

## Looking for Help: Attempt #3

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On a Wednesday morning in October 2019, I stepped foot in a doctor's office for the first time in more than two years. The carpet and the chairs were a nauseating shade of red-orange, and the office smelled like someone had tried to vacuum up mildew. I checked in with the receptionist, who handed me a clipboard full of paperwork. I sat down in one of the red-orange chairs, put the clipboard in my lap, and with a shaking hand, began to write.

The previous Friday, I had left a colloquium reception early to go for a run. My watch beeped at the conclusion of each mile as I trotted along the Hudson, watching the sun throw an array of reds and purples behind Jersey City. *I'll sleep well tonight*, I thought to myself, as I slowed to a stop in front of my Greenwich Village apartment building.

Sleep had been difficult. I have suffered from periods of insomnia since I was a small child, but this one felt different: it wasn't ending. Every night, I would start out in bed, hoping for sleep to bleach my mind of worries. But sleep didn't come most nights, so I would move to the couch and read non-fiction books chronicling the lives of famous scientists – Rosalind Franklin was my favorite – until my eyes would finally close at three in the morning. Every night, I consoled myself with a reminder that no matter how long it took me to fall asleep, I always did.

Until that Friday.

I stood up and delivered the clipboard to the receptionist, distracted and shaking. My mind and body were exhausted, and I was singularly focused on what had brought me to the doctor's

office: a need for help. *I hope he listens*, I thought to myself. *I hope he takes me seriously*. There were good reasons for these thoughts. I had previously approached two professionals with mental health concerns, and both had written me off as a member of the worried well.

"You're a worrier, but you have good coping skills. I don't think you need to come back," said the therapist I saw in college.

"I certainly don't think you need to be on medication or anything," said the psychiatrist I saw in graduate school.

After I returned home from my run, I relaxed with a hot bath and a glass of wine. Chris had left town to visit his family, so I kept the bathroom door open and enjoyed the unusual silence of the apartment. I fed myself dinner, I fed the cats dinner, and several hours later I relaxed into bed. I passed a few hours playing *Breath of the Wild* and reading a book whose name I can't remember.

Around one o'clock, I got out of bed, agitated from my inability to fall asleep. I walked over toward the closets where our tiny calico lay sleeping in her cat bed. I kneeled down and watched her little chest rise and fall. *How is it fair*, I thought, *that she can just sleep like this? How is it fair that she can have something I can't?* I reached out a hand to pet her.

"You could snap her neck. You could do it right now." The voice didn't sound like mine, but it came from inside my head. My hand recoiled and I escaped to the living room, where I took out my computer and began to journal, in an attempt to calm myself down.

I've had a very dark past week. The cold that I got from the graduate students took a long time to pass, likely in large part because I couldn't take off from work long enough to let myself heal, and also in part because I have not been sleeping well. It's been a week since I last wrote, and I have slept well twice – once because I took

NyQuil, the other, last night, unmedicated. I thought it was over, that the bout of insomnia had left, but here I am again – 1:30 in the morning, still wide awake. This entire week I have stayed up thinking about how badly I need to sleep, how much I want to sleep, yet every night I can't. I am worried I have forgotten how. This is one of the worst bouts of insomnia I've had yet, and I am starting to worry it will not end.

I am also just lost about what the best thing to do is on nights like this when I cannot sleep. Should I read? Go to the couch? Force myself to stay in my room? Play video games? Watch a movie? Try to work? The problem at the root of it all is that my brain just doesn't want to shut off at night. I don't know what the best way is to convince it to do that. Working sometimes helps, but then again, sometimes I get so involved in what I am doing that I find it hard to tear myself away and go to sleep. Reading sometimes helps, but tonight I just got tired of reading: it wasn't making me any more tired, and I had read a lot already. Sometimes I get tired after playing video games, but that didn't happen tonight; the screen seemed to really wake me up.

I'm now in the living room and have made myself tea. It feels ridiculous to be up at 1:40 drinking tea in my living room. But maybe this is what I need to do.

