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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 to a familiar Patsy Cline song, but in my case is more about getting outside for a little exercise. And indulging in a little nocturnal danger -- the kind that makes a grown man giddy with excitement and fear. But more on that later.

I owe all my late night sojourns to my internist, Dr. Sheila Ortinski.

"You're fat," is how she put it during my last physical, "and need to lose weight. Quit the fast food, get some exercise, get better sleep, and eat healthier. Otherwise there's a good chance you'll have a heart attack before you're thirty-five. I mean, holy hell, Jason! Your LDL's and triglycerides look like an old man whose eaten bacon all his life after guzzling glasses of buttermilk. And your BMI is higher than the speed limit."

Easy for her to say. She finished med school decades ago and passed her residency. Me? I'm still trying to finish my doctorate. Which means I have to teach my advising professor's *Intro to Psychology* courses every morning, take supervised clinical counseling hours each afternoon at McKenzy Acute Mental Health Hospital, and still try to hold down a personal life with my girlfriend, Gretchen. While paying the bills. Which I do by working the midnight shift at Our Sisters of Mercy three nights a week and every other weekend.

"You can plainly see I'm busy and don't have a lot of leisure time, Doc. So cut me a little slack, huh," I whined to Dr. Ortinski. "How am I supposed to find time to exercise on top of all that?"

"You'll figure it out. You're a smart boy."

So I came up with the most effective, time conscious, and low cost way of losing weight. I run on my work breaks at night -- fifteen minutes here, thirty minutes there. All usually after three a.m. But, honestly, running is boring! And I didn't feel like I getting enough calorie burn out of it. So I made it more interesting -- I engaged a little trick from my abnormal psychology studies -- VANE. Voluntary Arousal from Negative Experiences. It's a real thing, you can look it up.

This is how it works. On nights I run, I stimulate my adrenals by picturing the most frightening scenarios -- you know, killer clowns with red balloons chasing me. Or disfigured, cannibalistic rednecks or invading zombies or whatever. You get the picture. And when my fear builds up and I can't stand another moment, I take off running like a sorority girl being chased by a serial killer. Fifteen minute here, thirty minutes of sprinting there. Shoot, on most nights with VANE, I sprint like five or more miles over the course of my two fifteens and thirty minute lunch break.

You may think I'm crazy, but I'm not. VANE is a legitimate alternative for anyone living an academically sedentary lifestyle who wishes to lose weight fast. And it works too. I've lost nearly fifty pounds in the last three months. Not to mention becoming faster than I thought possible. In fact, VANE has given me more cardiovascular benefits than all those people spending hours in the gym. Though I didn't tell this to my doctor or my girlfriend. But I did confide in co-worker, Lily.

“Aren’t you afraid?” Lily asks after I returned from one of my late night runs – this one involving “giant rats” -- which had me all wide eyed and breathing heavy. “When you go out at night all alone? Aren’t you afraid something will happen to you?”

Lily is a mortuary tech with five children who’s been working at Our Sisters of Mercy since she was eighteen and is the moral center of our cold kingdom. She trained me and, in the process, acts as something of a surrogate mother.

“No, not really. There’s no traffic at three in the morning and virtually no people either. It’s quite peaceful, actually.”

“Well, if you’re not afraid, think about how scared the other people are.”

“What other people?”

“Neighbors and home owners and such who see you running through their neighborhood? They’re gonna think you’re a burglar or something and call the cops.”

“Possible. But it hasn’t happened yet. And even if it did, what could they say? I’m not doing anything wrong. Just your average pedestrian running down the sidewalk -- which isn’t illegal. Nor am I’m bothering anyone.”

“Well, you probably don’t know you are. If I saw you outside my house in the middle of the night, I’d be scared and call the cops. I mean, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but it’s not normal what you’re doing. Especially the way you keep pretending all those nightmarish things in your head. I think there might be something wrong with you. People crack up working this shift, you know. You don’t need help moving it along.”

“Lily, I’m not doing anything crazy. I mean, I don’t sneak up to anyone’s house or peep in their back yard or look through windows or anything like that. I don’t do anything

immoral or weird. I just run down the sidewalk, all in the name of health and exercise. If I were doing the same thing at ten in the morning, no one would even bat an eye."

Here Lily shakes her head. "Aren't you studying to be a psychologist? Don't they teach you behaviors like that are, what do they call them, abnormal?! Abnormal and all screwed up and nuts or something!?"

"No. I mean yes, abnormal psychology is part of the profession. But this is nowhere near that realm. This is more a primal thing. People with VANE like to scare themselves, not break the law. Which is not outside normal cultural norms or behavioral standards. I'm not doing anything different than anyone else."

"What are you talking about? Normal people don't do that. I certainly don't do that!"

