “It’s always good to do these kinds of tests, my kids, so you will know what to do with your future!” She says



in her annoyingly fake sounding concerned tone. Her glasses make her eyes look larger than they are and her short brown hair barely moves while she is talking. She has red lipstick on. “Why do we need to figure it out now?” Another boy asks. “It’s not like we haven’t got enough time!” He adds. More kids agree and the room is temporarily filled with many different teenage voices expressing their annoyance and frustration with a task they do not understand why they must do. Soon enough the guidance counsellor has regained control of the class and everyone is again quietly focusing on their personality test. My friend sitting next to me, a blonde-haired girl with freckles and green eyes, uses the opportunity, leans in close and whispers to me “This quiz is so long, I can’t stand it”. I nod in agreement before adding “It keeps asking the same stupid questions, just differently worded”. I do not like taking this test. What will the result say? Should it be a definition of me as a person? I feel that this class, this test, is rigidly putting me into a box. I want to figure myself out, I need time to do that. Not an online test.

Finally, one by one my classmates finish the test. The first ones are boys who have raced through all the questions by answering every single one with option A, without actually reading the questions. The rest of us watch them walk out the door, high fiving each other at their own cleverness. I cannot do that. Even though I hate the test, my constant need to please and do well stops me from ever even thinking about doing such a thing. It feels like blasphemy to me. Most of my peers have already left the musky captivity of the classroom and escaped into the sun. when I finally select the answer to the last question on my test and wait for the results. A few minutes go by. Finally, the computer screen spits out my destiny, my life purpose according to this personality test. It seems so insignificant in small black times new roman letters staring at me from the otherwise white computer screen. I read and stop. Squint my eyes and read again. Only two other kids are still in the room with me, besides the teacher. She is sitting at the top of the classroom, engaged in a computer herself. I hope she does not notice me. “What the...?” I mutter quietly, shocked. My personality test tells me I should study natural science. I have not got the slightest interest in that, whatsoever. I like drawing. I like social sciences. I like everything but natural science. I have already shared my interests in previous assignments. Last week I said it out loud in a discussion group we were made to have. What did we see ourselves doing in the future? Every single teenager had to tell the others their wants and wishes regarding their future. “I don’t know what to do.” I say. “I really want to study art, but I still want to do a double major so I can study social sciences as well.” The teacher seems gleefully happy about my story, nods her head and enthusiastically gestures me to continue. I’m torn between two high schools in the capital,

one of them I really want to be in, but it unfortunately does not offer an art major. The other, a school I'm less enthusiastic about attending, offers a strong art major." Unfortunately, the teacher could not help me and no class member of mine could either. I knew that from the beginning. The choice was mine to make, and I would be the only one living with the consequences anyway. Still, it is a problem that has lingered on my teenage heart. Every little problem feels like such a catastrophe to me. I have always been like that. My thinking is very black and white, I just do not know how contrasted it really is. Not yet.

"Sveindís, how is your personality test going? Have you finished it already?" the voice of my teacher immediately jerks me out of my memories of last week. "Yeah, but it's just not accurate at all." I answer, carefully trying to keep my face and tone of voice neutral. "Oh, you'll see, I think you should pay more attention to this test than you are doing. Your test results are so strong, you definitely need to use this as a reference for your future decisions!" She says. I feel like I am a small animal backed into a corner. Can this test really decide what I am? Is it written in my genes? My soul? I am something so easily categorized, so smoothly defined, that a computer program can do it in 60 minutes? Am I nothing more? The thoughts race through my mind, each without stopping longer than a glance. My body becomes hyperaware, as it does many times a day. I feel a sense of dread lurking over my shoulder. "Oh, and I would love for you to come with me to my office after this class, for a discussion about your problem from last week. Would you be up for that?" I look at her, a little intrigued. Maybe a glimpse of hope enters my worried mind. "Yeah, sure." I answer as I put my backpack on. "Great. Let's meet at my office in ten minutes sharp." She happily says with a large smile framed in red painted lips. Then sharp minutes later I let myself into her small office after softly knocking three times on the burgundy door. The guidance counsellor is sitting at her desk in a dark green computer chair. The same bland looking curtains as in our classroom cover the window at her office. They are the same in every window of school. Outside you can hear sounds of small feet running and the dribbling of a ball. The office feels airless. No window is open. Shelves full of books are lined on the walls. Next to the guidance counsellor a blonde young woman with glasses, a white blouse and red jeans is sitting, looking at me with a hint of smile on her face. "This is Maria, she is a student in guidance counselling and will be observing this discussion, helping us come up with a solution, if that is ok with you?" They both smile. "Sure, no problem." I answer and sit down in the musky, little office. The sun is shining through the window. Muffled sounds of children's voices from the playground carry through the glass. I quickly tell them about my problem, emphasizing I have no idea how to choose between the two schools. "Why don't you go to the local high

school here? It has an art department.” The guidance counsellor suggests as she wipes an imaginary spot off her sharp black dress jacket. Her idea is a logical one. An idea I immediately hate. An idea so out of the question for me, I have not even thought about it. “No, I don’t want to do that.” I answer, looking at her with honesty in my eyes. Maybe she can help me after all. She seems to want to. “Why not?” She presses. I hesitate for a moment. This office feels like a safe environment. I have always been able to depend on grownups. I decide to share my honest thoughts with her. “Because I don’t want to be with the same people in high school as I have been with throughout elementary school.” I say. They both stare at me blankly. The air in the office seems to change a little bit. It becomes more tangible. My body immediately goes into fight or flight mode. Survival mode. No one says anything for a few minutes. I start to regret having shared my deepest thought processes with these strangers. Finally, someone seizes the moment to say something. “You don’t have any friends, do you?” Maria, the student, asks. I cannot run away, and I cannot fight. My somatic nervous system therefore is in overdrive. I also feel annoyed and offended by her question. As if the only reason I do not want to continue to socialize with a certain group of people would be because I am marginalized. Which I am not, not at all. “Yes, I do.” I quickly answer, my voice obviously injured. Having a group of friends, a boyfriend and being the current president of the student union, I am getting increasingly more irritated with this conversation. There is a moment of awkward silence, no one seems to know how to continue this discussion. Finally, I add, trying not to let my voice shake “I also want to try new things, a new school and be in a new environment.” Biting my teeth, I try to not let my frustration with their earlier judgement be heard. “Yes!” The guidance counsellor quickly seizes my second explanation. “That should be your reason for wanting to go to school in the capital. Not the other one you mentioned”. She continues, with a large smile. My heart immediately sinks, like I have done something terribly wrong. Defence mode. I do not know what it is, for I simply expressed an opinion of mine. They both look at me with frozen smiles. I did not ask to come here in the first place and now I feel ridiculed. Satisfied, the guidance counsellor feels she has helped me with my problem and the session ends. I walk out of there, defeated, humiliated and with a guilty conscience. Guilty for mentioning my reasons in the first place. Angry at myself for sharing personal things about me with them. Annoyed at myself for being so childish. For trusting. For thinking even for a split second, they could help me. Instead, my stomach is roaring. My head hurts. I can feel the tension in my muscles. As I walk down the hallway towards the school exit I try to blink my eyes without water forming in them. I feel my throat closing and I want to get home as soon as possible. I was clearly told not to express

my true feelings towards a subject that regarded me, and out of the three of us, solely me. This moment, I learn that expressing my feelings is positive, unless the receiver might not like what I say. Then I better not say it. Learn to condition my behaviour to other peoples' expectations.

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“Well, grades aren't everything in life.” My mom tells me as I plump myself down on one of our black leather couches. She is sitting in the other, carefully studying a crime show on TV. She loves those shows. I do too. I often wonder if my interest in tragedies, homicides and large scale accidents stems solely from my mom, or if it is fuelled by a need to know. To know is to be in control. Maybe it is just another expression of my anxiety. After all, the more I learn about my anxiety, the more I see how it has coloured every aspect of my life. A deep colour, full of despair. Despair I have no knowledge of whatsoever at this point in my life.

I look at her with disapproval written all over my face. We are sitting in our salmon coloured living room. The black glass coffee table is in the centre of it, with the couches lined next to each other, forming an L shape around the table. Dust easily sets on it. No matter how often we dust it, the tiny particles of dirt always seem to reappear right away. Behind me there is a dining table for eight persons. The family gathers at it to have dinner during the holidays. My mom is trying to watch the crime show on our medium sized black television set which is sitting on the black television cabinet. Inside it the VCR and DVD players are resting. Next to the cabinet is another one just like it, only it houses an old record player and a collection of old records my parents own. Behind, the large windows to our green garden tower. My mom needs her undivided attention on the show, so she will not miss any important detail. I am interrupting her. I just showed her my school assignment. I am not happy about my grade. I am not happy about my own performance. I should do better. I can do better than that. I am better. I am, am I not? My heart is racing. My throat dry. Tears almost forming in my eyes. My voice almost shaking, I need validation. I need her to tell me this is undeserved. I need her to tell me I am more than that. It is funny, how a grade, red ink on paper, can have such a profound effect on me. On my idea of my own worth. It has an effect on me. Every time. “What do you mean?” I blurt out to her. I feel she does not know how important this is to me. How important school is to me. How important grades are for my self-image. With grades I judge myself, with grades I can measure my worth. Somehow, I need to put a number on my value. So far, it has been easy. My grades are good. They always

have been. Although, I keep telling myself they are not good enough. They never will be. There is always something I could be doing better. I tell myself I could be studying harder. Memorizing more. Working longer. “You got 8 out of 10 for this assignment, why aren’t you happy about it?” My mom asks, looking up from the paper I handed her, her thoughtful eyes reaching mine. A vibrant hue of blue. The TV show is quietly unfolding without her on the screen in front of us. She does not seem to mind at all. I know she wants to watch the show, though, but I am selfish when my anxiety infests in my heart. My mind. Nothing but my negative thoughts and emotions can take up space in my mind at this point. I look at her with annoyance written all over my face. I have a hard time hiding my feelings. Especially when it comes to my mom. She is my biggest supporter, my best friend. I know she will always be on my side. I can be myself completely with her. I feel comfortable with her. Unfortunately, that means I can let out all of my built-up frustration around her. On her. It must be exhausting. I have accumulated a lot of negative emotions in my short time of being alive. They often burst out like a geyser. Usually on my mom. Unfortunately, on my mom. Her question regarding my grade was irritating. It irritated me to the point of viciousness. I do not know why, it is a perfectly logical question to ask. Irritation is a familiar feeling to me. It flares up from within my stomach and before I know it, I have blurted something out in an aggravated tone. Sometimes something hurtful. I subconsciously feel like I must, just like I feel I constantly have to worry about everything and nothing, otherwise I will not be prepared. “Because, it should have been a 9!” I hiss, looking at her with fire in my eyes. I have this dreaded feeling in the back of my head that if I do not get good grades, my mom will become disappointed with me. I know my thoughts and fears are irrational, yet I cannot shake this feeling. It is dreadful. I feel I need to prove myself, repeatedly. I need to be good to be accepted. I do not really understand why, it is just how it has always been. “I don’t get it, Really. You did great on the test, there isn’t much of a difference between 8 and 9, you know.” She looks at the television program again. For some reason, I want to scream. She does not understand it. I want people to be impressed with what I do. For what you do, is what you are. Even though I secretly want to impress, I never feel anything I do really is good enough. “There is a huge difference” I snap. “I would have been the highest in class.” I keep telling myself I will be satisfied when I reach some arbitrary goal I have set for myself. Even though it does not give me the release I so desperately want. I have often managed to fulfil my own standards. Instead of celebrating I immediately move my goal upwards, to an unreachable standard. Deep down, I know this. I keep telling myself otherwise. My mom looks back at me. She knows this. We have been through this discussion many times before and we will continue to

discuss this time and time again. I feel she does not get it. She thinks I do not get it. “Would you really feel satisfied then? In full honesty?” She asks, her voice sounding grave. “Yeah!” I snap, anxiously picking off the long-since destroyed nail beds on my thoroughly gnawed nails. A nervous habit that has followed me since I was old enough to acquire teeth. Nail biting, teeth gnawing and irritated outbursts are defining features of my behavioural characteristics. My emotions overpower me in a matter of seconds and I need to blow up. I let myself, anyway. Subconsciously, I do not feel secure. Like an animal realizing its pending doom. I fight. I bite. This sense of insecurity makes me stomach hurt from the inside, like someone is squashing my intestines with their hands. My heart is constantly beating at a faster pace, I am always anxious and I always feel a sense of dread lurking over my shoulder. At least in school, I can handle myself. I regain some level of control. Maybe that is why I feel such a strong urge to excel. The better I do, the more in control I am. In school I am not frightened. In school I know what is expected of me. I do exactly what I am supposed to and more. I am praised for it, both in school and at home. Validation gives me control. It soothes my soul. All I ever need is some method to calm down my restless body and ill at ease mind. Being in perfect control has always been my answer. It does not work. It never has, but I do not realize that. My mind has been too heavily clouded with worry, fear and dread to see it. My mom looks at me, obviously not satisfied with my answer. I carefully think about her question. Around her I can allow myself to be fully honest. With her, with myself. Although my grades are high, they are always just a tiny bit lower than what they should be, in my opinion. I tell myself they need to be just a tiny bit better for me to be happy. What it really means is that I keep fuelling the belief that I never will be good enough. I am my own worst critic. I feel I am not pretty enough, not smart enough, not confident enough. I am never enough for myself. Therefore, I must never be enough for others. Is it good to know your place as not good enough in this world? Is that the essence of being? Maybe not, but it feels like it is. “Well.... Probably not....” I quietly confess, while looking at my destroyed remnants of nails. “I don’t think you would...” She answers, echoing my true feelings inside. “If you had gotten a 9, you would be sitting here, fretting over not getting a 9,5. Or a 10. You’re in this constant battle with yourself, and nothing is ever good enough.” She asserts, grabbing a piece of liquorice to munch. We both know it is true. So true it hurts. “Why?” She asks after a brief pause where I have been staring at the ruffling of the branches on the pine trees in our garden. Carefully trying to keep my composure. Silently screaming on the inside. The tension within is unbearable. The minutes’ pass. I feel her looking at me. I carefully keep my gaze on the outside world. Looking completely normal. Feeling everything but. I always

seem to need to do better. I never seem to be content with what I actually do. I just always need to be a little better than I really am. It is stressful, and it fuels my self-destructive behaviour of constantly criticizing myself. My heart keeps pounding heavy when I hesitantly answer my mother's question: "I don't know". I honestly do not.

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"Why do you want to take the standardized English test again?" My Danish teacher asks me. She teaches the other class English as well. As we stand in the middle of her classroom, everyone else has packed and is exiting. The class is over. I glance at the others quietly walking past. I hesitate. "You already took it last year, with the older class. You got permission to take it one year earlier. So, why do you want to do it again?" My throat is dry and the ever-familiar pounding deep within my chest grows steadily stronger. "I want to get a higher grade." I answer, as honest as I can be. "What grade did you receive last year?" She asks, looking at me through her glasses. Her thick, frizzly hair taken back into a high ponytail, as usual. "An 8." I answer quickly. "And what grade do you want?" She shoots right back. "A 9." I say. "That's not possible. I don't think you should take the test again. If you take it again, you might end up getting a lower grade, and it is the later grade that would count, not the higher. If you got an 8, that's pretty much as high as you can shoot for, you might possibly get an 8,5 but not a 9. It's almost impossible to get higher than 8,5." She says in her quick, straightforward, determined voice. All of the feelings come pouring down my back and into my stomach, like someone dropped lead down my throat. Incredibly heavy, and warm lead. I would have the last say, because I know better, my mind tells me. "My brother got a 9." I answer her. My brother, four years my senior, a brilliant mind who got all the rewards when he graduated high school. All my life I have admired him, strived to do the same as him, yet never felt I had my toes quite where he has his heels. "Yes, your brother" my teacher says, having taught him, he is well known to her. "He is different. He is special."

