

MY MOTHER ALWAYS ASSURED ME THAT unspeakable punishments were bound to befall any child as naughty as I was.

"If I were you," she'd say, "I'd be afraid to go to sleep at night, for fear God would strike me dead."

She would speak these words softly, regretfully, as though saddened by her errant daughter's fate. I thought myself unloved and unlovable — not only by my own mother, but by God himself.

In addition to threatening me with thoughts of eternal damnation, Mother also gave me a fear of strangers, germs, disease, and food poisoning. A precocious and imaginative child, I added to the list some bizarre fears of my own: rare ailments learned from medical dictionaries; falling into the fifth dimension; spontaneous human combustion.

When I was suspended from my private girls' school at the age of fifteen for a harmless prank, the headmistress referred to my behavior as "damnable."

This was no big news to my mother or me. What was news was that I had the highest IQ *and* the lowest grades in the entire student body. I took pride in the fact that, although I was a dysfunctional underachiever, at least I wasn't stupid.

The most devastating words my mother ever spoke to me came when I asked her if she loved me. (I had just been escorted home by the police after one of my many attempts to run away, so it was bad timing on my part.)

She answered, "How could *anyone* ever love you?"

It took me almost fifty years to heal the damage from all her ugly remarks.

Recently, discussing eating disorders with my dietician, I related a childhood ritual of mine, intending it to be an amusing anecdote to illustrate how far back my eating problems went. I even laughed as I spoke, poking gentle fun at myself. It was only when I noticed that

my dietician was watching me with sympathy, rather than amusement, that I became aware of the tears on my own cheeks. This is what I told her:

From the age of five or six until I was well into my teens, whenever I had trouble sleeping, I would slip out from under my covers and steal into the kitchen for a bit of bread or cheese, which I would carry back to bed with me. There, I'd pretend my hands belonged to someone else, a comforting, reassuring being without a name — an angel, perhaps. The right hand would feed me little bites of cheese or bread as the left hand stroked my cheeks and hair. My eyes closed, I would whisper softly to myself, "There, there. Go to sleep. You're safe now. Everything will be all right. I love you."

