

EMMA NELSON

BOOK GHOSTWRITING PORTFOLIO



EMMA NELSON

Memoir Ghostwriter + Developmental Editor

Hourly rate: \$150/hr

Emma Nelson began her writing career while working as a Legal Assistant in an estate planning firm. After a few months of moonlight ghostwriting, Emma shifted to writing full time. Over the past few years, her passion for writing has only grown. She has had the privilege of helping fascinating public speakers, entrepreneurs, and start-up CEOs share their stories with the world. Her previous clients have starred in Netflix specials, launched successful businesses, and taught at top universities.

When she's not writing, you can find Emma enjoying a latte with friends near her alma mater, Baylor University, or visiting family in her home state of Ohio. You can learn more about Emma at: emmagracewrites.com





SERVICES

MEMOIR GHOSTWRITING

NARRATIVE NONFICTION GHOSTWRITING

SELF-HELP BOOK GHOSTWRITING

DEVELOPMENTAL EDITING



PORTFOLIO CONTENTS



MEMOIR

5–10

Essay Feature: Anxiety and OCD aren’t “minor” mental illnesses.

NARRATIVE NONFICTION

11–20

Short Story Excerpt Feature: The Great War

21–24

Novella Excerpt Feature: The Love Story of Aidan and Grace

SHORT FICTION

25–31

Short Story Feature: I–35



MEMOIR



MEMOIR

ESSAY: ANXIETY AND OCD AREN'T “MINOR” MENTAL ILLNESSES.



I was shaking. Like, *really* shaking. My hands trembled, my breath came and went in irregular bursts, and my stomach sloshed with what felt like angry ocean waves.

I was sweating, yet I was freezing.

I knew I was about to pass out or throw up or die, but I wasn't sure which.

Through the symptoms I stumbled into my parents' pitch-black room.

They sat up with me for half an hour, trying to calm me down. The thoughts were swirling, every stressor in my life converging in one dramatic crash. I saw in my mind's eye a video of the South Tower falling on September 11, 2001, one floor after the other, the weight of each successive collapse bringing down the next until, finally, death and destruction weren't confined to just a few stories. They surfed on the waves of debris, glass, and metal. Office supplies and men rained down on a city of terrified onlookers.

This must be a nightmare, I concluded.

But it wasn't.

It was “only a panic attack.”

And I was only twelve.

I was fourteen when I was diagnosed with anxiety. “Generalized Anxiety Disorder,” to be specific.

Quite a few things suddenly made sense.

For instance, when I was eight, I decided I was a horrible person.

I'd had evidence to support my conclusion.

Often, I fell asleep during my hour-long, repetitive bedtime prayer. When I awoke the next morning, I wouldn't allow myself to watch cartoons until I repeated the entire prayer from the very beginning.

But my parents didn't make me do that. My church didn't make me do that.

ESSAY: ANXIETY AND OCD AREN'T “MINOR” MENTAL ILLNESSES.

I did.

Then I realized that I wasn't just a sinner, but a sinner destined for hell! At eight, I didn't really understand God's grace. I thought I had to confess every sin or I would not be cleansed.

I would be, as the Bible says, *unclean*.

I panicked.

What if I died before I had a chance to confess and repent of my sins from that particular day?

Every night, my poor parents had to listen to me tearfully explain every “bad” thought I had and “bad” thing I did that day (spoiler alert: when you're eight, the “bad” things you think and do really aren't all that bad). I was sure if I died, my in-depth confessions were the only way I'd make it into heaven. I was terrified I'd forget a sin one evening, get hit by a car the following day, and go straight to hell.

Then came the stomach issues.

My mother assumed I had IBS, which I probably did – but it was more than that. Stomach aches and anxiety went hand-in-hand, so as I moved up in grades and school ramped up, my pain grew worse.

And of course, I had to get all As, so that brought with it a whole new level of stress.

So when I threw up from the flu in the third grade and choked on my vomit, I developed a phobia of throwing up. My anxiety and stomach issues combined with this new fear led to what I would later discover was a typical OCD-style “obsession”: I suddenly thought I was sick all the time. In other words, I spent about a year of my childhood as a hypochondriac. My parents had to regularly pick me up “sick” from school and feed me saltines and chicken noodle soup when, physiologically, I was completely fine.

Thankfully for me, my mother deals with anxiety and stomach issues herself, so she was always patient with me. The only difference was our ages: her issues didn't really flare up until she was about eighteen, while my struggles blossomed at only five or six.

In middle school, my anxiety got to the point where I was shaking in class, having daily stomachaches, and unable to sleep. My freshman year of high school, my mother lovingly took me to a psychiatrist.

ESSAY: ANXIETY AND OCD AREN'T “MINOR” MENTAL ILLNESSES.

I sat across from an ancient woman with coke-bottle lenses and a floral patterned grandma dress. Both physically and mentally, she reminded me of Professor Trelawney from Harry Potter (if you don't know who that is, look her up and it'll take you all of two seconds to know exactly what kind of person my therapist was.) She gave me worksheets for “homework” on which I was to list my stressors each week. She had me lay down on her couch (yes, like they do in the movies) whilst she walked through “breathing exercises” that were supposed to help me sleep.

The exercises *did* help me sleep. But I still couldn't complete basic tasks, like eating, exercising, or reading, without feeling like I was drowning in a sea of anxiety.

So, exasperated, Shrink Trelawney prescribed me 25 milligrams of Zoloft.

After years of fearing pills and the Medical Establishment (at just fourteen years of age... I know), I refused to take my medication. Even though she told me the dosage was lower than she'd ever prescribed before – so low, in fact, that it probably wouldn't do anything to help with my anxiety – I wouldn't have it.

Finally, at my parents' urging, I started taking the Zoloft. Not much changed for my anxiety, but the good news was I didn't have any adverse reactions.

So we increased the dosage to 50 milligrams.