I finished my chamomile tea and stretched out on the couch, wondering what to do next. It was clear that sleep was not within reach. I returned to the bedroom and sat at my desk, pulling out two books that I was going to use for my introductory course over the next couple of weeks: *Language Files* (a textbook) and Stephen Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. I flipped to the syntax chapter of *Language Files*. It was disappointing; the book treats transitive and intransitive verbs as separate syntactic categories, which misses the obvious unifying theme that they're both types of verb. I opened *The Language Instinct* to Chapter 4. This chapter did not mention a syntactic distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. Furthermore, it presented syntactic trees

using a version of X-bar theory, while *Language Files* did nothing of the sort. As I continued to find inconsistencies between the two texts, my pupils widened, and my heartbeat sped up.

*I'm going to confuse the students, I thought. I've assigned them incompatible readings. The syntax section of this course is going to be a complete disaster. They're going to give my class horrible reviews. And then at tenure time, NYU won't want to keep me, because I am a terrible teacher. I won't get tenure, and I'll lose my job. And if I lose my job, I'll lose my apartment.* I tried to convince myself that this chain of thoughts was irrational. The only students who were going to notice the inconsistencies were the students who would actually do the readings, and those were the students who would tell me if they were confused. Even if I did get a bad set of course reviews, that wouldn't sink my tenure case; plenty of terrible professors get tenure. But my mind didn't listen. It had decided that assigning my students incompatible materials meant that I would lose my apartment, and it was too late to do anything about that.

The doctor's office was empty, so I was called in quickly. The doctor sat at a large wooden desk, in a stifling room enclosed by wooden paneling and lined with diplomas. He had white hair and looked stern. Without speaking, he gestured at the chair opposite his. I sat down.

"How can I help you today?"

"I'm here for an annual physical. I've also been having a lot of trouble with anxiety."

He looked at me over his round glasses, the wrinkles in his ancient forehead furrowing into hard lines.

"I'm not a psychiatrist, you know. Did you think you were making an appointment with a psychiatrist?"

"No."

"My specialty was oncology, not psychiatry. So if you need a psychiatrist, you'll need to go somewhere else."

"I'm here primarily for an annual physical," I repeated.

"But you said you also wanted to talk about your anxiety. Why?"

I recounted to him my inability to sleep. I recounted to him my chest pain, which had gone from being mild and occasional to crushing and constant. I recounted to him my worries about losing my job and my apartment over minor things, like assigning my students readings that weren't consistent with one another.

The doctor frowned and began to ask me a number of questions. First, there were questions about my physical health.

"Well, the problem clearly isn't with your heart," he said, after learning that I ran thirty miles a week and ate healthy foods. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a linguistics professor at NYU," I replied. "Tenure-track."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy in your marriage?"

"Yes."

He leaned back in his chair and studied me. "I see a lot of people who work at NYU. None of them have anxiety in the way that you claim to."

On Friday, after I read the two syntax chapters, I went back to bed and laid down. My head was still spinning with worry, and sleep was still out of reach. I tried to call Chris, who knew how to

console me on those nights, but the call went to voicemail. I thought some more and worried some more, and then, like a rubber band stretched too thin, my mind snapped.

I sat up and started to hyperventilate. *This is the end*, I thought. *My life is never going to be the same. It's never going to go back to what it used to be like. I can't sleep anymore and I'll never sleep again and it's going to drive me crazy, I'm going to go insane, and when I go insane I'm going to lose my job.* Suddenly and involuntarily, I began to emit sounds that were half-shriek, half-cry. My heart was beating in my chest like a terrified bird trapped in a cage. My surroundings looked shrunken and fake and they had lost their color; it was like viewing the world through a zoomed-out sepia camera.

After my breathing had returned to normal, I called my mother. It was three in the morning and I was grateful when she answered.

"Mom, I'm really anxious and I can't sleep."

"I'm sorry, honey. What are you anxious about?"

"Work. I'm anxious about teaching. I'm worried about my students not understanding what I tell them to read and I'm worried about them hating my class."

