

## FEAR

### *Miss Mouse is in the House*

*I can barely conceal beneath this modest smile my extraordinary gift for succumbing to fear.*

*How do I explain that my greatest fear is directly in relation to being?*  
— Clarise Lispector

To my dismay, I have discovered that the organizing principle—not a side show— behind my entire rainmaking enterprise is nothing but fear. A seller’s sweet spot is supposed to be meeting with buyers, but mine is cowering under my desk, shrinking from the whiplash of *Activity! Activity! Activity!* The truth is client contact is painful. Sales calls mortify and unnerve me. As far as salespeople go, I am of the timid, no-confidence type, not all teeth and outstretched arm.

Miss Mouse: *C’est moi!* Trembly and twitchy, my mouse-self bolts from her hole, snatches a scrap of sale, and scurries back to safety. Each foray costs a considerable quantity of psychic energy, requiring a compensatory retreat to recharge, *lick! lick! lick!* wounds, regain equilibrium. Once I have calmed myself, I scamper out to sell again. To emerge must be well worth my while, making the calculus of the cheese forever focal. This calculation — that potential benefits be commensurate with invisible, felt costs — accounts for my refusal to play for trivial stakes, my dread of small sales.

Just because the monster wasn’t under the bed last night doesn’t mean it won’t be there tonight or tomorrow night. Fear feeds—and feeds on—an overactive imagination, conjures bleak scenes we then sear in our bodies. As the dramatist Fassbinder writes, “Fear eats the

soul.” Fear is a shock to the brain. Fears have embedded histories, are geological as well as psychological. They are archaic, not surface phenomena, dynamic, and can swarm.

Fear is tangible, like a block of wood, and I am a woodcarver, whose work is to shape it into a sale. Until the final papers are signed, a sale exists only in one’s imagination, but the fear is in my fingers, and I slice one delicate wood-shaving after another, patiently turning my fear this way and that, trying to see where to place my blade, where the next cut should fall.

Fear is the elephant in the conference room, my nose wrinkling at its stink. My ever-present fear — every salesperson’s fear — is to be out-of-business (OOB): no qualified prospects (QPs) to call, pipeline empty, supply chain dry. Buried beneath this fear lies an even deeper fear: I will never make enough money to cash out and quit this racket. The job devours me.

I am afraid of half-willed things. I am afraid that closing a sale will corrupt me. I am afraid that *in* calculating I shall *become* calculating. I am afraid that after a hard gaze at a financial statement I shall forget to soften my gaze to an individual’s face. I am afraid of growing a thick skin that is impermeable to love. I am afraid of discovering I have the soul of a bookkeeper. I am afraid my last sale will be my last sale. I am afraid of feeling so afraid, of fear’s phantom load depleting my flickering energy.

The sales industry has a schizophrenic attitude toward fear. They fan your fears, milking them to goad you on, while at the same time insisting you hide them, treating fear as a contagious plague and mustering an array of linguistic artillery to combat it: attempting to snuff it out with cliches, cheerleading platitudes, and bullying imperatives; shaming and mocking; bombarding it with metaphors of sports and war. We also hear: *Get rid of fear, and that is all you ever have to get rid of.* But no-one unfolds with granularity — without

imperatives — *how* to abolish it. It is as if to be a successful salesperson one must no longer be a human being, but a weird mechanism whose wires don't leak blood.

Who are these sages sermonizing on fear, and what is their relationship to the woman sweating under my shoulder pads, shivering inside my sheer pantyhose, shaking in my kitten heels? *Fear*, they say, *alerts you*. But fear mangles my breath pattern, lays eggs in the marrow of my bones. It is not a red light blinking across the street. Nike prescribes: *Just Do It!* What does it mean that the inspiration for this imperative was reputedly taken from Gary Gilmore's last words?

Another murderer, Macbeth, employed the monosyllabic rhythm of *do + it* to egg himself on: "If it were done when 'tis done then t'were well/ It were done quickly" before Lady M interrupts him: "But screw your courage to the sticking place/And we'll not fail". Tell me, please, which do I lack: a screwdriver, courage, or a sticking place?

Yes, there is an element of powering on through fear — Beckett might say 'crawling on' — but slogans and imperatives are too blunt instruments for my stubborn and wily flat-mate, which requires a finer touch and more than a bit of Br'er Rabbit's cunning.