For the first time in my life, I started to feel better. No more panic attacks, no more shaking in class – I was still far more anxious than my peers, sure, but I was at least able to function!

I couldn't believe it: I was free!

But some things still didn't change.

I still had an hour-long bedtime routine that had to be done in precisely the right order. My phone apps still had to be closed properly, my phone turned on and off in a specific way, my closet door kept at an exact angle before I could turn the lights out.

Somehow, it never occurred to me – or to anyone around me – that I wasn't *just* anxious.

But I wasn't diagnosed with OCD until I was twenty-one years old.

That was after two years of sharing a room with another girl in college, during which she had to deal with me getting up to pee at least three times every evening before I could go to sleep.

ESSAY: ANXIETY AND OCD AREN'T “MINOR” MENTAL ILLNESSES.

I learned from my adult therapist that anxiety and OCD can be independent of one another, but they often go hand in hand because obsessions give you anxiety that can only be relieved – at least temporarily – by completing compulsions.

That's why I needed constant reassurance from my two-year college boyfriend that he still liked me. *That's* why I needed my mother to remind me that I was saved by grace through faith, regardless of the “bad” thoughts I forgot to confess. *That's* why I had to make sure my phone was perfectly parallel to the edge of my nightstand when I turned it off at night before I could sleep.

My therapist also explained that OCD does something really terrifying to the brain: it picks out the things you care about the most in life and convinces you that you will screw those things up.

For me, that looked like spiritual OCD. I cared so much about spending eternity in heaven with the Lord that I grew terrified I wouldn't. I obsessed over it, my thoughts ruminating on the terror that I would end up in hell. Suddenly, I was praying constantly to be forgiven and feeling no emotional relief.

For me, that looked like relationship OCD. I cared so much about my romantic relationships that I grew terrified I'd screw them up – maybe I'd say the wrong thing or, worst of all, maybe I'd cheat. Even though I've never cheated before nor had any inclination to do so, I was suddenly avoiding all young men that weren't whoever I was dating.

For a friend of mine with OCD, that looked like harm OCD. He cared so much about his family and his faith that his brain fixated on the worst thing that could happen – what if he hurt those he loved? Suddenly, he was avoiding all knives in the kitchen, even though he knew he would never actually pick up a knife and hurt anyone.

That's OCD – it's like your brain is a record player, and your most terrifying thoughts are broken records. They play over and over and over again and you have no idea how to escape the cycle.

Your memories stick, too.

It's almost impossible to “get over” things. You remember embarrassing moments in vivid detail; you rethink all of your conversations and memories. Overanalyzing and thinking about things like “What could I have done differently? What could I have said differently? What did I do wrong?” are so intense that your anxiety skyrockets and sleep becomes elusive.

One of my earliest memories is of my older brothers wrestling in the family room of my childhood home. I was probably about five at the time, and they were around eleven and fifteen respectively.

ESSAY: ANXIETY AND OCD AREN'T “MINOR” MENTAL ILLNESSES.

I can still see it: My eldest brother sat on my other brother's back, holding him down and shoving his face in the carpet.

“Eat it!” He yelled, victorious. “Eat the dust!”

I screamed at him to get off. Crying, I shoved him until, laughing, he lets my younger brother up.

Both boys are smiling. They were just playing around.

Yet I have never forgotten that memory.

Why?

Because I saw cruelty and I panicked. To this day, I want to undo that moment – fix it somehow – even though I know it wasn't nearly as bad as I perceived it to be.

I'm just a broken record player, still trying to spin the same stuff around.

OCD attacks whatever is dearest to you. That causes a spike in anxiety, which results in more obsessions and compulsions to alleviate the discomfort of the anxiety.

Sometimes I feel like my disorders are societally “minor disorders” or “baby disorders” – ones that aren't as serious as things like persistent depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, antisocial personality disorder, etc. People always say things like “I'm being OCD” or “oh, it's just my anxiety.” I'm not the type to be easily offended, so that doesn't bother me, yet I wonder how many people really understand the type of mental battle that extreme anxiety and OCD are.

Frankly, they're not “cute” or “small” mental illnesses. They have impacted what I've been able to accomplish. Thankfully, I've had access to therapy, medication, and resources that have taught me how to handle my anxiety and reach my goals.

But not everyone is so lucky.

We live in a world in which millions of people suffer from these disorders, but very few get the help they need to thrive. My dream is to change that – one vulnerable story at a time.

NARRATIVE NONFICTION



NARRATIVE NONFICTION

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT



September 11, 1918

The September clouds, heavy with rain, cast a grey shadow across the horizon. The fall air blended with the precipitation in the sky to form a constant, miserable chill.

I sat in the mud, leaned against the trench wall, and tried to get in a few minutes of much-needed sleep. Raindrops slid along the brim of my helmet and dripped into the puddle growing in my lap.

Half-asleep, I heard the plodding of footsteps in the mud. I opened my eyes to find Roy approaching from around a bend in the trench. Seeing me, he strode over and plopped down beside me. His dark brown hair, turned black from the rain, was plastered to his forehead, and his thick mustache drooped.

“Hey,” he said, pulling the straps of his pack from his shoulders.

“Hey,” I murmured back, my eyes closed. The rain came down harder now, the incessant drizzle replaced by the steady patter of thick drops.

I listened to Roy wrestle unsuccessfully with his pack, shifting around the kit inside to make himself a backrest.

I opened one eye slightly as he fell back against the pack defeatedly, resigning himself to the usual discomfort of living in the trenches. The last few months in the trenches had been constantly cold, wet, and cramped. There were way too many guys in such a small space, and some had gotten so sick they’d died. The food was terrible, and there was never enough of it. Nothing about the trenches was healthy, but I guess they were safer than the no man’s land above.

For a moment, Roy stared blankly at the rainwater gathering along the edge of the trench wall across from us. He absentmindedly brushed away the drops gathering in his mustache.

