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In and Out

My girlfriend Diane, her seventeen-year-old son Jon, and I are on vacation in San Francisco. We have just arrived at the airport where our hotel van is waiting. One passenger climbs into the front seat next to the driver, a couple and child occupy the first row of rear seats, and the three of us squeeze past to settle into the row behind them. As the driver slides the side door shut, I realize that the woman in front of me blocks me from opening it. Not that I'd want or need to since we'll be moving until we reach the hotel, but it's imperative for me to be able to get out of enclosed spaces. Not necessarily to get out, but to be able to.

As the driver pulls away from the curb, I call out to him to stop. Already I'm mentally allotting a portion of our daily budget to procure a cab which will assure me access to a door and wondering whether the scene I am making will ruin our trip. I'm particularly embarrassed in front of Jon, whom I don't know well and who is at an age where it's not yet clear to either of us whether he's supposed to regard me as a friend, authority figure, or irrelevant tagalong. "I'm sorry, I need to get out," I say, stepping over, or more accurately, on the passenger in front of me. Once outside, I silently celebrate my return to open air and add airport shuttle vans to my list of spaces never to enter again.

A month later, on the day before fall term classes start at the school where I teach, the faculty is assembling in a spacious conference room. As the meeting begins, several latecomers congregate in the doorway, next to which I have placed my chair. Again, I have no intention of leaving early, but my mind is focused on the availability of an exit. More latecomers arrive, pushing the others inside where they pull chairs from a stack and

place them in the path I have visually cleared to the door. A practiced calculation ensues: I must either flee before my anxiety crests into panic and while there is still enough commotion to mask my departure, or stay put and try to convince myself that I can leave any time I want to, which invariably ends with me causing a scene like the one in the van.

Then there was the performance of *The Lion King* where I sat down in the middle of a row and realized that my neighbors' knees blocked my exit in both directions. As the first strains of the musical overture rose along with the curtain, I was frantically excusing myself toward the aisle and watched the entire show from there. On another occasion, a five floor hotel elevator ride turned into a scrum when a throng of African American convention-goers packed in at the last minute, causing me to fight my way out from the back. Diane, who gets left behind during my bolts for freedom, told me that I looked like the world's worst racist. And pity the unsuspecting sixth graders at my school, whom I agreed to exclude from the audience for my ninth graders' talent show on the grounds of racy language. The language was harmless, but I knew that the extra bodies would jam the auditorium to capacity and keep me from being able to leave the light booth at the back of the room.

I mentioned adding airport vans to my list of spaces to avoid. Since that debacle, I have taken cabs to hotels when I travel and make sure to reserve aisle seats in theaters. As for the school meeting room, I now stand outside until the last latecomer has entered before planting myself just inside the door. I take the stairs to any hotel room below the twentieth floor and otherwise monitor the elevator boarding process, stepping out if the door opens on a crowd of waiting passengers. By seating the sixth graders on the auditorium floor, I discovered that I could high-step through them like a giant stomping a path to the door. Yet even adjusting for my claustrophobia, I end up avoiding a lot of activities that most people take for granted and that I might otherwise enjoy. Ironically, the more I succumb to my fear of being shut in, the more of a shut-in I become.

When I do make plans to go somewhere, I try to anticipate where and how I might get trapped and whether to risk it. For example, on the rare occasions that I consider taking the New York subway, I make sure to picture being stuck underground in a packed car telling myself what a fool I am for being there, all to save a few dollars on a

cab. If I can't ensure an enclosure-free trip, the potential perils consume me. For the past few years Diane and I have spoken of vacationing in Scotland. From the moment the topic came up and Diane began musing about dates and places to stay, my mind locked onto an image that will dominate that trip until my feet touch tarmac at its end—the moment after the plane lands when passengers fill the aisles waiting for the door to open. Forward or backward, there is no escape.

It may seem odd that I would enter these spaces at all, and I try not to. I have not flown since that 2010 trip to San Francisco, which was my first time on a plane since 2000. Whenever possible, I visit New York City on sunny days when I can walk long distances, avoiding mass transit. But it's hard to have a normal life or avoid being housebound without taking these conveyances periodically. Also, my claustrophobia is specific in its focus; being in motion on the way toward liberation distracts me from my confinement. Airplane cabins and elevator or subway cars bother me less if my mind believes that I will be released on schedule. It's often the secondary, negotiable entrapments that occur inside that prove most challenging.

