

# SCHOOL OF FEAR

The wilderness outside Farmington, Massachusetts

*(Exact location withheld for security purposes)*

Direct all correspondence to: PO Box 333, Farmington, MA 01201

Dear Applicant,

I am pleased to inform you of your acceptance to the summer course at School of Fear. As you already know, School of Fear is an exceedingly select institution, run by the elusive Mrs. Wellington, aimed at eradicating children's fears through unorthodox methods. The small group of parents, doctors, alumni, and teachers aware of our existence vigilantly maintain our anonymity. It is at the discretion of this small group that students are referred. We strongly advise all incoming applicants and their families only to discuss School of Fear in the confines of their home with the television on, water running, and dog barking.

On behalf of Mrs. Wellington and the entire School of Fear staff, I would like to welcome you.

Warm regards,

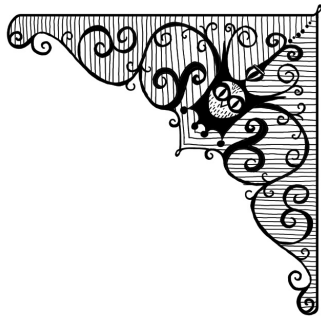
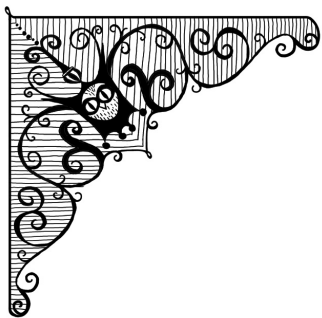


*Dictated but not read*

LEONARD MUNCHAUSER

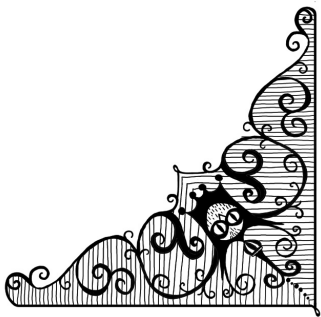
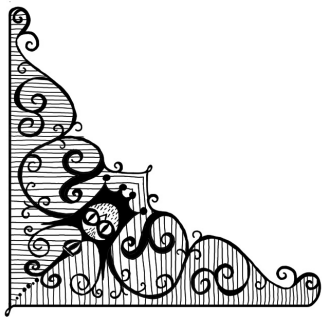
*Lead Counsel to Mrs. Wellington and School of Fear  
Munchauser and Son Law Firm*

LM/kd



**EVERYONE'S AFRAID OF SOMETHING:**

*Mottephobia is the fear  
of moths.*





**A** bell is not a bell. While undeniably constructed out of metal and heralded for its ability to ring, it is actually a great deal more than that. It's the taste of barbecue, the feel of sunburned skin from playing outside all day, and the smell of chlorine from freshly cleaned pools. It's the promise of football games, sleepovers, and video-game tournaments, all without the interruption of homework. In short, the bell is the gatekeeper of summer.

At Brunswick School for Girls in the posh Kensington neighborhood of London, a group of twenty uniformed students waited for the final proclamation that the school year was over. With desperation brimming in their eyes, the girls watched the clock and waited for the bell. A chorus of petite navy blue shoes, rife with impatience, banged against weathered chairs muting the teacher's voice.

Disregarding the teacher was hardly a new trick, but on this particular day, the girls did it with the deft ability of guards at Buckingham Palace, the fuzzy hat-clad group who refuse to react under any circumstance. With mounting frustration, the girls wondered if the bell had gone on holiday. It had a history of doing that during exams, oral reports, and other academic nuisances.

Thoughts of mischief frolicked through nineteen of the twenty girls' minds; however, in the back of the class, there was one young girl determined to will the bell *not* to ring. Raven-haired Madeleine Masterson had purposefully chosen her seat for its obstructed view of both the clock and the bell. Madeleine's blue eyes darted rapidly as she repeated three simple words, "do not ring," under her breath. For the first time in her short

life, she had nothing but trepidation and fright for the start of summer.

