

Merrily

—AN ESSAY BY—

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Anybody who knew me when I was growing up would be floored to find out I've written a horror novel. As a child, I lived in a constant state of worry and fear. I wouldn't eat spaghetti sauce because it looked like blood; I thought cats wanted to crawl down my throat thanks to *Tales from the Dark Side*; and I was sure every crime ever profiled on *Unsolved Mysteries* was going to happen to me (how unbelievably scary was Robert Stack on that show?). Every Friday the thirteenth, it was verboten at my house to even flip past the USA Network, because that's when they played the Jason movies back to back to back. The slightest glimpse of Jason and his mask was enough to make me sleepless for days.

But that was before the day I almost died.

ON JUNE 10, 1994, I jogged to an aerobics class at the YMCA. I was thirteen years old, and I lived in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Why did I jog to an aerobics class, sweat Richard-Simmons-style to wicked early nineties synth, and then bop out of the Y all set to jog back home when I had the body mass index of a pile of corn husks? I don't know. I guess I have too much energy. Some of which I should have invested, that flawlessly sunny June day, in looking both ways before crossing the intersection of Washington and Divide. Because as I loped across the crosswalk in my dip-shitty innocence, I heard a car horn. I turned my head to the right. And the last thing I saw before everything changed was a white hood slamming into me.

My memory of the incident isn't fast-forward or slo-mo; it's real-time. The sky and the ground switched places. I had a second to register this and to think it remarkably strange. My thought, if narrated, would have probably read, "Huh." I had that second because I was airborne before landing

ten feet from the car, which had been doing about thirty miles per hour when it whacked me. I don't remember hitting the sidewalk. I realized I was lying with my face in the gutter, my head pillowed on my right arm. I raised my head, saw my arm. And my next thought, which I voiced, was, "WaaaAAAHHHHH!"

My right upper humerus had split clean in half, with the bone flush against the skin of my upper arm. When my hand wouldn't move, my very energetic brain went into overdrive, repeating and elaborating on my previous eloquence by causing me to scream, "WAAAHHHH! HELP!"

I cinched my eyes shut and heard people swarming around me. Somebody covered me with a blanket. Somebody else ran to dial 911. A woman shouted, "You're in big trouble, lady!" at the girl who'd hit me; she was shaking and crying—but not nearly as impressively as I was shaking and crying. I'd switched my vocal output to a fast, whispered, "Help me, help me, help me," until I heard myself, decided I sounded pathetic, and stopped.

And *that* was the moment something truly bizarre happened. The terrified kid who had blitzed past Channel 9 every Friday the thirteenth so she wouldn't see a nanosecond of Jason's masked face—the kid who was creeped out by marinara sauce, felines, and gaunt old Robert Stack—she went calm. A voice spoke up from deep down. From an odd, important core.

How nice that you're not in any pain.

I could hear the ambulance siren as it came closer, and that calm inner core continued to grow and observe and speak.

It's a beautiful day. You might be paralyzed or you might die, but it's a beautiful day, and there will be another, even if you are gone. Accept this as a gift, and you'll find you are far, far braver than you ever believed possible.

Keeping my eyes shut tight, I said to the woman who was crouched over me, "Tell my mom I'm okay. Okay?" I told her my home phone number, one digit at a time. "Tell her I'm okay."

I didn't mean, I'm dying, but lie to her.

I meant, Here I am in the middle of everything I've ever feared, and I'm fine. I can't believe it, but I'm fine.

The siren grew deafening. Brakes squeaked. Rattle of a stretcher. Deep male voice.

"What's your name, honey?"

“Gina.”

“Gina, I need you to open your eyes.”

“I can’t.”

“I need you to open your eyes so I know you’re awake.”

“I’ll sing. So you know I’m awake. I can’t look at my arm.”

“... Okay. What’ll you sing for me?”

I sang “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” all the way to the ER, sometimes humming it, responding to questions from the nonplussed paramedic, who might or might not have noticed that I often repeated “Life is but a dream.” And that it made me smile.

I’D FIND OUT LATER that the reason my bodacious traumatic transverse fracture didn’t hurt was because it had stretched a bunch of arm nerves to the point that they snapped, immobilizing them. Basically, I’d broken my humerus in such a way that I didn’t have the capacity to feel pain at the injury site for two months, after which the nerves started sending signals again. By then, the bone was well on its way to mending.

I landed, I reiterate, with my head pillowed on that arm. Meaning it could easily have been my head that sustained a bodacious traumatic transverse fracture, and if it had, you would not be reading this essay or my first published novel, *Security*.

But if I hadn’t been run down that day — if the driver had braked a few seconds earlier or if I’d looked both ways before crossing — I doubt you’d be reading this, either, for two reasons.

One, after the accident, I developed an insatiable appetite for the experience of being frightened while cocooned in perfect safety. Namely, horror movies. I began to analyze them, interrogate them, and wonder how the genre, which could slip so easily into stupidity, could be so life affirming when it was great.

Two, *Security* is my first *published* novel. I wrote ten novels before it. I wrote dozens of short stories and hundreds of poems. I got rejected by more than a hundred literary journals, six MFA programs, and over two hundred agents (though for an essay collection, not for a novel). *Security* netted me an agent on the second try. And my agent is gold and I love her like PMS loves chocolate, but it took me a decade to find her. And in that decade I was poor

and I was scared and I got pneumonia and cracked a rib coughing and didn't go to the doctor because I knew it would bankrupt me. I once woke up with a fever of 102.4 and decided to write in order to see how I wrote with a fever of 102.4 (the answer: go to the doctor). I clung by my fingernails to a dream that seemed completely impossible.

Because life is a dream that is completely impossible.

Security is the story of a luxury hotel just days away from its grand opening. A skeleton-crew staff is in its final preparations for the opening's big party. There's a temperamental chef, a mischievous manager, a skittish maid — and, unbeknownst to them, a killer who stalks the halls, reducing their numbers one by one. But there are also people who understand that the only security that truly matters lies in the lengths to which we're willing to go for each other.

That in this impossible dream, we make a reality out of every second.

That maybe someone or something decent is watching us. Maybe they're cheering us on. And maybe when we open our eyes, we will be just fine.