Then, with a slight shake of his head, he sighed.

“So, you ready for tomorrow?” He asked.

“Uh,” I said. “Not really.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Yeah, me neither.”

I don’t think any of us were really ready. Our division first faced fire back in February, but this would be different. Moving southeast towards Vigneulles, our division would have to trek through patchy woods and over hills along the Meuse River to reach our objective.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

Those of us who made it to Vigneulles would hopefully meet up with units from IV Corps. Then some of the Germans would be trapped in the southwestern area of the salient and St. Mihiel could be, for the first time in four years, back under Allied control. The operation would consist of a unique combination of firefighting and trekking along. While the plan was clear, and we’d prepared as best we could in the time we had, we’d need careful coordination to succeed.

Roy and I sat in silence, taking in the calm before the storm. In my hunger I tried to recall the scent of my mother’s countless homemade apple pies. If I focused hard, I could taste a hint of the sweetened apples, but I couldn’t quite get the whole flavor. The overpowering scents of mud, sweat, and rot in the trench drowned out the memory until, finally, the sweetness slipped completely away with a particularly foul-smelling gust of wind.

“How much longer do you think it’ll be til we get to go home?” Roy asked, interrupting the silence. “I miss how boring Amherst was. That’s how life should be – so simple it’s boring.”

“Ha, I don’t know,” I mumbled. “But Boston isn’t too boring, so I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“I mean there shouldn’t be so much goin on,” he said. “Like people shouldn’t be real excited or real afraid, and houses shouldn’t be blown up, and a damn war shouldn’t stop ya in the middle of your life.”

I thought about that for a second, listening to the rain pelting against the muddy trench floor.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “You’re probly right. But that’s just not how it is.” Roy shrugged, but said nothing. Shivering, I shoved my hands under my trench coat and turned my head away from the blowing wind. I sat still in my discomfort for a while, waiting for the exhaustion and drumming of the rain to put me to sleep.

September 12, 1918

The night was so dark that I could barely make out the shadowy tree line in the distance.

Laying on my stomach in the dead grass between Roy and Frank, I clenched my teeth to keep them from chattering. Chills ran through my body as the rain poured down. Water gathering in the muddy puddle beside me overflowed, seeping through my uniform and adding to the cold.

We weren’t ordered to attack until 8:00, but we had to be in position in front of the artillery assault units ahead of time. Waiting was miserable; it meant hours lying out in the open, soaked, frozen, exposed, and terrified. We waited in silence.

I flinched at the sudden sound of a thousand shells ripping through the air above us. The sky above glowed with a hazy yellow tint, reflecting down onto the landscape below.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

Everyone around me stared intently at the sky, their gazes transfixed on the explosion of light above.

“Well, shit,” Frank said, his breath billowing out in a white cloud. “If they didn’t know we were coming before, they sure do now.” A rather thin, wiry person, Frank carried a constant pessimistic air about him, which he often tried, in vain, to cover over with humor.

To Frank’s right, Arthur broke his gaze at the sky and glanced toward me. “That means it’s about one, right?”

“Yeah,” answered Milford, our squad sergeant, from beside Roy. Milford was one for frequent interruptions. I think it was his way of asserting his authority over the squad.

“Damn, it’s gonna be a long night,” Arthur replied, again staring at the glow from above.

“Mhm,” the Sarge mumbled, mesmerized by the sky.

I shivered, wondering whether I’d even survive a few more hours laying on the frozen ground. One breath after the other, I thought, inhaling. In, out. In, out. The rain came down harder now, sending a sudden chill down my spine. I focused on my breathing. In, out, I thought, listening to the rain’s relentless barrage against the sodden earth. In, out.

After eight long hours, it was finally almost H-hour. The icy stiffness in my bones made it difficult to move.

Groaning, I pushed myself to my feet and shook the numbness from my limbs.

“God, I can’t feel my legs,” Frank said, smacking his fist repeatedly against his thigh.

“Give ’em a minute,” Arthur said, stretching. He twisted left and then right, his back cracking with a few loud pops. “They’ll come back.”

I adjusted my rifle belt and field pack nervously. Roy shivered quietly beside me, staring at the hazy morning glow along the horizon.

“Alright, boys,” Milford said, straight-faced. “It’s almost time.” I glanced towards Roy, but he’d closed his eyes and bowed his head. A touch of waning moonlight streaked across the front of his coat, forming a soft contrast with the rest of his dark uniform.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

“The hell’re you doing?” I asked him.

“Praying,” he murmured. His eyes stayed closed.

“Huh,” I said, confused. “I didn’t know you were religious.”

“I’m not,” he said. A hint of thinly veiled annoyance clung to his voice. “But it’s worth a shot.”

“Well, finish it up,” the Sarge interrupted, clapping us both on the shoulder. “Cause it’s 8:00.”

The sudden rumbling of the barrage behind us signaled the advance. From either side of our squad, the line surged forward. Bending over a little for leverage, I held on tight to my Springfield and rushed ahead into the blowing rain. Artillery shells zipped overhead as we ran, the ground rumbling as they met their targets. Joining the line, Roy and I ran side-by-side, trying not to lose each other.

The lack of consistent return fire signaled that our barrage hadn’t yet passed the German artillery line. Most of their gunners were still hiding out and waiting for the firestorm to pass.

We hurried to the distant tree line, praying we’d make it there before the return fire intensified. Sprinting across the open field, we were easy targets, and our rifles wouldn’t do much against German machine gunners shooting from behind cover.

Breathing heavily, I kept moving, zigzagging around a bunch of tangled barbed wire that had been smashed into the ground. *Oh God oh God oh God*, I thought, half-tripping over a rock poking out of the earth as I ran. *Don’t get shot don’t get shot don’t get shot*.

I neared the tree line where we’d planned to stop and regroup. Heart pounding, I focused on the spindly trees as I ran, pumping my legs hard to reach them.

