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Burning Bridges As We Go

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The Dangers of 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 putting myself in the kind of danger that makes a grown man scream and cry. Okay, not real danger mind you. I don't do anything crazy like jump off the overpass or dodge cars along the freeway. I just go outside for a walk -- through dark neighborhoods, after midnight -- using my imagination to picture the most frightening of scenarios and scariest of images. Which always ends with me scaring the *bejezus* out of myself and running for my life thanks to those vivid scenarios. On those nights, the adrenaline can last till dawn.

The official diagnosis, if you're curious, is V.A.N.E. – Voluntary Arousal from Negative Experiences. Which works like this. Imagine you're walking all alone in the dark with only the moonlight for your guide when you notice a very sinister clown standing on the street corner watching you. "*Sh&%t!*" you might exclaim, if you pardon my french. To which the clown responds by smiling and charging. When he does, I scream and take off. I can sprint almost two miles with an evil clown in pursuit. Or say you pass by a darkened house without nary a light on and deep from the old rickety porch comes a loud groaning of wood as this redneck in overalls, face all cut up and disfigured, stands to his feet. He's seven feet tall and holding a rusty axe, smiling his gap toothed crooked smile for all the world to see, like he wants to kill you and wear your skin for

his face. When he steps toward forward, you whimper and run. That's enough motivation to sprint a minimum of a mile.

Now doesn't that get your blood pumping? Those scenarios? If not, then ask yourself why you grow quiet walking past a cemetery. Or hold your breath when you do?

I happened across a cemetery once on a midnight walk and nearly ran half a marathon while the evil undead chased me.

You may think I'm crazy, but I'm not. VANE is not that unusual a response for anyone living an academic-ly sedentary lifestyle who wishes to maintain their intractably facile mind while simultaneously improving the health of their physical body. Of course working the overnight shift at Our Sisters of Mercy hospital as a mortuary technician doesn't do me any favors. Nor the Intro to Psychology classes I teach most weekday mornings for my doctoral advising professor. Or the clinical hours I'm required to do for my PhD most afternoons. I'm lucky enough to get to bed just to catch a few hours of sleep let alone work out. When my girlfriend and her sister return home in the evening, I'm up again making dinner or ordering take out. Followed by family movies or board games. Then some light reading and homework for all till the girlfriend goes to bed and I'm able to grab another quick nap. I'm up again with the alarm and out the door for work by 11:30. So you can see I have a full day and pressed for time. But we all have burdens to carry.

"You're getting fat and heart unhealthy," my personal physician, a one Sheila Ortonski, explained the last time I dropped by the clinic to see her. I'd been having a few unexplained chest pains just as summer started and was worried I might be having a myocardial infarction. But it turns out I was just out of shape and not getting enough exercise. "You need to lay off the late night junk food and get outside more. Go run

laps or join a gym,” is how Dr. Sheila put it. “Hell, you’re barely post thirty, but you look closer to a Dad of fifty. You need to exercise and eat healthier. Or else.”

So I agreed. And planned out how best to get into shape. But I wasn’t going to any gym like some mindless muscle head or do Pilates like some trophy wife in tight spandex trying to become a bullshit influencer on social media. Nor did I want to sacrifice what little daytime sleep and social life I did have. My motivation to kill one bird with two stones reared up and thus VANE was born. I decided to run at night while using frightening scenarios to motivate. And it works cause now I’m a lean one-sixty-eight on my six foot-one frame and feel faster and more invigorated than ever. And my girlfriend loves the ancillary benefits of the tight runner’s body and hard tushie running created.

“But aren’t you scared?” my co-worker Lily asked me after I returned from one of my lunch break all sweaty and febrile and breathing heavy. I explained what I’d been up to. But rather than receive the ‘*attaboy*’ I expected, she gasped in surprise, “You actually go out at night alone, in the dark, all by yourself and that doesn’t give you reason to be frightened?”

“No, not really. There’s almost no traffic at three in the morning and virtually no people either. So, no, I’m not afraid.”

“Well, if you’re not afraid then what about if someone sees you walking through their neighborhood? They’re gonna think you’re a burglar or something bad like that and call the cops.”

