Counting in Fours

No one understands the power of the number 4 like me. Around the age of twelve, when my head started talking to me—later to be diagnosed as severe OCD—it told me that certain numerical values were good and others were destined to kill my entire family. The number 4 was safe; 16 was perfect; 3 was evil.

The reality of everyday life became secondary to the catastrophic futures concocted inside of my brain. Numerical evenness was ingrained in every muscle movement and shift of the eyes. Every gesture or flinch had to be followed by a subsequent gesture or flinch to keep everything in life at an even number. Winking was not allowed. When I stood up, I had to do so at least twice—16 times if I was particularly anxious. This meant that when I stood up I lifted my butt one inch from the chair and paused in squat position before repeating. I still have really strong leg muscles.

When making out in high school, I had to quantify each kiss by either physical touch or seconds of lip touching. Kissing only brought about true pleasure when we naturally ended our make out session at a number divisible by four. Sixteen kisses or sixteen seconds of making out made me giddy, as it was 4x4, and therefore extra good.

While my OCD terrified me, it also brought about a sense of security. It was a comfort and a confidant that allowed me to feel a semblance of control over the uncontrollable. *My grandma may have a heart attack; my parents might not be able to pay my tuition; my friends could turn on me at any moment.* Numerical correctness became my scapegoat by obfuscating the intense anxiety and consternation of my life into a countable plan of action.

Numerical obsession of course made me a number too. I became a statistic and was added to the 2.2 million, the 1% of the USA who also suffer from OCD. My therapist often reminded me of this.

“I might be saving my family everyday with my counting. No one understands this,” I said.

“There are many people like you. Millions,” she said with the calm of a seasoned mental health professional.

This number, unlike all the others in my head, felt meaningless. It was impossible to grasp onto *millions* and use it to pull me out of my self-induced isolation. It was too large, too bland in its lack of detail. Numbers have a way of blurring the truth, not just through sample bias or statistical skew, but also by squeezing out all of the idiosyncrasies of an individual-- the emotional, grainy particularities that allow us to relate to one another.

I didn’t need a number. I needed specifics—the painful, comically absurd things that fellow obsessive compulsives do. I craved to see myself in other people. If there really are *millions* like me, then where in the world are they? I searched for familiarity to myself everywhere: in the other girl waiting outside my therapist’s office, in the man tapping his finger on the restaurant table, in the stutter of my mom’s friend. Were they counting too?

As with many teens, I found my first glimpse of relatability through deep dives into the Internet. I waited until my parents went to sleep, hid under the covers, and hesitantly googled my diagnosis. In Reddit threads, Youtube comments, and outdated blogs of suburban moms, I found the minutiae of the millions. Other people touched sidewalk cracks a certain number of times; re-read the same words on the page until it felt okay; quantified every moment of their life terrified of harming people if they didn't.

I finally was able to believe what I had been told: there are many people like me. Seeing the specifics of other people's obsessions helped me start to break down my numerical hierarchy and see it for what it really was. The number *millions* didn't help much. Nor did the number 16 save me from the inevitable and inexorable elements of life. That first night after googling my diagnosis, I still made sure to touch each pillow exactly four times and put my pajamas on and off twice, but at least I knew a few out there were like me, not just one in 2.2 million.