Fear is notoriously slippery, generalizing into anxiety. Inattention breeds it. If I take my eye off it, the invisible, gravitational force of my comfort zone will draw me back into easier, low-risk work and away from scarier but essential acts of groaning growth.

Fear, a whistling warden of my habits, master-locks all the doors with me inside, and patrols the perimeter of my comfort zone, arming the wall with sharded glass, barbed wire, blaring alarms — all the security industry paraphernalia. When we remain deep within our habits, fear sleeps; familiarity and repetition croon it lullabies. But when our desire lies

outside, and we tiptoe toward the gate, fear opens its Argus eyes and flexes its savage claws. Inside, I linger, engaging in elaborate planning, examining the typeface on my presentations, redesigning filing systems, color-coding my calendar, servicing small accounts, existing clients who greet me with a smile. If I'm not vigilant, you can find me here, tinkering away, within my padded cell. That's the problem.

All too often I find that I have worked hard (*tick*), worked long (*tick*), clocked improvement (*tick*), and yet have left fear untouched, free to waltz through the frames of my days like a perpetual-attention-test gorilla.

*How to ease my apprehensions just enough to encourage myself to do the next needed scary thing.* This becomes my secret job description: not how to sell, but how to temper fear.

Why do I think in terms of less fear, and not more courage? Because we work with what we have? Or is it symptomatic? My mission is to scoop enough fear out of the bath water that it won't overflow when I get in.

As reported by Gustav Jonsson in *Jacobin*, the "seat of courage," Musil once remarked, is not in the heart but "by and large in the billfold."

We're told we have four possibilities when it comes to fear: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. What I find myself doing — and it sounds simplistic — is to fuck around with it, inventing goofy games and cheap tricks, filling a grab bag of precise and often self-contradictory moves to work the gap between my vaulting fear and my crawling ambition.

I have been known to freeze, rabbit-like, when I sense mortal danger. But rabbits, according to Eugene Terekhin, also have a full repertoire of other survival moves when in peril:

When pursued by a wolf, [a rabbit] may run in a circle and then make one long leap out of the loop. The wolf, following the circular scent track, loses track of its prey. If chased by a hunting dog, a rabbit may allow the dog to get very close and then do a backwards somersault just as the dog lunges forward in what it thinks is its final grab. Often the dog loses sight of the rabbit in that instant and the rabbit gets away. If the dog still has a bead on the rabbit, the rabbit may then start doing a spasmodic “crazy dance.” It is believed that this behavior is designed to make the dog think the rabbit is possibly rabid and dangerous. Finally, rabbits have been known to jump right into the arms of human hunters.

Fear lurks in the uncertainties between sales, but fear can be met with methodology, by designing multiple fail-safe mechanisms to insulate me from the psychological conflicts inherent in this line of work.

If I don't excavate my fear, how do I know it's not in the smoke-filled back room calling the shots?

Once I find a fear, I mark its location with indelible, glow-in-the-dark dye on the map of my desires. I must work precisely at the spot where fear patrols the border of my comfort zone, neither so deep inside its gravitational field that I stay stagnant, nor so far out in space that I lose myself. Here I am drawing on the work of the great Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who identified the *zone of proximity*, that area at the edge of one's current competency where all learning takes place. My puzzle is to find that shifting spot just past my outstretched fingertips and keep myself in play there.

When I have located a fear, identified it, pinned it down, and anesthetized it, I feel calmed and less lonely.

*What are you afraid of?* Examine one fear. Name it. Hold it up to the light, turn it over, scrutinize it close-up. *Take your time.* What can you do proximate to that fear, one step in mid-air as you approach its porch step. Can you find that spot? Can you surround it. Tell it to come out with its hands up? Can you dip your big toe in it for a nanosecond? Don't step on the trip wire, don't trigger the alarm. But get as close to it as you can with no space between it and you, and hang out there for a while. Take a deeper breath from that spot. Soften the side of you brushed up against the fear. Don't try to do anything with it, just abide. Tremble so violently the orbit of your little planet wobbles, but stay.

Only a halfwit would expect to demagnetize habits relying solely on readily depleted willpower, without backup and reinforcements: tricks! props! routines! Such hubris. To make my discomfort zone a sticking place and play outside my safe habitat, I arm myself with the most absurd self-trickery comprising three types of paraphernalia: goads, lures, and barriers.

Goads: High-voltage cattle prods to propel me out of my comfort hole, crowbars to pry me out, clinging and kicking. Shove me forward from the small of my back.