“Maybe, but nothing like that has happened. Plus, what could they say? I’m not doing anything wrong. Just your average pedestrian walking down the sidewalk, or in my case running down the street. Though I’m not bothering anyone.”

“Your running at three in the morning like a prowler or a peeping Tom. There’s definitely something wrong with that! I mean, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but it’s not normal to walk around at night like that. I think there might be something wrong with you.”

“Lily, I don’t go up to anyone’s house or sneak around anyone’s back yard or try to steal anything or look in any windows or anything like that. That would be immoral. I just walk down the sidewalk as fast as I can and then run. It’s all in the name of exercise. Plus, public sidewalks don’t just close up because it’s three in the morning.”

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 it, 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.”

“Sure they do. All the time. Just in a different paradigm of action. Don’t people tell ghost stories over campfires? Or hide under their blankets if they see a spooky shadow? 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 dark movie theaters eating popcorn and being frightened. Or visit haunted houses every Halloween to scream in delight. Why else do you think people enjoy dressing up as vampires and werewolves and hobgoblins? 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, trust me, it’s not. It’s all the same, I assure you. I’m just engaging in my sensory experiences through a situational paradigm of intercession. Essentially traveling in dark neighborhoods at night to garnish a direct visceral reaction instead of paying my hard earned money to experience third-party thrills through a medium like a movie or costume. 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 by a homeless guy or robbed at gunpoint? Or attacked by a roving gang? Aren’t you afraid someone’s going to attack you or something worse?”

“No. I don’t put myself in any actual danger. Nor am I trying to get an adrenaline rush from true to life violent scenarios. 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 walk 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 locked away 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 stupid, but I did wonder -- was it really fundamentally 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. But 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, you are 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, Emma, and I, who were college sweethearts, moved in together after graduation with the intent to marry and start a family. But a sad and unexpected accident occurred. Emma’s parents died in a car accident leaving her care and custody of her nine year old sister, Gretchen. So we took over parenting duties, myself included, and made it work. Of course, I loved Emma. And I already thought of Gretchen as my little sister. But I didn’t realize how little I knew about women till I became a provider to one and a caregiver to the other.

By late last summer, when Gretchen turned sixteen, Emma and I’d already established a pattern of arguing about our expectations for Gretchen. What was permitted and what wasn’t. Like when Gretchen wanted to get a job for the summer and earn her own money, which Emma was against and I thought very responsible of her, the heat turned up. Emma eventually relented and Gretchen did get a job at our local supermarket not even a mile down the road. The problem was the store held late hours requiring employees to work evening shifts till closing after 11:00pm.

“Way too late,” Emma’s confirmed. “She can’t do it! Way too late for a sixteen year old girl to be out at night.”

Gretchen put her foot down in her determined teenage fashion and Emma once again relented. But she made amendments. “We need to pick Gretchen up from work on the nights she works late,” Emma insisted.

“We do?” I foolishly replied. I was comfortable with my schedule, my routines, and didn’t want to deviate. “Can’t she find her own way home?”

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

"Meaning me," I said irritated.

"Yes, okay? You're already up and you know I take Gretchen to her STEM program every morning at seven so I need to be in bed by ten to get up by six. I'd appreciate it if you made yourself available, okay? It's the right thing to do."

"Can't she just ride her bike? It's not that far. I have to be in the shower at eleven so I can leave by eleven thirty and get to the hospital on time."

"The hospital manager don'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, Gretchen can't just ride her bike. I won't ask you again. But you should know I consider you refusing as willingly putting your comfort ahead of her safety."

"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 the 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 right after dinner and the other half computer geeks playing Legend of Zelda on the Switch or such."

"She's a girl. It's not safe." Emma replied firmly.

"Not safe from what?"

“From some man attacking her.”

And there it was. The bias every women apparently held 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,” I continued. I guess I should’ve stopped, but the illogic of it all had my mind spinning. “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 if someone were to attack me, I’d be lucky to fend off even a preschooler. I’ve never hit anyone in my entire life.”

“I don’t care. It’s not safe. You’re picking her up and I won’t let you say another word about it. Or you can just admit you don’t care and I’ll find someone else who does.”

