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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, I admit, indulging in a little nocturnal danger -- the kind that makes a grown man giddy from excitement and fear. But more on that later.

You can say I owe all my late night sojourns to my internist, Dr. Sheila Ortonski.

"You're getting fat," is how she put it during my last physical. "What you need to do is lose weight. Quit the fast food, get outside for exercise, get better sleep, and eat healthier. Otherwise you'll have a heart attack before you turn thirty-five. I mean, holy hell, your LDL's and triglycerides look like an old man whose eaten bacon twice a day his whole life. And your BMI is higher than the speed limit."

Easy for her to say. She already finished med school and passed her residency. She has lots of extra time and money. Me? I'm still a grad student trying to finish his doctorate in psychology. Who still has to teach *Intro to Psychology* courses for incoming underclassmen five days out of every seven, hold office hours each afternoon, and complete supervised clinical counseling hours for those poor unfortunates at McKenzy Mental Health State Hospital. All while trying to hold down a personal life with my girlfriend, Gretchen. And still pay the bills. Which I do by working the midnight shift

at Our Sisters of Mercy three nights during the week and every other weekend. You can plainly see I don't have a lot of leisure time to golf or shop or whatever doctors do in their ample free time. So, when it comes to finding time to exercise, I had to get creative.

You might say I have a vivid imagination and had to get creative. But I didn't want to be one of those "gym rats" spending countless hours lifting weights or obsessing over their looks. Nor spend money I couldn't afford on some personal trainer or trendy weight loss drug. So I came up with the most effective, time conscious, and low cost way of losing weight. I ran at night on my breaks. But to make it more interesting, I engaged a little trick I'd learned from my abnormal psychology studies. VANE. Which stands for Voluntary Arousal from Negative Experiences. It's a real thing, you can look it up.

This is how it works. On nights when I get my forty-five minute lunch break, I run. Not just run, but maximize my efforts by stimulating motivation. I picture the most frightening scenarios – you know, killer clowns chasing me. Or cannibalistic rednecks or invading zombies or whatever. And when my fear has built up and I can't stand another moment, I take off running at the fastest I can stand. Miles and miles, like a sorority girl being hunted by a serial killer. Shoot, on most nights, those thoughts inspire me to sprint three miles in less than thirty minutes all the way back to the hospital I work at. Nor do I come down from the adrenaline till morning.

Now doesn't that get your blood pumping? Those scenarios?

You may entertain the thought I'm crazy, but I'm not. VANE is, for all intents and purposes, a workable process for anyone living an academically sedentary lifestyle who wishes to lose weight fast. Cause it works. I've lost nearly forty pounds in the last three months and become faster than I thought possible. In fact, VANE has more

cardiovascular benefits in thirty minutes than all the hours you spend in the gym ever could. Though I didn't tell this to my doctor or my girlfriend. But I did confide in my work partner, Lily.

Lily was a hospital tech with five children who'd been working in the mortuary of Our Sisters of Mercy since well before her first child. A stolid princess sheltered in her cold kingdom. And as such, the mentor who trained me in the proper handling of the deceased. In some respects, she's even a surrogate mother.

"But aren't you afraid?" Lily asked recently after I returned from a late night run – this one involving "giant rats" that had me sprinting out of my shoes till I arrived back at the hospital all hot and sweaty and breathing heavily. "Why do you go out at night all alone? Aren't you afraid something will happen to you?"

"No, not really. Why would I? There's no traffic at three in the morning and virtually no people either. It's actually quite peaceful."

"Well, if you're not afraid when you go out then what about if someone sees 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 -- for a little exercise on my lunch break. Nor am I'm bothering anyone."

"Well, you probably don't know that you are. I know if I saw you outside my house in the middle of the night, I'd be scared. 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. They 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 try to steal anything or look in any windows or anything like that. That would be unethical. And I don’t do anything immoral or weird. I just run down the sidewalk out and back to the hospital. It’s 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 psychiatrist? 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 or behavioral norms. I’m no different than you or anyone else in that regards.”

“What are you talking about? Normal people don’t do that. I certainly don’t do that!”

“Sure you do. All the time. Just in a different paradigm of action. Don’t people tell each other ghost stories over campfires? Or hide under their blankets if they hear a noise? Or hold their breath if 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 while being 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 instead of paying my hard earned money going to movies or buying costumes every Halloween. To me, denying my primal impulses and buffering them within 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 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 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 Lily brought up an interesting point. 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 no longer consider any situation in any open space safe 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 by evil impulses?! And then assault her?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!"

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

“Not when it’s true. 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. I remembered 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 truly 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 unexpectedly in a car accident 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 had late night hours.

"Way too late," Gretchen told me. "She 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 into the parking lot, after dark. And two, you will be picked up and driven home on every nights you work late. These 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 less than ten 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 some such 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 rear its ugly head – that every man was secretly a danger to every woman once the sun went down.

Not even six months later, through no intentional fault of my own, I proved Lily and Gretchen right by accidentally becoming a stalker who terrorized a young woman.

