

A Safety I Have Known

Introduction

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD

I GREW UP IN A MIDDLE-CLASS suburb of Los Angeles smack dab in the middle of the post-war baby boom. My mother, like all the mothers I knew in our neighborhood, was a homemaker. Her physical and psychological presence, through the first dozen years of my life, was synonymous and synchronous with home and security.

Although far from the breezy happiness of *Leave It to Beaver* and similar suburban sitcom portrayals of the era, my childhood did have a stability and sweetness, at least on the surface. My mother served in the PTA. My sisters participated in Brownies and Girl Scouts. I played third base on the Little League team. In family photos of those years, we are smiling.

But there were the night terrors. In my early school years I had frequent bad dreams that would shake me awake. Most involved being chased by monsters or falling into infinite black chasms. The predators and scenes came not from my brief biographical experiences but from mythologies, stories, and movies. With no perspective or inner resources to comfort myself, I'd flee my blankets, somehow stumble into my parent's bedroom, and curl up with my mother.

In the half-century since those days, my nightmares have mostly disappeared only to be replaced by real-world worries aplenty. The news provides fodder for a daily barrage of fearful thoughts. Where will the terrorists strike next? Will my family and friends be OK? Is my house safe? Will Southern California crumble in an earthquake? And then there's the particular worries that come from my medical practice: Did I miss that melanoma? Did the addition of that antifungal drug exacerbate his arrhythmias? Was her *C. difficile* infection from my overzealous use of antibiotics? I reassure myself — when I can — with a logical review of the circumstances and an experience of 30 years

of medical practice.

Mother's Day has passed. This year it came on Sunday, May 12. I am fortunate that my mother is still very much alive and kicking. I am grateful to her for many things — starting, of course, with the gift of life itself. As I inventory my gratitude, high on that list is my unshakeable sense born of those terrifying nights that some-

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(For Bernice)

Nightmares drove me to their bed
Startled and fear-frozen after tumbling
Over cliff edge or fleeing the approaching fangs.
I jolted, being seven, and sleepwalked to safety.

The stations of my midnight hegira are hazy:
A knit hallway rug and a dented hollow bronze doorknob
Marked the portal between the two worlds
Finally, the frayed frills of the knit bedspread led upwards,
From the dark floorboards to shroud the huddled giants.

The secret entrance lay on my mother's side
Digging deep, I'd find the sheet and burrow under to her.
Hand-over-hoisting-hand myself along her warmed
nightgown

Until, my pilgrim head lay on her breastbone,
Gradually rocking with her moist breath.

Sleep came quickly then and was peaceful. No demons dare
Enter this layered sanctuary. The smells were all magic.
The protective elixir of night sweat coated me and I flew
Above the rooftops of our street and over the outstretched
Jaws of dragons.



where, down some physical or psychological hallway, behind some inner or outer doorway, there is a place of safety. **SDP**

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