

## What Are You Afraid Of?

It's spring, which is a bad time for comedy. The city outside alights hopefully with new growth, white-tipped trees and yellow daffodils; there are brisk, happy joggers and adults tossing forth bocce balls in the park. It has been a long, hard Midwestern winter, and people are practically giddy. It's hard to be ironic about any of it. Essie doesn't trust it, spring. What was supposed to be so fucking great about it, anyway? Well, OK, a lot of things. It was nice to not wear a jacket, or to have to dislodge your car from the stalactites of ice that hung threateningly from the roof of the carport of the apartment your husband didn't want to move into because it had a carport. And the sun staying out a little later than four fucking o'clock, well, OK, that was good too. And there was the scent of honeysuckle that drifted off the neighbor's oversize pergola. That smelled nice. But still! It had no edge, spring. In balmy weather people had no need for the jokes of amateur comedians. Give her winter any day, when people, once you dislodged them from their couches, would sit in a dim comedy club for hours, getting increasingly drunk. Or fall, with its crumbling vegetation, its brilliant death and decay.

And so Essie's heart surges upon discovering that her apartment has been burglarized, a thrum of trembling excitement that stays with her as she tiptoes through the open door. It's an odd reaction, she recognizes, but there it is. *Material*, she thinks. She's always been jealous of comics whose lives are touched by danger or oddity. Mike Birbiglia, for example, would not be half as funny without his sleepwalking disorder. Perhaps her burglar has logged into his Facebook account on her laptop, or fixed a bologna sandwich.

Dan, her husband, will be displeased. An exceedingly cautious person, he has taught her things: Never trust that the mechanic hasn't accidentally drained your oil tank instead of filling it. Shred preapproved credit card offers before discarding them. But after a decade of marriage Essie has grown careless, her natural laziness bursting forth like a springtime waterfall. She buys discounted moisturizer from an unverified website. She uses the same password—the cat's name, Geronimo—for everything. She begins to identify with movie characters who open doors to reveal men wielding axes and other unlikely weapons. These people aren't stupid, she thinks. It's just that the worst-case scenario so rarely happens.

And so she patrols the house alone, carrying with her a large butternut squash for protection. Would she really have the nerve to whack someone? She wishes, just a little, to be tested. Or: There'd been a story a few years back about a girl in Winston-Salem who had stopped a would-be rapist by talking to him about God. Essie hadn't been raised in the church, but perhaps the burglar would like to hear some jokes. She knows a lot of jokes.

"Hello?" she calls. When there is no answer—was it reasonable to expect that a burglar would answer?—she picks through the damage: Dan's giant jar of change has been overturned, and she can't find one of the many remote controls necessary for operating the television. In the kitchen is an untidy heap of spatulas, splayed on the floor next to her measuring cups. Has she always owned so many spatulas? Suddenly she can think only of a joke she heard once, as a child: *Old burglars never die. They just steal away.*

"What were you thinking?" asks Dan when he gets home. "Why didn't you call the police?" It is the second incident in as many weeks. The week before she'd left her purse on the passenger's seat of her unlocked car and, as if to teach her a lesson, someone had plucked it away.

"I had protection," she says, and tells him about the squash. Already in her head it is forming a joke: *Stand back, I'm armed with vegetables!* "He didn't steal much, anyway. Just some DVDs and the change jar."

"You should really be more careful," Dan says. "Everything isn't a joke, you know." Their apartment is in an area of town optimistically described as *transitional*, where residents generally do not walk their dogs after dark.

"I will," she says. "I promise. Would you like more soup?" After it had become clear that the intruder was gone, she'd baked the squash with nutmeg, pureed it with heavy cream.

"I'm getting you some pepper spray," Dan says, and after the dishes are done, they go on the internet together and order a pink spray bottle on a keychain that promises to REPEL INTRUDERS FROM UP TO FIFTEEN FEET.

"When it gets here, let's go to the park to test it," he says.

"On someone?"

He ignores her joke, which is happening a lot more lately. "Just, you know, to make sure you know how to engage the mechanism properly." And then he actually says, like the Eagle Scout that he once was, "One should always be prepared."



Fear, according to their therapist, is what has come between them. Her name is Dr. Mona Mercy and she is a practitioner in the burgeoning

business of data psychiatry, in which shrinks-cum-data-scientists build models to determine whether you and your partner should (a) stay together or (b) break up. Dr. Mona's margin of error is a reliable  $\pm 4$  percent, which Dan has explained to Essie is really quite good.

"I'll gather data through a series of brief surveys and Q&A sessions," Dr. Mona told them at their first meeting. She preferred to be called by her title and first name, a practice Essie found simultaneously childlike and condescending. "At the end, your results will be delivered in a series of infographics."