My foot caught on something. I went down hard, knocking the wind out of me as my body smacked into the frozen ground. My hand, pinched between my rifle and the icy mud, stung sharply. I tried to stand, but I quickly realized I couldn’t – my boot was tangled in some barbed wire. Panicking, I kept my head down, clawing at my boot to try and free it.

A few yards ahead of me, Roy glanced over his shoulder. Realizing I wasn’t coming, he hunkered down and scurried over to me.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

“Don’t touch that!” He ordered, dropping to the ground beside me. In my blind panic, I’d reached to tug at the spiked wire with my bare hands.

Roy leaned over my boot, trying to see it better through the pouring rain. I watched in horror as he tried to steady his hands, which shook terribly from adrenaline and fear. He let out a shuddering breath and reached for the caught wire.

He cautiously unwrapped it, tugging as he went along to get the half-imbedded spikes out of my boot. His face, tense with concentration, was spotted with dirt and sweat. Stopping for a second, he reached into his pack and pulled out his wire cutters.

I focused on holding my foot steady as he clipped the loosened wire. My foot didn’t hurt, but I still wondered whether I’d find any cuts on it when I took my boot off later.

We both jumped suddenly at the piercing sound of gunfire cracking nearby.

“Shit!” Roy swore, his face pale. I followed his gaze to his right hand. An inch-long gash ran along the skin between the thumb and pointer finger, split open by the wire. Blood spilled from his hand, running down his palm and dripping onto my trousers.

“Shit,” he repeated. “My hand jerked.”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I reached for my pack and rummaged through it until I found my aid kit. I snapped it open and pulled out the little strip of gauze that was inside. Ducking at the sound of gunfire, Roy gave me his injured hand. I wrapped it quickly, pulling the gauze tight at the end to try and stop the bleeding. Roy winced, his teeth clenched, and turned back to the wire.

Working together, we tugged at it until, finally, my boot was free from the last bit of wire.

Freed, I scrambled to my feet. Roy and I immediately sprinted towards the tree line, hunched over with our packs bouncing steadily against our backs. I glanced at the ground repeatedly as I ran, afraid I’d catch another wire – and afraid that, if I did, I wouldn’t be as lucky the second time around.

Our pace slowed to a jog as we reached the line. Roy and I were breathing heavily as we crossed into the spindly woods, exhausted but also somewhat relieved.

A lot of guys from our division were there, too. Spread out to both sides of us, some tried to catch their breath while others shuffled about nervously, anxious to get going. Struggling to breathe, I put my hands to my knees and stared down at the frozen leaves littering the ground.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

I straightened a little as my breathing slowed, realizing I hadn’t yet looked for Arthur, Frank, and the Sarge. As I scanned the area for them, a soldier limped up beside me, half-collapsing to the ground. His furrowed brow and clenched jaw made his pain obvious as he tugged off his right boot. Grimacing, he gripped his ankle, studying a thick bloody gash running just above the bone.

“Oh, shit,” I said. “What happened, man?”

“Fucking barbed wire,” he spat, wincing.

Damn, I thought. *That could’ve been me.*

I felt a sudden pang of guilt for being grateful that it wasn’t. It was as if, in that moment, I’d thought that his pain had somehow allowed me to suffer less: as if there was a set amount of pain in the world, and he’d taken some of it so that I didn’t have to. I felt especially guilty because, for just an instant, I’d been okay with that.

I shrugged it off and helped him wave down an infantry medic shuffling hurriedly along the line. The medic jogged over and knelt down beside him.

Just then, I felt a sturdy clap on my shoulder. I turned.

“Hey, man!” Arthur said, smiling wide. “Good to see ya!”

I broke into a relieved laugh. “Ha, yeah,” I said. “Yeah, it’s good to see you too.”

“Milford and Frank are a few yards down that way,” he said, gesturing to the right. “We got separated at the end there. I’m such a damn good runner they just couldn’t keep up.”

“Oh, sure,” said Roy from beside me. “But you do know Paul and I are faster than all three of ya, ain’t that right?”

“Maybe so, but I’m sure in better shape than y’all. You’ll never see me hunched over wheezing like Paul here always is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked defensively.

“Oh, please,” said Roy. The corners of his mouth twitched upwards in a knowing smile. “You can’t run for shit.”

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

I shook my head at the ground and tried to look annoyed, but they were right. I didn’t run a lot before I joined the army, and I didn’t pick it up as well as the others did during training, either.

Just then, Frank and the Sarge appeared from behind another group of reuniting soldiers.

Smiling, Roy clapped Frank on the shoulder. “Hey, man,” he said. “How you doin’?”

“I’m alright,” he said, shrugging. “But I sure could use a cigarette and some coffee.”

“Damn, that sounds good,” Roy agreed.

“Time to go,” Milford interrupted, tightening the straps of his field pack. He wasn’t the sentimental type.

We followed him deeper into the woods, the frozen, dead leaves crunching underfoot as we went. The rain, which had steadied to a slow drizzle now, fell sporadically to the ground below. Trudging behind Arthur, I tried to match my steps to the sound of the droplets pattering against the earth.

“Damnit!” Roy spat, tripping over a log half-buried under a pile of frozen leaves.

Laughing at him, Frank stepped over it dramatically.

“Oh, quit,” Roy said, “it’s not like you didn’t just eat it five minutes ago.”

“Aw, come on,” Arthur chimed in. “Don’t y’all know how to walk?”

I looked up at the sky, trying to mask my annoyance. I’d come to realize Arthur was the kind of person who couldn’t stand to be left out of anything. No matter how stupid, he’d add in a few words just to be part of the conversation.

“Hey,” I pointed out, “it’s not our fault you walk all pretty.”

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

He was the only guy in our squad who hadn’t tripped at some point during our trek through the trees.