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After an agonizing day of retaking the standardized English test, where I was so stressed out of my mind I was shaking and sweating, so close to crying from the burden of proving myself, proving everyone wrong. Proving her wrong. After an agonizing day, another has risen. The day I finally get my test results back. These tests are standardized between all high

schools in Iceland, and they determine our future. They decide which student can get into which college. If your grades are not high enough, then you might not get into your first choice. This is my ticket to a college in the capital. A fresh start. A new life. I look at the envelope. I hold my future in my hands. It better be good. I better get a 9 on that second English test. With trembling hands, I rip open the door to the rest of my life. Here they are. The numbers that dictate my worth in this world. What do they say? I look at the first grade. I stare at it, motionless, as tiny droplets trickle from the corners of my eyes and land on the black ink.

*English: 8.*

“He is different. He is special.” The words echo in my mind.

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“...And if you need to have him fix something in the tattoo, you can contact him and go see him for free!” My friend then tells me. It has been a while since I had my half sleeve done by my tattooist. My friend had gone to see him a few weeks ago as well. A lot of my friends have gone to see him because of me, I praise him every time I get the chance. He is a really nice guy and a great tattooist. “Oh, really? I should contact him to have him fix a few things in the tattoo, then, so it’s perfect!” I excitedly tell her.

Later that day, I send him a Facebook message. It sounds more spontaneous than it is, for every sentence in that message, I have pre-written in word with every punctuation, dot, question mark and smiley face carefully thought out. I have changed minor things in the sentences, like putting a dot instead of a comma, only to change it back into a dot. Then repeating the process repeatedly. Spontaneous Facebook messages or emails are not my forte. I overthink every letter until I have created a whirlwind of fear and confusion in my head. What if he misunderstands? What if he thinks I am being too negative, will he think I am being snarky if I put a dot instead of a comma? Will he think I am pretentious for putting a smiley face? Or what if he thinks I look cold by not putting a smiley? What if he says no? What if he tells me I am stupid? What if he laughs? What if he does not answer? What if he thinks I am too needy? What if he thinks I am asking too much? He quickly answers and I do not open it. I cannot bring myself to even open it. Instead, I do what I always do, I wait for



Gyr to come home so I can ask him to read it for me and tell me if it is positive or negative. If it is negative, then I can bury it deep in my folder and never mention it again, I never have to read it. If it is positive, then I can have Gyr read it out loud to me. Better yet, I can have him tell me, in his own words, what the message entails. I do not want to hear him read the messages directly as they were written. It triggers raw fear in my chest. “NO, NO, NO! Don’t read what it says, just tell me what it says without literally reading the text out loud!” I yell at him. This is my way of coping with my fears. A truly irrational, destructive, non-helpful in the longer term, but a coping mechanism nonetheless. I know it is irrational. I cannot stop it. I even think I have progressed a little since I met Gyr. Before, I would call my mom and tell her my passwords to my frightening email and Facebook messages so she could read them and then call me and tell me if they were negative or not. Now I can fool my mom so she does not think I still have this problem. At the same time, I can fool myself into not thinking I have a problem. After my cognitive behavioural therapy with my psychologist a few years earlier, I got increasingly better at coping productively with the things that cause my anxiety levels to rise. I know I have been slipping back into old habits. I would never admit it to anyone, though, especially not myself. How can one admit to being fearful of opening emails? It sounds to stupid when said out loud, but that is what frightens me, deeply. Well, not so much the email itself, but the message within. Not even the message within, for what I fear most is to have my fears confirmed; I fear that I should not ask. I should not expect so much. I should not think so highly of me. I should not demand, for I am not worthy. My deepest fears are that my beliefs are not only my beliefs, but everyone else’s reality as well.

“The email is positive, he agrees with you that you guys should meet and fix up whatever that needs fixing in the tattoo!” Gyr tells me, breaking through my self-reflection. I feel immense relief. Imminent danger was avoided this time. “Awesome!” I exclaim. “You know, one of these days you have to begin reading your emails yourself, I can’t keep doing it for you.” My stomach immediately tightens up. “I guess...” I answer out loud, while silently thinking I will not. He is my boyfriend, he should do this for me. I cannot do it myself. That is how I feel and that is how it is.

I am in class at the University when my tattooer sends me a message. I see the little message bubble shining blue on my computer as I sneak to check out social media while the gray haired, middle aged, tall and lean professor talks and talks. His PowerPoint sheets, simple, black letters with a white background are tiring to read and I feel like I will fall asleep soon. The large room is only occupied with about a handful of people, a lot less than it can house. We are scattered around the room, our hands quietly ticking away at our computers.

Most of us probably doing something other than writing notes. I regret coming here this morning and think I should rather have stayed at home and slept. My friends, clustered around me, seem quite tired, but focused. Most of them are indeed writing notes. How can they stay so motivated right now? This class is the absolute worst we have ever had to endure. This teacher speaks in monotone. The subject is horrible.

The bright message bubble frees me from my lethargy. On instinct, I do not open it, but I see a glimpse of the message without opening. "...Friday the 21st, at 11:00 AM? :)" I read. Then I immediately feel so much shame gushing over me. I try to block the thoughts and feelings out of my head. I close my email server and pretend I am listening to my professor lecture about psychometrics when I really am focusing all my energy on fighting intrusive thoughts of shame and guilt and fear. Like someone is splashing bucket after bucket full of cold water all over me. My tattooer is probably asking me to come see him on a Friday, in two weeks. It just so happens to be that I am out of town. I am going north, to Akureyri with Gyr, to visit his family. I feel despair and hopelessness, fear and worry. I cannot stand having to answer with a no. That is somehow a horrible thought. I block the thought of the message out of my mind. Hurry up chatting to other friends, so that my tattooer' message gets buried under. I can then try to forget it ever happened. Better to hide from your problems than to have to tell your tattooer you cannot accept the appointment he suggested. Out of sight, out of mind.

On a Friday morning, the 21st of the month, around noon, I am lying on a mattress in a tiny room in Gyr's mother's apartment in the capital of the North. Gyr is lying next to me. He is holding me, heat from his body warming me up like a very efficient radiator. I always wake up before him. No matter when he lays down to sleep, be it before me, at the same time or after me, he always out-sleeps me. Not to mention when I am in new circumstances, my stomach ache usually wakes me up very early. The sun is also shining in through the curtains, into the small, white painted room, rendering me unable to sleep more. I just met Gyr's mom yesterday. She is a lovely, elegant looking lady. I need to pee, but I am too shy to go outside. I am scared I will run into her and must chat with her on my own. Usually, things like that do not scare me but the stakes are high, I want her to like me. Better to hide away in this small room, on this comfortable mattress, in the safety of Gyr's embrace. He mumbles something under his breath. He tends to talk in his sleep, eyes open and everything. Saying things that make absolutely no sense. It is so funny, I usually try to get him to say more and usually wish I could catch a video. I rarely do. I turn around, grab my phone and aimlessly kill time by scrolling through various newspaper websites, then I turn to social media. My heart beats a

little faster as soon as I notice my tattooer has sent me a message. “Are you coming already? :)” it says. My heart sinks. Adrenaline rushes through my body. Anxiety trickles from my head and down every limb in my body, like icy cold water pouring down from a fountain located at the top of my vortex. He must have assumed I would be showing up for his appointment! But why? Why? Why? I did not confirm it! What should I do! I lay as if paralyzed. Do not open the message. I will not open the message. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Finally, you’ve woken up, sleepyhead!” I lovingly say to Gyr as he opens his eyes. “Hmmm, no, let’s sleep more” he mumbles and hugs me close. My heart can not take it, though, I need him to read the message. I need him to calm me. I need him to say everything will be ok. “Hey, can you please read this message, now?” I ask him, shoving my phone in his face. He squints his eyes at the brightness of the screen. “What? Oh, come on, later.” He says, ready to catch a few more Zs. “No!! Now!! Please, please, please do it now!” I press. He sits up, tired, even though he has slept for 12 hours straight. Unbelievable. He rubs his eyes and then grabs my phone. “He suggested an appointment with me to fix up my tattoo, but his suggestion was for today and of course I couldn’t make it since we are here in the north, but I completely forgot to answer him and now he seems to have assumed that I would be going to see him today!” I quickly explain, lying about forgetting to answer. I sure as hell did not forget about it. I deliberately did not answer the message, I did not open it or read it through. It is a coping mechanism of mine and I know it. It is also illogical and I am ashamed of doing it, so I cannot admit it to anyone. Survival mode is not pretty.

“Well, yeah, he obviously thought you were going to come to the appointment. Now he has said more stuff... He’s basically mad that you didn’t show up, he thinks you bailed on the appointment...He’s pissed, from what the text says. He’s ending his message by saying that if you want to have the stuff fixed, you’ll have to pay for it.” My body feels the attack it has been expecting hit hard. Finally, the worst has happened. What I feared most has happened. He scolded me. He does not like me. My eyes fill with tears, my voice trembling from the arousal. “But, I didn’t accept his appointment! I didn’t book it! Why had he assumed I’d come, I hadn’t even answered him!” I need Gyr to agree with me. I need him to assure me I am being wrongfully attacked. I need him to say that the tattooer is in the wrong, and I am in the right. I shake. My fingers feel cold. Reassure me, soothe me, calm me, my body screams.

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My Facebook is open and I am checking every new notification with a hollow look on my face. Studying psychometrics is the absolute worst I have ever gone through in my 16 years of school. I have the subtle hint of pain and tension in my stomach, as usual, indicating to me I am alive. I would think something were wrong with me if one day I would wake up without a hint of pain in my stomach. I would then worry about not having the familiar ache deep within my belly. Worry. To live is to worry. My life, at least.

A notification flashes on the screen. A blue message bubble. My tattooer. What the hell does he want? He already told me off the other day and I had buried the resulting guilt and shame deep within me. Now it comes crashing out again with power equalling an eruption from a powerful mountain. My eyes are wide open as I stare in horror at the little blue bubble notification, patiently waiting for me to open. I will not open. My heart cannot take it. My body flashes warning signals at me, DANGER, DANGER, DANGER, written in blood red, bold letters on a huge sign with blinking light bulbs on it. DANGER. DO NOT ENTER. My friends are cluttered around me, thoughtlessly noting down glimpses of what the professor is blabbering about. I have no interest in the class anymore. What little focus I had is gone with the wind, now. I need an outlet. I need to know what he is saying, but I cannot read it myself. I need someone to assure me everything is ok. I am in the right. I am not in danger. No one is threatening me. I need someone to calm my nerves. Tell me I am safe.

Finally, the professor notices he has been lecturing well into our break. I tell the others I need to run to the bathroom, so they will not become suspicious of me rushing out of the classroom ahead of them. I firmly walk towards the washrooms for people with disabilities. One of them is, thankfully, unoccupied. I rush inside and turn on the light. I immediately call Gyr. He does not answer. My body is trembling. My breathing is shallow, chest rising. My heart aches and my stomach burns. I try calling Gyr again. It goes to voicemail. I need to talk. I need reassurance. I need acceptance. I need to hear a calming voice. I avoid looking at myself in the mirror as I quickly dial my mom's phone number. She is at work, but I do not care. Answer. Come on. Come on. Please. Answer.

"Hello?" My mother's voice echoes in my ear. Relief. A brief one, but a heaven-sent one nonetheless. "My tattooer has sent me more messages, this morning!" I almost yell out in the phone in my desperation. Of course, my mom knows all about the matter, for I have an insatiable need to discuss with her and hear her advice on anything and everything. My mom is the wisest person I know, and one of the most down to earth, rational beings in my life. I usually seek advice from Gyr, and my mom. Always both. I need to know what they feel about any decision I am about to take. I ask one, then the other. I have difficulty making

decisions on my own. I always feel as if I am making a mistake. “And, what did he say?” She asks, as if she would not know there is no chance I have read the message. “I don’t want to open it!” I say. “Just open it, it’s fine” She encourages me in her soft tone. “No. I can’t. You can keep telling me to, I won’t and you know it, so might as well stop trying.” I answer. “Fine, do you want me to read it for you?” She asks after a momentary silence. “Yes!” I exclaim. I need to know what the message is, otherwise I will not get through the day. I cannot afford to lose focus in every class I have yet to sit through. “What was your email, oh and the password to your Facebook, again?” My mom asks, I hear her finger on a computer mouse. She is ready to write down what I say. Someone tries to open the disabled bathroom. It adds to my anxiety levels. I do not want to go out and face someone who is disabled. Maybe the disabled person would scold me. Maybe they would yell at me. What if a lot of people are watching? What if their friends would be there, telling me off? My brain is like a whirlwind of catastrophe, no matter the circumstances I find myself in. I have learned that you can always find negative possibilities in every situation. My anxiety has taught me that. Again, someone tries to open the door I clench my fist, the one that is not holding the phone, and tense every muscle in my body while biting my teeth together as hard as I can, in an effort not to scream. This is an old habit of mine, I feel like it eases built up tension. It might just exacerbate it, though. If anyone starts knocking on the door or shouting at me from outside, I will literally shrink into the earth from shame. I wait in agony as my mom logs into my account and opens the message. I hear her breath on the other line. I want to scream “HURRY!” At her. She finally says something. “This is great.” She says. “Why? What is it?” My mouth says. My eyes repeatedly scan the walls around me. The bathroom is awfully white. “There’s nothing bad. He’s apologizing. Just go and read it now.” My mom assures me. She knows my rule of not reading it out loud to me. Unfortunately, her comforting word do not seem to comfort my central nervous system which still is under the impression that I am in imminent danger. I say goodbye to my mom and forget to even think about, let alone apologize, for interrupting her at work. I even forget to thank her for helping me, for enabling my ever-ongoing coping mechanism. My anxiety drives my focus around myself, my thought patterns, my bodily sensations, and nothing else. Me, me, me, me.

As I grab my phone and stare at the screen for a split second, trying to muster the courage to read the message, while alone and no one to talk to as I do it, Gyr calls. “Hi!” I greet him, relieved he called me as soon as he saw my missed call. “So, the tattooer sent me new messages! I haven’t read them” I continue. I do not mention the discussion I had with my mom, earlier. I need his stamp of approval as well. I need to be sure. I know my mom would

never lie to me, but better safe than sorry. Maybe my mom misunderstood the message. Maybe he meant it differently. Maybe it is sarcastic. Maybe. Possibly. Potentially. Beyond any reasonable doubt, I need to be sure. I hurry out of the bathroom as I listen to Gyr's voice. Of course, no one is waiting outside the bathroom door, ready to pounce on me with evil words. The area outside is crowded with University students, reading, chatting, working, writing, eating and resting. No one glances twice in my direction. Of course, no one was waiting. But .... The word lingers in my mind. This word lingers in the back of my mind every minute of every day. Bad things are not going to happen ... But ... What if? What if they do?

