



## On fear

By Stephen Gauer

I went to the west coast of Vancouver Island not too long ago to research a novel about castaways. One starless night, very late, I parked the car and followed a path deep into the rainforest. I pointed a flashlight at the ground to light the way. After a couple of hundred yards, I went off the path and sat under a cedar and turned off the light.

The world disappeared at once into a black void. I felt as though my eyes had been plucked from my head. I moved my hand in front of my eyes and saw nothing. I felt so disoriented that for a moment I wasn't sure if I was sitting down or standing. Only the pressure of my bum on the ground beneath the tree reassured me that I was attached to the earth and not in free fall through the darkness. I was afraid of everything

that I couldn't see and in the pure blackness of that night it was easy to conjure the terror of a castaway facing a night without fire and light.

I experiment with fear because it fascinates me. Fear is nasty and uncomfortable and compelling. It's the explosive subtext of modern life. It's one of few emotions we share with animals. It can challenge us to accomplish difficult goals but it can reduce us to utter impotence. For me, fear is the fastest, most visceral of emotions; like an invading force, it overpowers me in an instant and then barks out orders. A few years ago, on a camping trip in Florida, I stepped out of a campground washroom and suddenly heard a rustle in the deep grass directly in front of me. I stopped, and in the split second it took the neurons in the oldest part of my brain to fire, the hair rose on the back of my neck and my stomach began to churn. Something was moving across my path.

I wanted to run away. This is the first fork in the path of fear: flee or identify your enemy. Most animals flee. I knew that whatever was making the sound was a small animal and therefore the risk was bearable. I kept watching the moving grass. The grass moved again and an armadillo emerged. I had never seen an armadillo before. I knew nothing about them. They might be deadly, they might have a grudge against humans, they might be quite ferocious fighters. A man with a small smile on his face was watching me. I waited for the armadillo to move well beyond my path and then finally starting walking again. Back at the campsite, my wife laughed until tears ran down her face. Anyone who knows anything about American wildlife, she said, knows how harmless an armadillo is.

But that's the point isn't it? When you don't know what you're dealing with, you're at the mercy of the fear instinct. If I see a snake in my path, and I know nothing about that snake, I will assume it's

dangerous. A snake expert, on the other hand, or even a well-informed amateur like my wife, may well bend down and admire the beauty of its skin and the graceful motion of its body across the ground.

Fear's founding impulse was simple survival, but over time, it has acquired serious social freight. Small boys are taught to be brave, to overcome fear, to deny and conquer. As adults, we receive regular reminders from preachers, politicians and self-help gurus that the fears that cripple us are usually groundless and therefore surmountable. But we know better. We have many things to fear: sickness, poverty, death, the loss of love, falling buildings, failure, success, the end of a dream, the beginning of a nightmare. When we examine our lives carefully, we find our well-being and happiness hang by a thread and the delicacy of that connection unnerves us. I am only a phone call away from a death that will change my life.

Sometimes I'm attracted to fear. I don't fully understand why. I enjoy the primal workout of fear; it offers tension and release, just like sex. By putting myself into fearful situations, I think I hold onto life a little more tightly and that's good because it reminds me that I'm not here forever. For five years I sailed a small boat in the Strait of Georgia, all year round, alone, and fear was always a part of the experience, from the moment I pushed away from the dock, to the moment I returned and stepped back onto that same dock again. Many things can go wrong when you sail by yourself, but they almost never do. In some ways, the fear I felt kept me safe, because I double and triple checked every decision knowing I had no deckhands, no first mates, no assistant skippers to help if things went wrong.

When conditions were tough, when the wind picked up unexpectedly and the seas turned rough, sailing became the triumph of

cautious seamanship over impending disaster. Once, on a trip back to Vancouver from the Gulf Islands, with the wind building to 25 knots and the seas five feet and more, I kept imagining the very worst that could happen and as long as the mast stayed upright and the sails were intact, as long as the rudder worked and the keel did its job, I was fine. I was more than fine, actually, I was exhilarated and filled with the joy of our motion through the water and the satisfaction that came from knocking down every disaster scenario I could dream up.

One of my guilty pleasures is watching scary movies at home, late at night, with as many lights off as I can stand. I do this when my wife is away; the house is scarier when I'm alone. A little while ago I watched a movie that had me so worked up I held the remote in my hand, thumb ready to take action on the STOP button, for most of the second half. Three young filmmakers were lost in the woods; every night they went to sleep in their tent terrified of strange voices and sounds coming from deadly creatures they couldn't see. Night, darkness, the woods. A young woman's face, lit by her flashlight, filled with fear. I knew about being alone in the woods in the dark. When she cried, I felt her tears and spasms. After the movie ended, after the inevitable deaths in the basement of an abandoned house, I read in bed for an hour until my heart stopped racing.

Movie fear is an easy spice in the blander diet of middle age, and harmless because there's nothing at risk. But something deeper must be going on. Movies take us back into the dark houses of our childhoods, to scary bedrooms where we pulled the covers over our heads because the monsters we saw on the screen lived on in our minds long after THE END was supposed to banish them. Movies are larger than life, and make us feel like children again.

