

Promptly

Marcia Ross/2018

I am in my Short Memoir class in a basement room at the Cambridge Public Library. Fifteen or so of us are sitting around a set of long sturdy tables with faux wood surfaces, arranged in a square, our notebooks at the ready. We are all, I think, over 60, mostly women, but, counting the instructor, Judah, there are four men, which adds a nice balance. Judah has asked us to do a writing exercise about a time when we had to do something new – something perhaps a bit frightening. I am already frightened as I make a reluctant list, but at least the list helps me procrastinate the actual writing while also making it look like I am writing, so no one will guess that I am stuck.

I have no ideas. My recollections are lame or banal, or concern things I'd rather not reveal. The thought of exposing any of that produces more anxiety. And really, "doing something new" seems to have been the story of my life, along with increasingly bad choices in men and jobs, until I was about fifty. After that it's been pretty much a rut. I worked on the same novel for 20 years. I'm still seeing the same man who will never admit he loves me. Or maybe he really doesn't. He's an Israeli so who knows.

This anxiety is physical; it shuts down my mind. I know, I understand: I will have to perform, jump in somehow, and soon! The only item on my list is "first dive" but I've already worked that to death in a long story. How about "learning to drive a stick shift"? The list grows, but it's alarmingly dull (and that is a mean feat): roasting first turkey, taking bus in Haiti, building chicken house in the woods with no nails, first airline flight, bolting from marriage on cross-country Canadian train with 2 year old and a toothache, separating laundry by colors (what about stripes?). I don't want to be ordinary. I don't want to be frightened, threatened, intimidated. OK, I get it – it's other people I'm scared of, but dammit also my own lack of courage, my own mediocrity: writing itself.

The hole in my chest is sending freak electric waves down my arms, into my hands. My thumbs are anxious. My brain begins to make static. Time is a problem. I recall that this exact fear has with me from the first class when we were given a writing prompt. So, yes, plain old performance anxiety. Very common. And paralyzing. Yes, yes. But this writing stuff is just as scary as anything on or off my bloody list, anything I've ever had to do in my life. It's scary right now.