“Yeah, wow, this message is pretty amazing!” Gyr excitedly says after logging into my Facebook account. “He’s actually apologizing for being annoyed and rude earlier, because he later realized you hadn’t actually accepted the appointment and didn’t have it booked. He’s now inviting you to come whenever you can to have him fix whatever’s needed in the tattoo, and he’s saying that of course you won’t pay.” I stop in the hallway, halfway to my classroom. I do not know what to say. This is the best possible outcome I could ask for. My tattooer realized there was a misunderstanding and he apologized for lashing out at me. I would not have to pay for the appointment. I know I could not ask for a better resolution to my problem, and I know, at the same time, that my mind does not think the matter is resolved in any way. My body is still taking tumbles down a cliff, my throat is dry and my knees feel weak. No one passing me takes a second glance at me. I look normal on the outside. No one pays attention to me. No one knows I am quietly suffering. No one knows how helpless my anxious tendencies render me. No one knows how painfully physical it is, even though no scars can be seen on my body. At that split second, I make a decision. I know I will do what is easiest for me. What is safest for me. I will cope, in the only way that does not fright me. I will not go to see him again. I will bury his new message and this whole incident deep within me and I will never step foot into that tattoo parlour again. When the choice stands between fighting or fleeing, I flee.

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“Come on, honey, it’s going to be ok, I’m here with you! He’s not going to say anything, and if he would, which he wouldn’t, but if he would, then I’m right here and you know I never let anyone be rude to you.” Gyr says and squeezes my hand. We are walking from the main bus station downtown. On a bright spring day, the shopping street is full of life, even though the

pavement is wet from an earlier cloudburst and the sun is carefully hidden behind a thick carpet of white clouds. We are walking together, hand in hand, down the street. I am 21 years old and I come off as strong and independent. I am, in many ways. In other ways, I feel as if I am a small child. I always thought I would grow out of my fears. That I would stop caring. That with age, I finally would learn how to silence the ever whispering “But...What if...” voice in my head. I cannot seem to do that. With every passing year, it only seems to grow stronger. It whispers higher. My irrational fears multiply. My coping mechanisms become more maladaptive, characterized by avoidance. In the short term, that is what is best for me. I am only trying to save myself. Help myself.

“Hey, it’s going to be just fine.” Gyr keeps talking because I am not saying anything. My stomach pains are too great. My chest pains are too great. “I’m here, right by your side.” He lovingly says and lightly pulls on my hand while we are walking, as I have started dragging my feet as we get closer to my doom. He irritates me. I want to tell him to shut the fuck up. “YES. I know. You’ve said it over and over again and I get it! I got it the first time! Leave me alone!” I snap at him and rip my hand from his. It could turn into a heated argument right there, in the middle of a busy street in the city central, but it does not. Gyr is a patient man. He seems to understand my outbursts, like he knows they are only a manifestation of my anxiety. It will take me another four years and anxiety medication to completely realize and understand that my agitation, irritability and outbursts towards the people I love are nothing more than a clear expression of my anxiety. It is not me. It is the disease. Up until the point I will realize this, I keep thinking it is just me. That I am horrible.

We keep walking down the street, past all the colourful houses on both sides clad in corrugated iron, the iconic poster card view every outsider gets of Reykjavík. The breeze is fresh, but a little cold, as usual. Gyr silently walks beside me, not commenting at all on my vulgar behaviour. Soon, my mind again seizes control over my impulses and I regret lashing out at him. I slide my hand back into his and squeeze it a little. He smiles at me. He knows this is hard for me. He knows I am scared to death. He knows I do not want to do this. He knows that the only way I ever will, is with him by my side. He knows, for he is the only person who could persuade me to. We keep walking. Step by step, getting closer to the tattoo parlour.

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“I don’t really want to admit this to anyone but you...but I don’t really like going to the gym” I tell Gyr. “I know it is good for me, and everything, but it is just so hard to find the motivation to go three times a week. It’s so repetitive and boring.” I add, as I search for my gym pants and t-shirt. “It’s like this chore you have to finish, and that sucks! I wish going to the gym would be something I love doing. I wish I looked forward to it, like some people do. How long does it take for it to become fun?” I ask myself out loud. I run an Icelandic blog on health and wellness, and although the subject interests me greatly, I still have a hard time finding motivation to drag my butt to the gym 3 to 5 times a week. I just do not find this activity fun. I wholeheartedly wish I did, though. “I feel like a hypocrite.” I say. “How can I write a blog on health and wellness, where I am encouraging people to go to the gym, when I do not even like to go there myself?”. Gyr is lying on the bed, reading a book. The ceiling on our weird little apartment is awfully sloped, with a window sticking out in the middle. The window is closed, although the room is painfully warm. We cannot open it to let in fresh air, or else we would risk our cat running out on the roof. We have been through it before, an agonizing moment where Gyr had to climb out of the window to fetch our small black and white furry cat before it fell two stories to its death. Gyr turns the page in his book. He loves to read sci fi and fantasy novels, often re-reading the same books repeatedly, until they slowly disintegrate. The locks of his golden hair move slightly with the tilting of his head as he scans the pages. Calmly, still sifting through the pages, his eyes gaze up at me, and suddenly offers “You should try pole fitness”. I look at him, and immediately snort loudly. “Pole fitness? No way, you remember when I tried those horrible classes with my sister, where the girl instructing knew nothing herself and told us to go upside down in the first class, let alone told us to go search for tricks on YouTube to ask her to teach us! I do not know what to search for on YouTube, that’s not my responsibility, that’s why I would pay for a fitness class! To have the teacher tell me what to do! Not the other way around.” I am convinced pole fitness is just an amateur activity in my country, as would be expected. Nothing new ever comes to Iceland. Everyone looks and acts the same. There are just the regular, old, boring gyms, and then some fitness classes. That is really what I hate about living here. As a 22-year-old person, I cannot take up a new sport as a beginner. Usually, every sport in Iceland is something you need to have practiced ever since you were a child, if you ever want to have a shot at practicing it to your teenage- and grown up years. I have been thinking about taking up soccer again. It is the only sport I know, the only sport I have practiced. Just thinking about it causes a flooding wave of anxiety rushing through my veins. How should I go about taking up soccer again? I am 22 years old, I have not been to a soccer practice in around 6 years, and everyone I used to



train with has moved on to professional level. Most of them quit. Like me. I am not sure if I can join the rest at such a high level. Not even sure I want to, anyway. I push the idea out of my mind as abruptly as it comes to me. I am not even sure I really *want* to practice soccer, at all, again. I just do not like to go to the gym. I wish there were more options for me to do something else. Something where I could meet people, find new friends, be a part of a group. Living in Iceland sucks. “Yeah, I know” Gyr answers, immediately bringing my thoughts to a halt. “You know, the girl I am working with at the travel agency, she is opening up a pole studio with her friends.” I look at him with my automatic look of disdain, obviously not impressed. I have no faith in a pole studio in Iceland. “So? It’s probably just as lame as the other studio me and my sister went to. There is no room for professionalism in something new here in Iceland.” I answer, putting on my gym pants. “I don’t know” he answers, “She seems pretty professional-looking to me. They’ve already found a place downtown and they’re soon painting it.... Maybe I could offer to help them preparing it in change for you getting to try out a class a couple of times?” Ever familiar anxiety flows through me, like powerful rivers. I hate unexpected things. I hate the unknown. “NO. Not a chance. Thanks, but no thanks.” I tell myself I am not in the slightest bit interested, yet some nerve has been moved within me. It feels scary, unthinkable, horrible. It feels. I feel.

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“I CAN’T DO THIS! I AM GOING TO FAIL MISERABLY!” I almost yell at my boyfriend, standing up from my desk at home, running my fingers through my hair. My notes written on page after page after page in all colours of the rainbow, scattered over the dark brown desk. Underneath, a stack of printed notes. I am writing notes, by hand, from the computer written notes I made throughout the semester. I try to write my notes in colourful ink to enhance my memory. Writing and re-writing notes is also another way for me to remember, or at least I tell myself that. In my psychology studies, I have learned this is not the best way to memorize. I know that. I still feel like I have not studied well enough, unless I have written millions of notes. Maybe I do it more out of habit than need. A way to silence my anxious feelings. No matter how many notes I write, though, the feelings always flow violently in the last few days before a final test. Like a tidal wave crashing onto the buildings of a quiet beach village. Gyr is patient. He knows this. He has been through this many times before. He is trying to soothe my anxious self, for I am only psyching myself out. A final test in one of the hardest courses of the semester is tomorrow. I have studied religiously throughout it all. Still,

it does not ease my feeling of dread. Fear. Tension. Irritation. I am stressed beyond my mind. It never seems to end. I am finishing my fifth semester out of a total six in University. My bachelor degree. The best decision I had ever taken, or so I believed before I started. "I don't remember anything!" I tell him, my voice almost breaking. He looks at me with his kind eyes. Hugs me, standing in the middle of our bedroom. The night outside is quiet and dark. Calm. A stark contrast to the tornado of emotions inside of me. Studying psychology was all I ever wanted. Human interaction, thoughts and feelings has always been especially interesting to me. I was so happy to finally start my psychology studies. I knew it would be hard, but it is extremely hard. The amount of material is overwhelming at times. Every subject has the same amount of workload, regardless of how many credits are assigned to each course. The last two and a half years have been characterized by tension. Small panic attacks where I have a hard time breathing. "Why is this so hard?" I say. Gyr hugs me closer. I instantly feel annoyance bubbling up. I cannot help it. I am probably just an irritated person by nature. I often feel frustration and anger run through my veins at the smallest things. For example, Gyr giving me a hug when I am on the verge of a nervous breakdown, late on a Tuesday night, with every passing minute creeping closer to the horrible test. "Relax. It's going to be fine." He says, attempting calm me. The irritation bursts out and I push him away. "It won't!" I snap. I do that often. Especially when I am stressed. This degree was all I wanted, how can it give me such mixed emotions? People are usually very impressed when I tell them what I am studying. Most of them have heard how hard the psychology major is at the University of Iceland. I guess I thrive on it a little, I like to impress, as much now as always. I need approval. I need acceptance. I have slowly learned it is an expression of my anxiety disorder. A way to have control. Even so, I feel in little control of my studies. Constantly worrying about material I could be reading. Projects I could be finishing. Essays I could be writing. Throughout the last 2 years of my studies, I have declined numerous party invitations, trips abroad, weddings and birthdays. All because I have to study. It never seems enough. There is always something more to do. I always feel so overwhelmed. Before every final, I have the same routine. You might say it is kind of a ceremony. Something I must do, every time before a final test. Otherwise I do not feel prepared. I always try to convince Gyr and my mom that this time I definitely *will* fail the final. That is what I am doing this very moment. I angrily snap at Gyr "I WILL not do good on this one! I have a bad feeling about it. I know nothing! How can I not know anything? My mind goes blank! I will freeze on the test!" I nervously assure him. He is not convinced one bit. He walks into the small kitchen of our apartment in the attic. My brother is renting the place with us. He is not home at this point. I

can freak out in piece. I follow Gyr into the kitchen. He grabs a soda from the fridge. “Do you want something to drink?” He offers the can to me. “I will fail.” I declare. I never have before, and always say I will. I text my mom the same thing. “You got this. You always got this. Don’t worry. You’ll be fine” she answers. My mom and Gyr never believe me. I know I sound stupid every time I try to tell them, “No, I know I always say this, but this time I *will* fail, this time I know absolutely *nothing*. This time I should have studied harder. Learned better. Done more. Not wasted my time on trivial things.” They look at me with the same loving disbelief in their eyes. Not taking me seriously at all. I try to reassure them this is it. I want them to believe me this time. I certainly do. I have never failed before, yet I constantly believe I will. I know it in my heart. I am not as good as they think I am. I know it. This time I *will* fail.

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“See? This is what I tell you every single time you say you are going to fail.” Gyr says as I show him my grades this semester. All good, well above average. Certainly, well above failing. Gyr laughs. “Every single time, you try to convince me that this is definitely the time you will fail, yet every time you do great!” I look at him, laughter not high on my list of things to do at this moment. It does not matter how often I prove myself wrong, I never stop believing that each time, when I say I will fail, that is what will happen. I will fail. In the end, it will catch up to me. My actual lack of knowledge. How limited I really am. Everyone will know. They will finally see the *real* me. The incompetent real me. It terrifies me.

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January 2014 has begun. As dark as ever, as cold and windy and wet as usual. The snow visits regularly, but only stops a few days. Then it rains. The streets become shiny, thick ice layered over ten times. It is hard to walk without losing balance. The hard-blowing wind does not help, and in combination with the ice, often creates scary circumstances for walking people. I get out of the bus as it stopped by the side of the road. Carefully placing my sneakers clad foot down on the pavement. Contemplating what would be a better route, going through the park right ahead, or sticking to the sidewalk going around it? Both look extremely uninviting, with thick layers of bone breaking ice. Going through the park it is. Slowly walking through it, wind blowing in my face. My feet sliding on the surface. I am beginning to regret my

decision. I Finally signed up for a pole class after having followed the studio online for almost a year. Today is the time. The first class. My heart is pounding. My stomach aching from the ever-familiar anxiety. Worry and fear, that is me. It always feels like my stomach is burning. From fire, or ice. Halfway through the park I start to regret it all. Going into the park, signing up for the pole class. I am very early of course. Living with anxiety, I hate being late. Especially to new events. The unknown frightens me more than anything else. Through the darkness of the park I carefully tread. Each step bringing me closer to it. Fighting the wind, trying not to fall, I have my bag on my shoulder. It contains a water bottle and a two pairs of old boxer briefs of mine. I cannot believe I am going to an exercise class, armed with only those things. It feels so wrong. So, inappropriate. Finally reaching the end of the park I get into safer paths, the pavement filled with sand. The well-lit, carefully taken care of street where the pole studio is. I have not been to the studio before. I know it is located in some kind of areaway and that is what is frightening me a lot at this point. I hate to not know exactly where I am going. The unknown is unsettling. That is why I took a bus half an hour before what I would actually have needed to do. That is why I am now walking a bit slower, so I do not show up way too early. Being too early is also frightening. Everything is frightening. My body on constant alert. Walking up the well-lit street I am scanning each building, being inconspicuous about it. No sign of the studio, yet. I've reached the end of the street, from here it just crosses into other streets with apartment buildings. My heart starts racing. My body sensing fear, feeling danger that just is not there. My body does that a lot. I listen to it, every time, though. I need to. I worry. Standing still on the snowy pavement, flickers of snow fall from the dark sky. The wind blowing. I turn in slow circles. Trying to notice something I have not seen before. The houses are as familiar as ever. No change. No clue. It is as if I am in a fairy tale, trying to spot a magical door that has not been visible until this point. I do not see it. Minutes pass by. Nothing is of help. I consider leaving. I feel like everyone in the apartment buildings across the street are looking at me. Wondering what this suspicious girl is doing, standing there in the freezing cold. A few more minutes wasted. I am becoming very anxious. It is only ten minutes to class right now. I will not go if I am late. A movement in the street catches my eye. I see a young girl in her winter jacket, carrying an exercise bag. I become hopeful. She hopefully has no business being here unless for the pole class. She disappears into an alley next to the hotel by the street. On instinct, I follow her. Anxiety rushing through my veins. Lump in my throat, my stomach almost bursting with a burning sensation. The unknown is so unsettling. Finally, in the darkness, I see her go in

through a white door on the other side of the alley. A vague sign in the window. The letters **P O L E**.

