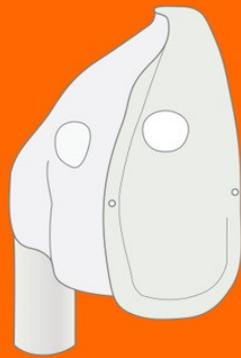


Invest in Oxygen Masks



a short satire

STEPHEN MEASURE

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“All you have to do is stop by my place twice a day and feed Princess.”

Abby cradled her cell phone between her shoulder and her ear, her hands on the steering wheel, her eyes on the road.

“No, you don’t need to let her out. She uses the dog door.”

There hadn’t been any other cars on the highway since Abby exited the freeway and headed north.

“No, you can’t take Princess to your apartment. Ralphster would eat her! . . . Yes, he would! He’s a vicious dog. . . . Yes, he is! Don’t you remember what he did to that squirrel?”

A large warning sign was coming up on her right.

“No, you can’t just move in to my place. We already talked about this!”

Abby passed the warning sign. Something about the air? She didn’t remember that from her last visit.

“I don’t care if it’d be easier to take care of Princess that way. We already talked about this. You know my requirement. I’m not going to budge. . . . Yes, it’s a big step, but so is moving in together.”

Abby laughed.

“Oh, you say that, but I know you wouldn’t really want us to, even if you pretend otherwise. You’d rather wait.”

Abby laughed again. She passed another warning sign. This one was larger. The signs were definitely saying something about the air. Was there a problem with pollution? Sheryl hadn’t mentioned anything.

“Listen, I have to go. I’m almost to Sheryl’s town. . . . Yes, I know Princess is annoying, but she used to be my mom’s dog. I can’t just get rid of her. . . . No, you can’t leave her at a park and hope a nice family takes her home! Don’t you realize that little annoying dog is my only inheritance? All of my mom’s retirement funds went into her medical care. . . . No, Princess isn’t worth any money. It’s sentimental value. . . . Oh, you wouldn’t understand.”

A blinking sign ahead warned her to slow down. Abby definitely didn’t remember that one. She relaxed her foot on the gas, her car slowing to half speed.

“Besides, she’s chipped. They’d just bring her back to my place anyway, like the monkey’s paw or whatever that story was. . . . Okay, maybe it was a different story then, but you know what I mean.”

Her phone beeped, another call coming in.

“Ah, that’s probably Sheryl on the other line. I gotta go. I’ll call you tonight. . . . Love ya, babe.”

Juggling the phone in one hand, Abby switched to the incoming call.

“Sheryl? Hi! . . . Yes, I’m almost to your town. Hey, what’s the story with the warning signs? . . . I’m about a mile away. . . . Yes, I see the big black things coming up. What are those, some sort of buildings? . . . What’s that noise? It’s like some giant fan or a vacuum or something.”

Abby watched the approaching structures nervously. The vacuum sound was getting louder and louder. She could barely hear Sheryl on the phone.

“Wait, what? . . . Yes, of course my seat belt is buckled. Why would you ask that?”

Then she passed by the giant structures, the enormous sucking sound drowning out the conversation entirely, and as soon as she passed them, her car swerved to the left as if hit by a powerful pull of wind. Abby immediately gasped, the air suddenly gone. She was choking! She dropped the cell phone, her car swerving again, and everything went black . . .

Her car door was open, and Sheryl was strapping something plastic to Abby’s face.

“What’s going on?” Abby asked, blinking in confusion. She looked at Sheryl, who was wearing a clear plastic mask herself, a small tube running down to something in her purse. Then Abby noticed her own mask was connected to a tube as well. Sheryl handed her a small canister.

“Here,” Sheryl told her. “You can hold it in your purse like I do.”

The loud sucking noise made it difficult to hear.

“What’s going on?” Abby repeated, speaking loudly. “Why are we wearing oxygen masks? What are those giant black things? Why does it sound like your town is being vacuumed up?”

“Let’s walk to my place and I’ll explain on the way,” Sheryl said.

Abby was about to suggest they drive instead, but then she looked around and realized she had driven her car into a ditch. She’d have to be towed out.

“Come on,” Sheryl said. “It’s a short walk. We’ll come back for your car later.”

