

My Prison

My screaming classmates surrounded me, unable to express their exuberance other than with mindless chants. They blared, “We’re going on a field trip! We’re going on a field trip!” Finally, our teacher, Mrs. Smith, calmed everyone down. Truth be told, I was excited too. I slept in my clothes the night before and I even packed myself a special lunch for the day. Mrs. Smith sat everyone down and reminded us of the day’s agenda.

“Does everybody remember where we’re going today?” Mrs. Smith posed the question in her usual chipper complexion.

“The Exploratorium!” we replied gleefully. The Exploratorium was a hands-on, natural science museum that all of the fourth graders went to on a field trip every year. I had never been, so my imagination was going haywire. Some of the older kids told me about a few of the exhibits but only one stood out to me. They described a life size maze with walls lined with mirrors. Everyone who made it through the maze got a prize at the end. Being a nine year old boy, this sounded like the coolest thing in the world.

After Mrs. Smith had gone through the safety rules (be respectful, stay with the group), we all headed out to the buses. I said goodbye to my friends since I had to ride the short bus because it had a wheelchair lift. I hated the short bus. It was an ever present symbol of my outcast status. It was a dignity stealing melting pot, where people of mental and physical disabilities became equal.

As I approached the bus, a woman in her fifties ran off it to greet me. She was wearing a blue jogging suit with sunflowers on it. She smelled like years of cigarette smoke. As she drew

nearer to me, she put her hand on my shoulder and squatted down as if to get to my level. “Hi Matthew, my name is Mary. I’m your bus driver. How are you?” Her enthusiasm was unbearable. She annunciated her words slowly as if I needed the extra time to comprehend what she was saying.

“I’m fine,” I replied, unamused. I may have been young, but I was very perceptive. I knew when I was pitied.

Mary ushered me to the wheelchair lift. It was like she thought she was saving me from the harshness of the outside world, giving me refuge from my peers, and providing me a place that I could call home. No one ever ridiculed me. I had several friends in my class. I never felt more alienated than when I rode the short bus.

I rolled onto the wheelchair lift which was protruding out of the back of the bus and onto the pavement. As the lift ascended, my classmates gawked in bewilderment. Their faces looked like that of a confused Labrador, head tilted, deeply perplexed. I felt like I was the first exhibit at the museum, on display like an animal at the zoo. I was used to it, and I did not blame them. You can’t blame kids for being curious.

When the lift reached the point where it was level with the cabin of the bus, I retreated to my seat. The interior was damp and dark. The leather hung like stalactites from the ceiling and backs of chairs. The sheet metal that lined the walls was rusted and studded with stray screws, ready to ensnare the elbow of an unwary passenger. It smelled like vomit and humiliation. There was one other person who kept me company on the bus. I did not know his name because he was so severely autistic that he could not speak, but we had met before. “How’s it going

buddy?” I said, not expecting a response but maybe a gesture of recognition. He didn’t respond though. He persisted in bobbing his head to the beat of some music that only he heard.

“Colin doesn’t speak much, Matthew,” Mary hollered from the front of the bus in her usual condescending manner. As if I could not remember our last encounter.

We pulled out of the school parking lot and followed the other buses to the Exploratorium. I watched Colin as he stared blankly at the back of the seat in front of him. I wondered what it must feel like to be so cut off from the world, both physically and mentally, how it must feel to be so oblivious to the world around you and trapped in isolation. I could not help but feel sorry for him, Colin. I wished I could relate to him. For the rest of the commute I pondered on what wonders the Exploratorium would bring. I speculated on what I might learn, what I might discover; all the while the maze still lingered in the back of my mind.

Finally the buses pulled to a stop in front of an enormous brick structure with multiple levels. It had large sparkling panes of glass which enshrouded the face of the building like a sea at dusk. The face of the Exploratorium truly concealed its magnitude; it was bigger than Wal-Mart!

We went through the same routine again. Mary unloaded me on the wheelchair lift and my classmates gaped at me like a circus performer as they walked from the buses to the entrance of the museum. When my “stage” had fully descended, I joined the flood of my fourth grade class. The buses had parked quite a ways from the entrance of the building.

