

Adventures of Self-Compassion: Memoir of a Depressed Undergraduate

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In Dedication of Savannah Miller

I will always love you my dearest friend. You are my inspiration. I will never forget what you did for others, showing them kindness, love, and acceptance.

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Thank you to everyone who knows me whether stranger, friend, or loved one. I wouldn't have been here to write this thesis without your support. I am grateful to be and to feel alive.

Thank you to my mom, my dad, and my brothers. We have been through so much together in the past, and I look forward to the future as we all heal. I love you.

Thank you to the rest of my family. Our time together has always been precious to me. I look to all of you with gratitude. I love you all.

Thank you to my close friends. You are also my family and helped give me a second chance at life.

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Abstract

Self-compassion, conceptualized by psychologist Kirstin Neff in 2003, is a possible mediator to the depression epidemic in university settings. I am among undergraduate students at Middle Tennessee State University who have had experiences with depression. In this thesis, I reflect on moments of self-compassion which led to me finding peace with my depression.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....1

Literature Review.....2

Methodology.....4

Memoir.....6

Prologue: Before Depression.....7

Chapter I: A Kind Voice.....13

Chapter II: Only Human.....24

Chapter III: Open Minded.....33

Works Cited.....40

List of Works by Ella Morrissey

“Parts of Us” Poem.....7

“Who Else is Crying in the Rain” Lyrics.....12

“Queen” Poem.....22

“Dear Savannah” Lyrics.....31

Introduction

The college student's journey to earn an undergraduate degree is arduous and breath-taking. School-life balance can be difficult to achieve between conflict of personal interests and the amount of responsibilities pressing into a student's shoulders. Stress and feelings of chaos can build when every second is dedicated to finishing homework, building relationships, or working part-time jobs. In addition, freshmen or transfer students adjusting to new university environments can become overwhelmed when facing feelings of isolation and loneliness. This stress is detrimental to both physical and mental wellbeing. Without proper guidance, a student prioritizes personal health less and less as more important deadlines approach. Under anxiety inducing conditions, undergraduate students start to exhibit signs of depression such as irregular sleep patterns and repetitive negative thoughts. Feelings of fear, sadness, and anger overcome the student's voice of self-care. Students become dependent on negative coping mechanisms, terrible habits to deal with these immense emotions. One of these habits is to be incredibly judgmental and bully oneself. Furthermore, this harsh self-criticism can decrease a student's motivation to live and perform well in school.

I am one of the numerous undergraduates dealing with depression and a critical outlook; however, I believe I can help people by telling stories of how I have battled depression in university settings with self-compassion. Several years ago, I began the journey of college, but I also began the journey to learning how to love myself. Self-compassion is a coping style of loving oneself without judgment and realizing how imperfections are beautiful. This coping style has three components: self-kindness,

common humanity, and mindfulness. The aspect of my project I will focus on is self-kindness, which means being gentle to oneself without critical judgment. The purpose of this research project is to help guide undergraduates in developing positive self-reinforcement of self-compassion by providing both literary analysis of my life and relevant research to this issue. This narrative is not meant to replace therapy or medication for people suffering with chemical imbalances or chronic mental illnesses. I only wish to represent my generation and give awareness about improving mental health with positive coping mechanisms.

Literature Review

Self-compassion was first conceptualized by psychologist Kristin Neff in 2003 as being kind to oneself and finding value in humanity through loving oneself without judgment. Neff created the self-compassion scale and argues that self-compassion is a better mediator to depression than self-esteem.

Studies on undergraduate students show that self-compassion helps to mediate depression by improving positive outlook and decreasing self-criticism, a major contributor to depression (Rabon, 2017). In previous studies, William James, a Western forefather for psychology, argued in 1890 that self-esteem was the first step towards to be a successful life and surpassing negative emotions. However, Neff wrote in her 2011 paper at the University of Texas, "Self-Compassion, Self-Esteem, and Well-Being," how self-esteem can be "unstable, fluctuating according to our latest success or failure...drives people to obsess about...negative events for self-worth, making them more vulnerable to depression and reduced self-concept clarity." Furthermore, more

recent studies on undergraduate students show that self-compassion helps to mediate depression by improving positive outlook and decreasing self-criticism, a major contributor to depression (Rabon, 2017).

Symptoms of depression include irregular patterns of sleep, a change in mood or appetite, lack of concentration, or repetitive negative thoughts. According to a 2017 global report by the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability in the world. This report sparked a mental health awareness campaign by the World Health Organization. Universities and other organizations have continued to research the risks of depression and anxiety in college students. Data as quoted by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America from the 2015 National College Health Assessment stated that, “85 percent of college students reported that they had felt overwhelmed by everything they had to do at some point within the past year.” This significant statistic explicates how most college students are dealing with stress. Excessive stress or trauma can lead to depression, which can make college students at risk for suicidal thoughts. In addition, according to the 2017 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States; this source also reported that suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between the ages 10-24. Moreover, young adults are taking their own lives, and, college counseling services are taking preventative measures to help with this epidemic.

