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I Can't Live Without Fear, But I Can Learn To Be OK With It

I've become obsessively afraid that the people I love will die. Now I have to teach myself how to be OK with that.



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I UNDERSTAND

Not so much the fact of it, but really the unknowables — the manner of death, the timing, the aftermath. Some days I’m obsessed to the point of paralysis. My boyfriend and I commute home together, but we’ll split up so he can pick up the laundry. I sit at home waiting, imagining he’s been hit by a car. Who will tell me? And then, who will I have to tell? What will it be like to live the rest of my life knowing I should’ve stopped him?

Or: My youngest brother texts me with a question about a book I’d recently recommended, and I wonder how many streets he has to cross to get to campus. And does he look both ways? Are his eyes on his phone? Some people live long lives, I remind myself. I bring to mind any elderly acquaintance I can. Besides, he’s younger than me. I’ll probably go first anyway.

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Or: My [best friend](#) asks me what I’m thinking about, since I’ve been silent on his couch for some time. What can I say that isn’t “imagining how sad I’ll be when you’re gone”?

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I didn't want to understand it; I wanted it to stop.

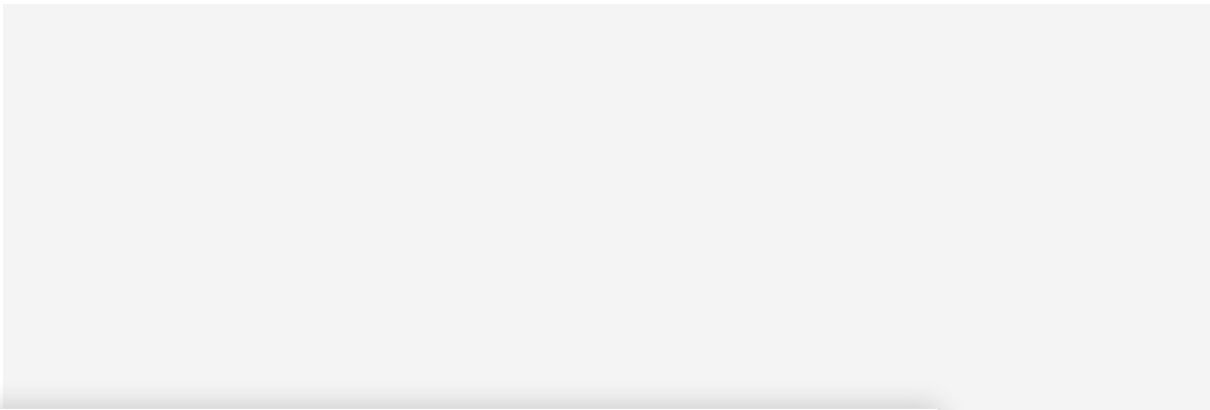
I tried working through this morbidity with a psychiatrist for the better part of the past year, but stopped going when I became impatient with what I saw as a lack of progress. I wanted a full day without the onslaught, but I wasn't interested in digging into my past to figure out why only certain people were the recurring subjects of these

dark fantasies. I told my doctor I couldn't sleep because I kept seeing my brother dying in a mugging gone violent; she asked me why I was punishing myself. I didn't want to understand it; I wanted it to stop. I wanted her to tell me these people were fine, that they'd continue to be fine, that I had permission to set worry aside.

I can recognize these thoughts, and this pattern, as a consequence of my OCD. I understand, for example, that my fearing an event doesn't make it more likely; I get that my obsessive anxiety is just that — anxiety — and not a reliable portent of doom. Remembering this brings me relief in short-lived spurts. It feels like solving the problem of death, but not in a real or lasting way. I can rationalize myself away from most of my anxieties, and medication eases their fury, but no one's given me sufficient reason to stop fearing death, not yet, no matter how much I ask for it. It will happen, to me, and to everyone I love. How is anyone ever not afraid?



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When I was very young it manifested as thoughts of violence. “Thought” isn’t exactly the right word, but I’ve found it’s the least misleading — “urge” falsely connotes desire; “vision,” a cohesiveness. What it felt like was a sense of possibility, which every now and then would make itself known in my mind. I’d walk past someone and feel, viscerally, that I *could* shove them, or hit them, or pull their hair. This would translate into a fear that I *might*, though I really didn’t want to, and when I’d lie down to sleep at night, all of it would settle into a swelling pool of dread, warning that something was wrong with me, something I didn’t want and would have to work very hard to hide.

