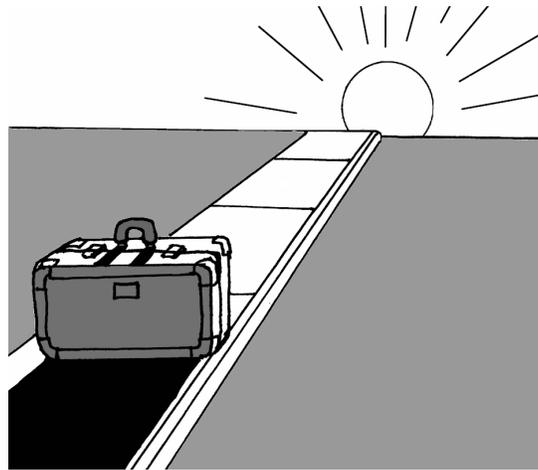


The Five Year Depression

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I need to leave work early today, but that isn't going to happen. Sometimes it seems like I'm the only one who does any work around here. Just once, I would like someone else to handle the unpleasant and menial tasks instead of passing them off to me. Well, it's not true that they always pass them off to me. More often than not, they just ignore them until they become so bad I am forced to do something. If I don't take care of it, nobody else will.

I have a long list of chores I need to do before... something. What was I supposed to do again? I can't remember. My head feels foggy today, like it's stuffed with too many cotton balls that press against my eyeballs and sinuses. It must have been that disgusting microwave burrito I had for lunch. I would like to do nothing more than go home, kick off my shoes and relax in front of the TV with an old black and white movie and a snack, but that isn't going to happen.

It's past closing time and I'm almost ready to head out the front door when the phone rings. I should let the machine pick it up but I grab the phone and answer out of habit.

Nothing important, just another person dumping their problems on me so I have to deal with them instead. Cast your burdens upon me, I will carry them to the top of the mountain for you. I get off the phone as quickly as possible and notice a piece of note paper taped to my computer monitor. Written on the top is the title, 'Things that have to be done TODAY.'

More things to do. Just let me finish so I can leave! It's like I'm fighting a hydra; I finish one task and three more pop up in its place. I'm never going to get to leave work.

I made it to the bus. I don't even remember getting on. Why am I going home on the bus? I never take the bus. It is standing room only, and I am squeezed in the back. I don't know anyone riding with me and they all look away, occupied with their own lives. Nobody talks, they fiddle with their cell phones or stare out the window. All I can hear is the bus motor as we drive down the street.

I have my arms wrapped around a large metal suitcase and it weighs a ton. What am I carrying, Car batteries? This is taking forever. See, this is why I hate the bus! What about my car? There's no time to go back for it, too much stuff I need to get done. I will have to leave it in the parking lot at work overnight. I hope it doesn't get broken in to. Not like there is anything to steal inside.

I think this is my stop, I need to get off, but I can't make it through these passengers with this suitcase, I hold it by the handle and it bangs against my shins as I fight my way to the front of the bus. I'm too late, the bus pulls away and I miss my stop. I wait as close to the door as I can, then get off at the next stop and trudge back along the sidewalk. The metal suitcase bangs against my Achilles tendon trying create a blister and I wish I could just leave it on the curb somewhere and walk away. I pull the list out of my pants pocket as I trudge along.

Now I remember what I needed to get off work early for, It's Rachel's going-away party! Why am I in charge of this stupid party? First of all, I'm anti-social and I don't like parties. Second of all, I don't want Rachel to leave. Going away parties make no sense. Why are we celebrating the fact that this person is leaving us? Are we glad to see them go? Maybe I could finally get up the courage to ask her to stay. This party could be my last chance to keep her from leaving.

Rachel and I have been friends since childhood, and I have loved her for a long time. I keep waiting for a chance to profess my love, but I am shy and a little pathetic. Rachel's family moved across the country and she is leaving to be closer to them. Now the clock is ticking down. I have to make my move now or I will never have the chance.

I look at my list and the first word written down is Michelle. I guess I need to invite her to the party. She lives in a trailer park a few blocks away and it is on my way home. When I get there, I stand on her porch and knock. The first thing out of her mouth as she opens the door is, can I take a look at her computer? Sure I can. Good old reliable me.

She is always asking me to help her with computer problems, wanting me to stop by and help her with some PC problem or another. I know the real reason is because she has a thing for me, a schoolgirl style crush. I'm not interested in her, I'm interested in Rachel.

