

Babbling

by Joe Alan Artz

A full moon silvers the neighborhood. I wake up at 2 AM. "There's a big white light in the sky, Ma," I say to my wife who is sleeping. "Maybe it's a comet. It's going to crash into the earth. Or the headlight of a train. I think it's getting closer." "Mmmf," she mumbles from the depths of her pillow. "The big white light is looking right through the window at us, Ma. I'm scared." She stirs. "Go to sleep, Joe-bud." "Ok."

Another night, I wake up at 2:15. I turn on the bedside lamp and read until I can't keep my eyes open. I lay the book aside, raise up from the bed to turn off the light, and am awake before my head hits the pillow. The only way to get back to sleep is to leave the light on. "Turn off the light, Joe-bud," she mumbles. "I'm going to leave it on," I say. "No," she says. "We should," I say. "The electric company did a study. Keeping one light on all night keeps your electric meter primed, just like a pump, so the electricity is ready and waiting when we wake up. They say in the long run it could save us hundreds of dollars." "Turn off the light, dear." "It doesn't matter if it's on or off. Our eyes are closed anyway." "Turn off the light." "Ok."

Our relationship is built on gentle teasing. She's the rock of our marriage, and I'm the waves and barnacles. She's the windmill to my Quixote; I'm my own Sancho Panza. She lets me babble in the night, but if I go on too long, she says "Nnnnn!" or if she's wakeful, says, "You're babbling, dear." If I run out of things to say, I tell her, "You're supposed to say, Shut up and go to sleep," and she answers, "Go to sleep, dear." "Ok."

I snap on the light at 1:54, by the bedside clock. "Wake up! It's time to read." "Mmmf." "You've got to. The City Council passed an ordinance." "Hnn unh." "The whole city is supposed to read for 15

minutes at 2 AM. I can read your book to you if you'd like. Mayor Ross will be awfully disappointed if you don't. " "Turn off the light, dear." "Mayor Ross drives around the city at night and if your light's not on, he raises your taxes." "You're babbling dear. Go to sleep." "Ok."

She's gotten more involved in the game with menopause. I wake up at 3:25. She's kicked off covers, radiating so much heat the furnace hasn't run for hours. "I'm flashing," she says. "Let's roast marshmallows!" I say. "I'll run out for graham crackers and Hershey bars." "Go to sleep." "Ok."

I wake up at 3:30. "Time to get up!" I say. "Mmmf." "Everybody up, let's do calisthenics." "Hnn nnh." "Almost everyone we know gets up at 3:30. Your whole walking group and their husbands are up by now. Michelle wakes up Barak Obama at 3:15." "Mmmf" "Hear that sound? It's the sound of light switches, all over town, flicking on." "Get up if you want to," she says. I get up, but there's no paper yet, so I come back to bed.

It's bedtime, and she's changing into pajamas. I'm in bed with my toothbrush. "Think how much time we would save if we brushed our teeth in bed!" "Go downstairs and brush your teeth, young man." "We could each have a little spittoon, right here by the bed. They've got them at Pier One." "No spitting in bed. Brush your teeth in the bathroom," she says, pointing. "Ok."

Another night I come to bed with my snow boots on. "It's going to snow tonight," I say. "If I sleep in my boots, I'll be ready to shovel first thing." "No boots in bed," she says.

My wife has two pillows. My pillow is ten years old, as thin and worn as a four year old's security blanket. "What's it like with your head so high off the bed?" I ask. "Can you see the mountains?" I whine about my little wafer of a pillow. "Every night I end up way

over here at the edge of the bed," I say. "My wafer of a pillow. My little sliver of bed." "Go to sleep, dear." "Ok."

For Christmas, she gets me a new pillow. "I'm up so high!" I say at bedtime. "When I wiggle my toes, it's like watching the Stones from the top row seats."

The new pillow is comfortable. But I still wake up and babble.

