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It's All in Your Head

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“Hana, stop! That’s not where I want it!”

I roll my eyes. Fourth-grade-me cannot comprehend why on earth these imbecilic classmates of mine are incapable of placing their felt ornaments on the tree in a straight and balanced fashion.

“I’m just fixing it,” I retort. “You put it on wrong.”

“There is no wrong, Hana,” soothes my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Johnson.

“It looks BAD. I’m just FIXING it.” I continue to delicately replace the ornaments on the tree. The girls are in an uproar. Mrs. Johnson drags me away and makes me sit in the corner.

She lectures me very gently. “You put your ornament where you wanted it. Now your classmates get to put theirs where they want them.”

I’m infuriated. I glare at the shameful, vile felt tree where the sloppy, smeared ornaments are strewn about carelessly.

“There’s too many on the bottom!” I insist. “JUDY just move yours over there!” I jump up and gesture wildly to where the ornament belongs. She gives me a sneer and OVERLAPS HER ORNAMENT with another one.

I start crying. “They’re doing it on PURPOSE!” I sob. “They WANT it to look bad!”

Mrs. Johnson ushers the other girls out of the room to join the rest of the class. I hear their whispers and feel their glances as they scurry through the door.

I bury my face so I don’t have to look at the nasty tree and I grind my teeth in frustration.

Mrs. Johnson speaks very gently, feeding me a load of BS about how “there is no right or wrong way to celebrate Christmas,” and how I must “love my neighbors despite their flaws.” She eventually gives up on this malarkey and tells me, “Just don’t look at it, Hana.”

I spend the next month NOT LOOKING at the tree. I do notice that somebody has moved Judy’s ornament so it no longer overlaps.
My momma has always accepted my peculiarities, and my Mema finds them downright endearing. When I showed Mema my innovative way of organizing my sock and undie drawer with an arrangement of empty tampon boxes, she gushed, “Great-grandma Mary would be so proud!”

I have a certain fondness for laundry. The clothing in my dresser shelves is stacked up by width. Sometimes when I’m feeling wild, I like to mix things up and arrange them by color instead. In order for stacks to fit nicely, I cut out a piece of cardboard from a cereal box to fold my clothing around. Occasionally, friends who come over and see these clothing stacks drop their jaws in shock and ask me if I use a ruler to get them so perfect. “Of course not,” I respond. “That would be ridiculous.”

For my last birthday, I asked for only one thing: a t-shirt folder. My mom bought me the plastic folding tray and my grandma bought me more t-shirts, “So I could show her just how it works.”

Last year, my roommate’s boyfriend, Chris, spent enough time in our dorm to learn that I have a very specific system of hanging up my laundry. Shirts are separated by tank tops, short sleeves, three-quarter sleeves, long sleeves, and flannels. They are sub-categorized by color and pattern. And all hangers MUST be placed curved-side out and evenly spaced.

As soon as I walk in the room, I notice my dresser door slightly ajar. “Did Kelly borrow something of mine?” I ask my other roommate.

She hesitantly glances up from her computer. “Nope.”

I pry open the door and see the catastrophe.

“Christopher?” I fume.

“You.”

Sure I had put up with him turning my picture frames upside down and my comforter inside out, but touching my laundry? This would not be tolerated.

I call up Kelly and ask with forced control if she is with her Christopher.

“Yeah, we’re in the parking lot!” she says. I hear mumbling in the background through the receiver.
"Um, I’ll be up in a minute. I need to say bye to Chris."

"Oh, no," I say. "You bring him up."

More mumbling, now sounding more urgent.

I hang up, and sit very delicately on the edge of my desk chair.

Waiting. Unblinking.

The door swings open very slowly. Kelly pulls Christopher in by the hand. He looks wobbly and weak.

I stare. I will wait him out. He knows what he has done. "Um," he says, not meeting my eye.

I stare.

"Look," he says, glancing nervously at me. He looks away again.

"I’ve been thinking, and I feel really bad for touching your stuff."

I stare.

"And," he cleared his throat. "I... I’m really sorry."

I slowly get up and start fixing my clothes.

"No," he says. "Let me."

I wheel around, tears of fury burning in my eyes.