Normally Madeleine savored summer's many quiet afternoons spent in the drawing room with a book, puzzle, or Internet-equipped laptop. Madeleine prided herself on having an above-average understanding of world politics. Most students did not know the name of Norway's prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, but Madeleine did. She also knew, and more impressively could pronounce, the names of Greenland's Prime Minister Hans Enoksen, Iceland's Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir, Mauritania's President Mohamed Ould Abdey Aziz, Benin's President Yayi Boni, and so on. Madeleine staunchly believed that all of the one hundred ninety-two member states represented at the United Nations deserved to be studied.

Madeleine would gladly spend the summer at Brunswick School for Girls if it meant eclipsing her parents' plan for her. She would live off the drinking fountain and vending machine; she simply needed to make sure she had enough coins. The idea began to take shape; Madeleine could ravage the library, devouring books by the armful, skip through the halls, and sleep in the

immaculate infirmary. A summer at Brunswick would be utterly delightful!

Regrettably, Madeleine's plea to stop the bell was flatly denied at exactly 3:00 PM. The piercing sound rang through the grand halls of Brunswick, inciting a stampede of girls in sharp navy-and-white uniforms. Much like the running of the bulls in Pamplona, the rush to leave school was a dangerous event. Luckily, this wasn't an issue for twelve-year-old Madeleine. She had long insisted on waiting ten minutes for the children, nannies, and parents to clear the front of the school before leaving her chair.

On that particular day, Madeleine was so drowning in dread that she lingered in the classroom for an extra forty-five minutes before exiting. She mentally alphabetized the list of United Nations delegates as a means to pass the time. Madeleine knew her mother and the driver were waiting; however, she had to summon the courage to face summer. It is a rather lamentable fact that few can call upon courage with the expediency they can fear. And Madeleine was no exception.

Mrs. Masterson, keenly attuned to her daughter, had

expected the delay and brought the *Herald Tribune* to read. Fortunately, she found the plush interior of her chauffeured Range Rover far more relaxing than the couch in her drawing room. After reading every pertinent story, Mrs. Masterson flipped the newspaper over just in time to see Madeleine nearing Brunswick's Victorian-styled main gate. She exited the car as Madeleine emerged from the shadows wearing a netted veil and a belt of aerosol cans. The young girl wildly sprayed the air around her while speeding toward her mother.

"Hello, darling, how was school?"

"Very well, Mummy, thank you for asking. May I inquire whether the car has been fumigated today?"

"Of course, Maddie."

"I do hope you're not fibbing, Mummy. I can tell the difference. My nose is quite discriminating."

"Fibbing? That is ludicrous. I assure you the car has been thoroughly fumigated today."

"Thank you, Mummy. Aren't you going to ask why I am late?"

"No, darling."

"Very well, then. Now, if you don't mind, I would very

much appreciate a quarrel and subsequent grounding. Perhaps one that lasted the entire summer, or if necessary, even longer.”

“Don’t be afraid, Maddie; it’s going to be like camp,” Mrs. Masterson said cheerfully.

“I’ve been to the cinema, Mummy! Camps have poorly insulated cabins with spiders, millipedes, and cockroaches that will climb all over me. I can’t possibly spend the summer in such squalor!”

Madeleine’s intense and obsessive fear of spiders, insects, or bugs of any kind greatly distressed her parents. It was an all-consuming fear that affected every aspect of her life from school to sleep. In the evenings, Madeleine prayed for a spider-free night before climbing beneath a canopy of thick mosquito netting. Already shy by nature, Madeleine had a fear of spiders and bugs that created an additional barrier for her to conquer socially.

Madeleine often remained at home, unwilling to stay in any structure that hadn’t been fumigated recently by exterminators. The brightly colored stripes of an exterminator’s tent gave her the warmth and excitement that most children reserved for birthday or holiday gifts. Regrettably, few parents at Brunswick were willing to meet

the costly and time-consuming demands of the young girl behind the netted veil.

In an effort to pinpoint the exact origin of Madeleine's fear, the Mastersons racked their brains for traumatic incidents involving spiders or bugs. They came up empty every time. As early as Madeleine's first birthday, they remember her crying fervently at the sight of a daddy-longlegs spider. With time, Madeleine's fear became more hysterical and extreme, until the Mastersons could no longer rationalize it as a normal childhood stage.

