

This is Not a Safe World

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Someone has propped open the doors again. The fire door in the hallway, and the exterior door leading out to the concrete stairway.

The exterior doors are kept locked. They are sometimes propped open with decorative rocks from the courtyard below when people move in and out of my building, and I understand that well enough, but in the last couple of weeks, someone's been leaving them open for hours at a time for no apparent reason. No sign of boxes in and out, no U-Haul parked outside.

I call and complain. The property manager tells me repeatedly that she lives in my building, on my floor, and she prattles agreeably about how leaving the fire doors propped open is a serious safety hazard.

"Yes, but the exterior door," I protest. This building is poured of cement and stucco and capped with the red tiles that bake omnipresently under the California sun. It's clearly been here unaltered since the mid-70s—or at least some of my appliances have—and fire is just not my biggest concern. I like reading about serial killers but I can hardly say *home invasion* out loud.

"If we catch someone in the act, we'll set 'em straight," she confides. I shrug and thank her, *thanks anyway* is my tone, or possibly *thanks for nothing*.

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I can count on one hand the activities I was allowed to do as a teenager, while forbidden activities would fill whole notebooks. In comparison, my friends and society at large seem to have had impossibly, giddily permissive adolescent lives. The constant refrain from my mother, when she turned me down on going somewhere or doing something or meeting someone, was that it wasn't her fault and it wasn't even mine. "It's not *you* I don't trust, honey," she'd say. "It's everyone else. The *world* is the problem. It's not a safe world."

Naturally I had some petty fury at her ruling from the bench this way, but her explanation was eminently reasonable. She didn't want me to be subject to the whims of the world, that was all. And she was my benevolent dictator-for-life, anyway; what choice did I have but to obey? So I went to VFW shows instead of arena concerts, sleepovers instead of keggers. I never smoked pot and I got drunk once. And the world seemed tranquil, unthreatening.

In college, I developed the habit of leaving my car, an eight-year-old Saturn sedan, unlocked. My standby phrase—and I must've uttered it dozens of times in those years—was "If anyone's going to steal this car, they need it more than me." Because it was unlocked, my car's window wasn't broken when my stereo got stolen during my junior year. My friend Lina, who locked hers, had to file an insurance claim and get her window fixed. Me, I just bought a new stereo. I'd meant to replace mine anyway.

Keen observation of an environment, analysis of weak or dangerous areas, is something at which the average untroubled adolescent doesn't particularly excel. Yet animals of all species

must assess situations before taking action. A squirrel determines if it's safe to cross the street. A deer chooses to bound out of the woods even though she's seen some orange and a dark muzzle gleam on the other side of the clearing. A woman decides whether she should let a man fix her drink in another room.

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My husband's friends have sent us two pairs of hobbit slippers for Christmas. For various reasons, we cannot use them, and I've procrastinated too long to return them to their retailer. I sell them on eBay instead. After the first pair is purchased by a guy in Idaho, I tuck the slippers into a Priority Mail box and leave it downstairs, on top of the outgoing mail box, whose slot is too narrow to accept even especially thick envelopes. That evening, I find the Priority Mail box ripped open, the slippers spilling out but unspoiled, my packing slip still inside. It has been placed, in its violated state, back on the brown metal outgoing mail box.

I call and complain. The property manager seems unimpressed. "Anybody can come in down there," she says. "Delivery people, plumbers—"

"It's supposed to be a secure building," I say. "The doors are all locked."

"If you leave a package there, anyone can get to it," she says. "All the residents can get to it, too. Just bring them to the office if you have them, if you have outgoing."

"But I shouldn't have to do that," I say. "If I leave something for outgoing mail, it should be safe. It was addressed. It was taped up." I want her to acknowledge that I have done nothing irresponsible in leaving an addressed package inside a secure building for the mailman who visits that very area each day. I

want her to agree with me, to say that it's unfair what happened.

"Just bring it here to the office," she repeats. Then she says, in this odd, meaningful way, "The building is full of *people*."

