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(Agoraphobia)

by Donna Baier Stein

He was always selling something, it seemed: cars, an illusion of security and understanding, himself. But now, poised on what could be the biggest sale of his life, he sat immobilized, psychologically glued to the swivel chair in his mauve modular cubicle.

His grandfather had become glued to his chair, too, of course. Died in it, in fact. But Gros Papa's chair was ratty, a ponderous old wing chair upholstered in worn velour, its spade feet painted brownish-wood to simulate mahogany. The chair sat in a dark corner of a dark, low-ceilinged apartment Gros Papa had been too afraid to leave. There were muted stripes in the wallpaper and a Philco 620 radio sitting on the floor next to the chair. Gros Papa had listened to it constantly, liking the news, especially the accidents that happened when people traveled too far from home.

Chet's chair was ergonomically-designed, and as he spun slowly around in it, he thought of his sister, Meredith, and how she had followed their grandfather's path. Or lack of one, rather. In their late forties now, she lived in an apartment uptown she hadn't left for twenty years. It had become her second skin. Chet or his wife Dorothy brought her groceries once a week, chatted with her briefly over the noise of the T.V.

"What do you want to *do*?" Chet prodded her.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Nowhere."

Dorothy thought Meredith was nuts, and she was right. When Chet first started dating her, too many years ago to think about now, he'd been afraid to tell her about his sister. But of course she'd found out when his mother died and the aunts muttered about how Meredith wouldn't even brave coming out for her poor mama's funeral.

By then, Chet and Dorothy were married, and

Dorothy was pregnant, so she couldn't back out. She stayed up at night instead, worrying about how their unborn child might somehow catch the family curse. And how, by the way, had Chet ever escaped it? she asked irritably from her pillow, not even expecting an answer.

He knew the answer, though he'd never articulated it to Dorothy. He'd *pushed* his way out into the world, as soon as he was old enough to leave his mama's side. He'd *read a lot*, everything he could get his hands on, including titles like *Secrets of Success* and *The Power of Persuasion*. And he'd learned how to sell anyone anything—including himself on the idea that there was something *there* in the outside world that was truly worth going after.

Now, the biggest prospect of his life waited out on the showroom floor. Chet could see the man if he rolled his chair just a few inches to the left on the clear vinyl chair mat. He had an expensive taupe trench coat (probably London Fog), neat rubber galoshes over his shoes, a drinker's ruddy nose.

And he wanted something Chet could provide: a fleet of fancy white limos, stretch limos with six doors and shiny burl wood cabinets inside, a T.V. and digital phone and portable fax in each. Crystal decanters and smooth leather seats you could sink into like a silky bath.

It wasn't that he didn't want to go with the man for the requisite test drive. He could remember each time he took someone out in one of the limos—the expressions on people's faces as they passed, the appreciative nods from the customer in the glassed-off seat behind him. He especially remembered how there was unexpected light from the ceiling inside the limo, pouring down on everyone indiscriminately, no matter their status, no matter the season.

Now it was winter. Wet snow bled down the huge glass walls of the carpeted showroom. It



was gray and foggy out there. From his chair, Chet could barely make out the letters of the light-studded oval sign above the dealership: Herb Jaffarian Motors. Outside, at least, there would be air. Room to breathe, but maybe, he thought now, too much of it.

Three other cars filled this end of the showroom: a black Previa All Trac with captain's chairs and roof rack, a blue 4Runner SR5 with cashmere beige and oak interior, a shadow plum pearl Avalon with alloy wheels.

Chet knew them by heart, ticking off cruise control and cassette deck, a/c, running boards—each add-on punctuated with a painful tap of his finger against the laminate desktop. The man in the trench coat was leaning against the hood of the Avalon impatiently now, playing with his watch.

But Chet could not, for the life of him, leave his chair.

His heart had started beating like crazy; he couldn't breathe. A pain shot down his leg; his hands tingled.

To calm himself, he put his hands on top of a book. It was a book of lists. Not lists that had anything to do with cars, but lists of other, more important things. Sometimes it dawned on him how little he knew, how much there *was* to know, and so he tried to pack his brain with more: the fact that "Gone with the Wind" sold 25 million copies in its first half-century; the date of the flood that struck Florence, Italy and destroyed so many cultural treasures (November 4, 1966); all the lines of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, "Snowbound," about a homestead buried in snow.