At six years of age, Madeleine drove herself into a panic-stricken state, complete with heart palpitations, after she watched a grasshopper slip through the front door. She became obsessed with the idea of the musically inclined creature crawling across her face while she slept. The mere thought made the already weak-stomached girl keel over with nausea. Within minutes, Madeleine gave her parents an ultimatum: move or call Wilbur, the trusty exterminator.

Wilbur had spent so many nights at the Masterson household that he not only was on their speed dial, but he also received holiday cards from them. He was an extended member of the family and the only person in

the world who actually relished Madeleine's fear. If it wasn't for Madeleine, it was doubtful he would have been able to afford annual holidays to Bora Bora. So when the Mastersons called about the grasshopper, he happily obliged. It was an awfully expensive job to remove one measly grasshopper, but Madeleine insisted.



In front of Brunswick School for Girls, Madeleine prepared to enter the car when a shiver crawled up her spine. Instinctively, she grabbed her repellent and prepared to spray.

“Don't shoot!” a shocked classmate begged, hands above her head in the surrendering position.

“Sorry, Samantha, I wasn't sure what was behind me,” Madeleine replied as she lowered the can.

“When was the last time a spider tapped you on the shoulder? Honestly, Madeleine,” Samantha said with exasperation. “I'm having a party tomorrow afternoon and I thought you might like to come.”

“Would you mind terribly having it at my house?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The party. May we do it at my house?”

“Then everyone will think it’s *your* party.”

“I suppose that’s true. Has your house been fumigated lately?”

“Sorry, Mum says she won’t fumigate again. Can you at least stop by for pizza?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think it would be prudent. Plus, your mum doesn’t much like the smell of bug repellent.”

Mrs. Masterson listened to the exchange with a sinking heart. She only hoped that after the summer Madeleine’s “problem” would cease to exist. As intelligent, polite, and soft-spoken as Madeleine was, she was equally dramatic where spiders or insects were concerned. Mrs. Masterson had been forced to confront Madeleine’s issue several months ago when she requested a note to excuse her from physical education class at school.

“Mummy, please write a letter informing Mrs. Anderson of my inability to play outside due to the flesh-eating virus I recently contracted.”

“The virus isn’t a problem indoors? Just outside?” Mrs. Masterson asked with amusement.

“Mummy, the virus feeds off the UV rays of the sun.”

“Surely you don’t have to choose such an extreme

disease to avoid playing outside. How about something simple like a cold? I don't want the school calling the Center for Disease Control again."

"Mummy, must you bring that up? I had no idea that foot-and-mouth disease was real. I was put on the spot and it popped into my head."

"Flesh-eating viruses are real too, Maddie."

"Yes, Mummy, but Mrs. Anderson has given me no choice in the matter. She said that short of a flesh-eating virus I would have to play outdoors."

"Maddie, don't you think it would be easier to play outside?"

"Mummy, not to be cheeky, but I would truly rather have a flesh-eating virus than go outside."

Mr. and Mrs. Masterson had tried traditional therapy and hypnotism to quell Madeleine's growing fears, but both were fruitless. The therapist and hypnotist believed Madeleine's dread of spiders had morphed into a phobia, arachnophobia. Of course labeling the fear did little to alleviate it. When instructed by Mrs. Anderson to attend school without her veil or aerosol cans, Madeleine faked her own kidnapping.

An hour after discovering the ransom note in the kitchen, Mrs. Masterson found Madeleine cocooned in mosquito netting at the bottom of her closet.

“Madeleine, what are you doing down there?”

“Mummy, I’ve been kidnapped; do you mind coming back later?”

“Darling? Who exactly kidnapped you?”

“No one was around, so I had to kidnap myself.”

Mrs. Masterson nodded before asking, “Any reason in particular for the kidnapping?”

“That mad, bonkers Mrs. Anderson is forcing me to go to school without my veil or repellents. It’s cruel and unusual punishment. I think I ought to consult a solicitor,” Madeleine said.

“Honestly, darling, there isn’t a solicitor in England who would take your case. On the off chance that you were *seriously* planning on taking legal action.”

“Mummy, I don’t have time to discuss this; I’ve been kidnapped.”

“If I speak to Mrs. Anderson and convince her to let you keep your veil and repellents, will you call off the kidnapping?”