“I’ve just been extra careful,” he said, smirking. “I like it when my uniform’s all nice and clean.” He ceremoniously smoothed down his mud-caked service coat.

I shook my head, staring at the roots peeking out from under the sticks and leaves that littered the ground. My legs burned from hiking and my head pounded from sleep deprivation.

Wondering how much longer we had to go, I peered back at the sky. The hazy light filtering through the grey clouds above came from the east, suggesting we’d only been moving for a couple hours. We probably still had a good deal of walking left before we’d reach Vigneulles.

“You think we’re still far off?” I asked Milford.

“Well,” he said, thinking for a second. “Yeah, we’ve got a ways to go, but we’re making pretty good time. I think we’ll get there by nightfall.”

“Feels like we’ve been goin’ for days,” Frank said, spitting.

“I know,” the Sarge said, “It’s the rain and the cold. We really haven’t gone that far.”

Shrugging, Frank pushed forward to where Arthur and Roy trudged along up ahead.

“So, how you doin’, Paul?” Milford asked me. I was surprised to hear genuine care in his voice.

“Oh, fine,” I said, shivering. “I sure could use a smoke right about now, but otherwise I’m doin’ alright.”

“Hey, me too,” he said. “And a good night’s sleep.”

Nodding in agreement, I pulled my trench coat tighter around me. “Why’s it gotta be so damn cold?”

Milford laughed a slow, tired laugh. “I thought you grew up in Boston! There’s no way this is much colder than that.”

“Well, I didn’t spend a lot of time outside in the freezing rain,” I said, fighting to keep my teeth from chattering.

“THE GREAT WAR” SHORT STORY EXCERPT

“Ah,” he said. “I see.”

We kept moving in silence, the icy wind stinging my face.

The sun had just slipped below the horizon when we saw an ugly hill dotted with half-dead trees up ahead. The waning light cast a hazy glow over the dying vegetation. A few patches of green grass stood out against a sea of brown, contrasting the living and the dead.

The hill seemed to grow taller as we approached. We stopped at its base, surveying the mixture of grey, brown, and green.

“Alright,” Milford said, gazing at a shriveled pine tree near the top. “Last hill – we’re almost there.”

Arthur cast me a sideways look. Hungry and sleep-deprived, we were all so exhausted that even one final hill seemed impossible.

Roy and the Sarge started up the hill, often tripping over the sticks and branches scattered about. With a deep breath, I fell in line behind Arthur and Frank, joining the other soldiers staggering upwards.

One foot after the other, we trudged up the hill. I watched as Milford and Roy neared the top and waited for the three of us to catch up.

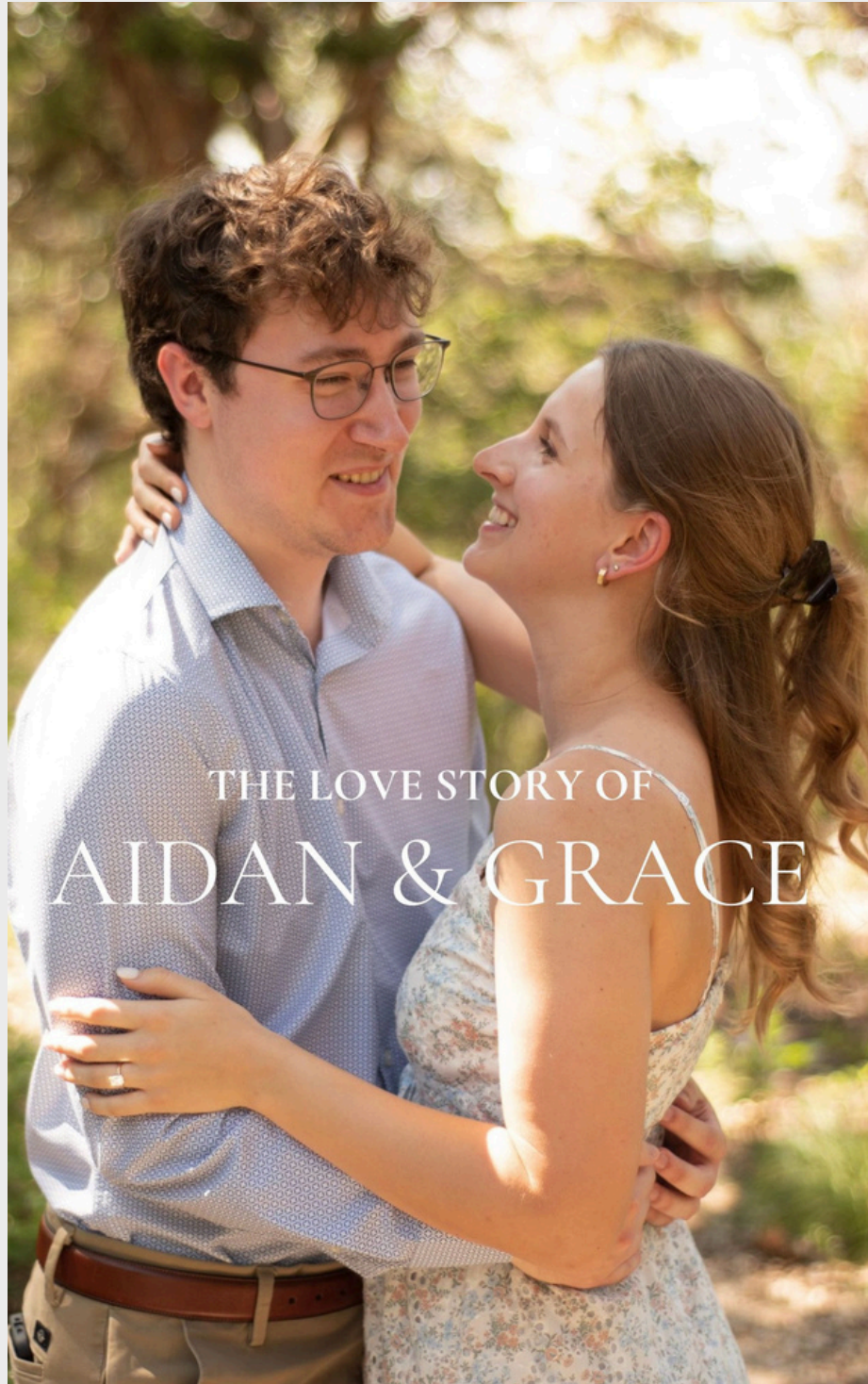
“Hey,” Roy called down, “we made it!”