Dr. Mona has a big, pointed nose and the dark, focused eyes of a predatory bird, and wears soft, matronly cardigans to apologize for this fact. Dan had read about her practice in an article, "Love and Divorce in the Age of Big Data," in the waiting room at the dentist, poaching the magazine to show it to Essie. They'd had to wait six weeks before enough other doomed pairs cleared out to make room for them.

They're on the way to their ninth of ten sessions, riding in Dan's old Honda while slurping milky lattes, a little pre-therapy ritual that Essie thought would lift their spirits but has turned out to be mostly dejecting. Essie still has no idea what their verdict will be. Stay married? Get a divorce? She wonders if there's any middle ground: Stay married but take a lover in the city? Separate, but meet up for an emotionally messy rendezvous six months later?

This week, for *Fears and Value Statements: Part II*, they have been instructed to each make a list of the ten things that terrify them most.

"Food poisoning," Essie reads aloud from Dan's. "Ooh, that's good. I'm adding that to mine."

"You have to give me one of yours, then," Dan says, his eyes still on the road. He is a focused driver, better than her.

"You can have *reintroduction of woolly mammoths into the ecosystem*," Essie says, and is surprised when he laughs. It's one of those increasingly rare moments when they feel like pals. Early in their marriage, both of them just out of college and giddy with the possibilities of the future sprawling before them, it had always felt like they were on each other's side. But then, almost imperceptibly, something had happened. They'd *grown apart*—of course they had—but it was more than that. It was a deep, chasm-like apartness, the kind of apartness where you began to feel a little bit crazy, like the person you agreed to spend all of the weeks of the rest of your life with has begun to see you in a totally different light, thinking you irresponsible and flighty and unserious, and you have begun to find him paranoid and unfunny. Essie isn't sure yet what will become of her and Dan. She actually looks forward to having Dr. Mona make this decision for her.

They settle into the chambray wingback chairs that Essie saw in last year's IKEA catalogue. She glances at her husband. She's always liked

how she and Dan look as a couple: he the contractor, she the stand-up comedian. He is normal-looking, with a thin, wide mouth and light-colored eyes and hair. She's the right amount of pretty for an aspiring comic, which is to say not very. In addition to being slightly overweight, she has her father's wily black pubic-looking hair and her mother's strong jaw, and she likes to dress in the manner of a slightly insane person, with oversized accessories and clashing patterns and heaps of jangly bracelets. Today she's wearing a baggy polka-dotted shift dress, fringed leather booties, and bright coral lipstick.

"Dan, we'll start with you," Dr. Mona says. Dr. Mona is wearing one of her fuzzy sweaters, which buttons at the neck and makes her resemble, if only slightly, a llama. "You listed *cloud security*. Essie, what do you make of that?"

"Cirrus or cumulonimbus?" Essie jokes, then clears her throat. "Sorry. I, uh. Maybe Dan—maybe he could elaborate a little more? I'm not exactly an expert in"—in *what?*—"in, uh, *computers*."

Dr. Mona nods. "I think that would be wise."

"Cloud security represents a single point of vulnerability," Dan begins. "A breach can mean that all of one's data is gathered in one fell swoop—a particularly attractive target for hackers, as you can imagine, since there's just one password guarding a veritable *jackpot* of personal information . . ." Essie feels herself drifting away, like a person losing consciousness. She is smart, but has a poor attention span, a fact that has long annoyed Dan.

"Thank you for that clarification, Dan," Dr. Mona says when he finishes. Essie watches her pick a piece of fuzz from her sweater and place it deliberately on the desk. "Essie, let's try again. How scary does *cloud security* seem to you?"

"A breach in cloud security," Dan corrects.

"A *breach* in cloud security. On a scale from one to seven."

"Um," Essie says. "I don't know. A four?"

Dr. Mona uses her stylus to make a note on her iPad.

"What does that mean?" Essie asks. "Is that bad?"

"I wouldn't say it's good or bad," Dr. Mona says. "Everything's simply evaluative. It's *data*." At this, Dan squeezes his wife's hand. He likes data.

But the truth is that it does seem bad to Essie, who had become increasingly alarmed as she read through Dan's list. *Home intruders*, *identity theft*, *cyberthreats*. There were several sub-items under the larger umbrella of cyberthreats that Essie had never even heard of, *botnets* and *precision-targeted malware*. Dan has always been cautious, but as the years pass his paranoia has become more and more pronounced, like the hair that grows from one's inner ear. Recently he installed a third deadlock and bought a shredder as big as a small refrigerator. Just last week, he'd spoken of acquiring a gun.

