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Shake It Out

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Author Bio

Christina is a senior English and Film Studies double major from Montoursville, Pennsylvania. She is a member of the Bullets Marching Band, Sigma Alpha Iota, and Alpha Phi Omega. She really enjoys reading and watching things and sometimes writes things, too. She likes finding beauty in the everyday and believes that the song was right—all you need is love. She often wishes that her life was a musical, but until that happens, she'll settle for the occasional sing-along with friends.

Shake It Out

Christina Gallo

"You're so shy."

"You need to start talking to people."

"You're too quiet."

"Does she ever talk?"

"Who haven't we heard from today? Christina? Christina?"

"Christina? Everything okay?" I abandon my daydream and dial back the ear-damaging volume on my iPod as my roommate's concerned face comes into view.

"Sorry. What?"

"I said is everything okay? You looked like you were thinking about the end of the world," Emily says half-jokingly.

"Everything's fine," I respond too quickly. I'm starting to believe it's the truth.

"All right. Are you interested in getting dinner soon?"

"I'm just going to have something here tonight."

"Okay. I'm going to go meet everyone else at Servo. I'll be back."

"See you later," I say as the door slams shut.

Quiet. Just the way I like it. I press play on my iPod and listen to the sounds of P!nk flowing through my headphones. *Don't let me get me. I'm my own worst enemy. It's bad when you annoy yourself.* I can relate. I'm lying on my unmade bed, staring up at the ceiling, hating myself, and counting the tiles. Fifty-three. That's how many tiles there are and yet, I can't stop myself from making sure. One. Two. Three. Ten. Twenty. Twenty-one. My mind wanders, and I lose count. "Shit!" I yell towards the ceiling as if the white plastic squares have personally offended me. If only that was my problem. At least now I can put a name to my "issue" as I like to call it. Thank you Internet. It's like someone studied my life, made a list of all the ways I was fucked up, and gave it a fancy name.

"That's what's wrong with me!" I say excitedly to myself after a late-night research session. While my roommate is researching the French Revolution, I'm looking up mental conditions. Yep, that's completely normal. And I'm a little too happy about the results because knowing is better than

not knowing, right? You'd think that I had just won the lottery as I read the three bold words at the top of my computer screen: Social Anxiety Disorder. Excessive self-consciousness and anxiety in everyday social situations. Check. Extreme fear of being watched or judged by others, especially people you don't know. Check. Fear that you'll act in ways that that will embarrass or humiliate yourself. Check. Avoiding social situations to a degree that limits your activities or disrupts your life. Check. Staying quiet or hiding in the background in order to escape notice and embarrassment. Check. Check. Check. This is me.

My mind returns to my empty dorm room. I've been doing that a lot lately, spacing out. It's one of the symptoms. I still haven't told anyone about my findings, but I don't need confirmation. About a year ago, I was able to gather enough courage to ask my doctor for medicine to treat part of my problem. Or I should say—to ask my doctor again. The first time turned into a scene I want to forget.

“So, how is everything going? Are you having any problems?” my doctor asks me with a smile.

Okay, here we go. “I think I need some medicine for anxiety,” I say shakily. The scratching of my doctor's pen stops suddenly as he turns to look at me with narrowed eyes.

“In what ways are you feeling anxious exactly?”

“Well...when I have to talk in front of people, I get really nervous, and my hands start shaking.” You know that's not everything. Tell him. Tell him now. I can't. The words are stuck in my brain. Before I can get too lost in my thoughts, I hear a strange noise coming from in front of me. It's my doctor. Laughing.

“Everyone gets nervous about public speaking, Christina. It doesn't mean you need medication,” he says with one last chuckle.

“Yeah, I guess not,” I say with a pasted-on smile. Damn it.

Luckily, I was able to get a new doctor a few years later, and, after a couple of visits, I walked out of the office with a prescription in hand. I thought a couple of pills here and a self-help book there would make me as good as new. That didn't work out too well. I tried two. Celexa made

me feel like my heart was going to beat right out of my chest, and Lexapro made me feel like I was walking through a fog. There's a third sitting on my desk right now. BuSpar. I've had it for a month and haven't given it a second glance until now. Now, I'm unable to look away from the glowing orange hue of the plastic. Suddenly, I jump off my bed and snatch the bottle off my desk.

"Take half a tablet by mouth twice a day," I read aloud. Determined that this time it's going to work, I pop open the bottle. Snapping one of the tiny pills into two, I throw one half back into the bottle and the other into my mouth. As the bitterness overtakes my senses, I march over to my refrigerator, grab a half-finished bottle of water, and swallow what I hope will be the solution to everything.

