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# **Wrong Place, Wrong Time**



**W**henever someone asks me what *What Would Rob Do?* is about, I always tell them it's about how to deal with situations that happen to you all the time but that nobody really tells you how to deal with. A lot of these things are not necessarily your fault. Call it bad luck, misfortune, or just the law of averages, but sooner or later a disconcerting circumstance will occur. You can either be caught helpless or have a little bit of knowledge to help you out of the jam.

Take the unfortunate scenario of getting a stain on your shirt. You could be having a completely enjoyable evening out with friends, perhaps eating Chinese food and—bam!—some of General Tso's chicken lands right on your new shirt. I spoke to one of the country's premier dry cleaners to find out how to fix the problem.

And speaking of unexpected messes, have you ever stepped in dog poop? You can take every precaution in the world—always look at the ground, be extra mindful around fire hydrants, never play pickup football in a dog park—yet it's still bound to happen. According to a 2009–2010 survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, there are 77.5 million pet dogs in the United States; so even if 99 percent of pet owners bag their dog's poop during their twice-a-day walks, that still leaves nearly one and a half million poops unaccounted for each day across the country. That's a whole lot of stink.

Surprising indignities extend far beyond the dog park; they can happen anytime you step outside your house. Anytime you get in the car, you have to worry about what to do if you get pulled over for speeding. You only have a few moments to

think through what you'll say as you sit in your car watching in the mirror as a state trooper approaches your driver-side window with notebook in hand. Perhaps you could tell him about a survey done by Purdue University that showed the majority of people believe it is okay to drive at least five miles over the posted speed limit. Then again, it's unlikely that the excuse really will hold up against an officer who feels personally offended by your cavalier approach toward accelerating. But what can you actually say or do to get out of this ticket? With a little help from the California Highway Patrol, I'll offer a few ideas.

It seems there's no escaping problematic scenarios. Even indoors, we're still susceptible to being tripped up. I heard from a musician who found herself stuck in an elevator in San Antonio, of all places. I discuss what you can do if you're in this situation—other than write a country song about it. Lastly in this chapter, I'll take a look at one of the most unpleasant spots to be in: the middle seat of an airplane.

I hope that reading about my experiences, along with the opinions of the experts, will give you some tricks to whip out the next time something springs (or squishes) on your path.

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## **Stains on Your Shirt! What Would Rob Do?**

Stains can happen to anyone. But for me they seem to happen much more often than for other people. Maybe it's because I dare to eat without a napkin. Maybe it's because of my tendency to consume food and beverages in a more relaxed, reclining position. Or maybe it's just because I'm the kind of guy who likes to talk with his hands, even if those hands happen to be holding a glass of red wine or a hot dog smothered in ketchup.

Over the years, I've spoiled many a shirt and tie, and sadly, even a new pair of Prada pants that I got from Neiman Marcus Last Call for an amazing discount. What were once my pants of pride became my scarlet-stained slacks of shame. Not only was I humiliated, but when I got home and couldn't get the stain out, my clumsiness ended up costing me some good money.

It doesn't have to be like that. I've discovered a few tricks you can use before you go out, or right when the stain hits you, as well as what to do when you get home, that will help combat those annoying accidents.

The first thing you want to do is to pick out your outfit carefully. White suede would be perfect for a Guns N' Roses theme party, but wouldn't a cut-off black T-shirt also be appropriate? The point being, try to find ways to avoid fabrics that can be easily ruined by stains. Stay away from suede, silk, and any type of fabric they make ties out of these days.

What's the easiest fabric to get something out of? White cotton. This is because you always have the option of bleaching it. When I was a waiter one summer, each night I would come home with the nastiest stains all over my white button-down shirt. After a while I didn't even bother washing it, I just bleached it each night. Even though the fabric eventually disintegrated, this strategy saved me hours in the laundry room.

Another tip is to try to avoid certain foods and drinks. The aptly named Christopher White, technical director at America's Best Cleaners (an organization of high-end dry cleaners), says the worst stains are from things like wine and mustard. He also said that compound stains, like coffee with cream and sugar, can be really tricky. Each element has to be treated differently, making removal all the more difficult.