An old joke springs into Essie's head. *Question: What do you call an elephant with a machine gun? Answer: Sir.* She feels her cheeks color and glances once, quickly, at Dan, as if he might be able to read her mind.

But they have moved on to Essie's list, which Dr. Mona is unsatisfied with. *Fungus from getting a pedicure*, she'd written, and *lake monsters*. She'd also listed *gravitational effects of aging* and, at the last minute, had scribbled on the name of an infectious disease that had so far not traveled farther north than Honduras; *60 Minutes* had done a segment on it.

"Is that it?" Dr. Mona asks. "Is that really, really it?"

Essie shrugs. "I'm honestly just not really afraid of much."

"OK," Dr. Mona says. "It's a start, at least." Essie notices for the first time the dark circles under her eyes, and wonders if she spends nights at home with her Excel spreadsheets and her statistical software, cleaning data and building models. The article hadn't mentioned a husband, though it noted her two large rescue dogs. "For this to work," she says, "I need a richer data set. I want you two to fill these surveys out again—and this time, Essie, I want you to really ask yourself: *What are you afraid of?*"

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Essie started performing at open mic night when she got laid off from her job at the corporate headquarters of an office supply chain, where she had spent eight years diligently creating spreadsheets that no one ever looked at. She'd been dawdling over a QC report and looking forward to lunch when Samantha from HR called her into the manager's office, where he told her profits were down and used the phrase *trimming the fat*. The two of them gazed at her with great sympathy. "I understand," Essie said, once she understood that they meant her to leave, right then. She collected her lunch bag from the break room, where a woman from customer service was eating a pork chop with her hands. She was given two weeks' severance and promised a letter of recommendation that never arrived.

At first the comedy, with its alcohol-slicked late nights, had numbed her, a mental salve for the dull, throbbing embarrassment of being no longer wanted at a job you hated. But now, though she's since gotten another job—a receptionist position at a day spa, possibly crappier than her previous job—she's grown addicted to the adrenaline-laced fear she feels when she steps into the light to tell her jokes to strangers. It's a little sad, maybe, a 34-year-old comedian who has never landed so much as an emcee gig and probably never will, but Essie is of the firm opinion that many things in life are a little sad if you think too hard about them, like eating french fries by yourself in the Rally's parking lot or buying *People* to see if Hayden Panettiere has lost the baby weight yet. Besides, she

loves the Funny Bone despite its air of trying too hard, the whole place with a whiff of something corporate that wants badly to be cool, its aging photos of Lenny Bruce and Robert Klein yellowing on the walls next to newer headshots of comedians who could be considered *famous* only among a small circle of people in a very specific part of the country. She likes how you can hear the oil popping in the deep fryer when you walk by the kitchen. She even likes the industrial scent of the fluorescent-pink soap they use in the bathrooms. But she's been in a slump for weeks now, her punchlines flat and lifeless. *I went to the dentist the other day. On the wall he had pictures of himself fishing. I wonder if he tells the fish really boring stories as he removes the hooks from their mouths.*

"Bad crowd," she sulks to Schweer, the owner, after bombing one night in front of an anemic crowd of four.

"I think maybe your material is too superficial," he says. He is eating onion rings and wearing a sport coat that is too long in the arms. He likes to tell people that he'd been a member of the Upright Citizen's Brigade in the nineties, but unless he's had a lobotomy since then, Essie is pretty sure he's lying. He is one of the unfunniest people she knows. But he likes to hang around her on open mic night, and sometimes gives her free drinks. He probably has a crush on her.

"You should write to your anxieties instead," he says. "You know, your neuroses. Your fears."

Essie watches his Adam's apple go up and down as he takes a swallow of beer. "You sound like my therapist," she says.

Schweer shrugs. "It's classic comedy technique," he says. "You know, let it bubble up. Freud thought humor was a way to temporarily detach from our fear."

She nabs an onion ring. "I'm honestly just not that afraid of anything. *C'est la vie*, or whatever."

"I'm not sure you're using that right."

She makes a face at him and then puts the onion ring in her mouth. It's cold, the batter limp and doughy, the onion inside as slick and soft as a worm. She chews a couple times and swallows the whole thing down.

"Anyway, listen," Schweer says. "There's an open slot for pro-am night on Friday. Do you want it?"

"Really?" Essie says. "Really and truly? Don't yank my chain, Schweer. I'm too old for that shit." Pro-am night, where a handful of local amateurs open for regional comedians, is the highest stand-up achievement an open mic lifer like herself can reasonably hope for.

"Really," Schweer says.

"Yes. Definitely yes." She makes a move to hug him and then hesitates; they don't have a touching kind of relationship. She gives him a little pat on the arm instead. "Thanks, Schweer."

