

spiral

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spiral

by [sickstarlight](#)

Summary

Royce, overworked and underslept, has a crisis and falls ill (not necessarily in that order).

Notes

enjoy four thousand words about how much royce has ocd (partly adapted from a prompt by rachthecool on tumblr).

He feels it first like, like an itch, like an itch he can't reach, like the itch that creeps back in to the back of his head until he can't ignore it, *can't* ignore it anymore. And he, well, he manages it the same way, of course, because he stops being - reasonable, stops thinking clearly when it gets too strong, and he simply can't afford that now, can't afford to lose his focus. He's very busy, there's no time to let a thing like that get in the way, not now, especially not now, when he's getting so close. So close!

It's not so bad, anyways, when he can focus on his work. When he can devote his attention to it. Makes it easier, to ignore it, push it aside for a time. Not fight it! Never fight it, no, that's how it *gets* him, if he fights it, well, he's already lost. But set it aside, that he can do, for a while, when something else has his attention. As long as his work's not interrupted.

But this, now, this is something different - quite different. Setting it aside, that's supposed to work, supposed to let him get on with things for a time, but it doesn't seem to help. Something's wrong, terribly, terribly wrong, and it, well, it's like it's eating him alive, pulling at all the threads of his thoughts until they unravel. His focus, that crisp bright ray of focus that's supposed to keep it at bay, it just isn't there, today, isn't there at all. Scattered, like reflections on the water, stirred up by the wind.

He shuts his eyes, presses the heels of his hands to his eyes. *Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap*, his thumbs against his temples, as he takes in a breath and lets it out. That's better, that should be... better, but it's still there, still *pulling* at the edges of him: something's wrong, out of place. He checks his desk, the pens and pencils laid out all in order, the notebooks marked and stacked just where he needs them. Not *neat* like people think it ought to be, but then, people often seem to miss the obvious patterns in things, don't seem to understand the math - and the math is always flawless. Always flawless! The mathematician might err, of course, even he's only human, but the math itself is perfect.

And it's not his desk that's misaligned, no, though he touches each notebook and writing utensil just to be sure, just to be on the safe side, adjusts them each minutely and confirm they're laid out exactly as they should be. Precise. Mathematical. It's something else that's wrong, that's ever so slightly, well, displaced.

Back to work, he's got to get back to work, but he's started thinking about it now, about all the dozen things that could be wrong, and the itch won't go away, and, well, now he's got to be sure. Got to be sure. If he could only focus maybe he'd put it aside, but he can't now, not today, so there's nothing for it.

He turns away from his desk and crosses the room, opens the blinds and closes them again. Opens them and closes them again. Again. Again. Satisfied that they're fully closed, everything in order, he checks all the lights as well, one by one, runs the tips of his fingers along the edges of the shelves along the wall as he makes sure his books and files are all in order. Everything's as it should be, as it should be, good. Good.

But *why*, then - why the *itch*. Why the feeling of wrongness that makes his spine crawl and his shoulders draw in too tense. Why the nagging sense that something isn't right. His mind drifts briefly to the thought of what might be wrong in the kitchen, or the bedroom, or the foyer - but he tears his thoughts away from all that. No time for that, no, no, he can't think about that.

It's not real, he tells himself, gritting his teeth. It's not, it's not real, it's not real or, at least, not *measurable*, not perceptible. Not something he can change or fix, despite the inexorable need to do *something*. He closes his eyes again, presses his fingertips to his temples. Wasting time, he's wasting time now, and he's too close for that, much too close. Got to snap himself out of it.

He takes a breath. Lets it out again. With one hand, he reaches into his pockets for his cigarettes, counts how many left in the pack, *eleven, good, that's good*, and pulls one out carefully. He puts it between his teeth, flicks his lighter a few times before letting it catch to light the end. Inhales, and holds his breath. And holds it. And holds it.

When he exhales, his head is spinning, but it feels - clearer, yes. Clearer. Sharp. *Focused*. He takes another drag and sits back down, adjusting his chair into its place, into its proper place. It's still there behind his eyes, the unfamiliar itch that he can't place, but it's dulled now, dulled enough that he can think. Back to work, he tells himself, can't solve a problem he can't see, now, can he, so he ought to work on something he can.

For a while, it works well enough; as it often does the cigarette helps soothe the itch, keeps it from getting, well, overwhelming, from getting too hard to ignore. Something else to focus on, help clear his head of all the meaningless distractions.