“Hey man, need a push?” about three random teachers and parent volunteers asked me within a two minute stroll. I wondered if I really looked that pitiful and helpless. I politely told them that I was fine and that I would rather do it myself. I hate getting extra attention.

Having already purchased our tickets, the teachers led us straight into the museum. Kids pushed and shoved to pry their way through the entrance first. I bypassed the blockade of students by going through a handicapped accessible door around the corner. The interior of the Exploratorium was glorious. It had high risen ceilings and was not divided by rooms or hallways. The whole place was very open. The second floor was like a balcony that went around the perimeter of the first. As far as the eye could see, there were exhibits placed all over the first floor, each spaced about ten feet from the other. Around each exhibit, stood a ring of observers, reading about and performing the actions of the scientific phenomena that each station demonstrated.

As soon as my classmates were in the building the safety rules went to hell. It was a mad dash to look at every exhibit so that we could go to the second floor where the fun stuff was. I was genuinely interested in the exhibits though. I looked at one that showed the effects of sound waves on different elements. It consisted of a glass box with a metal plate, an assortment of sandy materials separated by buckets, and a speaker. After putting each element individually on the plate and turning up the frequency on the speaker, I observed that the vibrations from the sound waves caused the sandy elements to form various patterns on the plate. I investigated another exhibit which involved throwing small metal objects into a wind tunnel to observe differences in aerodynamics.

We spent the whole morning experimenting with the various displays. After about three hours, the teachers managed to wrangle all of the students and herd us into the small cafeteria for lunch. I was excited to eat my lunch, a turkey and avocado sandwich, yum! All of my peers sat around and described what they had seen and learned with childish buoyancy. They stood up

and acted out what they had done like a game of charades, all the while their mouths filled with cookies and potato chips. We all laughed in response.

When it seemed as though everyone had eaten their fill, Mrs. Smith stood on a chair to address the students. “Is everybody having fun and learning a little too?”

“Yes!” the entire cafeteria full of fourth graders replied in earnest.

“That’s great!” Mrs. Smith said, even more enthusiastically than her students. “Well when we’re all through with our lunches, we’re going to go upstairs for the afternoon!”

Like the running of the bulls, everyone dropped what they were eating and ran for the stairs. I went for the elevator as fast as I could. The anticipation was building. I had to find the maze and get through it first. I fantasized about what the prize might be; maybe it would be a motorcycle or a jet ski. I got into the elevator and slammed the “two” button. It seemed to take an eternity to reach the second floor.

As soon as the elevator doors flung open, I scanned the area for any signs of a life size maze. Sure enough, there was a sign right in front of me that read *Mirror Maze*. The only problem was that there was a horde of tourists in my way, each wanting to steal my glory and complete the maze before me. I waited in line. I seemed to have spent a lifetime in that line. I wondered how confusing it might be to go through a maze with all of the walls lined with mirrors. Judging from the size of the first floor and where the entrance to the maze was located, it must have taken up more than half of the second floor.

As I drew near to the front of the line, I could see a narrow black door shrouded by a curtain. There was a museum employee who regulated the traffic going into the maze. The exhilaration that I felt was increasing; I was almost to the front.

Finally, the second before I was about to explode from the excitement, it was my turn to enter the maze. After the doorman permitted me to enter, I gave my wheelchair a final push through the curtains. Bam! I was halted. The doorway was too narrow for my wheelchair to fit through. I began to panic. I thrust my chair this way and that in a last ditch effort to make it through to the other side. I was so close. If I had but an inch of leeway I would be exploring the wonders of the maze.

“Sorry buddy. I don’t think it’s going to work,” the doorman said, without realizing that he had just ripped my life apart.

I realized that the effort was hopeless and made my way back downstairs, defeated. I did not realize that the maze was not wheelchair accessible. My whole life depended on whether things were wheelchair accessible. I knew I was different, but never before had my disability stopped me from doing anything. I sat downstairs alone, without even my self-worth to keep me company. I sat confined and restricted by a chair with four wheels; my prison.