



# **SHORT STORY NIGHT**

**FLASH FICTION BONANZA!  
PART II**

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LION'S TAIL BREWING  
MONDAY, OCTOBER 9 TH AT 7:00 PM**

## *Silence*

*TADEUSZ BOROWSKI (1922-1951) Polish short story writer, poet, essayist, and journalist, was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau. (published in 1959)*

At last they seized him inside the German barracks, just as he was about to climb over the window ledge. In absolute silence they pulled him down to the floor and panting with hate dragged him into a dark alley. Here, closely surrounded by a silent mob, they began tearing at him with greedy hands.

Suddenly from the camp gate a whispered warning was passed from one mouth to another. A company of soldiers, their bodies leaning forward, their rifles on the ready, came running down the camp's main road, weaving between the clusters of men in stripes standing in the way. The crowd scattered and vanished inside the blocks. In the packed, noisy barracks the prisoners were cooking food pilfered during the night from neighbouring farmers. In the bunks and in the passageways between them, they were grinding grain in small flour-mills, slicing meat on heavy slabs of wood, peeling potatoes and throwing the peels on to the floor. They were playing cards for stolen cigars, stirring batter for pancakes, gulping down hot soup, and lazily killing fleas. A stifling odour of sweat hung in the air, mingled with the smell of food, with smoke and with steam that liquified along the ceiling beams and fell on the men, the bunks and the food in large, heavy drops, like autumn rain.

There was a stir at the door. A young American officer with a tin helmet on his head entered the block and looked with curiosity at the bunks and the tables. He wore a freshly pressed uniform; his revolver was hanging down, strapped in an open holster that dangled against his thigh. He was assisted by the translator who wore a yellow band reading 'interpreter' on the sleeve of his civilian coat, and by the chairman of the Prisoners' Committee, dressed in a white summer coat, a pair of tuxedo trousers, and tennis shoes. The men in the barracks fell silent. Leaning out of their bunks and lifting their eyes from the kettles, bowls and cups, they gazed attentively into the officer's face.

"Gentlemen," said the officer with a friendly smile, taking off his helmet-and the interpreter proceeded at once to translate sentence after sentence-"I know, of course, that after what you have gone through and after what you have seen, you must feel a deep hate for your tormentors. But we, the soldiers of America, and you, the people of Europe, have fought so that law should prevail over lawlessness. We must show our respect for the law. I assure you that the guilty will be punished, in this camp as well as in all the others. You have already seen, for example, that the S.S. men were made to bury the dead."

". . . right, we could use the lot at the back of the hospital. A few of them are still around," whispered one of the men in a bottom bunk.

". . . or one of the pits," whispered another. He sat straddling the bunk, his fingers firmly clutching the blanket.

"Shut up! Can't you wait a little longer?" Now listen to what the American has to say," a third man, stretched across the foot of the same bunk, spoke in an angry whisper. The American officer was now hidden from their view behind the thick crowd gathered at the other end of the block.

"Comrades, our new Kommandant gives you his word of honour that all the criminals of the S.S. as well as among the prisoners will be punished," said the translator. The men in the bunks broke into applause and shouts. In smiles and gestures they tried to convey their friendly approval of the young man from across the ocean.

"And so the Kommandant requests," went on the translator, his voice turning somewhat hoarse, "that you try to be patient and do not commit lawless deeds, which may only lead to trouble, and please pass the sons of bitches over to the camp guards. How about it, men?"

The block answered with a prolonged shout. The American thanked the translator and wished the prisoners a good rest and an early reunion with their dear ones. Accompanied by a friendly hum of voices, he left the block and proceeded to the next.

Not until after he had visited all the blocks and returned with the soldiers to his headquarters did we pull our man off the bunk-where covered with blankets and half smothered with the weight of our bodies he lay gagged, his face buried in the straw mattress-and dragged him on to the cement floor under the stove, where the entire block, grunting and growling with hatred, trampled him to death.

tr. Barbara Vedder

(The Schutzstaffel (SS) or "Defense Squad" was the elite Nazi military corps. Created in 1925 as Hitler's bodyguards, the SS, or Black Shirts, controlled German security, including the Gestapo (secret state police) and concentration camp guards.)

