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Anxious

It started with tomatoes, but shrimp would end up playing the biggest role. Nasty, disgusting shrimp.

I worked with my mother doing clerical work one summer at Guna, a company that manufactured and sold homeopathic medicine. From time to time, the head of the company would decide to buy the employees lunch from a restaurant that an employee's wife owned. My first shrimp encounter happened when I worked there. I had ordered a safe teriyaki chicken dish. Somehow, the person placing the orders didn't get my dish, but there were extras of other things. Shrimp was one of them.

"Here," my mom said, placing the take-out container on my desk. "They had a bunch of extras that no one claimed."

I had never tried shrimp before simply because I had never wanted to. It looked decent enough. Like chicken tenders with fries.

But it wasn't that at all. I felt like I was biting into someone's arm and breaking the tender skin.

I rinsed my mouth throughout the rest of the day to erase the memory of the texture. Some days I remember the texture out of the blue, and people ask me why I randomly start making faces.

* * *

Mom came over to my house to have dinner with me. We lived two houses down from each other, so this was a common occurrence.

“Don’t forget to water the front yard,” she said as I let her in through the front door. She always said that when she came over.

“Honey sesame chicken or fettuccini?” I said as I walked into the kitchen. “I’ve got the stuff for both.”

“Whichever one is quicker,” she said. I got the stuff for the chicken out.

We washed the dishes together hours later – I washed and Mom dried just like always. After I was done with the last dish, I ran the sponge over the bowl of the sink to clean it out. Mom folded her rag and set it near the dish rack. We stood in the kitchen and talked a little bit before we decided that she should take some of the food home with her. While I was getting out a container, I saw my mom grab a paper towel and brush over the top of the sink.

“You should always make sure your sink is clean.”

* * *

I worked with the ISP kids on Wednesdays. These are the kids in wheelchairs, the ones who can’t communicate or feed themselves. Some of them can walk and only a few can speak.

Silvia was in the back corner feeding Janos. Viri’s mother hovered over her to make sure that she ate breakfast. Rigo and Yulissa happily bounced in their seats at the sight of cereal. Rigo was happy because he had already done the daily task of figuring out “less” and “more” in order to earn his cereal. Kelly was with Jesus on the other side of the room working on a counting exercise.

And Jordan and I. I hadn’t wanted to work with Yulissa that morning, so I volunteered to feed Jordan, the only wheelchair kid in this class. I put the restraining towel on him before

putting the bib that would catch most of the drippings. The restraining towel was used to keep Jordan's flailing arms from hitting away the bowl or spoon. I found that there was some sort of chicken dish for his meal today – pureed of course, and spoon-fed by yours truly. I've done this plenty of times – you spoon the food in his mouth, catch whatever falls out, and try again.

Jordan laughed, and whatever was in his mouth came flying out. I was quick enough to get the bib between us so that I was spared a major sliming.

The entire process generally goes rather quickly since he's a good eater, and today was no different. I took the bib off but left the restraining towel on because I've been told that it calms him down after a feeding. I used that time to go over to the sink, dump off the dishes and wash my hands. Rigo reached out to tickle me as I walked by, and I tickled him back.

I rinsed out the dishes and then put soap on my hands. I washed, I dried.

I took my watch and ring off and wet my hands. I worked up a soapy lather past my wrist and rinsed.

Again.

I stopped and looked down at my hands. I didn't move for a few moments.

I had washed my hands repetitively. Compulsively. It was getting worse.

* * *

I got a new computer desk. My old one was made out of wood and way too small. This one was much prettier.

I set the stupid thing up myself. It was my love child for an entire Saturday while I put it together. The instructions intended for the computer to sit on the left. I reversed the whole thing so that the computer would sit on the right. I hate when things are on the left.

The desktop is glass. Nice and pretty.

The first smudge showed. I wiped it away. This new contact made a bigger smudge. I got the sleeve of my sweater and finally took it off.

I braced myself on the desktop as I rolled away from it to get out of the chair. Two smudges from my palms. I left them alone; I was getting up and away from the desk anyway.

I returned ten minutes later with Windex. One streak-free shine to go, please. Squirt. Wipe. Good.

