

Nothing To Fear But by Stephen L. Burns

Most blessings are mixed--but how about curses?

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Dear Stan,

As a long-time reader of Analog, I know that more than a few members of your readership take the plunge and try to write a story that might just make it to the magazine's pages. If you have any way of accessing subscription records you'll see that I have twenty years (and probably an extra twenty pounds) under my belt.

But this isn't a story. Well, it tells a story of sorts. It might be delusion, but it isn't fiction.

Let me explain: I'm the chief Fire Investigator for a certain county in southwestern Pennsylvania. Not bad for a girl who got A's in all her science classes, and read as much SF as she could get her hands on as a teenager. I've held this position for about five years now. Most fire investigations are pretty cut and dried. But now and then one comes along that leaves you with more questions than answers. Or worse yet, haunts you.

I'm sure you have met a large number of techies, so maybe you've heard of Jeffery Bloss. Bloss Devices was not a large company, and it served a very specific niche: the design and creation of all sorts of sensing devices. Medical equipment, airport bomb sniffers, earthquake warning devices; all those and many more tools and instruments depend on components developed by Jeffery Bloss.

Here in my county he was something of a curiosity. Most people were aware that he was some sort of egghead scientist or inventor, but what they mostly knew was that he was very rich, extremely reclusive, and maybe crazy. When he was young he was known as Phobia Boy, and the name stuck. It was widely known that he still lived and worked in the house where he grew up--much added to by this time--and had not stepped outside it since he was a small child.

Maybe you read somewhere that his house burned down early this summer. He was found inside, and his death ruled a suicide. The fire was arson. He set it himself.

The house and contents were a total loss, but one outbuilding survived, and in it I found a backup network server. On that server's hard drive I found, among other things, the materials I distilled for what I've enclosed.

Having read Analog as long as I have, I'm willing to bet you have a pretty decent feel for what's possible, and what's pure moonbeams. What I've sent are bits and pieces from files I found on that computer, covering almost a year's time. At the end of all that is one more page from me, with a couple questions I hope you can answer.

Enough from me. I'll let Jeffery Bloss speak for himself.

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9.13.04:2118 Bad day.

Could barely make myself even cope with the presence of Kamalsky and Jones, and I've worked with them for long enough to even be able to deal with them in person. Was supposed to meet with Singh from Safe-T-Systems. Threw up twice before the appointment, could only make it as far as the doorway to the conference room, made a fool of myself for the five minutes I was near him, got sick again afterward. That time mostly from shame and frustration. No reason to be afraid of him, just stupid

phobias.

I hate this. Hate being me. Hate being afraid of everyone and everything. Would blow my own brains out if I weren't afraid of guns, afraid of death, afraid I'd botch that, too.

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9.16.04:0321 Can't sleep again.

Lonesome. Afraid. Always afraid.

For the millionth time I wonder: what is fear?

It's an emotion. A chemical reaction. A response to stimuli. Except when it isn't, like with me, the panphobic.

Drugs don't work. They might blunt my phobias a bit, but they blunt me even more in the process. Make it hard to think, hard to concentrate. Work is all I have.

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9.16.04:0359 Other thoughts:

Fear is chemical, hormonal, and all of that. But, the brain being what it is, isn't it also electrical? Synapses firing in a certain pattern? And with phobias or other long-standing fears, might these not be recurrent patterns?

If that is true, then shouldn't there be a way to interfere with that pattern? To nullify it?

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10.9.04:1234 Convinced there is a pattern.

Just can't seem to find the damn thing. Tried various methods, even bought my own personal MRI. Lovely machine, but no help. The same with other existing equipment. Have to design my own sensors. Good thing that's the one thing I can do with any confidence.

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10.11.04:1927 The hunt does not go well.

What I'm looking for is subtle and elusive. Even in a head like mine it's a dull glowworm gleam, not a flashing neon sign. Need an entirely different kind of sensor. Very sensitive to the slightest change-state, like those enormous underground setups for detecting neutrinos.

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10.23.04:2216 Barely able to work today.