Reaching him, Frank and I peered out over the little town below. The buildings were in shambles. Debris was littered about, and there were gaping holes in almost every structure. Eerily quiet, the town was cold and empty. It was as if I could feel the ghosts of the happy families that used to walk the streets, but now the memory was overshadowed by grey skies and buildings turned to rubble by war.

We climbed carefully over the top of the hill, hunched over to avoid being clear targets for anyone watching from afar.

NARRATIVE NONFICTION

“THE LOVE STORY OF AIDAN AND GRACE” NOVELLA EXCERPT



September 21, 2019

The 21st night of September is well-known for its affiliation with Earth, Wind & Fire’s 1978 song “September.” The song must be magic or something, because people inexplicably love it no matter how many times it’s played on repeat – and no matter how stuck in your head it already is.

Then again, maybe it’s not the song that’s magic. Maybe it’s September 21st.

Of course, none of this occurred to Aidan Weis as he made his way over to Memorial Hall on September 21, 2019. Instead, he thought about his first few weeks at Baylor University – the start of classes, the new friends he’d made living in Martin Hall, and his odd roommate – a practically mute foreign exchange student named Xiang* who wouldn’t leave the cramped dorm room for anything but his classes.

Aidan trekked across campus that Saturday in the interest of friendship; Emma, a loud-mouthed girl from his English class, needed help with her student senate campaign. She was hoping to be elected as a Freshman Senator. Student government wasn’t something Aidan would be caught dead participating in, but he wanted to be a good friend to this girl – after all, she’d already helped him with some of their pointless class projects.

Fixing his glasses, Aidan trudged up the concrete steps and across the front porch of the Honors Residential College. He followed a girl in – since he lived in Martin, he didn’t have an active keycard for Memorial – and headed straight into the dormitory’s drawing room. Emma had a whole spread of poster-designing materials splayed out. Colored paper, markers, stickers, scissors, and tape littered the floor. A small group of Emma’s friends chatted amongst themselves, some scribbling slogans whilst others cut out photos for the posters.

Spotting him, Emma jumped up from her makeshift workspace. “Aidan!” She exclaimed, her hazel eyes gleaming. She rushed over to greet him. “Thanks so much for coming.”

“No problem.” He surveyed the room. “Where should I start?”

“Pick any poster you want! The only rule is we can’t use words like ‘Baylor’ or ‘sic em.’ You know, no Baylor-trademarked stuff.”

“Sounds good,” Aidan said, taking a seat on the ragged carpet.

Although he was willing to give it a shot, Aidan wasn’t naturally artistic. He was therefore unsurprised when an attempt to slice a poster in half resulted in a finger injury.

“THE LOVE STORY OF AIDAN AND GRACE” NOVELLA EXCERPT

He waved Emma over with his uncut hand.

“Hey,” he said as she approached. “I cut my finger.”

“Oh,” Emma said, struggling to conceal a giggle. “There’s a bathroom down the hall, but if you need one, you can get a band-aid from my roommate. She’s got a bad cold, so she’s up in our room. It’s 246.”

She handed Aidan her keycard, and he took off up the stairs. He held his injured right hand atop his left to keep blood from dripping on the floor.

Emma had mentioned Grace – her roommate – before. Excitedly, she told him all about how close they’d been from the get go. She’d had more first-year roommate luck than Aidan by a long shot, but he was too good-natured to be jealous. Besides, he had some budding friendships himself – Xiang just wasn’t one of them.

As Aidan headed down the second floor hallway to Emma’s door, he prayed her roommate wouldn’t think he was a weirdo for showing up unannounced. Then again, he told himself, it would be par for the course for Emma to send a random man to their door. Perhaps Grace wouldn’t be so shocked.

He approached the room with a cheap plastic plaque reading “246” screwed into the wood. He knocked.

There were a few unnerving seconds of silence before the door creaked open. Behind it stood a dirty-blond girl with ocean blue eyes. She appeared slightly dazed, her petite frame enveloped in an oversized dusty blue t-shirt with a faded bird in the center. Emma hadn’t lied; the girl was definitely sick, her nose rubbed raw and her eyes red and puffy. Aidan barely noticed, though. He was too distracted by the fact that she was pretty cute – well, and that he was still holding on to his own bloody finger.

“Hi,” she said, her voice soft. “How can I help you?”

“Hey,” he stammered. “Um, I’m Aidan. I’m a friend of Emma’s.” He would’ve reached out to shake her hand, but he figured dripping blood on her probably wouldn’t make for a good first impression. “I’m really sorry to just show up like this.”

The girl nodded. “It’s okay, she’s mentioned you before. I’m Grace.”

He held up his injured hand. “I cut my finger working on her posters.”

“Ah. Just one sec,” she said, leaving the door ajar as she shuffled across the room to her tiny closet. Feeling awkward waiting in the hall, Aidan stepped inside.

“THE LOVE STORY OF AIDAN AND GRACE” NOVELLA EXCERPT

Grace’s face burned as she rummaged through the closet on her quest to find her stash of band-aids. Not only was she sick, but the room was a mess! The floor was littered with clothes, makeup, and hair clips, and school materials were haphazardly strewn across the furniture. *How embarrassing*, she thought.