I looked up from my victory. The curtain rod was crooked. As I reached out without a thought to fix the rod, I stopped myself. My therapist wanted me to leave one thing alone. I would be alright if I didn't touch this. I could leave the curtain rod alone.

I sat down at my new desk and turned on my computer. The newly cleaned speakers burst into song. I looked down to pull the keyboard out. There were three more smudges.

No, I thought. *No*. The curtain rod had to be fixed. The smudges had to be cleaned off. I couldn't do this.

* * *

The appointment was at ten.

9:45. Fifteen till ten. I had left my house at the intended time, but traffic on the freeway had set me back a bit. I was still going to be on time, just not early as I would have liked.

9:46. Carlisle. I felt like honking at the silver Maxima in front of me. At this rate, I was going to arrive exactly on time. Definitely not what I had planned.

9:47. University. Overpass to I-25 South. The overpass moved quickly. Maybe I would be just a few minutes early after all. I pushed rewind to hear Natalie Imbruglia's "Sunlight" again.

9:48. The light at Martin Luther took a bit long. I'd be ok, though. I was basically on

campus. The city bus ran the stop sign, and I waited. I barreled down Redondo.

9:49. Pedestrians. Taking their sweet-ass time. Oh, I know, let me pull out my cell phone and text while this car is waiting! I muttered one of my personal sayings: hurry the fuck you up. It doesn't make sense, but I like to use it when I'm getting impatient.

9:50. Seriously, it's not that hard to work a three-way stop. He got here first, he goes. I get my turn, and then you get to peel off. Trust me, that really is how it works.

9:51. The lobby at last. I checked in at the white-board before picking my usual chair.

9:52. I saw the therapist walk by. "I'll be right with you," she said.

9:57. No therapist. She's either in her office or over at the front desk. I started picking at my cuticles before I knew what I was doing. Normally I would make myself stop and take deep breaths instead. I was still hyped up from the drive down here, so I let myself indulge.

9:58. Two minutes to ten. I looked up behind me and saw a brochure for coping with test anxiety. "Come on back." I turned my head back around and saw her. I picked up my bag and followed her into her office.

We sat. She asked me about the week. Nothing to report. She rested her chin on her hand, her witch's hair falling forward.

"How are you with time?" she asked after we went over a few things.

I opened my mouth but then sat back and closed it.

"Are you a timekeeper?"

* * *

I held onto Janos as we walked on the school's dirt track, our strides in perfect unison. He saw an airplane, his favorite thing in the world, so we stopped while he pointed excitedly.

In the time it took for Janos to get his fill of pointing and squealing, Kelly caught up and

decided to walk with us. Silvia walked ahead and pushed Jordan's wheelchair. We talked about Kelly's two Border Collies.

Kelly offered to take Janos, so I let her grab a hold of the gait belt before letting go and stumbling back into a different pace. My legs felt weird, and my face tightened in concentration to figure out why.

Ah.

"What's wrong?" Kelly asked. I stayed behind her and Janos as I stretched and flexed my legs.

"Nothing."

It started again. My feet moved in ways that I couldn't stop. We continued walking. It worked for a while.

Kelly messed it up.

I tried again and managed what I could between Janos and me. I couldn't do anything about Kelly.

Unison. Match his stride.

I tried to fight it, but I kept looking down and matching my stride to Janos's. Eventually, I got it mostly under control, but then it started up again.

Match his stride. Walk in unison. Right. Left. Right. Left.

I became so exasperated at one point that I stopped walking to take a few deep breaths.

And then I laughed. My friend Cherie had asked me once about when and how new rules formed.

Whenever and wherever they damn well pleased.

* * *

Cherie lay on the ground stretching her back. I was sitting on the bed getting stuff together for the next day.

“I’ll look up the times for Cliff’s on Saturday,” I said at some point.

“Ok,” she replied. She continued stretching, and I continued getting stuff ready, mostly my bag for work.

Cherie, my roommate Stephanie, Stephanie’s boyfriend Matthew, and I had spontaneously decided that we were going to go to Cliff’s Amusement Park that Saturday, but we had to make sure what time they opened.

