

DEPRESSION AT 4AM

A short story by
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Depression at 4AM

Grocery shopping at 4 a.m. can look like a lot of things.

Like you have a lifelong battle with insomnia.

Like you work the swing shift, so three in the morning was more like two in the afternoon.

Like you had a sudden, unstoppable craving that needed to be satisfied.

Like you needed condoms, and the pharmacy was closed.

Like you got your period and were out of tampons.

Like you got a toothache and needed one of those repair kits to hold you over until morning.

What it didn't look like, though, was what it actually was as I wandered down the produce aisle, loading up on things that could never be considered comfort foods. Kale. Sugar snap peas. Eggplant. Foods I would never actually cook. Because that required intention and energy and ambition, things I suddenly found myself helplessly low on.

The shuffle of boxes sliding across floors one aisle over - you know, in

the snack section that I would avoid because I couldn't load up my handcart with things that said I needed a chocolate fix, like the magnesium therein could suddenly cure everything, could - if I shut my eyes and focused - sound a lot like waves caressing the shore at the beach.

But I couldn't close my eyes and think of beaches.

Beaches and water.

Water and drowning.

Those were not thoughts I wanted.

I kept my eyes open and slipped a small bag of radishes into my handcart.

I would avoid the mac & cheese and ice cream aisles for the same reason I avoided the snack aisle, spending far too much time instead on inconspicuous things like organic floor cleaner, toothpaste, yogurt, salad dressing, and tea.

Not coffee.

Coffee implied a pick me up.

A pick me up implied I was down.

I had given this a lot of thought.

I had given this a lot of thought because I gave everything a lot of thought. Too much thought. Repetitive, unrelenting, obsessive-compulsive thought.

Like how I couldn't wear a baggy shirt to the grocery store at 4 a.m. Like how I couldn't put my earbuds in. Like how I had to give a smile to the shelf stockers and the man spraying down the tables behind the meat section and the girl who would inevitably scan my items. Like how when she asked what I was doing shopping at 4 a.m., I had to tell her that I just came back from a trip to Australia or New Zealand and that my internal clock was all screwed up.

Not that they asked.

They never asked.

But what if they did?

What if they did, and I didn't have something to say? Some excuse?

What if I told her the truth?

What would she think or say if she heard it?

Someone should hear it.

I knew enough about what I was going through to know that going through it alone was what made it so much worse, that if I opened up, if I let someone else in, if I shared the burden of it, it would help. Not make it better. Not take it away. But maybe shorten it. Make it less intense.

What would happen if as I perused the prepared food section, seeming to weigh the varying flavors and brands of hummus like it was of the utmost importance even though the idea of mashed up, cold beans made my stomach shrink and twist, I turned to the man who was loading up the end-cap with Entenmann's - coffee cake and apple puffs and Pop 'Ems - and opened my mouth, let it fall out raw and wet all over the floor, baptized myself - and him - in the truth of it.

What would he do if I told him why I was here?

That I come to the grocery store because my depression makes my apartment look like a showcase of bright, shiny, sharp objects. That when I saw my mirrors, I didn't see the mirror. I didn't see myself either. I saw something that could be shattered, that could be picked up, that could be slid across my skin. That two nights ago, when I felt the first twinges, that weight on my shoulders, that constriction in my chest, that hollow nothingness in my brain, the desire to stay in bed even after ten hours of sleep, I had upturned my cutlery drawer, grabbing all the knives, throwing them into a small plastic container, filling it with water, then sticking it in my freezer. That if I wanted them badly enough, I would have to wait for them to thaw.

That I was the kind of person who needed to think about things like hiding their knives in blocks of ice to prevent temptation because I was the kind of person who once found comfort in little red beads on her skin, that found catharsis in the slide, the slice, the sear, the dots, the smears, the burning swipe of witch hazel on open wounds, the ripping of the band-aid glue two days later to check for infection.

That even with all the sharp objects stashed away, I found myself walking around, wondering how hard I could slam my head into the doorframe without causing permanent damage.

Or, what would happen if I choked to death on the bread I had for

breakfast - and lunch and dinner - for the past three days because it was all I had in the house. How long would it take for someone to notice? Would my mom start to worry after the fifth unreturned call? Had I burned that bridge too many times for her alarm to go up? Would it not be until four days later when my decomposing corpse was wafting out under the door that the neighbors called the super who hauled his fat ass off his recliner where he was watching reruns of the game from last Sunday, and found the key to my apartment, having to yank his shirt up over his nose to prevent himself from gagging as the smell became overwhelming as he got closer to my body collapsed on the floor beside my kitchen island because I never actually ate at the dining room table.