Following the girl, I open the door to the unknown. A large, white painted hall with much ceiling height. Right in front of me, a girl standing by a small table, the cashier. To the left, two leather sofas, a glass coffee table and a turquoise door on the white wall. It is closed. Music is playing in the room within. The sofas are occupied by a large group of girls. Around 15 of them, even more seem to be inside the changing room behind the cashier and a few are in line behind me, waiting to pay for the class. “Hi! You’re coming to level 1?” The cashier asks me with a smile on her face. She has got long, straight black hair pulled back in a high ponytail. “Yeah!” I answer, a little out of breath after the walk. I smile and laugh to hide how nervous I am. After I have finished my registration and paid for the month at the cashier, by that forever sealing my fate, I walk fast to the changing room which is at the very corner of the studio. The walls of the small changing room are painted white like the rest of the studio. The floor is smooth concrete, painted turquoise. The flag colour of the pole studio. The wall next to me is filled with polaroid photos from various classes, celebrations and showcases. They look like they have a lot of fun around here. I take off my jeans and quickly put on my black boxer shorts. Making sure to discreetly glance at the other girls to see what they are wearing to class. I do not want to be different. I do not want to make a fool out of myself. Somehow, emerging from that changing room in nothing but a shirt and shorts seems a huge step into the unknown. My heart is beating hard. I look myself up and down. Here I am, about to go train in a t-shirt and some boxer shorts, nothing else. This feels weird. Feeling very vulnerable, I leave the dressing room to join the others. I had quickly noticed most of them were also only wearing just the shorts. Otherwise I would have put my sweatpants on over my shorts. The turquoise door leading into the pole hall opens. The instructor appears, a thin girl with tattoos up and down her arms and shoulder length, dark hair. She makes way for a group of sweaty girls wearing shorts and sports tops or shirts who are coming out of the hall, some of them happily chatting to each other. I try to stand close to the entrance to the hall. I have no idea what to expect, but I do not want to be the last to enter. The instructor smiles at us and introduces the group into the training hall. We squeeze ourselves through the door, everyone trying to get in at the same time. The hall is quite spacious. Ceiling lights turned off, a light set in shape of a tube is lined along the walls of the hall, creating a dim illumination. A few lamps are turned on, resting in the corners. I quickly scan the room. I count 12 poles in total. I had counted all of us again and again before we went in the training hall and now I realize we outnumber the poles. Determined, I half-hurry to a vacant pole in the back of the room. A few

girls walk to a thin, white bookshelf to the left and fetch small washcloths and small aerosol cans before returning to their chosen poles. I nervously stand in the dark lit room, holding my pole in one hand as I have no idea what else to do. I do not dare to move away from my pole to grab a washcloth as I have no idea for what I need it and I am afraid to lose my place and be left standing there totally lost as to what to do next. Like they would tell me to leave if I did not have an assigned pole. I do not consciously think so, but something deep within me is still trying to tell me that I am in imminent danger should I let go. Irrational, unconscious fears are so frequent in my life I almost never notice them anymore. I just notice my heart beating faster and a strange tingling sensation within my stomach. I have learned this is anxiety. It has followed me for such a long time, feeling like this is normal to me. I never consciously think about those feelings. They just follow me, everywhere I go.

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“OH, MY GOD!!!! GYR!!!” I yell at Gyr from within the bathroom. I have been lingering inside, reading my Facebook feed when I notice a big announcement. Michelle Shimmy, legendary Australian pole idol, is coming to Iceland in just a few weeks to have a workshop in my pole studio. “Oh, wow! That’s amazing! Aren’t you going to go?” He excitedly yells from behind the closed door between us. “YEAH!” I yell out. I am so overcome with excitement, I start laughing uncontrollably and cannot stop smiling. Tears form in my eyes and quietly drip down my cheeks. I look at myself in the mirror. Am I really, seriously tearing up because of this? I have never felt like this before regarding any sport. I used to practice soccer as a kid but I had absolutely no interest in watching others play it, let alone to follow the United Kingdom’s premier league, like some of the girls who practiced with me religiously did. I used to think I just was not as motivated as them. I thought my interests lay elsewhere, in heavy music, photography and art. Now, as I watch myself in the mirror, red eyed and tearful from excitement over a foreign pole idol’s visit to Iceland, I realize I just had not found my place. I have now. I have only been practicing pole dancing for around four months but I absolutely love it.

I realized in my first class I wanted to become a teacher one day. I loved to watch how fluently my teacher would move around the pole. I wanted to be the same. I quickly developed an interest in the sport outside classes. I began searching online for videos and photos of pole dancers. I loved the atmosphere of classes at my home studio. I felt safe there. I started getting to know my fellow pole students. I felt a sense of belonging. Going to class

never felt like a chore. I would rarely even think about the classes as exercise. I could lose myself in the moment, trying to replicate difficult tricks our teacher showed us. I would grit my teeth and become wide eyed from determination when trying to sit on the pole for longer than two seconds. The pain was excruciating. I asked one of my teachers if it ever would get better. She told me the first three months were the worst. After that, it would get better. I had taken that as my highest commandment. I was going to overcome the pain. I was going to get better, and I did. She was right. I have now been training for four months and although the pain is still intense, it is getting better. I am getting better. After each class, I marvel at my newest bruises and look at them as a badge of honour. They showcase how hard I am trying. I have watched my body, clad only in shorts and a top, in a large mirror at least twice a week. Though hard at first, it became increasingly more mundane. I have become less self-conscious. My insecurities regarding myself and how I look have slowly started fading away. The tricks are so difficult, there is no space to focus on anything else, let alone to waste time criticising my body in the mirror. With each new accomplishment, I have begun appreciating my body for what it can do, instead of hating it for how it looks or how it does not look. I have managed to do tricks I never thought I would be able to. I surprise myself. I feel proud. I feel strong. I have started stretching, something I never thought I would do. In these first few months, I have learned to enjoy exercise. A pole class is so filled with goals to accomplish, it does not really feel like exercise. That is exactly what I have been looking for. Enjoyment. Goals to crush. Strength to gain. Without feeling like I am exercising at all. In these few short months, I have learned I can do more than I give myself credit for. Pole has helped me better manage my debilitating anxiety. I look forward to exercise with my friends each week. I feel more at rest in my everyday life. I sleep better after a pole practice. I wake up more energized than I have felt in a long time. In a few short months, pole dancing has come to mean more to me than I ever would have imagined. Pole dancing is helping me reshape my identity. Pole dancing is helping me to discover who I truly am. A confident, capable, fulfilled woman. In a few short months, pole dancing has become my therapy.

As I stand in the middle of the bathroom looking at myself in the mirror, teary eyed with dirty hair, wearing a white baggy shirt and with cheeks pink from moisture, I think about all the things pole dancing has helped me with. I realise how much it has given me, and I am thankful.

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I knock on the burgundy door of the office of my bachelor thesis advisor. The small office is located in the psychology part of the building that houses social sciences. The building is a few decades old. The offices of the professors of the psychology department are all lined up in a small part of the building. A small, cosy hallway shaped like a U with a few closed burgundy doors on the walls. My thesis advisor's door is the third one, right in the middle of the hallway. I really like and admire my thesis advisor. She is an elegant woman in her forties, tall, brown haired, thin and smart dressed, a children's clinical psychologist. She is energetic, determined and above all, passionate about psychology and people. She is exactly the person I would want in my corner if I ever had a child in need of her services. I knock on the door a few times and wait for a few seconds. She confidently opens the door and with her warm facial expression greets me inside and offers me the seat on the chair across from her desk, one I have sat in often in the last few weeks. The office is small, but professional. Painted pastel white, it has a window with white see-through curtains and three bookcases filled with all kinds of psychology books. Two shelves are neatly packed with bachelor's and master's thesis booklets she has advised before. My booklet will soon join them. "So, I was wondering if you could help me write my motivation letter for the University I'm applying for." I ask her, my eyes almost filling with tears at this simple request. Being vulnerable, setting myself up for possible rejection has never been easy for me. "But ofcourse" she warmly answers, looking at me with the same old, inspiring enthusiasm I always notice in her eyes. She immediately offers me a few tips on what to write about and how to form the text. I eagerly jot down everything she is saying, trying to make my notes understandable for future me. "What do you do as exercise?" She asks me. I instantly become nervous, feeling the lump in my throat appearing, my stomach instantly hurting and eyes automatically blinking faster to avoid shedding tears. I feel fear. Apprehensive, I start with "I just go to the gym now... But I did run the Reykjavik Marathon twice, collecting pledges for the cat shelter, though.". Looking at me, she nods. "So just that? I'm guessing as this is a sport psychology master's. They will be looking for people who are into sports." She voices my fears. Maybe I am not fit for this master's anyway. Maybe I'm not enough of an athlete. I used to be, though. Everyone else at this program will probably be professional level athletes or more. Except for me. Why am I not an athlete? Why do I think I even stand a chance? Swallowing becomes harder. I look at her friendly face, her questions perfectly appropriate for my motivation letter. I tell her "Well, I did practice football as a kid right up until I was around 16 years old ... But I don't anymore... You think I should put that in there? It's not too long since or irrelevant now?" She quickly smiles. "Of course not! Definitely mention that, it shows you have been a



sports participant since childhood. I'd only think that is a positive thing." Momentarily relieved my dream is not just a ridiculous, impossible longing, I scribble on my paper. Careful to remember to put in my past football experience, determined to make it sound more positive than it was. Hesitating, I look at the various books in the shelves across from me, reading their labels. Clinical child psychology. DSM-IV. I finally muster the courage to ask. "I recently started taking pole fitness classes.... I'm not sure if I should put that in there?" I ask her, my voice almost trembling. Half-suspecting horrible judgement, half-hoping she will answer me with the same positive enthusiasm as when I told her about my brief football career. She takes a moment. Carefully evaluating her answer. Probably going over her own feelings on the subject. A subject she likely has not had to think about in this context before. "I'm not sure." She finally answers. "I myself have watched the Iceland Got Talent show and seen a competitor do pole fitness and how incredibly hard this sport is. It is just like gymnastics and requires incredible strength." I nod my head in agreement, obviously relieved her opinion is a positive one. Still on edge, as I know she still has to finish her answer "...Although, I am just not sure everyone sees it that way. Perhaps the people on the board in the school abroad are old school. Maybe they are middle aged men who don't know anything about it. I think I'd recommend you not put anything about it in your motivation letter... Just to be sure." She corroborates my own hesitation on talking about it to people who do not know me. People who I do not know. I just do not want to be judged.

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Our room is warm. Small, but inviting. We have our bed in there, and a drawer. The tiny window lets in fresh, cool, midnight air. Both sitting on the bed, taking in the last moments of the evenings freedom before going to sleep, only to start the next day bright and early with school and work. "She's amazing." I tell Gyr as I show him a video of a famous pole dancer, dancing very sensually. Wearing high heels. Doing all kinds of amazing movements. Being very sexy. "But I just think those heels are unnecessary.... maybe just too much". I finish my sentence with contempt. Looking at her dancing, I feel like I am watching something I should not be watching. Like it is somehow forbidden. In my mind, well trained by society, women do not like themselves publicly. Confidently showing off is a big turn-off for society as a whole. Not to mention the direct display of sexiness. Being sexy is a blasphemy. Women are not supposed to be sexy of their own free will. I do not consciously think so, but I have spent

the last twenty-three years of my life internalizing that notion. Sexy is bad. Showing off is bad. Sticking out is bad. Being proud is bad.

The woman in the video keeps going. She is obviously not affected by society's expectations. She is proud. She does not care. Her movements are beautiful. Sensual. Sexual. I cannot put a finger on it, it is hard for me to express my words on the subject, I just know I almost feel uncomfortable watching. Like how I feel when I am watching explicit sex scenes in movies. Not because the content itself is in any way scandalous, more just because I myself become self-conscious. I feel anxious. I do not know what to do with myself. It is automatic. My brain is well-trained. "Why not?" Gyr asks. He waves his hand at the screen. Looks at me with surprise. Annoyed, even. Our little black computer between us, playing the video. "It's just...I really like the pole dancing.... But I'm not sure about the heels..." Unable to word my exact thoughts, as I was not sure myself what they entailed. My thoughts on how to be a modest woman, respectable member within society clashing with my intrigue by her confident movements, elegance and strength. Knowing pole dancing originates from strippers, at the same time knowing there is almost nothing society despises more than strippers. I love pole dancing. It has done so much for me, my spirit, my confidence, but I do not want respectable members of society to look down upon me. How can I ever be appreciated, taken as a professional, how can I find a job, if people do not respect me? Why is this so blurred? Why do people have to respect or disrespect you depending on your clothes, your dance, your work, your choice of exercise? I feel frustration quietly boiling from deep within my stomach. I still cannot put a finger on my feelings, what is it, exactly, that is bothering me; her movements and the fact she seems to not care about judgement, or is it frustration with the rules of society? Am I jealous of her for not caring or do I really not like her for colouring outside the lines? A lingering sensation between wanting to both accept and reject another woman's behaviour had been haunting me for the last few days. Not knowing what to do with my thoughts. Lingering self-doubt keeps washing over me. A few days earlier, I had shown my mom the video. She had said the exact same thing I had quietly been thinking. "Elegant and strong, but those heels are unnecessary. The sport doesn't need to be linked to that". My heart immediately started beating faster, and I felt a hot wave of shame rushing down my spine, like I had done something wrong. In my mind, I wanted to agree with her, but I also wanted not to. I was torn. In a way, I wanted to tell everyone everything associated with my sport was amazing, but in another way, I was afraid it wouldn't get recognition if it was...linked to "that". I had thought of that many times before myself. I felt apprehension about telling people around me about the sport I was practicing. Immediately

from the beginning feeling shame, not really knowing why. It was fun, it was hard, it had wonderful people and I was learning to challenge my body and mind in ways unfamiliar to me up until this point. Still, I felt fear. Fear of being judged, criticized. Having my mom utter the words reinforced it. Yes, pole could be a cool sport, only if it was not associated with “that”.

“Why the hell not?” Gyr’s voice prickles through my memories of past discussions, taking me back to right now. Us, sitting on our bed, in our small bedroom, with my little black computer carefully placed between us. He looks almost flabbergasted, unable to see my point. I can hardly see it myself. “She’s just being a badass, an awesome pole dancer, and confidently moving, doing crazy tricks and flowing really elegantly. Why do you even think about the shoes? Do the shoes make her performance worse?” He asks. “...No” I mutter, after a momentary silence. “Do the shoes affect her performance in any way? Well, beside the fact they probably make every move a thousand times harder...?” He continues asking me. “...No...” I repeat. “Exactly. Heels are just heels. They are shoes. Footwear. Shoes don’t say anything about her as a person. She obviously is confident and obviously is a really talented athlete. I don’t see at all why she shouldn’t be wearing heels.” The intrigued part of me vibrates loudly like a string on a guitar that had just been plucked. Immediately I feel butterflies in my stomach. It still feels wrong, but so right at the same time.

