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The Blotter

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“Winding Down My Stay-At-Home Dad Gig”

My eldest and I have found a time of day that works particularly well for us to converse. She likes to call me at night, just before she goes to bed. 11:45 is a very good part of the evening. Not quite tired, no more snacks, the last ballgame scores coming in, I’ve sent my video-game troops out to collect tomorrow’s resources (see my notes on playing a MMP online game in the April 2021 issue) and then the phone rings and it is she.

We talk about, well... whatever she wants to talk about. Sometimes she’s exhausted with school and her internship work and navigating the not-quite-post-anything world. It is just as likely that she asks me how my writing went on this day or the weather or some tidbit she picked up in class and wants to know if I ever heard this before. We talk about relationships, how to keep them, how to fix them, what makes them thrive. We discuss the climate (of everything – social, political, and of course the planet’s.) And then she might just as likely ask me about word-choices in marketing and how much it is like writing poetry, or she’ll let me read to her a raw and manic paragraph or two of my day’s work. It is here, in the dim, beige light of a single overhead lamp in my office, that I recognize that this is my audience. Not just any young-twenties person, but my person. When I get up in the morning and sit down at my keyboard, it is she I am trying to make laugh. The perceived she – sitting across from me and drinking a cup of yesterday’s coffee, creamed and sugared and reheated in the microwave, her feet up and eyes closed, just listening. And the real her, miles away, leaning on her old desk, staring at me with a crooked smile as I read. So, here comes a funny part, or a passage I intended to be funny. We’ll see. I am hopeful, don’t telegraph the moment, keep reading, my voice even. But she snorts and is laughing and waves her hands and tells me to go back and pick it up again. Say the funny part again, Dad. And that’s why I write, and why I go on. I’ve been paid by laughter from my audience. My person. It’s a heck of a thing.

She signs off to go to sleep, and I pad upstairs and check on my younger daughter, who is soon to be off into her second year of college, and first on campus. Her light is on. Her laptop glows in her face. Don’t stay up too late, I tell her, and she promises, which is both polite and a bit silly, in that although we’ve tried to stay out of her business because she has spent the school year at home, doing it all remotely and well, yet we still get in her business. She is patient with

me. Tells me how she thinks she's done on a test. My god, she's taking Organic Chemistry, about which I know nothing. Sometimes, when we are simultaneously puttering around in the kitchen, I occasionally ask if she needs help opening something, a child-proof package or ornery jar. No, Dad, I've got it, is her response. I know what she means – the throwaway shorthand that implies “thanks for offering, but whatever I'm doing that seems like I'm not doing it will be done in just a moment, so, no.” I also know what she doesn't mean: I've outgrown you, Dad. Nevertheless, I have told her that soon she will need to remember to call me from school, because I will miss having her around and sitting on the porch and drinking tea and opening her mayonnaise and watching Japanese anime with subtitles and she has carefully explained to me that we can do this sharing thing on our computers so it'll be like we're both still watching together and whoever invented that technology *thank you very much*.

So, anyway, this is how a career ends. A job that isn't really necessary anymore. Stay-at-home Dad. Once again, many years after being considered a viable candidate, a top prospect, I'm being downsized. Not outsourced, so there's that, but still it's kind of a bummer. Oh, I'll still get to answer some questions from time to time, and have my credibility questioned regarding financials and recipes, weather forecasts and baseball teams. Or, as I've told many an employee, is this a kick in the pants? Get out there and do something new. Find a fresh niche and mine it for nuggets of gold.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

don't feel tardy...

“Intensive Care

by S. G. Smith

Justine huffed as she hoisted herself into her silver SUV. She had bought a large van years earlier, hoping to fill it with children. At the auto mall, she had beamed at the mustached car dealer as she explained they were planning on having a large family. Her husband Sam’s hand was wrapped around her waist, as if it were protecting the area where his future baby was sure to grow. That was back when they had random unscheduled sex. They didn’t think any extra effort would be needed. Just get Justine off the pill and bam, baby.

