

FEAR OF HEIGHTS

I have a fear of heights. The fancy word for it is acrophobia. Most everyone who knows me, knows this. I try not to stand near places from which you can fall. When my kids were small, and we went on hikes, and when they approached the edges of anything, I asked them to step back. On mountain trails, I walked, pressed against the walls. On visits to breathtaking vistas, I stood as far away from the edge as possible. My breath was twice taken: by the view, and by my fear.

Why do I have this fear? Did I inherit it, or did something happen that caused it? It does not apply to enclosed places. I, unlike Erica Jong, do not have a fear of flying. In fact, I always try to get a window seat, and love every part of the sensation of flying: the takeoff, the views of the terrain below, the clouds, the bumps, the approach to the runway, and the landing. I understand that people who have a fear of heights are also supposed to be afraid of standing near picture windows in tall buildings. I find it exciting, knowing that I am protected. However, when I went to Camden Yards with Lewis and David to see a Baltimore Orioles game, the seats were so banked, I felt as if I might fall out, and found myself gripping the arms of my seat for nine innings.

Looking back, I suspect that my fear of heights was always there, but kept under control. When I was small, we spent a lot of time on the roof in the summer, “tar beach.” The edges around the roofs were low and I was always a little fearful, “queezy,” approaching them, but I did. We would also spend time on the fire escape, and I had the same uncomfortable feeling, but I would sit on the fire escape, and take care of my plants there. Some people actually slept on their fire escapes in the summer. Not me.

In the summer of 1952, Sylvia and I hitchhiked across America. What are the high points of such a trip? High points: Places where you can stand, with nothing below, looking across vast panoramas. I did it. I may have felt a little scared, but I actually did it. I certainly was thrilled by the sights, and I have the pictures to prove it. Thinking about it, I cannot believe that Sylvia and I actually hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon on a trail that was not very wide, and that sometimes required us to step to the outer edge to let mule teams go by. Where others were oohing and aahing about the extraordinary colors and shapes before them, I was carefully looking down at the trail, seeing mostly mule droppings.

Twenty-five years later, Martha and I took a trip out west, which included a visit to the Grand Canyon. We made our way to the same trail, and Martha wanted to go down, not to the bottom as Sylvia and I had done, but part way. I joined her for about ten steps, then turned around and returned to the head of the trail. I couldn't do it. I told her to be careful, and sat down on a bench.

What really scared me when I was young, was when my mother would sit on the window ledge to wash the outside windows. We lived on the sixth floor and she was short, and it was difficult for her to maneuver, getting onto the ledge with a wash cloth and towel. But she did: opening the window, seating herself, lowering the window, washing, wiping, then raising the first window, and lowering the second. I was afraid to look. When I took over washing the outside windows, I would stand on the inside ledge and wash the outside windows from the inside.

This may not be the place to reveal one of the most traumatic events of my life, but I will, since it may have something to do with my fear of heights. I have no idea how old I was, perhaps in my early teens. My mother and I were sitting at the kitchen table. She was expressing her bitterness, and her unhappiness with her life, and then said she wanted to end it. We may have had an argument, or my mother may have become angry and depressed describing how difficult her life was. What I remember was that she got out of her chair, walked toward the window, and made it clear that she intended to jump. I ran to her, grabbed her, and held on, yelling and crying. I made sure that she could not open the window, which she may have tried to do. After a few minutes, she went to her bedroom. I was left alone, shaking. When she returned, we acted as if nothing unusual had happened.

7-7-14