

Panic in Paris

The elevator door slid open. The crowd inside let out a collective gasp of excitement. But no one was more excited than my mom. This 110-pound woman is not normally rude, but suddenly she had all the courtesy of a linebacker diving for a fumble. My mom charged through the door, nearly knocking over an elderly, German tourist.

Great, I thought, just what we need: an international incident.

My mom wasn't interested in the sights, she just wanted air. If there's one thing that frightens my mom more than cramped spaces, it's heights. And we were now 889 feet above the Paris cityscape. Maybe we should have taken the Eiffel Tower off our "to do" list.

By the time I caught up with her, she had pressed her entire body against a huge steel girder that zig-zagged through the structure. The Eiffel Tower was her giant teddy bear. I couldn't help but laugh.

"What?" she said defensively, her arms wrapping around the support and her face flushed. "I'm having a great time."

"Yeah, I can tell. Let's go," I said.

Amidst the twinkling reflection of the City of Lights, I saw terror in her eyes. She was so scared of heights, she couldn't move. I imagined French experts dropping from helicopters in a desperate attempt to free their beloved Tower from the crushing hug of this tiny American.

I was going to have to think of something—and fast.

"I know, Mom!" I shouted, making her jump. "We don't have to get back in the elevator. We can walk all the way down." Before she could think about it, I took her arm and led her over to the stairs.

Hoping to distract her, I pulled out our Paris guidebook and called out the facts about the Tower as we made our way down. There's a total of 1,652 steps. Forty tons of paint are used on the Tower every year. The Tower sways about 4 inches in strong winds.

Judging from my mom's horrified gasp, this last fact was one I didn't need to share. We kept walking for twenty long minutes.

Finally, we headed down the last flight. I pushed the steel exit gate. "See? That wasn't so bad . . ."

The gate didn't move. I felt a twinge of panic. I pushed again, still no movement. Were we trapped? My hands repositioned for better leverage. I shoved again against the gate. Out of breath, I felt on the verge of tears. I hated being locked in. What was wrong with this door!

"Qu'est-ce que c'est la probleme?"

A young French security guard stood on the other side of the gate. He repeated his question. The fact that I didn't understand French only made me panic more. I banged violently on the door, rocked against it. Still nothing.

The guard smiled now. He pointed up and said in English, "The sign. Read it."

I followed his pointing finger to a sign that hung above the gate. It said: "Tirez." I looked at the guard blankly. What did that mean?

"The sign," the guard told me. "It says, 'Pull.'"

Stepping back, I stopped pushing the gate. I pulled instead. It swung open easily on greased hinges. Now my face burned from embarrassment, not panic.

"Karen, you really need to learn to relax," my mom said, laughing as she breezed past me.

15 Seconds of Fame

The Autobiographical Incident

Pick a memory from your life to share with others. The memory could be a minute long, a few hours, or a couple of days. Your life is important and must be remembered so that when you are 80 years old, your memories of times past will keep you feeling alive.

Think of a memorable moment in your life:

For five minutes, write about this moment:

(Narrative Action) Tell about what happened in this moment:

15 Seconds of Fame *(cont.)*

(Suspense/Surprise) What could be mysterious or surprising about the moment in your life?

(Interior Monologue) Tell what was going through your mind as this moment happened:

(Specific Names) Who was involved with the incident?

(Dialogue) What do you remember saying or talking about during the incident? Write down, word for word, what was said: _____

(Visual Details) Write down the objects, colors, shapes, and movements you remember seeing during this moment: _____

15 Seconds of Fame *(cont.)*

(Sensory Description) Write down what you heard, touched, smelled, and tasted during this moment: _____

(Feelings) Write down all the feelings you had during this moment:

Draw a picture from this moment in your life:

