

Eric Seiley

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 cry. More on that later.

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

“You’re fat,” Sheila told me point blank during my physical last year. “You seriously need to shed some weight before it’s too late. Quit the fast food, get more exercise and sleep at least eight hours. Otherwise there’s a good chance you’ll have a heart attack by the time you’re thirty-five. I mean, holy hell, Jason! Your LDL’s and triglycerides look like an old man who eats bacon and guzzles buttermilk every meal. And your BMI is higher than the speed limit. You’re only thirty-two for heaven’s sake.”

Easy for her to say. She finished med school decades ago and passed her residency while I’m stuck finishing my doctoral hours. Which means I also have to teach my advising professor’s *Intro to Psychology* courses every morning, supervise clinical counseling hours each afternoon and still pay my bills working the midnight shift at Our Sisters of Mercy hospital. Not to mention holding down a personal life with my girlfriend, Gretchen. When do I have time to work out?

“You can plainly see how busy I am, Doc,” I whined. “I don’t have a lot of leisure time so cut me some slack, huh. Better yet, write me a script for Adderall and help a fellow out – I can kill two birds with one stone.”

“You don’t want to go down that road, Jason. Too many doctors have done so and paid the price. Remember, there’s always a cost to cutting corners. So don’t. Do the work and figure it out. You’re a smart boy.”

So I tried the most efficient, time conscious, low cost way of losing weight and gaining health. I started running on my work breaks at night -- fifteen minutes here, thirty minutes there. All between three and five a.m. But, honestly, running is so boring! And I wasn’t getting much of a calorie burn at the pace I was going. So I made it more interesting and turned up the metabolic burners in the process by engaging in a little motivational tactic called VANE -- Voluntary Arousal from Negative Experiences. It’s a real thing, you can look it up.

Here’s how it works. On nights I run, I stimulate my adrenals by picturing the most frightening of scenarios – you know, killer clowns with red balloons chasing me. Disfigured, cannibalistic rednecks coming to slice me up. Invading zombies, giant xenomorphs, possessed demon suckers. Whatever I can imagine. You get the picture. And when my fear builds up and I can’t stand another second, I take off sprinting -- like a fat kid chasing an ice cream truck. Fifteen minute here, thirty minutes there. Shoot, on most nights with VANE, I can sprint nearly five miles cumulatively 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 cause I’ve lost nearly seventy pounds. Not to mention grown significantly thinner and faster. There’s even the unexpected post-run benefit where I become, well, *excited*,

if you catch my meaning. Which I take care of in the men's room before going back to work. I don't tell my doctor or my girlfriend this, though I did confide in my co-worker, Lily, once. Not about the post-excitement activities, mind you! Geez! Just about the VANE and running in the dark through suburban neighborhoods while on my hospital break.

"Aren't you scared?" Lily asks once I return from one of my late night sojourns, particularly wide eyed and breathing heavy. "When you go out at night 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 forever and is the den mother to our cold, little kingdom.

"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 mothers 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 by the way. 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 don't sneak up to anyone's house or peep through windows or anything like that. I don't do anything unethical 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 go to scary movies just so they can sit in a dark and eat popcorn and be frightened. And every Halloween, people visit haunted houses so they can be frightened and 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, stalker territory."

“No, it’s not. Trust me. It’s all the same, I assure you. I’m just engaging my sensory experiences through an interpersonal, highly situational paradigm of intercession. Not to mention, I’m getting direct visceral stimulation free of charge rather than paying my hard earned money going to movies and haunted houses. In fact, 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 rob 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 through quiet suburban neighborhoods in the middle of boring suburbia USA than, say, cruising east Oakland or Compton or Hell’s Kitchen where actual criminals dwell. This is Silicon Valley. The heart of rich nerds and pampered housewives hiding in their mansions playing video games and scrolling Tik Tok. 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 was Lily 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 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 and paying attention.”

I wasn’t female obviously. But I was paying attention.

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, 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 from 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. Yes, there are men out there doing terrible things. I see them all the time at the jail. But that’s the exception. 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 after midnight if you knew they were going to come across one of those guys when they were all alone and by themselves?” 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 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 take a summer job at a local supermarket and earn her own money. Which I thought was great, but Gretchen was adamantly against it because the job demanded late night hours.

“Absolutely not! Way too late,” Gretchen told Emma. “You can’t do it! That’s much too late for a sixteen year old girl to be out at night alone. Why don’t you get a retail job at the mall instead? Where they have daytime hours and lots of people around.”

Emma put her foot down in determined teenage fashion till Gretchen relented. But with a few conditions.

“First,” Gretchen insisted, “you will not leave the store, even to the parking lot, after shift. And two, you will be picked up and driven home every night you work late. Those are my terms.”

“They are?” I foolishly replied. Gretchen worked the early shift at Gated Labs and didn’t stay up past nine-thirty. Which I knew meant she expected me to be the one picking Emma up. Which I wasn’t sure I had time for. “You don’t think she can find her own way home?”

