

You're in the Way

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I don't know when or why I started obsessing over space, but I am sure it had something to do with being the middle child. After spending my childhood squeezing into the middle seat of the family van, sharing a bed with two other siblings, and never having a bathroom to myself, I was accustomed to giving up space. Honestly, space never seemed to be something that belonged to me. I was never really concerned about the way I inhabited space, until I noticed how others seemed to have it in excess.

My attention was brought back to the matter of space and my relationship with it while browsing the refrigerated section of Commons Mart. After staring at a cold ham sandwich for a while, I realized that someone was standing behind me. I was eager to move out of the way and recited the words that are usually used when one takes up too much space, "Excuse me." The words came up easily, sweetened by that compulsory need to be liked that I think plagues most people, as I was eager to get her stamp of approval before moving on. I had expected the usual response: a curt nod or awkward smile, something that shows the other party that there are no hard feelings.

She responded with, "You're excused."

She didn't look at me as she stepped into the spot I had been occupying. I experienced one of those rare moments in which I was relieved to have never learned how to win in a fist fight; my improbability of triumph was probably the only reason I didn't start swinging. I'm sure it seems petty, but I was baffled by her aggression. Her response was unnecessarily rude, but that didn't explain why I had been bothered to this degree. Even though I had been living on Vanderbilt's campus for over a month, I had yet to orient myself within the spaces that were available. The quiet agitation that usually accompanied adjusting to new places seemed to ring loudly in my ears. For the first time in a long while, I became more sensitive to the way people moved within shared spaces.

I first started thinking about the way others interacted physically within a space during family excursions. My father, like many other military men, was strict when it came to the image of the family. Public squabbles between my siblings and I were resolved with push-ups and half-hearted mutterings of "I love you." I remember facing my two older sisters, hands on the grimy tile of our local Wal-mart, arms shaking as we lowered ourselves for the twentieth time. Good times. Most arguments were the culmination of the frustration that came from exchanging space on a daily basis. What I remember most about those public outings was the fear I felt whenever I had managed to get into someone else's way; my father didn't like us taking up more space than we needed, and I didn't have much upper-body strength. My siblings and I would walk single file through aisles, apologies ready to be launched. After these exchanges, the beginnings of a question would start to burn in the back of my mind.

I had a pattern of forgetting the indignation I felt when others expected me to give them more space than they needed. For example, groups of friends would dominate the sidewalk, leaving me and other pedestrians to make way for them. After the Commons Mart incident, the questions

finally began to manifest: what decides how much space one can take? When does someone decide that they are important enough to rule a shared space?

It must be tied to power. The power that comes from an unspoken threat or one that comes from numbers and appearances. The people that are too busy with their phones to walk straight, the teens that horseplay, and the parents that let their children terrorize others, all inhabit space in a way that reminds me of natural disasters. There is no question of whether they own a place, because it is their God-given right. Their copies can be spotted stealing any number of public spaces in America; they are the standard. I have seen their likenesses in movies and television, so it would be preposterous to expect them to share space.

In my earlier years, I always noticed that people gave my father a wide berth. He is a large man and I used to believe that his size and his serious expression were what had allowed him to earn distance. He always lumbered through places, mean-mugging passersby as he plowed through the crowds. People always told him he looked like a preacher or an agent of some secret organization; other than his being black, his crisp suits and spectacles were probably the main factors encouraging these characterizations. My siblings and I used to spend hours trapped in Macy's because he had been mistaken for someone's pastor. The fact that he was happy to dispense pearls of wisdom to strangers was probably what kept us there so long. Don't get me wrong—I was quite pleased to think that someone would think my dad could be in league with someone as cool as James Bond. I always wanted to command the space in a room the way he did. I always wanted to hoard it the way others did, but I would remember the way it pleased people to see me move out of their way. Fold in on myself and make way, because that is the polite thing to do. Americans are not anything if not polite, understanding people.

I would be lying if I claimed to have never carelessly taken more than my share of space. In those moments—inebriated by a sudden rush of self-importance—I would often refuse to leave the sidewalk and wait for others to make room for me. Afterwards, I would find those questions again, and, with each new clarification, I would feel more anxious. Am I deserving of all this space I take up? Am I? No.