

Omit the Mayo

Delis are dangerous, relapse-wise. Sure, I could assemble my own sandwich. But then, between rising and shining and lunch, I'll sit on it and its baggie will rupture in my pack and wheat crumbs will burrow between laptop keys to breed.

And! Even if watery tomatoes fail to render the whole homemade concoction a soggy mess of wilted lettuce and slimy cold cuts, just contemplating that entire ordeal – even in this crumbless setting – is a count-to-ten-and-breathe type situation for me. But, then, that's why I'm back, sharing my sins with the group.

Right, here goes:

It's the lunch rush – asking for trouble, I know – I could eat earlier, grab a bite before noon, but I'm not hungry then and why should I subject myself to that sort of cibarious discrimination?

I brave the height of mealtime out of principal and it's lines; lines for everything. However, it's not these that muddle me, nor the waiting. What chaps and roils and rankles me is the *unnecessary* delay:

"What would you like today?"

That question never occurs in twenty minutes queuing, senselessly biding time that ought to be consumed in decision-making with twiddled thumbs and talking small about meteorological peculiarities while the listing of specialty and standard options looms large above the register. It takes concerted effort to end up front-of-the-line, mind uncrossed by that query.

Do they not know where this line ends? Do they not know why they wait?

That's the real issue, here. It's those that stand face-to-freckled-face with the apathetic cashier, um'ing and uh'ing as though the offering of sandwiches and salads is somehow alien and obscene. It's those who pay with perfect change after a prolonged, must-be-in-there-somewhere, two-finger-search through purse and pocket. This is my daily dread.

Despite past experiences at this particular establishment, that day I join the line spirits high. This empirical discrepancy is, in part, due to my adherence to the positive thinking model promoted right here – oh, don't misunderstand me, I don't believe the group is somehow at fault – but it was upon the strength of that model, that I had hoped and willed myself to believe that today these others would spend their time in line preparing for that final question.

My fantasy of efficient execution quickly withers unmanifested.

For starters, the Soup of the Day is not listed. There is none. This is a day and there is no soup of it.

They've the typical complement of brothy eats listed, but no du jour. I never have the soup – mind you – but this riles me no end. It should be there. Not for me, but for those whose choice is predicated on posted specials colorfully chalked beside caricatured ingredients.

That's just the opening salvo.

I shudder, still, at this next bit: the fellow behind in line is standing nose-to-neck (his to mine) – and my distaste for unsolicited contact is a frequent personal motif in these court-ordered sessions of ours, you'll likely recall – but he's huffing at my hackles and I shuffle forward and he skootches to match and he's breathing shallow and short and sour and, even without looking, I'm certain there's drool involved: a rivulet of *his* spittle fast approaching *my* nape.

If I cringe, that droplet will dislodge and slip between shirt and skin, sliding down my spine, mingling with the nervous sweat that this impending peril prompts and pooling at the small of my back where microbes will multiply and invade my immune system, spreading parasites and pathogens of the sort that require chronic visits to specialists and ages abed hoping for an end that doesn't involve vindictive boils and projectile bowel movements and oozing orifices.

Now, I'm hotly bothered and end-of-wits as I approach the front of this whole unnecessary delay. Sweat is gaining territory at the pits of my too-dark shirt and I'm hoping feebly that the stain goes unnoticed, but I can't help thinking that it's talk-of-the-town, which fuels further perspiratory deluge.

I stammer the usual, unsettled by my own unnecessary delay – unintentional as it is, mind you – and with my order placed, I inhale deep relief in the belief that this ordeal is nearly over. I move to the window where, in time, they'll call my name and my assembled comestibles will be handed over, wrapped in branded, brown paper.

This is a *necessary* delay and part of a simple system; easily understood. Or meant to be, and that intent I appreciate and exalt and, in this case, it's an outcome for which I hope and pray and count unhatched hens.

While waiting, most mill in the wings, leaving ample space for pickup, slurping noisily at spill-resistant coffee, gratefully crinkling their way through assorted periodicals and there's one fellow attempting to scratch

inconspicuously at places not meant to be itched in that way. They appear nonchalant, but their seemingly coordinated subtleties of annoyance accrete and accrue and needle and gnaw at my composure, regurgitating an incessant sense that they're doing this on purpose.

I breathe. I count to ten. Past ten. I focus on the simple system.

But even this routine is upset by a single late-comer who struts up until he's crotch to counter. This fractures the fragile balance and others avalanche in, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, arms nearly locked in lunchroom-protest manner.

Now, the last to arrive is first to crowd. The effect: as each order is called, the frustrated recipient must elbow through an unyielding congregation. A failure of the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Perhaps my problem in this particular scenario is an over-abundance of empathy. I'm putting myself in that position – just as I learned here – and in those front-of-the-crowd shoes, one instance of elbowed ribs and a mumbled 'excuse me' – perhaps two, for slower learners – would send me shimmying aside, embarrassed, a myriad of sorry's sunny-side up on my face.

But they don't. They stay; they stand and absorb the ire and close-proximity breath of that morass.

I count the instances of struggling lunch seekers – experiencing each in full, compassionate force – and they number six at this point. Six. I need two hands to keep track. Two goddamn hands. I watch the peeks they sneak at the packages they're handed and I watch the satisfied relief that sprouts as each finds an order intact and properly put together.