“Of course she can. Bit eleven at night is way too late for her to be out alone. She needs one of us to pick her up.”

“Meaning me,” I replied irritated.

“Yes, okay? You’re already up so 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 at 11.”

“The hospital supervisor 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. You should pick her up. I won’t ask you again, but you should know I consider any refusal a serious rejection – not to mention messed up that you’d put Emma in danger just for your own comfort.”

“What are you talking about? What danger?” I asked. “We live in the suburbs. How am I putting her in danger?!”

“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? She’ll be riding down a well-lit street with no one around. Not to mention, we live in one of the most quiet, boring towns in the whole wide world. The town is mostly senior citizens who fall asleep after dinner and families who don’t go out on school nights after nine.”

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

“Not safe from what?”

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

And there it was. The bias every women held against every man out there. The unknown presence of the anonymous, lurking male. I could’ve argued, but didn’t want to piss Gretchen off further and suffer her ire. Plus I loved Emma so it really wasn’t that difficult to bend to Gretchen’s demands.

Still, I found women’s logic untenably rude. Gretchen, Lily. All of them. They seemed so ready and willing to let some generalized fear sway them – believing every man was secretly a danger to every woman out there once the sun went down. And sometimes not even then. Just because they were women and we were men. Insulting.

But then it happened. Not even a month later, through no intentional fault of my own, I 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 late night house party. All the lights were on inside and the place glowed like a lamp shining bright into the night. With the few people left in attendance, mostly college-aged girls I noticed, visibly awake, loud, and intoxicated. So, I decided to incorporate the situation into my VANE motivation to run. Which felt like a gift. Because recently, I’d become somewhat de-sensitized to the horror-monster tropes and wasn’t getting the same kick. I wasn’t running as hard or receiving the same pleasant after effect. But now, this late night house party had me interested again. So, before I thought too deeply, I snuck onto their property -- all the way up to 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 and nearly screamed. Because, right then, the front door of the house flew open and a young couple came barreling out. Well, the drunk male barreled out, stumbling down to the sidewalk while his girlfriend followed, clutching his arm and trying to keep up. They scared me, and I giggled, feeling my VANE push me to run. What a nice, unexpected fright!

Since the young couple hadn't seen me, I decided to double down and follow. I hit the sidewalk, measured the space between us, and continued behind ten yards, matching their pace as I went. Amping up my VANE experience.

"Hang on, Tommy, I hear something!" the girl mumbled looking around. "Maybe we should go back."

"Why!" the drunk boyfriend slurred. Only it sounded more like *Rrrreeyyy? Yew saish we shhhh go home. Sho les go hooome.*"

"Tommy! There's someone behind us. Oh my gosh! He's not from the party and I think he's following us."

She was scared. Really scared, which wasn't hard to recognize. But why? Because I was a lone silhouette walking behind? I hadn't done anything. Or said anything. Which, I believe, proved my point.

A word in my own defense. Yes, I was following her. And I did recognize by simply being there, she was frightened. But how was that my fault? She was the one with the unsubstantiated bias. She was the one assuming I was evil, with bad intent, after

randomly crossing my path at three in the morning along a quiet residential street. Not my fault. It was random, and bordered on the ridiculous. Sure I was taking the piss out of her by following, but I never came closer than ten yards. Or gestured toward her in any way. And for all intents and purposes, had done nothing to justify her reaction. Not to mention, I had just as much right to walk down the sidewalk as her and her drunk boyfriend. Maybe I should be scared of them? I mean, from my perspective, they could be the real danger. He could be some toxic, frat boy idiot who might attack me just because his entitled sorority girlfriend said I was a problem. Who would be the real victim then, huh?! Plus, if she was so afraid of being out after dark, why had she gone out?! Why not just stay at the house party?

Still, her presumptions felt so insulting, I thought, *I'm glad you're frightened. Serves you right, you ignorant fool!*

"Tommmmyyyy!" the girl whined, "There's a guy following us. We need to get somewhere safe. Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh! He's getting closer."

I was that guy, but I assure you I wasn't getting closer. I just wanted to prove a point. So I kept walking, letting my footsteps echo off the sidewalk in time with hers. Stopping when she stopped. Moving when she moved. But always keeping myself ten paces back.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh," she began hysterically crying. "Tommy, he's coming for us!"

*"Sterpp fuggin 'round. Leesss ger home, kay?"* Tommy slurred clueless.

Now here's where I made my mistake. I should've stopped. Turned and just gone the other way. The point had been made and I could see she was pretty near to breaking. But my VANE was at full tilt and I wasn't thinking so clearly. Plus, I was pissed and wanted to really prove my point -- that she was safe despite her irrational fear. But then

she started screaming. And I mean *SCREAMING!* Loud enough to wake the dead and wake the entire neighborhood.

