My Terrorist Eye:

Risk, the Unexpected, and the War on Terror

By Susanna J. Sturgis

That August morning two round droplets appeared without warning in the lower left quadrant of my right eye. By early afternoon a large opaque but partially translucent disk blocked three-quarters of that eye's vision. Around the disk's peripheries the world was its colorful, sharp-detailed self. Straight ahead it was very strange. Since childhood, my vision has been lousy but correctable to almost 20/20. I'm an editor and writer; without functioning eyes, I can't work. I called Dr. F., my optometrist. Meet me at the office first thing in the morning, he said.

Detached retina was the most likely, and least dire, of the possibilities. Dr. F. made phone calls. Within a few minutes I had an appointment with an ophthalmologist in Boston. "I don't have insurance," I said. "Don't worry about it," said Dr. F. "Do you have a credit card?" Something wasn't being said, but I didn't want to hear it so I didn't ask. I live on Martha's Vineyard. Living on an island adds considerable hassle to every trip you take. There was a 10:45 ferry to Woods Hole. I was going to be on it. In Woods Hole I would catch the 11:45 bus to Boston. My appointment with the ophthalmologist, Dr. H., was for 1:15, or whenever I got there.

Detached retina it was; immediate surgery required. The surgery, I was told, is successful in 80 to 90 percent of all cases. Surgery would take place Wednesday morning. Dr. H. said that as an uninsured person I would get "the Medicare rate." I had no idea what that was, but I inferred that it was less than what an insured person would be charged. What choice did I have? I could shop around, get second and third opinions—but whom could I ask, and how long would it take? For best chance of success, surgery had to be done within seven days of detachment. I was already moving into day 2.

Focus is a remarkable thing. Within twenty-four hours, I (who under ordinary circumstances can put off making a phone call for several days, especially if spending money is involved) had made all the necessary arrangements. For fifty-three years I had been spared any kind of surgery that wasn't dental (wisdom teeth at thirty-one, a root canal at almost forty-eight). Now I was heading with reasonably tranquil mind toward a surgical rendezvous with a man I'd just met and about whom I knew next to nothing. Sure, all sorts of terrible things *could* happen, but deep down I trusted my sturdy, strong, no-nonsense, low-maintenance body to get me through.

Surgery, first thing Wednesday morning, was uneventful; during the hour-long procedure, I swapped stories and a few jokes with the operating team. Behind the blindfold the light show was fascinating: multicolored pixels performed an abstract and minimalist modern dance for a captive audience of one. I didn't try to imagine what was actually going on in there. My first post-op appointment was the next morning. So far, so good. Gauze patch over my right

eye and my glasses over that, I took a cab to South Station, caught the bus to Woods Hole and then the ferry to Vineyard Haven, where a friend met me at the dock with my dog, Rhodry Malamutt, some greens from her garden, and a cold beer.

The most arduous aspect of retina reattachment isn't the surgery; it's the days and weeks that follow. A gas bubble is inserted into the eye to help the retina stay attached to the eye wall; to keep the bubble in place and to reduce swelling around the eye, for as many hours as possible I was supposed to position my head so that my eyes looked *down.* Fortunately, this position was compatible with my upcoming jobs, which involved editing either on paper or on a client's laptop computer. My left eye, always the weaker of the two, rose to the occasion and made my living for me. At first my right eye was puffy all around, swollen nearly shut and very sensitive to light. Don't sleep on your back, I was warned; it could cause glaucoma.

The biggest challenge was that I felt *normal*—strong, healthy, alert, *fine.* No heavy lifting, I was told; avoid sudden movements and anything that might result in a blow to the head. But I had a horse, Allie, as well as a dog. I spent two or three hours every day riding and helping with chores at Allie's barn. Sacks of feed weigh fifty pounds and bales of hay often sixty or more. After my surgery, an operating room nurse insisted that my sister, who had come to pick me up, carry my backpack, which might have weighed ten pounds. I didn't ask about the hay.