“Well, I suppose so. But you’ll still have to pay the ransom. It’s five quid.”

“I don’t have it on me, but I can get it from your father downstairs. Will you come out in good faith?”

Shortly after the great kidnapping scare, Madeleine’s school counselor, Mrs. Kleiner, invited Mr. and Mrs. Masterson to her office for a private meeting. Mrs. Kleiner’s office did not come equipped with a comfortable couch, as Mr. Masterson had predicted, but rather two very uncomfortable baroque chairs. Mrs. Kleiner closed the office door, locked it, and pushed a towel against the base of it. Mrs. Masterson had only ever seen someone do that when there was a fire, as a means of blocking the smoke. As Mrs. Masterson prepared to ask if there was a reason for the towel, Mrs. Kleiner flipped on the radio. The gray-haired counselor removed her oval glasses and dabbed the sweat off her upper lip before speaking.

“Thank you so much for coming in today. I have an important story to share with you,” Mrs. Kleiner said quietly.

“We’re delighted that you’ve taken an interest in Maddie,” Mrs. Masterson responded.

Mrs. Kleiner nervously nodded before beginning her

story. “About twenty years ago I enrolled my niece, Eugenia, in an atypical program after she became petrified of dogs. If she even saw a dog, she would faint straight-away. She could be in the middle of the road, and boom; Eugenia would be facedown on the asphalt with black cabs and lorries barreling toward her. And all because there was a little white poodle a mile down the road.”

“How frightful,” Mrs. Masterson exclaimed.

“I’ve never much cared for poodles,” Mr. Masterson said absentmindedly.

Both women chose to ignore his comment and continue with the conversation at hand.

“We needed something potent for Eugenia’s phobia, yet with a proven track record, which isn’t an easy combination to find. However, after much research, that’s exactly what we found.”

“I’m so pleased to hear that. What is it called?” Mrs. Masterson asked.

Mrs. Kleiner looked both ways and then whispered, “School . . . of . . . Fear.”

“School of *what*?” Mr. Masterson asked.

“Shhhh. You mustn’t throw that name around. You cannot tell anyone what I am about to share with you. It

is of the utmost importance that the details of the program remain vague to allow students the highest possible chance at recovery.”

“Mrs. Kleiner, is this a school or Scotland Yard?” Mr. Masterson asked jokingly.

“Mr. Masterson, this is a school unlike any other and as such requires total discretion. Are you both prepared to make that sacrifice for Madeleine?” Mrs. Kleiner asked sternly. “Because if you aren’t, I shall turn off the radio, remove the towel under the door, and stop whispering. I am late for a game of backgammon as it is. If you’re not serious about helping Madeleine, tell me now.”

“Of course, we are very serious about helping our daughter,” Mrs. Masterson responded while staring down her husband. “I can’t tell you how concerned we are for her lungs alone. All that repellent can’t be good. She wakes up three to five times a night for maintenance sprays.”

“Are you absolutely sure you can handle it?” Mrs. Kleiner asked while staring coldly into their eyes.

“We’re sure,” the Mastersons responded.

Mrs. Kleiner explained that School of Fear is an exceedingly exclusive program run by the elusive Mrs.

Wellington; it is actually so select that few people are even aware of its existence. If one asks a postman, greengrocer, operator, or judge about School of Fear, they won't have a clue. The general public has no idea that such a place exists because the chosen group of parents, doctors, and teachers in the know are vigilant about maintaining the institution's anonymity. It is at the group's discretion that candidates are nominated, as Mrs. Wellington requires a letter of personal recommendation to consider a student.

Continuing with School of Fear's clandestine nature, rigorous background checks are performed on both candidates and their families. These background checks are so thorough that Mrs. Wellington often learns information that belies logic: everything from eating paste in preschool to misspelling one's own surname in second grade.

After acquiring all pertinent information on the applicant and family, Mrs. Wellington then requests an essay of no less than one thousand words detailing the child's fears and the traditional methods that have failed them. Points are deducted for grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and poor penmanship. The application

explicitly states that all essays are to be handwritten, as Mrs. Wellington doesn't care for dubious technologies such as typewriters and computers.