Researchers such as Jessica Rabon from East Tennessee State University have hypothesized that self-compassion is a mediator for depression or suicide. Among Rabon’s studies, in 2018, she conducted an online questionnaire with a sample of 356

students from a rural Southeastern university testing for indirect effects of self-compassion and wellness behaviors on risks of suicide. Rabon found that higher self-compassion negatively correlated with depression. This study highlights the benefits of raised self-compassion in college students and further dictates the risks of suicide in university settings. In her 2013 Ted Talk, Neff defined the three components of self-compassion as: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Raised self-compassion can improve the mental condition of college students who are isolated because feelings of loneliness or hopelessness from their depression.

This issue is relevant to the Middle Tennessee State University campus. At a conference in January, 2020, the 2019 National College Health Assessment compared in a PowerPoint a sample of Middle Tennessee State University and average of how many students were depressed, anxious, stressed, and were using substances to cope reported in a survey. The data showed that 23.5 percent of students from the Middle Tennessee State University Sample were depressed and that 36.3 percent were anxious. Nevertheless, negative mental health experience reports from the last year demonstrated that the average number of students who were feeling very sad increased from 59.4 % in 2016 to 71.8 % in 2019. A voice from this generation needs to speak on behalf of the student population, so this creative thesis is both research and memoir.

Methodology

I chronicled my personal encounters with self-compassion and research how self-compassion is a mediator for symptoms of depression along with its three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. My project consisted of three

sections. Self-kindness is the first component of self-compassion, which I defined and explicated studies connecting to this variable. The first chapter explained the trials I faced with self-criticism and the moments when I had begun to trust myself again in the summer after high school. For three years, I went through severe trauma and did not know how to give positive feedback to myself. My outlook was generally positive to others, but I did not value my own emotional state.

The second chapter will describe how I developed a supportive community through common humanity. I described one of my learning moments while on a short-term study abroad trip in Paris, France. In this chapter, my character started to show dynamic change especially as I learned how to be a leader. I illustrated how I learned to do my laundry, a simple task which led to greater accomplishments at Columbia State Community College. I learned to trust in my abilities as a human being.

The third chapter is about mindfulness. Numerous studies surround this cognitive therapy method about staying in tune with how oneself is feeling in the present. I applied this cognitive method to where I am in life at the time of writing this chapter. I demonstrated moments when I am much more aware of my surroundings throughout the paper. I have faced new challenges, but I have more knowledge of who I am. Overall, these three chapters outlined the three aspects of self-compassion with research or analysis to introduce each chapter.

MEMOIR

I acknowledge that the character in this story is a mere reflection of who I once was. The person I am now is still depressed and figuring out their path for the future; however, writing this thesis gave me a voice and motivated me to love myself more. I am not alone in this struggle anymore. I wish for other people to look at this memoir as an example of overcoming ties to depression with dedication, practice, and honesty. My example does not represent everyone who suffers mental health issues, but I hope I can give you, my dear reader, the opportunity to speak for yourself, to have courage, and to get professional help when needed.



PARTS OF US

Written By: 19-year-old Ella

I have none to myself

When you do it all

Both show love and

Regret from your

Transgressions

When you don't take care

Of You



PROLOGUE: BEFORE DEPRESSION

At 18, I think I should have been able to put clothes and soap into a washing machine. Younger Ella would have stood frozen. Her eyes would gape wide-open from all the intimidating knobs and buttons. She was so confused why red was considered a dark color washed on cold. Red was a warm pigment on the color wheel. The dryer wasn't helpful either. She would forget to clean the lint from the filter. What if she caught her clothes on fire?

The car was even worse. One wrong turn meant death. Ella's hands would shake behind the wheel. She would think, "I don't know what I'm doing! I'm going to crash!"

Anyone asking her for directions to her own house would receive a blank stare, and “I don’t know.” She didn’t know how to get home or how to get anywhere in the places she lived all her life.

Honestly, it was a bit sad. 18-year-old Ella thought she was incapable of doing any job right if she didn’t do it perfect the first time she tried. She blamed herself for every misfortune her family faced during her time in high school. Her mind was scarred from various trauma, and she needed therapy. Even then, a part of me was looking back on a troubled younger self.

The following passages have the potential to trigger readers. My intention is to tell the truth about what I experienced since my freshman year of high school; however, to protect the wishes of myself, friends or family, some information has been reviewed by those involved and may have been modified to protect others. I also ask my readers to respect the boundaries I make when sharing my personal story. All people in this piece are real and important to me. Please do not seek information where it has not been provided.

In order to understand 18-year-old Ella, you and I must go further back in time to 15-year-old Ella, a carefree high school freshman. This me was not afraid of failure, and she wanted the impossible. She imagined that she could become anything or anyone: singer, writer, zoologist, veterinarian, physical therapist, farmer, or president of the United States.

Unfortunately, 18-year-old Ella would disagree with this teenager. Dreams were fickle; change was something to fear. The future was blinding, too terrifying to move toward.

.....

15-year-old Ella came from a nuclear family with a mom, dad, and two brothers. They had several cats and a pure-bred golden retriever. They had lived in a 5,000 square foot house on a steep hill in a nice neighborhood. Since Ella was the only girl, her mom and dad spoiled her. Ella had her own room with sky-blue walls. She had a granite bathroom and a large walk-in closet. Her two brothers could be stinky and mean, but, at least, they still meant well. Despite the favoritism, Mom and Dad equally showered their children with love and gifts on Christmas.

Ella's house was like a red brick castle on an enchanted mountain. Tall walls and flights of stairs lined the outside of the home. Ella often sat on the highest brick wall with her orange tabby, Tiger, gazing out at the horizon of roofs and treetops. He would sit in Ella's lap and purr like a truck engine.