But even before he's *finished* he feels it creeping back in, prickling at the back of his neck and clawing at his spine. That's not supposed to happen, not yet. It's supposed to, supposed to

help, supposed to keep the feeling at bay for longer - an hour, sometimes two if he's lucky, if he's focused on his work. Shouldn't come back yet, why, he's still smoking his cigarette, it can't come back *now*.

He rubs his temples with one hand, takes the cigarette out of his mouth to sip his coffee in the hope that it'll help, but it's gone cold, gone cold and stale in the time he's been working.

For a few minutes longer, he tries to keep working. Tries to keep working. There's so much to do still, he can't let it get in the way. *Can't* let it get in the way. But if it's coming back already while he's still got a cigarette in his mouth, it only gets worse after he snuffs it out. Not so bad as it was before, no, not quite so bad, but it begins to eat at his focus again, drowning out his thoughts with the persistent nagging feeling that something is wrong until he can barely think clearly.

Perhaps stepping away for a moment, just for a moment, will help, he finally decides, and lays down his pen. Just a moment to clear his head, yes. With a sigh, he downs the rest of his cold cup of coffee and gets to his feet to pour himself another in the kitchen.

The taste of copper suddenly coats his tongue, cutting through the lingering traces of smoke in his mouth, and deep in his gut he feels something lurch unpleasantly as the room seems to spin.

No, no, no, he can't - he can't be - can't happen, he can't let it happen, can't be careless enough to let himself—

He hiccups and a mouthful of, well, coffee, mostly coffee spills onto his desk and as he catches his breath he has a brief glimmer of, of clarity, just enough to push his notebooks aside; they fall to the floor in disarray but he doesn't, he doesn't have it in him to care. The tight choked feeling in his throat is all that seems to matter, the only thing left that matters.

"No," he whispers, "no, no, please, no." He hopes the sound of his voice will ground him but it doesn't seem to help. "No, please, no, I don't - want—"

He breaks off as his throat closes up, his stomach heaving, making him gag. He's going to be sick again, isn't he, doesn't matter how much he doesn't *want* to be, how much he can't be sick, not now, not *now*. He closes his hands and opens them, raises one almost to his mouth before thinking better of it. Another painful lurch of his stomach makes him gag again, and then retch, before vomiting another stream of coffee and acid up onto his desk.

What a mess, he's got to, got to do something about the *mess*, can't just leave it pooled there on the polished surface, but he feels as if he can't move, as if he's stuck somehow, stuck frozen in place. It shouldn't be *difficult*, why, it shouldn't be much different than if he'd just, just knocked over his cup of coffee, that's really all it is, just coffee, except for the smell of it - and of course there's the way the cream's started to, to spoil, to *curdle* - and the sight of it thickening's enough to make him gag again, choking on the foul taste at the back of his throat. He's - he's got to - got to - *leave*, he's got to leave now, before he's sick again and makes it even worse.

Stumbling slightly he runs for the bathroom, has to press one hand to his mouth halfway there when he gags and nearly vomits in the hall, only barely manages to swallow back the burning in his throat. He drops to his knees without the time to turn on the light and wraps an arm around himself. Can't, can't stop shaking, bent double over the toilet and fighting to choke back the contents of his stomach as heaves wrack his body - but it's, it's, well it's simply no use at all. The itch that's been nagging at him for hours has made itself at home now on the back of his tongue, and the best thing, the best, the *only* thing he can do is dislodge it.

He whimpers, and sounds pitiful even to himself as he gags and retches weakly over the water, a thin stream of liquid spilling over his lip. Helpless to stop it, entirely helpless, but knowing's not enough, just not enough to keep himself from fighting it either. He hates it, hates it, hates being helpless, having no control, having *anything* he can't control let alone himself.

Another heave makes him pitch forward, shuddering as his stomach forces up more of its contents. At least he's barely eaten today, and it's all liquid, well, mostly liquid, just coffee and cream, nothing else in him to expel. Even that, why, after a long few minutes - he can't tell how long, can't keep track, nothing to measure except his own ragged breathing - even that trickles off to nearly nothing, until he's only gagging, just shaking and gagging uselessly.

With a groan he spits into the water and slumps back against the wall, eyes screwed shut, waiting for his heartbeat to settle. He digs into his pocket and pulls out another cigarette. It'll

calm him down, maybe it'll calm him down, and if not it'll at least get the sick taste out of his mouth.

