

❖ Echo's Story ❖

A Teen's Honest Guide to Living With Anxiety

★ *No fluff. No fake positivity. Just real.* ★

By Echo

EXPANDED EDITION

A NovaVerse Platform Publication

*For every kid who has ever stood outside a room
trying to convince their body it was safe to walk in.*

You are not broken.

You are not weak.

You are not alone.

And this book is proof that someone gets it.

— Echo

A Note Before We Start

My name is Echo. That's not my real name — I asked for a pen name because, honestly, the idea of people at school finding this makes me want to disappear into the floor. But my story? That's 100% real.

I'm 14. I have anxiety. Like, a lot of it. The kind that makes other people say 'just relax' and makes me want to say back — very politely, of course — 'oh WOW I had no idea, let me just TURN IT OFF, thanks so much for solving that.'

This book isn't a therapy manual. My mom wrote one of those (she's amazing, by the way — that's the other book). This one is from me, for you, if you're a teenager who feels like your brain is permanently set to panic mode.

I wrote this because I want other kids to know that you don't have to have your life together to still be okay. You don't have to be brave every day. You don't have to stop being scared. You just have to find your way through it — one terrible school lunch at a time.

I'm still figuring it out. Come figure it out with me.

— *Echo*

Chapter One: Hi. I'm Anxious. Nice to Panic at You.

Let me paint you a picture.

It's a Tuesday. I'm sitting in class, completely minding my business, when the teacher says those four terrifying words: 'Let's go around the room.'

My brain, which was doing fine three seconds ago, immediately launches into full disaster mode. Heart rate: rocket ship. Palms: swimming pool. Brain: completely blank — every thought I have ever had in my entire life has vanished.

This is not a dramatic exaggeration. This is a Tuesday.

My name is Echo, and I have anxiety. Specifically, I've got the whole combo: generalized anxiety (that means I worry about everything, not just one thing, very overachiever of me), and social anxiety (that means people, places, and eye contact are terrifying). Think of it like having a smoke alarm that goes off when you're making toast. Every. Single. Morning.

■ Echo Says:

I once spent 45 minutes planning exactly how to ask a store employee where the bathroom was. By the time I figured out the perfect sentence, I didn't need the bathroom anymore. Problem solved, I guess. That's what anxiety does. It turns normal things into equations. 'If I ask for help, they'll think I'm dumb. If they think I'm dumb, they'll tell other people. If other people know I'm dumb —' and suddenly you're calculating the probability of your entire social life collapsing because you needed a bathroom.

So What Actually Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is your brain's alarm system misfiring. Your brain thinks everything is a bear attack. Your presentation in first period? Bear. The cafeteria when it's full? Bear. Someone looking at you slightly too long? BEAR.

The annoying part is your body fully believes it. Your heart pounds. Your stomach does things no stomach should do. Your legs want to leave the situation entirely without you.

And here's the part nobody tells you: you can KNOW it's not rational and still not be able to stop it. You can literally say out loud, 'this is fine, nothing is wrong,' and your body will

respond: 'interesting opinion, we're still panicking though.'

That disconnect — between what you know and what you feel — is one of the loneliest parts of anxiety. Because everyone around you sees 'fine.' They see you sitting there, looking normal, maybe a little quiet. They have no idea that inside, your entire system is running emergency protocols for a threat that doesn't exist.

I used to think that meant something was seriously wrong with me. Like, fundamentally wrong. Like maybe my brain was built incorrectly and I'd just have to live my whole life faking normal while my insides screamed.

But then I learned something that actually helped: anxiety isn't a flaw. It's a feature. A really, really overenthusiastic feature. Your brain is trying to protect you. It just doesn't know the difference between a bear and a Tuesday morning.

Why I'm Writing This (And Not Running Away From It)

Because someone told me my story might help somebody else. And because I spent a long time thinking my brain was broken, and I don't want you to think that about yours.

Your brain is not broken. It is just... very enthusiastic about keeping you alive. Overly enthusiastic. Embarrassingly enthusiastic. But it's trying its best.

So are you.

■ Real Talk:

Anxiety doesn't mean you're weak. Some of the most resilient, funniest, most intensely alive people I know are anxious. We just also happen to need fifteen minutes of mental prep before answering the phone.

Chapter Two: The Cafeteria Is a Battlefield (And I Didn't Bring Armor)

I need you to understand something about me before we get into this chapter.

I love food. Like, deeply. I think about food. I dream about food. When I'm anxious, I find the thought of a really good meal comforting.

And yet — I will go hungry before I ask for it in a public place.

This is the contradiction of my life. I want the thing. I cannot make myself reach for the thing. And I will sit there, completely starving, watching other people get the thing, and instead of speaking four words to a human — I calculate whether passing out would be less embarrassing.