Say you are unable to avoid drinking wine or a cappuccino and you get a stain. What should you do then? What you do in the first few seconds could very well determine the fate of your article of clothing. Chris White says the first thing you want to do is blot with a dry napkin. Soak up as much of the liquid as possible before it can really set—blot, don't rub. Then try cold water. Don't use anything like Sprite or tonic water; their sugar content could create a chemical reaction on your shirt and make things worse. Salt is also out. White explained that stain removal is a science, and that a good dry cleaner will know the chemical components of various stains and how they react with different fabrics and dyes. One other tip I learned from Glenn O'Brien, *GQ*'s style guy, is that vodka works well on red wine stains (though he didn't specify whether it had to be top shelf or a well brand would suffice).

There are some stain-removal products on the market that can be effective in getting out blemishes. Wine Away (which Anna carried with her on our wedding night), is supposed to instantly make wine stains disappear like magic. There are also products like Shout Wipes or the Tide to Go stick for instant stain relief. When using any of these products, read the fine print. These purported lifesavers often offer no guarantees of working, and when dealing with different chemicals, you could exacerbate the problem instead of fixing it.

If you're lucky, you'll have minimized your stain by blotting the errant liquid before it has had time to really soak into your fabric. And if you're *really* lucky, the liquid hasn't landed right on your crotch. (If it has, you probably want to remain seated as much as possible for the rest of the night.) The real work for stain removal usually comes when you get home. You could pretreat the stain with something like Totally Toddler Nursery Stain Remover, which works on spitup as well as on

strained peas or any other mushy food you could imagine. You could also soak it in detergent before washing, but as Chris White advocates, it's best to leave the worst blemishes to the pros, who have an arsenal of stain removal techniques to get at the toughest stains. Some of the really high-end cleaners may charge you upwards of fifty dollars for just one nasty stain, but given the prices of designer labels these days, it's probably worth it so you won't have to buy a new pair of Prada pants.

There are a couple of things you should know before entering any dry cleaning establishment. First, choose wisely. If you're the kind of person who likes expensive clothes, you want to find a place that knows what they're doing. Ask around, do some research on dry cleaners before you hand over your valuable threads. Chris White recommends checking out the Web site of America's Best Dry Cleaners to see which of their members are in your area, but you can also check with the Better Business Bureau to find a reputable establishment near you.

Next, it's important that you clearly communicate with the cleaners about your stains. They need to know where the stains are, what they consist of, and most important, whether you've already attempted to pretreat them. Finally, test out your personal comfort level with the dry cleaner—especially important if you need to fess up to stains involving bodily fluids. You don't necessarily have to go through and point out every skid-marked pair of silk boxers you leave at the dry cleaners, but offering a warning is very much appreciated. White says a little note that says "beware" or "handle with gloves" goes a long way toward ingratiating yourself with someone who now knows many of your more intimate secrets.

Of course, some stains can't be conquered by even top-tier dry cleaners. That's when you need to embrace the stain and give it some friends. Your shirt can be repurposed as a garage

rag or a smock for painting, or maybe it's now the perfect candidate for being tie-dyed. Then again, if tie-dye is part of your wardrobe, you might not be the kind of person who fusses much over stains to begin with.

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## **Stepped in Dog Poop? What Would Rob Do?**

Is there really no better “dang!” moment than when you step in dog poop? The worst part of this dirty predicament is that the revelation of animal excrement on your shoe often doesn't come until long after the treads have been brimming with doo-doo. It's usually when you find yourself in an enclosed space that it hits you—say, after you've just walked across an expensive Persian rug in your aunt's living room. You get that feeling in your gut, that “Oh no, I think I might have stepped in dog poop” feeling. You do a quick shoe check, and if you're lucky, maybe you are wearing flat-soled shoes that are easy to wipe clean. If you have poor luck, as I do, you are probably wearing a brand-new pair of hiking boots, the ones with the deep treads perfect for poop to fill up every little last crevice. What do you do? You can try cleaning it out with a stick if you can find one. Some lucky people, like moms, may have baby wipes nearby, and if you're a proctologist, you may have some spare rubber gloves in your pocket. Most likely you're going to have to do it by hand. Yes, you will have to touch the dog poop with your bare hands. It's so gross.

