

# This is what panic feels like to me

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This is what panic feels like. The text comes from my husband "he has a headache so bad he is on the verge of being sick. I write back words of sympathy and ask if he needs anything. No response. Twenty minutes pass. No response. I think it's odd that it would take him so long to write back. I wonder if maybe something happened?

And now we're off to the races. Instantly I'm thinking he's had a stroke or some kind of infarction or whatever the doctors call it when you get a headache and then you die. Instantly my heart begins racing. I cannot stop picturing him, paralyzed and twitching, wishing I would come home so I can call a doctor and save him. I cannot stop picturing myself arriving home to find him dead. I cannot stop picturing my life unraveling from there "the call to his mother, the call to my mother, the shocked horror on the faces of my friends as they bring me tea and try to say something, anything, but there's nothing they can say, so we sit in silence and marinate in the bleak reality of mortality, the dead emptiness of my newly bereft future spreading out like ink over the plans I've made for the two of us, the sick, horrible feeling of despair, the desire to wake up from a nightmare. My heart is still racing. All of this has taken about fifteen seconds "to go from normal concern to overwhelming fear. Still no text response. I decide I must go home and check, just to be sure, just to alleviate the fear, just because if he's dead I should know about it as soon as possible. I pack up my things. I write a quick to-do list. Does this make sense if I actually believe it's real? Of course not "I don't really believe it "my thinking brain knows this behavior is irrational "why else make a to-do list, set myself up to be productive after the madness has passed, except if I don't really believe it's real? But I can tell you without a doubt that while my mind knows this is insane, my body believes it is utterly real.

This is something anxious people know: adrenaline is a dangerous drug.

^ I race out of the building. I try to calm myself down. "Now, I'm going to the car. I'm doing everything I can. Now, I am driving the car. I will get home soon. He's fine, he's watching TV, he's not looking at his phone, everything is fine. Picture him fine, watching TV. No, no STOP, do not picture him dead and cold. He's fine, he's warm and swaddled in a blanket and yes, ok, he has a headache, but that does not mean he's dying, jeezus get your shit together. • I drive and drive and I come to a stop light and holyshit I can't fuckingsithere anymore and then I pull out my phone expecting nothing and there it is "a response. "I'm fine. Suffering through it. Watching Netflix. •

Oh thank god. ^ Here is the evidence that the panic wasn't worth it, that I overreacted, that there is no cause for alarm. Here is the piece of information you needed in order to calm down: he is not dead. Dead people do not send text messages. But why is my

body still on alert? Why does it still feel like my healthy 31-year-old husband might just possibly be dying? Why don't I feel a flood of relief, other than the intellectual exercise of acknowledging his continued existence " why isn't the feeling there? What is wrong with my chemistry that I can't even take this evidence and use it to stop the racing heart, the shaking hands, the persistent belief that the world is ending and I need to run, sprint, dash quick as you can away from the oncoming disaster " or towards it, to confirm that it is real " either way?

I drive aimlessly, no need to go home anymore, my destination eliminated, I am unmoored. I drive around the block. I don't know where to go. My jaw is clenched and my shoulders feel tight. I realize I'm saying aloud, over and over, "I just need to breathe and chill the fuck out. I just need to breathe. Yep, I need to breathe and calm down." I realize I am not following my own instructions.

What a wonder, that my subconscious mind can send me a message in this way, that it can hijack my talking-parts and use them to send me a simple directive, that it knows the answer, that it knows the way back to sanity. What a wonder, that I could forget to perform this basic function in the first place.

I take a deep breath. Then another. Then another. This usually works. I just need to give it time. Another. And then suddenly it's working, the subtle alchemy of bile and adrenaline breaking down and disappearing under an onslaught of oxygen. It's not exactly a feeling of relief " more a sense of the barrage being over. The lull between cannon blasts. This is what panic feels like: I am under a protracted siege. I am faintly embarrassed, I mean what kind of crazy person leaves work without notice because her husband got a headache and she assumed he was in the final throes of death, I mean come on, you're a grown up. Hold it together. But I am also vaguely aware that I have survived something horrible, something that was outside of my control, and that I am going to have to go on surviving it for the rest of my life, and this round actually went pretty well, all things considered, and maybe it was good practice for the next round. So in that sense I'm kind of proud. Those thirty minutes were terrible, it's true, but hey, I got through it. It's possible to get through it.