(Spoiler: it would not be. I've thought about this. A lot.)

The Lunch Table Math

Lunch is the most socially complex 30 minutes of the school day. It's entirely unstructured, which is basically kryptonite for anxious people. In class, at least, there are rules. Someone tells you where to sit. Someone tells you what to do. In the cafeteria? You're on your own.

Which means every single day, I have to solve this equation: Where do I sit? Is that seat taken? If I sit there and they come back, do I move? If I move, will people see me moving? Is it better to stand by the wall until the panic passes? How long have I been standing here? Is it weird that I've been standing here?

Other people walk into that cafeteria and see lunch. I walk in and see a hundred possible ways things could go wrong.

There's a specific kind of dread that builds in the ten minutes before the bell rings for lunch. It starts in my stomach — which is ironic because I'm usually hungry. It's this tightening that creeps up through my chest until my jaw locks and my hands go cold. By the time I actually walk through the cafeteria doors, I've already lived through three worst-case scenarios in my head.

■ Echo Says:

Once I stood near the entrance of the cafeteria for so long that a teacher asked if I was waiting for someone. I said yes. I was not. I was waiting for my brain to calm down enough to walk to a table. This is my life. The thing about social anxiety specifically is that it's not shyness. People think it's shyness. It is not shyness. Shyness is like a mild preference. Social anxiety is your entire nervous system treating a school lunch period like a survival situation.

What Actually Helps (For Me)

I figured out a few things, slowly, over many uncomfortable meals:

- Having one person already at the table changes everything. ONE. That's all I need. One face I know, one seat that's clearly available, and suddenly the cafeteria shrinks from a warzone to just... a loud room.
- Sitting with my back to the room helps. I can't see people, so I feel less like I'm being watched. It's not logical. But anxiety isn't logical.
- If I decide what I'm going to eat BEFORE I get in line, there's one less decision to make in public. One less moment where I might freeze.
- Headphones. Just headphones. Even if I'm not playing anything. They're a signal that says 'I'm in my own world right now' and for some reason that makes me feel safer.
- Having a backup plan. If the cafeteria is too much, I know exactly which hallway is empty, which bathroom is the least used, which corner of the library nobody sits in. I've mapped the entire school by safety level.

None of these are perfect solutions. Some days the cafeteria wins and I eat in a bathroom stall with my anxiety and a granola bar. That's allowed. You're allowed to have bad days and still be okay overall.

■ Try This:

Identify one 'safe spot' in your school — a place where you can decompress for 5 minutes when everything gets loud. It doesn't have to make sense to anyone else. It just has to work for you. The library. A stairwell. The art room. Your guidance counselor's waiting area. Know where it is before you need it.

— **Reflect:**

Think about your own version of the cafeteria — the place that feels hardest for you. What's one tiny thing that makes it even slightly more bearable? Write it down. That one thing is your starting point.

Chapter Three: The Bathroom Thing (We Have to Talk About It)

Okay. I promised honesty. So here's something that I have never said out loud to basically anyone because it is, objectively, the most embarrassing thing about me:

I cannot go to the bathroom alone in an unfamiliar place.

I know. I KNOW. I've heard myself. I am aware that this is, biologically speaking, one of the most basic human functions. I am aware that other people do not require a certified support person to locate a restroom. I am fully aware of all of this.

And yet — here we are.

Why This Happens (Brain Science, Not Excuses)

For me, unfamiliar places trigger a specific kind of alarm in my brain. It's the 'what if something goes wrong and I'm alone' alarm. Bathrooms are especially triggering because they are enclosed, away from people I trust, and there's no scripted interaction — nobody tells you what to do in a public bathroom except stand there and hope nobody tries to talk to you through the stall door.

When I'm somewhere with my mom, I can do almost anything. The moment she's not there, my brain does a hard reset and suddenly I'm back to not knowing how to exist independently in a public space.

It sounds dramatic. It feels dramatic. But that's what severe anxiety looks like when it picks a specific thing to latch onto. It doesn't pick logical things. It picks the thing that will make you feel the most helpless, and then it builds a fortress around it.

■ Echo Says:

I have, on multiple occasions, chosen the very real possibility of a UTI over asking for help finding a bathroom. My kidneys and I have had many discussions about this. They're not happy with me. This is what severe anxiety can look like. Not crying in a corner (though that happens too). Sometimes it's just... quietly suffering rather than asking for what you need. Because asking requires talking to a person. Talking to a person requires believing they'll respond okay. And my brain has catastrophically failed to believe that every single time.

I'm Not Telling You This So You Feel Sorry for Me

I'm telling you this because if YOU do something like this — something that seems 'small' but is actually really controlling your life — I want you to know you're not alone and you're not crazy.