Soon those two goddamn hands are brimming and I'm on the verge of removing shoes to keep up the count, all the while knowing that with each order executed to requested specifications, the chance that mine will be botched is nearing statistical certainty.

My name and my turn to face the phalanx impends, I'm realizing as I tally. Not keen on squeezing through budgeless strangers, I hatch a brilliant, though passive-aggressive, plan – I know, I know, perhaps that's where I went wrong – but the plan is laid and I figure that I'd part the crowd by out-creeping them. I'll administer a taste of their own socially purblind behavior.

So, I stand close behind, puffing up to maximize physical meanacement. Backfire. They fail to cringe as expected and instead revel in my discomfort, oblivious to the intended reproach. Now, I'm the one out-creeped. Committed nonetheless, I'm all elbows as I struggle through and grab my sandwich and bolt like the

others, but I've invested more in this situation than they and now I'm feeling defeated and downtrodden – rather than simply miffed – and so really I'm skulking rather than bolting.

Once I've cleared the crowd and regained a timid hold on breath and beating heart, I peek and find they've failed to hold the mayonnaise – again – and that's the back-breaking straw right there...

I'll continue, but, please, no judgments. Keep that request paramount in your minds. It's a bit mottled and moist from here on – repressed? Perhaps. Likely. – but let's see if I can quilt the patches together: a stool was swung overhead to more fruitful avail in dispersing the crowd than any erstwhile, personal disquiet. The menu board came down in my hands. A soup of the day was added in furiously scrawled condiments. A soup of the day. Not *the*. I'm certain that obscenity-laden option would go forever unordered – passive voice? Was I? I had no idea. I apologize.

The commotion *I* caused – is that better? – drew a flock of gawking faces from the kitchen to the once-obscured delivery window. I lunged for them and snatched the nearest grease-spattered collar, drawing its owner half-through the opening. I held up the sandwich he and his cohorts had improperly – and likely laughingly – prepared for me. He struggled and squirmed as I brought his face close to mine and slathered every fear-frozen pore with unwanted mayonnaise, cackling all the while.

Those attempting to flee caught the brunt. All that unnecessary waiting and now they're rushed and look-at-the-time and elsewhere-to-be? Discarded lunches were stamp – Sorry. I mean: *I* stamped upon discarded lunches as I chased them down. That's how I broke my ankle.

I threw tip jar contents at the faces of those who'd previously had such trouble with change – sounds petty, I know, but dimes are dangerous when flung in anger.

I stuffed day-old baked goods down choking throats while shouting “what would you like today!?” at lung-topping volume. Muffled indecision fueled my rage, so I chose for them: banana bread and balsamic vinaigrette; chocolate croissant and dill pickle; tuna salad and carrot cake.

I cornered a pant-suited accountant, shouting at her through spittle-flecked lips “What do you think of the unseasonable weather now?” Saliva and unwanted bran muffin sobbed from her quavering lips in response.

The worst of the crowders were – I'm sorry. I can't help it. The experience is distant and impersonal. – I. I. *I* confined the worst of the crowders to a tiny broom closet, slammed the door shut without regard to protruding fingers and toes – I did that, as inhuman as it now feels. *I* did it, all right? I admit it.

And then, according to alternative accounts and genetic evidence, I urinated profusely, heavily, unendingly – their words – under the closet door after hastily gorging myself on angle-cut asparagus pilfered from the all-you-can-eat salad bar.

Hey! I see you giggling there. Your accusatory mirth is unhelpful. Tell him to cut that out! This is a healing process and your ridicule is no salve. Your turn will come. I'm not proud of this outcome and, indeed, I consciously experienced much of this only at trial.

The pangs of malicious media and their aptitude for embellishment is commonplace in this judgment-free circle, I imagine. There is no way I defecated in a food processor and, through sabotage, set the mechanism to perpetually puree. Digestive rhythms and mechanical illiteracy notwithstanding, I refuse to accept that, and other, accusations on principal.

Oh, that? That I did. I remember it well. In fact, I was surprised to find the fellow who'd been breathing down my neck in line so late in the ordeal. Corner-cowering; sniffing. Drool, snot, tears; the effluvia I'd feared now clearly evident. I pinned him to the floor, mustered the full force of my congestive fluid and let it fall slowly, oozingly, into his open, pleading mouth.

What was I thinking at the time? Just this: Don't stop; can't stop; won't stop until the discomfort and anger I felt on the inside is clearly evident in the eyes of the inflictors. I would foist upon them the weltering weight of my previously distressing empathy, is what I was thinking.

As the whimpered pleas for aid and cries of disgust dissipated; as the dust died and immediate targets diminished, I recall a threadbare geriatric with purple perm entering the deli as I still stood, mouth afoam, hair afrazzle, eyes wild and webbed with capillaries. She moved in careful stages, like a caterpillar, picking her way through strewn detritus and apparently unaware of the havoc reflected in her trifocals. "Are you serving brunch?" she inquired. "Closed for renovations," I mumbled. Her four-legged walker and two slippered feet inched off disdainfully.

That's all I recall. Honest. Hand to God and hope to die.

May I sit down now?