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Burning Bridges As We Go

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Walking after Midnight

I go walking after midnight in the moonlight well past the time anyone decent is awake. Which sounds like the lyrics from a familiar Patsy Cline song, but in my case is more a way of getting outside for a little exercise. And putting myself in danger. Not real, mind you, but the old heart rate does elevate. See, I work the night shift at Our Sisters of Mercy hospital. Which means, after sleeping during the morning, attending classes all afternoon, having dinner with my girlfriend and then studying before work, I head out having been sedentary most of the day. And I only have these few post-midnight hours, during break time, to both exercise and indulge my little hobby.

If you're feeling a bit confused, allow me to explain. I have what psychologists refer to as VANE – a voluntary arousing negative experiences condition. A compulsion. An obsession. Which in laymen's term just means I like to scare myself. It's not dangerous for anyone. I'm just like to feel fear. For example, say I'm walking at night through a residential neighborhood and I pass by any one of several elementary schools in the area closed for the evening. Well, I might think how scary it might be to look up and suddenly see the most frightening clown standing in the dark staring at me.

*Why is he there? I might think, What could he even be doing holding all those red balloons?
Now he's smiling at me with a great big evil grin and starts running at me!*

My heart starts racing. Sure it's an unimaginative rip off of a well-known movie trope, but it gives me a kick when I am forced to walk faster down the sidewalk out of fear. Sometimes I even run.

Not convinced? Imagine passing some dark, empty house with all the lights out when the moon is full. And just as you pass by, deep from the back old rickety deck, in the partial shadows, a loud groan of wood creaks from the weight of someone really big standing up. A big, giant evil redneck in overalls, face disfigured, axe in hand watching from the creepy dark recesses. Now that certainly gets the blood pumping don't you think?

"Aren't you afraid?" my co-worker Lily asks.

"Yes, that's the point."

"Not of that! What if someone sees you? They're gonna think you're a burglar or something bad like that and call the cops."

"Maybe, but nothing like that has happened yet. Plus, what could they say? I'm not doing anything. Just walking down the sidewalk not bothering anyone."

"There's something wrong with you," Lily, my Filipino co-worker and mother of four says. "I don't want to hurt your feeling, but it's not normal to walk around at night trying to scare yourself like that." Here she maternally shakes her head. "Aren't you gonna be like a psychologist or something? Don't they teach you that stuff like that is, like, being screwed up or nuts or something."

"No, it's a primal thing. People like to scare themselves."

"Normal people don't do that."

"Sure they do. Just in a different context. People go to scary movies all the time just so they can sit in a dark movie theater and be frightened. And aren't haunted houses all

the rage during Halloween? Why do you think people like to dress up as vampires and werewolves and hobgoblins? There's no difference between that and what I'm doing."

"Yes, there is. That's normal. Just, like, make believe. What you're doing is off the rails."

"No, it's the same, I assure you. I'm just using the sensory experience of walking around at night to gain a visceral reaction instead of paying my hard earned money, of which I don't have much anyway, to go to a movie theater or dress up in costume for a commercial holiday. To me, those are maladaptive traits of human interaction."

"Well, what about getting robbed? Aren't you afraid someone's going to attack you or something worse?"

"No. I don't put myself in actual danger to get a thrill. Nor am I trying to court an adrenaline response from the threat of violence. I don't have a death wish, Lily. I just like the imaginative thrill of fear. Which is why I only walk around quiet suburban neighborhoods in the middle of boring upper middle class USA. It's not like I'm cruising through east Oakland or Compton or Hell's Kitchen or anything like that. This is Silicon Valley USA. The heart of rich nerds hidden away in their expensive homes playing video games in their basements or something like that. Not the ghetto."

"It could happen. The suburbs can be dangerous."

"Not really, Lily. The most dangerous place around here is Starbucks on a Sunday morning trying to dodge some trophy wife's Tesla as she races to get her half-caff-non-fat-oat-milk-no-foam-skinny-girl-grande-chai-latte from the drive thru."

"It's not safe to walk alone at night."

"Says who?"

"Well, it's not safe for a woman."

"Why is it less safe for a woman than a man?"

"You know why. Because it is."

"You're saying it's fundamentally more unsafe for a woman to walk alone at night than a man by the mere proposition that she's a woman?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Cha! You know why! Because it is! You trying to be stupid or something?"

