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No Such Thing As Home Security

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I keep a black canister of tear gas stuffed between the pillows on the passenger side of my queen-size bed. Not Mace. Military tear gas; the same stuff they used in Waco.

I do not keep it in my purse; on my key ring or in my glove box like some women I know. Nor do I carry it when I go running alone on dirt trails in the foothills or around the streets of my neighborhood before dawn. No, I keep my tear gas in my bed because that's where—stripped of daylight, clothing and consciousness—I feel most vulnerable.

I think of my friend Julie. In college, she awoke at 3 a.m. to a ski-masked man kneeling over her with an 8-inch serrated bread knife poised at her throat. He used his mouth to tear off three pieces of gray duct tape before he slapped them over her pleading eyes and lips. In two hours, he altered her soul forever, then crawled back out her bedroom window, leaving her curled in a ball listening to the drip-drip-drip of the automatic

coffee maker in the kitchen. She sleeps with a stun gun now. The smell of French roast still makes her sick.

I know I'm not safe at home. Always, alongside Julie in the back of my mind, is the New York Times Magazine essay I clipped awhile back. In it, the author confesses that the anniversary of her rape has become "the brooding axis" of her year, more significant than her birthday. Her attacker slipped through the back door of her ground-floor apartment on an autumn afternoon while she was taking out the trash. I do not desire a brooding axis in my life.

Still, I take risks. At home, I leave the back door open when I lug a basket of laundry to the washing machine in the detached garage. And one afternoon, I left the same door open for six minutes while I dashed back to the supermarket to retrieve a bag of groceries I'd forgotten. I even left my keys dangling in the front door overnight once and nothing horrible happened. It's a story I suspect I like to retell because it affirms what I'd like to believe—that I live in a safe neighborhood.

On occasion, I've refused friends' offers to walk me to my car after dinner. I hear myself say, "Really, I'll be fine. . . . I'm just across the street. . . ." Then I proceed to clench my car key between my thumb and forefinger like a dagger and stride defiantly to the parking

Please see **FIRST, E3**

FIRST

Continued from E1

garage making don't-mess-with-me-or-you'll-be-sorry eye contact with every man I pass.

I know I could be more careful. So why aren't I? After all, it isn't like shutting the back door or letting a friend walk me to my car would be a Mt. Everest effort.

I'm not talking about bolting iron bars over my windows, packing a handgun in my purse or suspecting every man I nod hello to on the running trails of being a Ted Bundy. Or am I? Maybe that's what I'm afraid of.

And that's not how I want to live my life. So I do my best to strike a balance. I take precautions. Instead of sleeping with the windows open, even in the sticky, stewing heat of August, I put a circular fan on the floor beside my bed and tough it out.

I tried leaving the windows open once, but I couldn't sleep. I lay awake, imagining "him" silently removing a window screen and lowering his rubber-soled shoes onto my hardwood floors. I imagined the paralyzing numbness that would freeze my limbs when I realized the shadowy figure in the doorway wasn't a make-believe nightmare but a real one. I shut the windows and sweated in safety until morning.

But closing them wasn't enough; the next day, I drilled holes in the soft wood of the double-hung sashes and into those, I slid steel bolt window locks. I mounted motion-sensor floodlights on the garage and laced a heavy-duty Master Lock through the latch on the white picket gate at the side of the house. And then there's that canister of tear gas.

It's 6 inches tall, encased in a black leather holster with a snap on the front and a silvery belt clip on the back. With 65 one-second shots per can, one squirt is guaran-

teed to bring the enemy to his knees and keep him there for up to 30 minutes.

I practice. I know exactly how it lies: on the side between the first and second pillows, metal clip facing up, button toward the wall. Lying on my left side, I grab it with my right hand. From practice has come reflex. I've awakened from nightmares to find it clutched in the cleft between my breasts, thumb poised on the trigger, metal clip cool against my palm. I like that the reaction is automatic. It makes me feel ready.

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The only time I remove it is when I have a man beside me. When I pull the canister from beneath the pillows to stow under the bed with the dust bunnies, the look on the man's face is always one of confused surprise. I can see that he cannot fathom the vulnerability I feel alone at night, there for the taking.

Men cannot comprehend the veil of fear that shades my female life, the seesaw of risk and precaution I try so hard to balance. Unlike me, they don't hide behind their first initials in the phone book or announce "We're not home" on their answering machines when they really mean "I'm not home."

I do not hold this against them. They've always been men. They've always slept with the windows open in summer.

And for this, I envy them.