



Toast

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It's under my skin. All over, perhaps, dancing through my blood. There's a famous case about dimethylmercury poisoning. In the '90s, a researcher got a couple drops on her latex glove. It seeped through the surface in seconds, which was as much of a death sentence as a rebar through the skull.

I've got a rebar in my skull now. Maybe. I don't know.

Sometimes I get that way, all foggy and clammy. It's like being high: free from the lousy, complicated emotions and basking in the simplicity of hungry, tired, happy, sad. Then the numb fuzz goes on for hours and hours and hours. Then you forget how to experience thoughts with words attached to them, forget how it feels to hear your voice above water. For no reason at all.

I can barely remember the events leading up to it—unlocking the freezer safes, cutting through the laminate and nitrile gloves. It doesn't matter. I came back to my body after it had already happened.

I do remember picking out the scissors. They were those shiny, awkward clippers your mom keeps in the clutter drawer with the tape measurer and batteries and old keys. You can't fit your index and middle finger into the circular handles and you hardly cut in a straight line because you're too preoccupied with not dropping them.

Something about them always felt ancient and cryptic. No one buys those clippers, yet I happened to have them in my own clutter drawer.

When I have these bouts of obscurity, I've been known to act rash or not at all, from purchasing a \$500 chandelier for mudroom décor to sleeping for twenty-five hours straight. With the chandelier, I assume I was trying to regain a sense of satisfaction or gravitas. Today, I think I wanted to feel fear, and not just any fear. Proper, life-or-death fear.

I've wept, I've thrown up, I've hit my fists against the wall, but I'm

not sure that my panic is much more than instinct. As one of the few people authorized to work with organic mercury, the science of its infiltration of the brain is so hammered into my psyche that it left a divot for impulsiveness to settle in.

Dimethylmercury is highly lipophilic and highly hydrophobic; it loves fat and hates water. Because it's organic just like you, the body absorbs it into tissues and whatever makes it to your liver turns into regular old methylmercury, which disintegrates cells' organelles and kills them off one-by-one. Your body will welcome it, take its coat, apologize for the mess, none the wiser that it's invited a stalking vampire into your home. This poison is no friendly ghoul, free of motives. Like I said, it loves fat, and what's fatter than your brain?

Well, nerve cells—the brain's little messenger pigeons—are coated in the stuff. As mercury corrupts every faculty of the self, it also creeps beneath your skin, into your hair, between your toes, under your nails, behind your ears. You'll tingle and shiver and shake. Gradually, so gradually; dimethylmercury is such a lethal toxin because it makes friends with its unknowing prey for months before it tears into its neck and feasts. That sense of wrongness, the unease in the back of your mind, it will hold you and caress your cheek and tell you everything will be fine if you just don't turn around.

A drop and you're toast.

I put two pipette drops of clear dimethylmercury in one glass vial and two drops of water in the other. I then juggled them in the fume hood like a cheap jester until I lost track of which was which. Sure, I could tell the difference in viscosity and weight upon further examination, but you could check the barrel before a game of Russian Roulette, too.

In TV and movies, my consciousness would have returned the moment the liquid touched my skin through the sloppy hole cut into the PPE just below my wrist. Instead, I held still as the weight of my actions registered, enough time for 8,000 lethal doses to soak into my bare skin.

Showing an extraordinary amount of foresight, Me of Ten Minutes Ago sealed the deal by disposing of the leftover vial. Naturally. When I came back to myself, I took all of the measures the SDS sheets say you should—throw away contaminated gear, wash the affected area, everything you'd expect. Calling poison control, though...if I absorbed even a fraction of a droplet, I'm a walking corpse. There's no saving me, no risk to anyone else, no point in wasting resources or time.

So, here I sit. At my desk, surrounded by colleagues who, though they may not realize it, are far chattier when I've snapped out of a daze. My hand, the one that dealt the final blow, writes some inconsequential lab report in neat, jagged font, betraying none of my fierce panic. A coworker—Joel, I think—tells me he spent the weekend camping with his wife, Dani, even though his wife's name is Marie. How do I know that?