It hadn’t been that easy. The couple soon discovered that more went into making a baby than expected. They downloaded an app which tracked Justine’s cycle. They took lunch breaks at random times, rushing home for a quick session. After sex, Sam would prop a pillow under Justine’s back, and she would lie quietly on the bed, legs thrown up in the air. She peed on sticks and pricked her fingers. She took notes on her diet, exercise regimen, and sleep cycles. At night, she stared at the ceiling and wondered whether they would ever have a baby. They had already picked out the names—Wesley for a boy, Marisa for a girl. The baby began to feel more like a fantasy than a tangible goal. They started seeing doctors. Doctors who recommended them to other doctors

who told them nothing they couldn’t find on the internet. The doctors put both of them on drugs which made them nauseous. None of it worked. They even tried using something that looked like a turkey baster. Justine, a nurse herself, remained hopeful, determined that modern science could overcome any hurdle. Sam wasn’t as optimistic. He quickly grew frustrated as he felt Justine’s biological clock slowly tick towards its inevitable end. He started to slowly hint that adoption might be their best route, but she wouldn’t hear it. She wanted a mini-Justine to raise as her own.

After many tests, the doctor informed them that IVF would likely be their only chance at success. They put down a large financial investment and got to work. While Sam masturbated into a cup in a doctor’s office bathroom, Justine had to be sedated and medicated as needles probed her uterus. The embryos were placed in her uterus, and then they waited.

Today, Sam and Justine drove separately to the doctor’s office to find out if they were to have a child. The couple held hands as they anxiously watched the murky mystery of an ultrasound. Justine held her breath; this could be her last option. Sam rubbed her shoulder with his spare hand. When the doctor looked up at Justine, she

knew.

She let out the breath she had been holding. Sam held her head in his hands, stroking her hair. “It’s okay, baby,” he said as she cried silently into his palm. “I’m here with you.”

The doctor gave his condolences and let the couple have the room until his next appointment. They said nothing as they held each other. Sam wiped the tears from Justine’s eyes as she felt his own tear drops landing on her shoulders. With each strangled breath, they squeezed tighter, not daring to look at each other’s faces. After fifteen minutes like this, they were asked to clear the room.

Husband and wife said good-byes in the parking lot; they were both needed at work today.

Sam reached for her hand as she opened the door to her car. “We can still try adoption,” he said.

Justine avoided his eyes and slid into the car. “Let’s talk about that later,” she said. She allowed him to kiss her before closing the door and driving to the hospital, where babies filled every room. She felt sick.

As she pulled up to the building, she saw a gasping pregnant woman being wheeled into the building by a man. A typical sight for Justine, but today it felt like God was being particularly cruel with his timing. One of the

woman's hands gripped the man's arm and the other held her belly. She had a mess of hair sticking to her sweaty forehead. Justine hoped she wouldn't be assigned them.

"Lucky bastards," she mumbled as she parked the car. She made her way into the hospital and changed into her scrubs in a bathroom. As she approached the NICU main desk to look over the day's work, she tuned into the nurses' gossip.

"Lots of layoffs," Becky was saying to Abdul. She leaned across her desk, her chest almost squished against the computer. Abdul was bent down to listen, both forearms resting on the counter.

"Not again," he groaned. "I'm already stressed enough."

"You're telling me," Justine said as she signed in to the main computer. "I swear, one more bad thing and I'll pop."

Abdul and Becky nodded in solemn agreement. They knew Justine had an appointment with the fertility doctor today, but she hadn't revealed to them the results. Justine ignored their questioning eyes and shuffled some papers before heading to her assigned room for the day. There were four Tupperware-shaped cribs, one of which was empty. Two of the infants she recognized. She had been with both for about a week. They were red angry twins who constantly whined. Today, Justine resented them for their mere existence. They were babies and they were someone else's, and that was enough of a reason.

A week ago, Justine had will-

ingly tended to each of their minuscule needs. She had viewed them as a test for the babies she was sure to have. If she could care for a stranger's difficult children, surely, she could care for her own. She had performed the parental duties—bathing, feeding, and comforting—and the infants returned the favors with headache-inducing screams. But she hadn't minded.

She had loved them as if they were her own.

The twins wailed, demanding to be fed. Begrudgingly, Justine checked the feeding schedule and bottle-fed them their formula one at a time. As she held one of them, instinctually bouncing it in her arms, she looked over the paperwork of the new third baby. It had been sound asleep during her shift



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despite the shrieks of the twins. The new baby did not have a name yet but had been born a month before its due date on March 23rd, yesterday. It was a girl. She was hooked up to a feeding machine. The notes said she was too small to receive milk from a bottle or her mother. The mother had complications during birth and was receiving medical care.

