

The End of Unemployed Anastasia and the Once Rebellious Panda

A short story in two parts.

Part I

Anastasia heard a grinding noise and a clunk; felt a small jolt and then a much bigger jolt; saw the lights flicker once, twice, three-times; and then the elevator came to a halt.

Fuck!

Anastasia was late and a jammed up elevator would serve only to further delay her arrival.

She scolded herself for not leaving home earlier: “Silly, Anastasia. Silly! Silly!”

It was not, however, entirely her fault: a last minute ladder in her stockings had forced a last minute mad dash to her closet and a lack of ladder-less lilac leggings had forced a last minute change of outfit.

Anastasia was upset.

If the elevator did not start moving very soon her new job (fingers crossed) was as good as gone. The listing said punctuality was a top priority but punctual was something she was most definitely not being. In fact, she was extremely tardy, and with the pointer finger on her right hand she frantically attacked the elevator’s shiny numbered silver buttons to try and shock it back to life. This, however, achieved nothing other than to light up little, green LED halos around each of the buttons and put the elevator in the frustrating position that, when it did start moving again, it would be stopping at every floor.

Dammit!

This was not good, not good at all. And she tried to open the doors. First by repeatedly bashing the open door button, depicted in two back to back arrows facing outward from a single line down the centre; and then by hand, wedging her fingers in the crevice where the left door panel met its right hand counter-part and pulling with all her might. This, of course, did nothing other than to snap one of the bright pink finger nails on

her left hand and force her to accept the reality of the situation: she was trapped.

No, Anastasia could not get herself out of the elevator and would need to ask for help. It was thus fortunate then, that, on the silver panel with the numbered buttons 1-38 and beneath the open door and close door buttons, there was a small speaker with a tarnished-red button beside it. An inscription above it read: IN CASE OF EMERGENCY. This was most definitely an emergency, for not only was she trapped in an elevator but she was not alone. In the corner, on an angle from the elevator's control panel, standing quietly, with a suitcase and a stick of bamboo, was a panda bear and they were known to be very aggressive. Anastasia had seen the riots on the TV news and while the job interview was important, the prospect of an imminent panda bear mauling could not be ignored.

She pushed the red button and the speaker crackled.

"Hello?" She called into the voice box. "Hello?"

"Hello," a voice replied.

"We're stuck," she said. "We need help."

The speaker sighed, annoyed: "No worries. Don't panic. I will look into it. Just sit tight."

Anastasia released the call button and a waiting game began. A waiting game with a panda bear in a very confined space. Ugh! She took a step back against the wall to see clearly the panda on the other side of the elevator and see clearly his every move.

The panda nodded a greeting. Panda bears, however, can't speak and Anastasia interpreted his nod as a sign the panda bear wanted to eat her. She pulled her thick grey woollen skirt down to cover as much of her bare legs as she could. Panda bears, however, unbeknown to Anastasia, don't eat meat.

The panda looked away. He could see the fear written all over Anastasia's face and didn't want her to feel any more uncomfortable than she already did. The elevator was a small space, however, and there wasn't really much else for the panda to look at other than the wood panels and mirrors that made up the elevator's walls. It was as such that he found himself staring at his own reflection.

He looked tired. The black spots around his eyes were getting bigger, he thought, and he was putting on weight. Indeed the city had changed the panda in both appearance and behaviour.

The panda missed the forest but it was long gone: cut down, chopped up, hammered, and stained into beautiful pieces of furniture the panda could never afford. He could no longer forage for bamboo like he once had, instead it was purchased from big

cement boxes with shiny white floors and a thousand rows of fluorescent globes that kept them brightly lit day and night. Supermarkets, they called them, and while by most accounts they were safer than the forest—there were no predators inside—the panda missed the forest all the same.

He was lucky, however, in many other ways. He had chosen to enter the city whereas most of the surviving panda bears were emancipated dancing bears forcibly removed from their native habitat as cubs and made to dance for many years, chained to music boxes, with small children laughing as they smashed fire-crackers on the floor at their feet.

He was also lucky he was a panda. Indeed, many of the other animals that emerged from the forest as it was slashed and burned to make way for farmland had not found a place among the skyscrapers and the motorways. The meat eaters were, all but for a handful at the zoo, wiped out. Pandas, however, were different. They had banded together and demanded their right to exist and be free.

The panda was a part of the movement. He was there at the first sit-in at the bar of the Oriental Hotel holding a placard that read: IF YOU PRICK A PANDA, DOES IT NOT BLEED?

