

# The Price of Fear

**A**S A WOMAN, ESPECIALLY A 5'2" woman without a black belt in a single martial art, I am not supposed to walk alone at night. Ever. Anywhere. This is a point of agreement that crosses many boundaries—age, politics, residency, gender. In fact, according to many I'm barely supposed to stick my nose outside at all after dark.

I get reminded of this periodically from many quarters, most obnoxiously from those e-mail forwards from well-meaning friends containing "12 safety tips for women" that boil down to "hide in your closet at all times unless you've got a football team for an escort," or news about the latest (completely false) strategy that serial killers and rapists use to lure women to their doom. (News-flash: No one has ever lurked in a backseat of a car waiting to rape its driver. Never. And rapists don't target women with ponytails they can grab either.)

In fact even my beloved urban-legends Web site Snopes.com (which everyone should check before forwarding anything) falls into the same hype even while debunking these very e-mails. In the midst of tearing down the bizarre statistics, flat-out falsehoods and facile answers in one of these self-defense e-mails, the Snopes writer suddenly becomes a scolding granny of her own: "Complacency kills. . . . (none of this 'Oh, it's only a few blocks; I'll just walk' at 3 a.m.)." So much for "Take Back the Night."

Public-service announcement: Don't send me this crap. I'm mild mannered, but I do have my limits.

It's not (as my mother was so wont to accuse me of in high school) that I think "it can't happen to me." I've been mugged because I was too nice, and learned from it. I know someone who had a rapist force his way into her apartment with a knife. I read the news.

I am vigilant about my surroundings. I have a whistle on my keychain, don't carry a lot of cash, and don't wear headphones in part because I want to be able to hear footsteps behind me. I walk briskly. I spend a good portion of my time working through violent and grotesquely detailed fantasies about how I would respond if attacked, prepping myself to get over nice-girl inhibitions about screaming, running, and fighting. I know that *some* of the tips in those e-mails (like always run if you can) are worth bearing in mind.

And yes, there are some places and some times that I won't walk alone—they just may not follow conventional wisdom. Give me a crowded street in a poor city neighborhood over a deserted suburban parking lot any day.

But here's the thing: Being attacked randomly on a dark street is possible, but extremely unlikely. Meanwhile, the consequences of never walking alone at night would be immediate and real: It would

mean more driving, which (1) I hate to do and (2) is against my environmental values. It would cost me more in gas, and possibly require a second car. It would reduce the amount of exercise I get dramatically. (My chances of dying from a stroke if I don't exercise are *much* higher than my chances of being a victim of a violent crime.) It would mean I learned less about the neighborhoods in my city, saw less interesting stuff, and bumped into people I knew less often. Basically, and most importantly, it would mean that I was restricting my own freedom based on being a vulnerable little female. (Retch.)

Even Snopes gets fed up with the insistency of this typecasting. From a discussion of the variations on the "killer in the backseat" theme: "Even as a horror legend, this one is sexist to the core. As mentioned earlier, the prey is always female and both the evil fiend and the rescuer are male—

there are no exceptions to this typecasting. Both male figures are seen as powerful: the fiend for his evilness and mad intent, the rescuer for his coolness in knowing what to do and his ease in dispatching the fiend. . . . The woman, by contrast is portrayed as completely and unredeemably ineffective."

You may ask what I am going to do if something does happen to me. Probably change my habits—not because they were wrong, but because I really do have a healthy respect for the trauma that crime victims suffer, and I have no illusions that I would be able to blithely go on my way with the same risk tolerance. But I would rather have had my freedom up until that point.

The point is, we all risk traumatic things all the time. Despite the prevalence of date rape and domestic abuse, we date, sometimes while drunk and high, and marry. (In fact, one of my other complaints about this obsession

with protecting women from strangers is how it distracts from the far more prevalent problems of women being attacked by people they know.) Despite the insane numbers of deaths from car accidents, we drive on the highway (not to mention that most of us speed). People with bee-sting allergies go outside sometimes without EpiPens strapped to their wrists and people with fatal food allergies eat in restaurants. We all choose our levels of acceptable risk. Telling women that they can't do the same on this one issue is nothing more than a patronizing return to "poor things—they shouldn't go to college/play sports, it's too hard on their sensitive little constitutions."

And, finally, I insist on my right to walk at night in part because allowing fear-mongering to keep women, and often men too, off the streets at night makes the streets less safe. I don't want to be part of that little vicious cycle, for the sake of not only my freedom, but that of everyone around me.

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## THIS MODERN WORLD