Bumped the TV remote by accident, saw just a minute of news, enough to fill me with a day's worth of terrors. Endured a meeting with Gravely, liaison from DOD, about munitions/bomb sniffers capable of fitting inside a small drone airplane that could be flown ahead of a convoy to check for IED's. Got back to the parts of the house where I feel safest, got frantic when I heard a sound I couldn't identify. Became convinced a mouse or snake or insect had gotten in. Could only deal with it the way I usually do: put on breather hood and flooded rooms with CO2.

Profound fear of suffocation from the hood, but less crippling than fear of creepy things. If there was something, it's dead now.

Probably was nothing in the first place. Pathetic.

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11.6.04:2324 May be on to something.

Have come up with idea for a new kind of sensor. Fairly small, exquisitely sensitive, bicameral; meaning it will work paired with an identical sensor opposing it--or more properly, the other half of itself. Several pairs could make an array. Have begun hand-fabricating the first pair, with help from Kamalsky and Jones.

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11.12.04:0931 Progress.

Have K & J making more pairs while I figure out how to integrate output into a sort of holographic representation of what is being sensed. Feeling some optimism. May be on the way to building a lens for finding fear.

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11.19.04:1543 My utter stupidity continues to astound me.

Too involved? Maybe. Putting in even longer hours than usual, getting by on less than 3 hours sleep--mostly from short naps--each 24-hour period.

Could not immediately use the sensor array to find what I seek, of course. Want to find something? First establish a baseline where the thing you seek is either not present, or is at least at an acceptable background level.

Kamalsky and Jones both let me take readings from them. Kamalsky skydives, goes whitewater rafting, and she keeps snakes for pets. Jones is an ex-Marine and black belt, has been a volunteer fireman, plays sports. Kamalsky doesn't seem to be afraid of anything. Jones is creeped out by her snakes, so using one of them to look for a fear response was fairly easy. For them. Just the thought of a snake being here in the building had me locked in the bathroom throwing up from the time it came until the time it left.

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11.25.04:2154 All alone today, everyone off for Thanksgiving.

No matter, plenty to do, and I am my own turkey. Now have collected multiple exemplars of normal and fear-response readings taken from other employees and some friends of K & J. Worth the bonuses I paid.

At one end of the spectrum, normality. At the other, me.

Can't go out of course, but from one of my windows I can (when I'm feeling brave) peek out and see my nearest neighbor's yard. Every Thanksgiving he puts up lights for Christmas, and he did it again today. He wraps strings of bulbs around the small trees in his front yard. At night they turn into something almost magical, these three-dimensional constructs of light hanging in the air, sometimes seemingly unsupported, other times appearing to stand on a single twisting leg of light.

Fear is red. My sensors detect all sorts of mental activity, and the trick was in isolating the one I was looking for. The colors applied to this mapping are false, of course. In the model we've devised, all normal and other activity is pink to white--strong to weak.

I have seen my fear; it's on a computer screen before me right now. It's a twisted, tangled, million-pointed, complex thing hanging there like those lit up trees, rooted deeply in my mind and burning

red every day of every season.

I have seen the shape of my life-long enemy.

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12.12.04:0521 I am afraid.

How strange. I have found a new fear. I am afraid of one of the few things I never feared before: failure.

The list of things I am afraid of/phobic about is, well, terrifyingly long, even when broken into broad categories: open spaces and closed spaces; heights and being underground; fire, water, sunlight and moonlight, most weather; most animals and all reptiles and insects; most diseases and ailments and conditions and afflictions; certain foods; most people and all social situations, especially people in uniform or costume, which includes police, nurses, nuns, delivery men and clowns; being in the same room with other people, and being alone.

Yes, that last one too. Only I seem to have a better handle on that one than most of the others. I can stand it, mostly, except for those times I can't.

But never have I doubted my own intellect, talent, creativity. I sometimes think of myself as a natural-born problem solver. Just as the juices in my gut can break down the donut I'm presently eating, my mind does the same thing with problems. They are subsumed and attacked from every direction, broken down into component pieces, digested. In place of the doughy knot I began with, I have a sheaf of answers for its reconstitution as something useable.