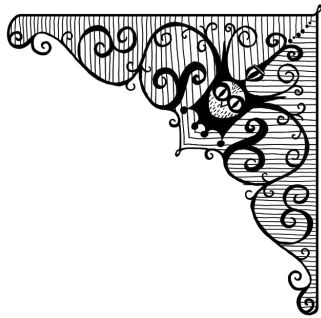
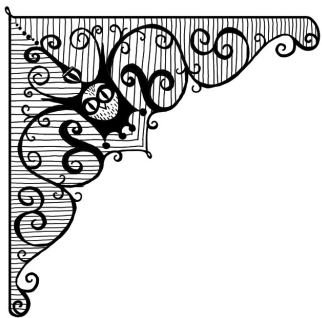


Not since the Mastersons changed health-care plans had they heard of a process with so much red tape. There was fingerprinting and extensive tests with peculiar names such as The Standardized Childhood Insanity Exam and Personality Defect Assessment. Overall, finishing the elaborate application was quite a feat considering it was all handled through the mail. Mrs. Wellington did not wish to disclose the identity of her employees prior to acceptance. While the candidates may have been in the dark about Mrs. Wellington, her private investigators ensured that nothing escaped her attention.

If Mrs. Wellington was notified of an information leak during the application process, candidates were immediately disqualified and sent a stern warning from her private attorney at Munchauser and Son. As anyone could tell you, no one messed with Munchauser Senior, absolutely no one. Many former students became fix-

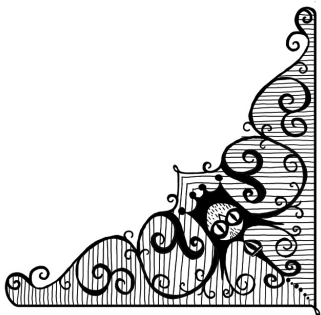
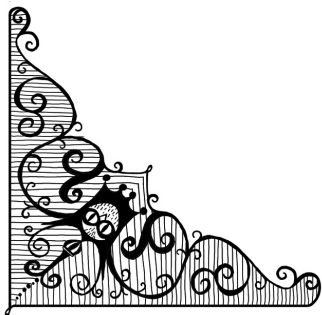
tures in society while never breathing a word of their days at School of Fear. It was a two-part vow of silence, one for extreme loyalty to Mrs. Wellington and the other for fear of the infamous Munchauser wrath.

Leonard Munchauser Senior was known for his wicked temper, ruthless nature, and cold heart; and that was with his family. The story goes that he once removed his son's eyebrows, one hair at a time, as punishment for spilling milk. Worst of all, Leonard Munchauser Junior's eyebrows were permanently affected, growing in spottily and lopsided. As atrocious as that may have been, it paled in comparison to the treacherous tactics Munchauser Senior employed to protect his clients. And no client was of greater importance than Mrs. Wellington and School of Fear.



**EVERYONE'S AFRAID OF SOMETHING:**

*Phasmophobia is the fear  
of ghosts.*





**W**hat do you mean Grandma's dead? How could you let this happen?" Theodore Bartholomew howled in the kitchen of his family's messy Manhattan apartment. The stout boy with alabaster skin, dark brown hair, and milk chocolate eyes framed by glasses stared at his mother in shock.

"Grandma was old, that's what happens. Old people eventually die," Theo's mother, Mrs. Daphne

Bartholomew, explained compassionately, placing her hand on top of Theo's.

"But you're old. Look at all those wrinkles. You'll be dead soon too!"

"I'm not *that* old."

"All I see are liver spots and wrinkles," Theo said as he started to hyperventilate. "I feel faint — quick, get the smelling salts!"

"I can't remember! Where do you keep those?" Mrs. Bartholomew asked with exasperation.

"Must I do *everything* myself?"

Theo pulled a first-aid kit from his jacket, grabbed a white stick, and snapped it under his nose. Even from a few feet away Mrs. Bartholomew felt the effects of the pungent smelling salts.

"Sweetie, are you okay?" Mrs. Bartholomew asked softly.

"My grandmother's dead, my mother's on the way out, and I just used my last smelling salt," Theo droned.