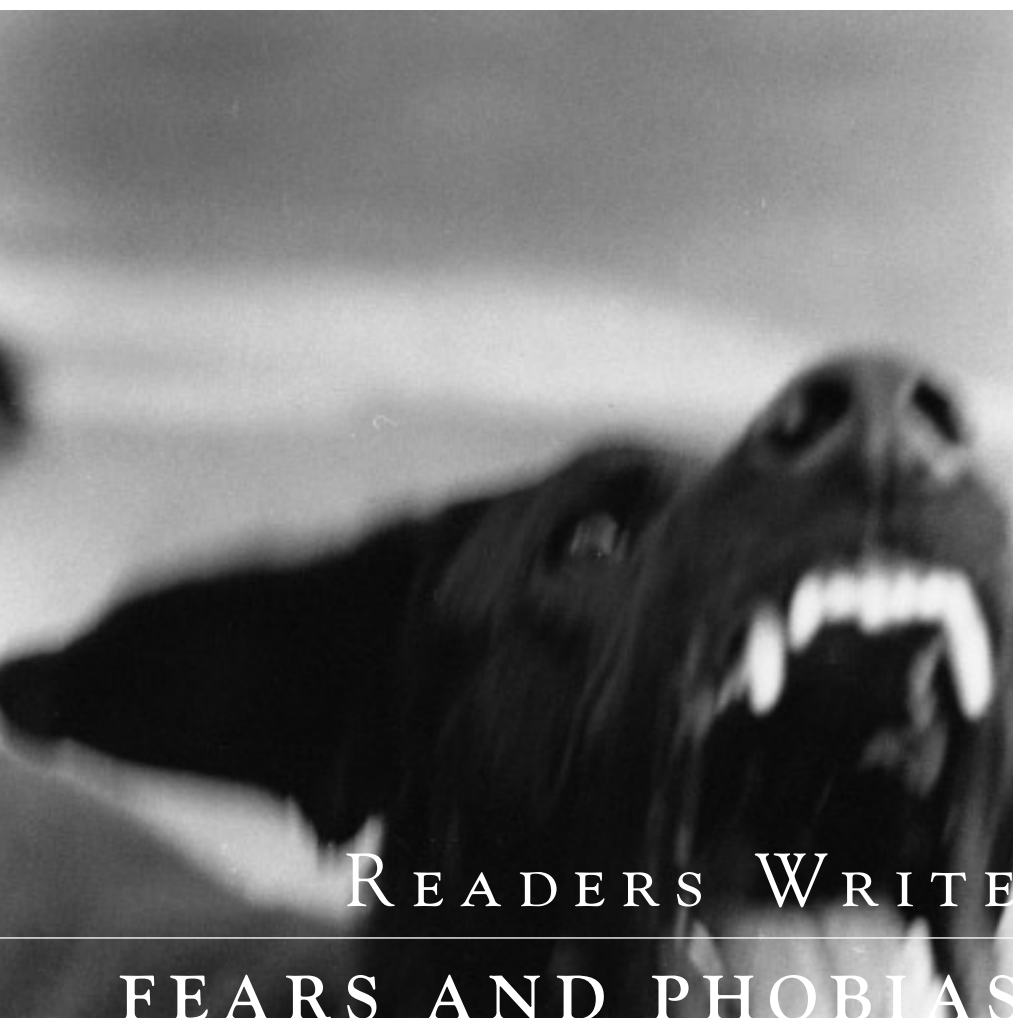
D.S. Barnett  
Marietta, Georgia

ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES IS OF THE annual trip upstate to the bungalow my family rented for the summer. The six of us kids piled into the rusting station wagon, along with three months' worth of luggage and two tense parents. The trip always began with the rosary or, if we were in a hurry, a single Hail Mary, which ended with "now and at the hour of our death, amen." In my young mind, I presumed this to mean that I was going to die in the car, if not on this trip, then on the next.

My fear of dying in a car accident never entirely went away. As a newly licensed driver, I was anxious behind the wheel. Tunnels and bridges caused me the most apprehension: I felt trapped, with nowhere to go. Driving to and from Manhattan to work, I had regular bouts of anxiety on the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. Then, after I married, I had a severe panic attack on the Triborough Bridge. It's a miracle I made my way across without killing anyone. After that, I vowed never to drive on a road I couldn't exit from quickly: no more bridges, tunnels, or even highways, because the exits were often too far apart.

Even when we moved to Long Island several years later, I refused to use the expressway. I knew every back way and

Photo: Richard Whitaker



READERS WRITE

FEARS AND PHOBIAS

side road, and could get anywhere — given enough time. Still, I felt ashamed, like a child who could swim only in the shallow end of the pool.

One gorgeous summer day, I took the kids to visit my husband at work. He had a construction job on the south shore of Long Island, with free access to a number of beaches. We spent the afternoon building sand castles and bodysurfing. When it came time to leave, I considered whether to go back the way I'd come — over an hour on winding side roads — or take the scenic Ocean Parkway and cross a bridge just south of our home: a forty-five-minute, traffic-free, ocean-view ride. I told my husband I was thinking of taking the bridge.

We worked out a plan: he would follow me in his truck, communicating by hand signals and light flashes, and we'd make a final stop just before the bridge. I took my two-year-old daughter in my car, convinced I wouldn't drive off the bridge with her in the back seat.

On the way, I prayed aloud to a Higher Power for help. (I was thankful my older boys were in the truck with Dad.) As the bridge loomed large, I prayed louder, begging for a sign that I was not alone on this journey: a neon beacon, a bright light — something.

As planned, my husband and I pulled over before the bridge for the final pep talk. He said all the right things and hugged me tightly. In the midst of our embrace, I heard him say, "Uh-oh." A state trooper had pulled up behind us.