Aidan didn’t notice any of that. He was too busy nursing his finger, trying to keep droplets of blood from spilling onto the girls’ fluffy white rug.

At last, Grace located the band-aids. She took one over to the dorky stranger that stood in the middle of her room.

“Okay,” she said. “Give me your finger.”

He held out his hand. She steadied it atop her own, carefully wrapping the band-aid over his skin.

Aidan hoped his hands weren’t too clammy.

Grace recognized the boy’s discomfort. He was thin, with short brown hair that curled up slightly in the front and blue-green eyes tucked behind dark-rimmed rectangle glasses. Although a little awkward, she found it kind of sweet that he came all the way up to their room just to get a band-aid for his cut. As a natural caretaker, Grace found joy in doing little things for others.

“There,” she said, satisfied.

Aidan admired her handiwork. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

The pair stood still for a moment, neither of them sure what to do next.

Aidan broke the silence. “So, you’re sick?” he offered, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Yeah,” Grace nodded. As if on cue, she coughed into her arm.

“Do you have cough drops?” He asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Cough drops. My mom swears by the Sambucol ones. I’ve got some back in my room in Martin.”

“THE LOVE STORY OF AIDAN AND GRACE” NOVELLA EXCERPT

“Oh,” Grace said, her voice raspy now. “No. I’ve got some cold medicine but it doesn’t really seem to be working.”

“I’ll bring them to you.”

He said it as though he was making her an offer, but the look on his face showed it was non-negotiable.

“They’re good,” he assured her, a smile playing on his lips.

She grinned back softly. “I’m sure they are. Thanks.”

And that’s how Aidan Weis met Grace Cary.

SHORT FICTION



SHORT FICTION

SHORT STORY: I-35



A bump in the road shook the driver’s seat as the semi flew down I-35. Eyes peeled on the highway, Ed reached blindly for his gas station cup of Mountain Dew. Grasping the condensation-soaked paper, he lifted it from the cupholder and gave the drink a little swirl. The ice was long gone, melted a couple hours back from the heat of the summer sun beating down on the semi’s massive windshield. Ed tried to imagine the ice hadn’t melted and the drink wasn’t watered down – in fact, for just a moment, the fizzless soda wasn’t a soda to him at all, but a strong martini served poolside in the tropics.

The raggedy mutt he’d picked up on one of his countless cross-country drives yawned from the passenger’s seat. The dog stretched, his brown paws curling around the seat’s edge. He stood slowly, wobbling with the movement of the truck, and hobbled towards Ed.

“No,” Ed insisted, staring mindlessly at the road ahead. “No way – you’ll make my legs go numb.”

But the old dog didn’t move. He stood still as a statue, his legs locked to keep his balance and his beady eyes trained on the side of Ed’s bald head.

Ed glanced at the pup – a brief error, but a mistake still grave enough for him to glimpse the irresistibly sad eyes of an ex-stray.

“Damnit,” he sighed, begrudgingly patting his leg. The mutt, triumphant, hopped into Ed’s lap.

Ed grunted as the dog circled atop his thighs, trying to find a sufficient space to curl up between the steering wheel and Ed’s immense gut.

The sun had almost fully disappeared along the horizon. A minuscule sliver of orange still held on to the day, peeking just barely over the rolling hills to Ed’s right. He smiled at the golden glow – sunsets and sunrises were the best part of the job, and night driving was the best time to ride. Less traffic, less noise – and best of all, the world flew by much faster in the dark.

Despite his grin, Ed felt an overwhelming eeriness that particular evening. It was as if the cars passing by were more suspicious, the curves in the road more ominous, even the trees along the highway more unnerving than they’d ever seemed before.

Ed ignored the oddity the same way he ignored any other abnormality in his brain: he cranked up the radio volume until “Master of Puppets” rang so loud he couldn’t focus on anything but James Hetfield’s screaming voice.

A couple of hours flew by before Ed pulled up to a podunk gas station somewhere in Oklahoma. The sun was long gone by now, darkness flooding the world once again. Ed was grateful – the music on the radio had been good tonight, and he was damn lucky he’d come across an open gas station in the middle of nowhere – no matter how trashy it might be.

SHORT STORY: 1-35

The semi’s tank was almost empty as he rattled into the parking lot and pulled up to a pump.

The battered gas station lights flickered overhead as he hopped down from the truck bed. It was a desolate scene – there was only one other vehicle in the parking lot, a beat-up dodge ram parked by the convenience store. It took Ed a minute to make it out – the truck was tucked under the shadow of a scraggly tree that blocked the store’s porchlight.

Glancing through the glass windows, Ed saw a lanky cashier inside, chatting with a customer at the counter. The customer – whom Ed presumed to be the dodge owner – wore an oversized green hoodie and a baseball cap. He laughed with ease at something the cashier said as they made an exchange – likely money for lottery tickets or cigarettes. The man in the hoodie sauntered off towards the back of the store.

Ed put the company card in the chip reader and waited for the confirmation. He poked the PIN numbers, removed the card, and stuck the pump in the truck’s gas tank. Knowing from experience that he needed a fresh Mountain Dew or he wouldn’t make it through the night, Ed trudged across the lot. He tried to ignore the desperate expression of his mutt, who had smudged its face against the driver’s seat window in protest of its owner’s absence.

Ed used the store’s dirty bathroom and sauntered over to the fill-a-cup machine. Grabbing a large, he pretended to consider the other soda options before filling his cup to the brim with Mountain Dew.

He walked lazily around to the chip bag aisle, a little taken aback to find the guy in the green hoodie standing there. The man was probably in his 50s, with a mid-sized gut and a scraggly brown beard that had started greying at the ends. He appeared to be torn between the Bugles and the BBQ Lays. While these were starkly different choices, Ed respected them both. Ed exchanged a curt nod with the man as he grabbed a bag of sour cream and onion Lays and made his way over to the cashier.