Lures: Breadcrumbs and shiny objects to entice me on. My task is to place bait outside, flashes of light that catch my curiosity and spur me to investigate. Pile up risk-taking rewards — unconditional love or one of its many surrogates — on the far side of the fear barrier and then bribe myself to claim them. Lures distract me from sensing danger.

Barriers: Locked doors, mined walkways, cattle grates, and unscalable walls to prevent me from scurrying back. My task is to corner myself, create barricades between myself and my comfort zone, making retreat impossible. Burn the ships.

I school myself to work perched in discomfort, with some pressure, gently fanning the flames of my fears of complacency. All performing artists know this: We get somewhere when *frisson* meets *savior faire*.

To focus one must spurn distraction, fear's most formidable ally. A distraction swerves and deviates me, and includes not only any uncontrollable, be it the weather, the economy, corporate inertia, the pitch of personality, the tumult of the universe, but also anything I can't use *right now*, everything superfluous to the moment, that great but irrelevant idea you want to flash in my face and shove down my throat. I scrupulously sort *everything* into two piles: Essential or Distraction, and attend exclusively to E, refusing all D, spurning everything in the distraction pile no matter how seductively it winks to me, lashing myself to the mast to focus exclusively on what is relevant. (Should I plug my ears or lash myself to the mast? I favor the latter as braver, but not necessarily wiser.)

To protect myself, I reach for my favorite prop: blinders. Horses need blinkers because they have lateral eyes, as do animals of prey, their field of vision covering three hundred and fifty degrees — only a little is missing — to monitor their environment, and which, like my imagination, may take in too much, impeding forward movement.

But there is another side of distraction that helps me slip past fear by displacing focus so as not to become transfixed by it. I distract myself — fruitfully — by trivializing a task in favor of its reward, as a doctor distracts a toddler with a puppet and lollipop before and after slipping her a shot. Some distractions are poisonous and others wholesome, and as with wild mushrooms it is vital to differentiate. Technology, for instance, has two faces. It is a form of leverage, but there is a constant temptation to get lost in it, in part because technology is a foreground consideration, and a feature of what we are selling, and in part because of its glamour element.

To rivet me to what is essential, providing a powerful counterbalances to fear and hard evidence against hallucination, I turn to numbers, counting and measuring the things I am afraid of, offsetting the flight of my imagination with the ballast of math. Numbers are essential props to visibly remind me — and insist I register — where I am vis-à-vis my dream-goals. I convert figures into self-knowledge, as professional sluggers survive slumps by accepting that in time they will revert to their batting average. My client acquisition ‘batting average’ is a measly .166. I ‘close’ one out of six prospects I pitch. (For context, my colleagues tell me theirs is .333 or .500.) No matter: If I want to gain one new client, all I must do is schedule six meetings. I needn’t fear five failures, only the sixth.

But beware of noisy numbers! They too are both a device and a danger, twinkling to mesmerize you, amassing to bury you in their avalanche. I allow no stray numbers near me, admitting only those strictly required to address an essential question.

Another of my fear-wrangling moves is to split myself into Br’er Rabbit and Br’er Fox and play the wily rabbit to my foxy fear. Fussing with fear requires me to be first the one who lays the traps, tiptoeing away, and then the one who blunders blindly into them, my cunning-self outfoxing my fearful-self. By setting up a full schedule of appointments in a week, I corner myself into showing up, my mouth spurting curses at the scheduler.

And then what? Shiver and play...

But never let fear play alone! Always couple it with something else, something bigger that matters more, either a desire (a positive) or another fear (a negative). Just as I must keep fear salient, I must also tie it tightly to another particular, not let it free float, feeding on the elements. Wrestle down the equation: *This* desire or fear matters more to me than *that*

fear. For the sake of *this* fear, I must muck with *that* one. Put it in a relationship. Contextualize it to straitjacket it.

I rub a lesser fear against a greater one and create friction, a spark, energy that becomes motion, convincing me that to avoid the latter I need to mess with the former. Picking up the phone paralyzes me, but the fear of next week's blank calendar shocks my brain more deeply. Cornered at my desk at two P.M. on a Thursday afternoon, picking up the phone is less scary than being OOB. It is only the terror of being OOB that presses me to emerge and do battle.

When fear is your cutting edge, you learn to pierce precisely along its line.

Why pry myself out of my comfort zone? Why live in discomfort? That is the question, isn't it? It is only because I am playing for dear stakes that I choose to fuss so assiduously with fear. By rendering ends super-salient, reeling them in until they merge with means, caulking the void between them with strange melodies, no gaps open for fear or her cousins to slip through.

