

As If Not Breathing Could Save him

by Ray Shea

She turned him down again. Said it was her insomnia. She was so tired, she said, she had to work in the morning, and why couldn't he understand that? She rolled over facing away from him.

He sat up in bed, thinking. When was the last time? Three months ago? Four? He could remember one time in this bedroom, but before that he would have to think back to before they bought the house, maybe last year some time.

A storm pelted rain against the window, what the Spanish called a *derecho*, one of those September fronts that lined up squalls one after the other like pink elephants on parade. The backyard would likely flood. He would have to go downstairs and check the drain near the back steps to make sure it wasn't clogged with leaves.

It was his own fault for asking on a weeknight, he supposed. But last Saturday she said it was too soon after her period. The Saturday before that she was on her period, she said. Her periods lasted six or seven days. Before that it was too soon before her period.

If he didn't check that backyard he'd never get to sleep. He rolled his legs off the bed and pushed himself up with both hands, quietly, trying not to jostle her in case she was starting to drift off. He slipped his feet into his flip-flops, pulled on a t-shirt and headed downstairs in his boxers.

The small backyard was already a lake as high as the bottom step, which wasn't so bad, but it would become a problem soon if the rain kept up. Might as well deal with it now, he thought.

He squatted near the edge of the porch, hanging on to the railing with one hand while he stretched his other hand down into the water. Despite the humidity, the wind felt cool on his skin, raising goose bumps every time a fresh blast of rain zephyred through the yard. He kept probing with his fingers where he thought the drain

should be, digging into the muck until he found it, sealed with a thick layer of leaves and sticks and mud. He scraped out the debris by the dripping fistful and raked out leaves with his fingers until the grate was clear and the water began swirling out of sight. It would eventually clog up again, but that would hold it til morning.

He cleaned up in the kitchen sink, drying his hands on the faded yellow dishtowel hanging next to the fridge. There was a bottle of Jameson on the counter, so he poured himself a glass, dropped in one ice cube and poked it around with his finger, the ice casting oily tendrils across the surface as it melted.

The wind had kicked up, whipping the pecan branches back and forth, throwing frantic streetlight shadows through the kitchen. He stood at the sink, watching the scum, tossing back his drink too fast. He poured another, three fingers worth, turned out the light and headed upstairs.

His wife still faced the wall, her breathing steady and quiet. Maybe sleeping, maybe pretending. He pulled the bedroom door closed, careful to turn the knob so that the latch wouldn't click when it shut, then he went down the hall to his office and locked the door behind him.

At his computer, he typed "redhead porn" into the search field. "Redhead XXX", "Cute teen redhead gets nailed", and "Redhead MILF" popped up.

He got up to double-check that the door was locked, then settled back into his desk chair.

With his right hand he drank the last of the whisky; his left was occupied. He thought about going downstairs to get the bottle but it seemed impractical with his cock sticking out of his boxers. The skin-tone caricatures on the screen seemed barely out of reach, just close enough for him to remember what it felt like to be touched, something other than his own hand on his own skin, until his orgasm pulled his innards out like a bee losing its guts with its stinger. He looked down half expecting to see his heart in his hand, seeing only mess, shame and emptiness.

He cleaned up in the bathroom, turned off all the lights and slipped back into bed. His wife still faced the wall. He lay on his back with his eyes closed and listened as the storms lumbered away to the east. Thunder was so peaceful, he thought, so soothing, as long as it was far off, and as long as you didn't think about whatever poor thing was getting hit by lightning miles away.

In the laundry room he pulled open a door in the floor, a trap door that had always been there but that he had never opened before. There was a ring set into one end, flush with the floor, and he had to dig it up with his fingernails, twist it around and then pull. A crust of lint and dust crackled as he angled the door up, its rusty hinges creaking. He leaned it all the way back against the washer, gently, so as not to wake her.

It was dank. Warm and tropical. Pitch black. He knelt down, leaned into the opening and listened, seeing nothing, hearing only his heart pounding in his ears as the blood rushed to his head.

He stood back up and looked for a flash light, finding one in her toolbox on the shelf behind the dryer. It was a brand new Maglite, long shiny red steel. He flashed it down into the hole but couldn't make out a floor. There was no ladder. He would have to jump. He jumped.

He hit with a splash, going all the way under, down and down until his toe touched a slimy bottom, then kicking for the surface until he got his footing and managed to stand. There was three feet of water in the basement. Basement? He didn't remember having a basement at all. He flashed the light up into the corner and saw the downspout end of the drain he had cleared earlier that evening. All the water from the back yard just emptied straight down here.

What the hell, he thought. How did they miss this when they bought the house? He never would have bought a house with a basement full of water. Think of the structural problems. How would he ever fix this? How could he be so stupid?

She grabbed his arm and he startled awake.