The sad truth is that I have a large collection of dog-poop experiences. To be sure, some of my *schnauzer shizer* stories are more memorable than others. One that comes to mind happened at my Hebrew elementary school, where I went by

my Hebrew name, Elihu. Most people get it confused with Eliahu, a prophet who's ritually invited into Jewish homes during Passover. I can assure you that after my little misstep, nobody was leaving the door open for me. I was outside with the other kids, running through piles of autumn leaves with reckless abandon. Lots of fun, but the leaves camouflaged the mushy land mine that I had unknowingly plopped my little foot into.

Once we settled back into our seats in the classroom, it wasn't long before I heard a loud "*Oy vey!*" My Hebrew school *mora* (teacher), a small, round woman with a red face, looked like she was about to collapse. The smell seemed to hit her and everyone in the room at the same time. We were consumed by the odor. Then she barked out the order: "Everyone check your shoes." I could hear wee voices cry out *lo* (which means *no* in Hebrew). I peeked at one shoe and was relieved to find it untarnished. And then when I lifted up the other one, there it was! A perfect dollop of brown soft-serve mush. It had even picked up a few leaves and twigs along the way. I looked behind me and saw a trail of brown footprints that led right to my desk. It didn't take long for the *mora* to notice the look of terror on my face. "Elihu, go to the bathroom and clean it off right now!"

I took off my shoe and did that unbalanced walk you do when you have one shoe on and one shoe off. I retraced my doody tracks out the door and made a beeline for the bathroom. When I got there, I tried to get out the poop with toilet paper, but it just fell apart in my hands. I then went to paper towels, which got about 80 percent of it. Running the sole of the shoe directly under the faucet got the other 20 percent. Of course, at that age my faucet skills weren't what they are today, so when I put my shoe back on, it made my sock all hot



and soggy. To add to the indignity, my shoe squeaked when I walked, serving as an audible reminder of what I'd done.

I have long wondered if there was a better way to recover from this situation, so I sought some professional help. But who would be an expert in this field? A veterinarian? A kennel owner? A dog breeder? Sure, they all deal with dogs on a daily basis, but does that really make them dog-poop *experts*? That's when I came across an industry that I didn't even know existed: professional dog-poop removers. Sounds serious, right? Well, unlike the tough-guy images of industrial waste removal companies, the people in this line of work like to poke fun at their occupation. Among the names of businesses I found were Turds Away, Doodie Free, and Wholly Crap Pet Waste Removal. I got in touch with the good people at Doody Calls, an outfit based in Northern Virginia.

The company was started by Jacob D'Aniello, along with his then girlfriend Susan. He started scooping the yards of his neighborhood after he got home from his day job as an IT consultant, "in a tie and khakis," as he recalled. He soon found there were enough clients for both him and Susan to do it full-time. He told me the two of them would scoop for twelve hours and be exhausted at the end of the day. It doesn't exactly sound like a romantic way to spend time with your girlfriend, but Susan must not have minded, because the two are now married and still in the business together.

In addition to being an expert in unorthodox courtship tactics, Jacob is also very well versed in the art of extracting wayward dog poop. First, he suggests that before you even leave your house, you should be conscious of the weather. A hot summer day not only melts ice cream, it can also turn what was once a hard turd into a lump of mush just waiting to be smashed underfoot. He also says it's helpful to know your neighborhood dogs. If the

family next to you has a Saint Bernard or a Great Dane, you have to figure there are bound to be some mega-poops in your vicinity. If the neighbors just have Shih Tzus and Chihuahuas, you probably don't need to be quite so cautious.

I would add that it helps to know your vegetation. When I was growing up, my family dog Biscuit had a favorite patch of lawn that she liked to poop on. My mother used to remark how the grass always seemed to be particularly dense in that section. So look for random patches of thick vegetation and stay away from them. And no matter where you are, look down at the ground as you walk. It might seem obvious, but these days you have to be on guard.