But not this time. Not yet. I can see the fear, but can't figure out how to defeat it.

I don't want this to be the one that stumps me.

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1.5.05:2154 New year, new idea!

A way to suppress specific areas of electrical activity with, I hope, finer than pinpoint accuracy. Many possible other applications, but only one counts right now. Only one gives me hope.

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5.1.05:1209 Feeling fooled.

Wouldn't it be today, April Fool's Day, that the last three months of work have come to nothing. K & J are off grabbing some lunch.

Me, I have to go throw up again.

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5.1.05:2141 The joke was on me.

It was Jones who gave us our breakthrough. The goal of the antanxiety field we are trying to generate is to suppress the fear pattern. I had been thinking in terms of trying to douse a fire with a hose, and expressed that analogy. Jones is a fireman, and pointed out that we would only be hitting the front face of the fire. As with real fires, maybe we should be hitting it from two directions. Surrounding it and snuffing it out.

So we set up a second field inducer about two feet from the first with the test subject in between.

Still no effect on the guinea pig--me. The sensors showed no drop in my usual fear quotient.

But by then I had begun thinking about the approach Jones had suggested. I believe two opposed inducers will create an oval field, shape, and strength yet to be determined. What about placement? Front to back, or sideways, hemisphere to hemisphere? Would we need four? Are there any phase effects as the two fields interact?

I sent them home hours ago. I'm really tired myself, but can't sleep. Too many things to figure out, too much work to do.

I think we may be close to driving the monster out of my head.

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5.20.05:1615 Phasing turned out to be critical.

We actually use the interference patterns. The programming of the app that reads the fear response and then provides targeting information has been a bitch, but the kludgy version is showing promise.

First real test today, and I was actually able to hold a mouse in my hand (!!). Unfortunately the targeting is a bit off, and I was not able to speak coherently while the field was on. Tweak code and settings. The next time I was again able to hold the mouse (so soft and delicate, almost like a warm, furry, soap bubble; strange that something so harmless could provoke such terror in me), but went color-blind and was nearly knocked flat by the smell of roses.

K & J got worried about that one, wanted to halt testing, but the guinea pig overruled them.

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5.23.05:2153 Homing in on it!

Held a lit match, put a paper bag over my head, ate an avocado, all with no ill effects. Held a rabbit--another indescribably amazing experience--and was able to stand while doing so with only a very slight dizziness. Have decided against testing with one of Kamalsky's snakes (much to Jones's relief), but I have consented to try a dog. A *big* dog. Watched the news with the field energized. Did not need to stop watching, or throw up.

Have already begun work on a portable version.

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5.24.05:1132 The dog was a wonder.

Big and funny and friendly--and it turns out I'm allergic! At first I thought the sneezing and itching were side effects of the field, but no. Almost too funny. Too bad. I really liked that dog. His name was Ralph. He licked my face!

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5.26.05:0217 Questions.

What will I do when the portable unit is ready for use?

Go outside. Look at the sky. Smell the air. Walk the street. Smile at anyone I meet. Maybe buy something in person, from a stand or store, just like anyone else. Doesn't matter what.

I hope I see a pretty girl.

I've always wanted to smile at a pretty girl, and wondered what it would be like to have her smile back at me.

Spending as much time inside the lab rig as I can, which limits me to one room. I can watch the news, watch movies I wouldn't have dared watch before. Make calls. Play with the mouse, who likes to sleep in my shirt pocket.

It looks like the portable unit will be more cumbersome than I hoped, but I'm in a hurry to get it finished. Refinement can--and will--come later. Already started designing the next generation, and my ultimate objective is to make the antanxiety field generator implantable.

There are millions of people like me. People whose lives have been ruined by fears and phobias. We can all be set free from our demons, from the monster squatting inside our heads. We can finally be like other people, lead something like normal lives.

In selfishly doing something for myself, I may be on the verge of doing a truly great thing for others.

