

The Common Cold

by Christian Bell

He sneezes 30 times straight, each a staccato blast in his bare apartment, calls his older brother, says, remember when we would count how many times we'd sneeze in a row?

Yeah, what's the record, like 68?

I forget, he says, thinking it probably only seemed like so many when they were kids. I got a cold, he says, sick voice flubbing words, as he rattles off three sneezes.

Through the phone he hears an electric guitar, sounding live not recorded; a train rattling, symptom of congested city living.

Sorry to hear that, his brother says, the baby just got over one. You have to come up, see us some time. You ever moving up here?

I hope some day, he says, as he's been saying for years. In the mirror he sees bloodshot eyes, thinks, I need sleep. Says, remember when dad's eyes would get bloodshot—I thought maybe he sneaked shots of whiskey upstairs when he was supposedly working the crossword.

No, you're wrong, it was because he slept five hours a night. Like Edison. Right up to when he died.

You think dad was a genius?, he says, hearing that guitar again, thinking where his brother lives, with his luck, it could be some virtuosic player like Petrucci or Satriani shredding in a bare brick-walled tenement.

What do you think, his brother says. A pause, silence. Gotta go, bro, things to do.

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/christian-bell--3/the-common-cold>»

Copyright © 2010 Christian Bell. All rights reserved.

They hang up, and just before falling asleep, he remembers as a kid waking in the night, throat scratchy, going to the kitchen for some water. There was dad sitting at the table, wide awake, reading glasses on nose, pen in hand above a Doppler graph of numbers on paper, one of many now-lost theorems, looking up as his son walked into the room.