Still, given the sheer size of the American pet population, sooner or later you're going to step into a squish. What then? D'Aniello says his crew has a whole assortment of tools they use to scrape poop out. Despite the obvious frustrations of having boots with deep grooves in them, he intentionally opts for the deep treads because they provide him with the extra traction he needs. If you think about it, the only thing worse than stepping in poop is slipping and falling in it. So if you're worried about slippage and you're in a likely environment—say, picnicking in a park where people let their dogs run around off the leash—you might want to consider leaving home flat-soled sneakers like Vans or Chucks. Also, don't wear flip-flops, because you run the risk of poop getting on your toes . . . or worse, under your toenails. If that doesn't define gag-your-face disgusting, I don't know what does.

Now back to the treatment methods. D'Aniello told me the most effective substance is indeed water. His crew often uses a power washer to quickly blast out the mutt manure. The key here is to keep water from getting inside your shoes, to prevent those soggy soles.

If you discover the mess too late and have already dragged it across your Hebrew school floor or an elegant Persian rug, D'Aniello says a product called Nature's Miracle is the only thing that can save you. It's made up of an enzyme that actually eats up the poop! According to the product's Web site, this stuff "liquefies and neutralizes the stain," unlike soap and water, which can leave unseen remnants of excrement in the fabric. D'Aniello says any trace of dung actually attracts other animals to the area and signals to them that, "Hey, this is a great place to drop a load!" In short, it invites a poop free-for-all, which I don't think you want inside your house.

Now that I'm more knowledgeable on the physics and chemistry of dog poop, I'm considering donating a new power washer and a five-gallon bucket of Nature's Miracle to my old Hebrew school in the hopes that I can spare some innocent little boy (*yeled*) or girl (*yalda*) from suffering the same shameful fate as me. I just hope that stuff is kosher.

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## **Stuck in an Elevator? What Would Rob Do?**

I'm lucky not to have many phobias. I'm good with bugs, heights, and darkness; flying on airplanes is no big deal for me, either. I have to say, though, despite conquering some of my earlier feelings of claustrophobia, I still have some lingering fear of being trapped in an elevator. Maybe it's all those movies I've seen where someone gets stuck in an elevator, then escapes by crawling up a shaft, only to face a dramatic shoot-out with an unseen enemy. Even though it's highly unlikely this will happen to me, I still find myself patting my pants pocket just to double-check that my cell phone is there when those elevator doors close. I've also been known to take extra notice of the

elevator's emergency system to see if the emergency phone is working.

Luckily, my fear extends only to entrapment, not death. For this I thank Mr. Elisha Otis, who in 1853 invented the safety device that prevents an elevator free-fall should the cable break. Today, Otis is the largest elevator company in the world, and thus the right people to speak to about how worried I should be. Edith DiFrancesco, vice president for Safety and Quality at Otis North and South America, told me that “vertical transportation” in an elevator is really one of the safest ways to travel. My own research confirmed that you are many times less likely to be injured in an elevator than you are in a car, or a plane, or a train, or even on an escalator. (I couldn't find any statistics comparing elevators to monorails.)

Even if Otis says elevators are extremely safe, I still don't like the boxed-in feeling I get from riding certain elevators, like the ones found in old New York City apartment buildings. I'm talking about the platform elevator where you pull a cage door shut and depress a big black button really hard, or manually hold down a lever while you peer out at each floor as you pass it by. It's never a good thing if I end up feeling like I'm the one operating the elevator. The car lurches upward at an uneven pace, and I find myself just waiting for it to choke at any second, which by the way would give me the twisted satisfaction of confirming my pessimism.

Elevator companies know that there are people like me out there. That's the whole reason for the DOOR CLOSE button. Even though in most elevators this button does absolutely nothing, it still provides passengers with a false sense of control while they are being shot up a seventy-five-story skyscraper. Another technique for passenger pacification is the onboard entertainment certain elevators provide. It started with Muzak—bad instrumental

versions of your favorite pop songs that are supposed to calm your nerves, though the practice of piping in Muzak has been defunct for quite some time. A newer concept that's gaining popularity is "elevator TV." A company called Captivate Network (which sounds too much like "Captive Network" for my taste) now provides programming for elevator passengers. While this may be another source of ad revenue, I don't know how much it will do for the claustrophobes who fear the steel beast that ascends and descends day and night.

