

## In Theory

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There are some things you just know, without even knowing where you learned about them. For example, that the shallow part in a lake is warmer than the deep ends. Maybe you learned it in school, but some things are just there, with this certainty that they are true, they are here, and there is no real explanation for why they billow in your mind. It's the certainty like in dreams, when you simply know that you are talking to the king of Switzerland (without that even being a real title anymore), when you never even heard of the man. This certainty applies to many things, not only to fun facts about nature (or Swiss nobility).

Lisa knew she would fail in the future. She didn't know how or what exactly, just that there was a great disappointment waiting for her. It's not that bad to know that about yourself, really. You can prepare. Every time she got handed a bad grade, a friend stood her up or she burned her food, she expected the worst. Oh well, that's it. The end of my good strain. Maybe the house will burn down, but that doesn't sound too exciting.

*Our house did nearly catch on fire one time,  
but nearly isn't really exciting enough, isn't  
it? Anyway, it didn't even happen when I was  
home. I guess I leave it out.*

See, that's the other thing Lisa was certain about – yes, her life would turn horribly upside down in a way, she would lose something, maybe, but it would be something truly tragic. Something in the scale of, lo and behold, what shit happened here. Houses burning down, friends leaving you, barely graduating, those are all basic tragedies. You can't call them tragedies, they are nuisances, obstacles you can overcome, you can come back from (yes, even a house burning down, although, admittedly, that's a little more annoying).

*Could sound belittling. Oh well. It's fiction!*

Lisa waited for something bigger. The kind of drama you see on Netflix, in a documentary, or a biopic, the kind you read about in novels. She never waited patiently, nor did she actively try to challenge fate and risk, provoking whoever or whatever to prove her premonitions to be true. After some time, she learned to live with that ever-present looming feeling and got on with her life. There was nothing to do about it anyway.

Her mom always felt it, too. The minute she learned about her pregnancy (“Twins, oh god, are you sure? Can you check again?”), her life shifted in multiple directions at the same time – being a mom, the main breadwinner, a wife. Directions she probably would have gone anyway, but so early? And with two kids already? There were things she wanted to do that now seemed impossible

and maybe even ridiculously childish. Florida, the only vacation she had photos of, now became a memory of another woman who had had the time and the resources to say “Yes, I would like to see the world (and yes, I will pay you back for the trip).” Lisa’s mom knew that her life would change drastically when she got the news of the twins, of course it would, but that was not the moment when she had the same premonition of Lisa’s terrible failure, at that time, she still seemed to have some sort of hope for her unborn children. Life struck her already when she was a child, so why should it happen again? Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, or how does the saying go?

*Ian Fleming also said: “Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it’s enemy action.” The enemy, in this case, my sister’s and my entering academia.*

The thing is, it didn’t strike in the same place twice, but close enough for her to feel the impact. This time, lightning hit her ex-husband, Lisa’s father. Back then both were still invested, or rather interested, in each other’s lives, there was even some love left for them to feed on. The twins were in kindergarten, mom and dad had jobs, their apartment was nice and close to the city. Lisa still remembers the exact layout of their rooms, their way to kindergarten, the train they used to go shopping. She doesn’t remember when exactly her dad lost his job and started staying home all day, playing video games and watching TV.

Mom didn’t mind this at first. Her job paid enough for them to get through this, and she liked the idea of her children spending some time with their dad. Whenever she thinks of this time now, she can’t help but feel regret, in some way. She once nearly admitted this, when Lisa started getting bitchy, and puberty hit her hard. She sees a lot of her ex in her kids, especially in Lisa. But that was later, when they were already divorced and trying to make things work for the children. Dad’s unemployment was the switch for all of this.

*There are unemployed people with very happy marriages. Maybe I simplify things too much here.*

To this day, Lisa never understood how her parents ended up together in the first place. She knows there was some kind of party, and she assumes that they had been a couple for some time. She assumes that because she can’t think of another explanation why somebody would try to make a marriage work when they don’t know each other. But then again, she remembers her father and is not so sure about any of this. Dad was, either way, a role model and pillar in Lisa’s life, he still is, despite everything.

