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Fear of Feeling

It was August 2010 when I moved to Manhattan from Vancouver. I had a scholarship to The New School, four suitcases full of clothes and books, a room in a Nolita apartment, and a huge sense of confidence that my life was just beginning.

Shortly after arriving in New York City, I was hit with a series of painful events.

First: My step-dad, who was very much a father figure to me, was cheating on my mother with a prostitute. I found this out suddenly, in the worst possible way (is there a 'good' way to find these things out?), just a month after starting graduate school.

My stepfather was what clinicians would call "an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse." His own mother sexually abused him as a small child, and this inexorable damage was reeling its nasty head 60 years later. The worst part, for me, was that the person I knew and loved seemed to have gone missing.

And then, one day in November, amidst feeling awful about the things happening with my step-dad, I overcame myself and committed to going to the gym. As I peddled on the elliptical trainer, a nightmarish flashback overcame me—a hazy memory of being fondled whilst in my bed as a young girl by a babysitter.

A few months after my step-father's betrayal came to light, weeks after the flashbacks started occurring, and just days before I turned 24, I went to party, drank too much, and was dragged into a back room where some guy named Ben pulled me to the ground and tried to rape me. I froze. Shortly after, someone entered the room and I had the chance to scramble away. It could have been worse, I got away before it got bad, so I told myself: maybe this isn't even a big deal.

Nevertheless: I began to struggle with insomnia. Anxiety would shake my entire body, keeping me awake. Instead of acknowledging the obvious etiology of these symptoms, I blamed myself. Something is wrong with me. I left lectures frequently to go to the washroom, where I grabbed onto the walls of the stall as the anxiety attacks rolled in.

One day in the Spring, I fled a seminar on Foucault's "History of Madness" in panic sweats, petrified that I was at the brink of my first break from reality, that I was about to turn mad myself. In many ways, I already had. I was in denial; itself is a form of madness, a delusion—the self-protective kind. Anxiety is like a breaking news flash: it grabs your attention and rattles your body's fear response, but it deceives you as to what is really at hand.

On the way home from History of Madness, I rode the 6-train from Union Square to Nolita where I lived. The girl beside me on the subway had her nose in a heavyset textbook that had an air of importance. I did what I always do when I encounter people reading books in public: I surreptitiously investigate its title and, ideally, its contents as well. The chapter she was reading was titled "Mental Illness as a Defense." As I read these five words I felt slapped in the face by

insight: a symptom is a defense.

“I froze. But I got away. It could have been worse.” Freezing, denial: these were methods of self-protection that worked initially but remained in place for days, months and, as I found out later, years. By that time, these methods of self-defense had morphed into symptoms: panic, a locked jaw, a fear of going crazy, the conviction that I had.

Several minutes passed before I realized the woman beside me wasn't reading a book about psychology, as I projected. She was a student of Law: “Mental Illness as a Defense.”

My anxiety was the clever defense created by a deceptive lawyer who convinced me I was crazy, when really I was just avoiding the feelings I felt over all that had happened, epitomized in my mantra: “It could have been worse.”

Pain (psychological or physical) is often submitted for assessment; the rating scale ranging from 0 to 10. I felt terrible guilt knowing that if I was asked to apply such a scale to my life, my pain couldn't be rated anything more than a 3. Unwilling to confront and own the pain I harbored, I cut myself off from all feeling instead. When you numb yourself out like this, there is only one thing remaining that you feel: anxiety, and it is constant. This strategy allowed me to enact a performance of coping well—“It could have been worse”—all the while, the performance itself belied a fixation upon my unacknowledged scars.

I reminded myself repeatedly that my own experiences were big enough, bad enough, traumatic enough. All the things that happened weren't “bad” enough to be the cause of my anxiety; therefore it was me: there was something deep inside of me, which was bad and broken. Joan Didion warns of this phenomenon in *The Year of Magical Thinking*: “This attempt at corrective thinking,” she writes, “serves only to plunge us deeper into the self-regarding deep.”

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Two years later, I've left New York but the trauma hasn't left me. I sit on my therapist's couch in Vancouver with a crafted conviction: “I shouldn't be so anxious anymore, I mean what happened wasn't even so bad.” My therapist, Devorah, looked at me over her glasses with pleading eyes. “All that stuff happened years ago,” I stammered, “and when I talk to my boyfriend about all of this I feel like he's sick of hearing about it.”

The worst part about my anxiety was that I felt ashamed about it. I felt like I had to hide myself from the person I loved. As I explained to my therapist, “I am afraid to show him how anxious and rattled I feel... see, he's been through way harder things than me...”

It took me a year of therapy until I could see how my constant anxiety was rooted in my fear of feeling what I truly felt beneath the anxiety: pain, sorrow and grief.

“We lose a part of ourselves with every trauma,” Jungian analyst, Greg Mogensson, writes, “and our disavowal of the pain serves to only push that lost part of ourselves even further away.” When we refuse to feel, Mogensson suggests, our personality often becomes split, and this inner

splitting is experienced as anxiety.

"Put it behind you," everyone around you insists, "it's time to move on." Of course people say this with well meaning, not knowing that invalidating someone's anxiety only feeds it, and creates additional alienation for those who are afflicted. For a long time, this dismissive type of advice only reified my internal dialogue: it could have been worse.

With Devorah as my guide, I was able to descend into the belly of my anxiety and out the other side to the feelings that lie beneath it. I found myself time-traveling through the wormhole of therapy to revisit these fraught episodes in my past. In the process, I could finally face the feelings I was then unable to feel, creating a vacuum that allowed the lost parts of myself to be summoned from their places of exile. Therapy itself is a form of time travel, "a method of retrieval," psychoanalyst Adam Phillips suggests, "of the misplaced persons in oneself."

In the Greek myth, when Orpheus went to plead with Hades to return his beloved Eurydice from the underworld, he was allowed to retrieve her under one condition: he was forbidden to look back at her until they fully emerged into the light. Content with this stipulation, Orpheus went on his way but eventually became paranoid that the Gods betrayed them. He turned back to make sure his beloved was still there, but as he did so, Eurydice dissolved into a shadow and returned to the realm of the dead. Recovering from anxiety, it seems, is precisely the inverse. In the process of retrieving the lost feelings within ourselves from the shadows of anxiety's underworld, we turn to face them ... and we, alas, come back to life.