Ella was extremely social and liked to be with her closest friends. Her parents drove her every place she asked like chauffeurs and cleaned up all the messes left behind without complaint. Although Ella was spoiled; at least, she didn't do much to trouble her parents. She got good grades and did what she was told...most of the time.

When Ella hosted sleepovers for her friends, they would keep her poor brothers awake with loud laughter. Ella, especially, sounded like a hyena cackling into the

wonderful, joy-filled night. The friend she laughed with the most was Savannah Miller, an energetic girl in a wheelchair. Both Ella and Savannah would start snorting whenever standing next to each other. Her brothers would ask nicely, “Please, be quiet.” The chuckles were inevitable though.

Savannah’s eyes were honest and hazel. Her smile was wide like a sweet angel. Her soul shone with kindness. Every moment anyone spent with her was a gift.

The two friends met during recess in kindergarten, when 5-year-old Ella was in timeout. Ella stood with her back to the playground facing a brick wall, and her ears picked up the faintest squeak of wheels. “What did you do?” a tiny high-pitched voice asked. Ella dared to turn away from the wall. And, there, she was...Savannah, the greatest friend Ella would ever have.

15-year-old Ella had no idea what hardship looked like. She was like any girl who wanted to live life happy and carefree in a small pocket of time and sunshine. She wanted to fall in love and be loved by someone special. Ella had the hugest crush on one boy since 8th grade. Savannah liked every boy since whenever. They breezed through their freshman year of high school together learning the ins and outs of being teenagers, peer-pressure and all.

When summer time was to come, Ella rode the bus home from school. Her arms were full of textbooks and papers. She was about to begin taking her first high school exam. Her eyes looked out the window in a haze. She watched each person exit the bus at their stop until she was finally at her own stop at the bottom of the hill. Her mind was full

of lectures and formulas from teachers, as she sweated up the steep mountain. As soon as she got to the top and up another insane number of stairs, she flopped on the couch in the living room. Right as she was about to take an afterschool siesta, her cell phone buzzed. Her mom was calling. Lazily with her thumb, Ella swiped right on the green call button.

“Hey, Ella,” her mom said, kind of nervous. “Please be ready in a few minutes. Your dad and I have a surprise for you and your brothers.”

And just like that, Ella found herself in a car crammed with her family. They arrived at a different house; one built much smaller and much older than the castle on the hill.

“This is our new home!” her parents said with strained smiles. Ella would never forget the exhaustion in their eyes, and the pain that followed that news.

Due to poor finances, her parents could no longer afford paying the big house’s mortgage. They were given an ultimatum to move out in a month’s time and find a new place to live. Doing everything they could at the time, they decided to keep the issue secret from their children. Luckily, her parents were able to rent a house close to their children’s schools. Close to the deadline, they told Ella and her siblings that they had to move out in less than three days.

The grief broke their reflection of a perfect home and beautiful family. This family had little time to process losing their home and other adversities which were to come.

The adult world was far too complex for a young girl like Ella. At first, she blamed herself for not understanding what this new, shattered world looked like. Then, she felt like it was her fault that her family suffered from these wounds. As a result, the 18-year-old Ella, I have come to know was born. However, this story doesn't end here.

You and I will look back on the shards of who I once was, fragmented into different selves and how they came to form who I am today.

WHO ELSE IS CRYING IN THE RAIN?

Written By: 18-year-old Ella

Who else is crying in the rain?

Daddy's almost home,

And I'm waitin' on the front porch step

For so long, I felt so numb

After all the years and tears

Dripped away with all my fears

I wonder, who else is crying in the rain?

CHAPTER I: A KIND VOICE

Teardrops gathered and fell like the water rushing through the streets. 18-year-old Ella sat, drenched, on her front porch step. Thoughts raced incessantly as thunder crackled in the distance. Her spine shivered in both cold and fear. *It's all your fault.* The thought twisted her chest—heartbeat slowing to a stop. *This body has no purpose. You have no future.* Ella couldn't breathe. *You deserve to die.*

Her fingers gripped the brick wall beside her. Somewhere inside another voice panicked. *I can't breathe! I can't breathe!* Memories raged in Ella's mind. Images of people, places, and things she loved screamed at her to get up.

Ella stumbled into the front yard, looking for help. She cried out loud, "Please! Is anyone there?" No neighbors or family were in sight. The rain poured on her. Her teeth chattered. Ella was alone.

Defeated, she fell to her knees in the wet grass and curled inside herself. *Why am I like this? Please take away this pain. I don't want to be here anymore.* A numbness crept and spread into her limbs. Closing her eyes, she let go.

That Ella was young, unforgiven, and abused. She had just graduated high school and had no idea what to do with herself. At that moment, she fell apart and let the tempest wash her away. And, I, the voice who wanted to live surfaced, and I was born from this emptiness.



The next milestone for high school graduates is some rite of passage to adulthood. For Ella, this next step was a decision she would have to make for herself. The thought of going to college or getting a job was terrifying. She needed to face her biggest fear before making any choice.

If she had looked in a mirror, her thoughts automatically would go to shame. *I'm ugly. You'll never be loved looking like this.* She compared herself to others, and she thought she had to be perfect inside and out.

