

Nathaniel Harrison is Claustrophobic

By Bess Bateman

Nathaniel Harrison wasn't claustrophobic. He really wasn't. Because the suffix 'phobia' meant it was an extreme or *irrational* fear, and telling someone that what they feared was irrational is just hypocritical. Everyone fears something.

It's not irrational if it's justified. If you have a traumatic experience in the water, it's justified that you would have a fear of the water.

Doctors and therapists all told him the same thing, "*Nathaniel, you already know what I'm going to say. You have severe Claustrophobia. It's been crippling you from getting on with everyday life. If you take the prescription...*"

If there was medicine to take away fear, then why did people still fear things? It didn't make sense and Nathaniel Harrison didn't like things that didn't make sense.

"There is a chance that if you don't..."

Rambling. That's all they did. Nathaniel reasoned, that this wasn't friendly people trying to actually *help* him, these were smart, cunning people who had jobs that gave them money. And the more they prescribed, the more money they got; who knew what it would do to him?

They made money off of crazy people.

(Not that Nathaniel Harrison was crazy.)

There is a certain exhilaration that people get from the things that they hate. Pain, fear, it's addicting. The more you fear something, the more it seems to come up. The more things because you pain, the more you drift towards them.

And Nathaniel was constantly finding himself in closed spaces.

He had a knack for finding out trouble, really, because it wasn't like he just woke up in a compressed metal box some mornings. It takes a situation, it takes a prompt, it takes *something*. But it happens so often that he's surprised he leaves the house at all.

It's the little things, like locking himself into his closet in the dark, and just sitting there. Or when he crawls under the bed and fights back a scream.

It's weird, trying to prove to yourself that you aren't afraid of something when you know that you really, really are afraid and you're afraid to the point that it cripples you from going about your day, and you haven't left the house in months-

But it was *not* a phobia.

Having a phobia makes someone crazy, and Nathaniel Harrison wasn't crazy.

But this morning was different, because for once Nathaniel checked his mailbox, and for once he had received a letter, and for once, Nathaniel actually felt surprised, because he had never thought he would hear from her again.

Dear Nathaniel.

The letter was now taking the blame.

I'm sorry we both left New York on bad terms. Things aren't looking good for me, and I know that you aren't exactly living a dream, either. I have Pancreatic Cancer. It's terminal. I know it's hard for you to get out, but I need you to come to New Mexico. Please hurry. The address is in the envelope.

And just to ice the cake, on the bottom had been written,

Love, Ellie

It was a punch in the gut.

He hadn't seen or heard from his sister in years, until that morning. He knew that she had been diagnosed with *something*, and he knew that she would be going to the doctor for tests, but by the sound of it, Ellie had been in a hospital for weeks or even months, and she hadn't bothered telling Nathaniel until the last possible second.

He didn't even notice the tears streaming down his face until he reached up to scratch his cheek. It wasn't like him, to cry like this. The medication he took usually just made him numb to his surroundings, and when they tried to take him off it, all he did was buy more over-the-counter.

But right now, he didn't feel numb.

Ellie was going to die. His little sister, the blonde-haired brown-eyed tiny ball of righteous fury, was going to die.

Still choking on gasps and sobs, Nathaniel pounced on the envelope, digging out the address and hurriedly running to his car, not even bothering to pack.

(Be courteous when you tell someone with an anxiety disorder that you have a terminal illness, especially when they happen to be your sibling.)

He wasn't about to let Ellie leave when the last time he had seen her, his last words had been, *"You're the entire reason I'm like this, Ellie! Who forced me onto that plane in the first place?!"*

It wasn't something he wanted to leave her with.

The car was harder than he remembered. It had been blanketed in a full centimeter of dust, hibernating through the years while Nathaniel adjusted to his new life, his new fear of being trapped in something, death rushing to meet him.

It still worked well, and miraculously Nathaniel picked up how to shift and such while speeding down the lane, but still the door seemed to tilt towards him and his knees were almost hitting the steering wheel.

He drove for hours and hours down the freeway.

It was easier to think about Ellie, when he started hyperventilating. Ellie; because she hadn't contacted him until she had been positive it was terminal and Nathaniel had no clue how long she had left.

Ellie; because before this, she had been the one person who had been able to get him out of an attack. Because before New York, she had been the one to keep him going.

Besides, what did it matter if he was in a car or not?

It was a fear, not a phobia. It would be irrational to be afraid of a car. Irrational equals phobia, and Nathaniel doesn't have claustrophobia.

Based on the directions, the hospital was by the freeway he was on, in the middle of the desert. It was an odd placement, but Nathaniel reasoned that he hadn't exactly been 'in-touch' with the world as of the last few years, and it might be something more modern.

He didn't trust his own judgement at this point.

Eventually, when the sky was dark and the sun was grasping to stay above the mountains, Nathaniel found himself at his destination.

A single building. Definitely not a hospital.

It was a motel.

It was an old, run down, crumbling motel that looked like it could collapse with a touch. There was a neon sign proudly presenting, MOTEL. It seemed to be the only thing that looked remotely alive in this place.

Ellie never said she was at a hospital. If it's terminal, they may have let her go to live the rest of her life the way she wanted.

Nathaniel inwardly cursed his mind for moving so quickly, but he gratefully got out of the car and walked inside, cringing when the door opened and a bell shrieked, announcing his presence.

The woman at the desk was tall and boney, and she grinned at the bell.

"Is Ellie Harrison here?" Nathaniel asked, jumping right to the point. He didn't just sit in a very tightly seated car for hours for nothing.

“She told me about you, Nathaniel Harrison, days ago!” The woman howled, her grin turning to a frown. “First room, just over there! Now *hurry up*, lad! She told me she would wait here for you until you came.” She pointed one long finger to the first door in the nearby hallway.

Nathaniel swallowed. Knocked. Waited. No answer.

He wondered if she could even stand.

“Ellie, can I come in? It’s Nathaniel!” After another moment of silence, he tried the knob. It worked easily and he slipped in. “I’m sorry it took so long; I was up in... Ellie?”

Eerie silence.

Ellie’s body was lying on the bed, like she had been sleeping. She wasn’t asleep.

Nathaniel unconsciously noticed that he was screaming, although the noise couldn’t be heard over the ringing in his ears. So he screamed louder, but all he could hear was the bell that had rung as he had walked in. He was too late, and Ellie was gone.

Ellie was dead, and the last thing he had said to her was that it was her fault for dragging him onto that plane, because although they had both survived the plane crash, only one of them had gotten claustrophobia from it.

He thought that if he had checked the mail a few days earlier, he would’ve arrived in time.

He thought that if he didn’t have claustrophobia, he would’ve arrived in time.

Nathaniel Harrison had claustrophobia, and his sister died in a dirty motel room because of it. He walked away with claustrophobia, and his sister walked away with pancreatic cancer.