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“Here we are! How awesome, we found the studio! Now, go inside and introduce yourself.” Gyr says. We have been living in our small town in Finland for a few days. Recently both of us acquired bikes. After all, that is the only way to travel in this town. The bus timetables seem very unreliable and they are very hard to understand. Not to mention how expensive bus cards are. This summer day in August is a beautiful one. We have been biking around, exploring, getting familiar with our city. Right at this moment we are standing in a street in the central part of town, holding onto our bikes, looking at the city’s pole dance studio across the road. It is in a brown brick building. The letters are written on a white sign in green and orange colours. P O L E. Gyr had found this pole studio for me, for the minute I realized I had gotten into the master’s degree program in sport- and exercise psychology and we had decided to move to Finland so I could pursue it, I began worrying there would not be a pole studio there and my progress would diminish. Gyr told me not to fret. He then found for me the website of this particular pole studio we are looking at right now. It looked very good on

the website. It looks very good in person as well. “Ummm...” I hesitate. Of course, the most logical thing in the world seems to be to walk inside that pole studio and purchase a monthly subscription. However, my anxious tendencies are anything but logical. My feet are frozen in place. “Let’s go inside and ask about their prices! I’ll come with you, if you don’t want to go alone.” He keeps pressing. “No, I...” I feebly mutter. “Come on, Sveindís! You wanted to go look for this studio, and we found it, and now you don’t want to go inside? Come on, now. If you don’t go now, you’ll never go. Let’s go. Let’s get this over with now. What’s the worst thing that could happen?” I hopelessly try to muster any viable excuse to get me out of having to walk inside that door at this moment. I cannot explain it. It just feels more frightening than anything I can think of at this moment. My body is trembling, my insides feel like they are going upside down and I start breathing heavier. I stand frozen in place. “There’s no one there...” I say. “Nonsense, I can hear girls talking on the inside! Come on, honey, let’s go. You’ll thank yourself later.” I hear what he is saying, but in my mind, I know I am not going in there. Going in there feels like going to my doom, like I could die. I am terrified. “I’m just going to send an email first.” I say. “No, let’s just finish this now, love, you’ll never go if you don’t go now, don’t let the anxiety take over!” He says, grabs the handlebar on my bike and pulls a little on it to get me to move. My body goes into survival mode and I jerk the handlebar back so he loses his grip. “NO!!” I yell out in a frantic voice. “I’M JUST GOING TO SEND AN EMAIL, OK?” I continue in my desperate tone, sounding a lot more aggressive than I mean to. My heart is thumping up my throat and I feel like I will puke it out sometime soon. “Ok, ok, no problem. I just wanted to help you, that’s all.” He says. We finally turn around on the street and bike the other way. My chest feels better. My heart is beating at a normal pace again. I feel relieved. I know I will have to face this someday, but it is not today. I know my behaviour is irrational. I know I am showing classic signs of avoidance behaviour and I know I should face my fears head on to lessen my subsequent anxiety. I know I need to do that, so I can show my body and mind that there really is nothing to fear. I do not die even if I confront difficult situations that scare me. I know that when I do face these situations, my feelings towards similar events in the future become more positive. I know I can do these things to better manage my anxiety. To control it. I know that. Knowing is not doing. I know my anxiety controls me on so many levels. I know I let it. I will fight it. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I win. Sometimes I lose. Today, I lose. Today, I let my anxiety win.

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“Today is the day. First day of school!” I happily announce to Gyr. I have been awake quite a long time. My bodily sensations usually wake me up very early every time I have something important to attend to in the morning. My anxiety makes sure I will not oversleep. It usually also makes sure I have a hard time falling asleep. My stomach is hurting, as usual. My heart is racing, as usual. Gyr is sleeping on our godforsaken second hand bed. The only one we found at the thrift store. It is made out of light wood and it has a blue mattress. We had it delivered to our place, which is located at the top of the hill, right in the middle of nowhere in our small finnish town. We realized after spending a fair amount of time putting it together, that the wooden plates supporting the mattress are not original like the rest of the bed. Someone must have put them in afterwards, after that same person broke the original support base. This means the plates are a little loose. Causing a lot of noise and rumbling at every tiny bodily movement on the bed. I have slept badly for the last few days because of it. I wake myself up from sound sleep because I am turning around. I can hear the springs when I lie on my stomach with my ear close to the mattress. They make small creaking sounds every time my belly fills with air. We both hated the bed after two days sleeping on it. It is almost not any better than sleeping on the floor, like we did the first three days after we moved to Finland. At least the floor makes no sound when you move. Gyr turns around on the mattress, causing the usual screeching. Nevertheless, he is still half asleep. He can sleep through almost anything. “Huh? Oh, yeah, awesome, sweetie...” He sleepily says.

I lock my bike to the bike stall in front of the sports science building at the University Campus. Yesterday evening I studied the campus map and thoroughly checked where I was going for my first class of master’s studies. I hate the unknown. Walking into a classroom full of strangers is enough for me to begin with. I do not need the added stress of finding the location. My stomach pains and accompanying feeling of overwhelming danger are ever present as I look at the front of the white painted sports building. I know my first class is not in it. For some reason, I wish it was. The university grounds are beautiful. Green grass, tennis courts, tall trees lingering heavy over us. The air is hot. I am wearing jeans and a tank top. This summer has been one of the warmest in decades. I look at the building across from me. It is made out of dark brown bricks. It has the letter “O” on it. That is the building my first master’s degree class is in. I am anxious more than excited. I somehow feel like I must not belong here. The other students are probably a lot more skilled than I am. A lot more knowledgeable than I am. A lot more qualified than I am. Tearing myself down is so

automatic to me, it feels like second nature. I believe everything I tell myself. With all my heart. I am a fake. I am not good enough.

I hear small birds singing in the trees around me as I carefully walk towards O building. I look perfectly normal to anyone walking by, so much that no one pays any special attention to me. People carry on with their day without so much as a second glance at me. Some are strolling from one building to the next. Others have sat down on the grass to enjoy the sunshine. Many are passing by on their bikes. Everyone travels by bikes. I like that. The day is absolutely lovely. Unfortunately, at the moment, I am not enjoying it the least bit. My mind is fixated on the impending danger. My class. Why is this so hard for me? Why are new situations so difficult on me? I walk up to the entrance. A heavy metal door. I push a button on the wall. The heavy door slowly starts to open. My hands are shaking ever so slightly, it is barely visible. I am good at seeming completely normal, even though I am breaking apart on the inside. Silently screaming in terror. My body, my mind, are always alert. Ready to take on danger, or run away. So much so, I often feel exhausted. Terrified at the smallest things. Things most people find so insignificant. Opening emails is something I usually cannot bear to do, even though they come from people I know. I hysterically force my fiancé to read them for me instead. As if I am afraid the message will attack me like a snake hunting its prey. Answering the phone is too much. I just do not do it. Opening the door when the doorbell rings. I rather pretend not to be home. Calling a restaurant to order take-away is terrifying to me. I know my thoughts are irrational. I know my fears are unnecessary. It does not change anything. My body tenses up, my heart beats fast and heavy, my limbs feel cold, my throat becomes dry, I breathe faster and my stomach hurts. I cannot remember a time my stomach did not hurt. Today is no exception. The heavy metal door on building O has finally swung completely open and revealed a white painted hallway. I walk inside. My stomach feels like it is about to burst. My heart is halfway up my pharynx, climbing higher with every step I take inside. I walk past two closed classrooms. Someone is teaching on the inside, I hear discussions going on and someone explaining in Finnish. The third classroom is empty. I realize the classroom in the middle, which is occupied right now, is the one I have my first class in later today. I am a half an hour early. My anxiety renders me unable to be late. It would be too much for me. I do not want the teachers to get a negative impression of me. I already am not good enough to be in this class, anyway. The class is still going on strong behind the closed door. I stand outside, waiting. No one else is there. I am stressed. Am I way too early? Where are the other students? I wonder how they are like. Should I be standing here? Why is no one here? Am I in the correct place? Is this the right classroom? For sure? I

slip my fingers into the pocket on my jacket and grab my phone. I assure myself this is, indeed, the correct classroom. Going over it over and over again. Building O, classroom 114. This is building O. I saw the letter on the building when I entered. Building O on the campus map I found on the University website corresponds to this building. Classroom 114. This is classroom 114. I am in the correct place. My mind keeps repeating these facts to soothe myself. It does not work. It never does. It is a never-ending cycle. Minutes slowly go by. The classroom door swings open. Students stream out of it, one by one. A few are still sitting at the tables, gathering their things. Two are having a passionate discussion with the teacher. I cannot understand a word. Finnish sounds so alien to me. Fascinating nonetheless. Finally, everyone from the former class has left the classroom. It only adds to my discomfort. More choices. More uncertainty. Should I go inside? Sit down and wait? The tables are lined up like an U. Where should I sit? In the middle? At the end? What if this really is not the classroom, after all. Maybe I misread. I know I did not, I still do not trust myself. My brain keeps firing danger signals and my body responds the only way it knows how; by being alert. On edge. Heart beating, chest rising, stomach aching, mind racing. After a few more minutes have trickled by, I am still the only one waiting in the otherwise empty, white hallway. The class is only a few minutes away. Maybe I have made some terrible mistake after all. Maybe they are all gathered someplace else, and I am here, standing in front of an empty classroom like an idiot. It is unbearable. I turn around and look for a restroom. It is located right next to the entrance to the building. I go inside. Standing there, not knowing what to do next. All of a sudden I hear a group of voices talking. People are entering the building. I freeze. My heart might go out of my chest at any moment. I carefully listen to the voices. I hear they are moving. I hear them moving into the hallway of classroom 114. I wash my hands, fix my hair a little, hope to god those were my classmates, and open the door into the unknown.

Walking quickly towards my classroom, I now see it is full of students. People my age. Some seem a little older than me. Everyone is chatting, putting their bags on the tables and sitting down. I am anxious and stressed. I tell myself I am excited, but I am probably more afraid than anything else. Luckily, there is an empty desk and chair between two guys, right in the middle. I am terrified of sitting down there, but I am even more terrified of not getting a seat. Driven by fear, I quickly rush to the tables and sit down in the middle. Why is this so hard? Some of the students are talking like they already know each other, and most of them are sitting in pairs or groups. My heart drops into my stomach. That frightens me. I do not want to be the odd one out. I wish I knew someone. I wish I could have had Gyr with me. He is my friendly face. My security blanket. Mundane tasks like starting a new class are

insuperable for me, and I do not know why. I am so used to it, I do not even see it. It is just who I am. How I am. I am my anxiety.

The class quickly goes by. Our professor, a short friendly looking woman with glasses and middle length dark hair, who always looks like she has a hint of a smile on her face, has spent the last minutes welcoming us to Finland and to this University. She has a calm and soothing voice and speaks perfect English, with the accent I will come to recognize as characteristic of native Finns. I am terrified. Frozen behind my normal mask. I am sitting in the middle of the room along with fourteen others. Young people from various countries. They all seem so calm and collected. Then, finally the lovely teacher says she wants everyone to get to know each other a little better. She starts explaining: “I would like everyone to take turns, where each of you introduces yourself, tell us your name and what you have studied before, then please pick an item you have with you now, tell us about it and how it describes something about you.” She begins, by mentioning a jewellery she has on and the story behind it. I am absolutely mortified. This feels so foreign to me. A professor, sharing a detail about herself with us, showing us a vulnerable side to herself? When I started University three years ago back in Iceland, there were 300 of us in the classroom and each professor would begin the class by respectfully telling us not to send them emails. Most of my teachers did not know me at all, did not recognize my face, did not know my name, had no idea I was their student, even if I had sat in first row throughout their course for four months each semester. Now I am sitting in the first class in my master’s studies and my professor is talking to us softly. Being a normal, human being. It is a completely unknown realm to me, and it silently frightens me. After all, every new situation does. The unknown. She offers the first student on her left-hand side to keep the conversation going. The dark haired, slightly bearded guy tells us about himself and then shares a detail related to an item he has with him and how it defines him as a person. The story was really good. That sends shots of panic throughout my body. I have a hard time listening to the next story. The only thing on my mind is how I do not have any item even remotely as good. I have no great object! Why did I not take something with me at home? I try to glance down into my bag without anyone noticing ...It is almost empty. The only thing I have is an organizer, a red book which I use a lot to keep myself organized...Yeah, I say to myself, I’ll just talk about that! I really cannot focus on what the others are saying about their items because I have been so stressed with finding something to say that does not sound completely stupid. How to talk about it without the others thinking I am weird. A guy and a girl have also shared information about their items. I am getting more and more nervous. Their stories sound so deep and well thought out. I had not expected that. I



had expected some awkward introductions and short one or two sentences on their item. Quite the contrary, they are sharing deep and meaningful information about themselves, each and every one of them talking for a few minutes. Some of them even making the others laugh warmly. I feel increasingly more stressed and fearful. Is my story good enough? I do not want to sound stupid. I wish I could be funny. That is too much of a risk, though. The only thing worse than saying nothing is saying something that was supposed to be funny and is not. Why are they so good at this and I am not? Yet another guy shares a really great story about him. How can they all be so good at this? I am going to look like an idiot. Then, a dark haired girl is next. She takes up her organizer, a small blue book similar to mine, and shares with us how she manages her days with it and how she is a very organized person. Her story was really good. She also made us laugh. I would not have managed to do that at all. My heart sinks to my stomach. OH, GOD now I cannot say exactly the same thing! There are only two people between us, and this girl has already shared a story about an organizer, I cannot do the same! Especially since her story was so much better than mine. God. This cannot get any more horrible. I will look like the only fool who has a problem with such a simple assignment. Think, think, THINK! What other items do I have? Well, almost none, as I decided to empty out my bag before coming to class, because it felt so heavy to bike with it on. Why, Sveindís, why? Why did I have to do that? I am so stupid. Concentrate. What do I have? Well, I have a water bottle and the book with me. Nothing else. What the hell should I say about the water bottle? Everyone is sharing really intimate details about themselves and here I come: “Hey, everybody, this is the item I brought with me today, a water bottle. Because I like water.” Seriously. No. My stomach acids are climbing up into my mouth. My heart feels like it will burst anytime soon. I cannot say that. Who does not like water? What kind of idiot do I want them to think I am? What to do? The guy next to me also has an incredibly personal item with him and shares a great story about how it relates to his sport and thus the most defining aspect of him. I have nothing, absolutely nothing related to my sport, and I am also scared to share my sport with the group. Maybe the teachers are not open towards it, as I had already discussed with my thesis advisor back in Iceland. The seconds’ tick by and my hands feel cold. My heart is in overdrive and I can hardly feel my legs anymore. There is no possibility of escape. No fighting. My body has a hard time to come to terms with it. The guy finishes his story. Finally, we have reached the middle of our U shape. Me. My turn. Everyone looks at me. A few seconds of silence go by. I shift my weight on the chair. The friendly professor gestures me to introduce myself. “Hi everyone. My name is Sveindís, I come from Iceland, have a bachelor in psychology and I brought with me a water bottle...Because I like to stay

hydrated.” My voice is almost shaking from the burden of sounding as normal as possible. A few more seconds of silence go by. My heart almost stops beating. Thankfully, the lovely teacher deems this acceptable and we move on to the next person. The relief is immense; however I still feel ashamed and irritated with myself for sharing such a stupid story. Seriously. “I like water” would have sounded better. Who would not want to stay hydrated? Everyone has super cool stories and I sounded like a complete dork. My face is probably so apple red right now, I could have introduced it as a separate item I brought with me. That is clearly what I should have done. In all honesty, I should have taken a deep breath and said: “Hey, everyone. My name is Sveindís and today I brought my anxiety with me. I think it’s fitting to introduce you to my anxiety, for my anxiety is with me every moment of every day of my life. It troubles my sleep. It facilitates my early wake ups. It makes me do things I do not like to do, like ignoring texts from friends, not answering the phone, over thinking the smallest situations, worrying my family will die, second questioning absolutely everything, feeling scared my friends do not like me for talking too much or violently tearing myself down for not being good enough, pretty enough, funny enough or smart enough. No matter what I do, my anxiety is with me every step of the way, whispering discouraging words into my ear. Telling me I can’t. I shouldn’t. I’m not. My anxiety is very psychological, in that my mind keeps telling me how incompetent I am, but it is also deeply physiological. When I am stressed, I have a hard time eating. I violently and uncontrollably retch when walking or talking too fast. My stomach almost always feels like the acids are burning through it. My heart feels like it will pump out of my chest. My muscles feel tense and I often get headaches. On bad days, I want to hide myself in my apartment and cry for no special reason. During those days, going outside to meet people is too much for me. Even on good days, my anxiety affects me deeply. Because of it, I am extremely irritable. My patience is very low, especially for my loved ones. I lash out at them for asking me how I am or for talking about something that bores me. I have screamed and yelled at them more often than I want to admit. I need constant reassurance when making decisions and I frequently need validation and acceptance. Anxiety is such a huge part of me, of my essence, my soul, my being, that I don’t even realize it myself. Anxiety has been a brightly coloured red thread throughout my whole life, so much that I don’t even see it. I hate my anxiety, but I can’t live without it. I am dependent on the negative feelings, in a sad, twisted way. I am dependent on them because I’m never without them. If I don’t feel anxious over anything specific, I feel anxious over not being anxious. I am so used to my negative emotions, I feel like I constantly need to worry or stress. Otherwise I do not feel prepared. My negative emotions feel like home. I need my anxiety, as

much as it needs me.” And that would have been the most perfect, honest, intimate story about me there ever was.