"No, not at all." I take a moment to ponder if Lily is right. Is it fundamentally unsafe for a woman, by the mere fact that she is a woman, to walk alone at night? Or have we just conditioned ourselves to fear the unknown stranger so much we no longer consider any situation in any open space safe for a woman after dark? Maybe, as a society, we've become too complacent and paranoid to be rationally self-sufficient?

"Lily, do you think just because you're a woman walking alone at night, some otherwise normal, nice guy is going to see you, be overwhelmed by evil impulses, and sexually assault you?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"That's a pretty cynical view of men. And more than a bit derisive."

"Not when it's true."

I remember once, when I was an undergrad at San Jose State, I attended a sociology lecture where the guest speaker, a retired Army colonel named Dave Grossman, encouraged people to take back the night by refusing to barricade themselves in their

homes after hours. He felt otherwise decent folk should walk around their neighborhoods whenever they desired. His motto being, *"We shouldn't fear the night, the night should fear us."* Of course, he was selling his book, *"On Killing"* and firmly believed the Second Amendment guaranteed every *legal* citizen the right to bear arms. His preference for his own daughter being a Sig Sauer P320 compact .380-caliber firearm with one in the chamber and six in the mag holstered and ready to go. So his advice was generally met with a grain of salt.

"Would you let your girlfriend or your sister or your mother go walking after midnight?" Lily asked.

"Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, yes, because to say otherwise would undermine the very point I'm trying to make. And no because it just so happens I just recently had that very argument with my girlfriend."

My girlfriend, Emma, and I dated in college before moving in together right after as a "conscientiously committed" couple. Whatever that means. Her words not mine. And we became parents just a few years after that when her parents died unexpectedly in a car accident and we adopted her younger sister, Gretchen, who was fourteen at the time. Things had been well between the three of us for some time. But earlier this summer, at the end of Gretchen's junior year in high school, she decided she wanted to get her first job at Safeway. Emma agreed and Gretchen began working during the week along with a few shifts on weekends that went till 10:00pm at night when the store closed. We only lived two blocks away so I assumed Gretchen would just ride her bike home like she did going to and from school. But Emma insisted we pick Gretchen up every time she worked late closing down the store.

“We need to pick Gretchen up from work,” Emma declared that first week Gretchen learned her schedule.

“You mean you want me to pick her up so you don’t have to. Because I’ll be up late getting ready for work.”

“Yes, okay? Please? Can you make yourself available to do that? You know I have early classes starting at six and then see my clients right after. It would be helpful if you picked her up before going to work. Please. I would appreciate it.”

“Can’t she ride her bike? It’s not that far. I’m usually in the shower just before going to work.”

“No she can’t just ride her bike. That’s not safe. We’re picking her up. It’s far too dangerous for a sixteen year old girl to be out alone at night.”

“What are you talking about? What danger?” I asked. “We live in the suburbs.”

“She could be attacked is what.”

“By whom?”

“Strangers.”

“What kind of stranger danger could there be the two blocks between Safeway and here? We live in the most quiet, boring town in the whole world. Half the town is asleep after dinner and the other half watching Netflix or playing Legend of Zelda on the Switch.”

“She’s a girl. It’s not safe.” Emma replied.

“Not safe from what?”

“From some man attacking her.”

And there it was. The bias every women seemed to hold against every man out there.

“Look Emma, when was the last time you heard of anyone, let alone a girl, being attacked here? Other than by a mosquito, I mean? People don’t even jaywalk here.”

“That doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen.”

“Okay, I’ll play along. If something were to happen, though highly unlikely, don’t you think Gretchen could handle herself? She’s about to get promoted to her black belt. And I’ve seen her spar. She knows how to defend herself, believe me. Hell, she can knock most guys flat on their ass if she wanted to. She could definitely destroy me. Whereas I’d be lucky to scare off even a preschooler.”

“I don’t care. It’s not safe. We’re picking her up.”

I didn’t argue further knowing it would only aggravate Emma. And I loved Gretchen so it wasn’t difficult to bend to Emma’s demands. But, again, that generalized fear reared its ugly head which felt like some kind of insult to just about every rational adult who’d ever fought to make their streets safe. I imagined parents would always know that fear, but it was still our responsibility to teach children how to be safe and independent and not let some unnamed fear control us. To make sure our kids made smart choices without letting unnamed fears dictate our lives. But I wasn’t dumb enough to challenge my girlfriend over such an issue as gender autonomy.

So I picked Gretchen up when she worked late and drove her home before heading to the hospital for my night shift. Until one day when, through no intentional fault of my own, I became the stalker and terrorized a young couple.

