

“There is Nothing to Fear . . .”

Judi Davis

A great treat of my youthful summers was dollar night at the drive-in movie, when the entire car-full was only one dollar. The last drive-in movie we went to as a family was in late August 1952. That night there were nine of us crammed into the new blue Packard like sardines in a tin. Once parked, we older children (I was eleven) got out the old drab olive army blankets and pillows and prepared our seats on top of the hill of dirt and gravel beside the car. We were lucky that night; there wasn't a neighboring car so we children had a speaker all to ourselves. With the blistering heat of day dissipating, the evening was balmy; sweet, fresh, river scented air caressed and cooled our over-heated bodies.

I don't remember the first movie we had gone to see, but the second feature was *The House of Wax*. Lingering daylight softened the flickering images of the early movie at the drive-in theater, but *The House of Wax* viewed in full dark showed all of its vivid color and the strong contrasts of light and dark. It conveyed all of the shock and horror that I am sure the director intended us to feel.

I think *The House of Wax* terrified me because so many of the scenes in the film were shot in an enormous basement with dark, sinister corners, and our bedrooms were in the basement. To get to the basement we went out of the house proper, across an enormous concrete back porch and down a steep, tunnel-like stairway and then through the basement door. The basement door didn't have a lock, and the door to the house was never locked; it couldn't be with five children coming up at various times in the night.

I actively hated that basement. The first room you entered had one very small, deep window-well that was beneath a tree and contributed hardly any light. On the left as you entered there was a gigantic shelf unit holding our home cannery fruit and jars of jam and jelly. The silver cans and the jars glinted in the gloom. The only source of light was a bare 60-watt bulb with a just-out-of-reach pull cord. Our bedrooms were beyond this room.

My bedroom had two small ground-level windows so it was light during the day. I liked my room in the daylight, with its golden tongue-and-groove knotty pine walls and built-in bookshelves, even though the floor was still bare grey concrete and the ceiling remained naked ceiling/floor joists. The room didn't have real doors—instead, Mom had hung some ugly old leaf-patterned curtains at the entry and closet doorways; they stopped about a foot short of the floor.

I used to lie in bed at night with my eyes straining, staring through the dark, watching those curtains, my ears tuned to hear the least unusual noise. I was afraid to close my eyes. Those curtains *moved*! They *always* moved. There was a subtle sway or a little twitch as though something was just waiting for me to fall asleep before it came in. I didn't know what was waiting out there, but whatever it was, it was bad!

After seeing *The House of Wax*, I made sure I was never, never alone in that basement. While I might be the first, or maybe second, one upstairs in the morning, I was always the last one, or nearly last, down at night. I never ever went upstairs in the middle of the night. Not once!

April in the Wenatchee valley is the beginning of warm, dry weather when the fruit trees dress in fragrant pink and white blossoms and the intense heat of summer is but one short month away. One sunshine-flooded April morning, I hadn't taken the school bus; I don't remember why. Mom and I were alone in the house. She was going to take me to school on her way to work, which was a big treat. As Mom and I started out the door, she said, "I think you need a coat."

There *was* the small fresh chill of early morning, but I *knew* the day would soon be very warm. I didn't dare let Mom see the fear lurking in the depths of my blue eyes. Trying to control the tremolo in my voice, I said, "It's really warm, Mommy."

"I still think you need a coat. Now go downstairs and get one."

"But... but..."

"Don't argue with me! I said go get your coat!"

"Will you come with me?" I asked, with a timid smile. (I was not my mother's favorite child, but we'd had such a rare good morning together, I thought she just might.)

"No!"

My small, reluctant feet dragged going down that steep tunnel of stairs. When I reached the basement door, I turned back and pleaded, "Won't you please come with me?"

"No! I told you, NO! Now stop this nonsense. Hurry up or we'll be late."

I opened the door and ran as fast as I could across that first room. I tore through those hated leaf patterned curtains, turned the corner without slowing, and pushed aside the closet curtains. I was *in* the closet, my trembling hand was clenching the sleeve of my short white waffle weave coat, my back pressed into the other garments hanging there, and wire hangers were jabbing into my head. My heart was hammering in my chest. I didn't seem to be able to breathe. I heard a strange noise. It was me. I was screaming in helpless terror, and in the screaming I was begging my Mommy to come get me, to save me. "Please, Mommy. Oh, please Mommy, P L E A S E!"

I don't know how long I cowered, frozen in that closet. It couldn't have been the eternity it seemed. I finally realized there wouldn't be any rescue. I knew that Mom heard my terror filled cries. I don't know why she left me there alone. There wasn't anyone to rely on but myself.

I forced myself out of the closet, raced out of my room, through the hated leaf-patterned curtains and that dark and gloomy room, past the glinting jars and cans, out of the door, and up the stairs, all the while hugging that hateful white coat.

"You left the door open, now go back down and shut it," Mom said.

I walked back down those stairs and softly shut the door on the secret horror that lay beyond.

Nothing was said as my Mother drove me to school.

Nothing was ever said about that morning. I am sure my parents never knew I refused to be alone in the basement, never realized I was terrified of it. They would have never dreamt that a family treat was the root cause of fear. This was *not* a well-thought-out learning experience.

I grew up that sunny April morning. It was a very private, internal growing up. I never again avoided being alone in the basement, and if I caught myself lying there with my fearful eyes watching those moving curtains, I resolutely closed them. I never again ran like the wind when it was my turn to go out in the starry,

moon-bright night to take the garbage to the burn barrel, out into the shadowy dark area enclosed by tall swaying hedges at the very back of our property. I was afraid, clear down to my toes afraid, but only God and I knew.

Many years later, I read Winston Churchill's famous, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." By then I had learned it for myself.