There was a silence.

"I never knew you felt this way about work."

We talked until I calmed down. My mother recommended meditation, so I downloaded *Headspace*, a popular meditation app. I lay in bed, unable to shut my eyes, unable to focus on Andy Puddicombe's soothing voice. The meditation started and then it was over, inducing no change in my mental state. My breathing quickened again, and I began to shake. *I'm not going to sleep tonight. I'm going to go insane.*

The doctor led me into the examination room. I sat down on the paper liner, on top of the blue table, and he approached me with his stethoscope. He placed the cold metal disc onto my chest.

"Okay, now I'd like you to breathe." I took a shallow breath.

"No, breathe deeper," he said, sounding agitated. I tried again.

"Good, now do that again." He paused to listen. "Your heart rate is very fast. Are you anxious right now?"

"Yes."

"I hope I'm not making you anxious, I don't like it when patients don't feel comfortable around me!"

"Oh no, it's not you." It was part truth, part lie.

"I'm going to draw some blood now," he said, and wrapped a tourniquet around my upper arm. My heart began to beat wildly in my chest, and I felt my entire upper body heat up as if it had been slid into a brick oven.

I gave up on sleep at around five-thirty in the morning. I got out of bed and sat on the living room floor, unsure what to do. For several hours I entertained myself with a jigsaw puzzle, but when I went back into the bedroom, I collapsed onto the wooden floor, my head between my knees and my arms wrapped around my shins. I began to hyperventilate again, rocking back and forth. When it passed, I picked up my phone and texted my sister, Audrey.

"Wondering if you are able to hang out / come here today. I did not have a good night mental health wise, Chris is out of town, and it would be good for me to be around someone I know. Nothing too bad, just could not sleep due to anxiety and it hasn't passed."

She responded minutes later.

"Sorry to hear that :( I slept at Grace's to help her move out some stuff this morning, but can come there when we're done. It'll probably be around 12 or 1, is that ok? I can come earlier if you need."

"Sure that works."

I put down my phone. It was eight in the morning and I did not know how I was going to make it to noon. *Maybe I will go for a run*, I thought. *If I don't go for a run, this is never going to end*. It had been fewer than twenty-four hours since my last run, but I laced up my Brooks Ghosts and set out for five slow miles on the Hudson, running north from Houston Street to Chelsea Piers. On my way back, my cell phone lit up with an incoming call from Chris, and I stopped to take it, lying spread-eagle in the green grass, looking up at the blue sky.

"Hey dear, I saw you called. What's up?"

"I didn't sleep at all last night," I blurted out.

"Oh no. I'm so sorry. Not at all?"

"Not at all."

"I'm trying to decide," the doctor said, "whether to prescribe you some short-term anti-anxiety medication. Just to help you sleep a little bit. But I'm not sure if I should."

"I understand." He looked at me with skepticism.

"Do you want me to prescribe you anti-anxiety medication?"

"Yes." *Yes, yes, yes. Please.*

"Let's go back to my office."

I followed him back into the wood-paneled room. We sat down, him looking down at me dubiously through his round glasses. He took out his prescription pad and scribbled something.



"Here. It's a prescription for Xanax. I've taken it myself."

I took the prescription and pocketed it.

"I don't know if you need to see a psychiatrist or not, but it might be a good idea for you to see a therapist."

"I know," I said. "But I don't know how to find one." He nodded.

"I know someone who might be good." He hollered at the receptionist to find the contact information for a therapist whose name I've forgotten, a therapist who didn't take my insurance and was at one point mentioned in the *New York Times* as a psychologist who treats rich patients.

"Do you have any other questions for me?"

"No."

"Okay, then the last thing you need to do is pee into this cup. You can give it to the receptionist on your way out."