She was crying, she was shaking him. He sat up in bed, disoriented, said, What is it? Is there water in the house?

There's a mouse stuck on the glue trap in the pantry, she said, her chin quivering, her tired eyes squeezing out tears. The glue trap that was his idea, that she had always said was inhumane and that had not caught a mouse since he put it out last month even though the mice were still shitting on the pantry floor every night.

Wait, he said. He was still trying to figure out the water in the basement. Trying to wake up. They didn't have a basement.

She could hear the mouse screaming and she couldn't deal with it. He needed to go deal with it, she said. He rubbed his eyes and said OK, slipped his feet into his flip-flops and headed downstairs in his boxers again.

The mouse was indeed screaming, a faint high-pitched twittering squeal. It lay on the glue trap on its side, two legs stuck fast and two legs scrambling in the air. He squatted down on the floor of the pantry and looked at it up close. Its eyes were wide open, big and sad like a Japanese cartoon animal.

He thought about what to do. He was pretty sure he couldn't unstick it from the trap, so he couldn't set it free. He could just throw it away, but it would take days to starve and that seemed cruel. He could cut off its head, or crush it, but he didn't have the stomach for the gore. How did the mouse end up trapped tonight, he wondered, after mice had come to shit in the pantry every night for a month without getting stuck? Was this just a different mouse? A stupider mouse? Or maybe this was the same mouse, trying a different course, taking a different path from the tried and true, and finding out where that gets a mouse in the end.

He pushed himself up with his hands and stood, grunting as his knees popped, then went to the sink, pushed in the stopper, and turned on the cold water. While it ran he dug around under the sink until he found some rubber gloves. Mice carry diseases, he thought.

When the sink was full, he shut off the faucet. Gloves on, he picked up the glue trap gingerly by the edges, carried it to the sink, and gently pushed it into the water. One end floated back up so he held it on the bottom with both hands.

The terrified squeaks stormed out now in silent bubbles, the two free legs clawing desperately towards the air just out of reach. The mouse's eyes went wider, or maybe that was just an illusion, a refraction of the light. He wondered how much air a mouse's lungs could hold. He remembered once reading a book about drowned fishermen, about the physiology of drowning, about what it really feels like to drown. How the drowning person at first tries not to breathe, as if not breathing could save him, until it becomes an involuntary necessity but by then there is no longer anything to breathe.

The stream of bubbles slowed, then stopped. The mouse stretched its whole body for a breath, stretched again, and again, and was still. Then one more stretch, and it died.

He stood motionless, his jaw tight and his lungs aching, head thick and queasy from the booze. The tiny animal's mouth was frozen wide in a silent shriek. He watched as it let go one last tiny bubble, which floated up and around in lazy circles before popping into nothing.

From the cabinet he pulled out a plastic garbage bag, the kind with the red pull-handles. He shook the bag open and held one edge against the counter, then reached into the sink with a gloved hand and tried to pull out the trap and drop it into the bag in one motion. But the glue stuck to the red handle, and the trap dropped and dangled on the outside, dripping mouse water onto the tile floor. The mouse hung on the paper like some kind of pathetic hunting trophy - - shrunken, wet fur, just skin and bones. Its tail spun out against the sticky trap in a flattened spaghetti shape, like a child's art project made from pasta glued onto paper.

With some doing he managed to wrestle the trap most of the way into the bag, losing a glove in the process, and tied it closed as best he could. He drained the water from the sink and scrubbed it out with bleach.

He couldn't very well leave the bag with the dead mouse on the floor for his wife to find. He would have to take it out. He was only in

his boxers, but it was late and the neighbors were likely asleep. He would be all right.

The wind had died down and the rain had slackened a bit. The water in the yard was still a couple of inches deep but he could see it swirling away nicely where he'd cleaned out the drain earlier.

There was something about that drain that he couldn't remember. Something important.

In his bare feet, he splashed tip-toe through the puddles, out the gate and down the driveway. Leaves and gravel marked the high water line where the street must have flooded earlier, and the garbage can had floated halfway down to the corner. He dragged it back, looking over his shoulder at the dark houses and feeling like the whole neighborhood could see him flopping out of his underwear.

He opened the lid and dropped in the bag with the mouse, then sprinted back, getting wetter than he'd expected. Dirt and leaves stuck to his wet feet and legs as he ran through the yard, feeling like somebody was watching. He tried to take the back steps two at a time, miscalculated, skidded and went down palms first onto the porch. He stood up and punched the wall with the heel of his hand, in frustration, then punched the door frame, harder, then swung at the window, checking his swing too late. The butt of his fist split the glass. Now he would have to get that fixed, too. He was so stupid. He was always so fucking stupid.

He went up the stairs, leaving wet leaves on each step, and flung open the door to their bedroom. He wanted to tell her it was finally dead. He wanted to tell her it was never coming back.