That night happened to be New Year’s Eve. And through no fault of my own, I ended up taking my lunch break at 3am. Like usual, I headed out for my walk deciding it was a good night to explore the neighborhood north of the hospital. It was after hours, but

the stars were still out and the moon shing bright enough to light up most of the area. The suburban streets were quiet, per usual, until I happened upon a house closing down its New Year's Eve party. All the lights in the house were on and I could hear the kids in the backyard, happy and intoxicated, turning off the lights and heading inside. It reminded me of my college days back when Emma and I used to attend such events. But this night, I decided to incorporate it into my little game. I set the scenario for myself.

"The lone man walking," I grumbled low in my head, "comes across a sorority house filled with college girls still in their night clothes closing down the house and getting ready for bed. Yet unbeknownst to them, danger is lurking. A serial killer, Ted, has followed one of them home and is watching from a dark corner under an elm tree just outside waiting for the house to settle. But coincidentally, his reverie is disturbed by an innocent young man walking down the sidewalk. An innocent young man," I continue narrating as I pass by the front door of the actual house, "who happens to notice him standing under the tree. Ted knows he can't leave witnesses, so in a blink, he turns and charges the innocent young man. Who is taken by surprise."

Which was what I was thinking when the front door to the house *did* actually fly open and a young couple came barreling out the of the house onto the sidewalk in front of me. It scared me so much that I actually *yelped* and jumped back letting them pass in front of me.

Now that was the best fright I've had in some time, I thought. And I really liked it.

I stared after the young couple as they walked away and noticed two things: One, they were both drunk, but the boyfriend was *really* drunk and doing his best to walk. The girlfriend was trying to help but struggling a bit herself. The other thing I noticed, the girl saw me when they left and now kept looking back over her shoulder at me behind

them on the sidewalk. Even though I had been there first. I could tell she had panic telegraphing from her eyes plain as the puke down her boyfriend's shirt. She was clearly thinking I must be second cousin to the bogeyman. And plainly thought, *"This man is going to attack me. He's gonna drag me into the bushes and rape me and my drunk ass boyfriend won't do a thing about it."* Which pissed me off cause it was categorically and unequivocally false! Not to mention there was absolutely no reason to think this way based on the spontaneous encounter we'd just had. I'd been innocently walking and she and her boyfriend had stumbled across me. But I could see she was completely frightened by my presence. And without a doubt, believed I was there to harm her.

"Michael," I could hear her whining to her drunk boyfriend, "Let's go back to the house."

"Hey, what? No! Stop pulling me. Come on," he slurred, "You said you wanted to go home, so let's go." And with that he continued weaving and stumbling down the sidewalk, nearly falling, while dragging her along with him.

I could've empathized with her because she was young and obviously afraid now. But her attitude was also very insulting.

"There's someone there," she whined, "We need to go back."

"What are you talking about?" he slurred looking over his shoulder, "There's no one there. Come on, you're seeing things. Let's go home. Come on!"

"There's a man back there following us."

"Who? Where? I don't see anyone." He was that drunk.

"He's there. He's behind us."

Michael looked. "There's no one there. You're seeing things. Come on," he insisted, continuing on, forcing her to catch up.

Now here's where I made my mistake. I guess I should've just turned around and gone the other way. Headed back to the hospital the way I'd come. But she'd pissed me off with her assumptions.

I mean, really?! I thought, How fair is this? I've done nothing to her. In fact I was minding my own business when she stumbled across me. So what if I'm a stranger. I haven't made any suspicious moves toward her or said anything in any way to give her any reason to fear my presence. I'm just some innocent guy walking down the sidewalk. At three in the morning. Through a suburban neighborhood. Dressed in dirty dungaree work clothes and heavy boots. Sweating. For all she knows, I'm just some common joe heading home from work.

I could still see her looking over her back, super paranoid and trying to clock where I was every second.

Just walking along sweetheart, I said to her in my head, waiting for you and your drunk ass boyfriend to be on your merry way so I can pick up my pace again.

"Hurry, he's following us. He's getting closer." She sounded very panicked now.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! There's no one back there. Come on, we're almost home."

Now, normally I'm a nice guy. Decent and respectful. But she'd really upset me with her assumptions. So I decided to mess with her a bit and teach her a true lesson about stranger danger. I *did* start following them. I didn't get closer, mind you, but I did stay right behind them matching my steps with theirs, simultaneously striking the pavement with my boots hard enough to reverberate so she could hear the matching thuds coming from behind her.