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5.26.05:0407 Can't sleep for thinking about it.

Imagine, an end to fear! Not just for those of us for whom it's pathological, but for everyone! The battered woman no longer afraid to leave her abuser, or to stand up in court against him. No fear of the dentist. No fear of heights, or failure. No fear to raise your voice, to hold to your convictions. Fear is the weapon used by so many tyrants for so long.

Fear of the dark, of the other, of the unknown. A thousand bitter flavors of fear blunted or wiped away.

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6.06.05:1543 The first field test was a success and a failure.

Worthy of tears, and now that I'm recovered, laughter.

I walked out my own front door. Actually it was the overhead door in the garage, that being wide enough to let Jones and Kamalsky stay at some distance on either side of me. Back straight, head high. The power pack and control equipment and other assorted stuff are built into a rather large leather camera bag I can wear hanging off my shoulder without looking too odd. The inducers and the sensors to guide the field are inside a hat, a thin wire running from it to the camera bag.

I've lived in the same house my whole life, and by the time I was four, I had to be heavily sedated to be taken from it for visits to doctors. So I was seeing my own front yard in person for the first time in a bit over 27 years. I actually looked back at my house from the outside.

I felt no fear, even though it's been years since I've even strayed down to the first floor of the house. Not from being away from my safe upstairs rooms. Not from the hot sun burning in an overlarge blue sky, or the birds that flew in that sky, or the cars driving by on the street, or the bugs that buzzed around me. I saw a *bee* and didn't get hysterical.

I felt the sun on my face. I felt the wind.

It was the wind that got me. A gust came out of nowhere, and one moment I was starting to laugh from the sheer joy of my release, the next my hat went flying off my head.

The whole situation went to hell in an instant. My sense of safety and security and fearlessness shattered, collapsed, imploded, and exploded all at once, taking me out and down in the process. I hit the ground in

shrieking hysteria. Kamalsky tried to grab me, but in spite of the time I've known her, and how much I trust her, at that moment having someone try to touch me just made things worse. Meanwhile Jones was sprinting after my errant hat. I saw that much before I fainted.

When I came to I was in my own rooms, and they had put me back inside the lab antianxiety unit, backed off, and turned it on.

I feel better now.

Needless to say, a redesign is in order.

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6.08.05:1539 Plan B.

I was perfectly willing to have the inducers glued--or for that matter *nailed*--to my head, but J & K overruled me. Now the inducers and sensors are securely attached to the inside of a tight-fitting stretchy fabric cap Jones assures me is quite stylish. Not sure it's me, though. So I decided to wear a baseball cap over that. The wire between the hat and camera bag unit has been reinforced because it broke last time. That was part of the delay. The inducers have to be painstakingly tuned to each other. Hat Model 1 blew into the street before Jones could grab it, and it got run over by a car. That crushed one of the two inducers.

This new getup works quite well. I returned to my front yard this afternoon, even walked out on the sidewalk a bit. I was outside for over an hour, testing my limits and being watched like a hawk by Kamalsky and Jones.

One thing they are watching for are aberrations in my judgment brought on by the fear suppression field; things like impulses to go play chicken with traffic, leap off tall objects, eat the lawn.

They said I acted quite normally, considering.

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6.09.05:1753 More field--or at least yard--testing.

Part of that was checking to see if any other devices interfere with the field, or vice versa. So far, unaffected by--and having no effect on--computers, cell phones, pacemakers, etc. Outside a whole two hours. No phobias, no deciding I'm Superman.

But the thrill is gone. I'm eager to go further, explore more. Effect of the field, or just-released prisoner syndrome?

Maybe both. Have gone back and forth about it with Kamalsky and Jones and reached no real conclusion. They are pressing for caution. Me, I'm almost giddy with eagerness to go up, up, and away.

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6.10.05:1834 More time in the yard.