Four days, Jack, I would say to this shelf stocker, that is a long time for someone not to miss you.

But no one would miss me.

No one would miss me because no one loved me.

No one loved me because it cost too much.

It cost too much because it didn't matter how much of yourself you poured into me, nothing could fill me up because I had cracks in my foundations.

It wouldn't take long for you to stop pouring.

And once you stopped pouring, I meant a little less to you.

And when I meant a little less to you, you didn't call or text as often.

And when you didn't call or text as often, four days was no longer a long time.

But it was a long time.

It was long enough for a person to become a body, a body to become gaseous enough to disturb the neighbors until the super came to inspect, found you, and called the cops, who then showed up and called the coroner who came to wrap you into a bag, then drive you to the funeral home, then slip you into a freezer, so you stopped the ever-loving smelling.

Then called your next of kin.

Four days, Jack, could be the difference between life and death, you know? It could be the difference between me and not-me.

So, on nights like this, when the lure of my bed was a siren's call, that

was begging me to answer, to curl in, to cover up, to sleep, to sleep, to sleep until my sheets were greasy with sweat and oil from my hair and skin, until my pajamas smelled like I hadn't showered in a week - because I hadn't - until my work called and fired my answering machine, until my plants died in the windowsill, until the milk in my fridge went rancid, until the lights got shut off because I didn't open my mail, until my stomach became concave, until my muscles lost their strength, until the hole inside just stretched itself ever-wider, like if it really applied itself, it could swallow me up whole like it had been trying to do for years, yes, on nights like this, I wrapped my nasty hair up in a bun, I changed into slightly less gross clothes, I rolled on some deodorant and swished mouthwash, and I got in my car.

I got in my car and then realized it was 4 a.m.

I realized it was 4 a.m. and I knew the coffee shops were closed, the parks had curfews, the bookstore wouldn't be open for another four hours.

So what am I supposed to do, Jack, when my apartment isn't safe, and the only place open is the grocery store?

I pull up.

I get a handcart.

I wipe down the handcart because, thoughts of self-conclusion aside, I still had a thing about germs.

Then I walk down the produce aisle like it is nothing out of the ordinary. I listen to the top forty station coming from the speakers in the exposed beams of the rafters and watch as a little bird lands on one of them. And I wonder what his life is like. If he lives in the store, sneaking pecks of fruit and veggies that the staff just thinks were nicks from transport or careless hands and nails. Or if he is simply trapped here until the light comes up and the doors are open more and he could slip out to find his little bird family that was missing him. And as I contemplate his nest and birdie wife and birdie babies, I realize even wild animals have better connections than I do.

And as I realize this, the hole inside stretches deeper, until it feels like a swirling vortex, until it is a black hole that sucks all the good in life inside of it, tucks it away, makes it impossible ever to find.

Do you ever feel like a black hole, Jack? I always feel like a black hole. I always feel like a black hole, so cold and destructive, full, yet empty. Unbearably empty, Jack. And nothing ever fills me up.

Nothing ever fills me up, but I come here, and I fill up a handcart; I pretend that I am making soup; I act like it could swell my belly. But this eggplant will shrivel and grow white mold. These radishes will get long, curving white sprouts that will promise new growth until the moisture in the sealed bag will eventually turn them black.

You see, Jack, I'm never actually going to make soup. I'm just here because I'm sad. I'm sad because no one loves me. No one loves me because I don't let them. I don't let them because I am a black hole and I am terrified that I will suck them in and destroy them too.

You see, I read in a paper a few years ago that scientists estimate there could be about a hundred million black holes just hiding among our stars.

And I knew, I knew that one was hiding in me.

It explained it so beautifully, didn't it?

It sounded better.

More poetic.

Certainly more eloquent than the endless articles I had read about what it really was, what was really happening to me, serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine - a brain that just doesn't work quite like it should.

That was clinical.

Boring, really.

I would much rather tell you, Jack, that I am a black hole than admit the truth.

That I am in a grocery store at 4 a.m. because being at a grocery store at 4 a.m. stocking up on veggies and hummus and floor cleaner does not, to anyone, look like depression.

"They're two for one," he tells me, making me jump, it being the first time someone has spoken directly to me in three days. I look over to him holding out a package of apple puffs that look a lot like comfort.

I give him a smile, because that was what I was supposed to do, even if all I was was a black hole with a handcart full of ingredients for soup I

would never make.

"Maybe next time."

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