And also because I'm slowly, very slowly, working on it. My therapist calls it 'exposure.' I call it 'the terrible thing I do on purpose to prove to my brain that the terrible thing won't actually happen.' It's not fun. It does kind of work.

Progress isn't always Instagram-worthy. Sometimes progress is just — I used the bathroom at Target with only mild panic and I was fine. That's a win. I'm counting it.

■ Real Talk:

The small stuff IS the big stuff for us. Other people don't understand why a bathroom trip could be a big deal. You don't have to make them understand. You just have to survive it, and then be proud that you did. Every single time you do the thing your brain said you couldn't, you're rewriting the story your anxiety tells about you.

Chapter Four: The Art of Starving Quietly (How I Ask for Nothing)

There is an art form to needing something and not asking for it. I have mastered this art.

I can be hungry, thirsty, lost, confused, uncomfortable, in pain, or in urgent need of something — and I will say absolutely nothing to anyone who could actually help, if that person is not someone I completely trust.

My trust list is: my mom. My best friend. My uncle.

That's it. That is the complete list. Three people. If you're not one of those three people, and I need something from you, I will wait until my mom is present, my best friend is available, or my uncle is reachable. If none of them are there? I'm on my own. Which means I'm managing.

Managing, in my case, means going without. It means being thirsty for three hours instead of asking for water. It means staying lost instead of asking for directions. It means sitting in physical discomfort rather than telling someone I need something moved or changed.

I know how that sounds. I know it's not healthy. But here's the thing about anxiety: it doesn't care about healthy. It cares about safe. And to my brain, silence is always safer than speaking.

Why Asking Feels Impossible

Here's what happens in my brain when I think about asking a stranger (or even someone I vaguely know) for help:

Step 1: I identify that I need something. Easy.

Step 2: I begin drafting the sentence I would say to ask for it. Also fine.

Step 3: I start thinking about all the ways they could respond. This is where things fall apart.

What if they're annoyed? What if I'm asking wrong? What if there's a whole protocol for this that everyone knows except me? What if I say the wrong thing and they look at me weird and then I have to spend the rest of this day/week/year avoiding that section of the building?

By Step 3, the cost of asking has become so enormous in my head that it's actually easier to just... not. Not ask. Not eat. Not drink. Not find the bathroom. Just survive until I get home where the three people who make my nervous system feel safe can help me exist again.

■ Echo Says:

I have a whole backup plan system for if asking goes badly. The backup plan has a backup plan. I'm working on the backup plan's backup plan. My brain is very thorough. Anxiety makes you a contingency planning expert. Unfortunately, it also paralyzes you before you ever execute Plan A.

What I'm Learning (Slowly, Reluctantly)

Here's the inconvenient truth I'm slowly accepting: most people aren't thinking about me as much as I think they're thinking about me. The server who takes my order at a restaurant forgets I exist approximately four seconds after I order. The store employee who points me to the bathroom goes back to their day immediately.

I am not the main character in most people's stories. I know that sounds weird as something to be comforted by. But it actually helps me.

They won't remember this. I will remember this forever. But they won't.

■ Try This:

Practice 'micro-asks' — asking for something small and low stakes, once a day. Ask someone what time it is. Ask for extra napkins. Ask a library where a section is. Each one trains your brain that asking didn't end in disaster. Collect those wins. Write them down if you need to. A list of times you asked and the world didn't end is powerful evidence against your anxiety's argument.

Chapter Five: The Phone Is Lava (And Other Modern Terrors)

Let's talk about the thing nobody warned me about: the phone.

Not scrolling. Not TikTok. Not even the comparing-yourself-to-everyone thing, although that's its own nightmare. I'm talking about the actual act of using a phone. As a phone. To call people. Or answer when they call me.

I would rather walk to someone's house in a thunderstorm than call them on the phone.

And texting? Texting SHOULD be the anxious person's dream, right? It's communication without eye contact, without real-time responses, without anyone hearing your voice shake. Except my brain figured out how to make texting terrifying too.

The Text Message Spiral

Here is how I send a text message:

Step 1: Type the message. Step 2: Read it. Step 3: Rewrite it. Step 4: Read it again. Step 5: Imagine every possible way the other person could interpret it. Step 6: Rewrite it. Step 7: Delete a word. Step 8: Add the word back. Step 9: Remove the exclamation point because it seems too eager. Step 10: Add it back because without it I sound angry. Step 11: Stare at the message for four minutes. Step 12: Send it. Step 13: Immediately regret sending it.

And then the waiting. The waiting is its own universe of anxiety. Every minute they don't respond, my brain adds another theory to the pile. They're busy? Sure. Or maybe they read it and hated it. Maybe they're showing it to someone and laughing. Maybe I used the wrong emoji and now they think I'm weird.