Last night, the son Dorothy had worried about and who was now a sullen fifteen (and who had no trouble at all leaving their house, in fact seemed to prefer it), told Chet he'd been suspended for stealing a portable c.d. player from a teacher's car. Chet wanted to cry, wanted to hit him, wanted to hug him, but did nothing except close his eyes.

Then the boy tried to manipulate him. He told Chet he had terrible dreams, always. Dreams of being buried alive in quicksand, dreams of running someone over in a car.

"The dreams scare me, Dad."

"I know," Chet had answered, eyes still closed.

Chet remembered as a child going to visit Gros Papa, listening to his mother snuffle as she timidly turned the steering wheel, Meredith sucking on her thumb in the back seat. He remembered hearing the frightening small *tsk* of the kitchen clock in Gros Papa's apartment, eyeing the bulging black phone that never rang.

"You've got to leave, Gros Papa," his mama would say. "You've got to get out of here. If only to the market."

But Gros Papa would stay in his chair, shaking his head. Afraid. And Chet's mother would leave heads of cabbage and vinegar, a tea cake.

Chet's eyes scanned a page of the book of lists in front of him: 1967, the year Gros Papa died in his chair, the Sony Tummy Tickler T.V. came out, a T.V. small enough to sit on your stomach. Gros Papa would have liked that.

Unfortunately, the man in the trench coat was looking really annoyed by now.

Wiping his sweaty palms, Chet looked around the showroom to see if there were any other salesmen who might help.

No one.

Maybe he could just stand up, walk the few feet between him and the prospect, and convince the man to come back for the test drive tomorrow. The weather would be better. He'd get a better feel for the car, be able to make a more informed decision.

But that was stupid! Chet knew it. This was a bird in the hand. He'd talked to the man's secretary on the phone; they wanted a fleet of limos, she'd said in her clipped British accent. Her voice made Chet feel like a clumsy fool.

But he knew the cars were good, that they were great, in fact, and that if he just opened the



door and let the man in the trench coat sink into one of those leather seats, why, it was practically a done deal. Fifty grand times six, three hundred thousand smackeroos, and the 10% commission was his. Enough to put a down payment on the new house Dorothy wanted. Enough to take a vacation, maybe to Bermuda where they could swim with the dolphins. They were supposed to be healing, Chet remembered reading somewhere. And there was plenty of that to be done.

He simply had to get off his ass and make the miracle happen.

The keys to the limo were in his desk drawer. Licking his lips nervously, he rummaged through the Herb Jaffarian personalized pens and Acco silverette paper clip boxes until he found them.

What kind of music would the man want to hear? he wondered, feeling for a moment like his old self. But then a second thought decimated the first: Was the c.d. player in the limo the same or better than the one his son had snitched?

By now, he could see gray sweat stains starting to show through the front of his shirt.

He held the keys up, dangled them temptingly for the man in the trench coat to see. "Just a minute!" he mouthed, pointing to some invisible, and nonexistent, task on his desk.

He was remembering the radio in Gros Papa's room: the Philco chairside, wood veneer, with AM and two shortwave bands, and a glowing beam indicator light. Chet remembered staring at that light when he and his mother went to visit, listening to the static-y sounds of "Mysterious Traveller" or "Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar." Reception was better at night than in the daytime, and better in the winter than in the summer. Then, the signals could be heard from greater distances, and Gros Papa would tune in to distant stations. Bring the world to him.

When they'd gone for their last visit, he and his mother and Meredith, just five at the time, they'd found Gros Papa blue and cold in his chair. Chet's mama started sniffing again, then

picked up the handset of the black phone and called her sister and sniffled and bawled some more, Meredith wrapped around her legs and hanging on for dear life. Chet carried the radio into the bedroom, where he curled up under a quilt made of dark velvet patches and listened. "The Thing at the Top of the Stairs" was on, on a series Gros Papa often listened to called "Escape." Chet took the radio home; his mother didn't even notice.