The barn was about three miles from where I lived. If you're supposed to be looking at your lap and you've got a patch on your right eye, driving would seem inadvisable. Three days after surgery, however, the cabin fever was too much. I removed the patch from my eye, drove to the barn, then replaced the patch. I didn't drive much. If I'd lived anywhere else, with more ferocious traffic and less familiar roads, I might not have driven at all. Some ten days after surgery, I cautiously resumed helping out with barn chores, and—at week two, day two—riding horseback again. I stuck to the easy stuff that doesn't jostle one's head: walk, posting trot. A week and a half after surgery I went to Boston for another post-op appointment. The ophthalmologist noted a "perforation" in the reattached retina that might affect my right eye's vision in the future, though he couldn't say how. *Whatever,* I thought. *I've got what I've got.*

By my next trip to Boston, a little over a month later, my activities were back to normal, though my right eye sure wasn't: the vision was improving, but straight lines weren't straight, right angles weren't square, and colors were markedly distorted. By day the lines down the middle of the road were more orange than yellow, and by night the taillights ahead of me looked red to my left eye and magenta to my right. The green hose went from plump when I closed my right eye to ectomorph when I closed my left. Still, the verdict of two ophthalmologists—my surgeon's associate, and then my surgeon himself—came like a sucker-punch: my retina had redetached, and I'd have to do the whole thing over again. The surgery, the recovery, the money—all of it. There was no money-back guarantee.

The first detachment wasn't hard to accept. Shit happens, and sometimes it happens to me. When the second detachment was confirmed, I thought, *No fair.* Shit shouldn't happen twice, and medical shit shouldn't happen twice to people with no insurance. I didn't intend to become uninsured. But for a self-employed single woman who mix-and-matched part-time jobs for many

years—a common scenario in the seasonal economy of Martha's Vineyard, where I have lived since 1985—before settling into full-time freelance editing, the insurance options were few. For fifteen years I managed to find bare-bones major medical plans through a series of progressive or literary organizations. The premiums and the deductible crept, then leapt, upward together. Despite the bite it was taking out of my meager earnings, I couldn't imagine doing without it. What if I got run down by a truck? What if I got cancer?

Then, after one corporate carrier gobbled another, my premium went from $272 a month to nearly $643. This was more than I was paying in rent, and the coverage was for major medical expenses only, with the usual restrictions and deductibles. My routine medical expenses were already coming out of my pocket. What was the hypothetical risk of getting hit by a truck or diagnosed with cancer worth in dollars? I'd barely been managing $272 a month; $643 was out of the question. I took a deep breath and let my insurance lapse.

When I told people that my retina had detached, the first question out of nearly everyone's mouth was "Why did it happen?" It just happens, I said. Hardly anyone believed me. They were sure I'd done something foolish, or careless, or negligent. Retinas do sometimes detach after a hard blow to the head, but usually it's just a glitch in a natural process. As people get older, the vitreous—the clear, jellyish substance that fills the eyeball behind the lens—withdraws from the retina, the membrane that lines the inside of the eye. In most cases it doesn't take the retina with it. In some cases it does. Mine happened to be one of them.

The second time around, some of my friends were even more skeptical: with the occasional reminder or rebuke they made it clear that they thought I had driven too soon after the first surgery, gone to the barn too soon, ridden too soon. But my ophthalmologist explained that scar tissue from the first surgery had attached to the retina and pulled it loose again. No way to prevent it? No way to prevent it. If only my friends had been right! Then I'd have known how to prevent a third episode. Stay home, look down, take vitamin C, drink fruit juice, meditate, pray . . . I might as well be performing rituals to persuade Zeus not to throw another thunderbolt in my direction.

When I caught the ferry to Woods Hole on August 2, 2004, en route to my first appointment with the ophthalmologist, I'd been off-island by boat exactly once since September 11, 2001. The wake of 9/11 had wrought a few changes that I hadn't noticed. A sign had appeared at the car-staging area at the Steamship Authority dock in Vineyard Haven, on the little kiosk where employees check you off the reservations roster and tell you which lane to park in.

CURRENT NATIONWIDE THREAT LEVEL IS

ELEVATED

"ELEVATED" was printed in black on a yellow board. I took to checking the sign whenever I was near the ferry dock. On Martha's Vineyard, it seemed, the nationwide threat level was always ELEVATED.