When the twins finally entered their post feeding naps, Justine walked over to the new crib to take a look at the baby. She would call it March 23 for now. Her tiny hands were curled in fists and she slept with a soft smile creasing her cheeks. Dark black wisps similar to Justine's black wavy hair framed the baby's face. Slowly, she began to open her tiny eyes. They were a bright green, just like Sam's. She stared at the nurse with a curious look.

Justine longed for the child. This was surely the most beautiful infant she had ever seen. March 23 reached out to her, and she immediately picked her up. The baby gurgled and nestled into her arms, closing her kitten-like eyes again. Justine held the baby, enraptured. She pressed her against her heart, wishing to absorb the infant's warmth. She brushed a finger across March 23's soft, rosy cheeks and brushed her hand across her hair.

She imagined giving birth to this child. After hours of pushing, the baby had arrived. In her fantasy, Justine looked at Sam expectantly through her blurred vision. She was on the edge of passing out, but she

had to know. Sam glanced down at the doctor's hands, then gave her a smile.

"It's a girl," he said as he squeezed her hand.

Justine let out a sigh. She watched as Sam took a bundle from the doctor's arms and handed it to her.

There she was. Their beautiful baby girl. With her mother's hair and her father's eyes. They had created her together, and they had had a successful pregnancy.

"Marisa," Justine said, kissing the baby's forehead. Sam nodded in approval as he wrapped his arms around their new family.

#

The following several days, Justine woke up eager to return to work. The twins had been discharged, and she had been able to spend most of her time attending to Marisa while she waited for the other cribs to be filled with new babies. Marisa's parents had visited often. Justine kept to her paperwork in a corner of the room, sneaking glances past her clipboard at the couple. They were still undecided on a name, and Justine didn't feel like suggesting the name she had chosen for the baby.

Within two weeks, Marisa was growing stronger and gaining weight. Justine had been able to transition her from gavage feeding to a bottle of formula. The mother had even had success breast feeding twice, both times when Justine left the room. She asked another nurse to monitor the room as she took a bathroom break.

One morning towards the end

of Marisa's treatment, Justine decided she was ready to try IVF again. She wanted her own Marisa. Hopping out of bed, she jumped into the shower and called for Sam to join her in the hot water. After toweling off, she quickly turned on the coffee machine and began her makeup as she hummed. Sam watched her with a sense of mild amusement. Justine thought of Marisa's beautiful, heart-shaped face while she almond-buttered her toast. Last night, she had lain awake in her bed, thinking about Marisa. She imagined the baby waking up with a raised fist and a howl, hungry for her mother's milk. And Justine had readily given it to her. She had rushed to unbutton her shirt. She had let the milk flow out of her into the infant—a long, silk thread connecting their two souls. She had poured into the baby with a happy, exhausted sigh, and she had been proud of her Marisa.

"What's gotten you in such a good mood?" Sam said, slipping an arm around Justine's waist. She turned around, wriggling her body against his, and she kissed him before taking a bite of her toast.

"Let's try again," she said. She watched his face fall.

"Try what?" he said.

"IVF," she said with a casual air. She took another bite and turned back to the coffee machine.

"Baby," he said. "We can't afford another failure. Especially with the layoffs at your job."

She whipped around. "Are you calling me a failure?"

"No, not at all," he said as he ran his hand through his hair. "I

just think it may be time to try another option.” He paused. “One that’s more likely to work.”

He looked at the ground and scratched his ear. She knew what that meant. Raising his head with her hands, she stared at his face, searching for what he was hiding. “What do you mean?”

“I did some research,” he said, “and adoption is actually cheaper than IVF.” He took a deep breath and reached for her hand. “I went ahead and filled out the forms for us.”

Justine snatched back her hand. She glared at Sam and, without a word, picked up her purse and left for work.

She arrived at the hospital with a snarl on her face. She couldn’t believe him. Who did he think he was?

“Rough morning?” Becky asked.

“Don’t get me started,” Justine said as she slammed a clipboard onto her desk.

“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it may get worse,” said Becky.

Justine let out an exasperated sigh. Great, just what she needed today. “And why’s that?” she said.

Becky looked down at her clipboard. “I heard they’re firing someone from our team,” she said. “Not enough babies to make income for all five of us.”