Keys to the limo pressing hard into his palm, Chet somehow managed to stand. He smiled and waved to the man in the trench coat, then ran a finger under his collar, giving him room to breathe.

When Chet reached him, the man seemed out of breath, too. Or maybe he was just angry Chet had kept him waiting so long.

Did he have a son who ever stole anything? Chet wondered as he pumped his smooth, cool hand with his own sweaty one. *Did he know how much you had to hurt, how empty you had to feel, before you'd take something that didn't belong to you?*

"Let's take it out for a spin." Chet heard his voice come as though from a far distance, accompanied by all the whistles and hums he remembered from Gros Papa's radio.

"That's what I've been waiting for."

Of course, Chet thought. The world moved while I sat. The world moved while Gros Papa sat and died. Once, right after he and Dorothy married, Chet went into a newfangled television store. The salesman showed him one of the new "T.V.s." All it showed was a big circle in the middle with an Indian chief's head at the top and four smaller circles with lines and patterns in the corners. After Dorothy prodded him to buy one, the same picture would show up on the TV screen just before and after normal program hours.

"Now." The man in the trench coat spat out the word. There was no doubt he was angry, and in a hurry. To Chet's eyes, it seemed the man



was moving even as he stood across from him in those firmly-planted galoshes.

“What’d you do?” Chet heard himself ask. “Rob a bank?”

The man looked at Chet in disbelief; his nose grew even redder.

Chet looked down at his palm. The keys he still held had drawn blood.

From the corner of his eye, Chet saw one of the other salesmen, Roger, come out of the men’s room, zipping his fly. Also in a hurry. And just behind him, beyond the huge pane of glass that fronted the showroom, the white limo sat, sleek and massive and tempting.

Ten percent commission on three hundred grand wasn’t enough to keep his son from stealing again.

It wasn’t enough to get Meredith out of her apartment.

It wasn’t enough to make Dorothy finally believe he wasn’t somehow cursed.

He had worked so hard, for so long. He had found a place in the world, become a salesman, earned a living. Had a son, had a wife, had a house.

When she was little, he had beaten Meredith at every sport and game they played. Beaten it out of her. He had played and competed and won. The dollars had blown in like dead leaves. And Meredith had been doomed to her lonely apartment from the beginning.

The outside, *the world*, was for Chet to conquer. And so he had.

Now, all he had to do was chalk up another win. Get the man into the car. Take him for a spin. Make the world go the way he wanted it to.

Afterwards, he’d walk over to Roger, slap his back because he didn’t want to shake his hand, and go back to his cubicle in victory. But once there, what?

He wasn’t going to die like Gros Papa. Though the man had taken control, Chet saw that

very clearly now. For there was no way you could control the rest of it—the sons, the wives, the speeding cars coming at you when you least expected them.

Outside, the snow was falling harder now. Snowbound. Lines from the Whittier poem slid through his frantic brain, poignant, persistent, making him ache. There’d been a family trapped in snow, a half-welcome guest, the sun rising cheerless over hills of gray. A chill no coat could shut out. A hard, dull bitterness of cold, the blinding storm. White drifts piling against the window frame until, when the second morning shone, the family looked upon a world unknown, on nothing they could call their own.

Nothing stayed the same, whether you stayed put or not. Idyllic families existed only in nostalgia.

The man in the trench coat had hold of Chet’s sleeve now, starting to pull him toward the car outside. Didn’t he see the snow? Didn’t he know how quickly you could be trapped in it? He jerked his arm away, caught sight again of the smears of blood on his palm. He took three strides to the huge glass wall, not checking to see if the man in the trench coat followed him, eyes only on the white limo, the snow, the air.

And then, making a fist with his huge, already sore hand, he pushed a round hole through the glass. Simply to reach the air. He saw Roger from the corner of his eye, shaking his head in disbelief, but Chet pushed another hole right beside the first, and kicked with his shoe until the glass crumpled in front of him, a snowfall of dangerous shards. Behind him, he could hear Muzak and shouts of other people, salesmen all of them. But he stepped right on through it—through the opening in the glass, through all the pitfalls and possibilities of it—and out.

He had to go. Somewhere, anywhere. Do. Something, anything. Hugging his son might be a good place to start.

