

Type II Agoraphobia

Scott Coon

Gazing down over South America, I didn't need a computer pushpin to know exactly where Cindy's house was. I'd stared at it so much that my eyes knew exactly where to go. After what happened with my therapy, I might never see her again and I couldn't blame her. I felt like such a fool.

"What's that, Mr. Kelly?" asked the little boy, pulling me from my momentary distraction as he tugged at the pants of my pressure suit. He stood beside me on the residential module of Space Station Galapagos, pointing at a small dome.

"That is a communications array," I explained as a clouds slid over Cindy's house – well, Cindy's father's house. "It relays computer signals for the people down there."

"I'm a people down there!" shouted the boy, arms up in celebration. "What's that?"

"It's a weather radar. It..."

"What's that?"

"An escape pod for..."

"What's that?"

"A window."

Janet grabbed the boy by his shoulder. "Calm down, Mickenbaccal. I *will* send you back inside."

To this, Shane Mickenbaccal replied, "What's that?" He was pointing at a solar panel.

Shane was at the very end of a chain of six and seven year-olds strung together by a safety cord and tethered to Janet's waste. The rambunctious boy had the whole string looped

back around to its beginning, thwarting Janet's attempt to get away from him and his endless questions. At the apex of the loop, another boy tested the cord's integrity by repeatedly trying to lunch himself into space. Station security kept a shuttle posted above us, just in case the kid succeeded, amongst other things.

"Sorry about him, Edward," explained Janet. "Shane's a little... *yeah.*"

"That's okay," I told her as I smiled to ease her exasperation. "It's not your fault. They're just kids doing what kids do." I was used to it. As the station's science teacher, taking the kids on their first space walk was just a part of the job and endless questions, along with repeated escape attempts, were just part of the spacewalk. It never bothered me.

I'd met Cindy on a space walk like this... sort of. We hadn't gotten outside yet when Cindy meandered mindlessly into our unruly formation, tangling herself in the tether. "I'm sorry," she said as the grey cord wrapped her legs. "My fault. Walked right into it, head in my thesis... I was up all night after my advisor... Uh! I'm getting us more tangled... Sorry, sorry... so, sorry."

"That's okay," I told Cindy, smiling to ease her embarrassment. "It's not your fault. They're just kids doing what kids do."

"Thank you," she said as she freed her legs, one at a time. "You're a very patient man. Guess you have to be, what with the kids and all."

"It helps," I joked. That's when she smiled at me. With her silver eyes gleaming into mine, I was done. I thought that kind of stuff only happened in dramas but there I was, asking her to meet me for coffee before I even knew her name.

"Make it a scotch and you're on."

The kids all sang, "*Oooooooooo*," but not before I got her number.

We were both science teachers, sort of. She was a TA working toward her PhD and intending to get into some “serious research” as soon as she got it. I was happy just teaching the next generation of serious researchers, like my mom was. I guess I sort of followed my mom the way Cindy sort of followed her dad. Cindy studies oceanography, a scientist just like dear old dad, but less militaristic than dear old dad’s ionic-dynamics.

Cindy and I had one of those dates where you end up feeling like you knew each other your whole lives. A year later, she had her PhD from SSGU and an engagement ring from me. But, that was before we discovered my T2A.

Tugging at my pant leg again, Shane asked, “Are you... Are you... Next week they are coming down there to people like me. Are you coming, too?”

That was the arrangement between our sister schools; they send theirs up for a spacewalk and we send ours down for a ground walk. “No,” I explained to little Shane Mickenbaccal, “I’ll be staying behind. I’m allergic to down there.”

An epiphany blazed across his excitable, little face. “You’re a T2A!”

“Shane,” said Janet sternly. “That’s not polite. You apologize to Mr. Kelly.”

As I tried to wave it away as no big deal, Shane pressed on. “My daddy’s a scientist; says he studies people like you. Can I take you home for him to experiments on?”

“Shane!” barked Janet before turning to me. “I am so sorry, Edward.”

I just chuckled. There’s no honesty like little kid honesty. “That’s okay, Janet,” I explained. “I was going to cover this anyway.” I turned to Shane but made sure I was transmitting to the whole class. “Yes, I have Type II Agoraphobia. I’m afraid of open skies because I was never on a planet when I was younger, like you. It’s why my class is going down to visit yours, so they won’t get what I have. I guess you could say, I’m allergic to the sky.”

“Thanks, Edward,” whispered Janet, even though she was transmitting on a private channel. “I’m about ready to cut the cord on that one.”