"Everything all right here?" the trooper asked.

My husband explained that I was afraid to drive over the bridge because of an irrational phobia.

"Would you feel better," the trooper asked, "if you had a police escort, lights and all?"

The lights seemed an answer to my prayer. I gladly agreed.

We crossed that span at a speed of forty miles per hour, with the trooper behind me, his lights flashing, and a line of cars following him, none of them daring to pass this strange convoy.

Bernie O'Connell  
East Northport, New York

WHEN I WAS FIVE, I WAS AFRAID MY mother would leave me somewhere and not come back. I remember one day she was late picking me up from an art class at the local museum. I even remember what I was drawing: a still life of vases, which my five-year-old hands depicted as straight lines. I held the drawing as I waited, fighting back the tears. Those flat vases are forever joined in my mind with the fear of being abandoned.

Now almost forty, I am still afraid of that inevitable day when my mother will leave me on this earth and not come back.

Katherine Milla  
Tallahassee, Florida

MY HUSBAND PROMISED ME THAT, IF we got divorced, the children and I would be living in a crummy apartment on the wrong side of town, wearing rags and rubber flip-flops. I thought of Dorothea Lange's famous photograph

*Migrant Mother*: a worn and weary woman with her hand on her cheek, her two children turned away from the camera, leaning for support on their mother's thin shoulders. The woman's worry is palpable, spreading out from her like the golden rays around depictions of Catholic saints.

Dread kept me in the marriage until, one day, I went to the library and made twenty photocopies of *Migrant Mother*. Over the months that followed, I colored the copies with crayons and markers, adding homemade paper-doll hats and clothes and fancy borders of shiny aluminum foil.

By the time I filed for divorce, I had decorated all twenty copies, and the migrant mother and her children glowed with serenity and humor. Whenever my soon-to-be ex threatened us with economic ruin, I was only annoyed.

Sheila Dickson  
Paradise Valley, Arizona

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
August 2002	The Kitchen Table	March 1
September 2002	The Phone Call	April 1
October 2002	Faking It	May 1
November 2002	Safety	June 1
December 2002	Against The Odds	July 1
January 2003	Scars	August 1

IT'S JUST PAST MIDNIGHT IN A NORTHWOODS campground. A full moon climbs high among the lodgepole pines. The night is silent except for the murmur of a wide, fast-moving river. On my way to the bathroom, I take the riverside road rather than walk through the rows of tents. I want to see the moon on the water.

I am dressed in a long T-shirt whose hem nearly touches the tops of my hiking boots, and carrying a camera in one hand and an unlit flashlight in the other. When I hear a noise behind me, I immediately think, *Bear*.

Then I am caught in a flashlight beam, and drunken male voices boom in the night.

"Is it a bear?" one shouts.

"No, it's some pussy!"

They laugh. I move on quickly.

"She's taking pictures."

I hear the unmistakable sound of a zipper.

"Take a picture of my dick. I'm the Loch Ness Monster."

I reach the bathroom, with its lone bulb. With my heart pounding and my hand on the handle of the heavy metal door, I turn to the men and say, "I wouldn't want to waste my film." I am surprised how loud my words sound in the still night. Then I am inside, leaning my full weight against the heavy door.

I feel a kick at the door. From outside comes a voice again, loud, drunk, and derisive: "I could fuck your brains out, but I wouldn't want to waste my dick." They laugh, and I can hear them moving away along the road. I realize that I am crying. I lean against the door until my breathing is even, my heart rate calm.

Returning to my tent, I see the silhouette of a man bending down inside one of the other tents. He is helping a little girl slip into her shoes. I think, *Here is a man like my father, my brothers, my lover: a gentle man, a safe man*. He opens the tent door, and the girl steps through into the night. She reaches back to take his hand and draw him out after her. They walk hand in hand in the moonlight.

