

Three Days

by Catherine Rietberg

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Boxing Day

Dear Ra,

I had to work today - the Boxing Day SALE - and I so didn't want to. I know that's a pretty common statement for me, always being hung-over and tired, but this time I was in a different type of hell. I am so glad at this moment that I'm able to write to this to you, that I am not dead, or lying paralysed and mute like some vegetable. I am writing to you for my own sanity, because I'm so scared right now. I'm scared of collapsing inside my skin, which is the only thing holding me together. I'm writing to you now to save my own life.

Have you ever been to a Boxing Day SALE, or seen the mayhem on the six o'clock news? I've seen it now. It's ridiculous. It's like those stores that create all the hype and people camp out the front overnight to be one of those freaks that burst through the doors at opening and trample one another to get... what, an appliance? Some deal on white goods? It's embarrassing. It's consumerism on steroids.

I've never worked a Boxing Day SALE before. What an experience! There's lots of busy-angry faces, pushing and shoving, and lots of, 'I was here first'. But it wasn't just the craziness of the SALE that bothered me; I had to endure the anxiety version of the *worst hangover ever*. And there wasn't anything I could do about it but try to act normal in order to appear normal, to wait it out.

Lee went to work today, so I *had* to go to work because I just couldn't be alone. I was so scared of myself this morning. I was scared of how I felt, and what I might do if I were left alone. There have been times in my life where I haven't trusted myself, but usually it's only about remembering to do things on time, or whether or not I did something I should've, like turn off the stove. But this morning was different. My thoughts were so filled with fear that they didn't know what direction to go in. If I felt lost, at least that would have been *something*. But this feeling is different. There's a void, an absence of feeling, but that absence is loaded.

I feel stupid for not calling someone to be with me. I don't know why I don't do that whenever I have a panic attack. But I think it's something to do with not feeling worthy of help.

So this morning I showered, got dressed, put make-up on, and walked out the door. It sounds simple enough, but each minute was an effort. I felt beyond fragile. In the past when I've felt panic I've had to go home from wherever I am as fast as possible. Home was my comfort zone. But today there was no such thing. That's why I didn't want to be alone. This isn't the kind of sickness that requires bed rest. I needed company because I didn't feel safe, because I didn't know what was going to happen, because today I may die.

It's a public holiday so the buses weren't running. I had to go down and catch a ferry - normally a basic task. Armed with a packet of Xanax my doctor had recently prescribed, I tried to encourage myself along the way with positive thinking - my own

version of what I imagine Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is. I could see the ferry in the distance leaving its last stop, New Farm Park. "Wooralbin" then made its way towards me. Being out in public experiencing a prolonged state of panic, whilst trying to appear normal, is nothing short of excruciating. As the ferry approaches, my internal dialogue went exactly like this: *No big deal, just gonna get on a ferry. You've been on ferries before, a hundred times over. (How many times do you reckon?) What about when you worked at the video store in New Farm, you caught a ferry or two every day. Every Sunday you catch a ferry because the stupid buses don't run (and you're in such a populated area). You can do this. Why are you even questioning this? But once I get on I'll be trapped! Nonsense. If you do, just **get off at the next stop**. But you won't need to do that, don't worry, silly, you'll be fine, you'll see, it's just like going to work any other normal day... any other 'normal' day. Sunshine and lollypops and... where's that jukebox in my head? I'll summon a song from you jukebox. I need a good song not this crap. I need a song for my travels. OK, here we go stepping onto the gang plank. (Do they still call them 'gang planks'? Is that a word only Pirates use? How do you spell 'gang plank'? Is gangplank one word or two, or is it hyphenated? Gang-plank. Is it even a real word? What the hell is it and why am I thinking about it? If I don't know what this word is, why is it in my brains' vocabulary?) No ones looking at you. Any glances are just normal, regular glances. Enjoy the air and the water. You're outside and it's a beautiful day. Yes, this is*

beautiful. I'm so lucky to live in a beautiful city like Brisbane. Don't worry; you can always just get off in New Farm if you can't stand it, then get the next one back. (But that could take 20 or 30 minutes!) My bed - I need my bed! It's ok, comfort zones... my bed, and my little teddy bear. No one is looking at you, no one is interested... but if they do their just looking at your cool sunglasses... Agony.

There are only two stops to the city from Mowbray Park. The ferry was about three-quarters full of people, so by the time I got to Riverside I was really freaking out. Of course, to anyone who looked at me I appeared normal and just like everybody else. Sunglasses help. But inside me raged a storm. I don't really know how to describe it to you, Ra. It was sort of like my body was on autopilot, but not that cut and dry. Somewhere inside my brain is the information my body needed to access the details on how to board, ride, and disembark the ferry. The information is in there because I have done these actions many times over. But it wasn't like simply 'going through the motions' because there was nothing simple about it. It was complex and difficult.