Audrey came over around noon, as she promised. She brought with her a litany of calming things: a candle, bath soaps, a needlepoint kit, a two-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, teas for stress and anxiety relief, and a kit of Beady Buddies, those bead-comprised animals that children (us among them) hung on their backpacks in the 1990s. It wasn't enough to quell my anxiety, but it was enough to distract me, until it was time to sleep. I lay in bed, trying to force my eyes shut. *Go to sleep. Go to sleep. God damn it why aren't you falling asleep?*

I went out to the living room to talk to my sister but didn't make it all the way there. I collapsed onto the floor again, my chest heaving with constricted breaths, and I began to cry. Audrey got off the couch, sat down next to me, and wrapped her left arm around my shoulders.

"I promise this doesn't happen every night," I said.

"I know. If it did, that would be pretty miserable."

Audrey got off the floor and returned with a glass of water. I was still shaking and crying.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'm worried about my job. I don't know how I can keep my job when I'm like this."

"Don't worry about your job," she said quietly. "Worry about you."

I slept for a few hours on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday nights thanks to *Dream Water*, a berry-flavored solution that contains 5mg of melatonin, 135 milligrams of GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid) and 10 milligrams of 5-HTP (5-Hydroxytryptophan). On Tuesday morning I woke up, laced up my shoes, and went for an eight-mile run around lower Manhattan. I ran west on Houston until I hit the Hudson, then headed south towards Battery Park. I continued through Battery Park, passed the Staten Island ferry, and turned north when I reached the East River. As I neared the Brooklyn Bridge, I began to think about the situation I was in. I couldn't sleep on my own anymore. My anxiety was crippling. I had tried hot baths and coloring and running and meditation and reading and everything else the Internet suggests, and nothing was helping.

"You could die," said the voice that didn't sound like mine. "That's an option."

On Tuesday afternoon, Chris came home. That night, he lay with me in bed as my breath convulsed inside my body, as I screamed and cried, as I thrashed underneath the covers. And then he had an idea. "Here," he said, approaching me with a pill. I took his Xanax, and within twenty minutes, the entire world morphed. I felt calm. I felt grateful that Chris was lying next to me, cradling me in his arms, instead of resentful that he couldn't solve all of my problems.

"You need to see a doctor, soon," Chris said gently.

I took the cup from the doctor and walked over to the closet of a bathroom. I sat on the toilet, pulled down my underwear, and peed into the cup. As I was screwing the cap on, terror struck.

*I took a Xanax last night, I thought. What if this is a drug test? What if he wants to know if I have a drug problem and he's drug testing me? What do I do? Do I take the pee and run? Do I dump it and claim I couldn't pee? Or do I act calm and leave it with the receptionist?* The world began to spin and lose color. My breaths drew quicker and my heart, already beating quickly, began to race. *I don't know what to do. I took a Xanax last night and it wasn't mine and that was so stupid. Now I'm going to be listed on some drug abuse register and he's going to take my prescription away and maybe I'll never get help for my anxiety.*

I emerged from the bathroom and calmly handed the pee cup to the receptionist.

"There's no copay," she said, sounding bored.

I thanked her and emerged from the red-orange office into the blinding sun.

The next morning, I was working in my office when the doctor called. My stomach turned over and my office went out of focus. *This is it. I've been found out.*

"Your bloodwork looks great," he said, once we had exchanged pleasantries. "Your cholesterol is fantastic. I also ordered a thyroid test, because your heart was beating pretty quickly, and everything's normal there too."

"That's great."

"Yes," he said. "How did the Xanax work?"

"Wonderfully," I said. "I slept really well last night." It was the truth: I had slept a solid eight hours for the first time in weeks.

"Well, maybe that's it then. Maybe you don't need to see a psychiatrist after all!" I smiled, trying to feel as hopeful as he sounded, trying not to think about how I had already taken two of the twelve tablets he had prescribed.

"Maybe not," I said.

I hung up the phone and turned back to my computer. As I tried to put my syntax lectures together, I felt the fear from that Friday night come creeping back. *The readings aren't compatible. They're all going to be so confused. I'm going to lose my job and my apartment.* Worry stole my ability to focus on my work, and, sighing, I left my office to take a walk.