She seems to imply with her words or tone or something that there are, or could be, thieves or unscrupulous people living in this building. I want her to assure me that there's a screening process for tenants, some kind of once-over that indicates these people, with whom I share something like dormitory quarters, are minimally trustworthy.

But she is telling me that I am at fault for trusting the locked doors, and for trusting the fact that a package addressed to some guy in Idaho belongs to *him*, no one else. She is telling me that I should expect to take the extra step, tote my parcels to the leasing office or the awful chamber of Hell that is the nearby post office. *The world is the problem, honey.*

"Look, I think we're at an impasse here," I say.

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Although sexual assault is as much a problem as it ever has been, I feel like there's been some rhetorical progress recently. There's actually a debate in the corners of the Internet I frequent about giving men some credit, seeing them more as humans and less as penetrative animals against whom the second sex has to take labyrinthine precautions. Against the refrain of *she was asking for it with those clothes* is the (often male) cry of *come on, we are not helpless beasts*. These sensible people ask to teach men not to rape, rather than teaching women to dress down and cross to the other side of the street and stay sober and thread their keys in their fingers and walk in pairs and threes and and and and and and.

Men? Teachable? Poppycock. Women just need to not be sluts, comes the reply.

I still don't really like locking my car. It seems to betray a lack of faith. But I have valuables to protect—specifically, the ability to drive instead of walking; I can buy more CDs of Fleetwood Mac and Erin McKeown—and I think I must be a chump if I leave my car unlocked when virtually no one else seems to. I envision Bad Guys lurking in the shadows constantly, watching me leave the driver's side door without spending that extra moment to shoot the lock home.

I dress modestly if I'm going out by myself. Sometimes I wear rattier clothes on purpose, trying to deflect interest rather than just sitting at neutral. The side of my mouth turns up derisively at fleshly women in heels and minis. *There's my rolling radar detector.*

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Whoever it is, is still propping the door open. Even though I put up signs.

PLEASE STOP PROPPING THIS DOOR OPEN!
THIS IS A SECURE BUILDING.
BY LEAVING THIS DOOR OPEN FOR HOURS
AT A TIME, YOU PUT US ALL AT RISK.
PLEASE STOP PROPPING THIS DOOR OPEN!

A Post-it is taped to the sign two mornings later:

Than stop experimenting with wierd food
It makes us vomit
No disrespect or ☺

I compose a reply in my head:

ETHNIC CUISINE IS NOT A SAFETY VIOLATION
BUY A FAN

Of course I don't put it up. I'm not *that* passive-aggressive. The property manager posts her own sign:

PLEASE DO NOT PROP OPEN THE FIRE OR EXTERIOR DOORS.
THIS IS A SAFETY VIOLATION AND A MAJOR FIRE HAZARED.
ALL DOORS MUST REMAIN CLOSED AT ALL TIMES.
THANK YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR COOPERATION.
MANAGEMENT

The property manager left my signs on the two doors where I taped them and tore off the appallingly spelled and somewhat racist Post-it. Despite the fact that the door with these signs taped to it is *propped open right this moment*, the fact of the missing Post-it gives me a fierce little kick of triumph that I'm pretty sure makes me a bad person.

I slide the rocks out from their doorstep capacity and descend the stairs with a bag of recyclables. When I lift the lid of the blue bin, I recognize my own handwriting inside: a stained leaf of scratch paper with some story notes. Something I'd put in a black bag with the kitchen rubbish last week. On purpose. I wanted it soaked in garbage water and buried in a landfill, not picked over by sanitation employees sorting paper from plastic.

"It *means* someone's going through the dumpsters," I say, when I call to complain. "It was a sealed bag. In the garbage bin. Someone went through it and put my paper in the recycle bin." It shouldn't matter, someone looking at what I've discarded. But

those are *my* notes. I don't want anyone touching them. I want them to decay anonymously. "Is this a thing? Something your maintenance people do to save out the recycle stuff?"