# “The Visitor” by Lydia Davis

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 [mastersreview.com/featured-fiction/the-visitor-by-lydia-davis/](https://mastersreview.com/featured-fiction/the-visitor-by-lydia-davis/)

Sometime in the early summer, a stranger will come and take up residence in our house. Although we have not met him, we know he will be bald, incontinent, speechless, and nearly completely unable to help himself. We don't know exactly how long he will stay, relying entirely on us for food, clothing, and shelter.

Our situation reminds me that a leathery-skinned old Indian gentleman once spent several months with my sister in London. At first he slept in a tent in her back yard. Then he moved into the house. Here he made it his project to rearrange the many books in the house, which were in no particular order. He decided upon categories—mystery, history, fiction—and surrounded himself with clouds of smoke from his cigarettes as he worked. He explained his system in correct but halting English to anyone who came into the room. Several years later he died suddenly and painfully in a London hospital. For religious reasons, he had refused all treatment.

This Indian visitor of my sister's also reminds me of another old man—the very old father of a friend of mine. He had once been a professor of economics. He was old and deaf even when my friend was a child. Later he could not contain his urine, laughed wildly and soundlessly during his daughter's wedding, and when asked to say a few words rose trembling and spoke about Communism. This man is now in a nursing home. My friend says he is smaller every year.

Like my friend's father, our visitor will have to be bathed by us, and will not use the toilet. We have appointed a small, sunny room for him next to ours, where we will be able to hear him if he needs help during the night. Some day, he may repay us for all the trouble we will go to, but we don't really expect it. Although we have not yet met him, he is one of the few people in the world for whom we would willingly sacrifice almost anything.

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Lydia Davis's most recent collection of stories is *Can't and Won't* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014). Among other works, she is also the author of the *Collected Stories* (FSG, 2009), a new translation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (Viking Penguin, 2010), a chapbook entitled *The Cows* (Sarabande Press, 2011), and a long narrative poem entitled “Our Village” in *Two American Scenes* (New Directions, 2013). In 2013 she received the Award of Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Man Booker International Prize for her fiction. She lives in upstate New York.

# Maid In America – Fractured

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f [fracturedlit.com/maid-in-america/](http://fracturedlit.com/maid-in-america/)

When I go in, the sink is bursting with unwashed dishes coated with moldy leftover scraps, half-filled glasses, cups that balance precariously on the counter rim, ripped open TV dinner boxes thrown on top; there isn't room for me to set aside the cleaned dishes. The washing skills I've practiced back home come to good use.

"It's real simple," Lisa said, on my first day. "Just Windex the windows, Lysol the kitchen floor, Clorox the towels, you know, and then, Mr. Clean the toilet bowls, there's also upstairs..."

This is not the country of brooms and pans, coconut brushes, or Pledge oil my mother used to shine our armoires. This is new territory. I'm learning that Americans can make verbs out of proper names. There are specific products with different colors for a given task.

Upstairs is a big room filled with a jumble of chairs and stools, various artwork framed in all shapes and sizes, boxes of clocks, oversized clothing, a jagged landscape of abandoned animals. I wipe bodies of deserted things with a cloth, rinse it with warm water, repeat. In the end, they still look the same. Forlorn and unclean.

Downstairs, Lisa pulls out a blue ice pop from the freezer while I have my arms soaked in a bubble bath of Palmolive detergent. I'm scrubbing a week-old worth of stuck grilled onions on dinner plates.

"Want one?" she says.

I shake my head with a smile, resist the temptation to ask why it's blue, if it tastes like Windex in her throat, what she'd call that shade of blue.

"Where're you from again?" she asks.

At this point in my life, I'm reluctant to speak English because I know I have a weird accent. When I tell her where I am from, her eyes grow big. I can see her mind goes in loops. "Oh, is that in Malaysia or Australia?"

I hate to disappoint her. She's a nice lady in her thirties, long blond hair, freckles on her cheek that remind me of a cheetah. There's a boyfriend with Oreo crumbs stuck on his T-shirt that lurks around sometimes. She doesn't make me vacuum her bedroom. I've never seen her bedroom. She pays me \$20 every Friday, enough to buy a nice stack of letter paper decorated with music notes and red violets to write to my parents back in Madagascar, a T-shirt with the Golden Gate Bridge, and I still have extra dollar bills saved in a Danish cookie tin.

