



1. PRETTY NURSES, ALL IN A ROW (1966)

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

-- Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*

WHEN I WAS 8, A BAD MAN CAME TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD AND DID THINGS THAT MADE MANY PEOPLE SAD. The year was 1966 and on TV, the first episode of "Star Trek" was broadcast. The plot concerned a creature that sucked salt from human bodies. That year my favorite song on the radio was "Monday, Monday" by the Mamas & the Papas. It was one of those carefree, hippie-dippie songs that got stuck in my head and stayed there. It was also the year I entered second grade at Luella Elementary School.

My Chicago neighborhood was called Jeffrey Manor. Its landmarks included Our Lady Gate of Heaven, Benny's Candy Store, synagogues, Grocerland, Sol's Drugstore. I think the amusement park on 95th Street was called Fun Land. I remember once onboard a terrifying ride there called "The Octopus," I screamed for dear life till the kid running the ride let me off. If nothing else, that was the day I learned that my voice was powerful enough to stop a whole amusement park ride dead in its tracks. I grew up in a duplex house with my mother, father and

older brother Clyde. A duplex house meant that our house was joined at the hip to another house and if you put your ear to the right wall, you could eavesdrop on the neighbors.

I knew just two other Asian American kids, Roger and Janice and their father was a doctor and I knew they were kind of rich because they had a piano in their living room. I was Japanese American; they were Chinese American. Close enough. I remember a friend named Tommy who was a good guy, taller than me, Irish American. I liked to go to his house because his back yard had two magical things in it: an above-ground swimming pool and a large weeping willow tree. I liked to think that the tree was crying, that the leaves on the ground were tree tears.

One hot summer day, I had a bright idea. I'd see if Tommy would let me come over for a refreshing dip in his pool. He and I loved to create a Human Whirlpool by moving our bodies clockwise through the water. Once we built up a strong current, we'd lie back and let ourselves get dragged around by the whirlpool. It was the closest we'd probably ever come to flying and it never got old for me and old Tommy. That alone made the pool a magical place.

"Great idea. Swim party!" he said.

"Would it be okay if I asked if Roger and Janice to join us?" I said. "The more bodies, the stronger the current." I was the social planner even back then.

"Absolutely," he said.

An hour later we assembled in Tommy's backyard with towels in hand. Janice and Roger wore sunglasses as rich kids often do.

"Thank you so much, Tommy, for letting us join you," said Roger. "I've never been part of a Human Whirlpool before!"

"Me neither. I can't wait," chimed in Janice.

And before we knew it we were in our designated positions, the four of us spaced equidistantly around the pool's perimeter. "So we just start moving in a clockwise direction," I said. "That's gets the water swirling."

Tommy continued. " -- and then when we've gotten to a good speed, you just lie back in the water and let the current take you!"

"I should tell you guys now. I can't swim," said Janice.

Tommy perked up. "Well, the rim of the pool is only three and a half feet tall, Janice. So I think you're safe." He winked at her.

"Besides, I'll rescue you," said Roger. "You know how mad Mom would be if I let you drown." Janice seemed reassured.

We got the water moving at a good speed and then we leaned back and started floating in circles.

Everybody was having fun.

We were flying. We were shouting.

We were magical -- not only because we were flying -- but because friendship was magical too.

And then Janice screamed, "Owww!!" Turns out she had stubbed her toe on the drain plug thingy and broke a toenail. Her toe was bleeding a bit.

"If you're bleeding, Janice, you got to get out of the pool! Don't pollute the water," said her brother Roger. She climbed carefully out of the pool. I spread her towel on the grass while Tommy went inside for a band-aid.

"Did you want me to keep you company out here?" I asked her.

"No, just go back into the water. Have fun for the both of us," she said putting on her sunglasses.

And on that day I learned that sometimes you stub your toe in the Human Whirlpool and have to lay down on your towel, and sometimes you float in perfect blue circles carried by the strong current and float forever. If stubbing your toe was the biggest problem in a person's life -- I knew it wasn't the end of the world. I still had my friends. What I didn't know -- what I couldn't know -- was how big problems could become, and how completely life could change in an instant as it would change in just a few days when a strange man with a pock-marked face arrived and turned our neighborhood into a crime scene.

A monster is a powerful person or thing that cannot be controlled and that causes many problems. By any definition, the bad man who was coming to town was a monster.

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

On July 14, 1966, a dark shadow fell across Chicago. At 11 p.m. Richard Speck knocked on the door of a townhouse where student nurses lived and studied and found comradery. The townhouse stood on 100th St, not far from Benny's candy store and Luella Grade School. It was also adjacent to the playground where I regularly swung on the swings. By the end of the night, eight women lay dead on the floor. They were strangled, suffocated and stabbed. During the commotion somehow Speck lost track. There was actually a ninth nurse. Corazon Amurao was one of three Filipinas that night. In a moment of chaos, she saw her chance and dove under the bed to hide herself. How could Speck have forgotten her? She was the one who first opened the door. But she was Asian and there were two other Asian student nurses he'd killed already.