I watch them for as long as possible,

because I want, with all my heart, to believe that bears are more dangerous than men.

*Karen McKelvey  
Cascabel, Arizona*

WHEN I WAS IN EIGHTH GRADE, MY PARENTS split up for good, and my mother, my two siblings, and I moved to a cramped, run-down cottage. It had a large kitchen, a small living room, a bathroom, and a screened alcove that became my brother's room. My sister and I slept on a fold-out couch in the kitchen, and my mother slept in the living room. The house was set on a debris-strewn lot by a highway, and at night I could hear the sound of tires squealing and girls screaming as cars raced past our house. Our dog was killed by a car right away.

Shortly after we moved there, I began to perform nightly patrols of the house. First I would check to see that the pilot light on the stove was lit and that none of the burners or the oven was on. Then I would check the pilot light on the hot-water heater in the bathroom. My mother kept her beautiful tweed suits and silk blouses on a rack behind the heater, and I always slid her clothes over, to be sure none of them could touch the heater in the night. After that, I would check the shower and the kitchen sink to make sure no water was dripping. (I have forgotten why.) Finally, I checked all the doors and windows.

I did all of this secretly, though obviously in plain sight. I would get up once or twice more during the night to make sure the clothes stayed where I'd slid them, and the pilot lights stayed lit, and the doors and windows stayed locked.

I was desperately worried that my father would come to the house in a drunken rage and try to force his way in. I wasn't afraid that he would hurt us, just that he would cause a scene, and we would have to turn him away or call the police. I was afraid someone would find out about him. One night, when my best friend slept over, I woke up thinking that I heard my father whispering to me through the window

screen near my bed.

Many years later, while hanging out with friends in restaurants or sitting quietly at work, I would conjure the sudden entrance of my father, raving drunk and staggering, claiming me noisily as his own, and I would feel a cold chill run through me, as if it were really happening.

Now that my father is dead, I wonder why it never occurred to me, not even once, that I might have been happy to see him.

*Name Withheld*

IT'S 7:30 A.M.: TIME TO GO TO SCHOOL. I pull on the blue warm-up jacket I wear every day, no matter what the weather. I care only about how I can hide beneath that loose-fitting blue jacket. I feel wrong. I feel fat. I bounce when I walk. I am afraid to go to school, but this is America: I have no choice.

I don't use the restroom at school. I don't answer questions in class. I practically don't exist. At lunch, I sit by myself and hope no one will try to pick a fight with me. Cynthia asks if she can join me. Everybody calls me a fag, and Cynthia a slut. We are outcasts together: Cynthia in her peasant blouse and too-tight jeans, and I in my Carly Simon tour T-shirt and blue warm-up jacket. She eats my tater tots, grabbing them with her long fingernails, but I don't care. With her, at least, I am not alone.

People say I have a goofy walk. I am so afraid of looking odd at times that I forget how to walk. There I'll be, in the breezeway of Burnet Junior High, frozen, unable to remember how to swing my arms or breathe.

Somehow, I get the impression that each arm is supposed to move with the corresponding leg. I practice walking behind the six-foot-high privacy fence in my backyard, making sure my right arm swings forward with my right foot. I practice so much that I make my walk worse. I get a new name: Robot Boy.

*Jeff Anderson  
San Antonio, Texas*

WHEN I WAS FOUR, MY FATHER REMOVED the training wheels from my little pink

bike. Without their support, I lost my balance and fell. It hurt so much that I refused to get back on.

When I was seven, I tried riding a neighbor's bike and fell again. The same thing happened when I was ten, and again when I was thirteen, and when I was seventeen. The result was always the same: the fall stung enough to discourage me for some time thereafter.

By the age of twenty-seven, I had spent much of my life in envy of the bike-riding population. My brother, nine years older than I, was a bicycle racer at the time, and my friend Mila rode her ten-speed down Ocean Parkway to work every single day.

