

Thinking

They were all three of them sleeping in their own little twin beds, about 1 AM, in the bedroom that they all shared. The older girl was eight, her younger sister was six and their little brother was four. Their complete peacefulness insulated them from the sounds of the night. They would have dreamt on 'till morning, but suddenly something happened.

The door to their room flew open and banged against the wall. At the same time, all the overhead lights flashed on. "What were you kids thinking?!" their mother screamed. "How could you do this? You brats! I should spank you all right now!"

This statement aroused dread in the children. The only thing as bad as a spanking was getting a shot at the doctor's. All three children were frightened and beginning to cry, squinting their eyes against the lights, saying, "Mommie, sorry", though it was never clear what their childish indiscretion had consisted of. The children's apologies, delivered over and over, did not rise to the level of contrition that their mother was looking for, because she continued to yell at them and tears continued to stream down their cheeks.

Finally, even their mother was exhausted. She ordered the children back to bed.

What did they feel the next morning, when they woke up? Were they afraid that their mother would continue to yell at them and threaten to spank them? Did they simply hope that enough time would go by that all the previous evening's fear and dread would end up "in the past"? And they wouldn't have to think about the middle-of-the-night incident ever again? The oldest daughter, who remembered most about these incidents, could not recall, at all, what the next morning was like.

And she could not remember, either in the middle of the night or looking backwards through the years, any signs that on some particular night, their mother's emotional storm was about to break. It was not as if they knew they were guilty of some misdemeanor. They hadn't stolen anything, or called anyone names, or hit anybody. Their childish peccadilloes were not capable of provoking such terror-laden, middle-of-the-night responses as they experienced at her hands.

The eight-year-old girl was left with a conclusion: where their mother was concerned, there was no way of predicting which errors would make her merely irritated, and which errors would make her decide to scream at her errant children in the middle of the night. What the eight-year-old figured was, you had to take each day as it came, and wait 'till you grew up, and could escape.

Cynthia Vautier March 16, 2018