One hurdle cleared. I met the mailman out front as he was making his delivery. He had undoubtedly heard about me and my peculiarities, if not my condition. I realize everyone around here must have. He seemed very surprised to see me out and about. Once meeting a stranger like that would have thrown me into a crippling panic. Instead I smiled and introduced myself, explained that we were working on a new method of treating the phobias that had kept me locked away. Took the mail from him, not even a quiver as his fingers touched mine, something that would have had me puking until I fainted.

Other main reason this was a sort of watershed moment: the antanxiety field seemed to have no observable effect on him.

That's been another unresolved issue. We know that the inducers generate a field in the shape of an elongated oval, but we don't know how far it reaches, how strength varies by distance.

Nor do we really know what happens when another person strays into the field. So far we've made sure that K & J stay at some distance from the narrow side of the field, so if there is any degradation of rational fear they won't be affected, and their watch over me compromised. I don't think it's really an issue. The field is too small, too weak, and what is being generated is keyed only to me.

Matters to be dealt with later. The more I am under the field, the more my confidence grows. Is it possible that over time the field effect could be detuned, letting fear creep back, and allowing my growing desensitization and self-assurance deal with it? Wouldn't that be something!

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6.11.05:1705 I want to leave my yard, dammit!

Now I'm the one with less fear than them, and I'm really beginning to chafe under their caution. I can see the reason for it, and understand it intellectually, but I've been cooped up my whole life, and now I'm out ... only to be chained up in my yard like a bad dog that might chase cars.

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6.11.05:1843 Fear and helplessness.

There is my whole life summed up in two words.

Now I can finally stand outside the prison they made for me, see how I lived, and wonder how I ever stood it.

Fear was the enemy, and I defeated it. Or will have defeated it when I can at last do the normal, ordinary things so long denied me. When I change myself. And then I can change the world.

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6.11.05:2120 I can't stand it any longer.

I'm going out. Why shouldn't I? What am I waiting for? I could call Jones or Kamalsky back to act as escort, but I'm willing to take the risk of flying solo.

Risk. What a delicious word. I can take a risk, can even act spontaneously. What a change from the days where I had to psych myself up for at least a week before I could cope with a meeting with another human being.

Still, I must be prudent. Not overreach. I won't go far, just to the grocery store over on the next block. Maybe I'll even buy something! Must take some money.

While hardly a voyage around the world, doing something as normal as going to the store would not so long ago have been as impossible and unlikely as my being shot into space to play golf on the Moon.

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6.11.05:2251 Home again.

Kamalsky and Jones--

No, Julia and Ahmed. My fear of intimacy always forced me to only use your last names. But I know who you are, and I treasure you. I want you to know that.

Here's what I have to tell you: You were right, and I was wrong. More wrong than I could have ever imagined.

I went out this evening. Just a quick trip to the store. It was a beautiful evening to be out. The air was fresh and sweet, the sun was settling toward sunset. Flowers and birds. Other people out and about, enjoying the evening.

And I was able to walk among them. Calmly, even taking pleasure in it. It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

I went to the store with the anticipation someone else might feel approaching some great attraction like the Taj Mahal or the Louvre. You must remember I've never been in a store before.

When you're phobic you're always imagining the worst that could happen. I've had a lifetime of such imaginings, but not a one of them could compare to what did happen.

I went inside the store. I bought a packaged cake, figuring I could celebrate with it when I got home. I went into the checkout aisle.

The woman at the register smiled at me as I approached with my purchase. It was a tired smile, and under it lurked something I was too obtuse and unsocialized to recognize, though I should have: fear and wariness.

The police sorted things out afterward, and took my statement. In the course of all that, I was able to reconstruct what happened and understand my part in it. The police only saw me as a witness. They didn't know--couldn't know--that I was the one who killed that woman who smiled at me, just as surely as if I'd shot her myself.

You were right, and I was wrong.

The antianxiety field can affect others who come within its range, and that range is longer than I could have ever guessed.

One end reached the woman who had smiled at me. It made her smile softer as all her fears were erased.

The other end wiped away the fears of her ex-husband, who had been stalking her for some time, and who was lurking in the next aisle.

