

Stories
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Fears

Ever since I was a kid, almost all my fears have been about my mother. Whether because she had heart problems (born with a defect), or because until I was six I only saw her hysterical, never happy... Anyway, by the time my milk teeth came in, my greatest fear was that she would die. A car would hit her. Yes, she'd be on her way home from work and get hit by a car. Maybe she'd already been hit. I'd look outside, sitting like a frog on the windowsill. She's not coming home from work. Here's the bus, everyone's getting off at the stop and trailing home like ants. But Mom's not coming. She's definitely been hit by a car! Or maybe not. She'd fall out the window. She'd be hanging the laundry or washing the window, when she'd lose her balance. She would fall. Good luck surviving a fall from the fifth floor. Or maybe not. She would die of a heart attack. She'd already had one before. She wouldn't survive a second one. Or what if something happened to me? She'd die of grief. Or from a heart attack brought on by grief...

Never upset Mom – I learned that quickly. That's why I became an expert liar before I was even out of diapers. My lies didn't stop her from worrying, but they did make me feel like I was guarding her, and my fear for her life receded a little. As far as my mother knew, I was always doing great. I got straight A's, went to study groups, wrote poetry, and put the toys away in my room. My fear of upsetting my mother was stronger than the truth, stronger than my own self-interest. My fear of losing her was paralyzing.

I was also really scared of war. I don't know where this fear came from, since no one ever told me any scary stories. Even though Grandpa was wounded in the war, he never stirred my imagination with war stories. I didn't watch war movies, either – even the thought of them was unbearable. I think my fear of war came from a dream. I had it often, almost always the same way. I was a man, a soldier, rushing across a field toward the forest. There was a German

helicopter flying above me, and I felt the machine-gun fire plowing across the wet grass and finally overtaking me. Always like that: I got stitched through with a line of huge bullets and it hurt like hell. I heard triumphant German voices. Then I died. Afterward I woke up, but I couldn't move my arms or legs, and I couldn't scream either, so I lay there dead as a doornail and thought: "Now that I've been killed in war, my mother will definitely die from grief." These war dreams crawled over me night after night, rustling like cockroaches. They alternated with dreams where my mother fell off a cliff and hit the rocks below with a thud.

My friend told me to write my fear down on a piece of paper, as if it had already happened. The main thing was, it had to be in secret code. Then my fear would go away. I'd learned a code somewhere: first you write the alphabet from top to bottom, then on the other side you write it bottom to top. You end up with this code: A-Z, B-Y, C-X, and so on. I wrote this in code: "Nln tlg srg yb z xzi" ("Mom got hit by a car"). I put the paper somewhere on my shelf. My mother found it and thought that I'd been sleepwalking again. She took the paper to show the women at work the nonsense I wrote in my sleep. The women were alarmed, and erased the words. A few years later, Mom actually did get hit by a car and barely survived. Everyone who knew her donated a liter of blood. I begged them to take more blood, more! Every week I went to the donation center and they chased me out because you're not allowed to give blood that often. For a long time, my mother was on the edge of death and I lived in her hospital ward. When she was sleeping very quietly, I watched her stomach nervously. Phew, all right, it's still going up and down, just visibly. She's breathing, she's alive. I blamed myself for everything. Why did I write that note, and in code, no less? I thought it worked like a spell. Whatever you wrote came true. This theory was confirmed a few more times, but the evidence was never strong enough, so no one believed me when I said, "Never write bad things because they'll come true."

All that came later, though. Back then, when I was a kid, my fear of my mom's death was unsubstantiated. But that loss already existed somewhere inside me, and whenever I thought about it, I felt a viscid pain. I never told my mom.

But I had more important things to worry about! The troublemakers. Disgusting groups of pimply teenagers in front of school. Their dirty hands, stinking of tobacco, tugging at your skirt, which was two years old but still pretty clean. On my way to school I waited until I spotted a teacher to cling onto. “Heyyyyyyyy, Inna Alexandrovna! Can I go with you! Great! Awesome! Of course I’ve done my homework!”

The whole class was nothing but troublemakers. One girl was always masturbating in literature class, her face all red. Everyone except the teacher knew what she was doing. After class, in the back room, oh the things they did to her. She was too ashamed to scream, but she did huff and puff. It was scary, so scary. Between periods, you have to rush out into the hallway – even if it meant taking a smack on the butt and a blow to the ego – just so you don’t have to hear the noise coming from the back room, that girl, that stifled laughter, that strange yelping. Why didn’t the teachers notice anything? Why did they sleepwalk to the teachers’ lounge as soon as the bell rang? Why did they allow that huffing and puffing in the back room?

Mom, I’m not going to school today. Mom, my foot. My foot hurts a lot. I don’t need to go to the doctor, it’s rheumatism (how did I come up with that?). My mother believed me, somehow. She believed every lie I told, no matter how ridiculous.

