

In the Still, Quiet, Calm of Night...

by Yvonne Smith

I arrive at work, hair and make-up done, greeting everyone in my path, making comical small talk with my suite mates -- before falling into my office, where I PLOP down and exhale. It's the beginning of the day and I am already exhausted! What no one knows is that my symptoms have returned - and it actually took ALL the energy and resources I could muster just to get dressed this morning.

What no one knows??? ... is that I was here until 2am finishing work that I had plenty of time to complete during the day - but couldn't because I was paralyzed with anxiety, fear and dread. What no one knows is that all my thoughts - and thoughts about my thoughts - and thoughts about what others might be thinking about me, freeze me during the day.... And that often my mind can't settle or rest until everyone has left. And that ... it is HERE - in the still, quiet, calm of night - that I can breathe ... and think ... and get my work done.

My illness was first diagnosed, 25 years ago - January 1993 - I was 29 - and it was the first Christmas after my divorce. The kids and I were making it. They had presents and I was looking

forward to starting this new (what I had hoped to be) uncomplicated chapter of my life.

But then - only a few days into January - I started crying - and couldn't stop.

I tearfully explained this to Marjorie, my therapist and she looked at me thoughtfully (as therapists are trained to do), handed me some tissue, and asked when the crying had started. I hear Marjorie as if I'm in a tunnel, and my mind rewinds back to earlier that week. I had woke up to a quiet house - and EERILY gray sky.

There I am - with one eye open. I peek out from under the covers and try to figure out, is it morning, evening, what day is it, am I dreaming? I start to panic, why is it so quiet??? My house is never this quiet. DAMN!! I overslept, the clock's fluorescent lights tells me it is 8:30. I was supposed to be at work at 8:15. Girl get up and get this show on the road! Yet, I'm frozen. I think, "What do I do first?" It's like I have to make up my morning routine from scratch. I manage to brush my teeth, wash my face, and pick out an outfit -- I'm on a roll. Looking through my dresser drawers, though, I can't find any underwear to match my

outfit. I fling clothes out of the drawer, getting more and more agitated.

"Yvonne," I say to myself, "why does it matter if your underwear don't match your outfit; who's going to see them?" But my mind is stuck and keeps saying they have to match. "Alright, don't panic, go to Plan B, get the kids up, dressed, and off to school, then come back and get dressed." Wait!! That ... that does not make sense. It'll be noon before I get to work. "Calm down," I tell myself. "Go back to Plan A, get yourself together, and then wake the kids." I stop and look around at the clothes strewn all over my room and think, "but my underwear don't match my outfit." Then I start crying - and can't stop. The crying doesn't stop.

Marjorie, (still looking at me thoughtfully) hands me more tissue, and says, "It sounds like you have depression." She asks if I'm open to taking medication. "Medication?" I repeat, (now I'm looking at HER thoughtfully). She explains that depression is an illness, and that taking medication for IT is no different than taking medication for diabetes or high blood pressure. I don't need convincing, though - I need relief, because I am soo tired.

That was 25 years ago, I'm now 55. The symptoms have come and they have gone. There are months, sometimes even years, when everything is good, but then, after pushing through life crises --I spiral down, and eventually crash and burn. At these points, I'm left with no resources to climb back out. At these points, everything feels hard ... and it takes me three times longer to get even the most basic things accomplished.

And the anxiety Why am I so anxious at home? I live in a safe and comfortable place. Why am I so anxious at work??? When I applied for this position, everyone knew it was perfect for me. I am a natural at planning events and meetings. "My gift" a previous supervisor called it. So why am I feeling so anxious?

I used to think "Well, I'll just get the doctor up my meds -- but I quickly learned that mental health meds are nothing to play with. Different medications have different side effects. One damages my liver. Another, 'though effective, robs me of my personality and joy. When I take it, I don't get stressed but I also don't laugh.... At anything.... Ever.... At my last med check, when I told my doctor that the symptoms had returned, we pondered about the best course of action and she said, "You've been through them all, chickadee." All that's left are old

school meds that cause major agitation and weight gain. ... And so ... it all continues ...

Through it all, I have grown. I've learned that taking care of myself is not self-indulgence, but rather - self-preservation. I've learned that the wonderful women I work with actually value my contributions, and trust I'll get my job done - even though every day is not a good day. And I've learned that despite being an "extra special" "handful," my friends and family are committed to helping me even when I don't know how to ask ... even when I don't know I need help. They love me unconditionally - even when this thing called depression is all over me.

The truth is ... this illness is insidious and brutal - relentless and mean - often debilitating, often invisible - but it's no match for me because I'm still here - still strong - and I'm still rising...