Maybe to Richard all Asians looked alike, were interchangeable. Maybe this was one night where that worked in favor of an Asian American.

I wanted to crawl under that bed with Nurse Nine and live too. We could've grown up there together under the bed in a world where you only identify people by their shoes. I admired this woman. Her survival instincts took her to a place away from the danger at hand. There amidst the lost coins and dust bunnies she surely must have held her breath and prayed. The least I could do was keep her company. And though I was just a young boy, maybe I could provide her some comfort.

I would be the one to tell Nurse Nine that the killer was gone, that we could crawl out from under the bed, that the morning sun was rising over 100th Street and her long night was finally over, that she was free to walk from this house into the future because at least she had a future, that she shouldn't think of that other room where the bodies of the pretty nurses lay on the floor all in a row.

When Corazon was certain the killer was gone, she climbed out onto a balcony and screamed for help. "They're all dead! All my friends are dead!" she shouted from the second-floor ledge in English and Tagalog. What a strange sight that must have been to the few passersby on 100th Street -- night shift workers, insomniacs in the wee hours of that morning. A lone nurse standing on a ledge screaming out her nightmare to the audience below.

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The next day I went to the park. There were police everywhere and reporters. I didn't know what was going on. I played on the swings as usual. When I returned home my family was glued to the TV. "I went to the playground today!" I announced though no one was listening. "There were tons of policemen and reporters --"

"There's a killer on the loose, dum-dum," said my older brother Clyde. "If you want to get killed, don't look for me to rescue you."

My mother hugged me and said, "Promise me you won't go to the park again."

My parents insisted that I not to go near 100th Street at all. That I should stay inside where it was safe.

"I wonder if they'll close down the schools tomorrow," said my ever-practical father who was a grade schoolteacher on the South Side. "If they close schools for a snow day, they should definitely close them for a mass murderer on the loose!" The whole family huddled round the TV that hot summer night. Mom made a pitcher of iced tea for us all.

That night I asked Clyde if I could sleep in the attic with him. He agreed grudgingly. I lay in the dark trying to sleep for several minutes but not being able to.

"Uh oh, it's 11 o'clock," said Clyde.

"So?"

"That was the exact time the papers said Speck knocked on the door of the nurses. You know what happens at 11 o'clock, don't you?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," I said sarcastically.

"The killer appears," he said.

Then Clyde clicked on a lamp. He turned to face me but instead of his face I saw melted flesh, deformed eye sockets, stringy white hair down sprouting from his head. It was my old Halloween mask.

I screamed. Even though I'd seen the mask dozens of times, it scared me. It scared both of us when the other wore it. Clyde laughed hysterically.

"You have to throw that mask away, Clyde," I said. "This is NOT funny anymore."

He laughed louder, almost crying. "I think it's hilarious."

"I'll just cut it up with a scissors. You think I won't?"

"You better not. I'll tell Mom and Dad on you," he said.

I ran down the stairs to my room. When I returned I had scissors in-hand.

"You're crazy," he said. "Don't destroy public property."

"I bought it with my allowance. I can do whatever I want."

Clyde tried to pull mask away from me, but I held on. We pulled the mask in different directions like a taffy pull. We pulled and pulled. To my surprise, it ripped in half and we fell on the floor. We were both laughing!

I proceeded to cut the mask into tiny pieces so it could never scare anyone again.

"You are possessed, little brother. "And now I'm off to dreamland." He turned off the lamp and the room went dark again.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Over the next few days, all of Chicago was on edge. People weren't accustomed to locking their front doors at night in those days, but you better believe they locked them from then on. Later I learned that Speck had seen the headlines about The Nurse Killer, saw the police sketch of his face plastered everywhere. He tried to take his own life with his knife -- but failed and was rushed to a hospital. It was there that a young doctor wiping blood off the wounded man's arm saw a tattoo: "Born to raise hell." He remembered the tattoo from a news story and called the police. That's how Speck got caught.

That message was a little different from the patch message I'd sew on my messenger bag years later proclaiming that "Life is magical." A lot different. For better or worse, people tend to

see what they want to see in the world. Call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Call it the Law of Attraction. Each of us arrives at a unique *worldview* based on our life experiences and the lessons we learn or fail to learn. One person believes the earth is flat. One believes the earth is round. One person believes in science. One believes in hearsay. One person believes that life is magical. One believes they were put on earth to raise hell.

Self-fulfilling prophecies.