She was just kidding; Janet was more used to it than I was. After all, she’d worked up here for years. That was before she took the job I was lined up for, before I discovered my T2A. Type II didn’t even exist twenty years ago. Ours was the first generation to have people born and raised completely in space. My Mom was a substitute teacher on SS Galapagos and dad ran freight to Mars and points beyond. There was never a reason for them to take me down to the surface; they didn’t really care for it, anyway. They’re both “retired” now, running packages together between Luna and Mars, but only because they like the diners at either end.

“How can you be allergic to the sky?” asked Shane.

“Well,” I explained, “when I’m under an open sky, I feel like I’m going to fly off into space.”

Shane folded his little arms as he regarded me with a thoughtful pout. “That’s not rational.”

I chuckled. “Phobias never are.”

That’s when I felt it. A rumble, like elephants stampeding through the station, rolled beneath my feet. I turned toward the industrial sections and saw a green plume shooting into space. Above, the security shuttles vanished, scrambling to respond to whatever just happened. They wouldn’t leave the kids unless it was exceptionally bad. A sick feeling drilled through my gut. “Time to go inside,” I announced, trying to appear calm. “We’ll have an early lunch and then a nice, long afternoon back out here.”

When we got into the airlock, the inner blast door was down and the red lights were on. My stomach sank deeper. Janet didn’t look too good, either. The kids were restless so we let

them take their helmets off but we made them stay in their suits until we figured out what was going on.

“Have you really never been down to there?” asked Shane.

I hung up my helmet and knelt down to his level. “I’ve been down a couple of times,” I explained. “It just didn’t go well.”

I’ll never forget the moment I discovered my agoraphobia. It was at the end of the car ride from the spaceport to Cindy’s parents’ house; I was meeting them for the very first time. She’d told me that they lived on an old, family plantation but I had no idea what she meant by that until we got there. A vast lawn stretched before a historic mansion like an open sea. I would’ve been rather stunned by the place if the great lawn hadn’t sent me into a sudden and total panic attack.

When we pulled up to the crest of the wide driveway, Cindy jumped out of the car and threw her arms around her dad. He was just getting off the phone. “That was Dean Mick’. Now I have to host tea time,” he griped to Mrs. Cavanaugh, over Cindy’s shoulder.

“It’s part of your job,” said Mrs. Cavanaugh, dismissively. “You’re not a pilot anymore, dear.”

“I know I have to do this crap,” he continued as Cindy hugged her mom, “but if I have to do it, it’s going to be scotch and cigars, damn it. They can have crumpets when Mick’s hosting it.”

“Mick’ *is* your boss. Be nice, dear.”

“Nice? Nice would be beer.”

That’s about when everyone realized that I wasn’t out of the car yet. The three of them peered through the open door to find me wedged in the back corner, shaking and sweating.

Cindy stuck her head in. “Edward, are you okay?”

“No... I mean... I don’t know,” I said as I wedged in even deeper. “I’m scared out of my mind for some reason, actually.” A nervous chuckle rattled out of me.

“Hello there, son,” said Mr. Cavanaugh, barging his head in next to Cindy. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nice to meet you, sir.” I wanted to shake his hand but I couldn’t make myself let go of the seat belt. “I’m not exactly sure what’s wrong with me. I feel like I’m going to fly away.”

Mrs. Cavanaugh pulled her husband and daughter out and knelt down before the door. “Oh my, you don’t look good, dear,” she told me. “Have you ever been to Earth before?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Mars?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Oh my. We had best pull you around to the garage.” She placed her hand on my quivering knee and said, “I’m afraid you have Type II Agoraphobia. I’m so sorry.”

“What?! That’s ridiculous!” declared Mr. Cavanaugh. “Come out of there and quit being ridiculous.”

When he tried to pull me out of the car, my phobia took over. What happened next, well, I honestly don’t remember doing it but I most certainly did. I punched Mr. Cavanaugh right in the jaw. Laid him out cold. I was horrified; but, Mrs. Cavanaugh, not so much. “The big oaf’s been needing a sock in the jaw for years,” she insisted, while Cindy fought to hold back her laughter.

And that’s how I met my would-be, future in-laws. Not how I hoped it would go.

It was only after I failed at treatment that Cindy said that she couldn't marry me if I couldn't get past my phobia. It's tough love and it's for my own good, and hers. I couldn't ask her to give up a surface life forever. I had to get past this. I had to do this for the both of us. Another attempt at therapy was in my future but, at the moment, I had a class full of kids trapped in an airlock and they were getting restless.

Flashing green lights brought the rising chatter to an end. When the blast doors unlocked, Janet and I exchanged glances of relief. Then the doors opened. Chaos filled the corridor as people poured into the escape pods. Janet and I quickly filled three pods with children. I put her on with the last group but stayed behind to check for stragglers.