Her inner voice had become critical like a bully, submitting Ella to guilt and shame. This part of her abused her for three years, even forcing her to cry silently. If she made a sound of pain, the voice would tell her that she wanted attention for the wrong reasons.

She was lonely and didn't trust that anyone would understand what she was going through. Her sleep patterns were irregular. Most mornings, she would wake up gasping from nightmares or vivid dreams. Her moods would fluctuate from deep despair to flittering joy. Negative thoughts would consume her mind.

The truth is that Ella was depressed. The one person she feared and avoided to take care of most was herself. She couldn't trust in herself enough to move forward with her life. On the other hand, somewhere along the way, crippling depression had stopped Ella in her tracks. She is not alone in this struggle.

Depression is a common obstacle for adults in the United States and across the globe. According to a 2017 global report by the World Health Organization, depression

was the leading cause of disability in the world. This research helped spark awareness about a mental health crisis. In addition, data as represented by the National Institute of Mental Health from the 2017 National Survey of Drug Use and Health concluded that, “an estimated 11 million U.S. adults aged 18 or older had at least one major depressive episode with severe impairment.” The effects of depression are widespread, and people of all ages can experience depression at least once in their lifetime.

Ella’s life was on pause due to depression. Her loneliness isolated her from the beauty of living and communicating with people who might have felt just as lost. The truth was difficult to see, and she had to fight her instinct to give up. She didn’t know how to cope with depression, and, thank goodness, she survived for as long as she did.

Survival had meant satisfying her basic needs and meeting expectations of others. She hadn’t thought that feeling or expressing her emotions was a basic need. Although, taking time for self-care was exactly what she needed.

Sometimes, a person chooses to resist the pain which comes from adversity and feel ashamed of their emotions. Psychologist Weiyang Xie in a 2018 Ted Talk, “Dare to Re-wire Your Brain for Self-Compassion” described how feelings of shame and guilt can keep the person from being free from his or her pain, “The neurological pathway resulting from a shaming ... create a mental model predisposing us to...despair and anxiety...leading to various mental health issues.” Pain is inevitable. Events outside a person’s control happen, and people make their choices in order to deal with the aftermath. Their options to cope can feel limited. In addition, in 2019. Harvard Health Publishing stated in their online article, “Watch out for unhealthy responses to stress” that

people who are stressed turn to negative coping mechanisms such as drinking alcohol, doing illegal substances, smoking, cigarettes, binge eating, under-eating, sleeping too much, avoiding friends, lashing out at people, or watching too much tv. These avoidance-behaviors and others can be detrimental to a person's overall health.

The source of a person's depression is what needs to be addressed first.

Depression can happen for various reasons. Causes of depression can include genetics, stressful life events, abuse, early life traumas, side-effects of medication, or medical problems (Harvard Health Publishing, 2019). Ella's trauma from high school, self-abuse, and stress was the source of her depression.

Depression increases the risk of suicide. According to the 2017 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States; this source also reported that suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between the ages 10-24. Ella almost took her life at one point. She had experienced suicidal thoughts while in high school.

Self-compassion, conceptualized by psychologist Kirstin Neff in 2003, is a possible mediator to depression. Self-compassion is a form of self-love and acceptance. Neff describes this concept as finding value in humanity through loving oneself without judgment and has three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is the first component which will be explored in the first chapter of this story.



A mockingbird flew from across the puddle-ridden street. He perched in the maple tree in the front yard and called to an unknown friend. Ella heard his song titter, cry, and, then, break into silence. Sitting from the front porch step, she gazed at the world anew and listened. The rain had stopped, and her father's truck whooshed down the road ahead.

Bang. His driver side door was shut tight. His work boots thudded and squeaked on the pavement. His heavy footfall stopped, straight and square in front of Ella. She avoided eye contact and stared at the broken brown leather on his boots.

“Come inside,” she heard a deep voice say, and she looked up. Dad was a tall, square man like a lumberjack. His face was red from the sun, and his eyes squinted down at her, confused. He held out a hand to help Ella get up.

Dad's grip was warm and his hands calloused. Ella held on till she could fully stand. Her muscles ached from sitting for so long.

Dad made sure Ella would come inside and held the door wide open for her. She meandered inside the house. Her clothes dripped on the hardwood floor, as she followed him into the kitchen. Dad glanced at the water on the floor and shook his head.

“Go shower, and get changed,” he said as he frowned. “You could get sick.” Ella nodded. Her voice was hoarse when she finally spoke.

“I will in a minute...” Ella said nervous. “I was out there for a while. I'm sorry.” She peeked at her father's expression, and tears welled in her eyes.

Dad stepped forward with his arms open, and she hugged him for the first time in months. She had held tight, afraid of letting go.

The weight of her emotions constricted and burdened Ella's heart and mind. *It's okay. It's time to cry.* The voice which had fought for her life surfaced. These words were so new, so different. Ella cried.

Her wails cascaded throughout the house as her father held onto her. *It's over now. You are safe.*

Her cries dried, and Dad pat her back like a baby. Ella felt embarrassed, but she smiled.

"Thank you," she croaked out. Her throat was parched from all the crying. Her father released her from his embrace. His eyebrows were raised in surprise.

"You're welcome," he said and grinned back. Ella coughed, and he stopped smiling. Her clothes were still soaked from the rain.