Every time there's a major power outage, there are always some unfortunate members of the populace who find themselves stuck in an elevator. I found one of these unlikely souls to talk to about the experience. Deborah Henson-Conant happened to get in an elevator moments before the power went out. If her name sounds familiar to you, it's probably because she's a Grammy-nominated musician who plays a hip harp, which is a small strap-on harp. (Yeah, that's right, she plays a strap-on.) While on tour in Texas, she and her partner Jonathan were trapped in an elevator in San Antonio for three hours. The escape hatch wasn't an option, since by law, escape hatches are locked from the outside, which makes sense, because they are really meant for rescuers to get in, not for people to climb out.

Deborah's elevator ordeal lasted longer than most because her elevator was not equipped with a call box. Edith DiFrancesco of Otis said that, had they been trapped in an Otis elevator, the call box would have connected them to an Otis operator, who not only would have sent help, but also would have kept Deborah calm while she waited. If you aren't completely freaking out in a stalled elevator, the operator could at least keep you company if you're bored. Deborah didn't seem to miss the call box. Instead of screaming and shouting for help, she and Jonathan decided to sing

every song they knew. I'm imagining they sang "Message in a Bottle" by the Police or "Help!" by the Beatles.

Now, what would I do? Push the **DOOR OPEN** button first. I know it sounds too easy to really work, but it's an actual recommendation from Otis. Ultimately, if I am stuck in an elevator, I'm going to try to take advantage of the time I have there, get to know the people around me, maybe engage them in a game of Truth or Dare, or sing some songs the way Deborah and Jonathan did. You never know when befriending your elevator comrades will come in handy. If you discover you need to use the restroom, you could ask their assistance in prying open the doors. (This practice is strongly discouraged.) If you are alone in the elevator, you'll have to simmer in your own thoughts. If your cell phone works, of course call for help; but while you're waiting for the cavalry, isn't this the perfect time to catch up with some old friends, or have that heart-to-heart with your dad that you've been delaying for a while? If all else fails, try sitting in the corner, closing your eyes, and imagining that you're somewhere else, like on a Zen retreat. When else are you going to have this much time for self-reflection?

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### **Speeding Tickets: What Would Rob Do?**

It's hard to find a more stomach-churning experience than looking into your rearview mirror and seeing the flashing lights of a cop car behind you. For a split second, you contemplate hitting the gas, but then you remember the countless police chases you've seen on *COPS* and realize that outrunning that squad car probably won't work. You pull over, hoping that

the cop caught you going only ten miles over the speed limit and not forty, which you might have been doing five minutes earlier. If you're a guy, you have little chance of winning the officer over by unbuttoning the top button on your shirt, so you need something clever to say. You have only that minute or two as the officer methodically strolls up to your car to prepare. When he or she taps on your car window with that black leather glove, it's go time. The stakes are high here—fouling this up could mean a nasty fine and possibly a huge hit to your monthly car insurance bill.

To get more insight into what cops are thinking, I spoke with Officer Umberto Jimenez of the California Highway Patrol. And yes, that's CHiPs, but no, he doesn't personally know Ponch (I'll get to that in chapter 5). Jimenez warns potential offenders that being a smooth talker won't get you anywhere. He says the majority of instances when you're pulled over result from the simple fact that the officer believes your actions were a danger to other motorists. He adds that every officer—whether a rookie or a longtime vet—has heard it all. In fact, there are a number of cop Web sites and blogs out there, such as AutoCult.com, where cops chat about the all-time worst excuses they've ever heard, such as: "I have to go to the bathroom," "I'm running out of gas," "My speedometer is broken," "My girlfriend just dumped me," or "I'm not wearing my glasses so I couldn't read the speedometer." (FYI, that last one really has no shot at working.)

