

WHAT SETS anxiety apart, in my experience, is how little you can tame it. Anxiety has a beat, a mind, of its own. Mind: as if it could think. As if you might reason with it, persuade it to go away.

As a child, I welcomed a goodnight kiss, but I was no Marcel, waiting rigidly awake for *maman*. Except on one night when, struggling to fall asleep, I was visited by a frieze of Sendakian apparitions, and a whole new scope of sensation opened up to me, the kind where something happens in you that you cannot redirect or overcome, the kind where you discover that the back of your neck can reveal things about your state of being, where your throat involuntarily (but how else really?) constricts, and your heart asserts its presence in your body, big time, and you aren't even running or swimming or playing basketball, you haven't even done anything wrong, you're just lying in bed, just *being*—hence the scream, which succeeded in summoning my mother, who surprised me, astonished me really, by telling me that she did not see the shadows on the wall, there where I was pointing with a trembling finger.

"You must have been dreaming," she said.

"But my eyes were open!"

She thought for a moment, a long moment, and then, instead of talking me out of my nonsense, she told me that her father, my grandfather whom I never knew, used to have what he described as night visions. Maybe I had inherited this tendency from him?

He made peace with them, after a time, she added. He went on with his life.

"Did they ever go away?"

"No, they never did."

To be placed in a lineage of anxiety: it was more reassuring to me than any coddling or (unreliable) predictions that these creatures would disappear by morning and never come another day. They did the former, but not the latter, as my mother must have intuited.

Years pass. I am, oh, maybe fourteen, and we are in a gastroenterologist's examining room, and I have just taken one sip of a milky, noxious white liquid, the first of what is to be many sips—the glass is alarmingly large—that are to make it possible to x-ray my stomach, where for some years now I have been having inexplicable pains, beyond cramps, a sensation like someone pulling at opposite ends of the roping that lodges deep in there. "Drink up," the doctor says brightly, and I look at him and say no and he says you must and I throw the contents of the glass (but not the glass itself) onto the floor.

My mother does not seem to know

what to do; she has no ancestor to invoke to soothe or explain. Or justify. Soothing isn't her intention anyway. She looks at me darkly, then helps herself to a wad of paper towels. She gets down on her knees and tries to clean up the mess I made while I stand there, watching numbly.

She has brought me to see this physician because of the mysterious stomach knots that our family doctor cannot explain, that fail to show up on all the other, less intrusive, less gruesome tests I have taken to date. Later, much later, I will practice some self-diagnosis and write away the source of these pains and the anxiety that so clearly gave birth to them. They are linked to my confused parentage, to my aunt who sought to borrow/steal/seduce me away from my parents and has mucked with my soul, my brain...oh, a long story, and one I've told, but all this lies in the future. In the now of age fourteen, the anxiety rules over my body and my mother, my parents, can do nothing to help.

And then, a lifetime later, and with a vengeance, it's back, but when good things happen: the book that tells that story finds its home, and I am away with my family, in Madrid for my daughter's spring vacation, when I learn that an Italian publisher wants to publish the book in translation. This is special news to celebrate, and I do, we do. We eat a delicious meal, drink tasty liquids...and I wake up in the night with my first prolonged bout of what I realize (self-diagnosing again, in a different way) is atrial fibrillation, an inheritance from my father, whom I've watched struggle with it for decades and whose symptoms I know, it seems, by osmosis.

Well, I almost know. Just in case—during Easter week in a Catholic country—I try to find a doctor. Everyone is away, every clinic shuttered. Finally I take myself to an emergency room not far from our Airbnb: yes, I have a rapid irregular heartbeat; when I go home I should consult my cardiologist. (What cardiologist?) "You are not likely to die from this."

Not likely it not good enough.

In the night my heart beats faster and more irregularly still. I start shaking, sweating. Good things happen and my body reacts by activating and redistributing anxiety to a different organ—but why? Because it has no other idea how to react when life turns large?

Right then and there I give up everything I've ever thought I understood about anxiety: the way it may be inherited, the causal nature of what sets it in motion, how it can be resolved by talking or the talking cure. Or relieved by writing or (other insights, from later

on) breathing or meditating. That night, and in the days that follow, when I decide to fly to New York to confirm that I am correct in my diagnosis and the Spanish doctor is correct in hers, I enter into the beginning of what I recognize is a new chapter in my lifelong, on-again/off-again relationship with Master Anxiety.

There is no one to call for, alas, when afib comes on. I can be doing nothing obvious, I can be reading or cooking or even sleeping, and my heart will go awry, sometimes for a day, two days. Or I can drink a little too much wine at dinner (stupidly) or speed up into a run too abruptly.

I have come to think of my anxious heart as my unchosen roommate; we share the same body that I no longer take for granted. "I" am soul, spirit, self, I am nothing fixed—it is something, it is everything, it is this unpredictable creature that can set the conversation, throw a tantrum, and channel anxieties I am not even aware of, or consciously frame as such.

Anxiety with cause, anxiety with no apparent cause: this is a difficult beast to cage, to grapple with. Now when anxiety decides to seize control of my heart, I simply wait it out. I sit still and check in with my irregular rhythm, and I watch as everything else drops away: work, people, peace of mind, delight in food, appreciation of sunlight, rainfall, you name it. I remind myself that my heart has always righted itself before. I don't allow myself to think what would happen if, one time, it elected not to.

—Michael Frank

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