I found myself alone in an empty corridor of empty chutes. The sirens screamed while the Captain's looping image requested my orderly evacuation. A chemical odor seeped into the air, traces of whatever happened in the manufacturing nodes. After taking one last look around, I climbed into a pod. As the door slid closed behind me, something leapt through, tumbled down the short walk space, and stuck the landing.

Arms up, Shane Mickenbaccal sang, "Ta-da!"

"Shane!" I yelled. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was hiding 'cause I wanted to ride with you!" he declared with a smile. "I had more questions!"

Pulling away from the station, the pod put us in zero gravity. Shane loved it, giggling and bouncing off the walls. I barely got him into a harness before the jets fired. I managed to strap myself in just before the stars vanished behind a curtain of reentry fire. When the flames parted, Cindy's house and all of South America stretched beneath us. That's when it hit me; I was going back to Earth.

Some crazed part of my brain thought it could put the pod right in Cindy's garage and wanted to get there now! I found myself throttling out ahead of the others, racing toward that safe haven I rationally knew I could not get to.

A bank of white vapor swallowed us but I pressed on, never easing up on the controls. The jets ran dry. The white began to thin. I could almost see the ground again. That's when we hit something, another pod. Both vessels tumbled wildly through the open sky. Smoke poured from the other pod. I could only hope it was an empty misfire.

The antigravity engines kicked on, lurching us forward in our seats. Then the atmosphere grabbed us by the flaps and shook our brains out. Finally, after a chorus of tree branches snapped against our hull, we hit the ground with a thud.

Still a little dazed from the hard landing, I gazed up through the hatch window, past a frame of shattered tree branches, and into a deep, blue sky. I almost wet my pants. Again, I cowered in the corner, grabbing at everything as sweat poured from my scalp. If only I hadn't left my helmet back in the airlock.

I tried to remember my therapy and use the window to gradually desensitize myself, conquering my fear with logic, but it didn't work then and it wasn't working now. Though, honestly, I really hadn't gotten very far in therapy. I was only there for a week. It was the night before our first, brief trek out under the sky, when some neighborhood kids thought it would be funny to pull the fire alarm. There we were, a dozen grown adults, ass up, gripping the grass as if it would keep us from flying off into space. I felt like such a fool.

Still strapped into his seat beside me, Shane gazed over and intensely whispered, "That was *craaaaaa-zy*."

“Yeah,” I replied, my nerves shaking my words like a thin, metal sheet. “Could you go check the other pod for me, Shane?” *Please, be empty.*

Shane popped out of his restraints and vanished through the portal. He soon called back, “There’s a little girl in there!”

“Anyone else? Is she awake?”

“No! ...Yes!”

I couldn’t leave this to a little boy. I had to get out there and check on that little girl myself, if there was a little girl. I told myself that I could do this, that the branches were like a ceiling; I could go out under the branches and they would protect me. Over and over, I told myself this as I crawled out of my pod and scrambled into the other. During my brief excursion, I was able to gather that we’d landed on a low ridge sparsely covered by trees. But, I didn’t know exactly where our ridge was.

In the other pod, there was indeed a little girl, alone. “What’s your name?” I asked her.

“Haley,” she replied, nervously, thinking she was in trouble. “I’s playing hide ‘n seek and... then... I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. Something happened on Galapagos and it sent you down to Earth,” I explained. Haley nodded. She couldn’t be more than five. Her arm was broken and she was showing signs of shock. I had to keep her awake and get her some help fast, which meant that I had to go back out there. I wanted to puke. “I need you to stay awake for me,” I told her. “Can you stay awake for me, please?” She nodded.

“Shane!” I yelled. “Where are you?”

His frantic, little face appeared in the portal. “You gotta see this!! The lights are all flashy-flashy and people are all everywhere and it’s all: WOO, woo! WOO, woo!”

“Shane! Shane... I need you to stay with Haley and make sure she stays awake, okay?”

“Yes, sir!” he said with a salute before tumbling in.

I had to go back out there. There were no other options. So, I took a deep breath and told myself, *the trees are a ceiling, the trees are a ceiling, the trees are a ceiling*. With my eyes fixed downward, I crawled on my belly out into the brush. Not able to see anything from down there, I found a mound of rock and dirt and crawled to the top of it.

Holding on for dear life, I gazed to the south. A couple of miles away, beyond a highway and a river, the rest of the pods had landed in a football field, as programmed. Emergency vehicles were all over the scene but, even with our beacons on, it could be hours before they realized that we were missing from the group. To the north lay my phobia’s intended landing zone, Cindy’s house. It was about half a mile away. It was within reach, if not for the great lawn that stretched before it.

All that open space, just the thought of crossing it sent my head spinning. I wanted to dig a hole and hide in it. I wanted to pass out. I wanted this to not be happening. But it was happening and two little kids needed me to pull my brain together. If I was ever going to get past this, it would be today.