"No," she says. "We don't go through the garbage. That's not to say—I mean, there might be *people*..."

Those *people* again. "Can't you fix that? Put locks on the dumpsters or something? I don't want anyone reading the stuff I throw away."

"You should probably buy a shredder," she says.

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During a particular fight with my college roommate, I needed to stay overnight somewhere other than in our room, where the atmosphere was thick and goopy enough to churn into butter. I called my ex-boyfriend—let's AKA him Felix—to ask if I could stay with him instead. We'd remained friends and I trusted him.

I was weary from fighting with my roommate, and exhausted from whatever stole my energy in those days, and Felix could not stop rubbing his cock against me as I tried to curl up and sleep. He whispered how much he regretted our breakup. He said he'd been in love with me but hadn't realized it. I went there for a quiet place to rest, but that was irrelevant to his desire to fuck me.

So I let him. I knew he wouldn't leave me alone to sleep until he fucked me, and my choices appeared to be 1) going back to my roommate and the butter in the air or 2) letting myself be fucked. He enjoyed himself and didn't notice me crying.

And I left anyway, because I couldn't stop trembling. I shook violently once back in my own bed, my eyes screwed shut. My

roommate, a generous creature in times of crisis, stroked my hair.

I let Felix occupy my body even though I didn't want him to. I let him use my most private parts to have an orgasm. Hardly a week goes by that I don't think of this, think of what was at stake, think of what I didn't fight for. I didn't realize that rolling over and relenting, for the sake of some goddamn sleep, would cost my bodily autonomy.

I should have fought for it. I should have known about my third choice, 3): this belongs to me, and you can't have it just because you want it. Be a man, not a beast.

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The door is propped open yet again. Signs admonishing this action still intact. I pull out the prop-open rocks and go back to my apartment and use Google Translate to create a sign that says "PLEASE STOP LEAVING THIS DOOR OPEN" in ten languages: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Filipino, German, Hindi, Russian, Chinese, Arabic. I figure that covers my bases pretty well here in L.A. Someone who speaks Italian will be able to piece the Spanish together, someone who speaks Urdu might be able to untangle the Hindi. I tape a copy to each side of the exterior door. *Buy a fan*, I think fiercely.

I Gchat with my husband. I tell him this is a hill I want to die on. I'm here alone all day long, I say. That door is supposed to be locked, to lock people out. Anyone could kick open our apartment door with just the knob locked.

You could put the deadbolt on, he says.

But I shouldn't have to, I say. Those people should just stop propping the fucking door open.

But they won't, he says, patiently. Unless we go knocking on doors, telling people individually how it affects you, nothing will change. People don't change their ways unless they have a reason to. Even then, probably not.

I could camp out in the stairwell to see who's doing it, I offer. Joking.

Or we could set up a camera, he replies.

But the complex should be doing that, I type, clacking more loudly. It's their job to be watching out for our safety. I shouldn't even have to make the damn signs.

But they won't, he repeats. If we were having this conversation in person, I know just what his voice would sound like. *The truth is the truth, dear one, no matter how much you and I want it to be otherwise. This is not a safe world.* It's not compliant, not cooperative. It's bloody and petty and penetrative.

Why should I have to shoot the deadbolt? I want to ask. Why should I have to buy a shredder, or take my package to the post office, or dress modestly? Why should I be the one who adapts my behavior to suit the violent world, when I follow the rules and use my turn signals and pay my taxes? Why aren't the protectors protecting? Why doesn't my body belong inalienably to me?

It's not you I don't trust, honey.

Do you want to look into other apartments? my husband asks.

I leave my fingers on the home keys for a long time, staring at his words. We've already painted, decorated, signed next year's lease. It's a busy summer ahead of us.

I only had my roommate to go back to, you see. I didn't know what else to do, who else to turn to. Rolling over, relenting, allowing, consenting, felt like the other half of a binary decision.

The murky other options seemed too awkward, too accusatory, too dramatic.

No, I say. I'll just use the deadbolt. I'll just get over it and use the deadbolt.