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The bike ride from home is quite scary at times. The road, a narrow pathway leading downhill from our apartment building is so steep, it is almost vertical. Biking down every day seems like an incredible test of bravery. The rest of the road then winds harshly like the back of a Bactrian camel. My legs feel wobbly for a while after. I still feel a tingling sensation in my thighs as I stand in front of our classroom along with a few of my classmates. I am still self-conscious and a little hesitant around the others, although they all seem extremely friendly and nice people. I just continually have this fear of not being as competent as the rest. Some of them have sports science degrees. I feel really incompetent in comparison because I feel I lack the preparation they have. Why do I only have this one psychology degree? Why did I not study more before coming here? Why did I put myself in this situation? Why was I chosen by the teachers? Maybe I bragged too much in my application and motivation letter. I made things sound bigger than they are. I am a liar. A fake. A phony. They will realize.

Still, being around my new classmates is relatively easy. I feel included. I feel good around them. They are very nice people. I guess it might be because most of the people I have met are foreigners living in a new country, just like me. Maybe we all share similar characteristics, we might all be a little more open to new experiences and more adventurous than the normal person. I really like this atmosphere of openness and acceptance. “A four-hour early morning class on a Monday” one of my classmates’ sighs to the rest of us. “Is there no justice in this world?” He jokes. We all smile and chuckle. We totally understand. I do not mind early classes, though. I was wide awake at 6 AM anyway. I wake up from hunger and stomach pains on days I am stressed. Sunday nights are especially hard on my body. It is like the change from a weekend off, going back into routine, really messes up with my system. My stomach ache then keeps me awake for hours and hours. I have to go pee every 10 minutes and my limbs feel restless. I then start to get anxious about not falling asleep and not getting enough rest, which drives me even further away from actually falling asleep. Then I wake up very early, and feel hungry. I have come to realize the feeling, although it is a very real feeling of hunger that only can be satisfied with food, is only another expression of my anxiety. Sometimes I eat and still feel hungry. Therefore, early morning classes are not what bothers me at this moment. I am relieved I found my classmates, it means I am in the right

building, in front of the right classroom. I therefore do not have to worry anymore that I am mixing appointments, as I always do when arriving somewhere. I can start to worry about the next thing, which currently is me not being qualified for this master's class.

The class goes on as normal. Everyone seems unfazed with my presence. Like I belong there. I know, though, that anytime soon, they will find out I do not. "...You do pole fitness?" One of my classmates asks me. I finally decided to just let it out and see what would happen. We are doing an assignment where each of us tells the rest of the class three things the other do not know about them. It seemed like a perfect opportunity. Jump into the deep end of the pool. I nod. I am shaking ever so slightly. Terrified at what they will think. What they will say. "Wow! That's amazing, it's really hard." He continues, genuinely impressed. The others seem equally impressed and interested. "How cool!" One of them says. "You must have real upper body strength to do that." Another pitches in. My two teachers are even smiling at me, like nothing had happened. I did not cause a crazy stir up. I did not shock them. I did not lose their respect. I smile, I even chuckle a little. I enthusiastically nod and agree with everything they are saying. It is hard. You do require a lot of strength. I feel my bodily sensations going crazy. I am so relieved I almost need to cry. I am so happy. I am beyond thankful this is everyone's reaction. I feel some tension releasing from deep within my stomach. I feel less anxious. Maybe I do belong here, after all. Maybe I am good enough, after all.

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"Moi!" A woman with short dark hair greets me as I walk in the door of the pole studio. I have learned this little word means "Hi" in Finnish. I stand in the hallway of the studio. Girls are walking passing me to go inside and some are leaving the studio, they must have been in an earlier class. The wall on my left is painted in a light green colour and the rest is sort of an off-white. The dark-haired woman is standing at the small cashier in the space between the changing room and the pole room. I smile at her. Here I am, finally facing my fears. I had emailed the studio a few days earlier, asking about the schedule, prices and so on. I immediately got a very warm and welcoming reply. I signed up for a training group and the first class was tonight. Tuesday evenings. Every other Saturday. "Hi" I say as I take off my shoes and then walk up to the cashier. Now I can see the pole space on my left-hand side. We are standing on a level higher than the pole studio so you get a good look over it. I count 13 poles. The same amount as at my studio back home. Some of them are orange and some of

them are dark green, the same colours as the studio's logo. A few girls are already sitting at some of the poles. I quickly scan the room to locate a good pole for myself. Then I look at the black-haired woman. She asks me something in Finnish. "Oh, sorry, I don't speak Finnish, but I was in contact with one of you about me signing up?" I keep smiling, I feel nervous, but receiving that positive reply on my email has strengthened my spirits, I know I can be here, I know someone expects me. That feels very comforting.

After sorting everything out with the lovely black haired woman and I have changed into my pole wear I timidly walk towards the staircase leading into the pole hall. A few girls are standing or sitting in the hall, waiting for the class to begin. I am the only foreigner in the room. "Hi!" A slender looking, blond girl says to me. "Hey!" I reply, smiling. "You're new to the class?" She states, asking to start a conversation more so than to hear the answer, as we all know I am. "Yeah! My name is Sveindís, I just moved here from Iceland." I say. "I'm Viola, I'm from Finland and I've been training here for a few months, welcome!" We spend a few minutes exchanging small talk. I am so thrilled someone took the initiative to chat with me. I definitely feel more at ease knowing I am welcome in this environment. I love my pole studio back home; how open and close-knit the community is. This pole studio seems the same. I love the pole community. It seems to be packed with like-minded people who are diverse, open-minded, welcoming and accepting. It is full of women who cheer other women on. Women who love to revel in each other's accomplishments. I have never experienced such a strong feeling of acceptance and unconditional love. Humans are social animals We want to be accepted. We want a sense of belonging. My heart, my anxious soul, my tense body finds peace in pole class. In pole class I forget my problems, I chat, I laugh, I joke, I have fun with the other women. I leave class rejuvenated. My problems seem insignificant after I have had endorphins pumping through my veins in pole class. I sleep better at night. I look forward to learning new things, challenge my body in new ways, show myself I am stronger than yesterday. In pole class I belong.

"So how did you like the class?" Viola asks me as we gather our stuff, clean the poles and head up towards the changing room. "It was great! I am so thankful the teacher took the time to explain to me in English if there was something I had a hard time understanding, she really didn't have to do that, but it made me feel extremely welcome, since all of you are Finnish and she was only doing it for me." I answer, genuinely touched by the gesture. "Yeah! Nice to meet you, thanks for class, see you next time!" She says and waves to me after strapping a bicycle helmet on her head. "See you!" I wave back at her, extremely excited to see her and the rest of the group in the next class. She looks like a great gal. I am so

thankful and happy to have been so easily accepted into this new community of pole dancers. I belong. I hope I can make friends.

I put my white bicycle helmet on and fasten it under my chin. I watch a few of the girls' head either up or down the road, probably going home. Viola bikes up the same incredibly steep little hill as I bike to go home. I take my time unlocking the chain on my bike, fixing my helmet and gloves before I head the same direction. It is a unconscious, albeit deliberate act. I do not want to have to bike past her on my way home, I feel it is stupid since we already said our goodbyes. I hate basic confrontations like that, and I do not know why. Running into someone in the mall, exchanging quick "hello, nice to see you" sentences is unbearable for me, for some reason. Therefore I have developed the habit of never looking around me when I am running errands. So, I do not have to meet people I know. So, I do not have to have the dreaded small talk. Even though I love being around people and love chats and discussions, spontaneously running into someone is scary to me. I hate the unknown. I hate the unprepared. It is all rooted in my anxiety. I fear not being prepared. I fear.

I am out of breath and panting after only reaching the middle of the steep little hill from the pole studio towards the University. I have to stop and walk my bike up the rest for biking the whole way is just too much on my body after a long pole practice. After all, I have a half an hour of biking before me before I can reach the safety of my apartment. After I reach the top of the small but ridiculously steep slope, there is another, gentler, slope. Biking home is so tiresome, sweaty and annoying. Finally, I reach somewhat even surface and the few minutes where the surface remains even is the happiest moment I have before the first large slope takes over. There are not many people around. I bike on empty pavement. Not a soul in sight. Well, almost. Quite the distance in front of me I catch the glimpse of someone biking up the steep slope in front of me. A being dressed in black. I automatically wonder if it is Viola. She had left the studio the same path I did. As I begin cycling up the slope by the Hospital the person in front of me jumps off their bike. The steepness has defeated them and they continue the way walking the bike. Even that is difficult. I know from experience. Is it Viola? The bike looks strangely like hers. She reaches the top of the hill and I automatically slow down to increase the distance between us. It is her. I am sure. I really like her and I would like to get to know her in pole classes, I was thankful she struck up a conversation with me, but still I cannot bring myself to catch up to her and tell her we seem to be going the same way, at least for now. I convince myself she will soon turn where I will keep going forward. Telling myself her place must be in another neighbourhood, albeit one close to mine since she has been going the same way as me, this whole time. I just cannot bring myself to

bike up behind her and shout at her or bring attention to me. I feel so stupid when saying bye to people and then going the same way they do. It feels awkward. Then I feel stupid for being awkward, which makes me even more awkward. I try to block the negative feelings away but that same feeling of someone watching my back creeps up on me and I have flashbacks of the time I snuck into my neighbour's apartment. At that moment, shame always seems to drip down my spine. I feel incredibly unreasonable for switching to the other side of the street and for slowing down so I will not catch up on her when I finally end up on the hill. I hope she will end up going another way so I can stop feeling so awkward and guilty for not being able to just hurry up behind a person I like and greet them, ask them where they are going. At the same time, my mind keeps telling me that I would just be bothering her. Maybe she just acted nice because she is nice, maybe she does not like me at all. Maybe she will become annoyed and frustrated with me if I were to greet her after she had thought she had said goodbye to me. Maybe ... Maybe ... Maybe ...

To my stress-induced horror, she keeps going the exact same way I usually do when heading home. I follow behind her, keeping a comfortable distance so she does not notice me. After all, how could I explain to her that it seems like I have been following her without letting her know about it this whole time? She might assume I do not like her, which is totally not the case. How can you explain to someone you just met that your thought patterns and sensations within your body are out of order? How can you tell someone fear and worry and unedifying ways of coping define your every thought, reaction, movement? How can you explain the feeling of your body constantly sensing threat in every corner? How can you explain and still have them look at you like you are normal? Like you are not crazy?

Right at this moment, my intestines are twirled around like clothes in a dryer. She bikes on, still a few dozen meters ahead of me. She has not noticed me. I silently keep wishing and hoping she will continue and that I will stop in front of the steep, incredibly narrow little path leading almost vertically up to my neighbourhood. It is irrational and I know it but I cannot stop. She then does what I feared most. She stops in front of the narrow path. I cannot avoid this any longer. I cannot flee. I cannot wait for her to reach the top of the hill, it takes a long time and you have to walk unless you have the stamina and strength of a marathon cyclist. She would notice me walking behind her at some point and then she might become offended that I did not greet her, like I was trying to ignore her. She would think I do not like her. The fear of that thought and the fear of embarrassment are stronger than my fear of having an awkward conversation with her or worse, an awkward silence with her, going up the hill.

I bike up right behind her. She hears someone closing in on her and turns her face towards the sound. She sees me, becoming genuinely surprised. “Oh, hey!” She yells out. “You live in this neighbourhood?” She asks me. “Oh, wow, hi!” I yell back, with my laughter I mask how nervous I am. “What way did you bike over here? I didn’t see you at all!” She keeps going “I didn’t realize we live in the same neighbourhood! What a coincidence! How funny!” She says, smiling and chuckling. “Oh yeah! Me neither! I just came up behind you realizing it’s you!” I lie. It is better to say a white lie like this than have to explain to her how irrationally I behave to soothe my own anxiety. I feed into it and I do not want to admit it. By telling someone I am finally admitting it to myself. I can not do that.

We walk up the steep path and it is wonderful. Viola is such an easy going person, chatting with her feels natural and unprohibited. I feel stupid for worrying so much about spending a few minutes with her or for thinking it would be awkward. I even feel a little sad when our ways part after the few minutes we manage to spend together.

When we happily tell people about the time we met, the white lie version is the one I let live while the real story I lay to rest deep within my soul. For a cute little chance meeting of two women on similar paths in this world sounds so much better than the reality of one of them being so riddled with anxiety over spontaneous situations she would almost rather hide until the other one has left so she does not have to confront her irrational fears.

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“I’m so happy we met!” Viola says as we walk our bikes back home after a great pole lesson. In the last few months, we have become increasingly closer, talking every day, chatting away about anything and nothing. She is so easy to be around. I love how we encourage and complement each other on everything. There is no jealousy or competitiveness going on between us. Nothing that could ruin our friendship. I look at her, and I know we will be friends for the rest of our lives. “Me too! I’m so happy I moved here! Who would have thought, the odds of us meeting? And it’s all because of pole” we both laugh. “Pole is everything.” Viola says.

As I sit down in front of the computer in my little Finnish student apartment, Viola’s words linger in my mind. Pole is everything. Pole dancing has given me immense strength, flexibility I never thought I would ever have, it has shown me I am more capable than I dared to think I was, it has taught me I can do anything, as long as I practice, it has shown me that mistakes are only stepping stones towards success, it has given me an outlet, tools to better



manage my anxiety, it has given me passion and drive, friends in different parts of the world, and now it has given me my best friend. Pole is everything.