I got up and walked into the bathroom to wash my hands. As I was doing this, Cherie got up, got on my computer, and started looking for the time Cliff’s opened.

My chest hurt. My heart beat faster. My eyes narrowed. I stood at the bathroom doorway and watched Cherie do what we said *I* was going to do. With my eyes constantly looking over at the computer, I went back to my bag and felt around for my notebook.

I wrote. I journaled. It’s what the therapist wanted me to do.

Cherie turned back and saw me. “Did something happen?” She knew why I journaled.

“I’ll tell you in a little bit.” I would tell her when my heart rate returned to normal and when I wasn’t screaming inside.

My computer. We said I would do it. Ask before you touch and move things. Ask. Ask. Ask.

She didn’t ask.

My stuff wasn’t under my control. Chaos.

* * *

“Can we go there instead?” Cherie asked as we drove by Pappadeaux, a seafood

restaurant, on our way to Subway.

“I’m doing this for you,” I said as I glanced to the side at her. I figured I could make something work. Just because it was a seafood place didn’t mean they didn’t have chicken.

They sat us by the lobster tank. Exactly what I wanted. Cherie took the seat facing the tank, and during the course of the meal, she would relate to me how one of the lobsters looked like he was reaching up for me.

“What can I start you ladies off with to drink?” the waiter asked as he came over for the first time. Water all around.

He came back when I was trying to figure out what to order. “I think I’m gonna get the catfish,” Cherie said. “It’s really good here.”

“Oh look,” I said. “They have grilled chicken.”

“You can try my catfish. Just to see what you think.”

The waiter returned. “Have you ladies decided?” At some point, I related my hatred of seafood to him. “The chicken is good,” he responded, agreeing with my choice. “How about a nice salad with tomatoes and peppers?”

I looked at Cherie. She couldn’t help but let her laughter burst out. It was no secret that I *hate* raw tomatoes.

“How about chicken, broccoli, and mashed potatoes?” I asked. The waiter left.

While we were eating, Cherie encouraged me to try the catfish. “Just a taste. It won’t be that bad.” She cut off a piece and set it on my plate. After a few bites of the chicken, I braved this unknown hazard.

Cockroaches. Alive. Marinated in spicy mucus. I could feel the legs moving and the hard skin breaking as I took a bite. I spit it out and looked at it in horror as I put my napkin over

my mouth.

The waiter walked past. “Can I get some more water?” I asked.

“Sure, I’ll get it in a moment.”

“Can I get it, like, right now?”

He must have seen the look on Cherie’s face. “Sure thing.”

* * *

There was a parade of medicine. Antidepressants that weren’t taken for depression. Zoloft ended up being ADD in a bottle. I couldn’t concentrate on even the most exciting things. My poor mother tried to have a conversation with me.

Five weeks on Paxil with Ativan thrown in “just in case.” Dizzy spells, tremor, and nausea.

This was when I started picking on my cuticles – a behavior bent on perfection.

“What can we do to give us some more time?” the psychiatrist asked me after I told him that I was having trouble in school because I couldn’t get anything done. “The Paxil isn’t working fast enough.”

He sat back in his chair and examined his notes. “You know, some recent studies have shown that combining Risperdal with Paxil for a short period can increase Paxil’s effectiveness. That may be the jump-start that we need.”

I blinked. Risperdal?

An anti-psychotic. A dopaminergic drug. I repeat: an anti-psychotic. We had covered drugs in my brain and behavior class. I knew about this one. It was not fun to be on.

“Would you be willing to try it?” the psychiatrist asked.

There had been a money issue with getting Paxil, so that dominated my initial response.

“About how much does it cost?”

He was silent for a moment and then reached behind him for the telephone. One hundred and thirty-six dollars was the price for a month’s worth of 1 mg pills.

No, I would not be willing to try it.

Paxil remained and so did the nausea, tremor, and dizziness. So did the cuticle picking. The cereal sorting. Counting kids every fifteen seconds when we went outside the classroom. Opening and closing doors. The smudges.

And then I decided to get a dog. Sweet, perfectly trained Jake who can’t help the shedding and doesn’t put his toys away.