The 'read' receipt is the single cruelest invention in human history. 'Read at 2:47 PM.' It is now 3:15 PM. They read it and chose not to respond. My brain has now written an entire screenplay about why they hate me.

Social Media: The Highlight Reel vs. My Behind-the-Scenes

I know everyone says 'social media isn't real' and 'don't compare yourself.' Great advice. Completely impossible to follow.

Because here's what I see: people my age going to parties, hanging out in big groups, laughing in photos where everyone looks comfortable and relaxed and like they belong there. And I think: I couldn't do that. Not the hanging out. Not the photo. Not the looking relaxed.

Some days I can scroll and it's fine. Other days I see a group photo of people from school doing something fun together — something I wasn't invited to, or was invited to and said no because my anxiety said no — and it feels like proof. Proof that everyone else is living the life I'm supposed to be living, and I'm over here unable to order food without rehearsing.

The worst part isn't the jealousy. It's the guilt. Because I HAD the chance to go and I said no. My anxiety said no, and I listened, and now I get to watch everyone else's fun from my bed.

■ Echo Says:

I once spent an entire Saturday night watching Instagram stories of a party I was invited to and said I couldn't go to because I 'had a headache.' I did have a headache. It was caused by the anxiety of thinking about going to the party. So technically I wasn't lying. But I also wasn't living.

■ Real Talk:

If social media makes your anxiety worse, it is okay to mute, unfollow, or just put your phone in another room. You are not obligated to watch other people's lives in real time. Protecting your peace is not being dramatic. It's being smart.

— Reflect:

What's one app or platform that consistently makes you feel worse after using it? What would happen if you took a 3-day break from it? Not forever. Just three days. See how you feel.

Chapter Six: Fitting In (Spoiler: I Don't. Update: That's Okay.)

I want to fit in so badly it physically hurts sometimes.

I want to be the person who walks into a room and knows how to be there. I want to make a joke at the right moment instead of three seconds too late or not at all because I couldn't make my mouth work. I want to not calculate the risk of every sentence before I say it.

But here's the thing I've figured out about fitting in, after years of trying: the people who look like they're fitting in are mostly just hiding what they're afraid of. Just like me. Just — they hide it differently.

The Performance of Normal

There's this thing I call the performance. It's what I do in certain environments when I'm trying really hard to seem okay. I watch other people. I borrow their body language. I laugh a half-second after other people laugh. I agree with things I haven't fully processed yet because agreeing is safer than having an opinion.

It's exhausting. Like, full-day, need-a-nap-afterward exhausting. Because it's not me. It's me doing an impression of someone who isn't scared.

By the time I get home, I have nothing left. My social battery is depleted. That's literally what I tell my mom — 'my social battery is depleted' — and she gets it. Some days I walk through the door and I don't even have the energy to explain my day. I just need silence and a blanket and for nobody to ask me anything for at least an hour. That's not being dramatic. That's the cost of performing all day.

The only places I don't perform are the three-person trust circle. With my mom, my best friend, and my uncle — I'm actually funny. Sometimes embarrassingly funny. I have opinions. I'm sarcastic in the way that makes people laugh, not wince. I'm adventurous. I want to DO things.

That person exists. She just needs the right conditions to show up.

What Fitting In Actually Is

I used to think fitting in meant being like everyone else. I've been slowly revising that theory.

The people who seem the most at home in the world aren't usually the ones doing the best impression of normal. They're the ones who figured out which version of themselves they could live with, and they just... live with it. Loudly, sometimes.

I'm still working on finding that version of me that I can take into public.

But the version that exists at home? She's pretty great. I'm holding onto her until the public version catches up.

■ **Echo Says:**

My best friend has seen me do a full character impression of every person at a party we weren't even at. My mom laughed for five straight minutes. My uncle still quotes it. None of this makes it to any room with people I don't completely trust. It's like a superpower with very specific activation conditions.

■ **Real Talk:**

You don't have to perform all day. You're allowed to have a you that only certain people get to see. That's not hiding. That's protecting something that matters until the world proves it's safe enough to share.

Chapter Seven: The Three People (And Why Two Is Enough)

My whole world fits in three people.

My mom. My best friend. My uncle.

That's it. That's the list. I've already introduced you to it, and I want to talk about it more because I think people underestimate how important it is to have your people — even if 'your people' is a very small number.

My Mom

My mom is the reason I'm still here — I mean that literally and not in a dramatic way, just in a factual way. She has shown up for me in ways that most people never see because they happen in quiet moments at weird hours and in small gestures that look like nothing from the outside but are everything from the inside.

She is my safe person. When she's in the room, my nervous system settles. When she leaves, I feel it. It's not something I decided — it's something my body learned, over years of being caught by her every time I fell. The body keeps score, and my body knows: she's safe.