At the edge of the state forest, at the well-traveled intersection where Barnes Road meets the Edgartown–West Tisbury Road near the county airport, stands another sign. Smokey Bear used to announce that the fire danger was low (green), moderate (yellow), or high (red) and admonish us to prevent wildfires. He still admonishes us to prevent wildfires, but his color code has changed. Now LOW is green, MODERATE is blue, HIGH is yellow, and VERY HIGH is orange. (EXTREMELY HIGH, so I'm told, is red. I've never seen it.)

Fire danger clearly correlates with rainfall and the lack thereof. What did the nationwide threat level correlate with? Number of bearded, dark-skinned individuals presenting themselves at U.S. airports? Anonymous tips to FBI field offices? I wanted to ask the fellows in the Steamship Authority booth: "You know this sign out here? What's 'elevated' mean? Elevated from what?" I lost my nerve. Wearing an eye patch and asking suspicious questions, even a middle-aged English-speaking white female might fit some computer-generated terrorist profile.

The 9/11 backwash didn't begin or end with the Vineyard shoreline. On the boat, in the Woods Hole Steamship terminal, at Boston's South Station, the loudspeakers crackled to life at regular intervals. On the ferry *Islander* the antiquated intercom turned the words to mush—was that a security warning we just heard, or were they just telling us that walk-on passengers debark from the starboard side of the vessel?

At the South Station bus terminal "Do not leave your luggage unattended" alternated with "The Massachusetts General Laws prohibit smoking . . ." and an injunction against taking pictures or videos. No one seemed to be paying the slightest attention. True, no one was smoking (we were well trained long before 9/11) or ostentatiously photographing exits, boarding gates, and ticket windows, but people were leaving luggage unattended right, left, and center and no security guards were taking them to task.

In October 1975, during a three-month hitchhike around Britain and Ireland, I stayed a week with a family in Bangor, Northern Ireland, a suburb of Belfast. The terror/counterterror of the Protestants and the Catholics was not then at a peak; still, evidence of hostilities, both past and expected, was all around me, in the graffiti, the checkpoints ringing the shopping district of downtown Belfast, armed military here there and everywhere.

The morning I left Belfast, the father of the family I'd been staying with volunteered to drop me off at the station from which I would catch the train to Larne, from which the ferry sails for Stranraer, Scotland. He had to get to work on time, so I arrived at the station almost forty-five minutes early. My host had warned me that the station had been bombed more than once, but still I was taken aback. The station was small and starkly bright. Its corrugated steel walls were supported by a framework of exposed metal. There were only three people there: me, the ticket seller, and the newspaper vendor. A sign mounted above the big metal trash barrel warned against leaving luggage unattended. My companions in the station had good reason to be suspicious of unattended parcels; I took the sign seriously. Before crossing the room to dispose of a candy wrapper, I slipped my arms into the straps of my backpack and took it with me.

Perhaps five minutes before train time, a sluice gate opened: people poured in, queued up for tickets, bought papers; the train arrived, and I joined the torrent that proceeded straightaway to the platform and got on. Passengers had evidently adjusted to local conditions; they weren't hiding at home, or driving to work, but they weren't hanging around in vulnerable public spaces either.

At Boston's South Station, three years into the "war on terror," bus passengers in waiting sat on the plastic chairs, on their luggage, on the low windowsills between gates. They read, they listened through their headphones; they talked desultorily with companions. A young woman struck up a conversation with a young man. Within moments she had produced a mandolin, he a guitar, and they were sitting head to head on the floor, tuning. People wandering down the concourse paused to listen, then wandered on. They glanced up at schedules on the closed-circuit TVs; they panned the concourse with eyes that didn't register much. No one was acting as if a suicide bomber might roll in any minute and explode himself among the croissant-pecking pigeons. Sure, terrorist attack was a theoretical possibility, but its actual likelihood was a tiny fraction above nonexistent and by our behavior we acknowledged as much.

The name of the game is risk. Anything *could* happen, but worst-case possibilities rarely come to pass. When does a risk become plausible enough to affect our behavior, or prompt us to forgo an activity altogether? How do we decide? My risk of dying in a motor vehicle accident is far higher than my risk of dying in a plane crash, yet anxiety rules when I have to fly and I rarely think twice about getting behind the wheel. Statistics aren't everything. I believe I'm a very good driver and that very good drivers can, most of the time, avoid getting into accidents. Every time I fly in a commercial airliner I put my life completely into other people's hands. I know nothing about the pilot, and nothing about the mechanics who fuel and service the plane. Nothing I can do will improve my odds of getting to where I'm going in one piece.

