

CHAPTER 1

OCD AND ME

“‘I am not OCD. OCD is not me.’ This way of thinking was foundational to my strategy in defeating OCD.”

—Shannon Shy, author of *It’ll Be Okay: How I Kept Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) from Ruining My Life*

I grew up in a safe and loving home with trusting, understanding, and warm parents, two older brothers, and a West Highland white terrier named McDuff—or, less formally, Duffer. Mine was a comfortable existence, maybe even sheltered. I realized early on that not everyone’s life was as carefree as mine, and it didn’t sit well with me. How could I be so lucky while others suffered? It seemed to be only a matter of time before my luck ran out, that my life would take a turn for the worse. Irrational fears began to take over.

When I read *Deenie*, a Judy Blume novel about a teenage girl with scoliosis, I lay awake for several nights, convinced I had scoliosis, too, and would have to wear a cumbersome back brace, just as Deenie had. I pressed my back into the floor to see how straight my spine felt, and I tried to examine my back in my vanity mirror.

When I saw *The Ann Jillian Story*, a TV movie about an actress who survived breast cancer, I believed I must also have a cancerous tumor. Over and over I imagined myself poking a dinner fork through my flesh and pulling the growth out. I would lie in my bed and cry, asking God why I had to have breast cancer, why I had to die. One day, worried about me locked away in my bedroom at the end of the hall, my mom knocked on my door. Not wanting to devastate her with my “news,” I pulled myself together and opened the door a crack. “Are you okay?” she asked. I nodded numbly and told her it was my stomach—again. After she left, I stood at my bedroom window, watching my brothers, dad, and dog play in the front yard. Duffer was running around in joyful circles, over and over again, and I choked up, thinking, “He’s so full of life.” I felt incredibly jealous.

And, perhaps most terrifying, when I watched a TV movie about a boy whose father had set him on fire during a custody dispute, I believed I was destined to be horribly marred in a fire. I would sob in bed at night, begging God to reconsider. Before bed I'd inspect my heating vents, making sure there weren't pieces of paper or T-shirts covering them.

Every time I thought I was over one fear, a new fear managed to weasel its way into my psyche, making it nearly impossible to sleep or concentrate.

Despite all of these horrifying images and irrational destinies I imagined for myself, I never told a soul. I never let anyone see me cry, and if they happened to, I lied about why I was crying. If only I had told my mom something, anything. She would have pulled me onto her lap and held me close, telling me not to be afraid. Maybe she would have helped me see that the things I feared were baseless. Maybe she would have helped me work through my fears—my obsessions—so they didn't have so much control over me.

But I kept it all inside. Every panic-inducing fear I faced for nearly 20 years, I faced alone. Not because I had to. But, rather, because I somehow understood that as terrifying as these persistent and intrusive fears were, they weren't *normal*. They were so heavy. They felt insurmountable. What could anyone do to help me? What was the point in sharing my fears?

I was like a typical teenager in most other aspects of my life, talking with my best friend about how scared I was to be kissed for the first time, and how scared I was to *not* be kissed for the first time. I worried aloud about tests and homework and boys and girls and clothes, but I kept the dark stuff hidden where I thought it belonged—deep inside me until I could manage my own way out of the abyss. Years passed and obsessions intensified. The nature of the obsessions changed, but they never really went away. There were obsessive peaks and valleys, good days and bad days, even good months and bad months.

By the time I was 26 years old I was utterly exhausted. I had been fighting a particular type of obsession—my fear that I would harm a child—off and on for about five years. It intensified when I was in serious relationships, because marriage and family felt like

logical next steps. That fear remained in tucked-away corners of my brain even when I was single. It was becoming as stubborn as I was—it wasn't willing to leave, and I wasn't planning to tell anyone what was going on.

A mental showdown.