For example, on that most recent flight to San Francisco, the beverage cart parked next to my row for fifteen minutes, trapping me in my seat. This traumatized me more than being locked into a proverbial flying coffin at 30,000 feet. As the flight attendants took orders and served the passengers in my vicinity, I reminded myself that the only thing between me and freedom of movement was a polite request that they roll forward a few feet—the only thing, that is, besides the teenage girl sitting on the aisle. Even though the airline had assured me of an aisle seat if I checked in early, I ended up in the middle of a row. The prospect of five hours hemmed in on all sides made me consider taking a later flight, but I convinced myself that I could tolerate being separated from the aisle by a single stranger obligated to accommodate my entries and exits.

And on a short flight I might have been ok. But the girl who sat down next to me, and whose impassive face and boxy knees still haunt me five years later, sealed herself inside headphones and played video games with unwavering focus for five hours. She moved those knees for my two bathroom runs, but her oblivious presence hardly exuded aisle accessibility, making her as much of a psychological obstacle as the beverage cart. I

marveled that something as unthreatening as the lower half of a girl a quarter my age, thumbing away on a Game Boy, could cause me so much distress.

In all of the situations I have described escape was not only possible but easy. The airport van, meeting room, elevator, subway, theater and airplane seats aren't exactly locked car trunks or collapsed mines, where politely asking to leave gets one a tire iron to the head or an unhelpful echo in return. But for me, the way out has to be within both my physical power and, for lack of a better word, my social power. I will demand to be let out if necessary, as I proved in the van, but in order to feel truly free, I need not to have to demand. Perhaps this is because asking would expose my disorder. Instead, I seethe with inhibition, feeling helpless when I'm really not. Give me a clear shot at escape, on the other hand, and that suffices. With no beverage cart or girl in the way, I could have happily stayed in my airplane seat the whole way to San Francisco, not even needing to pee.

During my imprisonment by game-girl, I tried a few distractions—reading, watching a movie, deep-breathing exercises, thinking unrelated thoughts. These didn't work for the same reason that I doubt psychotherapy would work: first, there's nothing that I specifically dread—neither suffocation nor being crushed—so it would be useless for a therapist to talk me through an episode the way one would guide a gephyrophobe over a suspension bridge, pointing out stability and safety features; second, the only way for me to believe in the reality of my situation (I'm usually free to come and go) versus my perception of it (I can't get out) is to think about it differently, and thinking is what gets me in trouble in the first place. Once in a filling elevator, Diane asked, "Are you freaking out?" For once I had been too preoccupied by other concerns to notice the crush, until she mentioned it.

As my condition has worsened in recent years, I have researched its physiological and psychological roots—which part of the brain releases which chemical to unleash anxiety, what genetic and experiential factors turn one person into a spelunker or astronaut and another into me. Yet for the same reason that therapy hasn't helped me with this problem, knowing its science doesn't make me feel any better when somebody blocks a door. And I'm afraid to know, to dwell on it to the point where it's all I think

about, where every invitation and initiative looms as a danger and I'm so alert to being closed in that I fret about it when I'm not. I even worry that writing this will increase my self-consciousness, while hoping that describing my fears may ease their hold on me.

My reading did reveal that claustrophobia is often rooted in a single trauma, such as being locked in a closet as a child. This rings true for me, though I can't recall any triggering event. I do remember a time when I rode subways and planes and in the back seats of two-door cars without unease. I remember threats of imprisonment by siblings and fellow summer campers (which, to be fair, I often provoked and reciprocated) and wonder if I blocked out the pleading and pounding that ensued. The first case of claustrophobia I witnessed was my mother's. When I was six, she took my older sisters and me to New York City and we rode the tramway to Roosevelt Island. My mother stayed behind in Manhattan. I was accustomed to her refusal to enter tight spaces and occasional lunging exits. Genetics aside, I suspect that my affliction is related to hers.

Even if I could explain why this is true or recall a specific trauma, I doubt that my problem would disappear. I know from my battle with general anxiety that facts are no match for fears. What frustrates me is that even as I have adjusted my behavior, my sensitivity has gotten worse, as if each new episode reinforces my distorted view. Just last month I began to panic during a back massage, spooked by the masseuse's hands pressing me down. As I sat up and made an embarrassed plea for breathing room, my first thought was "not this, too." Arriving home, I went online and learned that a prone or reclined position combined with a hovering body is a common trigger, turning visits to the dentist and eye doctor into potential dramas.