Have you ever heard of those people who, seconds after having a serious accident or car crash, manage to pull themselves from a burning car, or out of a frozen river whilst unconscious? I don't know what it's called by my ex did it once. He had a horrific car accident near Paloma where he veered off the road and rolled his van four or five times down an embankment. He was unconscious and said that he didn't remember anything at all. But the man in

the car that stopped to help had told one of the ambulance officers that my ex somehow managed to climb out of the wreckage and drag himself up a steep embankment to find the highway, subconsciously intending to be found. The ambulance officer told the Care Flight rescue helicopter team that airlifted him, who told nursing staff at the Nambour hospital about what he did. Anyway, we all seem to possess this back-up power, an intelligent energy that kicks in when we're unable to on a conscious level. That's the kind of strength I pulled out of thin air to get on the ferry today, to hold it together long enough to make two stops: Sydney Street and Riverside. My body was going through the motions, while the storm played out intricate, agonising details inside my brain.

Oh God, I remember all those times we worked together hung-over. Remember? Those really were the days. As a teenager I don't think I ever had a hangover. I didn't know what anyone was on about. I had no empathy for lack of understanding either. The drugs I took at 19 and 20 seemed so great that I didn't even notice myself drinking copious amounts of alcohol. In my early 20s it was the same; I may have even faked a hangover or two just to be on common ground with my peers. I only began to get hangovers in my mid 20s. That's when the effects went from neutral to negative. Before you and I met I was naughty, too naughty. Eventually I realised I wanted to be more than I was so I quit everything all in one hit on a New Years Day. But by my late 20s I was back on it. And that's when the hangovers came, it seemed, in lieu of all the

ones I was supposed to have earlier. They hurt me through to my early 30s, when it would take me three days to get over one! I suspect in my 40s a hangover will take four days to leave.

Some of our Hospitality hangovers were so hardcore! We were so bad! *Fuck it was hard!* A no-sleep, dehydrated, breakfast shift: the shower you had and your clean clothes do nothing to help. Your insides feel like they were dragged through an ashtray, then spew, and then a gutter. You just want to go home and get hooked up to an IV of fluids and vitamins.

Today I was holding myself together in the same manner as one of those hellish hangovers. If I'd let go for just a second I would've fallen apart; I imagined I'd be wire-sliced like in a horror movie, all my soft fleshy pieces falling to the floor. I had to constantly hold on to my senses, and all the while I was scanning my brain for signs of recognisable thoughts - thoughts I could grasp on to so I wouldn't slip away into an unknown oblivion.

I can't describe to you how unbearable today was. I couldn't relax for even a second. And there's no respite for retail workers! I was shaking on the inside, and collapse felt imminent. I could have got a taxi. But the ferry ride was a practice run in public to see if I could handle going in to work. And to see if the way I felt would change for the better by me changing my surroundings.

Going to see a medical professional was not an option, for it would have solidified the truth of what was happening to me, make

it so real that I wouldn't be able to handle the truth, and I'd die right there on the spot.

I was hoping I wouldn't have to take a Xanax but it was obvious I had to. I walked up the stairs at Riverside and headed for the public toilets. The ally is between a restaurant and a newsagent. The door was locked. Fuck. There was a young guy setting up the newsagent. I asked him for the key. He didn't have one. I looked normal to him - I think - if only just a little off.

He was in his 20s and probably either Greek or Italian. I needed toilets to take my pill, but also to get away from public eye for a few moments, even though it was early morning on a public holiday and there was hardly anyone around. "Can I buy a bottle of water from you?" I asked him. I suspected he hadn't counted his float yet or even set up the till so I added, "I need to take a pill." He sold me a bottle of water. It was \$1.50 but I paid \$2.00 because he had no change. "Yeah, it's a shame about the toilets. Even *I* can't go to the toilet till they open them. We don't have any in the back for staff either." He was friendly.

"Um... I'm not feeling well... I know this is going to sound strange, but will you help me?" He looked perplexed, but willing to help, friendly, you know? "I know I look normal, but I'm having an anxiety attack. I just need to stand here and talk with you for a few minutes. I'm sorry. I know it sounds ridiculous, and I'm really embarrassed."

“Yeah sure, I understand. Like I’ve never had one before, but I think my mate has.” I felt relief engaging with him. “Really, that’s terrible... I feel so silly for doing this. I really appreciate it. ...So what’s wrong with your mate?” Focusing on this stranger was helping me feel normal.

“Well, a few months ago we planned to go jet skiing. We had done it once before and had an awesome time. But when I phoned him on the day he sounded really down and said he just couldn’t make it. He didn’t even have a reason. We had been out clubbing the night before, and he was talking it up big time so I thought for sure he wouldn’t miss it.” He seemed disappointed about it. I sensed that he could tell me more, plus, I wanted to keep this conversation going. “What drugs did he take the night before?” I asked casually, as if I knew anyway, which I did.