"My question for you, Christopher, is WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS FUNNY?!" I struggle to convey to him the weight of my world and the lack of control I have in any aspect of my life as it constantly churns, and I helplessly bobble along, suffocating and drowning in obligations and responsibilities. "I find peace in having control of one MINISCULE thing in my life and you feel that you have the right to wreck it JUST BECAUSE YOU THINK IT’S FUNNY."

He cowers in the corner, still not meeting my eye.

As obnoxious as it is when people find it funny to mess with me, it is infinitely worse when they try to understand me. Once people start noticing my little quirks, all they want to do is “crack my system.”

When my strides aren’t quite long enough to get me to the next slab of pavement and I need to take a little leap to make it over the crack, they giggle and say, "Oh, so you don’t wanna break your momma’s back?"

But then when my foot makes a small detouring side-step, they stare in wonder at why on earth I won’t step on a dirt clump. “Dirt?"
You can't even step in dirt? Do you know what the ground is made of?

When I shake my sugar packet for an unnecessary amount of time, they hypothesize, "You shake it twenty-five times right? Is that twenty-five each direction or both directions?" And when I frown slightly they say, "Oh yeah! You don't do odd numbers... So how many times is it?"

My parents do a marvelous job of not questioning my motives.

A few months ago, I ordered a three-pack of screen protectors for my new iPhone. I sat on my bed and very carefully applied each one. The first I accidently applied upside-down, the second had a tiny bubble in the bottom left corner that I couldn't smooth out, and the third had a fingerprint on the sticky side.

After this traumatic failure, I flopped over on my bed and bawled. My mom came in and played with my hair to calm me and my dad offered to take my phone to the Verizon store to have an employee apply the screen protector for me.

I admire my parents deeply for having the patience to put up with my insanity. However, there have been times that they've failed to adequately solve my stressors.

When I was five years old, I was in ballet. According to my mother, I spent every evening before practice crying my eyes out because my bun had "sticky-outy hairs" that she couldn't fix.

I was only in ballet for three weeks.

Occasionally my compulsions have led to minor physical bodily harm.

As a sophomore in high school, I played basketball. Like all players, I invested in a few over-priced pairs of Nike Elite socks. One feature of the socks is that they are specifically labeled for your left and right feet. I found this innovation marvelous.

One day, I carelessly threw two left-foot socks into my gym bag. When I discovered this error in the locker room before practice, I had a minor hyperventilation episode, but still I pulled both socks
over my feet and tightly laced my shoes over them. I completed the
first five minutes of practice, but could hardly function as an athlete.
My right foot was ON FIRE. It weighed AS MUCH AS LEAD. It
was COMPLETELY NUMB.

I ran back to my gym bag, pulled off the demon socks, and
slipped on my no-show footie socks. All through practice, I could feel
blisters forming all around the perimeter of my feet. My new shoes
rubbed the back of my heel and blood ran down my ankle and into
my expensive insoles. It didn’t matter, as long as the fire was gone.

Oftentimes, these compulsions manifest themselves
as nervous tics. In uncomfortable social situations or stressful
circumstances, they seem to magnify by a thousand.

If I’m not sure what to say in a conversation, my hand flies to
my face as I examine my nails. Any snags, corners, or skin tags are
imperfections that MUST BE REMOVED—bitten, usually. It seems
that I spend half of all conversations with my hand stuck in my
mouth.

I can’t take a test without finding every skin imperfection on
my face, neck, head, and shoulders. If there’s one thing I can’t stand,
it’s BUMPS ON MY SKIN. These imperfections must be removed as
well—scratched, usually.

“It’s all in your head.” That’s what people say to me. “It’s all in
your head.”

I know it’s in my head. I can’t get it OUT of my head. That
constant voice tells me every single day that I NEED to do this or I
HAVE to do that—offering no further explanation as to why.

It’s my head that tells me I HAVE to tap the top of my soda
can four times before I open it so that it doesn’t explode.
It’s my head that tells me to GO BACK outside to check that
I locked my car door. Again. And again. And AGAIN.
It’s my head that tells me that if I can’t do it absolutely
perfectly the first time, it’s not worth attempting at all.
And they just don’t understand. They say things like, “That
picture is so crooked! My OCD is killing me!” But they do not
They don’t understand that I can’t even do something as simple as WALK without internally counting each step and grinding my teeth to the rhythm of my feet.

One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three, four. One, two, three. One, two.

They don’t understand.
And guess what?
Neither do I.
And that’s okay.