

**'The Sea Behind My Eyelids' by Maxwell Freedman**  
**Third runner-up**  
**2022 Young Writers Award**

**The Sea Behind My Eyelids**

I was watching the new *Minions* movie when I had my first panic attack. I know, it's embarrassing and I don't fully believe it either, but sitting in that slurpee-stained Cineplex chair, I just had this surge of terror and adrenaline, my chest was stretched taut, and all of a sudden I was going to sink or combust or disintegrate rapidly and my last sight would be of these little yellow creatures jabbering gibberish, because I'd be dead, drowned, fucked flotsam on the cinema ground. I was so sure.

Now I'm transcribing the WebMD panic attack symptom checklist on the back of an old receipt, observing each dot point on paper so I don't have to look at a digital screen too long. I write feverishly knowing self-diagnosis is a silly and nauseating pastime. It's also one of my favourites, so please enjoy the highlights.

*"Sudden high anxiety with or without a cause."* — Check! (There was no cause. Storms back home are precluded by a period of unmissable monsoon gurglings, but storms in Australia happen anytime they decide to capriciously rip the sky apart).

*"A racing heart,"* — Check! (But not in a *fluttering* way, like my heart when my boyfriend kissed me outside the school gates and I first felt his chapped lips brush my own. This time it was more in a *spluttering* way, like his old corolla when it quakes down the street to drop me off, much to my mother's dislike.)

*"Sense of terror, or impending doom or death."* — Check! (This is a symptom of my life in general, especially when our family discusses politics or religion at the kitchen table and I'm forced to mutely prod my salty chicken adobo under a framed painting of The Last Supper that has followed us, across several countries, ever since I was born.)

*"Tingling or numbness in the hands and fingers."* — Check! (It was more of a full-body tingle, reminding me of TV static or sparkling water. I find it interesting how these electric pins and pricks are often the precursor to complete numbness and unfeeling).

*"Breathing difficulties, including a smothering sensation."* — Check! (Like the minion named Stuart (one eye, short hair) would have felt when he was sucked into an airplane toilet and

laughed at by an entire cinema. That was my favourite scene in the movie before I started relating to it so intensely.)

Anywho, that's what WebMD says. Consider me seen and heard by these written words. I think this is what my boyfriend means when he says literature can touch your heart.

What the page did not help with was working out why this happened. In fact, it told me I didn't *need* a cause, but I'd certainly *like* one because for the last twenty-four hours all I have thought about is how to prevent this from happening again. The fear is so bad that I have implemented a series of superstitious rules: No television, No caffeine, and Most Importantly No Minions.

They've been working so far. When I got back from the cinema, I turned away from the TV, rejected the iced coffee in the fridge in favour of my humble bottled water, and shielded my face when I passed by my little brother's room where a Happy Meal version of the minion named Kevin (two eyes, sprouting hair) sits on his desk, jeering and goggled, ready to set me off again. This made for its own problems when I collided with my mother in the hallway. She gasped and cried SUSMARYOSEP, which is a lingual hairball that literally means JESUS MARY JOSEPH all in a word because just one of those people could never be enough for a filipino expression (we prefer to pack everything, be it in our food, words, or panic attacks). Post-blasphemy, my mother told me I shouldn't walk around with my hands over my face and she ordered me off to bed. I slept for thirteen hours and had twenty-six dreams.

My boyfriend texted me constantly during this period. He had been right next to me when the panic attack started, and after a moment he noticed me flailing there, chest lurching, face leaking, and decided something was wrong enough to tear his eyes away from the movie he'd watched as a joke and started honestly enjoying. The two of us mouthed at each other, gaping like fish, attempting to articulate my unprecedented bodily anarchy without disturbing the rest of the cinema. I employed wild gestures and expressions of pain. The apocalypse but pantomimed.

Eventually we hobbled outside, back into the lobby. My boyfriend asked if I needed an ambulance. I tried to give him my thoughts and contradicted myself five times in one sobbing sentence. Our joint indecisiveness was so extensive that the panic attack eventually ended of its own accord. After *that*, I collapsed atop the free seating, and my boyfriend wanted to buy me a plastic water bottle from the place you usually get popcorn and coke. I told him we could wait until he dropped me home because those things cost like ten dollars from there and in any case

there was no reason to ruin the Great Barrier Reef by buying one. Then he informed me that nine tenths of all plastic waste in the world is produced by under twenty multinational corporations, so there was no reason that I, a powerless teenager, should feel any guilt whatsoever. Very persuasive. He even produced statistics. I suckled the resulting bottle on the way home, knees up to my chest like a baby, while he grumbled in the driver's seat about how I had to see a licensed professional because this was a serious issue that he didn't know how to deal with. The truth is I just want to see him more, because he's the only one who made the ordeal bearable. Then he said he's just some guy. I said he's *not* just some guy and he's my boyfriend, and who knows, maybe I'd be dead on the floor if he hadn't held my hand and panicked back to me for fifteen minutes. I need *him*, not *them*! But he's insecure about his capacity to love me, so he has to outsource the work to those who have actually completed their Psych masters.

He's still going on about it now, through text. Will he ever give up? I respond to him bluntly in a manner I will regret later.

HIM: Are you feeling okay now?

ME: well it hasn't happened again so i am

HIM: Have you seen someone yet? I know a place that bulk bills.

ME: okay

HIM: Also, I've been reading about panic attacks.

ME: nice

HIM: *(sends a link to the WebMD page)*

ME: already read that

HIM: *(sends a link to the Beyond Blue page)*

ME: that one too

HIM: *(sends a link to the Healthline page)*

ME: fucking hell bob they all say the same shit

HIM: I'm lost, sorry.