He hesitated, “We do a few things here and there, you know, nothing major, just an E once or twice a month. But my mate’s been doing more speed lately. He’s complained of bad comedowns before but he said this time it was different. He couldn’t leave the house!”

I was shaking my head. I know. “That’s bad, man. I know. I feel bad for your friend. Speed is the worst. Speed is one of the reasons we’re having this conversation right now. I’ve done a bit of speed and it’s bad news. I blame speed for my panic attacks. Thanks for talking to me by the way.”

“No problem. Yeah, like, my friend... I tried my best charms to get him to come with us but he just told me that he hadn't ever felt so bad in his life and that he was sorry and then he hung up.”

“I feel bad for him, man. Speed sold these days seems so different from what it was in the early 90s; the comedown is shocking. It's the worst feeling ever, and almost totally indescribable. I understand why he couldn't go with you. “

“Really?”

“Yeah, man it's like your mind has arrested your body and your afraid of everything you do, even lying in bed just being conscious can be agony.” Helping him was bringing my state of emergency down.

“Wow.” I sensed the young guy had judged his friend a little harshly that day. Perhaps he was just disappointed they didn't get to spend that time together.

I thanked him for talking to me under the weird circumstances. I felt so embarrassed to ask him. I knew while we were talking that I had to face the inevitable sooner or later. Then I started on what felt like a small journey (four city blocks worth of my own thoughts) to work. I didn't take a Xanax. I told myself I was sufficiently distracted. But I did take the box up to the selling floor with me. I carried it like a soldier carries his gun, his protector.

After I arrived, I put my bag in my locker and signed in. I skipped my usual avocado, cheese and tomato toasted sandwich on multigrain. The idea of food... there was no idea of food - it didn't

exist. I wasn't late. There were so many people everywhere it took me 10 minutes to get to the escalator and go up one floor to Womenswear. There was actually a queue for the escalator! They had to employ people to stand there and make sure customers didn't barge on all at once. Too many people can cause escalators to stop, which I've seen happen before. It's a nightmare for the elevators, which are slow anyway. I never bother with them. I save them for people in wheelchairs, families with prams, and for people who've purchased really big or heavy items.

Rachel was already there, and she was already running around like a chicken with its head cut off. She was frantic, and I suspected, hung-over. Although she said she wasn't. Poor Rachel. She's the only other reason I turned up today. I didn't want to let her down. I didn't want her to think she would be alone all day in a sea of irrational customers. The need for a second person on a day like today is crucial, even if only for moral support. Still, I'm surprised and briefly impressed that our concession employed more than one person at public holiday rates.

Rachel was busy looking for stock on the computer when I approached. I sensed relief from her that I had turned up. But then her welcome smile morphed into something more disturbing as I got closer to her. I don't know what I looked like but I felt like a monster, and alien, a long lost creature posing as me. She stopped what she was doing and composed herself, taking the look of dread off her face. She looked at me. "Hey mate, how's it going?"

I was teary and shaky, and couldn't control these things like I have at other times. "Rachel, I need you to know that I'm *really* not well today and I'm not sure why I'm here or how long I will last. I'm very sorry. I think I wanted to help you out, but I don't know how long I can handle it for. I really can't... I'm scared I'll collapse or something... I can't tell you how I feel. I'm sorry... How do you feel about me going home?" My sentences were as fragmented as my thought stream; it was difficult to speak to her. It was difficult to speak, period. When I tried to make sense with Rachel the storm in my head didn't take a back seat, it was just there, loud and obnoxious forcing me to stay tuned. I'd rather listen to horrible music at high decibels - really. The hundreds of customers about us frightened me. And, big as it is, the fact that there are no open windows in this building suddenly becomes really obvious to me. I knew I was somehow obliged to the crowd of customers swarming us but I had nothing for them.

I could hear words coming out of my mouth and they were fluid. But it seemed as though another section of my brain had to focus to make sense of them after they were formed and out there. The raging storm inside, and the sound of my projected voice outside made everything seem like it was in slow motion. Whatever my eyes focussed on was going slowly, while the world just outside my cone of silence was speeding past.

Rachel's not stupid, and, she knows I'm a pushover. She's empathetic. "Darling, if you really need to go you can, I can do it on

my own. But I won't lie, it'd be good to have you around today and just hang out with you. But you do whatever you need to." She's good. She knew about my anxiety, and she knows me. I knew she wanted me stay. I let her know her understanding was appreciated, and that I would "hang around" and see if I'll be ok. I felt a little freer knowing I could leave at any time if I wanted to, I just hoped it wasn't going to be in an ambulance.