It had been *a*, if not *the*, defining moment of “the struggle”. And the events that had followed had been a spectacle of epic proportions. Protests, riots, water hoses, black and white banners, copper statues of presidents and war heroes painted with fat black and white splotches to resemble the fur of the beasts humans had enslaved and might wipe out. The panda had come together to march as one against the establishment and the establishment, as the are wont to do, resisted. Leaders were assassinated. Insults were hurled, as were rocks, and, in several extreme cases, Molotov cocktails. Men had died. Pandas had died. The blood of the two foes mingling in the gutters and pooling in the streets.

The pandas, however, had emerged victorious granted the right to vote and to be free. But now they were at the mercy of economics and ghettos sprung up all over the cities through the sheer force of low incomes and poor education. Many panda sold drugs, some had been forced to prostitute themselves, and others resorted to any number of petty crimes just to survive. The world the panda lived in was no longer divided by species but rather by class. The panda bears were still oppressed but the rebellion had been quashed with the illusion they were now free.

Anastasia watched the panda carefully. If he pulled out a weapon or came toward

her she wasn't sure what she would do but she thought it best to be alert just in case. The panda's eyes, however, told a very different story to those she saw on the news. They were sad, she thought, not menacing at all. She looked at his brief case, it was tattered and tired. The leather was worn around the edges and frayed around the locks. His body language did not display aggression but rather a gentle indifference.

She felt guilty about her presumptions. She smiled at the panda.

"Hi. I'm Anastasia."

The panda nodded, put forward his right paw, and grunted. Anastasia extended her hand and they shook. He wished he could speak. Indeed, in the human world language was of the utmost importance. English would greatly increase his career opportunities, but no matter how hard he tried to learn he could get no further than the sounds of four letters: A E O and R.

"OARE!" he moaned.

"I think I will call you Panda," Anastasia said, realising if they were to have a conversation she would have to do most, if not all, of the talking.

"They will have us out of here soon," she smiled.

The panda nodded and then the buzzer on the intercom sounded.

"Hey folks," said the speaker. "There's good news and there's bad news."

"Give us the good news first," said Anastasia.

"The good news is that we have isolated the problem."

"And the bad news?"

"The bad news is it might take us a while to fix."

The panda slumped to the floor. The panda had a bad leg from an altercation with a police officer's baton a few days earlier and it hurt to stand for extended periods of time.

"Are you okay?" asked Anastasia.

The panda nodded parting the fur on his leg to reveal a long purple bruise.

Anastasia winced.

"Can I do something to help?" she asked, but the panda just shook his head.

With nothing else to do, and seeing as she was going to be there a while, Anastasia sat down beside him. Her morning had been hectic and rushed—job-hunting can be exhausting—and she leaned against the panda's shoulder. His fur was soft and comfortable, and his body was warm and calming, and before she knew it, Anastasia found herself running freely in the plush green fields of the Land of Nod.

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Part II

Water was creeping into the elevator through a small gap between the doors and the elevator's floor and a puddle was encroaching on Anastasia's left foot.

"Don't panic!" Shouted the speaker

Anastasia woke up: "Huh?" How long had she been asleep? She wondered. And it was right then that the water reached her flayed foot. She quickly pulled her knee up to her chest and then, barely lucid, jumped up before it could reach and wet her skirt.

She shook the panda by the arm. "Get up! Get up!" She cried but he was heavy and Anastasia could do little to move him from the path of the clear puddle of unidentified liquid slowly crawling toward him. The panda opened his eyes slowly. What was happening? And then he felt the puddle touch his fur, cold and wet and he lumbered to his feet, rubbed his eyes, scratched his belly, and then stretched his arms as far out as they would go and yawned.

Anastasia went to the intercom and pushed the button. "Hello? What's happening?"

The intercom crackled: "Don't panic." And then: "We're not sure where it's coming from but we are sure it's only water."

Anastasia gave a sigh of relief. As long as it wasn't acid or brake fluid then she would be okay—a little water never hurt anyone. That said her shoes would be destroyed.

Bugger!

The panda's suitcase would also be wet through. The dilapidated leather was no match for the aqueous solution, the panda was sure of it. It was too awkward, however, to open it and check: 1, because he was a panda bear and the locks were not easily opened with panda paws; and 2, because inside was a 22 millimetre pistol he didn't want Anastasia to see. There was also a good chance he would fumble the soggy case and drop it, wetting its contents, destroying the gun, and ruining several important papers and photographs the panda also had with him.

The water reached ankle height.

Anastasia sighed and the panda scratched his head.

“What should we do?”

The panda shrugged and then there was a groan from outside like bending metal or warping steel.

“What was that?”

The panda shrugged again.