“That all?” The worker asked in a thick Indian accent. His grey crewneck nearly swallowed his thin frame.

“I’ll take a pack of Camels,” Ed huffed. The skinny cashier turned and pulled the cigarettes from the shelf. He quietly rang them up with Ed’s soda and chips.

Ed paid and left the store. Finding that the semi’s tank was full now, Ed returned the handle to its pocket and opened the door to the truck bed. He pulled himself up to set down his purchases.

“Come on,” he said to the dog, scooping it under an arm as he lowered himself back to the ground. “Shittin’ time.”

The dog’s tail went crazy as Ed hauled him over to the shadowy grass next to the convenience store. He dropped the mutt on the ground and commanded him to go.

SHORT STORY: 1-35

But the dog refused. Instead, he stared at Ed with an obstinate look on his face.

Then the mutt began to whimper.

Ed found this behavior very unusual. The dog almost always went right away. He was generally obedient, and he hadn't gone to the bathroom for eight hours or so, so Ed couldn't imagine he didn't need to go.

Ed wrinkled his face in confusion.

“What?” He demanded. “Grass ain't pretty enough for you?”

The dog whined louder. His whine morphed into a low growl.

He barked.

Ed realized that the dog's beady eyes weren't trained on him. They were staring past him. With mild curiosity, Ed turned.

Behind him was the four-door dodge.

At first, that's all Ed saw.

But since his dog kept growling and green hoodie was nowhere in sight, Ed decided it couldn't hurt to take a closer look.

He stepped up to the tinted back window, squinting to see through the darkened glass. Ed made out some light-colored clothes piled in the back seat, but he didn't see much else.

The mutt barked again. Just as Ed was about to tell it to shut up, the pile of colors shifted.

A woman's terrified eyes suddenly appeared in a tiny strip of light. The eyes widened at the sight of Ed. The woman let out muffled screams, shaking her head violently in an intense plea for help.

Ed staggered back.

SHORT STORY: 1-35

He peered around the hood of the truck, trying to locate green hoodie, but he couldn't see inside the store from where he stood.

"Shit," Ed cursed. He whirled around to face his dog, who now barked repeatedly.

"Shut up!" He urged, though he knew the mutt wouldn't quiet down.

Ed's mind raced; the thoughts swirled around in his brain, stirring a useless soup of ideas.

He knew he should run back to his truck and call the police. But they were in such a remote spot; he knew green hoodie could get far away before the police arrived. The only way to save this girl for sure would be to do it himself. Maybe he could break her out...

Who do you think you are? The voice in his head interrupted. *You're no vigilante.*

But Ed knew he'd never forgive himself if he didn't try.

Ugh, he thought, *why me?*

He felt an instant pang of guilt for his selfishness.

His dog was still barking. Ed knew he needed to do something about that. Fast.

He grabbed the mutt and jogged back to the semi. He tossed him in the front seat and shut the door. As Ed hurried back towards the darkened grass, the dog's incessant cries grew softer and softer behind him.

Ed quickly formed a plan as he approached the shadows. His heart pounded. He struggled to tuck his large body behind the shrub closest to the dodge's driver's seat.

It felt as though he waited for hours, but it wasn't more than a few minutes before green hoodie came bounding out of the convenience store. Ed peered through the sparse greenery as the man approached.

Abruptly, green hoodie paused. Ed held his breath, watching silently as the culprit glanced over his shoulder.

Green hoodie shrugged and kept moving. Ed grew more anxious with each step he took.

SHORT STORY: 1-35

The man rounded the truck hood and approached the driver's side.

He was now less than three feet from Ed. Ed wanted desperately to reach out and grab him, to choke him by his own hood, to stop him from getting any closer to the woman he'd locked in his truck.

Instead, Ed shuffled towards the side of the bush, waiting for the right moment to attack.

Click.

Almost there. Green hoodie had unlocked the truck's front door.

He reached for the door handle.

Shocked at his own agility, Ed leapt out from behind the greenery and pounced on green hoodie's back.

The man froze in surprise. Ed took the opportunity to wrestle him to the ground.

Green hoodie's shock didn't last long, though. He soon began to fight back, shocking Ed with his strength as he shoved the trucker off of him. Throwing their fists into the air like the amateurs they were, the two rolled around on the asphalt at the edge of the gas station parking lot.

If it weren't for the gravity of the situation, Ed would've found the scene quite funny.

Green hoodie threw another aimless punch, this time just barely missing Ed's head. Ed knew he couldn't hit his opponent effectively like this; he had to pin him down. He threw his weight over green hoodie and got on top of him, but he had a tough time grabbing the man's arms. They flailed about frantically until green hoodie finally landed a punch – the strong blow caught Ed right in the throat.

The sudden force threw Ed off. He coughed in pain as he tried to catch his breath.

Green hoodie tried to use the win to his advantage. He shoved Ed hard, fighting to push him off and regain control. But the man underestimated Ed's weight – those hours on the road sipping Mountain Dew's served him very well today – and Ed succeeded in landing a forceful punch to green hoodie's face.

Alerted by the commotion, the cashier sprinted outside and stood paralyzed on the porch.

SHORT STORY: 1-35

From underneath Ed, green hoodie tried to wriggle free. Encouraged by the throw he'd just landed, Ed ignored the man's efforts and began pummeling him. Green hoodie's nose started to bleed, but Ed didn't stop. He kept punching until, finally, green hoodie lay still, passed out from the shock.

The cashier ran back inside. Ed hoped he was going to call the police.

Wiping his brow, Ed pushed himself up to a standing position. He stared down at the battered man without even the slightest twinge of guilt.

Ed tried to ignore the soreness in his throat as he opened the front door of the dodge and peered inside.

The bound young woman stared at him from the back seat.

The terror in her eyes began to subside when she recognized Ed.

"Don't worry," Ed said. "You're safe now."



GET IN TOUCH WITH EMMA

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