Unlike Lisa’s mom, her dad worked many different jobs. Her dad was in the military, but she doesn’t remember that because this was before he even met her mom, so it never seemed to matter that much. There were some stories she recalls, things he saw and described with a distant look in his eyes, but other than those stories and a tattoo of a grim reaper on his arm, Lisa never had proof for this time in his life. Her dad was a cook, but that is also a time she barely has memories of. She personally hates cooking, and whenever she and her sister were at his place – after the divorce he lived in a small apartment above his parents – dad tried to cook somewhat healthy meals. Somewhat healthy in the sense that he knew that his children took after him and preferred glutamate over green beans any time. Then, if she got the time right, her dad was unemployed. He played video games, bloody ones, that is, and the twins were watching him and

cheering whenever something exploded on screen. Mom kind of knew that, but she didn't do anything about it. She also knew that her children were watching *The X-Files* in secret, hidden behind the door and barely able to make out what was happening. This seemed to be enough of an age restriction. Her dad was a butcher, and Lisa remembers an argument with a school friend about that. That friend really hated the idea of somebody killing animals for a living, it was disgusting, how could you not be ashamed of your father? She brought sandwiches with salami to school every day, and Lisa spent many afternoons with her family eating chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes. For a brief moment, Lisa felt ashamed, but she couldn't place that feeling in a secure box and so she swallowed it down. That was easy, without having to argue or, God forbid, even having to admit mistakes, and so she started to swallow more than just shame. But that is not the point of this part.

Now, if she was informed correctly, her dad was a postal worker. In the same branch as her mom, ironically, but ultimately this didn't matter as he could be working anywhere, and he would be as far out of reach as he is anyway.

*I'm not sure why I should include this. I continue this part later.*

Anyhow, nothing really weird happened with her parents. Every family has its drama, and the real tragedy hadn't happened yet. Lisa was still watching out for it, but it got a bit lost in her mind. Now and then it resurfaced, but the time between its disappearances got longer. She called that peace sometimes.

It re-entered her mind during the first semester of college. She started later than her sister and most of her friends because she finished school later, worked for a year, and then didn't know what to do. Something with English, something with Art. Why not both. It's not that she didn't have the time, wasn't that so?

*Just thinking about this time makes me feel like I'm losing time. Too many years spent on something, but alas. I also got to play video games as much as I wanted.*

The most irritating question was whether she was going to become a teacher later. God, no. Oh Jesus. No way. She answered the questions exactly like this, most of the time. There were a lot of uncertainties in Lisa's life, but becoming a teacher was the one thing she always knew would never happen. Speaking in front of people? Voluntarily? For her, that meant existing in the ninth circle of hell.

*Could also be another circle. Never read "Dante's Inferno." But you get the idea. It sounds dramatic but speaking in front of an audience was hell for me back then. Now it's still horrible, but more of a limbo than actual hell. Well, depends on the group size.*

Constantly being asked about your future and not having a precise answer gets tiring after some time. Lisa knew that a lot of people didn't have any idea about what to do later, but that didn't stop her from thinking she should do something about it. She was in her early twenties and already time seemed to be slipping. She only found out later that that's the thing with your twenties. Everybody feels like a failure and like being just too late for everything, every time, while everyone else already

has a concrete plan. In your twenties you also learn that people talk a lot of bullshit when they feel this way.

That's the very definition of a vicious circle. People acting as if they know it all, infecting others and bringing them to talk too much about their "plans," which are vague ideas, at best. All this just to not confess that you don't have a plan, really. Nobody wanted to be the only person in their closer circle with no plan for the future. Especially Lisa, who couldn't even stand the judge-y looks when she, once again, bought conventional sunscreen even though her friend had told her that the Great Barrier Reef died because of this sunscreen, and no, anybody could afford to buy the more expensive kind. If they couldn't maybe they shouldn't use sunscreen.

*I could go on with this, but I don't want to.  
Would taint too many fond memories with friends.  
It's also not that interesting.*

Then, most of the time blurred and faded into one big deep breath of trying to make it to the next semester. Lisa enjoyed her studies, but somehow nothing really seemed to matter, anyway. English was great, but there was a lot of educational theory involved, so every seminar became less and less interesting. Same thing with Art.

*Ugh, maybe I don't want to think about this time too much. It  
was fun, yeah, and draining, and also so so long. I want to tell  
something more fun.*

Lisa's time in her bachelor studies was fun. She went to parties, made some new friends, and as already mentioned somewhere above, she played a lot of video games. That was her idea of fun.