*Oh shit!* I thought. Realizing, if someone came out and saw me while she was screaming, I'd be guilty by pure coincidence of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Guilt by association. And even if I protested my innocence, I doubt anyone would believe me against that stupid girl's trumped up charges. So I broke it off. Stopped, turned around and sprinted the other way faster than I thought I could. My VANE fully engaged as I flew like the wind! All with the girl's screams echoed off the houses and nearby house lights flicked on.

Boy! My adrenaline was coursing through me sending me back to the hospital faster than ever. More excited than ever. Which Lily noticed.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Sure," I said after I caught my breath.

"What did you do?"

"What do you mean? Nothing! I didn't do anything!" But I told her what happened. I don't know why, but I did. Maybe because I wanted her to see it from my side and validate that the girl had over-reacted.

"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 despite her assumptions.

"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 that’s on her. I was just walking down the street 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 an innocent girl, you asshole! I have a good mind to call the cops on you myself.”

“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.”

“SHE,” Lily yelled, “FELT like she was in danger! Which meant 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 a man. 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 Lily, boyfriend to Gretchen, caretaker to Emma. By all accounts, an honorable and upstanding person. 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 not to go out on your nighttime excursions anymore! 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’d 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.

Still, I stopped VANE for a month and ran on the indoor treadmills at the hospital. Which was super boring and highly unsatisfying. Until I had 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 and develop a working theory before writing up my findings. Something akin to *Superstition in the Irrational Female Mind based on Neolithic Cultural Fear?*

Which is what I’ve been doing – following lone women from bars, movie theaters, late night restaurants, all in the name of research. I’ll spare you the rest of the details, Ms. Capelli, because I’m sure your newspaper editors can verify the research data. And with the police “manhunt” that’s currently going on, there’s additional information available concerning the locations I’ve been working. And I’ll certainly provide you with my written findings based on the nights I hit the streets for my midnight runs. All

in the name of science, mind you! I even included the new areas around the city I've been working that the police don't know about yet to prove I am on the up and up and you can trust me. All in the name of research, mind you!

Ms. Capelli, please don't look upon me as a "bad guy." That would be indolent. Especially since I've tried to be clear and explain all for the purposes of your reporting – which I believe will bear out my research. I've NEVER touched anyone! Nor broken any laws of any kind! Sure, I've gotten close enough to touch a few women I followed, but I never crossed the threshold, you know? I just did it for the data -- to see how they reacted. And, in all fairness, I've considered my own reactions. Which, being ethical, I factored in since I recognize I've been a catalyst for most of the data production. And I admit, my VANE has been sharper and more enticing than ever. The thrill of being caught – which happened on a few occasions – because women, I discovered, will call the police at the drop of a hat when a single man is out late at night in their vicinity – especially if his orbit reaches within twenty feet of theirs despite no illegal activity occurring whatsoever. But, like I said, it has all been in the name of research and the honest desire to solve this subjective assumption women have toward men – that we are the problem. I believe I can get to the bottom of this unsubstantiated fear and develop a working therapy to correct it.

I would also like your article to include how I remain the loving boyfriend to Gretchen, big brother to Emma, friend to Lily, patient to Sheila and so on. I am the picture of a decent, law abiding man to all women out there. A role model of an enlightened man embracing the "feminist" ideology. Nor, as my data shows, have I, as a representative of most men out there, been the problem. Women are the problem! In their ignorance, in their miscalculated perceptions and paranoid bias, they think, *Beware! Men are our stalkers!* But that doesn't mean we are. It is women who impugn the righteous dignity of men and reveal the superstitions of their subjective fear!

So to answer your other question, Ms. Capelli, this is why I reached out to you. You are a respected journalist known for fair and unbiased reporting. And recently, with all those police flyers being put up around town warning of a serial stalker, I'm worried I will be arrested and blamed for criminal activity. Which is wholly unfounded! I have committed no crimes and am no danger to anyone, as you can tell! And with your help, we can deliver a message to the police about their misguided "manhunt." So it can cease and I can finish my research.

You must understand I am not a criminal! I mean, sure, I recognize there are real dangers out there. And people who pose a significant danger to others every day! But most men out at night aren't dangerous. They're just going about their lives. The majority of us are decent, respectful and loving humans. You know this. Yet, through cultural bias, through gender inequality, we find ourselves subjected to women's irrational prejudices almost every day. Based on what? Some imprinted mode of suspicion within the female subconscious?! You must see this type of thing in your line of work all the time. But I believe such bias is unfair and must end! I say let us put common sense back into the world. I say, like Colonel Grossman, we must take back the night.

Through my research, I've taken progressive steps to change that paradigm. To gather enough empirical data so I can apply a working theory leading to the elimination of this cataclysmic misunderstanding stamped into every female psyche. So we honorable men no longer have to suffer such prejudice. You see, I only have altruistic purposes.

What do you think, Ms. Capelli? Will you write the article and champion my cause? Will you help me?

The END.