

July 4th, Austin, TX

by Ann Rushton

It is July 4th, Austin, Texas, just after nightfall. On the bridge, downtown, I sit against the curb with my husband, his best friend, the best friend's wife, whom I have recently become acquainted, and their baby, Sasha. We're waiting for the fireworks to start. Sasha is swathed in vanilla spray, which promises to keep at bay the incessant mosquitoes. She sits on her mother's lap, chewing her fist, the drool running down her bulging arms. Her eyes are so dark and small they remind me of spots on a ladybug.

People in cars, mopeds, scooters, and bicycles weave through the dense crowd. A police officer on horseback particularly entralls Sasha, who waves her arms in stiff jerks, her upper body bobbling. The best friends joke about how we have seen every personalized vehicle. At just that moment, a man wearing a three-piece-suit and a beret pedals by on a penny-farthing. Everyone laughs me the hardest.

"He must be stifling," the best friend's wife says.

The fireworks start and I worry about the baby. Will it be too loud for her fourteen-month-old ears? But my concern is misplaced. She laughs and claps as the sprays of light collapse against her shiny face.

My husband felt the trip down here would cheer me up, and it has, although we are staying at the best friend's two-bedroom hole. The guest bedroom (futon mattress on the floor) has flying cockroaches the size of small mice, and is the home to a cat named Moshe, who has a missing eye and a tail curving into a question mark. He decided the first night we were here that my favorite pillow was the best place to pee.

The best friend's wife has taken me downtown twice, to drink iced tea laced with inordinate amounts of sugar, and we quaffed it while sitting on the edges of Sixth Street, watching the parade of college kids linger outside of the bars. We talk about everything but having babies. I am not sure how much the best friend has told her, but I assume he has told her everything, and I appreciate her discretion.

The fireworks end, and, as we pack up to leave, a rogue team sets off smaller, stinky fireworks from a rickety boat on the opposite side of the river. We all turn to watch. It is a pathetic display, but everyone is cheering, and then booing when the Austin police set after them in a patrol boat.

On the walk home, we buy Choco Tacos from a street vendor, and as we eat, the ice cream dribbles down our arms, much like Sasha's drool from earlier. I take a bit, and ask if I can give a small bite to Sasha. The best friend's wife nods, and smiles, her long black hair flapping in the wind. She is beautiful under the spotlight of the street lamp, even her smile, which belies her crooked teeth. I take the bit and place it on Sasha's tongue, and marvel as she realizes the sweetness of the ice cream, the bite of the cocoa. She ponders, and then reaches out toward my hand holding the dripping treat, indicating that she wants more.