His hands won't stop shaking as he fumbles with his lighter; the first time he tries to get a spark it goes out, and he curses under his breath as he starts over, *click click click click click click* before it catches on the second try.

The first drag makes him cough when the smoke hits the back of his throat, still raw, raw and ragged from retching and heaving trying to empty his stomach. He grabs the cigarette out of his mouth quickly as he hunches over the toilet again, but there's nothing, simply nothing left in him to bring up. He sits back again, slouches against the wall and puts his cigarette back between his teeth.

There's still the mess, all that awful mess he's got to deal with, and only worse now, now, now that he's let it sit all this time. Terrible, terrible, the thought of it, makes his stomach turn again; he sucks in a deep breath, smoke burning in his chest, and lets it out slowly through his teeth. Terrible thought, but what's to be done about it now? He'll have to see to it, sooner or later. Once he's finished his cigarette, yes, once he's finished this cigarette he'll go and clean it up.

He stays curled there on the floor after he snuffs the cigarette out against the tile though, for a few minutes longer, just needs a few minutes longer to rest, when he's only just gotten finished emptying everything from his stomach. His head feels heavy and the room's spinning faintly around him, even now that the prickle of nausea has faded. Just a few minutes longer, he thinks, taking a breath to steady himself and pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes, pressing them in until he sees stars.

Okay, he tells himself, okay, okay. Get up, up up up, it'll only be worse the longer he waits. Up and into the kitchen for a cloth, and then back to the studio to deal with the mess, nothing else to be done about it. With an effort, he pulls himself back to his feet and stumbles out into the hall, reeling a little as his vision blurs.

First the kitchen, where he doesn't bother turning a light on, just fumbles blindly in the drawer for a dish towel. He checks the corners of it before running it under the tap, makes sure it's soaked through, soaked all the way through and then grabs another, dry, as well. Checks the tap twice to make sure it won't drip, checks the stove just in case, and then again for good measure. Good, good good good, everything in order.

He lingers for a moment longer in the kitchen, and considers turning the lights on to examine it more thoroughly, examine every corner in depth - but he's wasting time again, wasting time, looking for excuses to delay. It'll only be worse, only be worse the longer he puts it off. He'd best just get this over with.

Gritting his teeth, he ducks into the hall again and heads back to the studio. There's a foul smell that hits him as soon as he's in the door, harsh and acidic, and it nearly makes him want to vomit again, but at least he's sure, well, relatively sure he can't, so there's no need to worry. No need to worry. No need to worry.

Still, his throat is tight as he stumbles over to his desk, and it makes his breath catch in his throat. *Get it over with.* He drapes the cloths in his hand over the back of his chair and leans down to grab the waste paper basket under the desk. Up close, the smell is so strong it makes even his empty stomach churn, and he has to swallow hard to clear the lump from his throat so he can breathe. *Just have to get it over with.*

He rests one hand gingerly on the clean edge of the desk to steady himself for a moment before he grabs the dry cloth, holding the wastebin up against the desk to contain the mess as he mops it up. He's not yet half finished cleaning the surface of his desk when it overwhelms him, completely overwhelms him, though he's not sure if it's the smell or the feeling of it soaking into the dishcloth under his palm; he has to brace himself against the desk again to lean over the bin, retching harshly but bringing up nothing of substance. His eyes are watering, making his vision swim, and he scrubs at his face with the back of one hand.

He's just pulled himself together enough to try and finish cleaning up when he hears someone at the door, someone knocking at the door. He freezes. Can't answer, not now, can't let anyone see this mess though why someone's come to visit is far beyond him—

“Royce?” That's Grant, it's Grant calling from outside as he knocks on the door again.

Shit. Had he sent a message to say he was coming? Had they had some plan to meet that Royce had forgotten? He can't remember, can't remember, been too caught up in his work all day to think of anything else, and it doesn't matter now, no, what matters is that Grant is *here* and goodness knows he can't let *Grant* see this.

“Royce!” Grant calls more loudly, hammering harder on the door. “Royce Bracket, I know you’re in there.”

For his part Royce wishes he wasn’t, in fact, wishes very much that he was *not* in here, that he was more or less anywhere other than here, but there’s nothing he can do about that now. He takes a deep breath to steady himself and sets his jaw, one hand clutching the edge of the wastebin tightly as he hurries to finish cleaning up his desk. The urge to gag again threatens to overpower him, but he’s got to finish this, got to get this cleaned up before Grant sees, so he swallows hard against it and keeps wiping the pool of sick into the bin.