And there it was. It wasn’t fair, but how could I argue further and not suffer consequences? Plus I did love Gretchen so it wasn’t really difficult to bend to Emma’s demands. But, again, that generalized fear had reared its ugly head – which I felt was an insult to just about every rational adult who’d ever fought to make their town safe. Not to mention how helpless I felt challenging my girlfriend over gender autonomy issues.

But six months later, through no intentional fault of my own, the issue was brought home in a way I couldn’t deny the impact of. I became a stalker and terrorized a young woman.

It happened like this --- New Year's Eve came and I took my lunch break in the early morning hours, per usual. That night, for some reason, I chose to walk a route I hadn't explored before, discovering there were almost no streetlights in this new area. My VANE senses started tingling. And since the moonlight was shrouded by the clouds, it was difficult to see more than silhouettes clearly in the dark. I was nearly purring. But not all the streets were quiet. A house along the route was closing down its New Year's Eve party and all the lights were on -- it glowed like a beacon with the few adults, mostly girls, visible inside still awake, loud, happy, and intoxicated.

I saw an imaginative opportunity that didn't come along normally and so I did something I usually wouldn't. I snuck onto the property up to the bushes at the front door and hid in them. Then looked through the windows from outside in the shadows. I wasn't planning anything actually evil -- I just started narrating a scene to engage my VANE. *"The lone man walking," 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, standing under an elm tree. He has terrible deeds in mind. But by sheer luck, Ted is spotted by a resident and then.....*

Now that's what I was thinking. As the fear built and I prepared to run, something amazing occurred. The real front door to the actual house did actually fly open and a young couple came barreling out right past me in a cacophony of noise and movement. I couldn't help it! I yelped in surprise and jumped back, tripping and falling under the bush. Giggling nervously the whole time because the door flying open had given me a real fright and I was thinking, *Now that was the best fright I've had in some time!*

The young couple, a pretty college aged girl and her very drunk frat boy barreled past but she'd caught notice of me falling in the bush and it scared her. But she couldn't get her boyfriend to stop and go back to the house.

"Tommy, stop! There's a strange man hiding in the bushes. Tommy," she whined. "We need to go back inside."

"Fuck no!" he slurred. Only it sounded more like *furgggghhh nyooo* as he barreled away down the walkway out to the sidewalk with her in pursuit.

"Tommy! There's a man in the bushes! We need to go back inside!"

"Fuurrrgggghhh. Yew saish we shhhh go home. So let's gooooo."

"Tommmyyyy!" But he wasn't listening and she had no choice but to follow.

You know how sometimes in extreme situations you can just look at someone and read their mind. Well, I could see she was almost as scared as I. And that she absolutely believed I was evil and only there to rape and kill her. Which pissed me off cause it was categorically and unequivocally false! Not to mention without any basis of merit to assume that just because of the spontaneous encounter we'd just had. Okay, I was in the bushes, but had in no way made any moves toward her. Or given any indication I had any bad designs toward her. For all she knew, I was taking a piss or being sick on my stomach. It was New Year's after all. Not unreasonable. But that didn't matter to her because she had already predetermined the danger she was in and transferred it onto me. Transference is a biggie to psychologists!

"Tommy!" she continued to whine chasing her boyfriend, *"There's like a guy back there who's hiding in the bushes."*

In my head I was like, *"No I wasn't!"* I mean, I could've empathized with her had her assumptions not been so insulting. And then it happened – I decided to be the very thing she was claiming just to teach her a lesson. I climbed out of the bush and DID begin to follow her, matching my footsteps with theirs down the sidewalk. Staying just

far enough back to let her know I was there, but not close enough for her to make out any details other than my silhouette.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," she whined, nearly crying. "Tommy, we need to go back. He's following us!"

"Sterpp fuggin 'round. Leesss ger home, kay?" Tommy slurred looking over his shoulder, "There's ner won back dere. Yer just fuggin wit mee."

Now here's where I made my mistake. I didn't stop. I'd made my point, but rather than turn and leave, I just kept messing with her. I'm not afraid to admit I wanted to because my VANE felt completely different this time – somehow more exciting than ever. And it hadn't escaped my notice that the grin I was wearing felt more akin to the clowns and rednecks and zombies I pictured rather than the victim I had been running away. But she'd pissed me off. And even though I had no intention of doing anything, I was gratified to see how scared she was. Served her right for her assumptions. I was just some innocent guy walking down the sidewalk in the same direction. At three in the morning. Through a suburban neighborhood. At night. And she was wrong.