In the fall of 1999 I got my first horse in thirty years. Riding is not a risk-free activity. Horses may weigh less than cars and lack their metal casing, but they have minds of their own and those minds are ruled by the wariness of the prey animal. When threatened, their instinct is to run; when they can't flee, they'll fight. Even when everyone's in a good mood, a thousand pounds packs more accidental wallop than one-fifty. Nevertheless, when I told an acquaintance that I'd started riding again and she replied, "My husband would never let me do that," my immediate though silent response was *I'd get a new husband.*

I want to ride, so the risk is acceptable. I don't carry a cell phone, even though I go trail-riding several times a week, usually for an hour or more, nearly always alone. I don't even own a cell phone. This really, really bothers some people: Where's your cell phone, don't you have a cell phone, why don't you carry a cell phone? What if something happened to you? Something *could* happen to me, but for me the risk isn't high enough to warrant being tethered to civilization when I'm out in the woods. My horse is spunky but sensible, and on Martha's Vineyard it's practically impossible to find yourself more than three miles from a main road. If my horse were flighty or I rode through more remote terrain, I'd reconsider a cell phone. If my acquaintance really wanted to ride, she'd find a way around her husband.

A week after my second surgery, I was freaking out. I was sure my retina had detached for a third time. Was I destined for a future of endless detach-and-repairs at $2,100 a pop? Two days later I headed off-island for another post-op appointment. If I'd had dice to roll, I would have been blowing on them.

Expect the worst, so the reasoning goes, and you'll always be prepared; you'll never be surprised. En route to the appointment where I learned that my retina had detached a second time, I had felt no panic, no conviction that bad news was coming—the possibility of redetachment hadn't occurred to me. Now the possibility was very real. I was trying to steel myself for the worst-case scenario, but my gloom-and-doom pessimism didn't bring me close to the serenity I'd felt on that earlier trip. Ignorance may not be bliss, but it can be good for one's peace of mind.

When I got to Boston, the news was good. All's well, the ophthalmologist assured me; "very smooth," meaning there were no wrinkles or perforations in the reattached retina. Heading back to the subway, I stopped for a celebratory lunch at Burger King: spicy chicken sandwich, fries, extra barbecue sauce, and soda.

Our world, no less than the worlds of so-called primitive peoples, is so riddled with dangers, the wonder isn't that some people are phobic. The real wonder is that we all aren't incapacitated by fear. We can take precautions, but precautions don't guarantee that accidents won't happen. Nevertheless, many people cling to the conviction that bad things happen only to the careless, the godless, or the karmically unfortunate. They can't bear to acknowledge the wild card.

The real payoff for the hypochondriac and the habitually fearful is that they manage to duck all the possibilities that come with not being preoccupied with whatever they're afraid of: they let themselves off the hook. If I really believed it likely that I would find myself unhorsed and paralyzed in the middle of the state forest, I'd never put my foot in the stirrup. I can't live as if the worst-case scenario were imminent or inevitable or even all that likely. Such a life would be close to stasis, paralysis, self-imposed isolation from the wonders that make life worth living.

WARNING: LIFE MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH AND SAFETY. TO FUNCTION IN THIS LIFE, DENIAL MECHANISMS MUST BE ENABLED. PLEASE TEST YOUR DENIAL MECHANISMS NOW.

What changed in the aftermath of 9/11? For the overwhelming majority of us, the actual level of danger didn't increase a whit. True, before September 11, 2001, few of us could imagine a real-life jetliner flying into a real-life skyscraper. On September 11, we saw it happen, twice. In the following days we watched the reruns, over and over again. But although a new danger had been abruptly and spectacularly added to the realm of possibility, most people who work in tall buildings, or government buildings, adjusted and returned to their jobs. Frequent flyers returned to flying frequently. Like the Belfast commuters, or me dropping my health insurance, they balanced risk against necessity and desire; they carried on. Many people who didn't *have* to fly

took longer to adjust. When their real desire to travel quickly to a distant place outweighed the hypothetical risk of being hijacked, then they would book a flight and fly.

