

## BLUEBERRY POP-TARTS AND A MIND THAT NEVER STOPS

DANIELLE SHORR

STORYNEWS EDITORIAL

I brought a Pop-Tart to school in a Ziploc bag every day of the sixth grade. In the beginning of the year, I ate them, and then I didn't. Still, I kept bringing them, improperly stored, prone to crumbling, for the remainder of the year.

By the last day of school, I had compiled at least forty Ziploc bag-smashed Pop-Tarts in the bottom of my backpack. My mom cringed as she pulled the unrecognizable pastries from beneath binders and books. Why did I make a habit of bringing a snack I knew would be left uneaten and abandoned, swimming somewhere in my bookbag, purposefully ignored?

Because if I didn't bring a Pop-Tart to school with me every day, something would kill me, of course.

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When Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is thrown around in conversation, it is often in hyperbole. We know that wanting a clean home is not an actual indicator of the mental disorder, that organizing your desk is not the same as navigating a life that revolves around ritual and sometimes debilitating rigidity. Anxiety, OCD, and bipolar disorder are more than adjectives—so why do people feel comfortable claiming disorders they do not have to describe their frustration? Though this framing may seem harmless, it risks turning OCD and other psychological disorders into simple terms of exaggeration, rather than the often insufferable realities they truly are.

If you have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or any subset of an anxiety disorder, it is likely you are familiar with the torturous routine your brain has created, the rules it constructs about what will and will not keep you safe. These rules, of course, provide no actual safety and although you may be cognizant of this fact, you still oblige them. Like a hostage in love with their captor, this commitment to anxiety makes no sense, and yet the commitment endures.

As a child without the correct language to describe what I felt, I assumed my world of smashed Pop-Tarts was ordinary. I knew how my brain worked and I didn't question it. I didn't know the word for compulsions, only that I had them. My obsessions weren't obsessions, because I figured everyone's ruminations floated with the same intensity. Didn't other people feel the tormenting need to bring their choice of processed snack to school as some sort of unspecified sacrifice? Didn't other people stay awake worrying about the doom they would face should they forget to take it—a Pop-Tart they will never consume?

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My anxiety was not a delayed pubescent arrival, but crept up early in my childhood. I cried every day of first grade. This is not an exaggeration, nor is it something I did quietly, politely, and to myself in the privacy of a bathroom stall or behind a bus seat. I cried every single day and everybody knew it.

After I arrived at school, my mother—with the assistance of a second grade teacher—would attempt to coax me into the building. Faculty would come out one-by one-and take turns pulling my six-year-old-fingers from the edge of the minivan door. Once my hands could no longer withstand their Velcro-level persistence, I'd be escorted inside, already an inconsolable sobbing mess I had no shame about becoming. In fact, I did it with confidence. My mom, mortified and terrified by my neurotic tendencies, would do her best to say goodbye and

guarantee she would be back in only a few short hours. Then the guidance counselor—who I am sure had never seen such consistency in a child’s tantrum routine—would lead me into her office, accompanied by my teacher, where both sat me down with the intention of cracking the code.

It seemed my resistance to my mother leaving me at school was simply a proclamation of my love for her; it was actually the early stages of what would become an ongoing wrestling match with my own psyche.

As I grew up, the specifics changed, but the reliance on ritual remained, and my recognition of these rituals grew alongside puberty. From eighth grade on, I shredded my cuticles which such intensity that using Purell on my hands would have knocked me unconscious. I consumed Pepto Bismol as though it were an over-the-counter benzodiazepine that could somehow remedy the constant terror brewing in my intestines. In high school, I plucked the perimeter of my hairline until it was spotless, a habit with consequences that linger today in the form of irreversible side bangs.

I remember *anxiety firsts* more than most of the should-be-significant firsts in my life: my first panic attack at thirteen, when I learned that clawing the back of my neck could temporarily save me from needing to escape the classroom; my first call to the counselor’s office for vigorously scratching at my arms in chemistry class; my first pull over-to-the-side-of-the-road breakdown. I can’t relay the details of my first kiss or my favorite high school memories. The consistent feelings of fear I’ve experienced since childhood have taped over memory that might have been reserved for joy.

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Anxiety has always told me terrible things. Anxiety still tells me terrible things. It hops in my cart at the grocery store while I'm turned around with my head in the frozen section and tells me that if I don't leave the store in the next five minutes, something terrible will happen. *What is that something terrible?* I ask. Anxiety doesn't answer. It just smiles and nods, and it taunts me, "Why don't we stay and find out?"