In my lifetime, I've gotten pulled over about five or six times. I've always been polite and until very recently have never talked my way out of a ticket. My first mistake was to think that cops appreciate the line, "What seems to be the problem, officer?" They don't. Also, "I guess the speed just got away from me" doesn't really work well, especially when you're bombing

down California's Pacific Coast Highway with your convertible top down and the music blaring. The only thing that seemed remotely appreciated was an apology. While that might have made my transaction more pleasant, the result was still the same: a big fat ticket. I lived in Los Angeles for five years and wound up taking online traffic school three times. I'm pretty much a pro at the California drivers' exam at this point.

While the United States has no "speed limitless" roads like Germany's Autobahn, a lot of Western states have vast open roads perfect for putting the pedal to the metal. For instance, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and New Mexico all have stretches of highway with a maximum speed limit of seventy-five miles per hour. If you head to Texas, parts of I-10 and I-20 allow you to travel up to eighty miles per hour. But then again, for those five extra miles per hour, you have to ask yourself if it's really worth having a potential run-in with a Texas Ranger. I know I don't need a Chuck Norris wannabe sizing me up.

There are countless gizmos out there that supposedly help you see the cop before he sees you. The most popular is the radar detector, which beeps wildly if it senses radar guns nearby. Unfortunately radar is used almost everywhere these days, and not just by the police. Many photo-enforced stoplights use radar to nab motorists running a red. In addition, ambulances and construction crews use radar to try to get nearby motorists to slow down. Radar detectors can be helpful, but frantically scanning the roadside every time that little thing beeps is not what I consider a fun driving experience. One other note: radar detectors are illegal in my current residence of Washington, D.C., as well as in neighboring Virginia.

Other tricks I've seen to avoid being picked up are dangling a CD in the rearview mirror, which supposedly scrambles radar signals. You can also get a vanity license plate that's a series of



Os and zeros or eights and Bs, which is thought to make it that much harder for an officer to get a good read on your plates as you speed away in your Lamborghini . . . or in your Dodge Caravan, as the case may be.

None of the gadgets, special plates, or speedy rides means a thing once you *are* pulled over. Policemen are generally less sympathetic if they think you don't respect them, or if they think you're trying to outsmart them. If you have a radar detector, shove it under your seat before the cop gets to your car.

What works best is to act as penitent as possible. Remember, they're cops; they joined the force because they like being in a position of authority. Go with the flow and stroke their ego. Say something like, "Yes, Officer," or "I'm so sorry, Officer," or "I feel so bad, Officer." These responses might garner some leniency (or might not, as in my case). My older brother, Mike, goes one step further and works the tear ducts. Not every man can cry on cue—that takes years of experience—but if you've ever seen my brother drive, you'd know he has plenty of that. Crying may be the ultimate in self-emasculation, but judging by Mike's near-spotless driving record, it's clearly effective.

If you can't be moved to tears, consider one police online message board I read where a cop wrote in to say, "I hate it when they don't try to at least come up with something. At least tell me a lie, be creative, make me laugh and I'll probably let you go." The few times my audacious friends have tried the humorous approach, it's actually worked. Just ask my buddy who got out of a speeding ticket by telling the officer *he* was in labor.

From Officer Jimenez's point of view, cops are more concerned about keeping the roads safe than with making a ticket quota. I realized if I could convince police officers that I, too, was safety conscious, maybe I could work my way out of a

ticket. It wasn't long after I moved to D.C. that I got to test this theory. I was driving along a stretch of roadway in my shiny black convertible roadster (Mike advised me to get it). I was near the Kennedy Center, where the lanes switch over during rush hour to lead out of the city. Feeling somewhat giddy about driving on the left side British-style, I gave the car a wee bit more gas than was necessary.

