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Ivy Oration
Text is as prepared for delivery

Elevator Safety and Immortality
By Alexandra Petri

I know what you're all thinking right now. Yup, "Elevator safety is very important."

It is! You have a Harvard education now, and it would be a shame if you were to suffer some sort of accident.

I'm sorry, that may have sounded more threatening than I meant it to sound.

But safety is important now, because you put in your time here over the past four, or even up to eight years. You spent all those hours in Lamont reading, napping, checking ISawYouHarvard, or inhaling that one bag-checker's distinctive musk. The hard part is over. Now you can go out and change the world! This would be the worst possible time to trip into an open elevator shaft and waste all that investment.

That's why I will devote the rest of my talk to elevator safety.

If I may use a metaphor, elevators are life. If I may use a simile, elevators are like life. They have ups and downs, and it takes longer to get to your destination if a child wanders in unexpectedly and starts hitting all the buttons.

In the silence following that last joke, I came up with another analogy. Elevators are like relationships. If you're in one with a person who weighs more than two tons, sometimes it doesn't go anywhere. Elevators are like women. If you stand next to one long enough, they open up to you. Boy, is it awkward if you get your leg stuck in one! Elevators are like Larry Summers. If we left the future of women in science up to them, that would be stupid. But fundamentally, elevators are like life. They go up, they go down, and sometimes you feel like you're stuck.

What do you do then? What if you're stuck in there for hours? What if you run out of things to think about? Sure, someone once said that the point of an education is that it allows you to have more interesting thoughts. But this fails to convince me, since I am about to graduate from Harvard and I can spend hours on end imagining that I am a

grapefruit! (Pause) Grrrrrapefruit here! That's the sound I would make to alert other grapefruits that I was in the area.

What if you're stuck in an elevator with another person and you run out of conversation? Everyone always said that the best part of Harvard was the great discussions you'd have, but I think I missed that boat, maybe because I skipped all the Salient info sessions. Actually, I think the best part of Harvard is knowing that the people you spend all your time making foolish Youtube videos with could, if called upon, discuss Nietzsche intelligently. But there's only so much you can say about Nietzsche in a stuck elevator. "I hear God is dead," you can say. "Übermensch." After that you just sort of sit there, at least until the fire department comes.

To learn more about how to stay safe while waiting, I called the New England Fire Marshal. "Hello," I said. "I'm a Harvard student. I go to Harvard, a small institution that we like to call Harvard, and I took a moment from polishing this marble bust of myself that I take with me to parties so I can pretend to have a paler, less vivacious twin, to wonder about safety—" This is when he hung up, but in the silence before he put the phone down I could hear him respecting me.

So much for literal elevators. What about our metaphorical elevators? What do we do when they stop? Because, eventually, they will. Sure, there are things you can do to prevent it.

You can avoid blowfish. You can read the safety cards in the back pocket of the seat in front of you, and actually take a second to locate the nearest exit. It might be behind you! If you are a king and someone named Macbeth asks you to come and have what he describes as a "fun sleepover," you can refuse. If you discover that you are actually a giant blimp named The Hindenberg, you can stay on the ground! If you have a "friend" named Judas and he suddenly seems to have more silver than usual, you can get out of there!

But no matter how vigilant we are, we can't escape our fate. To put this back in terms of elevators, death is like an elevator. Eventually, it comes. Like it came to the Archbishop, English Concentrators, or to that one red dwarf, Science concentrators, or to Michael Jackson, women, gender, and sexuality concentrators, or uh—please consult your program, people in other concentrations, and you will find a reference tailored

exactly to your understanding of the world, as well as a copy of my resume, potential employers, and a picture of me strolling on the beach in a flattering light, casting directors.

So what do we do about this “mortality” thing? It worries me. Just so you understand my credentials to speak about this, one Christmas Eve—for the forty percent of you who are jews, this is a night when us Gentiles celebrate getting passed over by Santa—my parents decided to let me open one gift early. This gift was a book called *You Can't Be Too Careful*, which was basically a list of bizarre accidents in which people had unexpectedly died. I stayed awake all night reading it, and my life changed forever. After I read about a man who died when his wife ate contaminated fish and playfully bit his ear, I responded by developing a lifelong allergy to fish. And intimacy.

But according to my extensive research, death does seem kind of inevitable. This is unfortunate, but who has a better alternative? We could try to live forever, but bear in mind that the sun will burn out in 4 billion years, taking the earth with it! That will be awful! Where will we sit?

So maybe we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that we are eventually going to keel over, no matter how beautiful we are, or how many times we join the Masonic society. Maybe, instead of just wandering around in constant terror of stuck elevators, we should go out and try to win immortality the hard way, by doing something that will keep our names alive. This is great for our names and less good for us, but it's better than languishing in obscurity –which, incidentally, is the career goal that OCS recommended for me.

And there are lots of good ways to keep your name alive. You can name a chain after yourself, the way McDonald and Arby and Lady Footlocker did. You can suffer a horrifying accident in an elevator and get your name put on a plaque! You can be elected president. Unless, y'know, you're a woman. (*Looks sad/awkward*) No, I'm kidding, dream big. (*looks awkward again*) You can give your name to a Harvard landmark, the only downside of which will be the people with acne problems who try to urinate on you or have intimate relations in you.

But if we want that immortality, we'd better let go of the fear. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and he rode elevators

everywhere! So seize the day! You only have one life, unless you have an avatar, or are a cat who has lived fewer than eight times. Go out and live! Use your crimson cash before they deactivate your card! Use your metaphorical crimson cash before they deactivate your metaphorical card! And while you're doing that, please be careful, and if you ever find yourself stuck in an elevator between floors, remember not to jump and to wait for the fire department.

Thanks.