Justine gulped. When she first told Sam about the layoffs, she thought he was overreacting. There’s a whole floor of workers, and she had been working at the NICU for years. No way would they let her go. But now, there was a

one in five chance, much higher than she liked. Sam didn’t make enough as a high school history teacher to support the both of them, even without a child. It had taken him long enough to get hired in this area, how long would it take if they had to move again?

“I don’t like it either,” said Becky. “We just gotta cross our fingers and hope.”

Justine nodded as she gathered her papers and headed to her room with Marisa. She needed her comfort. The baby was sleeping in the large plastic tub of a crib. Justine stretched out her hand and Marisa curled her head against it, nuzzling her nose against the pinky finger. She watched as the infant pursed her lips and opened her mouth, playing around with the new sensations in her face.

Stretching out a chubby arm, she scrunched her puffy eyelids. Justine couldn’t help herself; she picked up the baby and clutched her to her chest. Justine was proud of herself. She had nursed Marisa back to health almost singlehandedly. Surely, she would make a good mother. She would have to go home and convince Sam to try IVF again. But for now, she had Marisa for at least a few more days.

Dipping her head, Justine allowed her lips to brush Marisa’s forehead.

“Just the nurse I was looking for,” said a man’s voice.

Justine stiffened and turned around. She smelled Old Spice and recognized the man as Marisa’s father. He smiled at his daughter and crossed the room to take her. Justine allowed him, her eyes following Marisa’s face.

“My wife and I decided on Logan,” he stared at Justine expectantly as he bounced the sleeping baby. Justine grimaced and hoped he didn’t wake the poor child. Getting no response, he continued, “Thank you for your help. She’ll miss you when she gets out.”

He clumsily placed the baby back in the crib and left them with an awkward nod. Justine looked down at the baby. She was to be discharged in two days. She would be gone, and Justine would have to wait on a new screaming babe. Work would be dull and boring again. Uncapping a Sharpie marker, she bent down to write “Logan” in the open space beneath the birth-date.

“You’re still Marisa to me,” she whispered. The baby smiled in her sleep.

#

When Justine came home, she could tell Sam was stressed. He sat at the dining room table, head in the palm of his hand. His phone lay in the other hand. He looked up at her when she entered the room.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She hoped it wasn’t anything too bad. She wasn’t sure how she could handle more bad news.

“The adoption agency called today.”

“Oh?” She walked over to the table to sit with him. They hadn’t talked about adopting since their last fight, but Justine had decided to entertain the idea for Sam’s sake. In the meantime, she would look into different IVF doctors.

“It’s such a long list,” he shook his head.

“How long?” she held his hand

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and was proud of herself for being such a supportive wife.

“16 months to four years,” he said, looking up at her. His eyes were glistening. Justine wiped a tear from his eye.

“It’s okay baby,” she said. “I’m looking into more IVF doctors and—”

“Goddamn it, Justine.” He slammed his palm on the table. “When will you give it up?” He stared at her, his lip quivering. “We don’t have the money to try again.”

Justine blinked at him. They had to try again. She needed a baby, no matter what the cost.

“Are you even hearing what I’m saying?” he said.

“Yes, Sam, I just—”

“I’m going through with it,” he said. “With or without you.”

Justine sucked in her breath. He had never threatened to leave her. Sam looked at his hands and took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry,” he began. “I don’t know where that came from.” He reached across the table to grab her hand. She put her hand on her lap. “Let’s begin again,” he said. “How was work?”

She thought about telling Sam that there was now a one in five chance of her being unemployed or that she was utterly smitten by an infant soon to leave. She felt nauseous.

“Good,” she said. He smiled.
#

The next day, Justine dragged herself into work for Marisa’s last day. At the desk, Becky and Abdul were talking to each other in hushed tones. Abdul was alertly

scanning the room while Becky rapidly tapped a pen on her desk.

“What’s going on?” Justine asked.

“HR wants to see you,” said Becky. She avoided making eye contact with Justine.

Justine brought her hand to her forehead. She didn’t want to think about what this could mean. She went to fill up her water bottle before her meeting. Taking a sip of cold water, she assured herself that she was safe. Out of the team, she had been here the longest. If anything, they were probably giving her a raise.

She headed to the HR office, reassuring herself along the way. She was directed to a small conference room. A short man with slacks and a button-up strode in and sat down across from her.