*But this gets somewhat tedious now. This whole college spiel. Let's focus on  
something different.*

Lisa tried to find some meaning in her story. In the beginning, she felt a tragedy looming over her, ready to strike any time. It still wasn't gone. Sometimes, when she was lying down at night, she imagined the most bizarre catastrophes, freak accidents, disasters ...

*That's not entirely true. There were also dreams about nice things. Many.*

Lisa's mind rummaged through every tragedy she ever heard of, bent it, melted it, absorbed it, even, until she could think of a lifetime where it could happen to her. Every night, things became more realistic. More tangible. Sometimes it felt as if they already happened to her, in a distant lifetime, getting closer and closer to her. One time, she dreamed about being burnt at the stake in the Middle Ages, like Joan of Arc; the next week, she was part of Marie Antoinette's court. Not long until she dreamt about being aboard the *Britannic* (which was more or less like the *Titanic*). Her dreams would catch up with the real world very soon.

*What the hell. That's not even remotely true. There  
were only dreams about stuff like that when I read it  
on Wikipedia the night before, and you can't*

*spin this to be some kind of self-destructive mind game I would play on myself. Also, the Britannic wasn't "more or less like the Titanic." Less people died, and I think it wasn't because of an iceberg. Though I need to google that.*

Lisa's dreams were only loosely grounded in reality.

*Even being "loosely grounded in reality" means getting some facts straight. That's not happening here. This whole story was supposed to do something different.*

She felt a shift. As if there was something speaking to her from far away. But it didn't feel like it felt in her dreams.

*Of course, it doesn't. I'm talking. To Lisa. You. Whatever.*

Lisa wondered if her parents had nights like these, too. Her mom was always very practical. Her dad however read a lot of Science Fiction. It wouldn't surprise her if he sometimes lay awake, imagining to be part of the first moon landing and to explore the galaxy for humanity, like Perry Rhodan.

*Mom read a lot of Stephen King. I bet she had fantasies like that, too.*

Lisa remembered her mom's dreamier side, too. It just wasn't as apparent as with her dad.

*Is this going anywhere? I mean, it started off ok-ish, I guess, but you sort of lost me when this whole dream business started. It's just not what happened. I could go back and forth like this forever. But why should I. Really. My parents had their issues and I guess passed them down unto me and my sister, who, by the way, never gets mentioned here anyway, so that's the first problem, really, because I can't ignore my twin sister, who is also my roommate, and also experienced all of this too, so she should probably play a bigger part in this. I digress. Also, I start to dislike the name "Lisa." I mean, it was supposed to feel like a different person and not me, but this detachment has gone too far. I never really saw myself as a Lisa. Toni would be cool. Or Mary-Sue, that sounds so whimsical for a 26-year-old German girl.*

Mary-Sue and her sister lived through all of this, and her sister had this looming feeling hanging above her, too.

*Yeah, no, that's not it. Doesn't work for me.*

She could always try something different.

*Maybe. But not here. She should focus on some other part of her life, I think.*

Her adolescence was also a time of great anxiety for her.

*I would be glad to not open this can of worms. I mean, in theory I could talk about any time in my life. The future! Oh, now that would be fun. Put some sci-fi in it. Would that count as autofiction? Technically, yes, maybe?*

When she got older, she saw things clearer. Her friends had completely different lives, with their kids, and pretty houses, worrying about mortgages and about where to spend their next vacation.

*I forget that the future implies me getting older. And my friends. And, oh god, my parents. No, don't want to think about that either.*

There were few things Lisa/Toni/Mary-Sue liked to think about.

*Not true, again. But, in a way, maybe. I'm starting to dislike your attitude. You know, I can just end the text whenever I want to.*

She knew that it had to feel right. Whenever wouldn't work for her.

*This feels right. Right now. Precisely in this moment. This is the last thing now. Can't think of anything now, anyway.*

## Author Biography

**Tina Pahnke** grew up in a small village, busying herself with movies, a lot of books and an unhealthy amount of video games. She turned those passions into an academic career, getting her bachelor's degree with majors in English and Art and is now pursuing a master's degree in North American Studies. Her studies are mostly focused on film theory and game studies, but she loves to ponder about gender and everything queer too.