

RITUALS

A crowded, mid-Autumn public transit vehicle meant an evening dodging an abundance of coughs, sneezes, and dust. Germy railings and dirty floorboards enveloped the portable microcosm. I bounced in a seat near the back of the bus. I sat knees together, shoulders rolled forward, head down, arms folded across my messenger bag. The smaller I made myself, the less likely I'd be infected.

My hands stung, a tingling pulse, dry skin, and I tried not to touch the extremities together in case friction caused them to burst into flames. That would be embarrassing. And my girlfriend cancelled our dinner date. A present embarrassment. I wanted to become small, smaller, smallest. I tried to erase my day. I tried to block the sound of, "Days gettin' shorter," from a random male voice, repeated every 30 seconds.

Then.

A slight weight to the right side of my hairline. There was a little pressure and I wanted to believe the feeling pulsed from the temple, sign of a tension headache. But, there was no pain. No headache but a thought: Why now?

I closed my eyes, acknowledging the person lowering herself next to me long enough to pull my right leg into the left. Smaller still. I was 20 minutes into my 30-minute ride and this was the first time the feeling struck. Which meant I could escape it faster. Big deal. The feeling

struck and it would linger, grow. assault. I was acutely aware of my only feasible defense. The internal conversation began.

The weight shifted and expanded across my head. *What landed on my head?* Nothing. But something's there. *Don't flick it.* I can scratch. *No!* I need to. *No.* The cobwebs. *There are none.* I need to flick. *Fight the urge.*

It was too late. The fighting, the justifying, the reasoning. Especially the reasoning. From that point forward, nothing was rational. And, yet, it was all real, all in my head. *Ridiculous, no?* Electricity raced through me, fired up the chemicals in my brain, the pulse pegged out, in the red. My legs seized, ached. Until I flicked.

Once. Twice. Thrice. *Wait.* A fourth time. *What is a "fourth time"?* *Quace? Quadce?* That line of thought pulled me away from the moment. I opened my eyes.

I wasn't sitting in a clean environment. I was okay with that. The constant push and throb of belief there were cobwebs in my hair was of immediate concern. I flicked four more times, rubbing my fingers together. The webs leave residue. *There is no residue. None. Not at all.*

There were no cobwebs in my hair because there were no cobwebs on the bus. There were no spiders. There were *likely* no spiders. There were *DEFINITELY* no cobwebs in my hair. The strength of my conviction didn't matter, the faith in knowledge made no difference. The feeling wouldn't go away. It was too entangled in the rituals I needed to complete.

Feel. Flick. Rub. Repeat...*with resistance.*

I looked around. Nobody noticed me. Good. I was in pain—both emotional and physical—and I didn't speak, look for sympathy, find relief. The rituals continued. Taunting.

Furious. Flick (rub fingers). Flick (rub fingers). Flick (rub fingers). *Wait, don't do it another...*Flick (rub fingers). Cycles. Cycles. Cycles. *Wait.* Cycles.

I focused out the window. I missed my stop. In a panic, I pulled the cord without using my shirt sleeve. My hand was now infected. *An amateur mistake, dude.* The cobweb feeling intensified but I couldn't touch my head with the infected hand.

I excused myself out of my seat, remaining small, and lurched to the front of the bus because I wouldn't have to open the front door. I kept my infected hand in a fist. A reminder of the harm that could infiltrate another part of my body with one false touch.

The air was cool on my neck, the sun still warm on my face. I walked the five blocks to my apartment. I used my keys to enter the building. I touched the doorknob but no one else in the building worried about what I worry about. This small apartment complex wouldn't house two of us. So, I don't worry about them. Up three flights to my apartment. I saw no one, heard nothing. Explaining my anxious state always added to the embarrassment and exhausted me.

I unlocked my door, opened and closed it, safe inside. I immediately sanitized my keys and the doorknob, concentrating on the inner knob but, since the hall was clear, quickly cleaned the outer knob. I, of course, needed to clean my hands, so I did that. Then, a shower. This was the second part of the ritual. Or, perhaps the second phase of rituals. Either way, I knew how I would spend the next 45 minutes.

I began with a 25-minute shower while standing in a beige, plastic dish basin. I lived in an old building with old tubs and narrow pipes. Water drained slowly so the basin kept my feet from any standing water. *There's little to no standing water.* The basin was a preventative action.

I needed 10 minutes to dry because I would invariably believe I brushed a part of my body against the bed, dresser, door or something else and would need to wash that part again. The final 22.22% was needed to dress, making sure to end with socks.

I sat down and breathed circularly—in through the nose, out the mouth sat down on the ancient couch. It enveloped me and I relaxed. The chemicals in my head stopped splashing around my brain, ceased lighting up sections that caused the pulse. I picked up the book I was reading about my disease. Some call it a disorder. I decided not to. A friend told me that while people who have leg or back injuries ice and heat the areas while medicating, I medicate and get assigned homework. I learned my disease manifests in counting, washing, and checking. My disease causes pain and isn't about my personality. I don't need all my tomato cans in a row. I do need to check the stovetop at least four times before I go to bed at night and leave in the morning. Putting tomato cans in a row is more constructive and less stressful. That's obsessive compulsive personality. The disease is the ritualistic behavior. Rituals, that's the disease.

I set my book on the couch and closed my eyes. on the couch I closed my eyes. I thought about what Bill said during a meeting as a way of explaining his need to show us the financial page of his report for the fourth time, "It's my OCD getting in the way."

No, it's not, Billy boy. That's NOT OCD. You don't have what I have so don't use MY disease to explain why you're an anal retentive d-bag. So please stop saying you have OCD. The reason you're rechecking the budget numbers is that you think Alice in accounting didn't get the numbers right. Stop saying your son has OCD because he's taking a shower after somebody at school sneezed on him. Refrain from counting to five because you think that's what people with OCD do, especially if you have no reason to count to five. And don't, don't, don't, don't ever say

someone who just ran through a litany of curse words has Tourette's. For your information Tourette's syndrome is a cousin to OCD and is caused by uncontrollable tics. So, someone who just went blue language on your ass because you look at her bust instead of her eyes doesn't have Tourette's. She's rightfully pissed off. Recognize broken arms or torn shoulders aren't the only cause of pain. Breakups aren't the only reason people cry uncontrollably and OCD doesn't heal over time. You can joke, just don't make fun. That's not nice.

That's not nice. That's not nice.

That's not nice.

Sitting on my couch, breathing circularly, I come to terms with having said all of those things out loud. (Except, perhaps, referring to Bill as a d-bag. I don't remember and there are conflicting stories as to what was actually said) Some directly to Billy Boy, others to the assembled, captive team. My manager talked to me. The second talking to, the first since I began ingesting Fluvoxamine. I . I wonder if the drug has kicked in yet yet. The tears streaming down my dry, burning cheeks prove I'm a mess. But, I'm not weak. I just wish it would all stop.

Stop. Stop.

Wait.