It’s evening. My mother yells from the hallway: “Natasha! Someone’s here for you!” In the doorway behind her I see HIM, the worst of the worst. I pass his apartment every day, he lives on the second floor. As I run past his door, I always feel like he’s watching me through the peephole and sneering with the most wretched, depraved smirk.

MOTH-ER! Why can’t you see – he’s one of the troublemakers! Mom! Why are you calling me to the door? Why didn’t you tell him I’m not here? I’m not home and never will be. Why aren’t you grabbing him by the ear and threatening him with violence? How come you’re calling me with that sing-song voice, as if my best friend came over to fold origami???

I come out to see him. His eyes graze over me, and for some reason he kicks between my legs. Right under the balls, if I had any. “Tomorrow you’re gonna bring me money. As much as

you got. Or else I'll jump on you from a tree.”

He started jumping on me from trees regularly, since I didn't have any money to my name. They must have taught the troublemakers how to jump from trees or something...

I gathered my things and some food and hopped on a train. To Moscow. I figured it was best to travel north. But since I'd blabbed to one of my friends about running away, I was brought back before evening. My mom was wringing her hands. I realized I hadn't thought to protect her peace of mind, that my dreams of Moscow had been an unacceptable luxury. I had to find a way to survive here.

I had to become one of the troublemakers. There were no good kids in my town, nowhere for them to come from. All the kids were troublemakers: bad, disgusting, and extremely dangerous. They played dangerous games in the forest by the railroad tracks. The things that went on in that forest, filled with the trills of nightingales and flowering acacias.

At five, they tied girls to trees and whipped them with stinging nettles until they went into hysterics and their entire bodies turned red. Then you had to lie to your mother, saying you accidentally fell into some nettles.

At ten, they made you lie on the ties between the tracks and wait for an incoming train to pass over you, and you couldn't crap your pants. They forced all the kids to lie there, but one boy stayed the whole time. Afterward, his mother took him to live in the city with his grandma, for good. We never saw him again. Obviously, the boy had crapped his pants, and was also a bad liar. He deserved our contempt and we never mentioned him again.

I felt ashamed, and tried not to think about him, but the boy who crapped his pants would give me no peace. I wished he'd send me a letter. I wished he'd write something like, “I didn't crap my pants. I'm living with my grandma because she's near death and needs care. After I lay down under the train, everything became clear and I became a man. Tell everyone I say hello...” and so on. But, of course, he didn't send a letter. They took him to his grandma's so he'd be far away from us troublemakers. I didn't have that kind of grandma. I had one, but I wasn't allowed

to visit her because she thought that I stuffed my face and she had little patience with her grandchildren, anyway.

In general, seeking protection from adults was a lost cause. You couldn't trust them, either. I really burned my fingers learning that lesson. One day I skipped after-school club and wandered through town, trying to kill time. My mother was at work and I didn't have the key to the apartment. I had something to eat at my neighbor's. I was hanging out near a store when this guy rode up to me on a bicycle. I'd never seen him before. He was cute. He told me he was a friend of my dad's. Dad had been living with another family for a few years now, so I had no clue what kind of friends he had. I had no reason to doubt that Dad was friends with this nice man on a bicycle. We decided to go for a ride. He took us around town for a bit, then said, "Let's go to the woods."

It was warm, April or even May, and the woods were already green and fragrant. We entered the woods like in a fairytale. The grass was tall and dense. Dad's friend helped me off the bike, then got off himself. "Do you want to lie down?" he suggested as he reclined on the grass. I also lay down in the grass. He said, "You know, it feels good to lie in the grass naked." I wasn't sure about this, since I'd done it before, and afterward my whole body had itched for three days. But Dad's friend was pretty self-assured and had started taking off his pants.

Luckily, Dad's friend had never been to our woods, and didn't know that people often walked through them on their way from the train. The woods were covered with footpaths, but Dad's friend didn't notice them through the tall grass. While he was taking off his pants, people passed by, having popped up quietly on the paths. Dad's friend was spooked. But then something terrible happened: a teacher from my after-school club came down the path. She saw me lying there with Dad's friend, who was buckling his belt and smiling nervously. She said, "Well, well, well..." When she uttered her "Well, well, well" I was pressing myself into the ground. Dad's friend was, too. Then she said, "Well, now! Who are you, exactly?" He stuttered, saying that he was a friend of my father's. She said, "And what is her father's name, I wonder?" He replied,

“Nikolai... Petrovich?” “No!” she said triumphantly, “His name is Viktor Fyodorovich.” I stared at Dad’s friend with contempt and shook my head. Shame on you, I thought. Shame! And we could have been such good friends!

They took a while to straighten things out. She wanted to call the police, but there weren’t cell phones back then, you had to use a pay phone. Dad’s lying friend refused to call the police. They bickered for five minutes, and then he disappeared.

