

Nine Anxieties

by Kim Grabenhorst

Jen has to go to Walmart in the middle of the night, during the period of time when the apartment is anxiously quiet because Dan has an overnight shift at the hospital and he's normally the one who picks out which records to play and which movies to watch, which beers to pick up from the ABC at the end of the street and the type of glasses they need to be poured into in order for them to "really open up." She has to go to Walmart because she needs to buy a scale, needs to start over. And there is always Walmart, with its lights like white asterisks beckoning to those lost out at sea. The thought of this makes her feel even more pathetic.

She starts the car and backs out of the driveway without looking, thinking about how, in reality, it is unsafe for her to be driving; all it would take is one memory—one image of nearly anything—for her hands to throw the wheel away and gently find her face, cover her eyes, just as her mother would do to her during sex scenes of movies when she was a child. And there are too many of those thoughts, all too embarrassing, too shameful to think about:

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1. The old man with the pug at the park who verbally accosted her while she was walking Lunette, her terrier mix.

"Cute dog," he deceptively began. "Are you the one who is trashing this place? Are you with them?" He pointed at a family sitting at the pavilion. When she said no, he screamed, "Liar! Pick it up, you lazy, fat bitch!"

Jen said, "Hey, fuck you, old man," but tears marched down her cheeks on the way home, Lunette on her lap licking at them as if she were carefully tending an open wound.

2. Lunette: her little dog's endless joy and unconditional love, all the times Jen had made it a burden instead of returning it, yelling at her to get out of the kitchen while she's cooking.

3. A family-sized box of Velveeta macaroni and cheese, eaten right out of the pan, licking the spatula clean, feeling sickly full, washing the evidence, covering the box in the trash with wasted paper towels so Dan won't see.

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This is why Jen's out on the highway now, because of all this, to get a scale, to start all over.

There is something peaceful about being out of the apartment and in the darkness that's softened by the glows of blue on her car's dash and the rhythmic passing of towering streetlights, of seeing a couple cars, drivers just like her, sprinkled out onto this specific strip of asphalt at this unique time. She thinks of when Dan had *Cosmos* one night and is half-embarrassed to find comfort in what Carl Sagan had said: "We are made of star stuff." *Okay, I'm okay*, she thinks, *I'm part of the universe*. She repeats this over and over in her head, more of a question than an answer. And before she knows it, there is Walmart, and she drops her anchor in the parking lot.

She starts the same way she always starts when panic and restlessness have driven her to Walmart in the middle of the night: in the women's clothing section. She catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror by the button-up shirts. *I look*

like a mom, she thinks. *An old mom*. Her reflection changes so frequently that it's hard for her to believe what she sees, another reason that she needs a scale. Right now she is humongous with hair like a burnt bush, mascara rubbed under her tired eyes, incurably sad-looking. Just a few days ago, when she was out to dinner with Dan, she had looked great, like a thick Liv Tyler. Or was she terribly wrong then?

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4. Dan finally coming up with his own conclusion about her: that her BMI says she's almost obese, that she's always crying no matter if she's happy or if she's sad, that he's tired of being with someone who is so content with being miserable, that he'd rather date and marry someone who laughs more, who makes funny jokes and doesn't think the joke's always on her, who kayaks on the Intercoastal, who enjoys being on top during sex, who likes extra pulp in her orange juice, just like he does.

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The thought of losing him is almost a relief. But then the idea becomes too real, and her eyes begin to swell up again as she moves toward the back of the store, to the fitness section.

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5. Her unused gym membership that's on automatic debit each month, for the last three months.

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*Scales...scales...scales...*there they are, right behind her the whole time. A little boy pops his head into the aisle.

"Hi!" he says.

"Hi." Jen's voice is flat.

The boy walks over to her despite her lack of eye contact.

"Where is your mom at?" asks Jen. "Go to your mom."

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6. "Are you going to buy one of those to see how big you are?"

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"Get out of here, kid." His eyes are moons for a moment, then scrunched small, then gone, running out of the aisle.

She picks up a \$17 scale, a mid-level one that's not made entirely of glass, nor the plastic non-digital one. A happy medium. She makes her way to the register. The cashier is a little older than she is, maybe. Also young and tired.

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7. The decision of whether or not to have meaningful interactions with strangers whom she will probably never see again.

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"Thank you so much," says Jen.

"You're welcome, honey. Have a great night." The look in her eye tells Jen that most people don't say thank you, that most people she rings up don't get the benefit of eye contact. Meaningful.

On her way out of the giant Walmart doors, which shove open just for her, she hears her phone receive a text message:

Dan:
Hi, beautiful. Crazy shift.
I can't wait to be home
with you. <3

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8. The questionable sincerity of text messages.

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She's in the car now, sitting in the parking lot. The scale is in a gray bag on the passenger seat, and she re-reads the text message. *Beautiful*, she thinks, and she starts crying. Why does she cry so fucking much? *Stop it! Be stronger, be edgier, be sexier, be less puffy-faced and more dry-eyed.* The kind of girl who'd be on top and can bite into an apple while telling a story and not lose the crowd at all.

There's the little boy from the aisle again, just standing there with his jaw hanging while he stares at Jen, red and sobbing, through the windshield. She channels all her madness, all the grossness she can't seem to free herself from, into one evil glare, and she lays on the horn. He jumps; his soul has been shaken. He takes off for his mom, who's loading groceries into the trunk of her car. Jen speeds out of the parking lot.

She comes home to Lunette having pooped on the floor. "Oh God, Lunette!" She darts under the couch. Guilt settles like putty in Jen's chest. "Oh, Lunette, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Lunette. It's my fault. It's my fault, not yours." She worries that this type of behavior has made her little dog love her no more than a person in an abusive relationship loves the abuser. Is it out of psychotic necessity or an understanding loyalty? Is there a difference? She picks up the poop in a clump of toilet paper and throws it in the bowl, then lies on the floor, sprawled on her back, making kissing noises at the ceiling until Lunette pokes her head out. "Hi, baby," says Jen. She comes all the way out and licks her on the cheek. "Let's go outside."

In the front yard, Lunette squats and pees, and Jen squints up at the sky, stars all over like spilt sugar. "We come from up there. Did you know that, Lunette? But I wish I could shine like that." Lunette tilts her head in concern, listening.

Soon Dan will be home, and the house will feel full and warm again, and she'll appreciate this but wonder why she can't be this expansive. She'll think that she used to be, a long time ago. In bed, his hand will find and rest upon her hip, and she'll find herself wide awake with wet eyes, staring at the drool he's made on his pillow.

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9. Wondering how much time she has before something sets her off again, before he leaves her, before Lunette dies of natural causes, before she can get it all right, start all over.