Every few seconds, I could see her looking over her back, super paranoid and clocking where I was, whimpering, *"Tommmmyyyy...."*

And I thought, Just walking along sweetheart. Waiting for you and your drunk ass boyfriend to get where you're going so I can start my run.

Now, normally I'm a nice guy. Decent and respectful. But she'd really upset me with her preconceived notions. And teaching her a true lesson about stranger danger was important, I felt. Until she finally freaked out and started screaming. That's when I decided it would be smarter if I just turned around and took my walk in the other direction. Her screams at full pitch, echoing across the neighborhood, loud enough to wake everyone easily within a square mile. So rather than piss in my pants in surprise,

I turned and took off running like I'd never run before. Faster than I believed myself capable of. Sprinting for all I was worth, zigging and zagging, till I couldn't hear her screams anymore and was well out of range.

Run, I thought. RUN! Get back to the hospital!

Man was I scared! And, if I'm being honest, more titillated than ever. My adrenaline coursed that night through every limb, pumping into my legs till I swear I was faster than a five minute mile! Nor did I stop till I made it all the way back to the hospital! Phew.

When I returned, Lily noticed I was out of breath and couldn't talk.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Sure, I said when I could speak. And I don't know why I did, but I told her part of what happened though I left out the hiding in the bushes part. I guess to test her reaction and gauge my complicity in the whole event. I was feeling a little guilty and a whole lot of adrenaline.

"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 whined. "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 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! She's a girl. You're an asshole and this is exactly why it's not safe for women to walk at night!"

"Why! HOW?! What about anything that happened indicated she was in any kind of real danger?! How does that make me an asshole? Maybe she was the asshole for assuming."

"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*, you jackass! Women have to be careful because of men just like you!"

"THAT's a *DAMN LIE*! Now 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 yelled stomping away. I probably wouldn't be seeing her down in the morgue for some time to come.

I really felt Lily's logic was unfair. She knew me and yet still believed I could pose a danger just because I was male. Why should I 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 and upstanding man by all accounts. But with a glance and a shitload of preconceived notions, woman assumed I was a danger for no other reason than I was a man. Lily. Emma. That girl. And I'm sure it wouldn't take Gretchen long to believe the same thing, if she didn't already.

“What kind of fairy tale boogey man have all you women bought into?” I lamented.

“And why have I been so ignorant to its existence?”

In the back of my mind, I had an epiphany. Instead of just getting angry, I might’ve discovered my first post-doctorate paper to seek publication for. I mean, there was a lot to unpack here and I knew, scientifically, I’d have to gather a great deal more empiric data. Formulate some kind of test and control group and then spend time analyzing and developing a working theory. I might even win a peer review award for something so new.

But I also admit it made me both sad and angry -- sad because, if I were being honest, in my world I could walk alone at night scaring myself as a game. But to women like that girl, like Lily and Emma and Gretchen, that same walk was a dangerous thing -- and not just by the misperception of circumstance, but because of an inbred, pre-conceived notion of perceived threat. Was this superstition or fear based on a Neolithic cultural caution? Make believe or the true threat of man?

As a man, I couldn’t deny the thrill I’d received either. My experiments would continue, I realized, but I’d have to develop a system of analyzing the results for posterity while including myself in those experiments. Who better than I, a man, to look into the concept of superstitious fear?!

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” my paper would begin, “there are real dangers in the world, to be sure. And people who truly are dangerous. But there are also a great deal people who are not. Who would never harm another, yet still caught up in the unfair gender bias imprinted into the female subconscious against all men.”

By day I’d remain a loving boyfriend to Emma, a big brother to Gretchen, and a friend to Lily, if she ever forgave me. And for all intents and purposes, I was going to be a model enlightened man embracing the “feminist” ideology. But by night! Oh by night!

All you ignorant women with your paranoid bias beware! I AM your stalker coming for you! Righteous avenger to all of man's dignity! Your superstitions will be exposed and the truth revealed! This man's *VANE* has a brand new purpose!

The End