That summer, I made a decision: I would learn to ride a bicycle no matter how scary or embarrassing it might be. (At that point, I was much more afraid of looking like a fool than of falling and hurting myself.) Unfortunately, bicycling is not something you can learn in the privacy of your home. I settled for the relative privacy of the Coney Island boardwalk on a weekday morning.

My friend Mila met me there early on a Friday. I tried not to notice the elderly people sitting on benches all along the boardwalk. And I particularly tried not to imagine what they would think when they saw a not-so-petite woman with wild, curly hair pedaling a bike while another woman ran after her holding the seat.

As the bike began to move, I became afraid my wheels would get stuck in the spaces between the planks of the boardwalk, even though the tires were too big to fit into those small cracks. I begged Mila not to let go and tried to pedal very slowly so that she could keep up.

Despite my begging, Mila eventually did let go without telling me. All of a sudden, she wasn't there, and I was pedaling by myself. I felt perfectly balanced on the bike. Then I stopped by putting one foot down, just as Mila had taught me, and I heard it: the applause coming from the benches all around. The old people were clapping and smiling. There was nothing left for

me to do but take a bow.

That was twelve years, thirty-five thousand miles, eleven states, three countries, and five bicycles ago.

*Marina Bekkerman  
Brooklyn, New York*

MY FATHER WAS DIAGNOSED WITH ALZHEIMER'S in the late 1980s. For a long time before that, my mother claimed his blood-pressure medicine was the culprit. My sister said that extreme stress affected his memory. I simply thought my father intentionally tuned us out.

When the official diagnosis came, I was horrified, but I also felt a small thrill: I had long been on the receiving end of my father's criticism, and was fascinated by the idea that his bottomless reservoir of disapproval might dry up.

My father's condition quickly deteriorated, and, as I'd imagined, the relentless badgering went with it. It was peculiar to find the tables turned, my father suddenly the one blundering about, his days full of foibles and mishaps.

Although some in my family complained that he wasn't himself anymore, I was grateful for this new father. For one thing, he was more affectionate. Sometimes he'd grab my big knob of a nose and then pat his own. "We have the same nose," he'd say with something like pride. "I like you a lot." I liked him, too — more, in fact, than I ever had.

I suppose I thought this was how things would remain. I hadn't anticipated how far down he would go. Toward the end, my father had no short-term memory at all. He would eat a sandwich and, while still licking his fingers, belligerently call out, "Where's my lunch?" He became paranoid, suspicious, and violent. My hollow-eyed and exhausted mother made the tough decision to move him to a locked ward.

The first few months I visited my father, he carried on rambling conversations that sometimes made sense, but more often didn't. Eventually, words failed him, and he went silent. He no longer made eye contact. I couldn't

reach him. I was amazed at how much I missed him, and astonished that I felt even worse when he died. I knew what a welcome release death must have been for him, but his dying took away my secret hope that he'd miraculously recover.

He comes to me now in dreams sometimes, and although he seems to be his old self, he never criticizes me. I quiz him to make sure his memory's intact: "Remember when I fell out of the crib and cracked my head on the radiator? Remember when I started first grade?" And he always does remember.

It seems I'm the one with the faulty memory these days. In my forties, I'm starting to forget. I forget the date. "Doesn't everybody?" you might ask. But sometimes I forget the year, too. When I look at a calendar, I'm confused. *That can't be the year, can it?* Sometimes I don't even remember what season it is. I tell myself it's stress.

Last month, I forgot my husband's work phone number. I paged through my address book and saw the name of a company where he had once worked. Did he still work there? I didn't think so, but I wasn't certain. How could I not remember? Frustrated, I began to cry. An hour passed, and then the phone number came to me unbidden.

Are these typical "senior moments" or something more? Watching my father become undone by Alzheimer's, I thought, *What could be worse than seeing him go though this?*

Now I know.

*Patricia Brazill  
Westwood, Massachusetts*

*(end of excerpt)*