"Get in the shower, and get changed," he said sternly. Ella rolled her eyes and went into the laundry room to grab a t-shirt and shorts.

On her way to the laundry room, she stopped to wash her face in the bathroom. The cold water splashed onto her hands as she gazed into the mirror above the sink.

Her cheeks were round, on the chubbier side. Her nose poked out and had a slight angled bump on the bridge. The water still ran as she lifted her fingers to touch her face.

Your eyes are raw from crying. Your face is all splotchy. You look like a pig that had just cried.

Ella's eyes narrowed. She shut off the water and really looked at herself this time.
Your eyes are blue. Your face is a perfectly good face. I look like I had just cried.

Ella gasped as she realized something. A warm, gentle presence touched the hurt in her heart and stopped her train of thought. This part of her whispered to her softly.

Why are you so mean to yourself?

A ripple of kindness went through her body giving her the strength to say out loud to her surprised reflection, "You deserve to be happy."

Ella hugged herself, proud to be alive, proud to be anything, because she made it through. This moment was the beginning of her new life as an adult.



Progress in Ella's life resumed once she was able to make her first choice as an adult. Ella was unsure of what she wanted at the time, but she was going to get there. Therefore, she decided to take time to herself and re-evaluate who she was.

In high school, Ella had chased hope like a fleeting butterfly, waiting for the stress to end. Yet, she had tried to be prepared for the next stage in her life.

Pursuing happiness was like an endless ladder she had to climb. With each rung, she had clung in fear, trying not to look down. Eventually, she tired to a point where she could no longer hold on.

Memories were missing in her mind. Pieces of herself were whispering and begging to be heard. Before, Ella had ignored those scattered voices, hating them and hiding them. Her brain was exhausted, resulting in constant anxiety.

She had lived in fear, until she had the courage to accept that those hurt parts of herself were hurting. Her story was somewhere lost in the depths of her subconscious.

Whatever happened that day when the rain had cascaded upon her, something inside had changed. This event was her first encounter with self-kindness.

Self-kindness, a component of self-compassion, was the first feeling which gave Ella the courage to face her fears. Once Ella realized how horrible she had been to herself, her thoughts had evolved into a new being of sorts. The voice was warm, caring, and inviting. Self-kindness broke through the shame and guilt. Ella had struggled for three years before finding this moment of clarity.

This new thought-process meant rewiring her brain and that required practice. Sometimes, her thoughts returned to rumination and cynicism, which is normal for anyone. Old habits die hard. However, new opportunities awaited Ella. Her adventure had only begun. For a month, she waited and was patient, eventually, relaxed. Then, happiness found her when she made her first goal.

Ella was going to go into therapy that summer, and, in the fall, she would attend Columbia State Community College. She did some research about transfer scholarships and found on Middle Tennessee State University's website page the Honors Transfer Fellowship Scholarship. Ella promised herself that she would work hard enough to achieve this scholarship, so she could afford higher education. For now, though, she had to simply focus on her own health.

Ella needed to learn how to make emotional boundaries with herself and others first. Her therapy started with understanding her own needs and communicating to her loved ones what was needed. Her heart was sensitive to the feelings of people around her and tended to over empathize. Ella had to learn how to distinguish her identity from her family.

Her parents still drove her to the places she needed to be. Her mom still did her laundry for her. Receiving directions from other people were still mind-boggling. Ella's life felt out of her control, and she wanted to be more responsible like an adult should be.

“Adulthood” looked like having a job, driving herself to the places she wanted to be, paying her own bills, having her own apartment, and, perhaps, finding love. Ella wanted to tackle “adulthood” all at once. On the other hand, being responsible for her own life required money, patience, and practice.

Self-kindness also required intervention and practice. When Ella was starting to judge herself or be negative. She had to notice the thought, and, then let it go. *You're a terrible person.* The thought would batter her mind along with a string of other negative

repeating phrases. She had to learn how to let her depressive thoughts float past her instead of holding them close, obsessing over them.

QUEEN

Written by: 21-year-old Ella

Which life do I fight for;

Is it mine or others,

To which I love more—

Each move is a guess.

What to say, where to stay—

Like a pitied pawn in chess.

If faith were to leave me,

I would hope for the best,

In faith, he cannot deceive me

In order to cross the board

Towards the other side,

I only look forward



The second component of self-compassion, common humanity, will be emphasized in this second chapter. Common humanity is about the human condition. Everyone hurts and feels pain. No one is alone in the fact that life can be difficult. Sometimes, people need to be a friend to themselves and recognize their strengths or weaknesses during times of suffering. Being imperfect is beautiful.



CHAPTER II: ONLY HUMAN

Ella's bare toes recoiled from the cold white tiles in her parents' master bathroom. The winter wind howled and wrapped at the only window in the room. The light in the room was dim, bouncing off the several mirrors in the room. Ella's eyes were drawn to the reflection to her right. Her parents had a large mirror which stretched over one side of the wall to the next above the bathroom counter. She hesitated to enter with her cell phone ready in her hand.

Ella shook her head and entered. She shut the door behind her and locked it. No one was home. No one would hear her in this room, if she were to do this now. Ella propped the phone on the bathroom counter and pressed the red dot to record. She stood there a moment regarding her reflection before pulling up a stool. Her words from her heart echoed in the bathroom.