I explain that it's a big island in the Indian Ocean. She says, "Oh right!" like she got it. I know. I'm confusing. I'm a dark Asian girl who speaks with a melange of accents Americans can't put their finger on.

She sits back on her couch, licking her frozen blue ice, her eyes fixated on the screen where there's a couple who's yelling profanities at each other. *Fuck you, go fuck yourself, piece of shit, cunt.* I love saying American curse words when I'm alone in my dorm room. They don't mean anything to me, but they are sharp, decisive bursts of sounds I imagine screaming from the open top of a Chevy on a deserted road, hair whipping air, like in the movies.

# Wolves

 [newyorker.com/books/flash-fiction/wolves-sterling-holywhitemountain](https://www.newyorker.com/books/flash-fiction/wolves-sterling-holywhitemountain)

Sterling HolyWhiteMountain

August 17, 2023

You won't understand this. Me and my cousin were trying to learn the language, but there were . . . issues. Some people were with us, and some were against us. The former said anyone who wanted to learn should learn, we didn't have time to waste, our mother tongue was dying. The others, they said we had too much white blood, we were not dark enough, we acted like we were too good for them! Man. Indian Country. The old guy said that long ago the people were pitiful and it was the wolves that showed us how to live with one another. The vision was one of compassion and order and beauty so fierce I could not grasp it. He told us the word for wolf. Mako'yiii. The old people, the ones who spoke the language, they had an interesting way of saying things. Even though they talked English, you could tell some other part of them was talking another language at the same time, one I should know, but don't. I guess that's just how things worked out, isn't it.

The guy we were talking to, he was one of those old people who always wore a hat. My gram used to wear this bright-yellow broad-brimmed affair of woven straw. You could see her from way off, walking with her cane, and, if you went up to her, no matter how long it had been, she would demand a hug, and she was much stronger than you expected. It was like this. One old guy, he wore these glasses. I don't know where he got them, they might have been the only pair of their kind on earth. This one time I saw him without them. For a second, I had no idea who he was. It's not a hat, but you know what I'm saying. Those old people, they're all gone now. I felt a freedom then, when I was at home and the mountains were there and the indescribable plains were there and the sunsets cast a light so serene over the land—you could think for a moment that everything was O.K. Sometimes, though, at night, I would wake in a proverbial cold sweat, and it seemed I had heard this howling sound, like the way wind sounds as it runs down and through a narrow canyon.

The old guy wore a black cowboy hat, and his face was dark brown and narrow with a long nose and heavy eyelids, and his lips were so dark they took on a purple hue, and he wore black sunglasses even indoors. You had this sense of import when you were around him, he was a line of dark energy running through a room. That's how the truth feels. But there was this eagle feather in the hat band, and it was too big, it was obscene somehow, but seeing it made you smile. He might have been a cartoon, but then you talked to him and you understood why there was no in-between with him, people loved him or hated him. His hands were big and heavy-seeming and scarred, and he was always clasping them on the table in front of him. You could not look away. Like a lot of men his age, he had been a street fighter when he was young and even when he smiled there was a threat in it. The three of us usually talked at the casino, and the ones who were against us would see us, and they hated it because there was nothing they could say with him around. They didn't know the language

at all, or what they did know they mutilated like someone standing at a butcher's block holding a cleaver for the first time. He was generous to their faces and laughed at them when they were gone.

Me and my cousin, we spent a lot of time with him, and learned about the old ways and how you might think about things now. There was a lot of talk, how things could be if only x and y. In the end, what I learned is that a language is a way of seeing, and there is almost no way to see in the old way now. Because of the feather, his appearance from a distance was jaunty, a word that has never been used to describe people where I am from. One time we asked him about this idea of indian blood and how we might talk about it in the language, and he thought for a while. He ran the pointer and middle fingers of one hand down the inside of the other forearm—strange how soft the inside of an arm is, you could cut a person wide open—and he said this phrase in the language. I can't remember it anymore. He told us it meant the government was watching our blood. I felt again the colossal thing looming over us all. I guess you might call it history, but that's not quite the word, is it. I wanted to throttle the thing with my bare hands, but the past is immune to even our most desperate aggressions and, anyway, I am not the type. The old guy's last name was Wolf Striker. Or that's how you say it in English. Sometimes when I was alone at night I would say it in the language—Mako'iyawakkii—and imagine myself in the same place but a very different time.