I have a presentation today. In other words, it's another of my personal doomsdays. I wake up at eight and make note that I have five hours before I actually have to start worrying. I skip breakfast, take a shower, go to my two classes, get lunch, and suddenly, four and a half hours have passed by. I return to my room—my safe haven—and obsessively go over my presentation. I could recite the damn thing from memory at this point, but I'm still not convinced. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, and it feels like electricity is pulsing through my body. Emily is sitting on her bed, staring intently at her computer screen as she watches the latest episode of *Breaking Bad*. I go into the adjoining bathroom to try and calm down. No need to put on a show. The minute I shut the door behind me, I grip the edge of the chipped counter and close my eyes to block out the cheap blue tile surrounding me.

"Breathe," I whisper to myself. "Nothing bad is going to happen. You're going to get up in front of the class, talk for five minutes, and then it will all be over and life will go on." I think I need to compose a new pep talk as soon as possible because those words don't even put a dent in my thick skull. The measured breaths of air that I inhale and exhale are pointless. Time for method number two. I release my hold on the counter and start to jump from one leg to the other. I shake my arms around, hoping my negative thoughts will escape from my fingertips and be flung into the corner of the tiny room. No such luck and my time is up. I flush the toilet, run the water for a minute, and walk back into my room and over to my desk to gather my things. As far as my roommate is concerned, I wasn't just freaking out in the bathroom. I sling my bag over my shoulder and I'm off to climb the wall that's blocking my view of the rest of the week.

Okay. So maybe I should've looked at the time before I opened the

door to the classroom. Apparently it doesn't take ten minutes to walk from my dorm to Breidenbaugh. As I walk across the front of the room, avoiding eye contact with those already seated, I realize that maybe I should be more observant of my surroundings, because I just walked in on the end of another class. No use turning around now. I take my seat as my professor tries to ease my embarrassment.

"This is one of my students from my next class." Oh my God. Kill me now.

"Sorry!" I say in a voice that's two octaves higher than my own. My face is so inflamed that I'm surprised my skin isn't melting onto the floor like in some science fiction movie. I press my shaky, ice cold hands to my cheeks in an effort to hide my reaction to what I deem a horrendous situation. The five guys in the front row seem to turn around simultaneously to stare as my mind berates me. I can't believe I just did that. I should have checked the time. I should have waited outside. I should have turned around. Why did I keep walking? Why did this have to happen today? Look at what I'm wearing.

All semblance of calm that I may have established has been destroyed by the detonator of humiliation that I just experienced. As my class begins, I can't focus on anything. The only hope I have is that we do our presentations at the beginning so that my heart rate can move away from the danger zone. Good news! It's time to start the presentations, and I'm first. I stand up from my seat on shaking legs and make my way to the front of the room as steadily as I can. I place my note card on the podium with my trembling hands and pray that the rest of the room can't hear the pounding of my heart. I press my hands together in a vise-like grip in front of me and begin speaking with a wavering voice. As I attempt to make eye contact with those sitting in front of me, I feel my face begin to burn and sweat rolls down my back. They're going to wonder what's wrong with me. They don't want to have anything to do with me. Why is he looking at me like that? Why is she smiling? The questions inside my head merge with the words flowing from my mouth, and, when it's all said and done, I can't remember anything from the last five minutes. I make my way back to my seat amid a smattering of applause and practically collapse into it. After ten minutes pass by, my hands have stopped shaking enough for me to begin taking my notes for the day.

You would think that I would have gotten over that by now. It's been nearly a year. That's the thing about me. I can remember every bad thing that's happened to me as if it happened today—every tiny stumble,

every stuttered word, every awkward interaction, every missed opportunity. It's like a weight I can't get rid of that's crushing me from the inside out. The good things are like distant memories that are blurred around the edges. You may be thinking, "Everyone gets nervous about a presentation." True. But it's not just that. When I have to meet someone new, my face turns blood red. When I have to walk into a room full of people, I start shaking. When I have to play the piano for a crowd, I can't think straight. When I have to work in a group, I can't speak. It's as if someone has stolen my voice away from me. All is well when I'm by myself or with people I know. These times are my only means of escape out of my head. It's like I have one personality for public and another for private. Too bad I can't block one out while the other is in use. Then maybe I wouldn't be lying here contemplating things I never thought would cross my mind. How do I escape this hell I'm trapped in? When will I stop hating myself and accept that this is who I am? Every year, I say, "This is it. It's going to be different." But it never is. I'm not an expert, but I'm pretty sure life isn't supposed to be this hard.

