
OK

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The fear that came then was insidious. It crept up within me and took hold, almost without me noticing. A slow burn extended from my core outward until I was locked within its grasp. Helpless. Something long dormant—or maybe simply subdued, silenced—filled my veins, infiltrated my bloodstream, stopped my heart and crushed each of my lungs, a caress that became a chokehold. I watched from some distant place, the land of unreality, as my body—my cage—betrayed me. Immobile, locked in a labyrinth with no exit, gasping desperately, seeking a reprieve that wouldn't come. My limp body was dragged along by the force of a wave too big, and I was small, I was nothing. Did I exist anymore? *I don't care, make it STOP—you win. I'm mute and deaf and blind isthiswhatdeathfeelslike? I don't—I can't—please—help—*

“How was the weekend?”

Emily inquired, looking up from her book and surveying me with keenly alert blue eyes. I responded blithely, positively serene, mask securely in place. It was good, it was always good, how could it be any other way? What a ridiculous idea.

Every nerve ending in my body was aflame, electric pulsating shockwaves reverberating with no release, coursing from the very tips of my fingers curled in tightly clenched fists and down the hunched line of my spine. I was consumed by it, devoured by it, the fear was in me as it was me, was *me*. My eyes had been squeezed shut—darkness was easier than light when light only served to blind. Peering through wet thick eyelashes, the room was blurry. I watched the stale yellow paint start melting off the walls, Salvador Dali-style—was it hot in here? Thick, shuddering gusts of oxygen forced themselves out of my throat in rapid succession, one after the other—*gaspgaspgaspgaspgasp—I can't breathe—I can't breathe—I* felt my airways constrict and shrink and fold gently into themselves. An ocean of me poured out from behind my eyes, the dam burst, the levy broke—the strongest walls are only as strong as their weakest point. Hot, salty wetness, melancholia streams and liquid nightmares. My hands were soldered to my chest and they had to be, they had to or my heart would fall out. *The pounding, it's inside my skull it's loud and full and my heart might really explode, I might really explode—that pounding, that pounding!*

I sat down at my perpetually cluttered desk, sifting through readings for that week and running through the laundry list of things I had to do, always a nagging fear that I was forgetting something. *Finish that sociology paper—status attainment and*

social reproduction, was it? E-mail your advisor and set up an appointment, you need to figure out your class schedule for next semester. Do your laundry. Eat. Shower. Sleep. Clambering into bed—one of the few things I really did miss while away—I set to work on my paper. Everything in order. Everything as it should be, as always.

The room pitched and swayed, a woozy psychedelic dream, as I blindly groped for the door handle through the thick film of sensation, adrenaline, *attack*. It was 1:30 am, but I knew they would pick up. “What’s wrong?” No hello—my mom didn’t have to ask, already knew. I spluttered incoherently, words dripping out of my mouth in a cacophony of cluttered syllables. *I need dad. I just need dad.* Still groggy, he asked what was going on—“Are you OK?” The guttural sobs that ripped through me, cleaving me in half, must have been answer enough. As a psychiatrist, my dad was well versed in how to talk his patients down, but I was not his regular patient. “Hey. Listen to me. I need you to breathe. Meg—breathe, slowly. In and out, that’s right. Good. Just like that. Keep going, in, out, in out.” *In. Out. In. Out.* I clung to his words like I had never heard him speak before, like those words would be my deliverance. And they were. The radiator thrummed against my leg, aching to prove just how much it was alive. Looking out the window onto the silent street, my lips pursed in a small “o,” I forced myself to do what my dad said. Slowly but surely, I unwound, the chokehold of panic releasing me, free, at least for now.

You are OK.

I am not OK.