It happened like this. One 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. The few adults still around, mostly girls I noticed, were 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. Since, to be honest, in the last month, the horror-monster tropes were become a bit boring and I was getting desensitized. Anyway, 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 still 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 a dark bush in the front yard. He has terrible deeds in mind. But by sheer luck..... and that's where I stopped. Because right then, the front door of the house flew open and a young couple came walking out right past me. I nearly yelped. *Whoa!* I thought feeling an entirely new wave of VANE stimulation triggering my instinct to run. I couldn't help it! It was a such a nice, unexpected fright!

The young couple, unaware I was there, probably due to their intoxication, continued walking down the path to the sidewalk. A pretty college girl and her very drunk frat boyfriend. Before I knew it, I was following them. Down the sidewalk and out into the street, matching their pace.

"Tommy, stop! Tommy I just heard something!" the girl mumbled to her boyfriend looking around. Maybe we should go back inside."

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

"Tommy, look! There's someone behind us! We should go back."

"Fuurrregghhh. Yew saish we shhhh go home. Sho les gooo home."

"Tommy!" But he wasn't listening and she had no choice but to follow when he continued walking along. As did I. My VANE was building again.

But now I noticed a new sensation. You know how you can just look at someone and tell exactly what they're thinking? Well, I could see this girl was scared and thinking I was evil -- only there to rape and kill her. And her boyfriend couldn't do a thing about it.

Which also pissed me off cause it was categorically and unequivocally false! I had said or done nothing toward her to give her this idea. Sure I was taking the piss out of her by following, but always respectfully ten paces back. Just an innocent pedestrian who happened to be walking in the same direction. But to her, I was evil incarnate just by my mere presence.

"Tommy!" she whined, "There's like a guy back there following us."

I was that guy. I wasn't trying to actually harm her, but maybe a part of me wanted to teach her a lesson. So I kept walking, letting my footsteps echo off the sidewalk in time with hers, as I kept 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 did. I was also pissed and wanted to make my point – she was safe despite her irrational fear. That is until she started screaming. And I mean *SCREAMING*! Loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood.

That’s when I realized. I mean, if I’m being honest, my VANE was more titillated than ever with the turn of events, but my rational mind kicked in. If someone came out and saw me, I would be guilty by pure circumstance. And if I protested, I doubted anyone would believe me. So I finally did turn and started running the other way faster than I thought I could. With the girls screams still echoing off all the houses. I even saw a few lights turning on.

My adrenaline coursed through every limb and I made it back to the hospital faster than I ever had before. Less than five minutes per mile! Wow!

Lily noticed I was more out of breath than normal and acting hyped up.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Sure, I said when I could speak.

“What did you do?”

I don’t know why, but I told her what happened. I guess to gauge her reaction at my new experiment. And because I was feeling a little guilty and a lot excited at the moment.

"You traumatized that poor girl!" Lily scolded, truly angry. She apparently didn't see the humor in it. Or catch the irony of how completely safe the girl had been from me.

"I did no such thing!" I replied. "How did I traumatize her? I never did 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. And you're an asshole! I have a good mind to call the cops myself and report you."

"Why! About what? I didn't commit any crime. Nor was she was in any kind of real danger?! How does that make me an asshole who should be arrested? Maybe she was the asshole for assuming."

"SHE," Lily yelled, "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, 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 unfair? 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. 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 changed my tune immediately and agreed. Apologizing over and over for my stupidity till Lily finally backed down. But, in the back of my mind, I wasn't wrong. Worse, I was being falsely stereotyped. As were my brothers of the night. But then I came to an epiphany. Instead of just getting angry, I realized, 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, I'd have to gather a great deal more empiric data. Followed by formulating some kind of test and control group. Then analyze and develop a working theory and write up my findings. I might even win a peer review award. I was going to call my experiments the Superstition in Fear Based Irrationality of the Female Species based in Neolithic Cultural Caution?

Well, I'll spare you the numerous details, but to say I had to cloak my activities to times when Lily wasn't paying attention and Gretchen wouldn't question my time away from

home. All pretty much continued, except I ran in the rehab lab on nights I worked. But in my free time, when I had time, I went to new areas at night and sought out women to follow. From bars and movie theaters and late night restaurants after close. Mostly follow and, I'll admit, frighten just so I could record and tabulate their reactions. A few times, I even came close enough to touch them, but not so they could see my face.

And I'll admit, my VANE experiences were sharper than ever. Because now I risked more than just innocently walking along. I was courting being caught – which did happen here and there. People do tend to call the police when a lone man is out late at night dressed in all black without apparent reason. But it was all in the name of research.

I even imagined giving an acceptance speech when I won a fellowship award for best new research. "Ladies and Gentlemen," I imagined myself saying, "there are real dangers in this world, to be sure. And people who are not only dangerous but truly in danger. But the majority of people are decent. The great majority of men are safe. Yet, through cultural bias, we men find ourselves subjected to women's irrational prejudice solely on the basis of gender bias imprinted into the female subconscious against all men. I have now taken steps to change that paradigm."

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!

The END.