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“I really love your blog!” A student at my studio says to me after the pole class I just finished teaching. I wished I could become a teacher, and here I stand, a year later, teaching. Teaching for the first time was incredibly stressful, but incredibly giving. I feel immense warmth, gratification and happiness after each class. “Awesome class, by the way, thanks! See you next week!” She says and flashes a huge smile. I smile and thank her for her wonderful words. Finally, I am beginning to learn to accept compliments. The only way you can accept a compliment, is if you believe it. I have finally started to believe. My blog has helped immensely. I have gotten a lot of compliments because of it. People like my writing style.

The launching of my blog was hugely successful, garnering thousands of visitors in the first day. It was more than I ever expected. I had decided to open a blog to write about pole dancing. Pole dancing means so much to me, and I have so many thoughts, ideas, opinions, that I never have voiced publicly. I have always loved to write, writing Harry Potter fan fiction as a child and writing about health and well-being in various Icelandic media. Always afraid of making mistakes. Always afraid of saying something too vague, or too opinionated. Afraid of stirring feathers. Of people becoming upset with me. Of someone arguing with me. Finally, my love for writing overpowered my fear of judgement. I opened a website and began writing. A joy it has been. So many have contacted me to tell me they love reading what I write. I never would have imagined. It is good to put yourself out there, let others know what you are thinking. You will be appreciated for your honesty. You will find like-minded people. I have learned this, and I am so incredibly happy I decided to do this. I feel proud over some of the blogs I have written. It takes me a long time to put them together, but I am genuinely impressed with myself afterwards. Finally, I am slowly learning how incredibly talented and capable I am, finally I am learning that you can be proud of yourself, even openly. Finally, I am learning that powerful people lift others up, encourage them but do not tear them down. The pole community generally seems to be filled with positive, genuine, accepting people. I feel so accepted, so secure. I belong.

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“Thank you for suggesting I should try pole dancing.” I quietly say to Gyr with a smile. “I really had no idea what I was getting myself into, when I walked in there that day in January, a year ago today. But it feels like I’ve always been doing this... It’s just a year, but it feels like forever... It’s so funny...How something you’ve only done for such a short time can have such profound effect on you, your life, your identity.” I say and sigh. We are eating out, celebrating my 24-year-old birthday and our 4 year anniversary of being together. We are in a Viking themed restaurant, surrounded by warmth, dark furniture and Nordic elements. I am wearing nice clothes, some makeup, I have my favourite perfume on and my favourite man sitting across from me. His eyes are twinkling and he lovingly smiles at me. It is easy to feel so happy your heart could burst, even in spite of the fact that Gyr decided to shave his beard into a moustache earlier this day. For some reason, he likes moustaches and he always seems to have a moustache when there is an occasion to take a photo. Birthdays, reunions, Christmas. I joke about it annoying me and we regularly laugh. With his blonde locks and a thick moustache, sitting in this Viking themed restaurant, he reminds me of Asterix, the character from the French comics. “I’ve finally learned to embrace myself, I feel” I say. “Pole dancing has made me realize I am stronger than I thought, both physically and mentally. I can do things I never thought I could before. I also think looking at my body in the mirrors, day in and out in pole class has made me more accepting towards it, I’ve grown to like how I look and even began being proud of myself, my body and my strength. I’ve even realized that it’s ok to feel proud and to admit that to others! I know you’ve told me there’s so much I have to offer and so much I know, but I’ve never known how to actually *believe* you. Pole dancing, both the sport and the community worldwide, my new friends all around the globe, and my blog have all helped me reach that point. I finally believe I am smart, pretty, funny and competent.” I smile. For the first time in my life I blatantly praise myself without feeling full of myself. For the first time in my life, I know I am telling the truth, and I am happy. “Yeah!” Gyr agrees with me. “I can tell how positively pole dancing has been impacting your life... You feel more secure, happier in your skin and you obviously are more at rest after a pole practice. You clearly manage your anxiety a lot better, when you pole dance.” He beams with pride. “I’m so proud of you, love. I just want you to be happy.” He says and raises his glass. “To us” He says. I raise my glass to meet his. “To us.”

## **Discussion**

The following interpretation of the story is autoethnographic, although Ellis (2004) argues that the story in itself is the analysis where evocation and representation create the results. Each reader will bring their own world, their own stories, to the text and come to different conclusions than the one before them. This, Ellis (2004) says opens up a generalization through the readers, and the conversation is opened up, rather than closed down. I will, however, offer backstories and my interpretations on some of the stories included in my autoethnography. As Denzin (1997) pointed out, there are multiple truths that exist and stories are versions of those truths. Each story, therefore, is one version of the truth. Every person has a different experience, different thoughts and ideas, and therefore anyone can choose to form their own conclusions based on their own pre-existing knowledge and how they interpret the data. My interpretation is my truth, which I support by existing theories and research in the field. Since I am the researcher and the subject, I acknowledge my own preconceptions and biases and admit fully that I am affected by my former knowledge. My preconceptions therefore affected both the process of writing, as well as the following interpretation.

### **Exploration**

In the beginning, I set out with a goal of showcasing the positive effects pole dancing had had on both my body and mind. As a sufferer of generalized anxiety disorder, I have discussed often with my partner how necessary this type of exercise is for me, because abstaining from it for longer periods of time causes me to feel tired, moody, I have difficulty sleeping and my anxiety becomes much more difficult to control. This is what is known as ‘the exercise withdrawal syndrome’ which researchers have found to affect regular exercisers who temporarily abstain from physical activity (Berlin, Kop & Deuster, 2006; Kop, Weinstein, Deuster, Whittaker & Tracy, 2008; Morris, Steinberg, Sykes & Salmon, 1990). Being an extremely active pole dance athlete the last three years, in addition to being a pole dancing teacher the last two years, I am confident I experience exercise withdrawal when not exercising. The logical way, then, was to incorporate the positive feelings regular pole dancing has had on my mental disease as well as my self-image and confidence. Anxiety is such a central part of my being, but that is something I had not realized so strongly until I wrote this autoethnography. I knew it had affected me a great deal, and that it had probably

been with my since I was a child, but the process of writing, reviewing, re-writing and reading literature made me realize how strongly anxiety affects me, every minute of every day. I did as Freeman (2010) had pointed out, I looked over the past from where I am standing in the present, with my current knowledge and experience, and saw past events in a new light. The writing process allowed me to draw connections between different events, that would not have been possible if I had not consciously decided to review my life.

The evocative part of the ethnography was challenging. Ellis (2004) has said how writing evocatively about past, personal and painful experiences can take a toll, mentally and emotionally. I experienced that fully. Writing brought me back into the moment of the memory, and as I tried to describe the feelings I felt at the time, my body would experience the same symptoms. It felt overwhelming at times. I felt exhausted. Angry. Ashamed. Scared. Annoyed. Sad. All of the stories represent an extremely raw vulnerability, a side of me I do not want to show, let alone write about in detail for the world to see. However, as Ellis (2004) has pointed out, the process was worth it in the end for it was cathartic. This exploration made me understand myself better, which will make me better at understanding others.

## **The stories**

### **In childhood, it begins**

The first stories in the autoethnography represent my childhood. I wanted to highlight the fact that anxiety is something that has followed me all my life, even though I did not get a diagnosis until I had lived two decades. I was concerned with showing, that even though my life has been extremely safe, warm and supportive and I had a wonderful childhood, anxiety has still found a way to creep up on me in various ways. I write of this for anxiety is often seen as a teenage-, young adult or adult disease, even though the statistics show “that 50% of mental illness in adult life (excluding dementia) starts before age 15 and 75% by age 18.” (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012: p. 2). The fact is, a person with anxiety has suffered a long time before they get help, if they ever do. The stories I chose to tell are but a glimpse of my childhood, but they represent the times I felt emotions overpower me, when I felt as if the world was about to end. I had no name for what I was feeling, and so I thought it was normal. As Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2010) found out in a systematic review, children and young people often lack the knowledge and education on mental illness. In my childhood,

even though I am not very old, mental illness was not readily talked about and most referencing to mental disease came from pop culture. Gulliver et al., (2010) pointed out that young people feel mental illness is stigmatized which barriers their willingness to seek help. Finally, in my late teens, I begged my mom for an appointment with a psychologist. Even then, her first reaction was to say that everyone feels anxious. It is as if persistence has been carved into the minds and bodies of older generations. No matter how tough times are, you are supposed to power through. Of course, in the end my mom had me see a psychologist who helped me in so many ways. I do not want to think about how it had been, had my mother denied, for it would both have been a denial of me getting help, I would have perceived it her disbelief I had a problem. That this was how I was supposed to be, feel and behave, and it would never get better, for it was normal. I am thankful she accepted my cries for help. I hope that with my generation things are changing, people can be more open about their struggles and seek help without judgement. I hope the stigma of mental disease is fading. Stories such as mine hopefully bring us closer to that.

### **Society, when does sexualization begin?**

The story from my birthday party is one readily remembered by both me, my sister and my mother. We have talked about it once in a while throughout the years. It only came back to me after I had finished writing about my football coach. I had sat a long while writing and editing, and all of a sudden, this memory bloomed into my consciousness. I found it interesting to include because of the connection it has with sexualization and stigma, which I feel connects it to pole dancing in a subtle way. Society has an interesting connection to female sexuality, where it will have stores that offer thong underwear for children and women's bodies are used to sell anything from lingerie to car parts, yet at the same time this very same society despises a woman being an autonomic agent where she shows her sexuality. Therefore society despises exotic dancers, and by association, stigmatizes pole dancing as a legitimate physical exercise. Society cannot stand uncontrolled female sexuality and has not since the industrial age brought on widespread fear that the morality of young working women would be spoiled, which brought on large scale moral reform campaigns and new policies of female sexual regulation. The government of the united states began surveilling and controlling any expression of sexuality that did not conform to a marital, reproductive framework (Odem, 1996). This fear of women's increased social and sexual

autonomy and subsequent demonization has infested western societies throughout the years and become accepted. As children, we are not deprived of the effects pop culture has on us, where these standards are overtly and covertly taught in every aspect. I knew, in my childish heart, that this type of underwear was not for me. Yet, there I stood, with thong underwear in my size. What was society telling me? Wear the underwear, but feel ashamed for doing it. Be sexualized, but feel uncomfortable with it.

### **Children's sports: Fun, or life and death?**

The story about my football game marked the end of my otherwise short lived but intense football career. A tragically common story. Child participates sports, overworks themselves to the point of injury, at which point the child is forgotten completely. They always say that sports are about the team spirit, friends and fun activities, but unfortunately for many they are about winning, no matter the cost. With this story, my point was to show how I had been a very active child, very much driven and motivated in my sport. My knee problem and my coach's lack of empathy diminished my interest. Football just was not for me. As a self-conscious teenager who had a need to do right, I would have needed a more supporting exercise environment. Pole studios that I have tried in different countries of the world seem to have an air of positivity and supportiveness around them. Although I only have experience of few and this still is a relatively young sport, I would like to see more of pole dancing offered for children, in the same way gymnastics is offered. Bodyweight exercises that focus on stamina, strength and mobility are very beneficial for the body (e.g., Janssen & LeBlanc, 2015; Hagger-Johnson & Shahab, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017). Pole dancing requires all those factors and is therefore an ideal alternative activity to offer children and adolescents, as well as adults, if other types of exercise are not seen as interesting.

### **Inside the mind of a GAD sufferer**

Throughout my life, grades have controlled me. I was good if I got good grades, or so I thought. The catch was that I never got good enough grades. I always wanted to do better than I had done. Nothing was ever enough. As I worked on the literature review for this thesis, I came across studies done by Clance and Imes (1978) and Clance's (1985) definition of 'the impostor phenomenon'. I was moved to tears. It felt as if I was reading a mirror, where the

page was a mirror reflecting myself. I felt immense connection to the description of the woman who always seems to think she is not good enough, not qualified enough, no matter how well she does. I feel this thought pattern began to formulate in my story about art class where we were drawing. Based on that story, and many more similar to it, I feel as if socialization of our culture had an effect on the future development of my impostor belief. I do not feel this is how I was born. We are product of our cultures, more so than anyone can realize. As I am only human, I admit my biases and faults. As I read through the research articles on the impostor syndrome, I found it to resonate perfectly with my autoethnography. Reading about the family history of impostors. While reading, the memories of the standardized English test burst into my mind. I certainly have an older sibling who is very intelligent that I kept comparing myself to. Although my parents never compared any of us siblings and never talked about any of us being better than the other, I did often hear from older schoolmates and teachers how smart my older brother was. I felt as if there was a high standard set by my brother which I had to hold. It was common for me to hear me being compared to my older brother in the school setting. In addition, I had a classmate whom I liked. We either shared the highest grades on some tests and then either one of us got a higher grade on other tests. I felt as if I was always just a step behind both those characters in my life, whom I admired and in some ways, saw as my competition. My teacher, a respected authority figure, saying those words to me only cemented my beliefs of my own inferiority. Throughout the years, I learned to attribute my (what I felt was) lack of roaring success to internal, stable characteristics. Any sign of major success on my part I would explain away by external attribution, saying I got lucky or that there must have been some misunderstanding (Heider, 1958). The impostor beliefs, the torment, fear and hysteria associated with them followed me all through university, throughout my bachelor degree and the first year of my master's. I included a story from the days of my final exams one semester when I was doing my bachelor's. Which semester out of the six semesters I did? It could be the first one. Or the last. Or somewhere in between. All of the final exams preparations were the same. It became a ritual. I felt so strongly, all the feelings I read about in descriptions of 'the impostor phenomenon' (Clance, 1985; Clance & Imes, 1978). My desperation to prove that this, indeed, was the moment everything would end. No matter how illogical I must have sounded, every time, repeating the same words, each time disproving them by a large sum, I felt so strongly that I indeed was going to fail at that moment. No matter how often I had succeeded in similar situations before (Bandura, 1989) my disbelief in my own ability persisted.

The story of my tattooer is the most extreme case I have related to my fear of reading messages and emails. I wanted it included for it shows the illogical thought patterns a person with generalized anxiety disorder has. It is a road riddled with self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal, 1968). My irrational fears caused me to avoid situations where I was sure there was danger, even though no signs of such had been shown. My avoidance brought on negative reactions from others, which further fuelled my fears and future avoidance behaviours. I began extreme avoidance behaviour of this kind in my late teens. At the moment of the story of my tattooer, I had already been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I had learned that my behaviour stemmed from my anxiety. I understand now, as I look back on those moments, I did not fully grasp what that meant in reality. Only through the active reflection of this autoethnography did I fully realize how deeply my anxiety affects almost every thought pattern I have. I have read the diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder often throughout my studies and known they describe me, yet I never understood how deeply the factors described in those criteria's affect my thinking and behaviour.

The stories from my first day at a Finnish university, finding my Finnish pole studio and biking home the same way as a person I had just said goodbye to are, like the story of the tattooer, included to portray the irrational thought patterns and extreme negative emotions that go on in a GAD person's mind and body at any given moment. Those stories are written with the goal of having the reader immerse themselves in the experience, to fully experience how it is to be in normal situations yet feel on the verge of screaming, crying, fleeing or hiding, sometimes all at the same time.