Janette chimes in that her mother's dog's littermate was in a boat accident as a puppy that prevents him and his owner from camping near bodies of water. She always taps her fingers on something—like the wooden desk she's leaning over—in patterns of four when she lies. So I've heard?

I'm focused on nothing and everything. The mercury hasn't set in yet; it won't for many weeks, but the adrenaline pumping through my veins refuses to waver. Hardly anyone on Earth has the opportunity to experience the uniquely frightening death of dimethylmercury exposure.

A fortnight passes without any change, and frankly I'm getting impatient. My betta fish has already started his extended sabbatical to my sister's house. I notarized retirement beneficiaries, sold my guitar. Every night I wake drenched in sweat that reeks of rotten eggs, haunted by the sensation of clear bugs the size of sesame seeds squirming along the arteries that swathe my bone marrow. Crawling ever upward toward the fatty feast that makes me me.

There is a special thrill that develops as the date of your death

becomes imminent, a curiosity of what lies beyond. I want to spend the rest of my time basking in the certainty that every moment I have left is more precious than the last. Unless I take matters into my own hands, I will be left to languish in my nightmares.

It should be more difficult than it is to pocket a vial of dimethylmercury. To drop a toxic chemical unceremoniously into my bag and take it home to my dingy, unassuming apartment. To place it carelessly beside the butter dish, like it were a salt shaker. I have no dreams; I'm too preoccupied with dread and giddiness to sleep.

On this, the first morning, I rifle around the cabinets for a kettle that I haven't used in years, fill it with water, and let it boil. I have a four-ounce jar of dried chamomile, tiny intact flowers that my little sister picked and dehydrated until they were shriveled and returned to the budding state of their youth. A teaspoon should do. The scalding liquid pours through the herbs and tea strainer until the mug becomes so full that water submerges them all. Only then appears the subtle aroma of sitting on the porch in a rocking chair, wrapped in a blanket that you tuck your nose under to fend off the morning chill.

As the smell of honey and contentment permeate the air, I drop a slice of sourdough into the toaster. I then scoop a dollop of peanut butter into a small bowl and add cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, and brown sugar. The way I cup the vial of liquid death in my hands is both reverent and repulsed, yet I do not shake or hesitate as I use a dropper to dose my spread with a dash of poison.

For a second or two, as I stir, the enormity of what I've done sends needlelike prickles of trepidation down my arms and through my spine. Thankfully, the bread chooses then to surge from its chamber and startle me—not enough to risk the vial's contents—and any reluctance dissipates into my periphery. Undeterred, I set the vial back on the counter and move to transfer the sourdough onto a salad plate, contrary to my usual practice of setting it on paper towels.

The tea should be finished steeping, so I remove the strainer and

take a sip. It tastes milder than it smells, but leaves no room to doubt that any longer and its potency would be overwhelming. Even so, a teaspoon of honey and half a cap of vanilla would do it good. I reach into the silverware drawer and withdraw a butter knife; the bread has cooled enough now that the peanut butter will spread smoothly and refrain from melting.

There is nowhere in this apartment that contains appropriate significance. I sit on the ground, legs crossed beneath the coffee table in the main room. The extravagant material of my undoing making acquaintance with a condiment. Never knowing whether I was already contaminated with dimethylmercury will always be a source of annoyance, not that 'always' is a particularly long time. Still, the assurance of my demise is a comfort for which I am prepared to sacrifice that knowledge, just this once.

When they find me here, months from now, they will wear hazmat suits. But here I am in my footie pajamas, enjoying the present more than I ever did the past. For the first time in my life, I believe that I have escaped the fugue state for good. Toast is almost too overwhelming to comprehend with a freshly sound mind—the sourness of the bread, a product of weeks of painstaking care. The nuance of peanut butter, roasted and salted and sweetened to the perfect standard of consumption. The complexity of the spices, each telling an intricate story upon my tongue.

Every time my breath threatens to hitch, I take a sip of chamomile to ease the effects of my elation. A bite, a sip, a breath, until all that I have is a mug and a salad plate.

A drop and you're toast. I won't waste a single one. 