Yet even the tiniest accommodation can quell my fear. My own dentist promises to stop drilling if I signal him (no matter that his concern is pain rather than suffocation), a routine courtesy that makes an outsized difference to my peace of mind. Just imagining being loomed over by someone oblivious versus someone sympathetic to my neurosis is enough to start me toggling between panic and calm. The same skewed perception makes it tolerable to be in a moving subway but not a stalled one, in a sealed plane but not a blocked seat, and to have someone I know sitting between me and an aisle. Again, it's not

a question of getting out, but of knowing that I can without being judged weak, rude, or crazy.

My school teaching job suits my need to occupy large spaces and control my entrances and exits, except when it comes to chaperoning field trips. Because of my aversion to sitting in theater rows and riding on buses (one person in control of a single exit), and my potential humiliation if I were to panic while surrounded by students, I avoid these outings, relying on excuses, last-minute cancellations, and uncollegial refusals to volunteer. Worried that I'll be seen as a malingerer, I have kept my disability from colleagues and occasionally loved ones. A few years ago I balked at joining a family cruise on the grounds of an incompatible schedule. Spacious seas? Open decks? The prospect of being shipbound gave my neurosis a whole new twist.

I confess that neither field trips nor cruises appeal to me for other reasons having nothing to do with being cooped up. I like the classroom part of teaching, but get my fill of being around kids during those five forty-five minute periods per week. As for cruises, long stretches of idle time and the social demands of a floating hotel would increase rather than diminish my stress. All of which points to claustrophobia as a way for me to get out of doing things I don't want to do. This fits with my sense that my reaction to being trapped is usually about something else—social discomfort, reluctance to displace people, powerlessness, even a desire to commiserate with my mother.

If this is true, then I have to ask whether I'm claustrophobic at all, given that few of the episodes I have described posed any danger. In every instance I had enough air and could get out, either immediately (van, meeting room, theater row) or eventually (plane, elevator, subway). The fact that my sensitivity gives me an excuse for hermitic behavior explains why my range of activity has diminished over the years. My latest mental block is locking the door while inside single room restrooms, the kind common in the basements of New York City restaurants. I picture the lock sticking, my panic escalating, and no one hearing my shouts. The onset of this coincided with my son moving to Brooklyn, giving me another reason to avoid that crowded place at a time when my motivation to visit would have increased.

If claustrophobia is my way of getting out of going out, then it works too well, as not all of the adventures I forgo are ones I am glad to miss. Besides wanting to visit Scotland, I love live rock music, but the packed-in crowds at concerts have kept me from attending one for forty years. Of all the other fears that people (including me) suffer from—of heights, spiders, darkness, water—none places such a curb on one’s freedom of movement. Nor are there any upsides to this handicap, opportunities opening as others close. Granted, my retreat from the outside world frees me to cultivate my interior world, but the latter is also the true source of my phobia, making it more of a prison than any physical enclosure. In the end, the only advantage to living a life of avoidance is being able to do so; my frustration at my limits is balanced by my relief at not having to test them.

The only question left to ask is what would happen if I had to endure one of those situations. Would my panic spike and cause a breakdown, with me screaming myself hoarse or bloodying my hands trying to get out? Then what? Exhaustion? Fainting? Would the panic resume when I came to, or finally give way to resignation, or acknowledgment that I could breathe and that this was my only true concern? At some point would I think myself into composure? One thing is certain: being forced to face my fantasies would either break me of them or break me. The latter seems more likely; far from exulting “I can do it” after disembarking intact from that San Francisco flight, I haven’t flown since.

The ability to tolerate confinement, particularly in the relatively benign places that plague me, seems so easy. Physically, it’s hardly different from being unconfined. As someone equally afraid of heights, I often cringe at construction workers moving around on skyscrapers, yet remind myself that they have the same amount of surface beneath their soles as I do walking down the street. The peril is all anticipated, all in the mind, which, as Milton’s Satan said, “can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.” I wish that knowing my mind was playing tricks on me could diminish its power, or even better, reverse the effect, turning the closest quarters into a great outdoors.