Listen to me for once. Here is how it works. You look at a thing, and then you look at something else, and when you look back the first thing is different somehow. A value makes its shape known only to the corner of your eye. One day I looked away from the old guy, and when I looked back it was his funeral. I got a call from my uncle. I had gone back to school, I was in a study carrel, reading a text on Indigenous plant medicines written by a professor from Sweden. I was broke, but my auntie gave me gas money to go home. The funeral was one of those things you may not see again. The priest had tried to come in, and there was a fight in front of the building where the bodies are put out, because the old guy had said there should be no priest. I knew why he said it, and I knew that I would say the same whenever my time was near. The church has had us in a choke hold for a long time now. Someone had one-punched Father Allen and laid him out flat on the sidewalk, and then another guy stepped in and really put the boots to him. You knew it was a story that would never go away, that cocksucker on the ground with his broken glasses, crying out, Please God! Inside, the old guy's body was in the casket, and his arms were crossed over his chest, and his best boots, the black ones with the embroidered flowers, were on his feet, and the black cowboy hat was off to one side but the feather was missing. Some of the people who were against us were at the funeral, and they said how sorry they were he was gone they were so sorry they had never been this sorry. He was the last great speaker of our language, etc. I watched them go one by one to the mike near the casket, and while they spoke I invited my most murderous thoughts to join me. Then I dropped out of college. Phone calls, e-mails, letters came, even a text. (Hi K\_\_\_\_! Your absence from Twentieth-Century U.S. History is noticeable. . . .) I ignored them all. There was nothing left in me. I told family and relatives the



things he had taught me and my cousin. This idea of indian blood, I said, half this and a quarter that. It's just more white-man bullshit. This isn't our way! But no one cared. One of my cousins listened for a while and then bummed a twenty spot. When I went back to school the next year, I don't know. There was this white girl in my tribal-sovereignty course. I tried to talk indian law with her, but she just wanted to talk traditional foods. One night she offered profound and considered commentary on the situation. You look white to me, she said. After that I thought often about taking her back to the reservation. We would go to Big Bear Alley, where everyone who lives on the street sleeps in the summer. I would say, This one here and that one there and this one over here who looks sorta like me—these are my relatives. Is that authentic enough, I would say. Does that meet your criteria, you fucking bitch.

The dreams came back for a while. I dropped out for good. Things really do end. Sometimes, when there is no moon and the soft starry arc of the mako'iyo"so'koi is cast across the sky like a mother's arms and I cannot sleep, I drive to a spot on the flats where you can hear the wolves. I roll down my window and listen. They come sleek and systematic and regal down from the mountains and through the canyons, and some of them howl while the others assert themselves over the coyotes and ranch dogs who yelp and cry out in the dark. You would not believe the sound. In my head I can still hear his voice. Out on the flats it is an absolute slaughter. ♦

# Missing Person Report by Miriam Mandel Levi

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 [flash-frog.com/2023/08/21/missing-person-report-by-miriam-mandel-levi/4](https://flash-frog.com/2023/08/21/missing-person-report-by-miriam-mandel-levi/4)

August 21, 2023

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This morning my husband left for synagogue and did not return. He should have been home by 11:00., 11:15 if he'd stayed to exchange words with the rabbi. But by 11:45, there was no sign of him.

I'd laid the table with a white cloth, silver wine goblet, two plaited rolls, and two place settings. Fish and potatoes warmed on the hot plate, and a bowl of salad dressed in vinaigrette stood on the kitchen counter. It wasn't unusual for the two of us to eat Sabbath meals alone together. Our adult children rarely visited. And we'd fallen out of the habit of inviting friends.

I stepped outside and looked down the road to the bend. The noon sun shone so brightly that the sidewalks glittered. Squinting, I recognized members of the synagogue walking towards me—two men in white dress shirts carrying velvet pouches. I asked them if they'd seen my husband at morning prayers. They had but, whether he'd left the synagogue or lingered, they couldn't say.

Calling my husband was out of the question as he didn't have his phone. I might have walked the short block to the synagogue to find him, but I didn't. Should I have been alarmed? I wasn't.