I am conflicted over the notion that there are few nuanced ways to write about anxiety. My attempts to spell it out can't possibly encompass the whole of what it feels like to actually live with the disorder. It's estimated that over forty million adult Americans struggle with some form of it. What requires explicit and repeated clarification for those that don't live with this spectrum of disorders is the understanding that anxiety is not nervousness. Unlike nervousness, anxiety is irrational, intrusive, and random in its arrival. I don't get anxiety when setting up to lecture my class of first year college students; I don't feel anxious when public speaking (on the contrary, I'm a moderate narcissist who loves being center stage). Instead, anxiety jumps in my car at a stop light and tells me that I need to go home, that the errands can wait. If I decide they cannot wait, anxiety inches closer, sits passenger-side and says, "But what if you vomited, like, right now? Wouldn't that be fucking awful?" And instead of slapping anxiety out of the vehicle, I nod. Yes, yes, it would be terrible. I make a left turn instead of right. I go home. I park my car, defeated with the knowledge that anxiety is a persuasive bitch.

A psychiatrist I went to for years offered logic as a solution to the irrationality my brain produces in excess. But feeding logic to anxiety is often a hopeless effort. My anxiety is a carnivore and rationality, with all its vegan offerings, does little to satiate it.

The workings of my brain are not innovative. It's hard for me to map them, let alone explain this to people who never will. Transcribing the intricacies of my anxiety and the ways in

which it has at times consumed my life is a coping mechanism, at the least; at the best, it's a reach for relatable connection.

I often question what about me is normal and what is a result of anxiety. Only entering my bed from its right side, never left—a habit or ritual? Going to the bathroom to pee five times or more during the night—a natural bodily function or an irrational fear of peeing myself mid-dream? Refusing to walk behind my car—a safety measure or a forced path? To most, these oddities might look like nothing more than quirks or small annoyances. But to truly understand anxiety is to recognize its hold, its invisible strength, the uncomfortable place from which it stems and the undying fear that keeps it alive.

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Anxiety disorders hardly ever live alone. As I've gotten older, mine has shaped and shifted, stretching to other unsettling forms. I deal frequently with depersonalization, the sensation of being outside your body in a way that's in direct opposition to the kind proposed by meditation. Mirrors can become a ramp for my detachment to slide down, sending me farther away from myself even as I'm in front of myself, facing myself. Derealization, the feeling of not being real, is another accompanying spiral that knows little relief; it's an endless battle between being outside my body or being in it and terrified. I am constantly questioning the realness of things around me, my connection to the earth, its validity. The big existential questions of life, too, are torturous in a way that most people typically don't find them to be. I am often overwhelmed by the strangeness of things that are not at all strange. My brain is skilled in making the familiar feel foreign, taking comfort and turning it into dread.

While I am mostly at peace with who I am, I'm often frustrated with the fact that these thoughts don't occupy any space in some people's heads. I still catch myself contemplating a life

without anxiety and its relatives. What would it be like to be always in the present, to sit comfortably somewhere between feeling everything and feeling nothing? If mental illness weren't my normal, what would my normal look like? Would my comfort zone be larger? Would I have missed out on less? What would it be like to know rest as a tool and not a chore? What would I be able to focus on if my attention wasn't focused on keeping myself functional?

As a result of this constancy, and my tendency to be transparent about my struggles, I often deal with unsolicited advice from people I confide in. No, CBD is not a cure. Neither is THC. Yes, I have tried yoga. I work out daily, take care of my body, eat well, sleep enough. I understand some have difficulty accepting that it's merely chemical. I've struggled with that, too—for years, actually—seeking doctors of all sorts to find an answer other than the one I've had. But the reasons for my anxiety are clear: my brain simply does not know how to balance itself. I've found assistance in the form of therapy, anti-depressants, and self-accountability.

Besides minor fluctuations over the years, not much has differed about the ways in which my brain does or does not function. I still fight daily against the rules my anxiety insists I follow or else, and *or else* remains an unknown I am unwilling to challenge. For the most part, I am still a slave to my worries, but I exist today in small triumphs: not matching my socks, resisting the urge to walk laps around the coffee table, not getting up at night to check the handles on doors I already know I locked.

One thing that has changed significantly is my relationship with Pop-Tarts. I no longer bring them with me as a compulsion. I buy flavors I like and eat them because they are both convenient and delicious and nostalgic. On the way to buy them—specifically, the limited-edition strawberry milkshake flavor—I'll hear anxiety and its threats looming in the background. I turn up the music. I keep driving. I arrive at Target with a sense of accomplishment.