I take the energy produced inside me by fear and use it to propel myself forward. My imagination spies something over there that I desire, which I then commit to getting, which means confronting all the scary obstacles along the way. Making a sale is Odysseus un-monstering his way home.

Here are just a few of the other (goofy) things that I do... humming to the tune of *My Handyman* along with Alberta Hunter...

I play with proportions. Break a goal into small bits. Even smaller. Even smaller. (If I am afraid to take a breath, then don't. Just inhale... and when it's time, exhale.) Find a microscopic movement toward a goal. As for an infant who is learning to crawl, place all goals just slightly beyond my grasp. Treat each inch as summiting Kilimanjaro and tie it to splashy rewards. Make risk minuscule and reward extravagant. An inch. What's the next inch. What's the next... It is this granular.

I space the rungs of my goals a rice-grain-width apart to fit the span of my fear, adjusting them incrementally like a high-jump bar, so that when I lose my nerve, I have something familiar and secure within reach.

I concentrate client contact (high pain) and elongate prep-time and down-time (low pain). Ensure the bitter medicine is 100%-proof, high-payoff, potent pain. The calculus of Miss Mouse's cheese...

I use stagecraft to curtain off the object of my fear. Once I've taken its measure, move it upstage, out of the spotlight. Light downstage action vividly, employ chiaroscuro. Another form of distraction.

I calibrate diverse kinds of fears. Contrast the fear of dying with the humiliation of not making a sale. Remember, fear is more pliable when it is tethered in relationship.

Not trusting to natural ability, I don the role of a professional, acting "as if" I weren't afraid, employing counterfactual imagination. *If I were a professional planner, what would I do in this situation?* (By definition, all professionals play roles; the notion derives from an occupation that one 'professes' to be skilled in.) Then I do my best to act as I imagine. Play the role. Speak the script. Enter stage left on cue...

To pass the time on my drives to and from sales calls, I fling off shame and insults and cue the Walter Mitty heroic fantasy deed: rescuing young children, extracting them safely from school-buses that have plunged into frigid rivers, taking the bullet and landing the plane full of orphans. I find the mountain pass and sacrifice my life. Always for the children...

I complicate everything by constructing Rube Goldberg contraptions to insulate me from my fear, self-completing mechanisms that have all the dream, play, and ritual elements to which I am drawn. The bigger the fear, the more elaborate the apparatus. If I am too scared to do something, I may yet be able to construct a contrivance, a series of chain reactions, that once in motion will by way of momentum move my marble along a groove to complete the journey to the dreaded deed. Once constructed, my only job is to drop the marble — and duck.

I make myself into Emma, a dog I once knew, who had been taught to sit up, beg, shake paw, roll over, play dead — but only as a complete series and only in that exact order, so that once the routine began, she would not stop until all the tricks had been played out and *presto* — the treat appears.

Inexplicably, the telephone holds a mysterious power to terrorize me. Yet telephoning is what I must do tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Sales managers diagnose me as having ‘call reluctance’ as if it were a medical malady. Every Thursday afternoon, we are supposed to dial the phone to fill our calendars with next week’s appointments. But I am horrified. (*Hell, I’m afraid to pick up the phone and order pizza*, wrote Elizabeth Wurtzel in *Prozac Nation*.) Early in my career, I would beg a friend to sit in a room outside my office to watch the telephone-line button light up when I picked up the handset. Knowing

she was watching, and mortified to waste her time, I ground my teeth and made a few calls. A short-lived trick, as one cannot outsource grit.

My working solution has been to lock myself into a strict incantatory ritual. At two o'clock every Thursday afternoon, I seal my office door and, say, if I must make thirty phone calls, I lay out on my desk thirty M&Ms. Then I mercilessly taunt and mock myself — *A, to earn a million dollars all you have to do is eat 30 M&Ms. That is your entire job description. Think of the shite jobs other people are doing right now, for scant subsistence, risking their lives, and all you — entitlement herself — have to do is pick up the phone and speak some script. Do you think you can do this?* — with as much dripping contempt and scathing scorn as I can put into my inner voice. And eventually something happens in my stomach, and I pick up the phone and dial it, sweating, clutching my script, fidgeting with my scorecard and my other prosthetic devices, Winnicott's transitional objects, to get me through the scene, bribing and rewarding myself at the end of each call by popping a brightly colored candy disk between my lips.