The teacher turned her attention to me. She walked me home, yelling the whole way, and when she found my mother at the store, she started yelling at her even more loudly, telling her in the gravest tone how I’d been fooling around with Dad’s friend.

Traitor, I thought. Vile creature. She doesn’t get it, she doesn’t have a brain! She doesn’t understand you’re not supposed to upset my mother, she won’t survive a second heart attack!

My mother took me home and beat the shit out of me with a jump rope out of helplessness. At that point, I understood very clearly that having grown-up friends was also not allowed.

I wanted to be friends with ghosts, or imaginary people, or aliens. I wanted them to be strong and honest, to protect me. Everyone else was scared of ghosts, and I was trying to arrange meetings with them. It never worked out. Although a few times I successfully pretended to make contact with a spirit in front of my mother, and she believed me. Then she told the women at work about how I was not only a sleepwalker, but also a medium. Reveling in my lies, I told my mother about people who’d come back from the dead and landed from outer space. But I never met real dead people. Too bad. My whole life, I’ve never met a single spirit. I only had real friends, the kind made of flesh and blood.

By now, our dangerous group had grown up a little. We got into cigarettes, weed, and alcohol, always in the forest. Then the teenage sex started.

And then, a horrifying piece of news rocked the whole town, shattering even the worst

people. “Seven teenagers brutally raped and killed a fifth-grader in the forest. They sewed his mouth shut so he wouldn’t scream, stuck barbed wire into his anus and twisted it until it came out of his throat...” There was a very detailed description, horrible to imagine. The teenagers were caught and put in prison somewhere, but within two years every single one had been released, and they came to our nightclub at the cultural association. The seven murderers stood with beers in their hands and watched the dancing girls who, for some reason, started flailing even harder when they noticed the murderers’ gazes. Back then, it was very fashionable to flail with your whole body. An employee from the cultural association chaperoned us the entire night. Vera Fedorovna, a 45-year-old woman. She watched serenely as the girls twisted and writhed and the murderers nursed their beers. She had the light, half-smile of someone who had everything under control: girls and murderers alike.

You had to leave the nightclub earlier than everyone else while pretending you weren’t leaving at all, just stepping out for some air and coming right back. But really, you crouch unnoticed along the parapets and the flowerbeds, in the shadows. Then you cross the road, go under the trees, and go home, go home! You don’t want any of the murderers to follow you. You want them to think you’re still writhing beside them, and that later they might have the chance to “walk you home” – that is, chase you, catch you, and fuck you in the forest. But most importantly, you have to leave early so that you can slip past that second-floor door, where the tree-jumper lurks unnoticed. Then, quietly, trying to walk silently, you get to your fifth floor. But you have to make sure in advance that there isn’t anybody on the dark flight of stairs between the fourth and fifth floors. Because there often was someone who’d turned out the lights and waited for me, wouldn’t let me go home, to my mom, who went to bed early and slept blissfully unaware that in her very entryway her daughter was being groped by some shady guys. Future murderers, for sure. Sleep, Mom, sleep in your cradle of grapevines. He’s got barbed wire in his pocket, he’s about to take it out, tomorrow everyone will be horrified, and you, of course, will die of grief.

Later, someone slashed the upholstery on our #15 door. C-c-c-cut, like that, slashed the knife's entire length. He was so angry, he even wrote "Natasha, suck my dick" on the entryway wall. The sassy yellow cotton door survived the wound. What a disgrace. Afterwards someone painted over the graffiti. We stitched up the door. Then someone slashed it again in a different section. We stitched it up again.

A new nightmare appeared in my repertoire. I'd go up to the fifth floor, where I saw the evil tree-jumper, his dick hanging out. He cut open the door with a knife, and blood flowed from it. And the door was my mother. The whole landing was covered in blood, the knife and the tree-jumper's dick were covered in blood. The dream, which recurred with impressive regularity, eclipsed my war dreams. Those sweet, heroic war dreams...

"Mom, let's move! We could move to Abrau-Durso? To the settlements? To Bumblefuck, Nowhere!"

"Yeah, yeah, we'll move," my mom said vacantly. "We've always wanted to go to Kamchatka!"

"Mom, I'm serious! I can't live here!"

"Ok, ok! We'll definitely move one day!"

"Now, Mom, now!"

To this day, she hasn't moved. She still lives among murderers and tree-jumpers, who by now have married, procreated, and gotten fat. She lives in an apartment with a scarred, stitch-worn, quilt door. On her way to the store, she walks past murderers sitting outside with strollers and gnawing on sunflower seeds. They say "hello" to her. Things have calmed down. No one's lurking on the fifth floor.

I visited her and peeked into all the corners of my fear with a bottle of cognac in my hand and my husband on my arm. We drank a lot, wandered around the town drunk, and ridiculed these fears. I doubled over with laughter. I hoped my hooting would stifle the deathly chill in my stomach. The deathly chill of the German lead, the barbed wire, the steel knife blade, and that

terrible, naked dick.