

Keep the Door Closed

Beth Henry

The door is closed, not a good sign. My mind races as I envision what lies behind that heavy, white door. Imagining the worst, my hand trembles as I turn the knob, slowly but anxiously, until the room's interior reveals the worst: he has still not cleaned up his room: remembrances and souvenirs from parties, trips, and movies scattered among the novels of mystery, history, and other fiction; drinking glasses with swirling amber residues of iced tea set on dresser tops; laundered clothing, folded on the small antique bench that can no longer be seen; fitness and automobile magazines, useless keys, business cards, golf tees, photographs, countless pennies ... get the picture? I suppose you're thinking I have a teenage son whose floor and furniture exhibit a complex network of materials significant to his life. Alas, no, it's not my teenage sonit's my husband.

After years of attempting to control the clutter and hoarding of countless items reflecting his many interests and hobbies, John and I finally reached an agreement: a small room in the house is respectfully designated as "his," and is deemed "off limits" to me. Keep out! No girls allowed! This means you! I'm permitted to enter, but not allowed to "tidy up." He and I differ on what to keep, what to get rid of, what goes here what goes there. It's preferable that I just stay out. John agreed to keep the mess to a minimum, though the word "minimum" was never clearly defined. I have since learned that our definitions clash. As compulsive cleaner, I am beckoned by the dust on the dresser and shelves calling my name like soldiers in a prison camp. When conditions reach an intolerable degree, I decide to attempt a rescue mission, cautiously avoiding the searchlights, vacuum cleaner in hand. Luckily, John has never recognized the changes. My innate urge to organize, arrange, and categorize is the primary reason I keep the door closed. What I don't know won't hurt me. Out of sight, out of mind. These are my mottos, as my tolerance is tested.

Some may deem John as a selfish man, requiring a room to himself in our small, three-bedroom Cape Cod style home. But when John's hoarding tendencies encounter my need to have a systemized state of affairs, I'm satisfied to give him this "dumping ground" as a compromise. The day I witness a colony of unspecified insects or a stench of undetermined origin emanating from his room, the deal's off.

The Gamble

Beth Henry

With great enthusiasm, my husband John and I boarded the plane that would take us on a first-time adventure to Las Vegas, Nevada. A wedding had been planned in this City of Wonder: John's son Jason and his fiancée, Tori would be tying the knot, so for us, the trip was twofold: celebrating the union of the happy couple and exploring the famous desert city.



The flight was without incident, giving me opportunity to leaf through some travel materials and to dream about winning The Big One. On our approach to Las Vegas, the treeless mountains formed a scenic backdrop. I was so excited!

Inside the airport, I was amazed to see the multitude of silver slot machines lined along the perimeter of the airport walls while folks played intently -- eyes fixated on the colorful spinning reels, hoping to win the fortune of a lifetime. Some hesitantly squeezed their quarter tightly before dropping them into the slots, appearing to be making wishes or saying prayers before carefully letting go. Others held drinks and cigarettes in one hand and quarters in the other, firing one shiny coin after another into the thin opening and grimacing with impatience as another precious quarter was lost to the machine. Few gamblers were aware of the busy travelers rushing by. Within the confines of the airport, loud announcements, stale cigarette smoke, crying children, and dinging machines were making me feel anxious. There were too many people in this airport. The humidity was high, and I was tired. After rushing to retrieve our luggage and hail a cab, thankfully, I had the opportunity to sit back in the coolness of the car and regain some control. After ten minutes or so, I was able to look out through the driver's windshield to see a city awash in neon glitter. We had arrived!

Our hotel, New York, New York, was absolutely huge, taking up an entire city block. The immensity was intimidating. The façade of the hotel was a replica of the Manhattan skyline, complete with a towering Statue of Liberty and a Coney Island style roller coaster. The coaster, with its rolls and hangs and dizzying forces of negative "G's," operated on a twenty-four hour basis. In turn, so did the murderous screams that accompanied each white-knuckled rider. As we waited to approach the reservation desk to check in, we endured a line that wound itself through the hotel's lobby. I imagined that at least half of the hotel's two thousand guest capacity stood in line with us, patiently tolerating the slow process of obtaining a room. I tapped my foot and shifted my body from side-to-side, slowly creeping ahead in this miserable line, praying for a room with cool, soft sheets and a functional bathroom!

After finally checking in, we maneuvered our way to the elevators, wandering through the casino, through lines of people, through clouds of smoke. The hubbub, the commotion,

and the constant ding-ding-dinging of the machines over-stimulated my mind, creating another bout of anxiety. I was fatigued. I was overwrought. I needed a good night's sleep. Of course, when one is in such a state of exhaustion, something as insignificant as a full-sized replica of a roller coaster from Coney Island outside the window shouldn't interfere with one's slumber, should it?