Twelve-year-old Theo was the youngest of seven children, and by far the most, well, everything. That was the thing about Theo; he was rather hard to describe since he was so many things. He was definitely the most dra-

matic, hysterical, and neurotic boy in the borough of Manhattan. He was also kind, genuine, sweetly naïve, and a vault of unusual facts. His mind often journeyed to dark places, setting off a hailstorm of concern, which he didn't think twice about sharing.

Oddly, Theo's siblings never worried much about anything other than getting into the bathroom first. Therefore, it was hardly a surprise when Theo took his grandmother's death the hardest of all the children. While admittedly a tad insensitive, his siblings were grateful for the extra space their grandmother's death provided. Before judging the Bartholomew children, one ought to remember that Manhattan apartments are unbelievably short on space, prompting many landlords to list closets as bedrooms.

Regardless of the rationale, the Bartholomew children's interest in their grandmother's room offended Theo. He thought it best for the room to be kept as a shrine to his grandmother, complete with her hearing aid, dentures, and heart medicine. Her stuff was the last vestige of her presence in his life, and moving it felt downright sacrilegious. The shrine idea, along with the "We Miss Grandma" tee shirts, were vetoed at a Bartholomew family meeting.

Theo's disappointment in his siblings intensified when none of his six brothers and sisters joined him in throwing their bodies on the coffin at the funeral. In true Theo fashion, he considered the act to be a testament to loyalty and love. As Mr. Bartholomew spoke at Morristown Cemetery, Theo stared at the oak coffin covered in white lilies. His father's voice echoed in Theo's ears as he ran full-speed toward the casket, ultimately knocking off the lilies. He held on to the coffin tightly, his face squashed against the smooth wood. Theo believed that if he had died first, his grandma would have done the same for him. He saw it as one final hug, albeit through a casket.

With tears streaming under his glasses, down his soft skin, and onto his snug suit, Theo felt a hand on his back. It was his older brother, Joaquin, sent to fetch him. Theo released his grip, allowing his brother to lead him back to his seat. Theo's dramatic performance continued with him squawking "Why?" loudly while looking at the sky.

"Because she was ninety-five," Joaquin calmly responded.

Theo glared at his brother, irritated by his literal response.

“What? Was that a rhetorical question?” Joaquin just didn’t get it.

Shortly after Theo’s grandmother’s funeral, the already anxiety-prone boy developed an even more intense fear of death and a fanatical need to track his family’s whereabouts. Theo demanded hourly contact with each member of the family to confirm that they were alive. All data was logged into a notebook aptly labeled, “Dead or Alive.” It was quite a striking title, but Theo did have a flair for melodrama.

Sitting in his family’s dark living room, the walls lined with books and paintings, Theo opened “Dead or Alive” and began with his eldest sister, Nancy. He had last seen her running out the front door with only a cardigan to keep warm. Theo worried she could catch a cold, lower her immune system, contract meningitis, and contaminate the whole family. He had prudently texted her to get a jacket, surgical mask, and some anti-bacterial hand sanitizer, but she ignored him. As he dialed her number, Theo shook his head, thinking about how often his siblings thumbed safety in the face.

“Nancy, this is your brother . . .” He paused, expecting

her to greet him warmly. “I suppose since you have four brothers I should identify myself by name. It’s Theo.”

“Trust me, I know who this is, Theo,” Nancy said with obvious annoyance.

“Good to hear,” he replied with an oblivious smile. “I need verification of your safety and well-being. And I wanted to encourage you to return home to get a heavy coat, surgical mask, and hand sanitizer.”

“Stop calling me, I’m on a date!” Nancy fumed.

“I’ll take that as an affirmative that you are alive and well. And make sure your date washes his hands before holding yours — lots of germs going around this time of year. Okay, have fun. I’ll call you back in an hour.”

“Don’t you dare!” Nancy yelled, but Theo had already hung up the phone.

Not even the strict rule against cell phones at school stopped Theo from checking on his family. He constructed a system during school hours in which each family member was required to text Theo a confirmation of his or her status, alive or dead. It wasn’t necessarily the most logical system, since a dead person can’t text. In fact, Joaquin and his two other brothers often texted back “dead” as a joke.

Theo never laughed. Even with his elaborate and time-consuming system, thoughts of death continued to plague him. His siblings started referring to him as Theo the Thanatophobe — thanatophobia being a fear of death or dying. Theo didn't acknowledge the name, feeling justified in his behavior after reading the newspapers' accounts of death from car accidents, sickness, crime, and other grotesque manners.