At 1 p.m., our usual mealtime, I sat down at the table, slid the wine goblet and rolls from my husband's place setting to mine, and recited the blessings. I couldn't recall a Sabbath meal alone, but the experience felt oddly familiar. I kept looking at my husband's chair, conjuring scraps of a conversation we might have had about our aging parents or the children or the weather. Then I ate dessert and recited grace, imagining his baritone voice chiming in with mine.

After lunch, I moved to the living room and lay on the couch. I visualized my husband next to me, tipped back in his recliner, book propped on his belly, glasses pushed on top of his head. Ordinarily, we read, doze, and the day passes. It's quiet in the house; we don't talk a lot. After all these years, we've covered the important topics.

The time for afternoon prayers came and went. I looked through the kitchen window as men walked by the house talking and gesticulating with fervent hand motions. Women pushing strollers chatted animatedly with friends. Children shouted from one side of the street to the other. The world was raucous with conversation. Even through the window pane, the sound was deafening.

By now, six hours had passed since my husband's disappearance, and I hadn't begun to investigate his whereabouts. I would have made inquiries had anything seemed amiss, but the day resembled any other. Nothing in my experience indicated that he was missing. I felt no particular lack, worry, or longing. Lonely, yes, but no more so than when he was here with me.

I wondered if my husband had disappeared, not this morning, but long ago, and I hadn't noticed.

The sun set; the Sabbath ended. If I didn't alert the authorities now, I would be a prime suspect in his disappearance. I drove to the police station to file a report. An officer received me in a small, drafty room where he typed my details on an ancient desktop computer. When I told him my name and address, he straightened in his seat and fixed his eyes on mine. He said my husband had just left the precinct. He'd come in to file a missing person report.

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**MIRIAM MANDEL LEVI** — Miriam's work has appeared in *Creative Nonfiction's* anthology "Same Time Next Week," *Brain, Child, Literary Mama, Under the Sun, Poetica, bioStories, Sleet, Tablet, Blue Lyra, Chautauqua, Random Sample, Sky Island, JMWW, MoonPark, Sunlight Press, and Persimmon Tree.*

# Blue People

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 [ceasecows.com/2020/09/17/blue-people-by-abbie-barker/](https://ceasecows.com/2020/09/17/blue-people-by-abbie-barker/)

Now that our mom is gone, my older sister calls after I'm in bed and tells me about the Blue People. She can't sleep. They only visit at night.

"Ignore them," I tell her. "They're not real."

"That makes them angry," she says.

"Close your eyes, then."

"They get louder."

"Are they saying something now?"

"Yes. They say your sister can't help." On the other end of the line, I hear something scrape against a dish, like a spoon or knife.

"Put on a show. Maybe fall asleep on the couch," I say.

"The Blue People don't like TV." After a pause she says, "I miss Mom."

Our mom had a way of handling these conversations, every sentence beginning with *sorry*. I have a hard time feeling sorry for my forty-four-year-old sister. Her illness has formed a rift, one I don't know how to span.

\*

The Blue People materialized after we saw The Blue Man Group in Boston for Mom's 60<sup>th</sup>. My sister denies any correlation. The ones in her head are quick and dwarf-like, dressed in stretchy, monochromatic suits. I can't help but laugh when she describes them. Sometimes she'll laugh too. But when the Blue People visit her apartment at night, I'm told they swarm and chant, rearranging kitchen drawers, scattering sharp and shiny objects – the paring knives and serving forks, her hand-me-down cheese grater. She says it takes all her strength to shut them out. I tell her it takes all my strength to understand.

\*

My sister comes for dinner every Thursday. I invited her once after the funeral, but she keeps showing up. Tonight, she walks in without knocking and asks what I'm making.

"Pasta with sauce," I say.

"No meatballs?"

"We're out."

She slumps into a dining chair and spins a butter knife in front of her. "Where is everyone?"

"Charlie's soccer game, remember?"

"Am I supposed to remember everyone's schedule?"

I poke through the fridge shelves. "He has another game next week. Maybe we could do dinner Friday?"

"You know I don't like going anywhere after therapy."

"Another night then." I pile arugula into two bowls and point to a bell pepper on the counter. "Can you cut this? I need to start the pasta."

"Arugula gives me gas," she says.