And then water started to spray into the elevator through the gap in the door firing sporadically like a thumb over the nozzle of a hose. Anastasia and the panda fought to block the mad jets with hands and paws and the latter held up his suitcase to deflect the watery assault but it did the good part of fuck all.

In barely minutes they were soaked and the water level had risen to waist height.

The panda gave up trying to shield himself and dropped the suit case into the water where it floated like a brown leather rectangular boat on the icy sea. A sea now touching Anastasia’s belly button causing her to wince as it formed an ice cold ring around her waist. The panda went to the door and put his back to the spray blocking the jets and giving himself and Anastasia some reprieve from being blasted in the face.

The water jets, however, were not the worst of their problems. The water was cold: ice cold. And while the panda had lived before in icy climates, Anastasia had not. She was shaking like a leaf. Her perfect teeth chatter-chattering, her arms a mess of teeny-tiny goose bumps, and her porcelain skin turning a pale shade of blue.

The panda had to act or Anastasia would go hypothermic. He beckoned her over and mimed instructions: jump up, hold on, and keep yourself out of the water. She did and positioned herself with her her legs wrapped around his head, in a reverse shoulder ride that placed her pink lace knickers right in the panda bear’s face.

The intercom crackled: “Are you okay in there?”

But before they could answer back it zapped, sparked, and gave a fizz: it was dead and the water was very nearly up to the panda’s chest.

“Fuck!” Cried Anastasia. “We’re on our own!”

The panda grunted.

“We’re going to die!”

Anastasia realised there was every chance the elevator could fill to the top, and she wasn’t sure about panda bears but she definitely couldn’t breathe under water. She looked around the oak panelling and mirrored walls and then to the roof. A manhole! There it

was! A way out!

“Panda,” she said. “Over there.” And pointed.

The panda was straining beneath Anastasia’s contorted frame but at least the rising water was taking some of the pressure off his damaged leg. He wiggled a little and careened his head to see around her. Yes! A manhole! They were saved!.. although he wasn’t a man and he suspected he would never fit. Still it was better than nothing—the water was up to his neck and there was barely two feet of air between the top of his shoulders and the roof.

The panda, with Anastasia attached to his head like a claw in an arcade game, moved in slow, long, water-weighted steps toward the manhole, releasing the water jets from the door jam to once again spray freely.

Beneath the manhole the panda did his best to hold Anastasia steady. Anastasia, however, pushed and heaved at the manhole with all her might making it very difficult for the panda to keep still.

“Stay still, Panda, stay still!” She cried, but even if he could, it wouldn’t have helped. The manhole wouldn’t budge, not a bit.

They were trapped. They were going to drown.

Not yet, the panda thought to himself, not like this. And he hatched a plan. He shook Anastasia off his shoulders and into the water. She could no longer touch the bottom without going under and kicked frantically to keep her head in the little more than a foot of air that was left in a shallow cavern between the rising water and the roof.

The panda bear looked around and found his suitcase floating carefree and unperturbed by the rising water. He grabbed it and frenetically fumbled with the locks but it was too hard and he pushed it toward Anastasia.

Anastasia grabbed at the suitcase and quickly clicked the locks. The case sprung open and the panda spun it around and grabbed out the gun. A piece especially modified to be operable with his panda’s paw.

He pointed it at the roof and motioned to Anastasia. They both dropped beneath the surface with only the panda’s paw and the gun poking out.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

They resurfaced but where there should have been three bullet-shaped air holes more water was pouring into the elevator.

The lift shaft was flooded too! And the water was now rising faster! It had reached the panda’s eyeballs, it was above his mouth and nose and he didn’t know how to swim! Furiously he paddled but it was doing very little and the panda was almost ready to give

up.

“What do we do Panda!” Anastasia cried. “We’re going to drown!”

The lights flickered once, twice...

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Anastasia cursed and jabbed frantically at the open-door button beneath the water. No, it was no use, but she had to try something! Anything! The water was so high she could only breathe by practically kissing the roof!

The panda, with the last of his energy, kicked at the walls and thumped at the ceiling but it did nothing and the water was now so high he had to keep his head beneath the surface and point his nose at the roof to breathe: there was barely an inch of air between his nostrils and the ceiling.

The lights flickered again: once, twice, three times and then flicker-flicker and the lights went out.

Black.

Anastasia was pressed up against the roof but it was no use. This was it: her last breath. The panda sniffled and Anastasia gagged on a mouthful of water.

“Good-bye, Panda,” she gurgled.

And then the water completed its journey from the floor to the ceiling and the last pocket of air was squeezed out of the elevator and into a bubble whose escape to freedom had inadvertently and seemingly unintentionally bought about the end of unemployed Anastasia and the once rebellious panda.