Theo's neuroses were never quite as heightened as when his parents went camping in Yosemite National Forest in Northern California. Between the remains of ancient glaciers and towering redwoods, there was absolutely no cell reception, preventing them from checking in. Theo's imagination went into overdrive as he envisioned grizzly bears devouring his beloved parents.

Without consulting his siblings, Theo decided it was downright irresponsible of him not to do as much as possible to safeguard his mom and dad. He figured if they couldn't check in with him, he would check in with them, by any means necessary. Various accounts of his parents being injured, attacked, trapped by fires, or lost were reported to park rangers.

“I said *lost!* What part of *lost* do you not understand? They asked me to get help!” Theo screeched.

“If they don’t have a cell phone, how did they tell you they’re lost?” the ranger smartly asked.

“I have the gift. . . .”

“Of bull,” the ranger added.

“The psychic gift. PBS is doing a special on me in the fall,” Theo lied. “Please, you must find them!”

“Listen, kid, I wasted eight hours yesterday with that phony fire story. I’m not falling for this again.”

After the park rangers threatened legal action against Theo, the Bartholomews realized it was time to get help. Since they both were theology professors at Columbia University, they decided their first course of action would be to inquire with other faculty members. They waded through a few boorish comments about military school and fat camp until they found a psychology professor whose son had overcome a fear of foreign languages at a private institution in New England. Apparently, the fear had been so pronounced the boy refused to go in public without headphones. Of course, before the professor told the Bartholomews the name of the institution, he looked both ways down the hallway

and closed his office door. Like others in the know, the professor chose to whisper when speaking about School of Fear.

The Bartholomews salivated at the notion of eradicating Theo's thanatophobia and other general anxieties. Of their seven children, Theo was by far the most time-consuming and draining with his constant worry. Mr. and Mrs. Bartholomew asked their other children to stay in their rooms while they spoke with Theo. Seated on a maroon loveseat, his parents explained their plans for his summer at School of Fear.

"Are you out of your mind? *School of Fear* sounds like a cult! Why not send me to North Korea?" Theo asked sarcastically, shaking his head in disgust.

"Theo, it's like camp, not communism," his mother retorted.

"How can you even entertain this notion? They don't allow cell phones! Have you no mercy, woman?"

"Theo, stop the theatrics," Mr. Bartholomew interrupted as Theo dropped to his knees.

"Take a good look at this face; it may be the last time you *ever* see it."

"Theo, they are going to help you enjoy life more,

worry less. Doesn't that sound good?" his father asked calmly.

"Worry? Me? I don't worry. I am merely a practical observer of life, commenting on potential harms. That hardly constitutes worrying," Theo said in a vain attempt to convince his parents that he didn't have a problem.

"Theo," his parents said pityingly in unison.

"What?"

"You don't take the subway," his mother started.

"A fire could break out or someone could push me in front of a train; the mayor keeps ignoring my letters about a safety rail. And not to mention all the people touching stuff with their dirty hands. A lot of them don't use soap in the bathroom — you know the type: Joaquin. He runs his fingers under water for three seconds and thinks his hands are clean."

"What about wearing a parachute on planes?" his father asked.

"Preventative measure in case of engine trouble. I truly believe that it's the wave of the future."

"The surgical mask?" Mrs. Bartholomew asked sweetly.

"I only wear that during flu season. As any reputable

doctor will tell you, kids are more susceptible than adults. There were ninety-three influenza-related deaths in 2003.”

“Is that what you’re afraid of? Dying?”

“Until someone comes back and tells me what happens, I’m not sure I want to do it. And so far Grandma hasn’t visited.”

“Theo, why don’t I explain a few things,” his father said before expounding on the countless beliefs in the afterlife.

Theo sat calmly listening to everything his father had to say. Occasionally he nodded, or tilted his head, but mostly he just absorbed. Finally, when his father finished, Theo rubbed his chin and stared up at his parents.

“Do you feel better?” Mrs. Bartholomew asked hopefully.

“Not really. Don’t you find it suspicious that the afterlife has more options than a salad bar?”