"Sure you do. All the time. Just with a different paradigm of action. Don't people tell ghost stories over campfires? Or hold their breath when they pass by a cemetery? Lily, people go to scary movies all the time just so they can sit in a dark movie theater and eat popcorn and be frightened. Or visit haunted houses every Halloween to scream in delight. Why else do you think people do it? It's a primal thing. People love to be scared. There's no difference between that and what I'm doing."

"Yes there is. That's normal. Going to movies and haunted houses and stuff like that is normal because it's all just make believe. What you're doing is more like going off the rails into cuckoo territory."

"No, it's not. Trust me. It's all the same, I assure you. I'm just engaging my sensory experiences directly through an interpersonal, highly situational paradigm of intercession. Not to mention, I'm getting direct visceral stimulation free of charge rather than pay my hard earned money going to movies or buying costumes every Halloween. To me, denying my primal impulses and buffering them against false representations of reality ARE the maladaptive trait."

“Well, what about getting hurt then? Attacked or robbed at gunpoint? Aren’t you afraid someone’s going to attack you or worse?”

“No. Like I said, I don’t put myself in any actual danger. I don’t have a death wish, Lily. I just like the imaginative thrill of fear. Which is far superior, and more controlled when you run around quiet suburban neighborhoods in the middle of boring suburbia USA than, say, cruising east Oakland or Compton or Hell’s Kitchen where actual criminal activity and dangerous street thugs dwell. This is Silicon Valley. The heart of rich nerds and pampered housewives hiding in their mansions playing video games. 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-nonfat-oat-milk-no-foam-skinny-girl-venti-chai-latte from the drive thru.”

“It’s not safe to go out 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 by the mere biological fact that she’s a woman?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Cha! Don’t be an idiot! You know why! Because it is! You trying to be stupid or something?”

“No, not at all.”

I wasn’t trying to be ignorant. But I wondered if Lily was right? Was it intrinsically unsafe for a woman, by the mere fact that she was a woman, to walk alone at night? Or have we just conditioned ourselves to fear the unknown stranger so much we consider any situation in the open unsafe for a woman after dark? Have we, as a society, become so paranoid and complacent as to no longer allow ourselves to be rationally self-sufficient?

“Lily, do you think just because you’re a woman walking alone at night, some bad guy is going to attack you.”

“Not just the bad guys. All men.”

“Wait! You’re saying, if a woman, attractive or not, were to walk at night by herself, some otherwise normal, nice guy is going to see her and automatically be overwhelmed with evil impulses?! And then assault her?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

“That’s a very cynical view of men. And more than a bit derisive. I think I’m offended.”

“Cha, screw your offense! It happens all the time. You’d know that if you were a woman.”

I wasn’t female obviously. But I didn’t buy her argument. 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, strongly disagreed with Lily's view. He encouraged people, man, woman and child, to take back the night by refusing to barricade themselves in their homes after hours out of fear. 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.

But I wondered if he was right.

"Lily, I think you're misguided on that one, anecdotally speaking. Your average man is decent and respectful."

"I don't think so. Would you let your girlfriend or your sister or your mother go walking alone after midnight?" Lily asked.

"That depends."

"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 recently had that very argument with my girlfriend."

A little background for you. My girlfriend, Gretchen, and I were college sweethearts who'd recently moved in together with the intent to marry and start a family. But a sad and unexpected accident occurred. Gretchen's parents died in a car crash leaving her sole care and custody of her younger sister, Emma. So we took over parenting duties, myself included, and made it work. Of course, I love Gretchen. And I already thought

of Emma as my little sister. But I didn't realize how little I knew about women till I started living with them.

Earlier in the summer, when Emma turned sixteen, she announced she wanted to get a summer job and earn her own money. Which Gretchen was adamantly against because the job at our local supermarket demanded late night hours.

"Way too late," Gretchen told Emma. "You can't do it! Way too late for a sixteen year old girl to be out at night."

Emma put her foot down in determined teenage fashion and kept at it till Gretchen relented. Only with a few conditions. "First, you will not leave the store, even the parking lot, after dark. And two, you will be picked up and driven home on every night you work late. Those are my terms."

"They are?" I foolishly replied. I knew Gretchen's early work schedule and my late night one meant she expected me to be the one picking up Emma. Which I wasn't sure I had time for. "You don't think she can find her own way home?"

"No! Of course not. Eleven is way too late for her to be out at night alone. She needs one of us to pick her up."

"Meaning me," I said irritated.

"Yes, okay? You're already up and you know I get up early to take Emma to her STEM program before going to work. It would be impractical for me to stay up that late when you already are. I'd appreciate it if you would make yourself available, okay? Is that what you want to hear?!"