"I am making a declaration." The stool shifted as she adjusted in her seat, and she closed her eyes searching for the feelings inside.

"I'm sick. I'm tired. I'm anxious, feel overweight, feel vulnerable, and small. It's so hard to feel big, empowered, dominant, and in control." She brought one leg on the stool and hugged her knee.

"My body is like a different person, and my mind doesn't always operate with my body. It's like I see the world through a lens, and I don't always know whether or not if I'm the person talking, that the words just come out of my mouth and that my body just

does what it wants on its own accord. I get pangs in my chest, banging headaches.

However, this is all within me, this is all behind one reflection.” Ella opened her eyes.

“I have a confession. I don’t know myself. But my story is still being written. My heart has two parts, the young and the old. I’m the good girl and the bad girl. The good girl who listens, the good girl who will, despite her pain, still smile just to help someone else feel bigger. The bad is the anxious, the procrastination, the self-blame, the guilt, and the shame. My head feels so heavy. I cannot levy. I cannot balance. I lose myself in a hole, how much has life stolen until I’m broken, shattered. Feel as if I’m torn and a new person was born. I’m scared to reach out to the people here, the people near. I think too much and too little about the world—my selfishness, my self-pity.” She had let out a breath as the truth escaped her.

“Who will I be? Who I am now I don’t think I will like. I am very fearful. I dream now, and it’s so hard that it hurts that I have so much self-doubt. I feel crowded when everything and everyone else is so loud. And I hurt myself when I’m always, always my own worst enemy that I let myself shake as I do with this anxiety. And this is all from deep within. I fear reaching out. And I’ve realized something important now.” She had let go of her knee and put her hand on her pounding heart.

“Don’t repent until you’re ready. You’re the one who opens yourself to this world. And, you’re the one who needs to listen. But, for now, be honest with your emotions, because I can no longer store them. My fellow college students, who suffer. I can no longer be your buffer. You’re just as strange and broken as I am. And that’s the reason why I stand.” The stool was pushed back with a screech, as she stood.

Ella pressed the stop on the recording. She replayed the video for her own private viewing and saved the video. No one was in the room with her, but Ella didn't feel alone. She had said what she needed to say to herself before making another decision in her life.

Ella was going to turn 19 in a month. A week prior, she had turned in a scholarship application for a short-term study abroad trip to Paris, France hosted by the Tennessee Consortium of International Studies partnered with Columbia State Community College.

Something most people wouldn't know about Ella unless spoken was her love for the French language. Ella lifted her head high and left her parents bathroom with the door left wide open.



At 19, Ella learned how to do her own laundry at Cité Universitaire in Paris, France. The summer heat had climbed to 37 degrees Celsius, in other words, 99 degrees Fahrenheit. She had a designated roommate and dorm. The second week of the month trip had passed, and Ella's side of the dorm was beginning to stink. The heat was not helping.

Her roommate had asked her that morning, "What is that smell!?" Her nose had scrunched up in revulsion as she entered the room. Ella was laying on her bed playing a video game and looked up in shock.

The both had searched the room, until the source of their suffering was found. Ella's eyes gaped open as her roommate peered into the mini fridge of their room and took out a crumpled piece of wrapped cheese. *Uh oh.* Ella had thought.

A few days ago, Ella had bought some brie cheese from a Fromagerie and had munched on it every now and then. Something she didn't realize was how pungent the stench was. Her roommate handed Ella the half-eaten cheese, and Ella threw it away in the trash can.

"I'm so sorry!" Ella exclaimed. "I'm a bit nose blind." She explained as she noticed other sources of deadly stank. Piles of sweaty clothes sat on her suitcase, and trash were piled up on her desk. She turned to look at her angry roommate.

"Okay, I am going to clean up tonight," Ella said determined. After that, Ella was challenged to do what was previously impossible. She had sat for several hours on her dorm's floor studying the clothes labels and distinguishing between light or dark colors. To Ella, laundry was a science.

Picking up the miscellaneous trash and putting them in a bag was the easy part. *Uh, where do you go?* Ella thought as she stared dumbfounded at the huge black bags. Two of the bags were filled with laundry, while the others were trash. She lugged them out into the hallway, breathing heavy. She saw a person walking by.

"Excuse me!" she puffed out as she heaved a trash bag in the air. The stranger turned around.

“Where do you to go to do laundry and do trash?” she asked. The person frowned at her for a second, and, then laughed.

“Go on the elevator, and it will be on the bottom floor,” he said, and Ella smiled in relief.

“Thanks,” she mustered as she made her way down the hallways to the elevator.

“Phew,” she gushed out as she wiped the sweat off her forehead. She pressed the elevator button labeled “0.” The elevator had no music and creaked while descending. The inside felt like an oven from the hot weather. The smell of the bags worsened in the small space.

Ella gasped for air when the doors opened on the bottom level. *I thought I was going to die in there.* She had thought to herself while stepping out of the elevator. Scanning the ball before her, she had found a trash shoot and, in desperation, dragged the trash bags towards it.

The first bag got stuck. She had to press all her body weight to push the bag through. The second one went down easier. Ella’s first job was done, and, now, she had to do one more dreaded task...laundry.