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The violent thoughts abated as I got older, when my obsessive anxiety found other uncomfortable thoughts to latch onto: that I needed to binge, that I needed to purge, that I was failing at school, that I was failing at everything. It wasn’t until I was 26 years old — not even a year out of college, living alone, in a new relationship — that death crept in.

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It started with my boyfriend, Brendan. We'd been seeing each other for about four months and things were going well. We hadn't yet said we loved each other, but it didn't matter; I knew I did. We had jobs that kept us busy, and it wasn't unusual for texts to go hours unanswered, on both ends. Then one day, out of the blue, I noticed he hadn't responded to a text I'd sent two hours prior, and I decided he had probably died.

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It's not as if I would be the first person to be told, I reasoned. I'd be far down the chain of contacts. When would it have happened? When he'd left my place that morning? How could I find out? I scrolled through NYPD alerts for accidents involving a solo cyclist in his late twenties. What would I do when I found out? What would I do? What would I *do*?

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I tried to calm myself down and pulled out my phone. "Heyyy just wanna see how your day's going, make sure you're alive haha," I texted him.

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Then I switched over to a conversation with my best friend: “So Brendan hasn’t texted me back in a while and I kind of think he’s dead can you tell me this isn’t true?”

“THIS ISN’T TRUE,” my friend — no stranger to my anxiety — texted back immediately. Brendan responded within a few hours (to his credit, unfazed by his fairly new girlfriend implying that he might be dead), and I was relieved. Kind of.

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I figured out within a week that, though the fear had quieted, it was making a home for itself in the recesses of my mind, and inviting others like it to join. I couldn’t avoid it; I couldn’t ignore it. I found it **most likely to** haunt me when I was happiest, the low refrain trailing through every meal, every long walk, every joke shared: *He isn’t safe, he isn’t safe, he isn’t safe.*

My therapist at the time told me I was experiencing a diverted fear of abandonment. For the first time in years, and after more failed romantic endeavors than I could count on both hands, I was in a relationship that was just *good*. Couldn’t it be possible that what I was really afraid of was him just up and leaving? The fear was on loop, she told me, because I was stuck fixating on one moment of disaster. She suggested I break that cycle by

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“I’d fall into a depression. I wouldn’t leave the house. I’d lose my job. I wouldn’t talk to anyone.”

“OK. For how long?”

“I don’t know. Months. A year.”

“OK. Then what?”

“I guess I’d probably start seeing friends again.”

“OK. Then what?”

“Maybe I’d go find a new job.”

“OK. Then what?”

And on, and on, until she’d successfully walked me through to a point of understanding I’d be fine. The “OK, then what” method helped me keep my fear of Brendan dying at bay, and it remains a coping mechanism I employ when nothing else works. But then it wasn’t just Brendan who seemed in constant danger. Soon it was my brother, and my father, and my best friend.

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In a [New York Times essay](#) about a seventh-grade bullying incident, Junot Diaz draws a compelling distinction: “Before that attack, I had felt fear plenty of times — which poor immigrant kid hasn’t? — but after my beating, / *became afraid*. And at any age, that is a dismal place to be.”

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There is a difference between fear (noun) and afraid (adjective); fear can visit you and then get on its way, but it's the latter that becomes you. And once you're a person who is afraid, everything is a potential danger.

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It's probably safe to say my OCD makes me afraid, but I know I'm not unique in my fear. Maybe I experience it in a more disruptive way than others, but people from time immemorial have been less than psyched about their mortality. So at least I have a vast population for potential commiseration. My roommate, for one. When she and I find each other home at the same time, we'll often swap our neuroses.

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“Let’s hear it,” I said.