She's not perfect. She gets frustrated. We disagree. There are moments where I can see her trying really hard to hold it together when I can tell she just wants to fix things for me and can't. But she stays. She always stays. And for a kid whose nervous system learned early that things disappear — that consistency is everything.

My Best Friend

My best friend is the only person outside my family who gets the full version of me. Not the performance. Not the careful, edited version. The actual me — including the chaotic, sarcastic, weird, occasionally deeply dramatic version.

She doesn't try to fix my anxiety. She doesn't say 'just stop worrying.' She adapts. She goes to the bathroom with me when I need her to without asking why. She sits in a specific seat so I don't have to pick. She texts me first so I don't have to initiate. She does all of this casually, like it's nothing, and that makes it feel like it's nothing.

That is the most valuable thing another person has ever done for me.

■ **Echo Says:**

Having one friend who adapts to how you are — without making it a big deal — is worth more than fifty friends who need you to perform. I would choose her over a room full of 'normal' social situations every single time.

My Uncle

My uncle makes me feel brave. I don't fully know how to explain this except to say that when I'm with him, I try things I wouldn't otherwise try. He has a way of assuming I can handle more than I think I can — without pushing, without pressure, just quietly expecting good things from me — and somehow that expectation makes the good things more possible.

Every anxious person needs at least one person like this. Someone who believes in you so easily that you start to borrow their belief until you can grow your own.

Three Is Not Sad. Three Is Everything.

People will sometimes pity the kid with a small social circle. I used to pity myself for it. I don't anymore.

A small circle of real is worth more than a large circle of performance. I know what I have. I'm not trading it for numbers.

— **Reflect:**

Who are YOUR people? Even if it's one person. Even if it's a pet. Even if it's a voice on a podcast that makes you feel less alone at 2am. Write their name down. That's your anchor. When everything else feels like too much, that's who you come back to.

Chapter Eight: 2 AM and My Brain Won't Shut Up

The daytime anxiety is one thing. I can distract myself. I can put on headphones, go to class, focus on something, text my best friend, find my mom.

But nighttime? Nighttime is when anxiety gets creative.

There's something about lying in a dark, quiet room that gives my brain permission to replay every single thing I've ever done wrong. Not just today. Not just this week. We're talking about the time I mispronounced a word in fifth grade. The time I waved at someone who wasn't waving at me in seventh. The time I laughed too loud and someone looked at me.

My brain has a filing system for embarrassment, and at 2 AM, it pulls out every folder.

The 2 AM Playlist of Doom

Here's how a typical night goes:

10:00 PM — Get in bed. Fine. Normal. A little tired.

10:15 PM — Brain starts reviewing today. What did I say in third period? Did it sound weird? It probably sounded weird.

10:30 PM — Brain has now moved on to tomorrow. What if the teacher calls on me? What if there's a group project? What if they change the seating chart and I'm next to someone I don't know?

11:00 PM — Now we're doing future anxiety. What about high school? College? What if I'm always like this? What if I never figure out how to be normal?

11:30 PM — Existential territory. What's the point of anything? Not in a dark way, just in an everything-feels-overwhelming way.

12:00 AM — I'm now anxious about the fact that I'm still awake and tomorrow is going to be terrible because I'm exhausted.

1:00 AM — Anxiety about the anxiety about the sleep. We've gone meta.

2:00 AM — Finally fall asleep, but only because my brain ran out of things to panic about. For now.

■ Echo Says:

My brain at 2 AM has the energy of a squirrel that found an espresso machine. It just bounces from worry to worry to worry, and every time I think it's settling down, it goes 'OH WAIT remember that thing from three years ago? Let's unpack that RIGHT NOW.'

What Helps Me at Night

I'm not going to pretend I've solved this, because I haven't. But a few things make the nights shorter:

- I keep a playlist of shows I've already watched. Nothing new, nothing with surprises. Just familiar voices in a familiar story. It gives my brain something else to hold onto.
- I write things down. Not in a 'dear diary' way. More like a brain dump. Whatever my brain is chewing on, I put it on paper so it stops circulating in my head. Sometimes just seeing it written down makes it smaller.
- I text my mom. Even from the next room. Sometimes just knowing someone knows I'm awake makes me feel less alone with the thoughts.
- I remind myself that morning always comes. Every single bad night has ended. Every single one. That track record matters.

■ Try This:

Keep a small notebook by your bed. When the 2 AM spiral starts, write down the three biggest worries your brain is throwing at you. Then write next to each one: 'Can I solve this right now?' The answer is almost always no. Seeing that on paper gives you permission to put it down until morning.

Chapter Nine: School Is a Full-Time Performance

I spend approximately seven hours a day pretending to be a person who isn't anxious. That's a full-time job. And then I come home and need to recover from the job of pretending, which leaves very little energy for the actual job of being a student.