"Arugula. Really?"

"Besides, I shouldn't be handling knives right now."

She slips these statements into conversation easily and often, so she can talk about the Blue People. Every week I cook her dinner, and every week she finds reasons not to help. I dump the greens into a single bowl and chop the pepper. She asks for a glass of water. I tell her to get it herself.

\*

That night my phone buzzes against my book and casts a bluish oval along the wall. I pull the quilt to my nose as my husband rolls on his side. He and I talk a lot about boundaries and how to set them with my sister. Earlier he said, "What would happen if you didn't pick up?"

I used to ask my mom these same questions, certain a missed call or unanswered text wouldn't derail my sister. Responsiveness fuels deeper need.

The buzzing stops. Then immediately starts up again. This happens four more times. Just when the calling feels ceaseless, just when I'm about to reach over and answer – the phone goes dark. I sink deeper into the covers and close my eyes. I don't fall asleep.

\*

The red-haired nurse in the psychiatric wing rifles through my purse. She pulls out a nail file and holds it up, accusingly.

"Just take the whole bag," I tell her. I don't need her assessing my lack of preparation, the dangerous items I lug around: two sharpened pencils, a stray shoelace, my mini-stapler.

The nurse slips me a ticket in place of my purse, like I'm at a club shedding layers. She holds out her palm. "Phone?"

"I won't take it out. Promise."

She gives me a look that says she knows my type and stretches her arm out farther.

\*

My sister is lying on her side, facing the single window of her double-occupancy room, white sheets tucked tightly around her. She doesn't stir when I walk in. I hear wailing and a rhythmic knocking from somewhere down the hall.

"I brought your toothbrush and deodorant. Some comfortable clothes."

"My blanket?" She still won't look at me.

"You didn't ask for a blanket."

She slides her knees closer to her chest. My sister communicates everything through her posture, the shift of her breath. Mom always knew to bring a blanket.

I sit in the vinyl armchair near the window. The cushion is blue – Blue Man blue. It makes a farting sound when I lean back. Normally she'd laugh. Instead she lets out a cough that's quick and sharp, like it hurts.

"You didn't pick up," she says.

I should tell her I'll never replace Mom – that I don't even know where to begin. But she's stuck in this sterile room beside a stranger's unmade bed. I want to smother her scalp in shampoo and hand her a brush. I can't even offer that. Inside this hospital, I have nothing to give.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm sorry you're here." The words float between us like limp balloons. My sister twists on her back and stares blankly at the ceiling, as if my apology never reached her. As if I said nothing at all.

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**Abbie Barker's** writing has previously appeared in *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine* and *Ellipsis Zine*. She earned a degree in fiction from the Mountainview MFA, and an MA in Literature from Fordham University. She teaches college writing and lives with her husband and two kids in New Hampshire. Abbie is a reader for *Fractured Literary*, and you can find her quietly lurking on Twitter [@AbbieMBarker](https://twitter.com/AbbieMBarker). Almost every morning, she wakes up early and writes.

*Lead image:* "cutlery" (via Flickr user [Steve Johnson](#))

# A Random Strike

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[americanshortfiction.org/a-random-strike/](https://americanshortfiction.org/a-random-strike/)

Betsy Boyd

July 18, 2022

I hated my job at the bowling alley more than usual that day. The Maximum Lilac deodorizer had run dry. I was too busy renting out shoes to slap an out-of-order sign on *Mission Impossible*, which left me with a list of token refunds a mile long. My period was nine days late.

Some adults nearby were talking about the war in Ukraine while their children tried to bowl with two hands.

“Five bucks a gallon,” this bald dad guy said, then slugged beer. “And it’s not even our situation.”

They were as dumb as I was about world affairs. Did any single Texan actually understand what was happening over there or for what reason? But despite the fact I’d just changed my minor from poli-sci to dance, the bombings had found their way into my dreams.

A pregnant mom mentioned how she’d read that another pregnant mom over there had delivered and lost her baby and then died herself. She brought it up when there was a lull, the only sound their kids’ bowling balls tanking in the gutter or cracking a couple of pins. No one responded, creating another lull.

“Sure you don’t want gutter bumpers?” I called to the parents.

One kid made a random strike, and the adults and children cheered loudly, which I thought was a bit over the top.

