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Fight or Flight: The Biology of an Anxiety Attack

Alesandra “Sasha” Temerte

Content Warning: This piece contains graphic descriptions of an anxiety attack written in second person.

First, there is fog—it is always fog. As your mind swells with a million thoughts a second, you lose your words as soon as they come to you. Time seems to slow down and speed up at once, as your life grinds to a halt. Your brain pounds in pace with your heart—pulsing and pulsing. Still, the fog remains.

You are sixteen—there are so many papers to write and problems to solve that you have not slept in days. Your hands forget what it means to hold a pen. Your muscles weaken and your hands shake. Crumbled by pressure, you stare at the bio notes before you. You fail to find humor in the irony that you just learned that the parasympathetic system is an agent of calm, and the sympathetic system fuels panic. You’ve been memorizing the body for hours now, and when you glance at the clock in your room, it is already 10 p.m. The thought of the late night of work still ahead paralyzes you.

At this point, your own parasympathetic nervous system flees. You can no longer be saved by the slowing of your heartbeat, the gentle river of a mouth that is not dry, a body that knows there is no danger here. Instead, a signal is born in the cerebral cortex. It rushes up your brainstem, and now, the sympathetic

nervous system is wide awake and hungry. Searching for the invisible peril, your body betrays you. It kicks the doors of logic closed. It grabs the lever and cranks adrenaline into high gear. Now, all that is left is fight or flight.

Five minutes have passed. The frontal cortex fails, taking with it your final hope for reason. The system misfires—somewhere, a flaw in the program prevents an inhibitory response. The amygdala runs wild, finally loose and hyper and alarmed. Molecules of fear ravage through your blood. In the midbrain, pain flowers. The barricades shoot up—every wall on guard—as the periaqueductal gray roars to call for a defensive response. The limbic system of emotions wreaks havoc, and there’s no way to slow its army down. The hippocampus, thalamus, and brain stem are all on top alert. A simple glitch in the matrix has erupted into war.

Ten minutes have passed; it is at this point that symptoms peak. You wonder what it feels like not to hold the world on your shoulders. You worry about your best friend, the one who wishes she didn’t exist. You worry about your future, unsure of who you will become, whether you will be happy crunching numbers at a desk. You worry about the country, about what the choice in politicians

says about its people. You worry that you are a woman. No. You worry that you are just a *girl*. You worry that your body is weak. You worry that your knowledge and wisdom won’t save you against a gun or a man in a suit. You worry about your vulnerable heart. You worry that those you love might die or leave. A sob escapes you thinking about how small and fragile and helpless you feel in this dark and greedy world.

Eleven minutes have passed. You are tense. Your heart is thumping past your ribcage, and your lungs are failing to keep up. Your breathing is short and shallow and quick as an escaping prisoner.

Twelve minutes have passed. Everything fades, including you. The only thing you can still clutch are looming thoughts. Your tears are swift and seemingly endless. Your eyes dart to find the hiding monster, nowhere to be seen.

Thirteen minutes have passed. You are faint. You don’t feel real. Your muscles are tense and something deep within your chest is aching. By now, you are cold, so very cold. With each jacket you put on, there are only more chills darting across your skin. You read, somewhere, that sometimes there is heat, but all you know is cold.

Fourteen minutes have passed. Upstairs, you realize your crying is too loud—after all, your family below can’t know. You decide that water might calm the burning in your chest. In the shower, you sit down and let the water batter your skin, let the tears mingle with the falling drops, and let the downpour mask your cracking gasps for air.

Fifteen minutes have passed. Your nails are digging into your palms; you know there will be marks, but the task focuses your

mind. The physical feeling distracts you from the rush of thoughts, as if you’ve been reaching through the fog, and now, your hands found something they can grasp. You feel real. Human. Here. Alive.

Twenty minutes have passed. For a while now, you have been staring straight ahead, urging your heartbeat to slow. Your breathing is staggered yet controlled. You shut your eyes.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Everything is okay.

Everything is okay. Gradually, you rise. Turn the shower off. Dry your body and face. Your cheeks are no longer red. All that is left are puffy eyes and little curves in the palms of your hands that will fade by sunrise. You are grateful that for you, there is never blood.

The fog has finally cleared. Your body is exhausted but steady. Downstairs, you brew tea like nothing happened. You are thankful—an anxiety attack rarely lasts longer than 20-30 minutes. Once the fight or flight has melted away, you realize how irrational it was. You promise it won’t happen again; although, it inevitably does. It’s not something you can control.

Though the anxiety never truly leaves you, someday, years down the line, you will find the right combination of countering and calming thoughts. Someday, you will find ways to channel the adrenaline. Someday, you will not break like this.

But for now, you rest. You tell yourself everything is okay.

Without the fog, you finally believe it.

Author’s note: This depiction is not representative of the author’s mental state today.

Layout by Drew Harper. Illustration by Dalila Emilia.