“Royce?” Grant calls from behind him, much too close. “What are you - ah, *hell*.”

He turns quickly, trying to keep himself angled between the desk and the doorway to hide the awful sight from Grant, but the movement makes his head spin and he has to double over the bin again, with a weak gag that comes out more like a strangled sob.

“You damned idiot,” Grant says quietly, crossing from the doorway to put a hand on his shoulder. “What have you gone and done to yourself now?”

“I think, ah,” he manages, his voice hoarse and trembling. “Think I’m not well.” He swallows hard, trying to clear the lump in his throat again, and adds, more quietly, “Not... really very well at all, actually.”

“I can see that,” Grant says, not unkindly. “You look awful. When’s the last time you slept?”

“I, ah,” he falters. “I’ve been, well.”

“Mm,” Grant replies, arching an eyebrow. “I thought as much.” He glances at the desk, and Royce wants to disappear into the floor. If Grant’s grip on his shoulder wasn’t so tight, he might collapse, might just collapse right here. “Have you even eaten today?”

“Not, not much since....” he begins, frowning. “Since, ah...” Now that he thinks about it, he’s not sure the last time he ate even *was* today, technically speaking, in the usual sense. Certainly more recently than he’s slept, but that’s little use, little use as a measure at the moment.

“Get something to eat and then get to bed,” Grant tells him. “You look ready to drop.”

He groans, swaying on his feet as his stomach lurches unpleasantly. “No, I can’t, don’t think I could, ah, could eat much, not at the moment,” he manages weakly, and swallows hard, trying to keep his breathing steady.

“Bed, then,” Grant says firmly, steering him towards the hall. “You need to *sleep*, Royce, you’re going to kill yourself like this.”

“But I,” he protests. “I’m, I’m busy, Grant, busy busy busy, I’ve got too much work to do—”

“And it’ll be here when you’re up again,” Grant points out, pushing him gently out the door. “You’re in no fit state to work now, though. Go, and I’ll make sure you have some ginger tonic when you’ve slept, and something light to eat.”

“I have to, well, have to clean up this mess,” Royce insists, but he doesn’t have the strength, doesn’t even have the strength to dig in his heels as Grant marches him down the hall. “All this mess, I can’t just...”

“If it’s so damned important, I’ll see to it myself,” Grant says. “You’ll have to get your papers back in order yourself, I’m afraid, but you can do that after you’ve slept.” He stops pressing forward outside the door to the bedroom, his grip on Royce’s shoulder loosening slightly. “Bed, Royce,” he says. “*Now.*”

If he were to be totally honest, why, if he were to say anything about it at all, Royce would have to admit it’s relief, more than anything, quite incredible relief he feels as he stumbles into his room, his knees simply giving out from underneath him as he reaches the bed. His head is still spinning, still spinning even now that he’s no longer standing, but it’s better than being on his feet. As much as he might like to argue, would still very much like to argue in

fact, it seems his body, fueled mostly by coffee before he'd thrown all of it up, has sided with Grant in this particular debate, and even as he struggles to crawl under the covers he finds it's getting hard to keep his eyes open.

He thinks Grant says something, looking into the room from the doorway, but he can't make out what it is, can't make it out at all, and everything's gone dark before he has the chance to ask.

It's dark by the time he wakes, sometime late that night, and his head feels clearer than it has in days, and when he turns on the light by his bedside it's to see a plate of soda crackers and a bottle of ginger tonic on the nightstand, just as Grant had promised. He manages a smile, pushing himself upright, and reaches for the tonic with one hand.

When neither a few sips of tonic nor a handful of crackers makes his stomach try to revolt, he rubs at his eyes with one hand and stumbles to his feet. It seems Grant's already gone, gone home once he was asleep, but there's a message waiting for him, reading *Hope you're feeling better when you're up. Cleaned up in the study; I don't know how you organize your things but I tried to at least make them tidy. Call if there's anything you need. -Grant.*

It's true, when he looks into the study, that all his things are still out of place - but the notebooks, pens, and papers he'd scattered on the floor in his earlier panic are stacked and lined up neatly at the edge of his desk. To his surprise he's still relieved, even glad about the attempt to help, even as he sits down to rearrange them, put them all back in their places, all in their proper places.

He'll have to say thank you later, he promises himself, once he's caught up with his work. As much as he'd resented Grant's unexpected appearance at the time, now that he's back on his feet he can't deny he's grateful for the help.

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