Nobody tells you that anxiety is this exhausting. They talk about the panic attacks, the worry, the fear. They don't talk about the fatigue. The heaviness of carrying a performance all day, every day, with no intermission.

Being Called On

There's a specific kind of terror that lives in the phrase 'Echo, what do you think?'

It doesn't matter if I know the answer. It doesn't matter if I was literally just thinking about the answer. The second my name is said out loud in front of other people, every thought I've ever had empties out of my brain like someone pulled a plug. I can feel the blood rush to my face. I can feel every pair of eyes rotate toward me like some horrible synchronized swimming routine.

And then I have to speak. With a voice. Out loud. In a room where people can hear me.

Sometimes I say something that makes sense. Sometimes my voice comes out weird and too quiet and I watch the teacher lean forward with that 'what?' face, which means I have to say it AGAIN, louder, which is basically my personal version of a nightmare.

Group Projects: A Horror Story

Here's my ranking of school activities by anxiety level:

Working alone: manageable. Working with one partner I know: okay. Working with one partner I don't know: difficult. Working in a group: extremely difficult. Working in a group with people I don't know: absolutely not. Presenting the group project to the class: I am now deceased.

The problem with group projects isn't the work. I can do the work. Give me the work. I will do everyone's work if it means I don't have to negotiate, speak up in the group, or present anything out loud. I have literally done the entire project myself just to avoid the social

component.

Teachers think they're teaching 'collaboration.' What they're actually teaching me is 'how many tasks can you take on silently to avoid having to advocate for yourself in a group setting.'

■ **Echo Says:**

My group project strategy is: volunteer for the research part (done alone, no talking required), do twice as much as anyone else (so nobody has a reason to be frustrated with me), and when it's time to present, suddenly develop a very convincing cough. I'm not proud of this. But I'm alive, so.

Tests and the Blank Brain

I can study for a test all week. I can know the material perfectly. And then I sit down, the test hits my desk, and everything I knew is just... gone. Like my brain formatted itself.

Test anxiety is its own special beast because it attacks your memory at the exact moment you need it most. Your body goes into fight-or-flight, and your brain decides that recalling the difference between mitosis and meiosis is not a survival priority right now.

The cruelest part? I usually remember all the answers about five minutes after I turn the test in.

■ **Try This:**

If you have test anxiety, talk to your school counselor about accommodations. Extended time. Taking tests in a separate room. These aren't cheating — they're leveling the playing field. Your brain works differently under pressure. That's not a weakness, it's information, and the school can work with that information if you let them know.

Chapter Ten: The God Thing (I Know, Stay With Me)

I'm going to be honest with you: this is the chapter I almost didn't write.

Because faith stuff is personal, and I'm fourteen, and I am very much still figuring out what I actually believe versus what I was told to believe versus what feels real when I'm alone at 2am and my brain won't stop.

But I'm writing it anyway. Because not writing it would be dishonest, and the whole point of this book is honesty.

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." — Psalm 34:18

I found that verse on a night when I needed to find it. I don't know if that's coincidence or not. I've decided it doesn't matter — what matters is that I read it and something in me unclenched. That's real.

What I Actually Believe Right Now

I believe there's something. I'm not always sure what to call it or how to talk to it or whether it hears me. I have questions. I have doubts. I have nights where the whole concept feels very far away.

But I also have nights where something settles in my chest that I can't explain any other way except — something is holding this. Something is here.

My faith is small and fragile and frequently confused. But it's mine.

Why Faith Doesn't Fix Everything (And Why That's Okay)

There's a version of faith people sell that is basically: believe hard enough and nothing bad will happen. I don't believe that version. Bad things happened to me. Bad things happen to a lot of people who believe very deeply and sincerely. Faith didn't prevent any of it.

But faith — my small, fragile, frequently confused faith — gives me somewhere to put the fear when I don't know what else to do with it. It gives me a conversation I can have at 3am that doesn't require anyone else to be awake. It gives me the weird, unexplainable sense that I am

not completely alone in this.

For a person whose nervous system's biggest fear is being alone and unprotected — that's not nothing. That's actually a lot.

■ **Echo Says:**

I don't pray like they teach in church. I mostly just talk, usually in my head, usually starting with 'okay so here's the thing.' God apparently listens to those too. Or at least, nothing has caught fire yet, so I'm counting that as a yes.

For the Skeptics

If you're reading this and you're not religious or you're not sure, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. This is just my honest experience. Your experience gets to be different. This book is for all anxious teenagers, not just the ones who believe the same things I do.

What I want you to take from this chapter — whether faith is part of your life or not — is this: find something bigger than the anxiety to anchor to. Something that reminds you the moment you're in is not the whole story. That you are not the final word on your own life.

For me that anchor is God. For you it might be something else. Find it. Hold onto it.

