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Author

Nguyen-Cruz, Maria Alexa

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Weightless

By Maria Nguyen-Cruz

I felt like the world was ending.

My laptop said that it was three in the morning and my body was giving off the same energy that a corpse gives off—drained and devoid of life, a vacuum that sucks up vitality and does nothing with it. Earlier that day I saw the numbers on the scale and watched the way the fat in my upper arms seemed to pour out of the sleeve used to measure my blood pressure (had it always felt *so* tight?). I couldn't stop fixating on the tightness of my jeans—the way the fabric squeaked when I pulled them up the entire way. I felt like the bloating was the first stage of rotting—and that I was watching and anticipating rotting, all at once. Anxiety came to me in waves, reminding me of fear, whispering insecurity, making me look back at two-year-old papers and *dread*-cringing because I was certain that I left a terrible impression on those poor teachers. The words on the page were not valid, and these copies? Proof.

Then there was the energy. Boundless optimism that made my heart rocket, like the peals of a child's laughter or the rush of going really high on a swing. Out of nowhere I had gained hope for the future, was looking forward to advancing my career, thought that all was going to be right in the world someday—all before the thunderous and cruel crash. Within the course of a couple of hours the energy of an excited child turned into the despair of the town crier, "The end is nigh!" my heart wailed as I draped myself across my bed, "It needs to be remarked that we are not only disgustingly overweight--but we are *also* incompetent!" Then, an hour later, "The apocalypse is canceled! We are, like, totally fine!" Then vomit in the morning, before crawling out of bed to start my day.

It was like this for forty-eight hours—then it felt like I had something that was more like a hangover for another week or so.

2oz of Bleach

My scalp stung for a while, as if the skin around my hair follicles were sunburnt. At some point during my recovery period, I had the bright idea of going blonde, and my newly smooth

and pale hair harassed my face as I watched the flickers of cartoons through droopy eyelids. I could still smell bleach in my bathroom—and the fans were not getting rid of the scent as well as I had hoped.

Two habits of a highly effective depressed person: the first being that they change their hair dramatically, and the other? Staying up late to watch TV. I could feel my stomach rising and falling, breathing with my diaphragm as sleep was crawling her way towards me- all signs that told me that rest and comfort was coming. I did rest, perhaps *too* well since I missed a class that I was already marked truant for several times. I wasn't sure that the Professor would've understood or have the patience to hear my excuses(he did when I slinked into his office to explain, like, half a month later) but decided that it was better to explain the situation once I felt more settled.

Popping a pill was easy. Recovering from the side effects was much, much harder.

Fifty pounds of Feathers

For the record, I was overweight. One hundred and ninety-eight pounds isn't exactly the recommended weight for a person who stands at 5'1—but at least I didn't look like a brown Mrs. Pac-Man. Wellbutrin, what was a weight loss pill in the eighties, is an antidepressant in 2019. In April of 2018, it made me feel like a mess. Attendance was shaky, my self-esteem was unstable, the distance in my long-distance relationship was unbearable. It was like getting my pants pulled down in front of the entire school, getting #cancelled on twitter, and finding out my milk was spoiled at the same time. Then, it was fine. Order. Energy in the morning, statements direct, emotions subject to the situations that I was in. In a world gone mad, what was a woman's key to getting her revenge body in the eighties became a life vest—the reason that I feel normal today. Perhaps what happened was akin to a Queer Eye makeover, a new force dedicated to making me feel fabulous storms into my house (body), roasts and tears it up a bit, makes me cry about my feelings, reevaluate what I'm feeling and how I look like—before finally arriving at *catharsis*.

Taking Wellbutrin was a decision that I made with my psychiatrist. Being a depressed college student, I am not in a position where I can dedicate time to do things like CBT (cognitive

behavioral therapy), which I heard is good for people with PTSD but very intense and demands a lot of time. The intensity comes from it being a process that reverses one's association with negative behaviors, feelings, memories, etc.-- a world of pain for someone with deep rooted issues. So, Chad (my psychiatrist) says to me, "Tell you what, we'll get you some Wellbutrin to keep you afloat—like a life vest."

Honestly, that's kind of what it is. I spent an hour researching the drug after I started taking it and found that Bupropion (the fancy medical name for Wellbutrin) is an NDRI, a norepinephrine and dopamine inhibitor. It blocks the transport of hormones that (in excess amounts) can cause anxious and depressive episodes. Or at least I think that's what it does. Apparently, the process it goes through to produce such effects is too complicated to observe and even the pharmaceutical nerds admit to only understanding its neurological effects. A stab in the dark, as I cut through the haze of my depression.

2oz of Peroxide

I had dark brown hair, before going blonde. It was longer too. When I was younger, I compared the texture of my hair to my sister's—she had waist long shiny black hair (and dandruff, which made me feel better) while my own hair was frizzy and thin. I straightened it, because I hated it. I dyed it, because I thought it would make me like it more.

I dyed it a bunch of other colors, pink, blue, purple—I thought I'd like those better too. I thought that I was doing the right thing when I lightened it in between shades, it turns out that it's not the hair dye that damages hair. It's the corrosive mix of lightener (bleach) and peroxide.

Eventually, a hairstylist shaved it off when my hair became too damaged to work with. My hair curled and feathered softly when I parted it to one side.

It felt good, having hair the texture of feathers.

Fifty Pounds of Steel

I think I was fourteen when my mother handed me a Xanax for the first time. I was anxious, crying and scared of what she thought of me after failing a test for the first time—and she looked so tired of dealing with me, she reached into her purse, opened up a small white bottle, and shoved a tablet into my palm. After swallowing it, I fell asleep with my anxiety bundled into my chest. When I woke up, it felt like it was further from me—but it was still there, just sitting a couple of feet away from me, and I could see it just a little more clearly.

Weighted

Today I felt like the world was ending.

I was alone in my apartment, and I felt overwhelmingly sad about a future decision that I saw approaching over the horizon. Graduate school or bust. Or bust myself before going to graduate school—to get used to teaching before sitting down doing nothing but teaching and researching for eight years. Joining the work force means that I'll be relinquishing parts of my time that could be spent pursuing my lifelong dream of having a doctorate and becoming a professor. Advancing one path meant slowing the other and manipulating the delicate balance between these two in my head felt like someone was balancing a cartoon piano with a rope over me.

Either way, the future was coming, and I felt like the world was ending—but instead of lying down and rotting, I breathed. I tried to firmly plant myself in my reality, focusing on breathing and the feeling of the soles of my feet on the hardwood floors. I imagined that I was a plant, transplanting myself to stable and fertile ground and saying, “I can *stay* present and still prepare myself for the coming times, the probable disaster.” I am very used to disaster. I am very used to being under stress and enduring the strain of neglecting my mental health—but just because I am used to enduring, does not mean that I should continue to do so. The thought can happen, and I can be flexible and trust not just the Wellbutrin—but myself.

Today, I felt like the world was ending and I was okay despite it. I have defeated my depression—not by no longer being depressed, but by getting better at moving forward. The first steps aren't easy, and neither are some of the steps further along the winding path of mental health, but that's because it takes time getting used to having weight.