“I’m Patrick from HR,” he said. Justine didn’t recognize him. He must be new. They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. The man adjusted his glasses before going on a long speech about how the hospital was a family and how it cared for everyone, but a family functions best when everyone is on the same page.

“And we can’t afford to not be on the same page, can we?” he said with a smirk. Justine wanted to smash his glasses into the desk. Instead, she nodded politely.

“Patrick,” she blurted out during a brief pause in his speech. “What is this actually about?”

He sighed and took off his glasses, cleaning them with his shirt. “Justine,” he said as if they were longtime friends. “You know

we care for you here at Mercy Health, but we have to make some cuts.” He put his glasses back on and looked up. He folded his hands on the table. “I’m sorry,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “You have two weeks.”

Justine stared at space behind Patrick’s shoulder, out the window and at the parking lot. Her vision unfocused. Without her income, they wouldn’t be able to afford IVF again. She couldn’t have her own baby. She had lost her chances at a mini-Justine.

“I’ll give you some time to yourself,” he said as he stood up. He patted her shoulder on his way out.

Justine didn’t need time to herself. She knew exactly who she wanted to be with.

She marched down the hall into Marisa’s room. The baby was to be released tomorrow, and Justine had planned on spending the whole day memorizing her features. Now she sat next to Marisa’s crib, sniffing into her hand. She had no way of trying again, and tomorrow she would have no one.

Marisa started crying. Justine immediately stood up. With one arm she picked her up, with the other she checked the computer. All of Marisa’s feedings were up to date and she had been changed only an hour ago.

“You’re just sad you have to leave me, aren’t you?” Justine said, wrapping the baby with both arms and lightly bouncing her. Marisa’s crying softened. Justine tucked her head against her shoulder and headed out the room. Walking usu-

ally helped Marisa calm down.

With a light bounce to herself, Justine slowly strolled down the hall. She saw Becky, who nodded at her and then quickly walked past. Becky had probably known about the layoff and hadn't even warned her. So much for friends.

Justine found herself at the elevator. Marisa was now mostly quiet, letting out the occasional squeak. Might as well take her on a quick walk outside to make sure she's happy. Justine would return after a stroll around the hospital's small garden.

When they got off at the ground level, Justine took her out the side doors to the garden. She softly sang to Marisa, who gurgled into Justine's scrubs. She laid her hand on the baby's soft tufts of hair as she shushed her. She felt a glow in her stomach. This is motherhood.

They started walking back towards the hospital, Justine humming to the baby. Marisa let out a single cry, and Justine determined she needed a lap around the parking garage. Just one, and then they'd return. She passed by her own car and found herself walking towards it. Justine wondered what it would be like to have a baby in her car.

She closed the car door behind her. She was breathing more heavily than she realized; her heart was racing. Justine held Marisa in her lap. A whole baby in her car. She didn't have a car seat though. Justine pretended to make a car seat out of her jacket and placed Marisa in it. She imagined they had

had a beautiful day at the park and were now heading home.

She looked at Marisa. As Justine twirled one of the baby's tiny curls with her finger, she studied the baby's face. But the face which had once charmed her under the bright lights of the hospital unit looked different in the darkness of the garage. Her dark wisps, once so similar to Justine's hair, were fading and coiling. The raven hair had turned into a dirty blond, and the tufts had transformed into curls. Her bright green eyes were darkening into a hazel brown. Her toes were long like fingers, and her nose was smushed. Under the beam of the car lights, her skin glowed a darker shade than Justine's. They looked nothing alike.

She began searching the baby. Fully undressing her, she covered every crevice and nook of the child's body, looking for any sign of resemblance. Even a matching mole or freckle would do. But long before she checked the baby's last toe, she knew she wouldn't find anything. The infant had become unrecognizable.

It let out a howl. Justine checked her watch; it was feeding time. It screamed for food, just like the other babies did. Justine's breasts ached with a lack of milk. She bounced it on her leg, a sharp pain growing beneath her chest. She could not provide for a baby. She frantically patted its back and checked its diaper. It kept crying. A knot formed in the pit of Justine's stomach. She was not a mother. Only a fool.

She stared at the infant she

held in front of her. Its bright purple face was contorted in pain. Bits of spit flew out of its mouth. Snot dribbled down its nose. Its breath stunk of formula.