The tall weeping willow tree in Tommy's backyard began to shed its leaves that summer and wouldn't stop, the leaves fluttering down like slivers of paper. The tree wept for the eight student nurses who perished too soon and all the good deeds they would have done and for Corazon who hid under the bed and had to live with the memory. In her recurring nightmares, she lives under the bed still.

The tree tears were real after all. They never stopped falling. Some days I stood under the tree with Tommy, Roger and Janice and we let the leaves rain down upon us, catching them in our hands. Other times we lay down on the grass till we were completely buried by leaves. Like children who weren't there anymore.

Eventually I was allowed to return to that playground on 100th Street. But to get to the swing set, I had to pass the townhouse where the murder happened. Once I stopped in front of the entrance to the building. I kept staring at the front door, daring it to open. Was it seconds, was it minutes? I couldn't be sure.

Suddenly the door opened.

I jumped.

It was a young woman going out to walk her dog. She just shook her head at me. I clearly wasn't the first gawker to make an appearance at the crime scene.

That night I came to my parents' bedroom. It was still early evening and Mom was resting on the bed after washing the dinner dishes. I told her that I was afraid. Because of the killer. She said I needed to learn to defend myself. She held up a pillow in front of her and asked me to punch it as hard as I could.

"I don't want to hurt you," I said.

"You won't hurt me," she said.

I gave a little rabbit punch into the pillow.

"You got to punch harder," she said. "As if your life depended on it!"

So I threw a real punch. And then another. It was kind of fun. Mom said if ever a bad man tries to hurt me that I should punch him as hard as I could.

Though I never needed to punch anybody, I was grateful Mom had showed me how. I never did join Nurse Nine in that secret world under the bed. My eight-year-old life was calling. There was homework to be turned in. There were new friendships to be made and birthdays to celebrate. I would push these bad memories to the back of my mind and try to look on the bright side as my mother always did.

The nightmares began around then.

Sometimes I'd dream I was swinging on the swings late at night in the park behind the building where bad things happened and I would hear the awful creaking of the swing set above me. Sometimes I'd dream Nurse Nine and I were living out our lives under the bed, reading comic books by flashlight. Sometimes the killer would reach under the bed and find us, dragging us by our legs into the light...

CONJURED

Twenty-five years later, Richard Speck appeared once again in my life. This time I conjured him by writing a ten-minute play about a woman who grew up near the Speck murders. By this time, I had become Nichiren Buddhist and I was writing plays for the stage. I'd heard American Blues Theatre was developing a show called "Monsters" which would explore monsters both real or imaginary you might find in Chicago. I wrote a short play about the nurse killer, but I shifted the focus from the killer to the survivor.

ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN

Sometimes at night, I walk through the hallway of my building. You might think I'm tempting fate, but the truth is I just want to feel free to walk wherever I want, whenever I want. I don't want to be one of these paranoid urban dwellers with twenty-two locks on their doors. There is plenty. It's kind of nice when you walk through the hallway. You hear TV shows, people leaving messages on answering machines, sometimes a typewriter late at night. When I walk past the doors, it reminds me of tuning in a radio station and you hear bits and pieces of things, but never the whole thing.

Those women he killed, they weren't just nurses, you know – some of them were Asian American. Most people don't think about that, but I do.

The Windy City Times described my piece as "...a burning portrait of a young Asian-American woman still haunted by the memory of growing up one block from where Richard Speck killed eight nurses." The Chicago Tribune review noted my play was "drenched in black humor." I enjoyed turning a life moment into art, fixing it on the page as one might pin a butterfly in behind a glass frame.

What did I learn from this early experience? Depends on whether we're asking the thirty-three-year-old me -- or the eight-year-old me. Ask the older, wiser me and you're asking a man who had converted to Nichiren Buddhism. Instead of seeing the events of his life and the world as random, the elder me now saw them from a Buddhist worldview through the lens of karma.

The tragedy no longer seemed a freak act of violence as the press described, but rather a manifestation of the karma of the killer and the student nurses. Reporters stated, "Speck could've stopped at any house." The elder me came to disagree with that assessment. He came to think that Speck could *only* have stopped at the nurses' house because he and the eight women had a karmic relationship, likely from past lifetimes. Their lives were inextricably linked in a way that his life never was. From that view, young Dwight's life was never in danger.

Ask the younger me what he learned that summer and you'll get lessons that are simpler. Young Dwight learned that the world was not a safe a place as he had thought. That there were things that could happen that even the police couldn't protect him from, nor his parents who loved him. That at the end of the day, the only person he could truly count on was himself. Maybe that's why he thought of Nurse Nine so much, how she cheated death with her vanishing act. She saw a small window of opportunity and she took it knowing it may have been her only chance. *She thought her way out of an impossible situation*, as the boy would have to do many times in his later years. As we all have to do to get through our lives.

What Richard Speck did that night was the act of a monster.

What Corazon Amurao, Nurse Nine, did that night was an act of magic.

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