All constraints on his behavior vanished, his fear of reprisal or getting arrested swept from his head. He laughed, and pulled out the pistol he was carrying and pointed it at her. She stared back fearlessly and laughed at him. He screamed that he was going to kill her. She laughed again and stuck her tongue out at him.

I stood dumbly in the middle, confused by what was happening. But not afraid.

He fired one shot that missed. She started to climb over the checkout counter to go after him.

I had started to turn at that first shot, which changed the focus of the field. Both of them were still in it, but now it reached others. One angry-looking man who had been waiting in the next aisle suddenly tucked the beer he'd been waiting to buy into the crook of his elbow, shoved the person ahead of him out of the way, and sprinted for the exit. Another checkout woman, who was being harangued by a customer

who was angry that she wouldn't accept outdated coupons, suddenly slapped the customer across the face.

By then I was turning back, and my checkout woman was up on the counter, yelling at her ex-husband, screaming that she wasn't afraid of him any more.

That's when I finally understood what was happening. I was the cause of all this. I snatched off my baseball cap and tried to get my fingers under the inner cap that held the inducers.

The second shot came just as I got it off.

I collapsed, shrieking as a thousand old terrors came flooding back, new and all too real ones riding the wave. The checkout lady who had smiled at me fell on top of me, smile gone, blood gushing from the ragged hole in her forehead.

After a timeless interval, maybe a minute or so, I managed to get the cap back on again and regained control of myself.

But it was too late. The woman was dead. Her husband, probably panicking when the field's influence ended, fired several other shots, wounding two people, then ran out of the store. As luck (of one kind or another) would have it, the police who had been called just before I got there because the woman's ex-husband had been violating a restraining order, arrived. The gun was pointed at the police and one shot fired. That shot blew out one window of the police car. The fire they returned was more accurate. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

So there you have it: my trip to the store set off a miniature apocalypse.

With careful management of the field's effects I was able to give a brief statement and then get the hell out of there.

One side of my mind insists that I can make changes to the antanxiety field, make it safer to use.

But I know better. All I have to do is imagine what might happen if the field as it now exists were to be used by governments, the military, police, criminals, or terrorists.

My life made me see fear only as a limitation, an oppression. But it is also a check on our behavior. Without it we would be little better than animals.

So, Julia and Ahmed, take warning from my report. I've sent you each a glowing recommendation and a two million dollar bonus. Retire, go into some other field, but whatever you do, *do not* try to replicate the work we have done. Let these words and what has happened make it clear: *what we have to also fear is a lack of fear*. Think on that and be afraid. Be very afraid.

Good luck.

Jeffery.

--Oh yes, I did some checking up on the postman. He's a Zen Buddhist monk when not delivering junk mail. Bad test protocols always come back to bite you.

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6.11.05:2344 The drugs are starting to kick in.

Feeling logy and sleepy. Messages sent, work at an end. When my heart stops beating, that will trigger

the incendiary devices I've built and placed all over the house. Everything must go, all records, everything we built.

Funny, I was always afraid of fire.

Not now.

Nothing to fear.

Noth

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The house burned to the ground, a total loss. But he overlooked one detail. As I mentioned at the beginning, he had a backup network server in a safe place outside the house.

Ahmed Jones and Julia Kamalsky would not tell me what Bloss was working on when he died. I was barely able to catch up with them for an interview. One was relocating to Hawaii, the other to Alaska.

The violent events Bloss described did transpire on the night he died, pretty much as he described them. The police report listed him as a witness.

Other than the excerpts I have sent you, all copies of all files have been destroyed. I know fires, and believe me, mine didn't leave a trace of any paper or disks, and reduced the server to a puddle of melted metal.

So one question that has plagued me enough to make me send you the preceding materials is this: could he have really done it, built a device that erases fear?

I hope you might have an answer to that.

As for my other question, I really won't mind if you prefer not to provide any sort of answer or opinion. But I'll ask it anyway:

Is Bloss right? Are we doomed to live with fear forever?

I know that now I'm afraid the answer is yes.