Leaning forward, Justine pressed her forehead against the baby's. It stopped crying. Its short breaths warmed her face. "Why can't you be mine," she whispered. The child began crying again, and she cried with it.

Justine thought about heading home to Sam. She imagined that it was a normal day. That she had not been fired. That she had not taken Marisa. She would slip into his lap, kissed him on the nose. Takeout Thai would be on the way. She would look him in the eyes and tell him she was ready to adopt, ready to be a mother. He would pick her up and twirl her around, the way he does when he's excited. They would go upstairs and make love like they had before they worried about conceiving. And Justine would be happy. ❖

Three by Tina Bethea Ray

“Nina Simone”

Nina Simone called herself the reincarnation of an Egyptian queen who carried herself like royalty
her music floated on bird feathers and a rabbit's foot
it traveled across coasts, from the Atlantic to the Pacific
traversed continents, from North America to Africa to Europe
the little girl from North Carolina was a worldwide force, uniquely talented, and
perfectly pitched to deliver a message to America's Dropbox
she was brave enough to tell a king she wasn't non-violent
but frail enough to take whoopings from a lesser man
Nina sang and wished for freedom, she lived bipolar extremes
I imagine running in her circle with Martin, Lorraine, Langston, James, Malcolm
young, gifted, and black
finding her music now is like losing her all again
I cry somewhere deep in my being when I hear her belt
“I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free” or “My Baby Just Cares for Me”
to listen to Nina Simone is to live and die at once
how she gives life and scrapes it away
she still travels the world
The name Nina means small but she was big enough to transcend time
to cross continents
and truth be told, she was too noble for small-minded people

“Blooming”

My vision board
shows me living on Grandmother’s land
with goats to mow the grass
a tiny, dark blue Ranch house
with minimal necessities inside
like a coffee pot, books, Momma’s blanket
outside, tomatoes, grapes, berries
and knock-out roses grow
rich
fertilized
like my mind

“Southerners”

As old as syrup tapped from black, maple trees
as deep as a spring-fed pond
we live like
today holds promise
like tomorrow holds potential
we survive on fruited pies,
cheesy casseroles
and fried
everything
we reach
always, stretching for greatness
covering
all others, like a mature pecan grove

“The Hero of The Con”

by Kevin Brown

To his booth they come
to thicken his hair

to their memory, square his jaw
and straighten his spine

to the pose of their nostalgia,
as others swipe by with some dim

recognition of the pleated face
behind the table bannered:

Meet Bazzow! Faded glory is stacked
in 8 ½” x 11” glossy stills, a defender

of mankind in orange and blue tights,
fists on hips,

cape streaked with a lightning bolt,
lifted in no breeze.

The hands of the clock are bound
as he watches other vendors,

checks his uncalled phone,
adjusts the faded *Time Magazine*

sleeved in mylar that’s tagged:
PLEASE DON’T TOUCH!

This living legend dying
for a drink and the days

he could have one,
when he saw the world

with x-ray vision, flew through
it with superhuman strength,

the money and Hollywood parties,
foreign countries and foreign cars,

women and wives, flashbulbs and kids,
his future, his present, his past

over most of his life ago.
But here, another approaches,

arms souvenir loaded and smiling,
anxious to act out a scene

scripted in muscle memory:
He’s a really big fan,

never misses a rerun, loves
the episode where Bazzow

defeats The Manigator in the bowels
of the sewer. The beau idéal nods,

a chiseled smile connecting
now to then, the unknown him

to who he was Tuesday nights
on CBS, 8/7 Central.

But the powers surge with the conjuring
of these scenes and what was behind them

when the lights and nights
blazed in white flame.

He says that episode was a blast
to film, and he's glad he likes

the show, as the fan claws through
press kits and lobby cards, lifts

a weathered action figure cubed
in a display case reading: NOT FOR SALE.

"How much for an autograph?" the fan says,
and is shown the price list.