That's right dear, I thought, if you're going to assume I'm the boogey man just because I'm a man then you deserve to be scared. How do you like me now!? I'm gonna keep walking twenty feet behind you till you either piss your pants or run away. Which serves you right!

Which is exactly what I did for another one hundred yards or so. And it worked. She began to unravel, getting more and more freaked out, unnerved enough to finally tear away from her boyfriend and start running. Forcing him to run after her yelling, "Hey, where'r you going?"

"RUN! HURRY UP! RUN," she screamed.

I admit I'd received an unexpected thrill unlike any I'd previously known seeing her afraid. It was different than creating my own. And I wouldn't necessarily admit this to anyone else except myself, but I thought, "*Yes! That's right! Run. Run. RUN!*" If I were really honest, I'd also admit I enjoyed being the boogey man. Her fear was so...intoxicating!

But she was also yelling now and screaming for her boyfriend to run, which I knew would wake up the neighborhood. So wisely, I broke off the chase, turned onto a side street, and started running for my hospital as fast as I could sprint. But not before I saw her run up to some neighbor's house and banging for all she was worth on their front door, screaming for help the entire time. A stranger's house, ironically.

When I returned, Lily noticed I was flushed and out of breath. When she asked how my walk went, I confided in her. Mostly to test her reaction and gauge my complicity in the whole event.

"You traumatized that poor girl!" Lily scolded, being truly angry, after I told her what happened. I thought she'd see the humor in it as well.

"I did no such thing! How did I traumatize her? I never did anything to her."

"You followed her and scared her half to death. You made her believe she was in trouble."

"I was walking down the street first when she and her drunk boyfriend came upon me. I had nothing to do with their timing nor could I have avoided them. She just assumed the rest."

"She didn't assume anything. She was in danger. She's a girl. It's not safe for women to walk at night."

"Why! HOW?!"

"Because you followed her."

"I was walking along minding my own business! And I certainly was no threat to her. Nor would I ever be. In fact, had anyone actually tried to hurt her, I probably would've been the first person to jump in and try to protect her. And you know that."

"She thought she was in danger and that was enough."

"What about anything that happened indicated she was in any kind of real danger?!"

"SHE," Lily began yelling, "FELT like she was in danger. And that's enough!"

"Well, I can't take responsibility for HER paranoia!" I yelled back. "Nor should I have to."

"IT'S NOT PARANOIA! Women have to be careful."

"OF WHAT exactly? Says WHO?! Shouldn't there actually be some kind of threat?! Not just all in her head? That's a ridiculously limited way to go through life being suspicious of everyone!"

"I can see," Lily spat ending the conversation, "that you're just gonna be a complete idiot about this so there's no sense explaining any further."

"Fine!"

“FINE!”

I didn't like Lily's logic. She knew me and yet still believed I could pose a danger just because I was male. Which wasn't fair. And made me feel guilty about something I had no control over. For being a man? For being a stranger? I was a good person and had been my whole life. Friend to her, boyfriend to Emma, caretaker to Gretchen. An honorable man by all accounts. But with a glance and a shitload of preconceived notions, that girl assumed I was a danger for no other reason than I was a stranger. Same for Lily. And Emma. All unknown men were not only a threat to them, but guilty without chance of being innocent. Until *they* decided you were safe. Then, well, then you were re-assigned to be their protector, relying on you to keep them safe and provide for them. Be their 'hero.'

Women certainly have a fucked up view of the world, I thought, Damned if we do, damned if we don't. How fair is that?"

I knew there was a lot to unpack here and it made me both sad and angry at the same time. Sad because, if I were being honest, in my world I could walk alone at night trying to scare myself as a game and a chance to test my nerve. To women, like that girl, like Lily, like Emma, that same walk was a dangerous thing. A circumstance to avoid at all costs just because they had a pre-conceived perception of threat.

So I was conflicted. In some ways, I knew they were right to be cautious. Of course there were places and situations which were to be avoided. Which could be inherently dangerous because of location and criminal element. But not every place was like that. Not every circumstance meant women were in danger. Honestly, having such a generalized state of fear seemed overwrought and no different than my imaginative attempts to scare myself with clowns and rednecks. Superstition. All make believe.

I didn't believe we would get anywhere as a species by giving into the vague fear and paranoia of "stranger danger."

On my drive home that morning after the New Year's Eve incident, I imagined how I could teach Gretchen to not fall victim to a woman's paranoia and use her better judgment not to fear the world around her. She didn't need to suffer the imposed burden of paranoia her older sister, and most women, held against men.

