

Ansia - Emily, Year 8, NSW

“Does anyone know the answer?”

Thirty blank pairs of eyes stare back at Miss Rosae’s glittery, hopeful ones. I can see inside spheres of spiralling hazel that she is silently praying for someone to raise their hand.

I pray right along with her, letting thick dark Italian curls of hair slide in front of my face as I mask my features into the expression I’m best at: *neutral*.

Please, don’t pick me.

“Someone I haven’t heard from yet..?”

God, I hate that line. I think every teacher on the face of the earth uses that phrase at least once a day. *I haven’t put my hand up for a reason*, I want to shout.

“Lucia, what about you?”

I freeze.

The pencil shivers in my hand as I look down at my notebook, the ebony ink of my messy script blurring and slithering together to create a taunting language I can’t understand. My mind is wiped.

“Um..”

Is my face on fire?

I turn to the window to see for myself and that’s when I catch a glimpse of It.

Suddenly, it feels like an elephant is sitting atop my chest.

Squeezing my lungs.

Eliciting spasms and tremors in my leg.

You know this, It seems to taunt me, slits of black eyes glittering maliciously from where It stands from outside the window, framed by the swaying gum tree outside the science block.

“I...uh.” My voice is breathy with panic.

I think someone laughs, and Miss Rosae smiles a little sympathetically, but the tilt of her thin lips is laced with another feeling entirely.

Disappointment.

Something I know all too well, since the feeling of its all-encompassing mass consumes me every day.

It smirks, clothed in all black and the remnants of my lost dreams of self confidence. I stare back desperately, gaping like a fish as the class seems to move on, bored of this interaction.

“It’s alright. We’ll come back to you...”

Please, don’t come back to me. Leave me stranded here. Leave me lying here. Leave me to stew in my own disappointment.

Leave me alone.

LEAVE ME ALONE!

I want to shout at It. I know It won't listen. It haunts me, always towering, looming over me, reminding me of how utterly powerless I am in the face of my inability to speak up.

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Did I always care about what people would think of me?

It’s a good question. And I’ve yet to come up with an answer that would be entirely honest. Because to tell you the truth, I can’t remember a time when It wasn't at my back. Over my shoulder. Snapping at my heels.

How embarrassing, It taunts me as I trudge up to geography class. Wow, Lucia, I really thought you’d be able to do it this time. You knew that answer, admit it.

“Shut it.” I growl.

Too bad you’re so “shy,” It laughs.

My eyes well. I steady my breathing, smooth my blazer.

“*Andare via*, please.”

Could it really be that simple?

I want to, so desperately, be able to share my true self - emotions, opinions, insights - without fearing the judgement of others. But It, forever my unwavering shadow, makes this seem impossible.

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“Pair up, please!” Mr Rosing screeches from his perch at the desk, glasses crooked on his pert nose. “Time to start our Oceans and Seas project!”

I look around nervously at the swarm of students buzzing around me, whispering to their friends, eyes slashing about to scan for the unfortunate leftovers, shunned from the pack. I almost always fall into this category, so I let the familiar phrase envelope me and prompt me to raise my hand as it falls from Mr Rosing’s lips. “Who doesn’t have a partner?”

Apparently, the girl in front of me with shiny, slicked hair and glossy lips turned up in a snarl is as unhappy with this arrangement as I am.

“What even is the difference between an ocean and a sea?” She asks, rolling her eyes and chewing her gum loudly.

Smack.

Smack.

Smack.

My heart begins to pound. I know It is close.

“Um..I think it’s..”

Oceans and seas.

Think.

If all the people on Earth stood at the edges of sapphire seas, poised themselves above the frothy rolls of waves, and cried all the tears in their eyes, would the oceans rise?

I have words. I have many, in fact, waiting behind the crease of my lips that acts like the spine of a closed book, signalling this is where they live

SO SAY THEM.

“Yeah..so..uh..”

WHERE IS MY VOICE?

I look frantically towards the back of the stuffy classroom. It looms, clothed in night and stolen promises, quirking a brow.

I open my mouth shakily.

I scream and scream and sound comes out, truly, pure, beautiful sound. But it gets swallowed up by sparkling bubbles of fear.

I'm standing at the bottom of an ocean. Maybe a sea?

What's the difference?

I know. Of course I do.

"I actually don't know." I pat my warm cheeks with cool fingers, laughing breathily.

Disappointment.

An eye roll again. "Well, we're off to a great start."

Ooh, ouch.

As soon as the bell rings, I gather my books and nearly sprint out into the cool air. It's Friday lunchtime, my favourite period of the week.

"You know you can't come in here." I'm smiling triumphantly at It as we stand on the threshold of classroom E12.

Unfortunately, I do. Have fun in your little club.

I step into the Book club with a stupid smile and a bounce in my step.

The girls and I talk about the novel we're reading, a crime thriller, and discuss the merits of having a school book swap. I even gather the courage without It looming over me to show them a piece from a story I've been writing. They clap and cheer in time to my bursting heart.

If only Book club could last forever. I could talk about reading and writing, my biggest passions, for eternity and never get bored.

But the bell rings. Everyone packs up their belongings like they have better places to be. And as soon as I sling my backpack over my shoulder, It has found me.

Home time. Yay. You know what that means.

“They’re doing better now,” I mumble.

Yeah, right. Evident when they forgot your birthday two weeks ago. Did you really think that cheap cupcake with the electric candle was carefully curated to express their love for you? Happy fifteenth birthday, and all that?

“You know how they are.”

Of course. That’s why I’m here. You think that because your parents forget about you, you’re not good enough. So you constantly try to please and impress others by being perfect. But you’ve applied so much pressure on yourself that you’ve already cracked. You barely put up your hand in class anymore and you shake whenever someone asks you a simple question, fearing saying the wrong thing.

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I wedge the key into the lock, twist.
Click.

“*Sono a casa,*” I whisper to the walls.

As the phrase echoes in the empty hallway, I make up my mind.

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The puffs of white smoke from the trains match those coming from my mouth in the crisp air of the morning. The ticket is scrunched in my hand, the weight of a shadow heavy at my back.

You’re really doing this? Think practically, Lucia. You should worry.

“I’ll be fine,” I say calmly.

I turn to It. After all the time we’ve spent together, I feel I owe It an explanation.

“I’ve thought about this. For a long time, actually. I want to travel, see the world, write stories upon stories, binding my books with passion. I can’t rely on some book club to be my only source of relief. And to do that, I need to get away.”

It stares at me.

“So...you won’t have me to cling to anymore. You can’t drag me down anymore, make me feel like I’m drowning anymore. I have things to say, and I’m not scared. I’m leaving you behind.”

With those words on my tongue, I step softly into the carriage. Feel the train rumble to a start. Hear the clamouring of bells and whistles. Taste freedom. Smell hope.

It's only when I'm rolling towards the next sunrise, feeling as light as a feather, that I turn to look back at the station just in time to see It chasing after me. It runs and runs but cannot keep up. I'm laughing as I feel my shoulders straighten, not having realised they were slumped before.

We turn a corner, and plunge into the darkness of a tunnel. It is gone.

This feels like a big moment in my story, and I'm feeling kind of sentimental. So I utilise the very limited Italian the people I'm leaving behind ever bothered to teach me.

“Arrivederci, Ansia. Non ti rivedrò mai più.”

Goodbye, Anxiety. I'll never see you again.