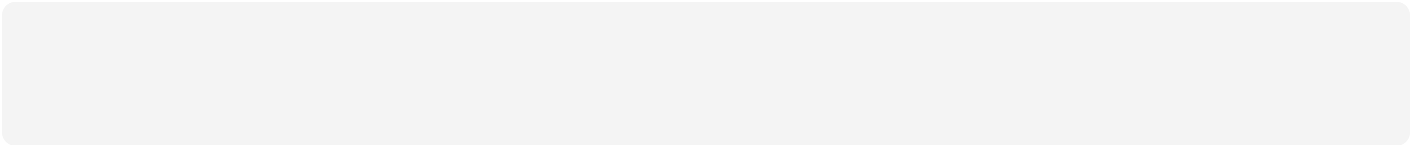
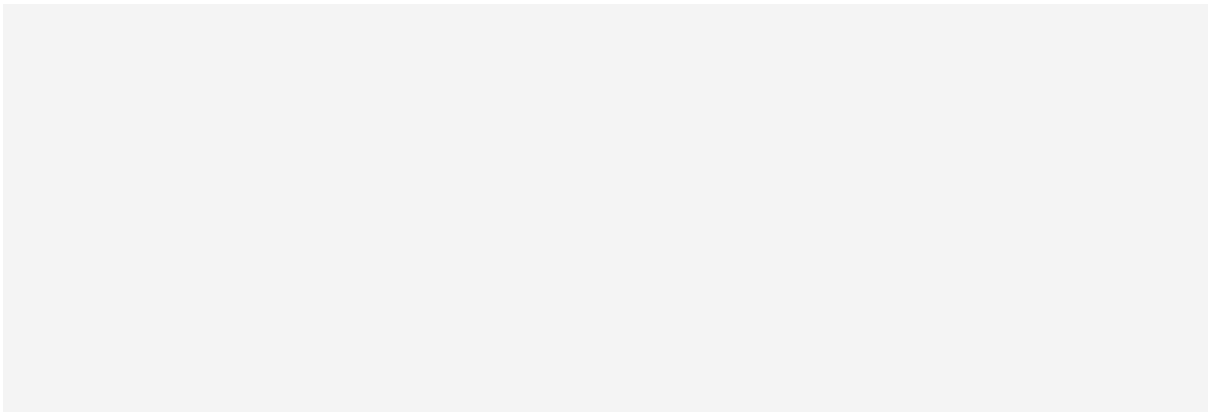
“Flying cockroach,” she said, gathering dinner ingredients from the refrigerator. “I saw one today. It was HUGE, and I was like, *This could be it — flying cockroach leaps at you, you instinctively jump out of the way, you stumble over the edge, BAM.*”

These conversations are filed away as evidence in my collection of almost constantly revolving fears, a list of restrictions that has grown exponentially as I’ve learned new ways to be afraid, and new things to be afraid of. I try to mitigate it with random, preventive texts to the people I’m fixated on that day: “Never walk into an elevator without looking, OK?” or “You know never to yell at another driver when you have road rage, right?” or “JSYK if you ever drop your phone on the tracks I will buy you a new one if you promise you won’t jump down to get it and also if you do jump down to get it and survive I will never speak to you again.”

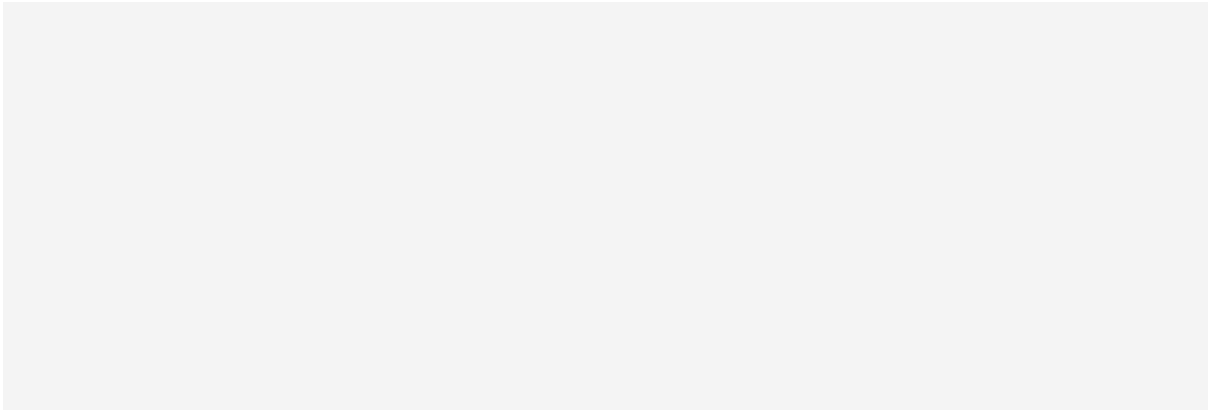
My brain is great at convincing me that the act of identifying a risk is enough to make it a reality, but of course this isn’t true — in the same way that