The events of 9/11 were indeed terrifying, but it was not fear alone that led to the official "war on terror." On September 11, 2001, the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress were forced to acknowledge, in an implacably public way, that they weren't in complete control, that all the little games they play to create the illusion that they *are* in control had proved inadequate. And it freaked them out. When the shock wore off, they—and many who shared their assumption that the United States was invulnerable—reacted in anger. Someone had to pay for bringing them face-to-face with their own vulnerability, perhaps the nearest man in a turban or woman in a hijab, or the next person to declare that the destruction of the World Trade Towers didn't nullify the Bill of Rights. The U.S. went to war with Afghanistan, then invaded Iraq. With one eye open and the other shut tight, it looked as though treating all Muslims, Muslim countries, and people with Arabic names as suspects would make us safe, or at least make us feel safer. Through the other eye it was easy to see that our safety, or the illusion of safety, was being purchased with other people's fear. With both eyes open and mindful of our own recent experience, it wasn't hard to see where this was leading: scared people often react, and retaliate, in anger.

Most ordinary Americans know we aren't in complete control; one way or another, we come to terms with the wild card, the possibility that we might get raped or mugged or broadsided by a bus, we might get cancer or swine flu or Lyme disease; we might get laid off from a job or dumped by a lover. If the worst-case scenario comes to pass, we may be shocked or angry or scared almost witless, but we usually manage to keep putting one foot in front of the other, making our way across the radically changed terrain. After 9/11 that's what most of us did. And as the months and years passed, it became clear that for most of us the terrain hadn't changed all that much. We hung around South Station, reading, talking, eating, making music while waiting for our bus or train. At airports the longer lines and more stringent searches affected everyone, but the profiling affected a relative few, and most of us were not among those few.

In January 1941, with Hitler ascendant in Europe and the United States preparing for war, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt reminded his fellow citizens: "The mighty action that we are calling for cannot be based on a disregard of all things worth fighting for." He looked forward "to a world founded upon four essential freedoms," and he listed them: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The U.S. president who more than sixty years later instigated the "war on terror" was preoccupied with the fourth of these freedoms—to the exclusion of the other three. It seems that many Americans are likewise.

In deciding whether a risk is worth taking, I balance the possibility of negative consequences against the likely benefits. It's not the risk of death or injury that keeps me from bungee jumping; it's my lack of interest in jumping off a tall building with an elastic cord attached to my foot. The pleasures and challenges of horse ownership and riding alone into the woods, on the other hand, are compelling enough to make me take risks and forgo other pleasures to attain them. Useless health insurance was worth $272 a month; at $643 a month, the

risks of being uninsured were less compelling than the prospect of working many extra hours and having that much less time and energy to do the things that make my life worthwhile.

How much are the Bill of Rights and the whole U.S. Constitution worth to us as a people? In the aftermath of 9/11, the actions of the U.S. government said "Not much—surely you don't think all that civil liberties stuff applies to people we're scared of?" The war on terror was, to borrow FDR's words, "based on a disregard of all things worth fighting for." And the lack of opposition to it, at the highest levels of government as well as among the general populace, was frightening.

For all our rhapsodizing about "the land of the free and the home of the brave," Americans are a scared people. Our economy capitalizes, quite literally, on fear, fear of death, fear of germs, fear of aging, fear of fat, fear of losing out or being left behind—this last a prospect that our corporate-controlled economy makes real for all too many people, all the while persuading us that the best way for us to get ahead is to let the corporations have their way. Too many politicians and pundits are willing to fan our fears into a conflagration, then offer us a fire extinguisher to put it out. You name the fear, there's a product—or a war—that promises to make it go away.

At its very heart democratic government requires that we accept uncertainty as part of public life. The Bill of Rights is intended to encourage ferment, not to squelch it. By its nature it challenges us and throws us off balance. It expects us to understand that by accepting a certain amount of discomfort and unsafety in the short term, we are supporting the long-term health of the democratic institutions we claim to cherish. The hypothetical free market, the reasonably level playing field of many small buyers and sellers, works similarly. Our conglomerate-dominated market does not. We will never live in a risk-free world. I doubt many of us really want to. The question is how much we're willing to pay for the illusion.