At the end of this little stretch was a cop standing outside his car with a radar gun pointing right at me. He motioned with his finger for me to pull over, and I followed it like a tractor beam to a parking lot where two other cars were waiting for their punishment. All I could think about in my head was the word "safety." It was like those Men Without Hats lyrics: "Ssss . . . Aaaa . . . Ffff . . . Eeee . . . Tttt . . . Yyyy." I told the cop I was unaware of the speed limit—which didn't go over well—but then I talked to him about the lane change and how I was "unsure of how it was going, so I just followed the guy in front of me." (It was him, not me!) Then I added, "I'm awfully sorry, Officer. It's just that I'm not familiar with this road and was just concentrating on the road and being safe so I didn't notice the speed limit sign!" At this I received a sigh and a look of understanding. He came back and gave me a piece of paper I will cherish for many years to come: my first written warning. I was so excited, I nearly peeled out of the parking lot.

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### **Stuck in the Middle Seat of an Airplane? What Would Rob Do?**

Air travel can be brutal. Parking lots are miles away from terminals, there are long lines at check-in, and even longer

lines to get through security. By the time you get to your gate, you're already exhausted. When you get on the plane, forget about having an empty seat next to you so you can stretch out. Nowadays airlines need to squeeze every dime they can out of every flight, so your chances are better than ever of getting that loathsome middle seat.

The middle seat stinks for a lot of reasons. You have neither the comfort of easy bathroom access nor the view from the window. You're wedged in, and depending on how long your flight is, you have to tolerate not one but two potentially annoying strangers on either side of you. Being in the middle seat means pretending you're completely comfortable sitting inches away from people who may be talking your ear off, crowding your personal space, or inundating you with flatulence for hours on end.

It was never even a question that I, as the youngest of three children, would get the middle seat on the plane when our family traveled somewhere. On one side would be my snoring brother with his face smushed up against the window blocking the view. On the other side would be my sister barricading my path to the aisle and freedom. She'd be game for a few rounds of gin rummy before nodding off, leaving me alone to try to bend over to reach the bag of "vacation candy" at my feet without smashing my head into the fully reclined seat in front of me. People in the middle always seem to recline to eke out whatever extra room they can.

I figured my days of "middleseatdom" would finally be over when I became the leader of my own flock. That was not to be the case. It's been made clear to me that my role as the head of the household is to make sure that my wife is comfortable at all times. So in movie theaters, at concerts and sporting events, and on airplanes, Anna always gets the aisle.

I guess I should have read the fine print of our marriage contract a little better.

As you can see, my middle seat credentials are fully in order. Now I'll let you in on what I've learned from David Grossman, a former airline industry executive who writes a business travel column for *USA Today*, on what insiders do to avoid the "hump from hell."

To avoid the middle seat, Grossman suggests going on standby for your own flight. It's a risky move, since you'll be one of the last to board the plane and your overhead baggage compartment may be full. If you have only a small carry-on, then you may be in luck; otherwise, you'll have to check your bag. The reason to go standby, Grossman says, is that the seats that are free for standby passengers are often the very best ones on the plane; the passengers who originally occupied them are usually the ones who paid full price and have been upgraded to even better seats. (A quick side note: going standby at "will call" is also a great way to get really good seats at a theater or a sporting event. Venues often hold premier seats for last-minute VIP requests. This is how I once got sixth row center seats at a sold-out show of *The Lion King* in London, the one place I didn't mind squeezing into a middle seat.)

You may also want to factor in the type of aircraft you're booking your reservation on. Grossman points out how each aircraft has what the industry calls its own "pitch," or space, in between seats. Web sites such as [SeatGuru.com](http://SeatGuru.com) or [SeatExpert.com](http://SeatExpert.com) will help you figure out which airplanes have the most leg room. After searching economy class seat pitch charts on [SeatGuru.com](http://SeatGuru.com), I found that Finnair's Boeing 757-200s have a paltry pitch of just twenty-eight to twenty-nine inches, while United Boeing 757s have a seat pitch of thirty-six inches. That's a full eight more inches for your knees. You can look

up seat width, too. The winner in that category is US Airways Beech 1900, whose economy-class seat is nineteen inches wide. That's pretty good, considering that the average width on most first-class flights is around twenty-one inches.

Another trick I've heard about is to ask at the counter if you can sit in a row where there are people with the same last name. There's a good chance this row was reserved by a family who paid for a window and an aisle, then crossed their fingers that the middle would be free. If you sit there, you'll foil their plans, and most likely one of them will slide over next to the other one, so you won't be in between them.