The Greeks saw drama as a means of catharsis, or purging of the emotions, required to keep the human psyche healthy. Aristotle, that most rational of Greek philosophers, even goes so far as to argue in *The Poetics* that catharsis makes people better behaved. I don't think scary movies are cathartic in the Greek sense of the word; they don't purge strong feelings so much as exercise them, functioning as a kind of keep-fit program for the instinctive side of the human psyche. Scary movies touch the fear reflex deep in the brain, and evoke all the associated pleasures of intensity, absorption in the moment, and heightened awareness. We feel more alive when we're frightened, but we also know we can't live there. After fear comes a return to the trough of normal awareness; the credits roll, the house lights come on and we walk back out into the sunlight of everyday life.

We may disagree on the pleasures of fear but we all have an opinion about it. Perhaps fear is the one universal emotion in the human experience. We may not all love and hate, or at least not intensely, but we all feel fear. Poets, of course, know about fear. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," writes T.S. Eliot, full of modernist bravado, in *The Waste Land*. When I read that line I think about my father's cremation, the ovens of Auschwitz, the sweepings of a housewife on Monday morning in mid-winter, the contents of a farmer's closed fist after a windstorm. Did the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrate the banality of fear just as it demonstrated the banality of evil? "I am a stranger and afraid/In a world I never made" writes A. E. Housman, a very different kind of poet than Eliot, summing up his psychological and sexual alienation after the First World War and in the process defining not just our modern predicament but our entire mythological journey in the West since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden.

Some fears remain intractable. Creative fear is largely about failure, the failure to be good enough, to measure up to certain expectations, to finish the grand design that exists so perfectly in one's head, to win the fame and applause one deserves. "Fear ringed by doubt is my eternal moon," wrote Malcolm Lowry, a novelist who drank too much and wrote too little, and worried chronically about his inability to finish anything. Books are one of the more fragile products of the human mind, easily lost, destroyed, burned, forgotten or abandoned. The process of creating them is even more fragile. The writer has only to pause at the end of the next sentence he has just written, look up from the screen, stare at the wall, run his eye along the titled spines of his book collection and in those meagre five seconds he can begin to feel a paralyzing fear and worry. Where will the next sentence come from? How can I finish this book? Is it the best book I could write? Will it be good enough to sit on that shelf next to books by writers that I love and admire?

Action doesn't necessarily conquer fear, but it does neutralize it. I can write the next sentence, and the one after that, and as the paragraphs accumulate I have a sense of forward motion, of beginning in one place and ending in another. Inertia is more than just a concept in physics, the idea that a body in motion will remain in motion until acted on by an external force; it also describes this pleasurable sensation of travelling through words to reach a destination. Sometimes the destination is visible before I reach it, sometimes it comes up suddenly and surprises me. And as long as I keep moving, fear stays away.

Does death lie behind many of our fears? Perhaps. But we don't want to look at death very closely, do we? In a way, our modernity functions like a vast conspiracy to keep death in the closet, with the door

closed and locked. We not only want to live forever, we want to stay young forever, like the doomed hero of Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Most of us don't want to think about dying and most of us don't spend a lot of time talking about death. My wife spent the last ten years of her nursing career caring for dying people. For us, death is a favourite topic of conversation because it asserts a proper sense of priorities and cuts through the banalities and opinions of day-to-day life. By speaking about the unspeakable, we make it a little more manageable. Left to itself, death is implacable, inarguable and unalterable; it sits out there on the horizon, like a malicious cloud that won't go away, provoking a shudder every time it throws a shadow across our lives.

Am I afraid to die? I don't know. Perhaps I feel sheltered from it because my wife, who is twelve years older than I am, may die first. She will be an advance scout of death. I don't believe in a God and an afterlife, and I have no idea what will happen when my life ends. When I imagine my death I can only replay my father's death. I see an old man in blue pajamas in a hospital bed, blind to the world, breathing slowly and heavily as the end approaches. Is he afraid? I don't think so. Surely we lose our fears before we lose our lives.

Another experiment. Late on a Sunday night in fall I got in my car and drove downtown, through Stanley Park and across the Lions Gate Bridge. Just past the bridge, I parked near a small building on the side of the road and walked back toward the bridge. When I got to the middle of the bridge, I stopped. There was no netting or any kind of device to thwart jumpers. When I leaned all the way over, I could see straight down into the black water below. It would be very easy to jump if that's what you wanted to do.

I stepped down from the railing and looked up at the lights. They were mounted on the tops of big lampposts as thick as a man's head. If you stood on the top rail, you could hold onto one to steady yourself. I was looking out over the water, still facing the railing, when a voice behind me said, "Sir, would you please step away from the railing?"

I turned around. A policeman was walking toward me. Behind him, a police car was parked in the wrong lane, facing south, with a flasher on. Traffic in both directions had stopped. My heart started to pound and my throat went very dry. Police make me nervous at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" he asked me.

"I'm a writer," I said. "I'm researching a story about a man who jumps off the bridge."

The policeman's expression didn't change. For a moment I felt that I was my character, that I was in fact not just researching the story but actually living the story. The sensation sent a jolt of fear through my body. I wanted to sit down. I wanted the policeman to go away.

"Sir, I'd like you to get into the car so I can drive you off the bridge," he said.

I nodded and got into the car.