With less weight on her shoulders, she coasted to the communal laundry room. Other people were inside. As she reached the room, she remembered something very important as she watched people fill the tray with soap. *The detergent!*

“Hey, I left my detergent upstairs. Would you please watch my clothes for me?” she asked a girl next to her. The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m going to be here for another hour or so. I don’t mind,” the girl said. Ella said another thanks over her shoulder as she scrambled back to the elevator. *I just can’t catch a break. Can I?*

She successfully acquired the laundry detergent. The brand was generic and smelled like heavy cologne as she poured the soap into the tray. She had emptied the bags into the washer. After asking other people numerous questions and thanking them once more, she pressed start on the machine. Ella, officially, had started her first load of laundry in Paris, France.



Being alive and being human can be a mess of feelings and past events. If ignored, sometimes, problems pile up and get stinky. Sometimes, people don’t even realize a problem exists unless told. Ella’s sense of smell had failed to recognize the strong smell and was comfortable with her mess.

Her roommate communicated that there was, indeed, a mysterious funk. Ella needed someone else’s perspective to notice the other unpleasanties. She had not intended on being a mess-maker. Ella had never shared a space with someone else outside her family for such a long period of time. Her parents had cleaned up most stuff after her. Her mom did her laundry and dishes. Her dad cooked. Ella missed her family.

Most days, Ella was homesick and anxious, wishing to talk to friends she knew. Ella video chatted them often. Her closest friends were Savannah, Lizzy, Chris, and Valeri.

Savannah sassied Ella for keeping indoors when Ella should be out there exploring. Lizzy sighed and tried to keep her patience telling Ella that she would be home soon. Chris made sure she was okay. Valeri was quiet and shared pictures of cute bunnies to cheer Ella up.

Without her loved ones, Ella felt strange. Her mom was the person who helped Ella prepare for air travel and several weeks away from home. She was Ella's number one supporter. Her dad and brothers were fishing and taking care of the animals while she was gone. Ella had an albino rabbit named Waffles. She was incredibly fearful that Waffles was not fed the right amount.

She also missed her work as a hostess in a local pub. Ella had worked at her first job for almost a year. Her co-workers were good friends.

While in Paris, Ella realized how small her world really was in Tennessee and how much she loved home. Her perspective had expanded past the United States border. She was completely outside her comfort-zone.

With time, she would start to feel comfortable in her temporary home, feeling proud of Paris. The feeling of being lost was not as scary as before. Ella even got lost in the Louvre and had found her way out.

Struggling is normal for the individual. Making mistakes is a part of the human condition. Sometimes, people can learn from their experiences and see past themselves. The sky above them is wider than they think.

Ella had been on a plane, had seen the country of her dreams, and had returned home with the promise that she would expand other peoples' horizons. She was planning to start a creative writing club and a magazine.

She had discovered that asking question leads to, not only, answers—but opportunities to learn more about herself. Common humanity meant the courage to find her own direction in life. She was not alone in her journey.

As time went on, she learned to drive and took herself to places to explore. She had discovered mindfulness and the feeling of freedom which comes from autonomy.



DEAR SAVANNAH

Written by: 22-year-old Ella

You know me through and through.

Anytime I was blue, you knew.

I look around, and you're right there.

You have the sweetest soul.

And, now, you're singing in heaven,

Your life was my everything.

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The third component of self-compassion is mindfulness. Mindfulness is awareness of emotions and approaching the feelings with curiosity. Instead of obsessing over pain, a person lets the pain go with acceptance. Perhaps, a person feels what he or she needs to feel in adversity in order to move forward.

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CHAPTER III: OPEN MINDED

Savannah's loss was painful for Ella. They were the same age, 22 years old. Several years had passed since Paris. Ella sat outside her favorite coffeehouse in downtown Franklin, sipping a white mocha latte, reflecting on her life.

Ella got the Honors Transfer Fellowship scholarship to Middle Tennessee State University. She was working on her thesis for as a requirement of the scholarship. She had graduated from Columbia State Community College. She was Editor in Chief of a magazine she founded for several years and had represented three organizations. Did any of those accomplishments matter?

Yes, she had worked hard to get where she was now. Ella was slipping back into depression like an old pair of shoes. This time, though, she knew what to do to hold on to the present.

A tear fell without protest as she knew that she was going to hurt for a little while. She accepted the sadness like an old friend, comforting the dull pangs in her heart.

Memories of Savannah were everywhere she went, and Ella had went looking for those moments where she could feel closer to her lost friend.

The news was sudden and difficult to process. Time meant everything to Ella, and, more than ever, she wanted her own life to slow.

Covid-19, a terrible pandemic had swept the world. Globally, people were suffering and facing loss. People were starting to lose ground with their mental health.

Ella's fingers gripped the large, white mug as she drank the coffee down little bit by little bit. The steamed milk was smooth, and the taste was bittersweet. She focused on the flavor as another tear fell.

A waitress wearing a mask stopped by and asked, "Are you alright?"

Ella gently placed her mug on the table and winced when a sound was made.

"No," Ella whispered. "But, I'll be okay." She paused for a moment. The waitress's eyes were earnest. She bore no ill will for Ella.

"I just miss my best friend," Ella said and breathed in, then out slow. "She passed away due to complications in a surgery." The waitress gave Ella her condolences and walked away.

Ella was grateful to her and left a nice tip. The latte had given Ella some warmth on this chilly autumn evening. She planned to go see an animation by herself. The movie theater was re-showing old movies at discount ticket prices, since most films had to extend their release dates.