It didn't. The next morning I awoke with renewed stamina. Eager to explore the city-in-a-city, I was dressed and ready to go before my husband, so I wandered down to investigate the hotel's first floor alone. It was only 9:00 a.m., yet as soon as the elevator doors opened, I was once again exposed to billowing white clouds of smoke filling the air. The ding-ding-dinging continued. As they bustled in their slinky cocktail outfits, the waitstaff couldn't be more eager to sell another drink. "Would you care for a drink ma'am?" one skimpily clad waitress inquired as she gazed throughout the game room, never really making full eye contact with me. Though not averse to indulging in the occasional cocktail, I wondered who in the world, with the exception of wild and crazy college students, would care for a drink at nine o'clock in the morning. In response, I muttered, "Uh, no thanks." Hearing the "no" but not the "thanks," she whisked off, weaving her way in and out of the hundreds and hundreds of early risers -- or late nighters -- whichever way you'd like to look at it.

I had expected Las Vegas to be a town with great people-watching potential. I was hoping to witness bizarre and flamboyant high rollers strut throughout the casino, feathery and glittered, slinky and colorful. Placidly sitting back and silently observing others is an inexpensive hobby of mine. Yet, most of the people here in Las Vegas appeared no different than what one might see in one's own town. Just people. You know, sensible cotton. Denim. Bowling shirts. The occasional disco attire.

Though I knew the bright sun was shining outside, the inside of this windowless hotel was dim. People looked haggard from a full night of gambling. Though colossal in size, the hotel gave me a sense of claustrophobia. In the casino, I was surrounded by the unwanted sensory stimulation of flashing colored lights and continual dinging, which grated on my nerves. Winners shouted elatedly while losers furiously cursed. Cigarette fumes permeated my clean hair and clothing. Sweat began to form on my neck and forehead as a wave of doom seemed to sweep over me, rendering me with a feeling of helplessness. I quickly decided to return to the safety of our hotel room.

But finding the elevator proved to be easier said than done. The maze of shops, restaurants, and casinos did not register familiarity. After an extensive search – crossing the Brooklyn Bridge and circling through Greenwich Village – I was relieved that my predicament was finally resolved once I saw the elevator doors ahead. As I approached, I read, "This elevator services Tower A, floors 1 – 50." Our room was in Tower B on the 72nd floor. Had it not been for a small group of well dressed, young, attractive businessmen standing nearby, I might have had an emotional meltdown right there between the Empire State Building and Starbucks. In an attempt to maintain my dignity, I flashed the gentlemen a weak smile. Yet, the image was shattered with an involuntary moan of frustration as I made an about-face and continued my search.

Drained but not defeated, I eventually worked my way back to the room. Immediately chugging down a cold bottle of water, I collected myself to some degree. I decided that from then on, I would not leave the security of my husband's more reliable directional sense.

Proceeding back through the condensed version of New York City together, we decided to venture outside this windowless cave for a breath of fresh air. Pushing hard against the heavy, wooden hotel doors, I was met with a powerful, oppressive blast of heat! It was nearly 11:00 a.m., and the temperature was 113 degrees. ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN DEGREES???? Do people LIVE in temperatures like this, I wondered. And if so, WHY? After walking, sluggishly, for merely a few city blocks, the severe heat was taking its toll. I looked like a little drenched rat, dripping wet with perspiration. It was now time for Plan B: indoor shopping. This is another hobby of mine, but not an inexpensive one. This entailed, however, a return to the massive, stinky, ding-ding-dinging hotel, undressing, re-showering, redressing, blow drying, redoingby then, I'd made up my mind: Las Vegas is not my kind of town.

If you're interested, the wedding was beautiful. And, actually, there was something positive about our stay. One evening, amid the aforementioned pandemonium of the less than desirable casino, pure human greed overcame me, and I decided to take my chances with a gaming opportunity (When in Rome, I rationalized). The tables of Blackjack and Poker were intimidating because if you had little understanding of the game, you were more or less an irritant to the "real" players. Therefore, I experimented on the slot machines, having a go on one and then moving to another, determined to "Buy baby a new pair of shoes," or whatever it is "they" say. After yet another pack of nearly twenty dollars in quarters, the machine suddenly began flashing lights and ringing bells, alerting me that I was about to be deservedly compensated for these days of pain and suffering. I flashed a winning smile for onlookers, knowing somewhere deep down in my heart that this vacation was finally going to payoff! Maybe this vacation had been some test of my inner strength. If so, I had just passed with flying colors! Slowly, a long receipt to be redeemed at the front desk slithered from the machine. I grandly stepped forward to receive my just reward. A single glance downward announced the total value of my winnings: two dollars and fifty cents. Vegas, I hate you.