*Even if they are not in, as long I have dialed, I still get to eat a piece of candy...*

The point isn't that I fall for such cheap tricks, but that I fall for them helplessly, again and again and again. This susceptibility to being my own dupe is one of the secrets to how I manage a career in sales. Being my own fool, exploiting my credulity and predisposition to self-deception, I con myself to do alien acts.

Another trick: Beauty whelms fear. If the type on the page is balanced and the font agreeable, my fear recedes a bit. If I color-code my meetings in my calendar book with gorgeous hues, my fear diminishes. If my dress has dash to it, I enter a room with a hint of swagger, displacing fear.

Love eclipses fear. Complete attention burns away fear. Creation and play cannot coexist with fear. I cannot genuinely laugh and be afraid at the same time, insists Stephen Colbert. Music and rhythm lesson fear, as does activating my spine. *Whistle a happy tune... the ant and the rubber tree plant...* I embark on each new sales call humming under my breath, *You gotta have heart.... miles and miles and miles of heart...*

Over a career, the intricacy and intimacy of my fear-fucking apparatus match the intricacy and intimacy of my fears. What I had thought was bailing the boat was in fact building the boat. If I had advice, which I do not, it would be to develop a robust repertoire of fear-mucking moves.

*Oh, don't be so frightened!* But it is fear that keeps me constantly buzzing about, giving me that extra punch, seeing things from multiple perspectives, playing devil's advocate, peering ahead through the fog with my lantern, ever on the lookout, on the *qui vive*. I want the beast awake, but sleepy, fed just enough to growl, but with claws retracted.

David Huron, in *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*, writes “There are significant biological benefits to be gained if an organism is able to learn new ways to become fearful. When it comes to fear, learning should be easy, but unlearning should be difficult.”

What have I gained from deep inner wrestling with fear? All this fear has forced me to become more analytical, more alert and attentive. Emotions are motivational amplifiers. Fear of not having people to pitch acts as a perpetual prod, infusing shivers of urgency, heightening my consciousness of risk. Fear breeds patience and keeps me careful. It makes me rigorous in my processes, filling my work with exact coping rituals, learned

mechanisms, precautionary checklists. Fearing blind spots, I contort myself and adjust the mirrors to spy myself from multiple perspectives. Fear is ground into the mix that motivates me to do all the scary things I do.

The biochemist Erwin Chargaff noted that “A balance that does not tremble cannot weigh. A man who does not tremble cannot live.” Timidity is not to be disdained. It creates a lag that can be productive, a hitch in timing that disrupts monotony. A breath untainted by self-sureness. Like James Baldwin, I learn that “the things which hurt... and the things which help...cannot be divorced from each other.” And I conclude, like Lispector, that “certain fears — if they are not demeaning and have indestructible roots — have given me my most incomprehensible reality.”

What does it mean that a root meaning of fear is ‘revere’?

My fear fuels me and seldom shows; I can bluff well enough. *Inner quake, outer quiet...Inner quiet, outer inscrutable.*

And what does this little animal make of fearlessness? Is fearlessness standing on the bones of my fears, plucked clean, my head topping the pit? Does fear make me ready until I can be ready without it? Can one go all the way through fear to emerge battered but fearless? Can I grow nerve? Can one turn wishbone into backbone by repeated brave acts of being?

Is it possible to train new habits of body, mind, emotion, spirit, and for those new habits to equip a person to move the wall an inch, as Beckett sought to do.

Fulfillment always involves an encounter with something we have to be courageous enough to withstand.

Surely freedom from fear cannot be the same as courage. Fear itself is a habit, a default response. Can one find courage without dithering? Chewing on our fears, do we swallow them or spit them out? I understand reckoning with fear to be necessary for growth, but is its presence *required* for me to act? I cannot imagine my business without fear because that would be to imagine myself with a different root stock, which I cannot do. But can fear become an atrophied limb that falls off, exposing a vein of fearlessness? Perhaps, at long last, some fear does fall away, like a piece of sticky tape that loses its stickiness, exposing, if not fearlessness, then the benign familiarity of an old rag doll, a peace of sorts, a void, a durable truce.

Over time, by confronting *this* job on *these* terms, piling up fearful acts, I see they make an unarguable heap, an accretion of instances of brave acts, evidence I can only shrug in the face of. Acting with fear has proven to be a worthwhile habit to woo. Perhaps I have become, as Clarice dubbed herself, *an audacious coward*...