Rachel and I didn't really know each other well enough at the time for supportive hugs. Besides, she would have sensed the fortress around my heart. My skin alone had the shell of a submarine bomber protecting it, as it was holding me together.

I spent the whole day at work in a state of panic. No shit. The whole day. I know that you're thinking it's not possible. No one could be in a constant state of panic for that long before something gives way. But it's true. I didn't collapse. I didn't call an ambulance. I didn't go to sickbay. I didn't cry. But I also didn't *do anything*. Thousands of people come to this sales event. It was an absolute madhouse. It was like interval drinks at QPAC but it wasn't over in 20 minutes! It went on and on and on and on...

Women were like animals: they knew what they wanted ahead of time and instinct drove them towards it without grace or any regard for their fellow animals. Miniature tornados devastated section after section of the department store's once pristine visual merchandising; there were clothes and accessories and things from

other departments everywhere! The change rooms had been devastated. There were mountains of garments on the waiting chairs and all over the floor. The main couch had so many clothes piled on it that you couldn't see the DVD screen mounted to the wall - it was taller than me! At any moment I thought it could topple down and suffocate a child or some old lady. At one stage, I ducked behind the wall to turn off the video clips in a vain attempt to reduce the noise, and our little back room - normally used for a moment of respite - had become an ocean of material. Talk about "rag trade". Each cubicle had its own mountain of clothes thrown down on the ground, disrespecting the art of fashion.

Some girls from Spotless were hired for the day just to hang out in the fitting rooms and re-hang clothes. But they didn't know where things went, all the clothes that went into the change rooms never made it out. People outside the change rooms were acting crazy too. At one stage, I saw a young woman pick up a dress from a rail and hold it up against herself in front of a full-length mirror. When she didn't like what she saw, she just threw it down on the ground and walked off! All the floor mirrors had messy semi-circles of clothes around them. As the day progressed, the merchandise on the racks became thinner and thinner. By the end of the day, people were choosing garments from off the floor.

Normally, Rachel and I were supposed to perform the Six Steps of the Sale - or at least acknowledge them for piss-take value. The Six Steps is a tacky American system adopted by heaps of

companies to lure customers into buying as if people were nothing more than objective consumers. But today things were different. People knew what they wanted, and talking to sales girls isn't going to get it in their hands any faster. People charged through crowds and trampled on each other's feet to get where and what they wanted. I imagined it as a crowded marketplace in India and they're giving away free goats.

An elderly lady came up to me and I tried to help her, but communication for me was difficult - standing up was difficult - and just 'being' required so much effort. She walked away from me. As the day progressed, I was so relieved to realise that no one else really needed me. I couldn't do anything anyway. I was helpless, and useless. For most of the day I stood in one spot in the centre of my section while hundreds of single-minded shoppers raced around me in frenzy mode. Sometimes they bumped into me, sometimes they pushed me, but mostly they ignored me. I imagined myself as a young tree with few protective leaves standing solitary in a windstorm. I had no means to defend myself. I was quivering like a newborn animal quivers when a human holds it.

I don't know how normal I must have appeared to others. Rachel didn't say anything; I think she was being nice. My face may have been a little off colour, despite my make-up. I felt like my eyes looked like they were unable to focus. I felt like *I* was out of focus like that guy in that Woody Allen movie. I felt like I barely existed, like the last creature in a species that has died off.

Every now and then Rachel would check up on me. I guess she was kind of relieved too that customers didn't need my help. I spent the whole day trying not to collapse onto the carpet. The effort rendered me teary though I didn't bawl. I held onto my sanity as though I was hanging from a cliff, and I waited, expecting the moment I would break down and finally be taken away by paramedics.

Finally, after a fraction of eternity, Rachel told me to go. It was only half an hour before I would have normally left. It was about 4pm. I couldn't believe I'd been there all day! Each moment of agony was etched into my brain, yet I wondered where the past five hours went.

Walking out the building felt like walking out of prison a free person. I passed a bookstore on my way home and bought this little black book with its blank pages to write you this letter. I *need* to write.

So now, here I am, in bed, sick to my wits end with anxiety, writing you this letter. I'm horizontal. I'm lying on my left side and I'm using the little blue book light that Lee got me for Christmas. I feel sad, and scared, and I'm *so tired*. I have never felt this kind of tiredness before. Every fiber of my being is exhausted. It's like my brain is so busy holding onto whatever is left of itself it has no time to tell my body how to process energy.

Lee is working on a motorbike out in the garage while I write this. I can't talk or explain myself in a way that he could empathise

with so he has no real idea of what's going on - *I don't know that I do either this time!* He just knows I'm not well, and he doesn't know what to do or say to alleviate it. I don't think I can be helped. I'm hoping on time to come quickly and rescue me. I'm sorry my handwriting is so messy this time; I can't control it.

I'll never forget today, Ra, but I tell you this: today was nothing compared to what happened in November.