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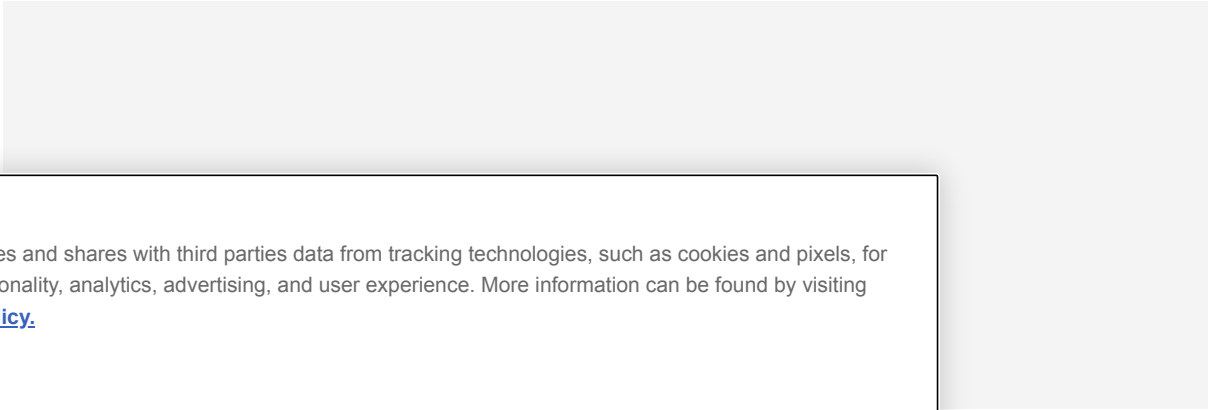


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This past summer, my mother took me and my three siblings on a long-awaited trip to a small Italian beach town, where our rental was a five-minute walk to the coast. A few days in, we discovered that we could take a shortcut to the beach and the bustling strip of shops and restaurants by going under the train tracks that separated us, through a poorly lit tunnel filled with croaking frogs and a trickling stream. One night, when my siblings and I wanted to continue drinking after dinner, my mother refused to walk back alone.

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it alone before. What do you think is

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And she listed off her fears — she hadn't done it at night; she could fall; someone could follow her; essentially, some vague thing could go very, very wrong.

We challenged her more than we probably should have. She shouldn't be afraid, we said; how could she be so afraid, we wondered — she, the most fearless woman we've ever known, having lost her sole parent at 14 years old and then having survived mostly on her own ever since.

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"Isn't it fair to say that I've just gotten more scared with age?" she asked. We relented, and walked her back.

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Fear is sort of like death in that neither is really a problem with a solution.

Perhaps this is true, and growing up just means discovering new things to fear. Which is to say: Perhaps I'm wrong to assume the people around me aren't also functioning with a default "afraid" setting. Maybe they're just better at ignoring it.

This might seem like a dismal conclusion to reach, but it could also be liberating. There isn't a secret everyone but me is in on. I'm not weak for feeling my vulnerability more sharply as I grow older. It *was* easier to live freely before I'd experienced heartbreak, or stayed in a hospital, or went to the funeral of a friend.

We learn fear, certainly, but fear is sort of like death in that neither is really a problem with a solution. In the case of fear, it's less something you abolish than it is something you survive. It's crossing the street even though you read a frightening statistic about pedestrian deaths; it's getting on a bike even though, last time you were on one, you fell; it's saying goodbye to the person you love while knowing there is always the chance that this goodbye will be forever.

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Of course, this isn't about how I found a cure for my OCD, or how I recognized the beauty in our eventual, inevitable ends, reaching a state of peace and acceptance. If the transhumanist community announced we

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But when they won't subside — when I'm sitting on the couch with Brendan, at the mercy of a stream of doomsday thoughts — I've found the best relief comes from setting those thoughts free, speaking the unspeakable, taking his hand and asking him to ground me, remind me that it's true: One day he'll be gone, but today, he's here.

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tripping over his shoelaces and falling. I get panic attacks-- I shake and cry and I can't sleep at night. But this article shows me that I'm not just a psychopath trying to imagine my family's death. Thank you.... [Read more](#)

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