*"His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." —
Lamentations 3:22-23*

New every morning. Not new every perfect morning. Every morning. Including the ones after the worst nights.

Chapter Eleven: Bad Days — A Field Guide

Nobody writes honestly about bad days. They write about overcoming them, about what you learned, about how you came out stronger. All of that is fine and good and also completely useless when you're in the middle of one.

This chapter is for the middle.

What Bad Days Actually Feel Like

Bad days for me aren't always dramatic. Sometimes they're just heavy. Like everything is made of more weight than it usually is. Getting out of bed is more. Eating is more. Answering a text is a full project that requires rest afterward.

Other bad days are loud — my brain running through every worst case scenario it can generate, which is a lot of scenarios because my brain is very creative when it comes to things that could go wrong.

And some bad days are both: heavy AND loud. Those are the ones where I stay very close to my safe people and don't try to be brave about anything.

■ Echo Says:

My personal bad day survival kit: my bed, something I've watched before (no surprises), a specific playlist, my mom nearby even if we're not talking, and food that requires exactly zero social interaction to obtain. Snacks I already bought. In advance. Because I planned for this.

Things That Actually Help (For Real, Not Theoretically)

1. Lower the bar. On bad days, your only job is to get to tomorrow. That's it. Not to be productive. Not to learn anything. Not to be okay. Just to get to tomorrow. Tomorrow you can re-evaluate. Today you survive.

2. Do the thing that costs you the least. Bad days are not the day to push yourself. Bad days are the day to do the thing that helps with the smallest possible effort. For me that's music — I don't have to do anything except press play. Zero social interaction, zero effort, immediate result.

3. Tell someone. Not everyone. Just your person. A text. Two words. 'Bad day.' You don't have to explain. A good person will respond without requiring an explanation. And if they do require one — they might not be your person.

4. Wait. This one's the hardest and also the most reliable: bad days end. They have a 100% completion rate so far. They feel permanent when you're in them. They are not. This feeling — as real as it is right now — will change. Wait for it to change.

— **Reflect:**

Think about your last bad day. What's one thing that helped, even a little? It doesn't have to be big. Maybe it was a song. A blanket. A pet. A text from someone. Whatever it was — that's data. That's your brain telling you what it needs. Listen to it.

Chapter Twelve: The Things They Don't See (Living Behind the Mask)

There's a version of me that everyone at school knows. She's quiet. She's polite. She does her work. She doesn't cause problems. Teachers would describe her as 'a pleasure to have in class.' Other students would describe her as 'the girl who's kind of there but not really.'

That version of me is a mask. And the real me is behind it, watching, exhausted, wishing she could take it off.

What People Don't See

They don't see the twenty minutes I spend in the car before school, trying to convince myself to go inside.

They don't see the scripts I write in my head before every interaction — even the ones that should be simple, like buying lunch or saying hello to someone in the hallway.

They don't see the relief that floods my entire body when I get home, close the door, and finally get to stop performing. The way I physically collapse. The way my jaw unclenches for the first time in seven hours. The way I tell my mom 'my social battery is depleted' and she just nods because she's learned that means: don't ask me questions, don't make me talk, just let me exist quietly for a while.

They don't see the way I cry sometimes, not because anything specific happened, but because the effort of being 'fine' all day took everything I had.

And they definitely don't see the guilt. The guilt of saying no to things. The guilt of needing more than other people seem to need. The guilt of being the kid who makes everything harder.

The Weight of Invisible Struggles

The hardest part of anxiety isn't the anxiety itself. It's the loneliness of it being invisible. Other people's struggles are visible — a broken arm, a bad grade, a fight with a friend. Those things get acknowledged. People ask if you're okay. Teachers give extensions.

But anxiety? Anxiety looks like nothing. It looks like a quiet kid who's 'just shy.' It looks like someone who 'needs to come out of their shell.' It looks completely, totally fine from the outside, which means nobody thinks to check if you're fine on the inside.

I am so tired of looking fine.

■ **Echo Says:**

Sometimes I wish anxiety was visible. Like, I wish people could see a little warning light above my head that says 'currently running at 200% capacity, please approach with gentle expectations.' Not because I want pity. Just because I want people to know that the quiet version of me isn't ALL of me. There's a whole storm happening that they can't see.

■ **Real Talk:**

If you're reading this and thinking 'that's me' — I see you. Not in a cheesy, motivational poster way. I literally see you because I AM you. And the fact that you're still showing up every day, mask and all, means you are tougher than you think you are.

Chapter Thirteen: Things I Actually Know Now

This is the part where I'm supposed to give you a neat summary of everything I've learned. The problem is that my life is not neat, and pretending otherwise would defeat the entire point of this book.