### **Finding a suitable exercise activity**

I felt it important to highlight how regular exercise at a gym did not appeal to me, for this is an opinion shared by many people and many women (Azevedo et al., 2007; Skidmore-Edwards & Sackett, 2016). Even though I had been an active child and had resumed regular exercise long enough to be considered in the stage of maintenance according to the trans theoretical model of behaviour change (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) and had even began blogging about health and exercise, it had not induced inherent feelings of motivation or made me like going to the gym, as I thought would happen if I became a regular exerciser. I still found it boring and battled with myself every day to keep doing it. I did not see any goal in mind, other than perhaps to improve my fitness level or my physique. That did not feel



enough for me, I wanted a goal, like those I had when I practiced football. Something to aim towards. I felt aimless and alone at the gym.

Researchers have long known that participating in group exercise is often very positive as people make new friends, everyone shares the same goals and the group can offer social support and encouragement to keep at it. Physical activity that emphasises social support could therefore contribute to sustainable exercise behaviour (Allen & Morey, 2010; Carpenter & Gilleland, 2016; Crook et al., 1998). Recreational pole dancing is done in a group setting, even though there is usually one person on each pole. This setup is similar to dance classes, where the group practices as a whole, even though each person is going through all the steps without having to rely on others to be able to complete each exercise. This setup opens up space for a lot of communication, social support and feelings of belonging which all contributes to maintenance of exercise behaviour. This is exactly what Holland (2010) found when interviewing women who engage in recreational pole dancing in the UK and elsewhere. Women reported developing new friendships through pole dancing, they talked a lot about their increased fitness, stamina, strength and confidence as a direct result of their pole dance involvement. In the last few years, pole dancing has moved out of the realms of exotic dancing into mainstream exercise studios and currently it is offered to people as a great way to work out, although there is an element of exotica, as recreational pole dancing studios market pole dancing as recreational, with a hint of sensuality and release. Usually, pole dancing is seen as a type of exotic dance where the metal pole is used to perform spins and tricks (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Pole dancing is expanding and now both studios as well as professional competitions include a wide range of dance styles, from exotic to contemporary. Additionally, studios usually offer stretch classes, conditioning classes and similar type classes as can be seen in gyms, dance- or yoga studios.

### **Pole dancing and demonised female sexuality**

I included the stories from my discussion with my thesis advisor and my apprehension with the direct display of sexuality in pole dancing to show my own insecurities, fully blossomed since childhood and how my fears connect to a broader cultural perspective, where women are repeatedly told not to stand out, not to be proud and above all, not to show sensuality and sexuality in any other domain than marriage and when to reproduce (Gianni, 2015). This rhetoric is especially clear when one reads the handful of studies available on recreational

pole dancing. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) are mainly concerned about the negative impact recreational pole dancing has on women because of its roots in the sex industry. They argue that since the participants emphasized the benefits of pole dancing to help them stay in shape and increase their fitness, pole dancing is contributing to the maintenance of the 'feminine ideal' and the male gaze. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) feel recreational "pole dancing may reinforce societal notions of both masculine and feminine sexuality as a result of encouraging women to construct themselves as erotic objects" (p. 241). In their analysis of websites of recreational pole dancing studios in Australia, Donaghue, Whitehead and Kurz (2011) criticized how the studios emphasized that their primary function was to provide a legitimate fitness activity instead of labelling themselves as offering raunch culture activity, and that this cover story works in studios' favour for it gets more women through their doors, who would not show up if the activity was labelled as only sexual. They believe the studio owners know this and therefore actively camouflage pole dancing as empowering, confidence boosting, great workout, fun and funny. Donaghue et al. (2011) argue that pole dancing is a part of a postfeminist repudiation of some aspects of feminism. The websites they studied talked about studios' being safe spaces where friends can exercise, enjoy themselves and have a laugh. The researchers felt this portrayal allows women to keep face while being sexualized in pole class and offers them some kind of ironic distance to exotic dancers, where recreational pole dancers are parodying pole dancers in the sex industry. They think this contradicts the studios' framing of pole dancing as empowering. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) further concluded that even though recreational pole dancing technically could not be labelled as pornographic for it is not solely intended to arouse viewers it is still inherently performative where women are told they can learn skills to show off, and thus, still feeding into the male gaze by getting women to accept the notion of performing and showcasing their bodies. They contrasted this to jogging or lifting weights, as they feel those types of exercises are not marketed as skills women can show off. This criticism is far-fetched, for the relationship between a person's exercise goals, instructor and exercise environment is more complicated than exercise activities being either inherently performatively marketed or not. Studies show that women who focus on exercising for health rather than looks are less likely to objectify themselves during exercise (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Strelan, Mehaffey & Tiggemann, 2003) even if the instructor in a group class is emphasizing and modelling self-objectification (O'Hara et al., 2014). Studies further show that focusing on exercise to improve physical capabilities of the body helps women to minimize self-conscious thoughts, even though the exercise environment might be triggering those thoughts (Lox, Martin Ginis & Petruzzello,

2010; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Segar, Eccles & Richardson, 2008). Research also shows that focusing on the functionality of the body, what it can do, helps directing attention away from how the body looks during the exercise (O'Hara, Cox & Amorose., 2014). This functional focus might promote intrinsic motivation, which has repeatedly been linked to higher exercise adherence (Cury et al., 1996; Greenleaf, 2005; Segar, Spruijt-Metz & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006; Segar et al., 2008; Strelan et al., 2003; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge & Fredrickson, 2006; Quinn, Chaudoir & Kallen, 2011). O'Hara et al. (2014) concluded that exercise professionals need to encourage an exercise atmosphere where the functionality of the body and how it performs is highlighted rather than focusing on how it looks, for that might increase exercise attendance. This is exactly what is being upheld in the pole classes Whitehead and Kurz (2009) criticized, where the focus is on learning tricks to show others how strong and capable the body of the exerciser is. This can also be seen in the webpages Donaghue et al (2011) looked at. The studios emphasized having fun in a good group of friends, participants discovering their inner power, becoming stronger and fitter and the possibility for participants to learn gravity defying tricks requiring strength and stamina they might be proud enough to show off. All these goals focus on something other than directly how the body looks. This is also what I subtly highlighted in my story. My pole classes have always been centred around having fun, supporting other women and being supported by other women, learning new things and challenging myself and my body by performing gravity defying tricks that require immense strength, stamina and flexibility. My pole classes have never been focused on how my body looks. Based on current research, it can be argued that pole dancing classes might contribute to higher female exercise retention, which studies have shown us is needed. In any case, in the end, every sport is performance based to a certain extent. A jogger might jog to participate in a marathon one day. A weight lifter might participate in a bodybuilding or fitness competition. Football, basketball, dance, chess, and so on. Every sport has competitions and showcases. The need for challenge and to show off hard earned skills is a human quality. Pole dancing is no different than any other sport in this sense.

This fixation Donaghue et al. (2011) and Whitehead and Kurz (2009) have on framing recreational pole dancing as inherently performative and sexual by conforming to the male gaze and the feminine ideal seem to be greatly influenced by conventional standards of gender perception and might be influenced by the authors' internalization of the male gaze (Lamb, Graling & Wheeler, 2013). Furthermore, authors ignore male participation in recreational pole dancing. It seems as if feminist scholars such as Donaghue et al. (2011) and Gill (2007) feel

that women have moved on to become active agents in their own sexualization, believing they have freedom of self-expression and can do whatever they want but are still seeking to portray what fits patriarchal standards, that is, the male gaze. Rhetoric of this kind ignores the multifaceted nature of both society and person, as well as the live, reciprocal relationship between the two, which is ever changing. As Griffiths (2016) said in her book on recreational pole dancing, women participating in this activity cannot be viewed as one dimensional.

In their conclusions, Whitehead and Kurz (2009) argued that pornography such as pole dancing makes its way from the underground to mainstream through its relabelling as an inherently neutral activity. They say that through this relabelling, pole dancing can then be given a new place in mainstream culture as a “form of expression requiring artistic talent, persistence, confidence and as resulting in a skill that is ‘just like any normal dancing’ (p. 241). This is an interesting criticism. As Lamb et al. (2013) pointed out, if an activity can be judged as misogynistic or pornography by a person without a second glance, does that not speak volumes about the person’s internalization of the male gaze? Whitehead and Kurz (2009) do not seem to view pole dancing as a legitimate type of dancing. Yet, no matter how raunchy it is, in the end, it is dance. Koff (2000) defines dance training as something that “dictates movements and strategies for learning specific motor skills with the aim of mastery and future performance” (p. 27), and dance education as something that “seeks the development of self-expression and interpretation through motion, with self-knowledge as its aim” (p. 28). Both training and education aim to teach the person about the body and how it can move. According to these standards, pole dancing taught at recreational pole dancing studios is indeed dance, like any other type of dance. It seems as if criticism from scholars such as Whitehead and Kurz (2009) and Donaghue et al. (2011) mainly stems from the connection modern recreational pole dancing has with the sex industry, for it is from there it originated. As Jarrett (1999) went over in her book on the history of erotic dancing, belly dancing is one of the oldest known forms of dancing, and erotic dancing. Originally it was a fertility dance, where the dancers were highly respected and sensuality, sexuality and nudity were not considered forbidden or dirty. Religious, western standards of female purity and modesty contributed to the evolution of dance styles where nudity and sensuality were progressively viewed more negatively. Even though belly dancing is generally viewed as a legitimate form of dance, it has connections to the sex industry. That connection does not make belly dancing inherently worse or better, it is just a fact. One definition, of many, of belly dancing in a multi-layered world. Even ballet, Jarrett (1999) mentioned, usually seen as the highest form of art and appreciated as such, is not deprived of the connection to the sex

industry. In the early days of the ballet, the dancers also acted as courtesans. Men could pay sums of cash to go backstage and view the ballet dancers before the show, with the intention of picking a dancer to take home with them after the show. This connection and history of ballet and belly dancing does not negate the dance forms as such, just because of the history. A person can enjoy both ballet and belly dancing as a legitimate form of art, spectacle and exercise. The same goes for pole dancing. The fact that the first recreational pole studios were established by exotic dancers should be viewed as a highly feminist activity, where women broke out from the strip club and became entrepreneurs, offering a legitimate form of exercise and dance to the general public. The narrative Gill (2007), Donaghue et al. (2011) and Whitehead and Kurz (2009) are championing excludes a large group of women by painting them as victims, or active victims, in their own sexualization without looking critically at the influence of the wider culture and the multiple interacting factors both within the person and culture. It is exactly this narrative which Bruckert (2002) feels objectifies her. As a scholar and a former stripper, she had great difficulty locating herself within feminist analysis and felt she, and women like her, were not given space anywhere in the literature. Jarrett (1999) describes the same narrative with early feminists, who excluded female sex workers and exotic dancers, either viewing them in a 'us versus them' light, or taking the position of pitying them as fallen women in need of saviour. The continuation of this narrative, where sex workers and by association, recreational pole dancers, are judged negatively as nothing but tools feeding into the male gaze is problematic. This narrative, where the focus is solely on women and what women are doing wrong, only feeds into the patriarchy by upholding long outdated views that women are ultimately responsible for anything and everything that happens in our culture, by dividing women into groups based on outdated standards of modesty and by creating a false sense of superiority based on one's sense of their interests and behaviour being more acceptable than others without realizing they all are a product of society.

## **Conclusions**

I set out to do an evocative autoethnography on the experiences of living with GAD and how recreational pole dancing has helped me better manage my mental disease. Through the process of writing, I realized how important it was to focus on how GAD is experienced and so I began searching for memories I have that can showcase that as clearly as possible. I feel I have been successful. As Laurel Richardson said in Ellis' (2004) "I bring forth memories that

I perhaps have not before made central in my identity and I develop a new frame for them by looking through the understanding that I have now” (p. 176). I have described autoethnography as a field within postmodern qualitative methods of research, highlighted the importance of storytelling and listening to stories both in research and in the general culture. I have argued for the benefits of pole dancing as a recreational activity, I have dived a little into feminist theories on stigmatization, the male gaze and female exercise, I have mentioned how important exercise is for the mind and body and above all, I have realized a lot about my own disease previously unknown to myself. It feels as if the process of writing this thesis has been the last piece of the puzzle for me to understand my disease fully to live in harmony with it for the rest of my life. Hopefully, this text will also be of help to others.

### **Limitations**

Ellis (2004) mentions that one of the greatest benefits of autoethnography is the fact that people respond to it. I have held her standards high, trying to make my stories into a self-conscious analysis through introspection and narration in the hopes of evoking the same feelings as I felt in the readers. Hopefully, the generalization will occur when readers respond to this work. How do they compare themselves to it? Do they feel a sense of connection? Do they themselves suffer from GAD, do they find a connection to me, a sense of relief someone else feels the same way they do? Or will they find no connection to the stories? This brings me to discuss the limitations of this study. Since this is a first-person account of my lived experiences, it is limited to my experiences only, although as I already said, readers might generalize the story onto their own experiences, in which the goal of the thesis will then be attained. This story has been tremendously helpful for myself in my quest to understand myself and my disease better. Of course, this story and research might not be seen as helpful for anyone other than myself. I embrace that limitation and hold Ellis’ (2004) words close to my heart, as she said, the benefit of learning about yourself should be enough of a justification to do a study, even though, as she added “all stories potentially are about more than our own experience” (p. 36). Other limitations, as Ellis (2004) has mentioned, have to do with you as a character in your story. For readers, you become your story, and you might continue to be frozen as the story you wrote in the minds of your readers. This can be especially hurtful for an autoethnographer when writing about difficult subjects. Other potential limitations can be viewed from a quantitative method perspective, such as the fact that this story is not a clear cut accurate portrayal of how those situations happened.

Originally, I wrote down field notes where I was trying to cover as much as possible. As I developed the story and materialized the plot line better I omitted some parts that were not adding anything to the story. My current perspective of course clouds my memory (Ellis, 2004), as it should, since memory is an active entity and not a stable characteristic, it evolves and changes as we do. I therefore found myself adding stories as I delved deeper into the research literature surrounding my topic. In this sense, the story was both frozen and alive in my mind. I had the events in my memory, but I did for example not remember exact discussions. I tried to capture the events as accurately as possible, with a focus on re-creating the emotion felt in the situations. This limitation however becomes a less concern when you realize that we can never fully capture an experience, not for recollecting a memory for a story, not for filling out a questionnaire, or answering interview questions. Even field notes are one portrayal of the truth, one selective story from the past, frozen at that point in time, at that moment (Ellis, 2004). Stories should therefore be viewed as nothing more and nothing less than what they are; stories about experiences.

### **Future implications**

I would like to expand on this project and interview pole dancers who suffer from GAD, and pole dancers who have other types of mental or physical diseases. I would like to start a dialogue on how pole dancing is helping them manage their diseases better and if they find any connection to my story. I feel a positive view on the benefits of pole dancing is certainly needed in the current research literature. Hopefully I can add more to that in the future. In addition, I would like to see autoethnography been introduced more into psychological literature, for psychology is a profession where the professional makes a living off of listening to autoethnographies. Each person seeking therapy tells the psychologist a story from their life. A story that is a truth to that person, and the psychologist must take that story at face value, believe the person is being as truthful as they can be, offer empathy, understanding and help. Both the practice of writing autoethnographies as well as reading autoethnographies makes a psychologist better at understanding the human condition, which is what psychology is all about.

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