

I'm Not Crazy

By Cristi Oramas

Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., and Neiman Marcus. Stores you'd never catch me step foot in. Yet, there I was, standing in the International Mall surrounded by them. I felt like a character out of the movie *Alien*. Any second a grotesque worm-like creature would tear its way out of my stomach. I was sure of it. Must have been the decaf. Damn machine was out of regular again.

It didn't help any that I stuck out like a sore thumb; my tattoos and piercings a sharp contrast to my pale skin. I wore a cut-up Metallica t-shirt I made into crop top and my favorite sweatpants with stains on them.

The first kiosk wasn't too far away. Every squeaky step I took towards it was like a countdown, like the type they put on bombs in the movies. Goosebumps rose up and down my arms as a chill ran down my back. I rubbed my hands together using the friction to warm myself as I approached the salesman.

"Would you like to try the secret to looking beautiful forever?" He smiled showing his perfectly straight, white teeth and looked me dead in the eyes as he spoke.

He came in for the kill, and he thought he had it. I, on the other hand, got to enjoy his strong muscles massaging his very expensive dead sea products into my arms. The smell of coconut mixed with hints of ocean water wafted off my arms as he worked the lotions into my skin.

"For you Miss, I can give you my personal discount." He punched numbers into a calculator. "That means you'll get everything for only \$389.98 today."

“Actually, no. I changed my mind,” I said.

“But Miss, you liked the products, right?” He was getting a bit nervous now.

“Yes, but I changed my mind. I don't want them.” With that, I turned around to walk away.

Why would I do such a thing? Well, I'll tell you, but the answer might surprise you.

You wouldn't imagine a behavioral center to be sandwiched in on the fourth floor of an office building, but that's the case at Rogers Behavioral Health. I got off the hot elevator, finding myself in the middle of the reception area; the central hub of the place.

My hands shook so badly I was afraid the staff wouldn't be able to read my intake paperwork. I must have looked catatonic at this point because the lady next to me stopped what she was doing to ask if I was okay. I had reached my favorite question: Reason for visit?

This question was not a simple one and it sent me into a panic-fueled rumination about my life and how I ended up here.

Two lines. That's all the space I had. Two lines to write about being diagnosed with Chronic Major Depression at three. Two lines to talk about my father's death traumatizing me and leaving me with a panic anxiety disorder. Two lines to write about how I developed agoraphobia and severe social anxiety. I wish I could say that was the end of it, but I needed someone to listen to me because I felt I had been misdiagnosed for most of my life. It all needed to fit on those two lines.

Sweat dripped down my forehead and my leg tapped uncontrollably. Staff walked through the reception area; in one door, out through another. Women's heels clacked on the floor as they pushed carts of food into different rooms. Men laughed and talked about sports by the coffee machine. Then there were the children. It's estimated that 18.3% of U.S. adults have been diagnosed with some type of serious mental health disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). That means one in every five children will grow up to be these adults. It seemed this place was trying to catch this issue early on. One of the kids looked about fourteen. He was yelling at... actually, I'm not sure who or what he was yelling at. Another girl, about nine, was crying hysterically by the bathroom. She would attempt to grab the handle but just as she was about to make contact, she would pull back, scream in defeat, and do a little dance, cupping her private area like her life depended on it.

There was a line at the coffee machine. I waited for my turn; every passing second making my mouth water in anticipation of my caffeine fix. Finally, my turn. I hit the button to fill my cup.

Empty again.

Remember the man in that Indiana Jones movie? The one that gets his heart ripped out by the crazy guy screaming "Kali-Ma! Kali-Ma!" That's the closest thing I can equate my feelings to at that moment. I was the man whose heart was just ripped out. I got my cup of decaf and went to see my psychiatrist. For the sake of privacy, let's call him Dr. X.

"Look, I've been on every antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication on the market and have tried practically every therapeutic modality out there. Nothing seems to be working. I've

done some research, and I think I've been misdiagnosed. I know the depression is a problem I can't ignore, but I think my anxiety problems are a side effect of another underlying issue. Please, hear me out," I said. He sat at his desk and looked at me, rubbing his chin with his thumb and index finger.

"Okay. I will listen," he said in his thick Russian accent.

ADHD presents itself through three different symptoms: hyperactivity, inattention, and a combination of both. Boys tend to develop the hyperactivity or the combination, whereas girls tend to develop the inattention and sometimes a combination. This leads to many women being wrongly diagnosed or not being diagnosed at all because being a hyperactive child is much more disruptive than being an inattentive one (Waite, 2009). Most of my symptoms aligned with this new diagnosis. Dr. X decided to test my theory while still treating my social anxiety issues. He changed my medications and with the help of my behavioral specialist, created a list of exposures for me to do.

Before arriving at Rogers, the very notion of a behavioral center would have had me picturing myself in a round, sponge room with one door and a tiny window, constantly being monitored by men in white suits. In actuality, I spent my time performing specific tasks. These were listed in order from easiest to hardest based on how much anxiety they caused. The idea is to get patients comfortable with anxiety ridden situations and the reactions of others.

I wish I could say it was easy. It wasn't. There were plenty of days that the exposures left me a sobbing mess on the carpeted floor of my room. Some days I needed all the push I could get from staff just to get out of bed, but I knew I needed to trust Dr. X and his plan. He was the first doctor to listen to me, and I wasn't going to miss out on my opportunity to get better.

On my discharge day, I went to the coffee machine. It had just been refilled. I filled my cup with hot water and grabbed some herbal tea instead. It's funny how when you start to make changes within yourself, you begin to change on the outside too. As my mental health got better, I began to care about my body. I started to nourish myself for the first time in my life and I found enjoyment through yoga and meditation. I was a far cry from when I started treatment; a fidgety coffee addict with no self-esteem. Though frustrating at first, the regular coffee always being empty was a blessing. Eventually, I got used to decaf and my addiction to caffeine faded just as I truly started to recover and get my life back. It was like the universe was giving me a physical representation of the change within me.

Oh, and the guy at the kiosk; he wasn't so happy, as expected. However, the world didn't end. I learned I could say no, and I didn't owe anyone an explanation. I left that mall after completing my most feared exposure, liberated from the cage my brain had kept me in.

They say when the Phoenix dies it catches fire, burning itself completely into ash. From that pile of ash hatches a re-born Phoenix to rise and live again. I am a Phoenix. I was broken, and Rogers helped me to rise again with hope for a future I never thought I could have. No longer are the days of endless anxiety. Now, I can say I finally have a life worth living.

References

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