Without ever getting off my knees, I strapped Haley to a medical board and harnessed it to myself like a donkey. Shaking and sweating, I started my long crawl toward the great lawn and Cindy’s house. Shane’s assignment, keep Haley awake, and he did so with style. Shane danced around behind us, singing, “Awake, awake, awake! You have to stay awake! Laaaa!!” Not what I had in mind but, as long as I could hear Haley giggling, I knew she was okay.

With my eyes down and the trees watching over me, I tricked myself into crawling the thirty yards to the edge of the ridge. A nearly vertical hill, about two stories tall, separated the

safety of the trees from the horror of the great lawn. I froze. Soon, my dripping sweat formed a mud puddle beneath my face. I couldn't just sit there, immobilized. I had to do something. I told myself to start lowering Haley down the hillside but I just wouldn't listen to me. "Shane?" I asked meekly. "Do you see a big house out there?"

"Yup," he said, "big yard, too. They need a pool."

"Do you think you could go see who's home and bring them back here?" Just asking the question filled me with shame. How could I put this off on a little kid? How was I ever going to get over my fear if this is how I faced it? In my mind, Mr. Cavanaugh stared at me in the back of that car, baffled. He was right; I was ridiculous, shamefully ridiculous.

Before I could change my mind, Shane answered, "Yes, sir!" and, off he went, charging down that hill. Almost immediately, he lost his footing and rolled sideways and down the steep slope. "Ow! Ow! Owwie!! My ankle hurts!" he called from below while I just stared at my mud.

Maybe I could wait? Maybe someone would find us soon? I called back to Haley but she didn't answer. As a glacier of fear slid down my back, I held my breath, listening for any sign or sound. A long, slow breath reached my ear. She was asleep and that wasn't good. I couldn't wait any longer.

Keeping my eyes in the dirt, I swung the sled around and dangled it down the grassy slope. Haley remained asleep but she was still breathing while I crab-crawled down, headfirst. The awkward sled tried to pull me off the hill but I managed to get us down safely. At the bottom, Shane held his red and swollen ankle. It was twisted real bad but not broken. Still, the only one who could walk was me. But could I get off my hands and knees?

Looking up to see which way to go, I caught a full view the blue expanse spreading above me. Immediately, all of my organs flew off into the sky, leaving me hollow and queasy. Swirling dots gathered around my eyes, gradually closing into tunnels. My breath drew short. Sweat poured. I couldn't even feel the grass I clenched between my fingers.

"This is illogical," I told myself. "You understand gravity. You're a science teacher, for crying out loud." But, it didn't matter. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. I was in danger of blacking out. Instead of getting up, I fell flat to my belly.

"Come on out of there and quit being ridiculous." The words echoed out of my memory and smacked me in the back of the head. An imaginary Mr. Cavanaugh stood over me, glowering. "What the hell is the matter with you? Come on out of there and quit being ridiculous. There are two hurt children counting on you. My little girl is counting on you. Get on your feet!"

"Yes, sir!" I said to my imaginary Mr. Cavanaugh. Then, to my own surprise, I pulled my belly off the ground.

Beneath my hands and knees, the earth became a roiling sea. It took more than a moment to steady myself but I eventually pried my hands from the dirt and grass and sat up on my knees. With Shane in my arms, Haley on the board, and my eyes fixed on the far-off, roof covered porch, I planted my foot and pushed off.

For the first time in my life, I stood upright under an open sky.

I took my first step, then my second. Each step fell more solid than the last. Before I knew it, I was walking on asphalt. I'd reached the driveway. By the time I reached the front porch, I no longer needed the shelter... well, mostly.

Though it still scared the hell out of me, I could finally do it; I could walk on a planet's surface. I'd have to remember to thank Mr. Cavanaugh for his encouragement.

The three of us must have been quite a sight when Cindy answered the door. Her mouth moved in a confused search for a question as her eyes darted over our little caravan. "What are... how is... what the hell?"

Zonked from his big day out, the half-conscious Shane mumbled, "What's that?"

When we arrived, Haley's parents were already at the hospital looking for their daughter. A month later, I was the second most important guest at Haley's birthday party.

Shane was back on his ankle and annoying nurses in no time. It turns out that the Dean Mick' that Mr. Cavanaugh worked for was actually a Dean Mickenbaccal. It also turns out that a real good way to get in with your in-laws is to save the life of your future father-in-law's boss' grandson. Who knew? Six months later, on a beach in Rio, he became my actual father-in-law. I needed a little something from the doctor to get me through it but I was able to give Cindy the day she'd always wanted and that's what mattered most to me.

Therapy continues.