As I sit at her desk fiddling with her computer, The only thing Michelle can talk about is her new boyfriend. I don't think it's just a ploy to make me jealous, I think she really has fallen for this guy. I guess she got over me. Michelle is several years older than I am, not very attractive and honestly a bit dull. I think she was dropped on her head as a child, but that's not her fault. If someone like her can find love, what is wrong with me? If I'm arrogant enough to consider myself better than her, why am I still single?

Strange, I was never attracted to Michelle, but being replaced as her target of affection stings my ego a bit. I didn't like her, but I guess I liked her liking me. Does that make me a bad person? I get out of her place as quickly as possible. Visiting Michelle and hearing about her love life has made me feel lonely. As I walk along the sidewalk, I dig my phone out of my jacket pocket and call my Mom, but I get her voice mail. I call my Dad and I get his voice mail too. I text a couple of friends about the party tonight but I don't get any replies. I guess they are busy or something.

My friend Lance wouldn't let a day like this bother him, nothing bothered Lance. He was simple in that way, only dealing with things at face value and moving on. He never dealt with the emotions and implications that lay beneath the surface. Some days I pitied him for having such a simple existence and missing out on so much of life. Today I envied him for being free of all the problems that went along with an examined life. An over examined life?

The sun is going down as I walk home. There is no beautiful sunset, just the light fading to gray and the world slowly getting darker. It's dark enough that it seems like the street lights should be coming on, but they don't. The streets are empty and no cars drive by. It feels like I haven't seen another living soul since I left Michelle's place. Dusk has always depressed me, ever since I was a child. I'm not sure why.

I feel cold and lonely and helpless. I remember a dream that Rachel told me about, she said it was the most disturbing dream she had ever had. My worst dream ever was something dumb, being chased by the Incredible Hulk when I was a kid.

In the dream she was babysitting her best friend's daughter, Chloe, and for some reason Chloe wanted to visit this big old Gothic house on a hill outside of town. She described the world of the dream as very gray as she drove up the road to the house. Around the house was a huge empty grassy field, the kind that just invited you to run and frolic around. As soon as they reached the house Chloe jumped out of the car to play. She was having so much fun that she couldn't hear Rachel yell for her to come back. It was too late, there was a cliff at the far edge of the grassy field that Chloe didn't notice and she ran over the edge and fell. No matter what she did, she couldn't stop it, Rachel was helpless. That was when she woke up.

Rachel always said the disturbing dream was symbolic of her fear of the responsibility of motherhood. She was smarter than me when it came to psychological stuff. Just one more reason I liked her, one more reason I wanted her to stay.

It's completely dark by the time I finally make it home. My arms hurt as I have a bag full of party supplies in one hand and my metal suitcase in the other. I don't even remember going to the store to buy the supplies. My head still feels foggy, like if I don't pay attention, chunks of the day just slip away and I don't remember them. I need to get in a better mood, I have a party to prepare, and a girl to win over.

I turn on the lights as I walk inside but three out of four bulbs are burned out in the fixture. The lone remaining light bulb glows faintly, like it needs to warm up. My eyes haven't adjusted to the darkness yet, and it feels like more than just the absence of light. It feels like an entity in itself, inky and pouring itself over every surface the house, swallowing up the light. I go from room to room, turning on more lights, but when I leave then come back to the room, they have either burned out or grown extremely dim. The house will not get bright.

I go to the kitchen and rummage around my junk drawer. I pull out my flashlight and switch it on. It gives a weak orange glow, the batteries are weak and almost dead. I have another flashlight somewhere, but I don't know where it is. I think even if I find the other flashlight, the blackness would swallow up its beam just like it has done to every other light in the house. I go to my bedroom and sit on the floor and try to make my bedside reading lamp work. It has a short in the wiring and if I don't turn the neck a certain way, it goes out. I keep twisting and adjusting the lamp but it keeps blinking out.

It feels like I'm waiting for people to arrive. Oh yeah, Rachel's going-away party. I'm so forgetful today. How long have I been sitting here in the dark? The house is completely quiet and there is no noise outside either. Shouldn't the party guests be arriving by now? Michelle always arrives early. I pull out my cell phone to look at the time. The party was supposed to start at seven-thirty. It's now well past nine. Are they still coming? Where is everyone?

I wake up laying in my bed, with my clothes still on. I have been napping the day away and my head feels foggy with a slight headache from sleeping too much. I sit up in my bed and look out the bedroom window. The sun is going down outside and the world slowly turns twilight and gray. I feel horrible, I'm glad it was just a dream. Then I remember. Rachel died five years ago and I will never see her again.