So instead, here are just things I know now that I didn't know before. In no particular order. Presented without flourish.

- Anxiety is not a personality flaw. It is a misfiring alarm system. You did not choose it and you are not weak for having it.
- Having two or three real people is better than having twenty people who don't actually know you.
- The thing you're dreading is almost never as bad as the 45 minutes of dreading it.
- It is okay to leave a situation. You are allowed to go. You don't owe anyone your discomfort.
- Asking for help is survivable. The asking feels like dying. The actual asking is usually over in twelve seconds and nobody cares as much as your brain said they would.
- Humor is armor, but make sure it's not the only thing you have. Feel the things too.
- Your nervous system is not the enemy. It's trying to protect you. It's just... overqualified for most Tuesday situations.
- Progress is not linear. You can have a breakthrough and then a terrible week and then another breakthrough. This is normal.
- You are allowed to be a work in progress. Actually, you are required to be one. Everyone is. The people who seem finished are just hiding their drafts.
- Being brave doesn't mean not being scared. It means being scared and doing the thing anyway — even if the thing is just getting out of bed and making it to lunch.
- Social media is not real life. The people posting their best moments are also having their worst moments. They just don't post those.
- It's okay to not be okay. Say that again. It is okay. To not. Be okay.
- You don't have to explain your anxiety to anyone. 'I'm not feeling up to it' is a complete sentence.
- The nights end. The bad days end. The panic attacks end. They have a 100% track record of ending.

■ **Echo Says:**

I am still anxious. I will probably always have some level of anxiety. I've stopped trying to get rid of it entirely and started trying to make space in my life for it without letting it run everything. That's the goal. Not cured. Just — coexisting, a little more peacefully.

Chapter Fourteen: A Letter to Anyone Who Gets It

Dear You,

If you've read this far, you either have anxiety or you love someone who does. Either way — I'm glad you're here.

I want to tell you something that nobody told me early enough:

The version of you that shows up in your worst moments — frozen, panicking, hiding, silent, unable to ask for the simplest things — that version is not the real you. That is you under siege. That's what happens to a person when their nervous system has been carrying too much for too long.

The real you is in there. I promise. The funny one, the brave one, the one who wants to try things and say things and take up space in the world — that's the real you. Anxiety is just the thing standing in front of the door.

The door can open. Maybe not all at once. Maybe just a crack at first, just enough to let some air in. But it opens.

I know because it's opening for me. Slowly. Awkwardly. With a lot of steps backward for every step forward. But it's opening.

Some things I want you to know:

- You are not too much. You have never been too much. You are the right amount of everything — your nervous system is just running in overdrive.
- You deserve a safe person. If you don't have one yet, that is not a reflection of your worth. It's just timing. Keep going until you find them.
- The small victories count. Using the bathroom in a new place. Asking for your food order. Sitting somewhere new. These are brave things. Let yourself know that.
- You don't have to perform. Not for me. Not for this book. Not even for yourself on your bad days. Just exist. That's enough.
- You're not alone in this — not even a little. There are so many of us. More than you think. We're just all quietly managing our Tuesday smoke alarms at the same time.

I'm rooting for you. Even from behind my comfort zone.

With everything I have,

Echo

Now, I Need You to Do Something Brave

Hey. Yeah, you. The one still reading.

If any of this sounded like your life — if you saw yourself in these pages, even a little — I need you to do one thing for me. Just one.

Show this to someone.

Your mom. Your dad. Your guardian. Your aunt, your uncle, your grandparent. Your teacher. Your school counselor. Your coach. That one adult who always seems like they actually care.

You don't even have to explain it. You don't have to have a speech prepared. You can just hand them this book and say:

"This is me."

That's it. Two words. You've already read a whole book about how hard asking is — so I'm not going to pretend this is easy. It's not. It might be the hardest thing you do this week.

But it might also be the thing that changes everything.

Because the adults in your life? Most of them want to help. They just don't always know what's happening inside your head. This book tells them. Let it do the talking for you.

And if you're a parent or teacher reading this right now because a kid just handed it to you — **thank you for looking.** That kid just did the bravest thing in this entire book. Please meet them where they are.

The parent edition — **"Echo's Story: Anxiety & Me — A Parent's Guide"** — is also available. It was written by my mom, and it's her side of this story. If you're a parent trying to understand what your kid is going through, that book is for you.

If You Need Help Right Now

This book is honest, not a substitute for real support. If you're struggling, please reach out:

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — Call or text 988 (free, 24/7)

Crisis Text Line — Text HOME to 741741

Teen Line — Call 1-800-852-8336 or text TEEN to 839863

NAMI — nami.org | 1-800-950-6264

Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ youth) — 1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678-678

If this book helped you — pass it to someone who needs it.

Echo's Story: A Teen's Honest Guide to Living With Anxiety

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