A sale or not, this one will soon be gone
while the weary warrior remains

thinking of Styrofoam sewers
in Studio City, and wishing

he could lift a fist
and rise from seat and building,

a soaring star shooting
through the sky. Instead, he yawns

and waits to trade their money
for a piece of his prime,

morph his memories into one of theirs
as others slide on, seeing or not

looking through his secret identity.
The sun will drop and he'll stand, force-

field withered as a once broad chest,
as muscle that gripped bone

now dangling from it,
like impenetrable skin now flesh

netting, keeping in instead of out,
and stack the best of him in brittle boxes,

his exit as grand as his entrance, manner
mild, a riddled stone of cleft chin

from all those years flown by,
a contrail of energy

still channeled in a hero's gut,
always ready to rise against evil,

bolt into action in the face of tyranny,
battle villainy with all his might,

to be at his finest
in the darkest hour.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

I had this strange dream a while back after watching too many TV shows. I dreamt of a vampire girl in a red and black nightie in a hostel room (I was a day schooler then). It is night-time and the dream had a cartoonish quality to it. The girl crawls upon her roommate to bite. There is mention of a fair profile with green eyes. The girls are alone. I know she is a vampiress who want to bite and turn others to expand her legion. She has already bitten him. The him in question is Edward but he looks like Parth from Warrior High (an Indian TV show). I know even he is a vampire now. He was lovesick and let her bite him, making no effort to resist her.

It is night-time. She flies happy with the lights out, eager to convert all girls. She is happy at new-found freedom and the opportunity. She goes to a room downfloor, where two girls are sleeping. The first one is her target and mumbles something in sleep. She has a tender expression looking at this girl. She bites and the girl turns and speaks, but her words aren't clear. Seems like she knows she is bitten but does not overreact.

The vampiress asks: Now who is your virus n-making?

The girl replies: It is on the way.

I know they are speaking of an antidote that prevents vampire blood from mixing with the human. A 'someone' is making it. Now I hear the bitten one quarrelling with the hostel warden wanting blood and I am super happy because wanting blood means transformation. I peep into the kitchen to see her tossing something chicken in the frying pan, wearing a red nightie. I am super happy that she is badly in need. She will have to come out. In the dark I open the door for her in secret.

Now, though they haven't yet finished preparing the medicine, I have discovered something. I can make the transformation super-fast, almost overnight. She moves out, glides through the door; she doesn't see me. I follow her out into the path. I see her drinking the blood of a swan; I say it before I see it. It is similar to the scene in Harry Potter. From the moment she approaches the door her form has changed again. Now, as I see her drinking and is about to approach her, I see him. He is in silver light and there is a prophecy. I have seen the light and heard the prophecy even before. It is that he makes you believe him, that he is on your side, and then fools you. I

cannot remember the exact words.

I am frightened at the sight of him and kind of falls to his feet. His name is Harry Potter and I ask myself, 'eh Harry Potter? Why not Van Helsing or Frankenstein like in the movies?'. He accompanies me to my room but refuses to share the bed with me. I suspect that he is afraid, but he doesn't want the vampiress to know. I am not sure if he is really aware of his master plan, what he is supposed to do. I am thinking on his behalf now and is really concerned for him, and scared of what the vampiress might do; after all he is human. They speak something. It seems like they are both afraid of each other. I wake up and realize I remember nothing of what they spoke.

Regards,

Neelima K. E. - India

Contributors

S.G. Smith is an undergraduate student studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing at The Ohio State University. Her work has been published in *The Journal*, *The Blue Marble Review*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. She is the second place recipient of the university's Jacobson Short Story Award.

Tina Bethea Ray is a poet whose work is forthcoming in *The Good Life Review* and *Wingless Dreamer*. Her poetry is under review at *Barely South Review*, *Right Angle Publishing*, *Lost Pilots Lit*, and other creative outlets. Ray does not send simultaneous submissions. She is a former teacher and journalist who earned an English degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and a Journalism degree from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Ray lives in North Carolina with her husband, sons, and dog. She is differently abled, but swims currents.

Kevin Brown has published two short story collections, *Death Roll* and *Ink On Wood*, and has had Fiction, Non-fiction and Poetry published in over 200 Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. He won numerous writing competitions and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including three Pushcart Prizes. He co-wrote the film *Living Dark: The Story of Ted the Caver* that won a Moondance Film Festival Award and was sold to New Films International.

THE LEGEND OF WIPE-ONCE WALLY

AND HIS 13 RULES FOR HOW TO SURVIVE A GLOBAL PANDEMIC
IN A NATION THAT'S GONE COMPLETELY BATSHIT CRAZY



Joe Buonfiglio

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WEIRD?

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WEIRDER!

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