CREATIVE WORKS

Here be dragons?

As I finished watching the grainy videotape of his police interview, I was more convinced than ever: this man was no monster. Although not a routine aspect of my work as a child abuse pediatrician, I had agreed to review a father's statement to police, in order to help clarify whether the injuries his newborn had sustained were explained by the mechanism of injury he described.

Indeed they were. The dozen or so rib fractures were consistent with fractures sustained as a result of the squeezing of the rib cage; just as he described it. The retinal and subdural hemorrhages, unexplained by medical causes, were consistent with the shaking mechanism he reenacted. The bruise over the occiput was consistent with the baby having been thrown against a wall afterward, just like he said. And that was the easy part...

Much more difficult to watch was the unfolding human drama of the interview; this man's revelation of the very fabric of his being, the wretchedness of his soul and the remorse he now felt. I was a voyeur, hidden in a thermostat-mounted camera, getting a rare glimpse into the heart of a penitent father. I was distressed to watch a grown man cry to the point of not being able to stand. To watch him weep, surveying his actions and their unintended consequences, and tell his wife that she would be better off without him, was heart-wrenching. This man was facing the music.

"I've never hurt anyone in my life."

"I didn't mean to hurt him."

Suffering is everywhere in medicine. Some experiences are readily apparent. Others, such as child abuse, frequently go unnoticed. When acknowledged, the sheer difficulty we have, as healers, visualizing and believing that a helpless child could be injured at the hand of a parent, conjures up powerful images of parents as purposeful, violent monsters.

Like medieval explorers, daunted by what lay ahead in uncharted waters, we all build mental constructs; images of unfamiliar situations that we develop out of misunderstanding, inexperience and fear.

Eric Field

These default settings, which we revert to in difficult times, rationalize what we witness, protect our own fragile emotions, appease our fears and make the unbearable bearable. *Here be dragons.*

Despite these constructs, despite the rationalization, with time comes the inevitable realization that the evil is not what we portray it as. There are no monsters to chain, the evil is not in them; it is in us all; waiting for the right circumstances to unleash it. Not all parents who injure their children are the monsters society makes them out to be. They are like us: fallible, vulnerable, tired, anxious, impulsive, poorly supported. In an instant, an ordinary, average man, faced with the seemingly unstoppable high-pitched shrieks of his infant child, loses control, makes a bad choice and regrets it. Instantly.

Indeed, there may be lies, cover-ups, denial. Indeed, the harm is done. Indeed, children need protection. Indeed, it could have been any of us. How many are we, who can truly claim never to have lost control? How many have gone too far and not been caught? How many are, de-

spite that, loving parents, hard-working souls trying to provide for their families, pillars of our communities? Although it may help us cope to portray parents of physically abused children as monsters, we must not be too quick to judge. Every situation has its own circumstances, every family its own demons, of which we only get the most superficial glimpse.

Reflecting upon and acknowledging this does not excuse the deeds, but it helps us understand that sometimes, good people do bad things. There are few dragons in this world. Rather, there are too many overwhelmed parents who, in an instant, lose their way and for a fateful, brief moment, breathe the fire they did not know was within them.

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The people and events portrayed in this article are composites of various people and events over many years.