"Can't she just ride her bike? It's not that far. I mean, I have to be in the shower at ten so I can leave by ten thirty to get to the hospital on time for my night shift."



“The hospital manager doesn’t care if you’re a few minutes late to the mortuary. He’s just glad you’re there. And your patients will still be dead, so they don’t care either. But, no, Emma cannot just ride her bike. I won’t ask you again. But you should know I consider any refusal an insult – you’re putting Emma in danger ahead of your own comfort.”

“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 can there realistically be within one mile between our house and the store? It’ll take her not even five minutes to pedal home. And we live in the most quiet, boring town in the whole wide world. Half the town are senior citizens asleep after dinner and the other half computer geeks playing Legend of Zelda or Fortnite or whatever on their game consoles.”

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

“Not safe from what?”

“From some man attacking her. I’ve said that already. Are you being intentionally ignorant?”

And there it was. The bias every women apparently held against every man out there. I could’ve argued further, but wasn’t willing to suffer Gretchen’s ire. Plus I did love Emma so it really wasn’t that difficult to bend to Gretchen’s demands.

Still, I found the whole woman's logic untenably rude. They all seemed so willing to let some generalized fear sway them – believing every man was secretly a danger to every woman once the sun went down. Insulting.

But then it happened. Something that convinced me otherwise. Not even a month later, through no intentional fault of my own, I accidentally stalked and terrorized a young woman on one of my night runs.

It happened like this. One Friday night, I took my lunch break, per usual, and was cruising through a nearby suburban neighborhood when I came across a house closing down a late night party. All the lights were still on inside and the place glowed like a beacon. With the few adults still around, mostly girls I noticed, visibly awake, loud, and intoxicated as they cleaned up.

I decided to change things up a bit and engage my VANE in a new, more imaginative way. I probably shouldn't have, but the horror-monster tropes had become a bit boring and I was getting desensitized. So, before I thought too deeply about it, I snuck onto their property -- all the way up to the bushes at the front door -- and hid. I wasn't planning anything evil. I really wasn't! But I did begin narrating a sinister scene to engage my VANE.

"The lone man," I whispered, "crosses path with a sorority house filled with college girls dressed in their night clothes. Yet unbeknownst to them, danger is lurking. A serial killer, Ted, has followed one of them home and is watching from the shadows in the front yard. He has terrible deeds in mind. But by sheer luck...."

And that's where I stopped. I had to because, right then, the front door of the house flew open and a young couple came walking out. I nearly yelped. And got excited. The couple had scared me and now I was feeling an entirely new wave of VANE stimulating my instinct to run. What a nice, unexpected fright!

The young couple, unaware I was there, walked right past and headed down the sidewalk -- a pretty college girl and her very drunk frat boyfriend. Before I knew it, I was following them. I got out of the bush and hit the sidewalk, following them down the sidewalk, matching their pace.

"Hang on, Tommy, I just heard something!" the girl said looking around. "Maybe we should go to Katie's house."

"Fuck no!" the drunk boyfriend slurred. Only it sounded more like *Fuurrrggghhh nyao*.

"Oh, Tommy, look! There's someone behind us! We should go back," the girl cried spotting my silhouette.

"Fuurrrggghhh. Yew saish we shhhh go home. Sho les go hooome."

"Tommy!" But he wasn't listening and she had no choice but to follow as Tommy continued along. As did I. My VANE was building higher than ever before.

A word in my own defense though. I could see this girl was scared because I was following. But what really pissed me off was she just assumed I was evil – only following her to attack her. Which I wasn't. Nor had I said or done nothing toward her to give her that idea. Sure I was taking the piss out of her by following her, but I never came any closer than ten yards. And for all intents and purposes, was just an innocent pedestrian who happened to be walking in the same direction. But to her, I was evil incarnate by my mere presence. Which was insane! And insulting!

"Tommy!" the girl whined, "There's a guy back there following us."

I was that guy. I wasn't trying to actually harm her, but maybe a part of me, at this point, wanted to teach her a lesson and prove a point. So I kept walking, letting my footsteps echo off the sidewalk in time with hers, always keeping myself ten paces back.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," she cried. "Tommy, he's coming for us!"

“Sterpp fuggin ‘round. Leesss ger home, kay?” Tommy was clueless. “There’s no-er back dere. Yer just fuggin wit mee.”

Now here’s where I made my mistake. I should’ve stopped. Turned and just gone the other way. But my VANE was at full tilt and I wasn’t thinking as clearly as I normally would. I was pissed too and wanted to make my point – she was safe despite her irrational fear. I had no ill intent toward her. That is until she started screaming. And I mean *SCREAMING*! Loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood.