Who exactly is Bob?

ME: short

two eyes

bald

the best minion by far, did you even watch the movie??

I shut my eyes, not sure why I'm trying to irk him, and not sure why I'm lying. The best minion is obviously Stuart.

Here's another truth bomb while I'm at it: what scares me is not really the minions, but instead what I see now that I have my eyes closed and am forced to remember: a colossal rippling crowd showered in glittering blue-white-red confetti; people upon people thrusting flags and campaign posters of those same colours into the air, crying out, praising the lord, amassing in collective awe of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, the new president of the Philippines. Watching this on TV a few months ago, I balled my fists and screamed very silently, not daring to raise my voice because my mother actually likes the guy. She doesn't realise that he's the son of a brutal dictator, that he lies about the past, that his policies are pulled from a bubbling pot of nostalgia, misinformation and misogyny, or that that's he's just generally more of the same and less of the better. She thinks he's preferable to Leni, my beloved Leni, the level-headed lawyer that could have saved us if only if only if only. My mother's eyes shine like those in the Manila crowd who celebrate heartily the approaching end of things.

This is the sea behind my eyelids, and it means to sweep me away.

A few months ago, actually, I talked to my little brother about what's happening back home. He picked his nose very thoughtfully and told me it didn't matter much to him, because he doesn't live there. He was born in Australia, unlike me, who followed my mother (and our Last Supper painting) to this country. I still struggle to understand what that decision must have been like for her. Of course, there were others who left at the same time—members of our little community diaspora, which bloomed like a flower, posting its petals across the globe—who should understand what it is like to be part of one place and also another; and yet many of my friends from back home just post images on social media of glittering malls in Dubai or New York instead of saying something about our pinoy plight. Have they chosen to stop caring? I, on the other hand, stretch myself painfully between the two countries that mean the most to me, and I'm starting to wonder if that's why my chest was so damn tight yesterday.

Panic attacks can also be hereditary. Don't think I haven't considered that, but it's impossible to know for sure. My mother *does not believe* in panic attacks. My mother *does not believe* in mental health. In their place she has her well-thumbed bible and that time in her teens when she apparently spoke to god, which based on her dinner table recounts actually involved many of the same WebMD symptoms I just ticked off for miserable amounts of dopamine.

Suspicious. Telltale even. I could burrow deeper into this, but there's no point. It's all relative because it's all in the family.

I receive a text. Then another. And another. My boyfriend is so very worried, so I decide to stop being ridiculous and reply.

ME: sorry about before, really  
thank you for sending those and i'll definitely read them and get therapy  
i'm just not sure what to do right now  
i listed my symptoms  
i have these rules of things to avoid  
and im thinking about home again

HIM: Let me know if I can do anything. I could call?

ME: sure call me yeah

HIM: I don't want to overstimulate you or anything though. Maybe I shouldn't.

ME: it would be better because i dont want to look at the screen

I think he worries that he could trigger me or something. I guess I can't really blame him after he saw me lose my panic attack virginity to a children's movie. He's nervous, just like he was when he tried and failed to lose his actual virginity a few weeks ago. Back then, we located something slightly misshapen about the condom and simultaneously heard the slightest movement outside, which was probably just the wind nudging the door because the house was empty. We took the easy way out, allowing our uncertainty to swallow our excitement, and went to bed. Typical him. Typical me. Despicable us.

Against all odds, though, my phone starts buzzing. I raise it to my ear and swipe to answer, to hear his voice which has come to me as if from heaven. The first thing out of my boyfriend's mouth is an apology, which is annoying because that was meant to be the first thing out of mine. I say that and he laughs. I laugh too.

We lapse into discussion of the world. I explain that I am constantly haunted by the idea that this man called Bongbong is now in charge of my country, because he's a conservative nutcase that lied about his policies and his family and his own life. I make sure to stress that the guy dropped out of university after failing politics and economics, two subjects the Philippines could use a lot right now. I emphasise how nonsensical his name is even by our standards and

how overall the world is just so far gone that I do not know what to do in this ‘global citizen’ archetype that each day feels more and more like a straightjacket. My boyfriend is an optimist, replying that we have to start small, support what we can, and count ourselves lucky that we live here of all places. There’s no sense worrying about things out of our control, though he knows I often do; and, by the way, was that perhaps the cause of my panic attack yesterday?

I knew he wanted to bring the conversation back to that. See how he smuggles it into the end of the question, almost as an afterthought, as if it was never meant to come up. He is growing bolder. I reward his confidence with a straight answer: Yes, it’s probably part of it, but there’s a lot of other things and I don’t think panic attacks are like Covid, where you can trace back to the cause. They’re not so obvious.

He asks what they are like then.

I ask him to imagine drowning. Water is continually entering your mouth and your nervous system freaks and your body burns and your mouth forms prayers to things you do not believe in if only it will stop. Then imagine that continuing for a really long time.

He says that sounds horrible.

I agree. I confess I’m scared it’s going to happen again. Next time I might not resurface.

He says, well, he’ll always be here, and in any case it seems like these things always end, based on what it says online. *Eventually* they do.

And he isn’t wrong there. For a long time you’re held in suspense by these shimmering seas that fold you, origami-esque, wave upon wave, all the while digging salt crystals into your skin and filling your organs with a rising tide. You’ll be flung around in a pacific ocean inside yourself, and no matter who you believe or who you pray to all you can do is wait until one huge wave finally crashes and melts on foreign shore, leaving you glassy-eyed and gasping, halfway across the world. You’ll wobble to your feet and see you are far from home on an expansive beach with interminable boundaries, and with the tip of your toe you’ll begin tracing wispy lines in the sand, remapping yourself from the beginning, one heartstring at a time.