"You're welcome," he says, licking a fried-batter crumb from his upper lip. As a result of the onion rings, his whole mouth area has taken on

an oily sheen. “I wouldn’t yank your chain, Essie,” he says thoughtfully. “Unless that was something you specifically requested.”

As she drives home she thinks about what Schweer said: *Write to your fears*. Maybe he’s right. What is she afraid of? The year before, she’d become terrified of food becoming lodged in her throat and choking her. She’d watched YouTube videos of people demonstrating how to perform the Heimlich maneuver on yourself, thrusting their abdomens repeatedly onto chairs or, in one case, the back of a child’s toy chest. She’d practiced the move herself once, on the secretary desk where they keep the mail, and began cutting her food into child-sized bites. But then at some point she realized she’d forgotten all about it, and recalls the fear now only vaguely, as a slightly puzzling memory.



She begins gathering material. Carefully writing and rewriting her jokes, mouthing them aloud in the car to get the timing just so. After work she drives around, looking at the glow of her city in the shadows. On Wednesday, two nights before she is to go on at pro-am night, she looks up Dr. Mona’s home address and drives by her house. She expects to see her through a lighted window, perhaps on her laptop with a dog curled at her hip, but there she is instead in her front yard, working in her garden by flashlight, tending carefully to beets and collard greens. She’s wearing clogs—actual gardening clogs that are so heinously ugly that Essie feels a little bad for her—and an oversize, non-fuzzy sweatshirt. Her nose glints with sweat. Essie speeds away, feeling she has committed a violation, of a kind that happens when you take something private from a person without them knowing it.



At home, Dan has just returned from racquetball, his sweat forming a neat collar around the neck of his T-shirt.

“Hey,” she says. “Did you hear about that guy who got caught driving in the HOV lane with a giant teddy bear in the passenger seat?”

“No,” he says. “What happened?”

“Oh, that’s actually the entire story,” Essie says. “Just—this guy who, yeah, put a big teddy bear in his car so he could drive in the high occupancy lane.”

“Oh,” Dan says.

She watches him perch at the edge of the couch and begin to painstakingly unwind an elaborate lace-up brace from around one of his ankles. She’s about to make another joke—*Did you upcycle somebody’s Victorian corset to make that thing?*—when he asks if she’s heard about Nora’s car being burglarized.

“Nora?”

“Nora. Yes. Our neighbor. Five doors down. You know—older lady. Very sweet. You’ve met her.”

“Oh, Football Nora?” Halfway down the street lives a tiny, enthusiastic woman with violet hair and tissue-paper skin who believes, truly and honestly, that her alma mater’s quarterback is the second coming of Jesus. “For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son,” Essie says now, miming the sign of the cross, “and installed him as quarterback at the University of Alabama.”

“Did you hear what I said?” Dan frowns. “Thank God she didn’t leave her garage remote in the console.”

“Yeah, thank God.” What does he want her to say? He wants her to say *We are not safe*. Dan’s motive for telling this story is one of caution, of warning; she feels his compassion for Nora is little more than a thinly veiled I-told-you-so. He wants her to recognize that there is danger on their street, in their neighborhood, in the world. He wants her to say *I’ll be more careful*. If she were a better person she’d acquiesce. But his pointed, pedantic warning annoys her, and, the TV remote—since recovered from deep in the couch cushions—already in her hand, she begins flipping channels to show she is not impressed.

“Do you hear what I’m saying?” he says.

“I don’t know, Dan. Does the Pope shit in the woods?”

He opens his mouth and then closes it. “I’m not sure what that means.”

She gestures, annoyed. “You know. The Pope, his holiness. Taking a dump in the woods. With his pope hat on. It’s *funny*.” She sighs. “Never mind.”



The next day, at their final therapy session, they’re supposed to be discussing *Attitudes Toward Finances and Savings*, but the conversation circles back to Essie’s carelessness.

“She won’t double-check the door when she’s leaving the house,” Dan says. “It worries me. Because our neighbor, Nora—well, there was an *incident*—and then of course there was the break-in, two weeks ago—”

“I’ve already apologized for that, OK?” Essie interrupts. “I’m sorry. Next time I’ll call the cops. Pronto. Look, I’m putting them on speed dial. 9-1-1.”

“That’s not the only thing,” Dan says. He’s avoiding her eyes.

“Go on,” says Dr. Mona. She’s wearing a cropped little blazer today, a garment nothing like her usual linty sweaters. Essie can’t stop gazing at her, thinking about her tending so lovingly to those vegetables.

“Yes,” Essie says, turning to her husband. “Please, go on.”