She wanted to go see *How to Train Your Dragon*, her absolute favorite. Ella treaded down the old streets of Franklin, Tennessee. The historic buildings brought some sense of nostalgia. She remembered the times she brought Savannah here in her car.

When Ella had first learned to drive, Savannah was one of the first few people who witnessed Ella's terrifying driving. Her friend's eyes would get so big holding onto whatever she could when Ella drove.

When Ella reached her car, she put her hand on the seat next to her, imagining Savannah's lively presence. Yet, Savannah was not here anymore.

Ella had accepted this fact and put the key in the car's ignition. She kicked off her shoes and put her bare feet on the break. As she put the car into gear, her music turned back on, and the volume was up way too high.

She pulled out of her parking spot in the main square and proceeded to the movie theater. The theater's parking lot had few cars, and Ella entered, refreshed from the car ride.

"One ticket for How to Train Your Dragon, please," Ella said politely. The ticket holder regarded her and pulled up the seat selection on the screen.

"Hey, I just wanted to say that you have a very nice voice," he said. Ella looked back at him with a smile hinting at the edge of her lips.

"Thank you, I actually like to sing," she said. The boy was close to her age. She wondered in her mind as she walked away if he was single. She shook her head over that nonsense and proceeded to theater number 2.

During the whole movie, Ella had bawled her eyes out in the dark while eating Junior mints and a slushie. She came home that night hugging her old stuffed Toothless. Never had she felt so close to her younger self, waiting for her dear friend to come back, waiting for the world to get back to normal.

The earth was still in motion. Ella still had homework, a life to live, a job to fulfill. The feelings of this world were still too new. A world without Savannah was like a whole new planet. *If only* were words which would appear in Ella's mind. She had to remind herself with patience that the possibility of Savannah coming back was futile.

Ella went to see her therapist weekly. She had taken care of herself as best as she could. Sometimes, people must hold on to what they know until they are ready to venture into the wilds of a new identity.

A new Ella had come into this world, when Savannah had left it. Forevermore, new and old parts of Ella would interchange or grow. The pieces that were once shattered inside Ella moved, flashed, and rearranged at their own convenience as she lived through these past years.

Her dreams were full of Savannah. Sleep was hard to catch at night, and Ella had slept through most days. Ella knew that this process was temporary though, since she had been through it before.

At least, she wasn't numb to the people around her. At least, she could still see beauty in the skies before her. The future is never too far to reach.

Let the feelings come. Let them go. And breathe in. And breathe out. Remember, then let go. You'll find acceptance. Ella had told herself.



The Ella spoken of in this chapter is me. I have been writing this thesis with the intention of helping you, dear reader, to see the process of learning and understanding self-compassion. Mindfulness is being aware of who you are at present moment.

I want to let you know that I am okay. I have been through a lot since my high school years. All my research has helped me reach this point in life where I can look back on the old me as if she were a different person. I recognize her and value her as a dear friend, just as much as Savannah.

I am not alone and have people who support me, love me for who I am. I cheer the old me on almost like a hero in their own adventure. The Ella in this chapter is 22, has a big time skip since 19. I breach this gap by saying that time moved incredibly fast for me in those years, since I was so happy. The purpose of this thesis though is to remind people of the struggle.

Depression had made me feel selfish, weak, and hateful; I had to remember who I am. Who I was does not matter as I implore my readers to love themselves enough to take care of who they are at present. I'd like to leave you with advice I have garnered over the course of my research. I remind people that I am not a medical professional. Seek professional help. These mindful exercises are techniques I have tried to help with my own experiences with depression.

Breathe, live, and feel what is needed. Remember the simplest memories that you are grateful for. Let the kindest part of you open up. Say something nice to yourself even if you really don't mean it.

You are valued. You belong. You are beautiful and human. You are not alone.
Your heart is like a child reaching out to you. Be gentle with that heart of yours.

The lights are low. You cannot sleep. Let rest find you. Close your eyes without caring about what happens. Do what you can until dreams carry you away.

Your heart rate is up. Touch something familiar. Remember the feeling of that object in your hand. You will be okay.

You can't find someone to love you. Your love has been here all along. Love yourself. Care for yourself whether you are single or not.

You have too much adrenaline in your stomach. Eat something light like crackers to absorb the acid. Drink a little bit of water.

You are afraid. Recognize your fear. Is your fear real? Is it true? Your feelings are valid. Don't let fear control you though. Be safe and proceed with open communication to others, if possible.

You are worried. Write down or draw what you ruminate for a minute. Set a timer for as long as you think you will need. When you are done, close the book. Walk away from it until you are calm enough to look at the worry again.

You are wanting closure. No matter what you cannot change the other person or what has happened. You have changed though and will need to find acceptance by letting yourself feel what you need to feel.

You are angry. Your anger is a feeling. Don't act on the feeling but recognize that anger. Communicate the feeling effectively. Do you need to set healthy boundaries? Can a compromise be reached?

You are sad or lonely. It's okay to cry. It's okay to not be okay. You won't always be in that hole, and you'll make your way through.

My adventure is not over, neither is yours. We are not alone. I yearn to continue writing and to expand upon this project with further feedback. Every life and story matters. I am grateful that I got to share part of my life with you, and, thank you for reading. I invite you to explore your mind and self-compassion. Perhaps, you will find your own journey.

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