

Muted by Anxiety

By: Rebecca Wosk

December 1st, 1989: a rainy fall day at the Women's and Children's hospital in Vancouver. At three fifty three in the afternoon, a baby girl was born: the youngest of three to her proud mother and father. They named her Rebecca Eve, that's me. Described as a placid and happy baby, life was peachy. I never knew I was different until grade one when another student made fun of me for speaking in front of the class, something which at the time was not a normal occurrence. My heart started racing, my palms got clammy; I was so embarrassed that I started crying. From then on, I rarely spoke at school; I became the quiet girl.

Fast forward to grade three: I was eight years old and got the devastating news that my grandmother passed away; she was my everything -I was crushed! It was as if I started the day as an eight-year-old and grew twenty years by the evening; then on I was never the same. I was forced to mature, prematurely. This spiraled me into depression--just imagine--eight and depressed! After my grandmother's death, life for me changed. My attendance at school became sporadic. I had my group of friends but when I left in grade six, it seemed they had mostly disappeared. I moved from school to school, five in total between grades six and nine. I felt judged and watched by everyone. It felt as if I was on another plane of existence rather than everyone else my age. I hated going out; I was so stifled by the pressure of having to be social. I remember often avoiding going into stores or restaurants because there were too many people.

When I reached twelve, my parents didn't know what to do with me. They sent me to counselors, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists: whoever could try to figure me out, but to no avail. I was put on anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medication: anti-everything. They either turned me into a zombie or an overly-emotional maniac. This went on until I was eighteen, at which point I felt healthy and strong enough to get off the medication.

Okay, I'm going to rewind for just a minute back to when I was fourteen: the year everything changed. My parents ended their twenty eight year marriage, sold the house my sisters and I grew up in, placed the pets that made up our menagerie into other, loving homes. My mom packed up and moved my sister and me out to Chilliwack. We went from a beautiful five bedroom home on the west side of Vancouver, with everything we could have ever wanted, to a two bedroom townhouse that was infested with bugs. Now, I'll never complain about this situation because it was the best learning experience I could have ever had, but you can imagine how hard that transition was for a fourteen year old.

Enter school: ah school, my favourite thing. I now had bright purple hair and a face full of piercings. I guess it was my way of "expressing myself," but it did not help with anything and I was bullied often. The anxiety took over and I became reclusive. I stayed home from classes, pretended to be sick, I did anything I could so that didn't have to be around my peers. I was seeing a guidance counselor at school and a counselor on my own. They both told me "you have so much potential, you're such a smart girl," which didn't mean anything to me. When

you're anxious, you are held back by fear; all you can think of is when you get to sleep next or when you will feel safe. I wasn't capable of thinking about my education or my future when I had such strong feelings of anxiety. But something in me always felt like everything would be okay.

I got through secondary school and knew I had to move on to something more, so I applied to college. I moved back to Vancouver and enrolled at Langara college. This was an extremely difficult time. It was my first time living on my own and my first time at post-secondary institution. I was alone in the world as an adult and my family was two hours away from me. My anxiety took on the form of shyness; I was painfully shy. It was very difficult for me to talk to anyone or speak in front of the class. You know how in every class, you have to introduce yourself and say something interesting? Doing this was so terrifying to me that I would shake and get dizzy and just pray they would somehow forget I was there. I felt so out of place, like I really didn't belong in any of my classes. I dropped classes in the second semester and then left Langara. I moved back home, and a year later got into Capilano University's Arts and Entertainment Management program: a gift from heaven. I had never felt "so in my place" as I did at Capilano.

I was doing so well and my anxiety was at a minimum, but still there to a certain extent, as it always is. I was functioning, however, and not terrified to speak. I met my best friend at Capilano, we instantly bonded as if we knew each other forever and then some. We both had such a passion for music that we started jamming. She would bring her guitar over and we would sing. Little did we know, this would turn into something amazing: Chatterton Eve, our band. We wrote and rehearsed and one night in November of 2012, we played a showcase for our closest friends and family. It went well, but I was so nervous. Anxiety and performing are not a great mix. After the showcase, I was heading home with a couple friends when I started to see spots in my peripheral vision; blackness took over my eyesight and I couldn't breathe properly; I thought I was dying. All of my senses were leaving my body, panic took over. My friends had to call an ambulance and I spent the night in the ER at VGH. While waiting for a doctor, everything got worse: I lost feeling in my limbs, my face went numb and I couldn't speak. I thought this was the end and I was preparing myself for death. Finally, the nurse gave me an Ativan and I was recovering extremely slowly on a bed in the hallway. This, to date, was the most horrifying physical experience I have ever dealt with. I had what I call "aftershocks" for a couple weeks after and was not able to return to Capilano until I was strong enough to attend. This was the most severe anxiety attack I have ever had and hopefully it will be the last of that magnitude. To feel so out of control of your body and mind is frustrating and I spent nights crying because I didn't understand it. But, I am the kind of person who moves on feeling stronger than I did before. I took this as a sign, a sign to start paying attention to my feelings and accepting the fact that I have severe social anxiety. I couldn't go out alone, I couldn't go to school, I couldn't eat in front of anyone; riding public transit caused anxiety attacks and performing was terrifying, I was muted by anxiety. I was at a crossroads: do I continue to perform with Chatterton Eve or do I quit and lead a quiet life with no need to be in front of a crowd? I chose the best thing for me, Chatterton Eve. The best thing I could be doing with my life is to be writing and singing, to give myself an outlet. When I saw the psychologist and the resident at VGH a few months after my episode, they both looked at me slightly perplexed and impressed, both saying "it is unheard of

for someone with such severe social anxiety to get on stage in front of a crowd and perform.” I never thought of it that way and their comments put everything into perspective for me.

That’s my story. It felt, all my life as though anxiety was brushed off as something that is made up and easy to deal with. The reality of anxiety is that it’s paralyzing, scary and confusing. I have grown from a girl who couldn’t speak in front of her class to a woman who performs in front of large crowds. If we have the proper support and love, we can overcome and achieve whatever we may want to and excel at great lengths. Anxiety does not have to define you. I am no longer muted by anxiety.