Okay, okay, she was scared! And I realized, if someone came out and saw me, I would be guilty by pure circumstance. Even if I protested, I doubt anyone would believe me. So I finally break it off and started running the other way faster than I thought I could. With the girls screams still echoing off all the houses. As I sprinted away, I saw several house lights turning on.

Boy! My adrenaline was coursing through every limb that night and didn’t stop till I made it back to the hospital faster than I ever had before. Which Lily noticed.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Sure, I said when I could speak.

“What did you do?”

I don’t know how she knew. Or why I told her what happened. But I did. Maybe because I was feeling a little guilty and a lot excited. So I told her how I’d followed a girl, but just to prove a point about her ill-conceived notions.

“You traumatized that poor girl!” Lily scolded, truly angry. She apparently didn’t see the humor in it. Nor realize how completely safe the girl had been from me.

“I did no such thing!” I replied. “How did I traumatize her? I didn’t actually DO anything to her.”

"You followed that poor girl and scared her half to death. You made her believe she was in danger. You PUT her in danger!"

"Now look, Lily. I admit I scared her, but 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. YOU did that to her! She's a girl, you asshole! I have a good mind to call the cops and report you."

"Why! For what? I didn't commit any crimes. Nor was that girl in any kind of real danger! She just imagined she was. So how does that make me the asshole? Maybe she was the asshole for assuming I was some lecherous hump when I'm not."

"SHE," Lily yelled, "FELT like she was in danger! She WAS in danger!"

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

"It's not PARANOIA, you jackass! Women have to be careful because of men like you!"

"THAT's a DAMN LIE! You take that back!"

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

"FINE!"

"FINE!" Lily growled stomping out of the morgue.

I thought about it the rest of the night. Was Lily's logic fair? She knew me and yet still believed I posed a danger to that girl just because I was male. And for some reason I felt guilty about it. For 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

Gretchen, caretaker to Emma. By all accounts, an honorable and upstanding man. But with a glance and a shitload of preconceived notions, it was assumed I was an evil, lecherous hump because I was outside after dark. They all thought that way.

“What kind of fairy tale boogey man have all you women bought into?” I lamented once Lily returned. “And why am I the ignorant one?”

“Don’t talk to me,” Lily said. “If you say another word, I swear I’ll report you to the hospital supervisor and have you fired. And you’re to go on no more nighttime excursions! Do I make myself clear? You can run on the treadmills in the rehab offices like a normal person.”

I saw I wasn’t going to change Lily’s mind. Worse, I had made an enemy out of her. So I changed my tune immediately and agreed. Apologizing over and over for my stupidity till she finally accepted. But, in the back of my mind, I wasn’t wrong. Worse, I was being falsely stereotyped. As were my fellow brothers of the night.

I stopped VANE for a month and ran on the indoor treadmills at the hospital. But then I came to an epiphany. Instead of just getting angry, and there was a lot of suppressed rage there to unpack, I decided to make VANE part of my doctoral dissertation and break new ground. Scientifically speaking. Which meant I needed to gather more empirical data, followed by formulating some kind of test and control group. Then analyze and develop a working theory before writing up my findings. Something akin to *Superstition in Fear Based Irrationality of the Female Species based on Neolithic Cultural Caution?* I might even win a peer review award.

Well, I’ll spare you the details, but I didn’t change my routines. I did start running on my nights off though, telling Gretchen it was for my health. Then I’d go to new areas around the city to seek out women to follow -- from bars and movie theaters and late

night restaurants after close – recording and tabulating their reactions. A few times, I even came close enough to touch them, which yielded some of the best results.

I'll admit, my VANE was sharper than ever. The thrilling risk of being caught – which almost happened here and there, once or twice. And Lily was right. Women will call the police just because a lone man is out late at night dressed in all black for no apparent reason. But it was all in the name of research.

So now the real work begins. By day, I am the loving boyfriend of Gretchen, big brother to Emma, and friend to Lily. Not to mention, the picture of a decent man to all the other women out there. In essence, I am the model of an enlightened man embracing the “feminist” ideology. But by night! Oh by night! Beware you ignorant women with your paranoid bias everywhere! Beware! I AM your stalker! I am your consequence for impugning the righteousness of man’s dignity! Your superstitions will be exposed and the truth shall be revealed! VANE has given my life a new purpose!

One day soon, I will write up my findings and win an award. I even imagined giving my acceptance speech. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” I will say, “there are real dangers in this world, to be sure. And people who are in danger from others who are truly dangerous. But the majority of people we meet at night are decent. And the great majority of men are safe. Yet, through cultural bias, we find ourselves subjected to women’s irrational prejudices solely on the basis of gender bias imprinted into the female subconscious against all men. I have now taken steps to change that paradigm. And you have validated my work by granting this wonderful award.”

The END.