FIGHT OR FLIGHT

IN HER FORTHCOMING BOOK, *THE DEEPEST WELL*, PEDIATRICIAN **NADINE BURKE HARRIS** INVESTIGATES THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHILDHOOD TRAUMAS AND ADULT DISEASE—AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO RESTORE YOUR HEALTH.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPHER SERRA

IN 1998, HEALTHCARE PROVIDER KAISER PERMANENTE AND THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL PUBLISHED A PAPER SHOWING THAT **ADULTS WHO HAD EXPERIENCED EXTREME STRESS AS CHILDREN WERE AT HIGHER RISK FOR DEVELOPING LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESSES**—SUCH AS CANCER AND HEART DISEASE—THAN ADULTS WHOSE CHILDHOOD WAS COMPARATIVELY STRESS-FREE. THE MORE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, OR ACES, A CHILD LIVED THROUGH, THE GREATER THE ODDS OF CHRONIC ILLNESS DOWN THE ROAD.

FOR CALIFORNIA-BASED PHYSICIAN NADINE BURKE HARRIS. THE STUDY WAS AN EPIPHANY: IT CONFIRMED HER HUNCH THAT EMOTIONAL DAMAGE IN CHILDHOOD COULD EFFECT PROFOUND PHYSIOLOGICAL DAMAGE LATER IN LIFE. ONCE A PEDIATRICIAN IN SAN FRANCISCO'S THEN-IMPOVERISHED MISSION DISTRICT, BURKE HARRIS FOUNDED THAT CITY'S CENTER FOR YOUTH WELLNESS, A PEDIATRIC RESEARCH CLINIC, IN 2007. SHE AND HER TEAM STUDY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND AIM TO REVERSE THE LONG-TERM PHYSICAL HARM THAT STRESS CAN INFLICT UPON THE BODY. "DOCTORS MAY BE AFRAID THAT BY ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT EMOTIONAL TRAUMA THEY'LL OPEN PANDORA'S BOX," BURKE HARRIS SAYS. "BUT NOT ASKING IS FUNDAMENTALLY HARMFUL."

BURKE HARRIS HAS SINCE DEVELOPED A METHODOLOGY FOR DOCTORS TO SCREEN FOR ACES AND PARTNERED WITH SIX TREATMENT CENTERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO HELP PATIENTS REVERSE THE DAMAGE. SHE DETAILS THIS JOURNEY AND THE CHALLENGES FOR ACE RESEARCH IN HER POWERFUL FORTHCOMING BOOK, *THE DEEPEST WELL: HEALING THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY.* IN THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT, BURKE HARRIS EXPLAINS THE INSPIRATION FOR HER WORK AND THE EFFECT STRESS HAS ON THE BODY. —*SARAH GRANT*

» **IT WAS CHILLY,** which was typical for a December night in San Francisco, and as I walked down Mission Street with my friends, I hugged myself to try to warm up. The four of us talked simultaneously, our voices drowning out the sounds of the city as we made our way back to the car. Not wanting to part ways as the evening came to an end, we lingered on the corner of 19th and Mission. None of us noticed a red car slowing down across the street. Seconds later, we heard *pop! pop! pop!*

As the car peeled out toward 20th Street, my friend Michael tried to laugh it off.

"It's just some stupid kids playing with firecrackers," he said. But a few moments later, he got uneasy and ushered us toward his car. "We gotta get out of here. Something's going down."

We were almost at Michael's vehicle when we saw the man lying on the sidewalk.

"Oh my God," my cousin Jackii cried, "he's been shot!"

Reflexively, I headed toward the victim, not noticing that my friends were running in the opposite direction. "Nadine!" Michael said. He grabbed at my arm, but too late.

I dropped to my knees when I reached the man's side. I had finished medical school the year before; now my doctor instincts took over. As I got a good look at his face, I saw that he was still a boy—he couldn't have been more than 17. There was an entry wound above his right eyebrow, and because he was lying on his side I could see a fist-size exit wound at the back of his head. My inner narrator began calling out a status report like I had been trained to do in the trauma bay: Gunshot wound to the head! No other signs of penetrating trauma!

In the movies, the guy would have been out cold, but in real life he was throwing up on himself. I'd seen a lot of scary stuff in hospitals, but this was different. Time seemed to slow down. I found myself shifting into autopilot. I kept checking things off the list that I had learned in medical school: ABCD—airway, breathing, circulation, disability. Keep his airway clear. Make sure he's breathing. Check his pulse. Maintain the position of his cervical spine in case his neck is broken. At the same time, a voice in the back of my head kept telling me that I wasn't in the safety of the emergency department—there was no security guard at the door, and the red car could return. Every cell in my body was telling me to get the