"...and there's a written test on each of the eight subjects and an interview to follow. The day will then conclude with..."

Oh no. The fear immediately floods through me as the usual doubts creep into my mind. An interview. A nightmare. I see myself sitting timidly across from a group of judges towering over me. They're questioning me as I sink further and further into my seat. I'm on trial for a crime that I didn't commit. Uh-uh. No way. I've got to get out of this. I feel my legs itching to run from the room and never look back, but I force myself to stay put. By the time my agitated thoughts calm down, everyone's packing up their things and getting ready to leave.

"...see you all on Thursday."

It's my freshman year of high school, and I decided to join the academic decathlon team. At my first meet, I got gold medals for overall score and music in the honors division. I had a great time, but that was because I only had to sit among a large group of people and take written exams in a few subjects. Now that we've made it to regionals, we have to compete in all ten categories—two of which are speech and interview. I don't know what I was thinking when I got myself into this. My heart rate is increasing steadily as I think about everything that could possibly go wrong during my interview. I might not know the answer to one of the questions. My answers might not be what they're looking for. I'll make a fool out of myself. I just can't do this. I have to leave. I have to run.

A week later, the day has arrived. I'm still in bed, hoping I can sink into my mattress and disappear until the bus has left.

"Christina, it's time to get up. You're going to be late," my mom says as she pulls my shades up.

"I don't feel good at all," I say. "I threw up last night." Liar.

"When?" my mom says incredulously.

"In the middle of the night." Coward. Without another word, my mom makes her way to the bathroom next to my room.

"The sink doesn't look dirty," she says as she comes back into my room.

"That's because I rinsed it." Freak.

"Okay. Fine. Stay home. But this is the last time I'm calling that school."

"Fine." I bury myself under the covers and celebrate my victory. But my contentedness doesn't last for long. Soon, a familiar, intense guilt dominates my brain. What have I done? What's wrong with me? I ignore my nagging thoughts of self-loathing and regret as I drift into a restless sleep.

The next day, my friend and fellow teammate, Kate, calls me.

"Are you feeling better?" she says as I hold the phone to my ear in an unnecessarily tight grip.

"Yeah. Sorry I couldn't be there. How was the meet?" I say as my façade slowly starts to crack. As I listen to my friend talk about the meet—the meet that I should have been at, the meet that I had wanted to be at—I can't take it anymore. The guilt is just too much to keep to myself. A strangled sound makes its way past my lips and all of a sudden, I'm crying like I've never cried before.

"Are you okay?" I hear Kate say quietly through the phone.

"Yeah. I just...really wish...I could've been there."

You would never know that there is anything wrong by looking at me or at what I do. My clothes scream, "Look at me!" and my extracurricular activities say, "I love people!" Despite all of this, my brain yells, "I want to hide!" and drowns out any attempts I may make to be what I think is a normal human being. What's normal anyway? Who decides? I don't know, but all I know is that I want to be that person that people see at first glance. I'm not the girl who can't walk down the street some days without being a bundle of nerves. I hate her, and I want her out of my head forever. Here's hoping that the jagged half of the pill I swallowed last night does just that.

It's been a week since I took that first dose. Two times a day I've been taking those damn pills and nothing has happened—nothing good anyway. Maybe I should stop it. Maybe I can fix myself. I can buy that *Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook* I saw on Amazon with the “proven, step-by-step techniques for overcoming your fear.” That has to work, right? I should stop it. You know those commercials that are in black and white and then the person takes a pill and suddenly the world is a rainbow of colors and the birds are chirping? I used to find that hilarious, but it's not so funny to me anymore. The only problem is that the reverse has happened. Nothing seems right, and I'm balancing on the edge of a pit I don't want to fall into. I walk outside, and I can't wait until I make it safely back to my room. I've taken to perusing the same three websites on the Internet over and over again instead of doing my homework. Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, repeat. I just don't care anymore. I'm thinking about dropping some classes. Maybe I should drop a major. English. Film. Film. English. I can't do this anymore. I should stop it. My thoughts are racing, I can't concentrate, and I'm beginning to think of doing things that no sane person should ever ponder. I really should stop it. I should give my scissors to my neighbor and throw my razor in the dumpster. I've read the same paragraph three times and still have no idea what it says. Why did I act like that today? Will I ever be able to change? I should change. Will I ever be normal? Maybe I should stop. I can't stop. I'm sick of hiding. The bottle of pills on my desk mocks me. Stop it. I pick up the plastic cylinder and throw it as hard as I can at the blank wall in front of me. I don't even bother to see where it lands as I throw myself onto my bed. Maybe next year.