Let's say you end up in that middle seat despite your best efforts. There are some things you can do to preserve your sanity and your space. The first is to defend your leg room. There's a device called the Knee Defender that makes it impossible for the seat in front of you to recline. While many claim it works great, I could see it leading to a confrontation. Can you just imagine the person in front of you screaming, "Hey, you bastard, did you just lock my seat?" It seems evil to tamper with another person's seat, especially since I'm a firm believer in seat-reclining karma. As I already mentioned, middle seat people seem to be the first to recline their chairs out of some spiteful vengeance for their crummy location. Fortunately, there seems to be an unwritten code of the skies that for flights under two hours, most people don't bother reclining their seatbacks. I like to think that if I'm courteous enough not to recline my chair on a short flight, karma will reward me with a person in front of me who respects my leg room. There are a few exceptions to my "no reclining on short flights" rule. Obviously, it's okay to go for it if nobody's behind you, or if there's a small child who doesn't need the leg room (though you might be in for a lot of kicking). Lastly, if the

person behind you has reclined themselves, give it right back to them and recline away.

If karma isn't working, I try to protect my space by offering some subtle resistance the second I see the seat in front of me start to move down. I engage my own knee lock against the seatback, holding it up while a big Schwarzenegger-like vein pops out of my head. The other method is to use the "head block," where you lean over like you're having a really bad day and use your forehead to resist any reclining (watch out for recliners who use a jerking motion to get their seats back, as this move could lead to some head trauma). But despite your best efforts, a reclining seat will sometimes catch you off guard. When that happens, get up to go to the bathroom, then grab the seat in front of you. Act like you're trying to steady yourself because of turbulence and use the opportunity to shove that seatback into the upright position. They'll never know what hit them.

Once you've secured your leg room, you'll want to protect your space from the other passengers in your row. For some tips on this, I spoke with Mike Davidson, a blogger and CEO of Newsvine.com, an online amalgamator of different news sources. I found out about Davidson when I stumbled upon one of his blog posts divulging his own middle-seat survival secrets. He says it's important to quickly establish yourself on the armrest. As the middle passenger, either you can go for outright dominance, or you can work your elbows onto the back end of the armrest, letting your neighbors occupy the front part with their forearms. Now, for me, wrist jockeying gets into some pretty dicey territory, because the last thing you want is to wind up having continuous physical contact with a stranger over the course of several hours. One thing I do is wear a jacket as sort of a flesh guard between me and the skin

of other passengers. The best kind of jacket for the job is a big down ski jacket, which creates a huge puffy buffer zone. If you get hot, you can take it off and leave it wrapped around you. Now it's a makeshift cocoon, insulating you from the other passengers.

The only time being in the middle seat can be a bonus is if your better half is occupying the seat next to you. You won't need that puffy jacket to block anyone out, but it will make an ideal pillow when you try to establish what I call "sleeping supremacy." This is where the first person who dozes off gets to sleep on the other. I'm not talking quaint "head on shoulder" sleeping—I'm talking "raised armrest, full face planted in the lap of the other person" type sleeping. Wouldn't you know that airplane trips have a way of inducing a narcoleptic reaction in Anna? She's usually asleep before we reach cruising altitude. But that's okay. I've also discovered that if I let her get some extra sleep on the plane, I can totally guilt her into letting me sleep in the next time our daughter wakes up at three in the morning. "Hey honey, you've got this one, right?"

If you happen to be flying solo and find yourself hating life in the middle seat, my last piece of advice is not to be a poor sport about it. Whether through money, thinking ahead, or plain chicanery, your row-mates figured out how not to be you, and they don't want to hear your sad story. They're most likely intentionally stymieing any banter in fear that you're going to be *that* guy who talks someone's ear off on a twelve-hour flight. Don your blackout eye shades, put on your headphones, and go through the playlist you made for this flight (mine includes the bands Air, Air Supply, and Jefferson Airplane). Better yet, pop a sleeping pill and put yourself out of your misery. As a last resort, try chatting up the person directly *behind* you. If you haven't reclined your seat, they'll most likely be friendly.