Abby stood up with Sheryl’s help. The oxygen coming through her

mask had a funny smell to it. Abby wondered if it was from the canister. They stumbled out of the ditch and then started walking along the side of the road. Then they stepped up onto the sidewalk as they entered the town on its main thoroughfare.

“What’s going on, Sheryl?” Abby asked. She stuffed her oxygen canister into her purse. “Why are we wearing oxygen masks?”

Sheryl adjusted the strap of her mask. Then she pulled out her canister, checking a reading. “Do you remember when I told you about that billionaire moving to our town?”

“Yeah, you said something to me about him last year.”

“Right, well, as soon as he moved in, he started buying up all the property on the outskirts of town. Everyone was excited at first. We thought he’d do something great, put our town on the map somehow, you know? But then he installed these giant machines all around town and started to suck out all the oxygen. We’ve had to wear oxygen masks ever since.”

“Why would he want to suck the oxygen out of your town?”

Sheryl shrugged. “Who knows? He’s a little eccentric.”

The shops along the main road were all open like normal, men and women going about their daily chores with oxygen masks on their faces.

“I don’t get it,” Abby said. “Why do you let him suck all the oxygen out of your town? Why don’t you try to stop him?”

“We did try,” Sheryl said. “We all complained about it, so the town council made a law that it was illegal to suck oxygen out of the town.”

“Then why is he still doing it?”

“Because he took us to court, and the judge threw out our new law. Apparently it lacked a rational basis, so it was unconstitutional. That’s what the judge said, anyway.”

“What? How could it lack a rational basis? Humans need oxygen to live!”

“That’s what we told the judge!” Sheryl said. “But he just waved it away like it was nothing. He said that people go without oxygen in the air all the time—scuba divers, military jet pilots, astronauts. He said that if some people can go without oxygen in the air around them, then obviously having oxygen in the air isn’t actually necessary, and therefore he declared that the law lacked a rational justification and was unconstitutional.”

“What? Humans need oxygen to breathe! Your law was just reflecting that fact!”

“Sure, but he rejected that reason. He said we needed a better one.”

“But that *is* the reason! What else are you supposed to say?”

“I don’t know. We’ve always had oxygen in the air to breathe. I never really thought we’d have to defend something so obvious.”

Abby shook her head, the plastic oxygen mask swaying a little from side to side. “None of this makes any sense.”

“Do you really think so? I thought it didn’t make any sense either, but the media keep talking like it makes complete sense. I was wondering if maybe it was just me that was mixed up.”

A jogger passed them, running along the side of the road, a large oxygen tank strapped to his back.

Sheryl went on. “But it’s like you said. We need oxygen in the air to breathe. That *is* the reason. But if the judge already rejected the reason, what do we do then? Come up with a lesser reason? Why would that be more effective than the actual reason? Besides, at some point, I think you have to realize that some judges simply want to let eccentric billionaires suck oxygen out of our air, so no matter what reason you come up with, those judges will work up an excuse to rule the way they want to rule.”

Abby shook her head again. “This just makes no sense. If something is necessary for survival, then that’s rational! People need oxygen in the air to live. It’s perfectly rational to base a law on that fact. Sure, there are corner cases, but that doesn’t change the main truth. Focusing on the corner cases is irrational.”

“Yeah,” Sheryl said. “You know, after the judge ruled the law unconstitutional, an analogy keeps coming to my mind.”

“What’s that?”

“Imagine you tell a toddler to not touch a hot stove because it will burn their hand,” Sheryl said, “but instead of listening to you, the toddler turns around and says ‘because it will burn their hand’ isn’t a good reason and to give them another one or else they’ll put their hand on the stove. What do you say to that? What do you say when the actual reason has been rejected?”

“I don’t know, but why are toddlers controlling the conversation?”

“I don’t know!”

“Craziness,” Abby said.

“I agree. Craziness.”

A woman crossed the street in front of them, walking a terrier. There was a small oxygen mask strapped to the dog’s face.

“And the judge thinks this is rational?” Abby asked.

“I guess so.”

“Well, what if it’s the judges that are being irrational? What if irrational judges are declaring that rational laws are irrational? What do we do then?”

Sheryl looked at her friend and shrugged. “Invest in oxygen masks.”

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