"Gretch," I would explain, "there are real dangers out there to be sure. And people who truly intend to harm others. Not just because they're women. Or because we're men. But because they're lost and evil souls out to hurt others. And I would give just about anything for you never to live in a world like that or experience anything close to what those evil people do. I also want you to know there are good people out there who will do everything in their power to protect you from harm. Your sister and I are two of them. But, you must never invent fears or vilify men for the generalized reason simply because they are men? Condemn us all? That isn't who most of us are. Yet, to many women out there, we are evil by the mere fact we are men. I hope you never let such double standards dictate the terms of your life."

Hardest of all I realized, even if I was right, I was wrong. In Lily's eyes, in that college girl's eyes, even in Emma's, I was evil because I had the potential to be.

After days of pondering this duality, I let my anger win out. Something I knew I'd have to talk to my therapist about.

Well, I thought, if that's who I am to these women, nothing more than stranger danger, then why don't I show them by being exactly who they think I am!? Stranger danger indeed! I'll show them stranger danger and scare them every chance I get. Take the fight to them!

I was projecting, I know. Even using transference to rationalize what was hard to admit. But to my therapist, I admitted the truth. Following that girl on New Year's

Eve, seeing the absolute terror in her eyes, had excited me in a deeply primal way no scary movie or fright walk scenario ever had.

“That is to be understood,” my therapist Dr. Sheila Bogdanovic responded. “All men hold insecurities about their manhood. And it is not out of the range for otherwise normal men to desire control over women in order to ward off their feelings of inadequacy. But it is the marker of an evolved species when men recognize this and act to eliminate the harmful threat they pose to women. To veritably erase their maladaptive need to dominate over our collective consciousness. And our bodies.”

Bullshit! I thought. But what I said was, “Of course, doctor. You’re so right. It is a man’s duty to ensure women recognize we are no threat to them by doing everything in our power to become non-threatening collaborators and partners. Do you have any suggestions how I may do this? I want to be an enlightened man.”

“Of course,” Dr. Bogdanovic patronized. “It really is about embracing the feminist principles we’ve long laid out, striving to establish ourselves in this patriarchal society.”

The newly awakened caveman in me thought, *Fuck off! This is all a load of bullshit making us men responsible for your women’s insecurities!* Which bothered me a great deal internally, but I decided right then and there never show her my true face to her, or any woman in my personal life again. Or to offer any dissenting opinion I may have. But that didn’t mean I was quitting my newly discovered hobby.

Thanks to Dr. Bogdanovic and Emma and Lily and all the rest of you women out there that panic at the sight of a stranger, I have you to thank. Becoming not only an enlightened man, and a psychologist, in the public eye, while discovering the secret true nature to my inner soul should be celebrated. Not vilified. And I intended to do just that. During the strategically placed night hours when I took my break, of course.

By day, I remained normal. The man I was supposed to be to Emma and Gretchen and Lily and all of society's women. But by night, I turned into the avenging stalker. Intent on taking the indignation of paranoia women forced upon us and turning it into a righteous crusade to stop such irrationality. I stopped walking by myself through neighborhoods around Our Lady of Mercy after midnight. And I stopped the silly game of scaring myself. It had become an insincere and disrespectful past time in light of the fear women had to suffer through all their lives. I shouldn't be making a game of an all too real threat they felt. But I also couldn't deny my true nature. I WAS a man. And to every women, except the handful I was known to as father, husband, friend, colleague, and therapist, I WAS a danger. Because I was a stranger.

As the English poet, Lord George Gordon Byron once wrote, *there is pleasure in the pathless woods, there is rapture in the lonely shore, there is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea, and music in its roar; I love not Man the less, but Nature more.*

So I embrace my *stranger danger* persona. And, AM the man all women assume I will be after hours when confronted with their innocent selves at night, in the dark, all by their lonesome. I stalk. And I scare. And if I'm being honest, it gives me the biggest and healthiest dose of manly thrill and power over women. I walk after midnight now wherever I choose, through dark corridors and alleys and streets, from bars and stores and late night coffee houses, looking for the random female to follow. Oh I never harm them physically. Though maybe someday I'll test how far I'm willing to go at their expense. But for now, I am contented to follow random, unknown females wherever they lead, making sure they realize a strange man is following them. And then I bathe in their fear, their paranoia, and the fright of it all.

I have become *righteous avenger to all of man's dignity!* Women beware!

The End.