“Let ’em go wild, it’s healthy,” said a man in a tight Under Armour T-shirt.

I reminded myself that there was still time if I needed to terminate. I had the number and address for the place in Fort Worth. I could drive there on my day off. But I had better pee on a stick tonight.

I jotted the word broken on the back of a snack-bar menu and stuck it to *Mission Impossible* with a band-aid from the first-aid kit.

“No, it’s literally broken?” asked a pre-teen girl with a French braid.

“Yes.”

“Shit,” she said.

A round of clanking artillery fire gave us both a start.

“Awesome!” she said.

*Mission Impossible* had randomly begun working.

She yanked off my sign and started playing.

Blood rushed into my underwear—no mistake—and I dashed to the bathroom for a tampon. I was so relieved I blew myself a kiss in the wide mirror it was my job to clean. I kicked one leg up high to see if I could reach the towel dispenser, which I did.

After I got back to my station, the pregnant woman came to return her kid’s shoes.

I said to her, "I read that, too, about the lady and her baby."

"Aren't you dear," she said. I think that's what she said.

She thanked me for the coupon I gave everyone for five-off the arcade, and we looked at each other. The woman's son galloped over and took hold of her stomach.

"Go on and play your games for a few," she said to him sweetly. "But when I say you're done, I need you to be through."

"Fine," he said.

"Yes, ma'am," she corrected, but he was gone.

"Kids," she said to me.

"Kids," I said like I knew what we meant.


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A native Texan, **Betsy Boyd** is a graduate of the Michener Center for Writers and the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. Her fiction has been published in *Kenyon Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *Eclectica*, and elsewhere. Her short story "Scarecrow" received a Pushcart Prize. She directs the Creative Writing and Publishing Arts MFA program at the University of Baltimore.



# The Wife on Ambien

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 [newyorker.com/books/flash-fiction/the-wife-on-ambien](http://newyorker.com/books/flash-fiction/the-wife-on-ambien)

Ed Park

July 26, 2017

The wife on Ambien knows the score. I mean this literally. Rangers, 4–3 in overtime. Devils fall to the Flames, 3–1. Knicks lose again at home. In the morning, I open the paper and none of this checks out.

The wife on Ambien calls me Bob, calls me Mom, calls me Mr. Bluepants.

The wife on Ambien makes false starts. In one week, she has sketched a music hall (she is not an architect), designed a drone (she is not an engineer), written two scenes of a play called “Haunted Masquerade” (her M.F.A. is in sculpture). The handwriting is a bear, but I piece together a plot: society lady leads double life in the London of Jack the Ripper. In the morning, the wife on Ambien denies authorship, though at lunch I hear the first line of the soliloquy leave her lips.

The wife on Ambien cooks eggs. I take pains to hide the ingredients and the hardware. Still, she conjures omelettes from a secret stash of eggs, with a pan I somehow miss. She sings her robe. I gain five pounds in a month.

The wife on Ambien gets fresh. She moves on top of me like it’s spin class. That was nice, I say afterward. Really nice. It reminds me of our wedding night. Paris! My God! We were so young! Do you remember how the stars, I say, then stop, because she’s already snoring.

The wife on Ambien tries to order Ambien on Amazon.

The wife on Ambien makes up names of golfers.

The wife on Ambien keeps me guessing. You don’t want to know what I did in Tucson, she says, patting me on the head, like a child. I’d better not say what went down in West Hartford. Tell me, I say. She looks around for some eggs.

The wife on Ambien shifts her legs. To the left, to the right, to the left, to the right. She bends and extends. What are you doing? I whisper in her ear. Skiing, she says. Skiing in the Canadian Rockies with Mr. Bluepants.

The wife on Ambien recites the poetry of T. S. Eliot, sings the music of the Jesus and Mary Chain, calculates how much we need to save to retire. Her figures vary. The wife on Ambien also tells me it doesn’t matter, that the sun will swallow the Earth exactly eight billion years, or thirteen weeks, or twenty-four hours from now.

The wife on Ambien orders Uber after Uber. The cars stream toward us like a series of sharks. It’s 4 A.M. Drivers from many countries gather on the corner, fling curses at our window, break out the booze, arrange marriages among their offspring.

The wife on Ambien hacks into my Facebook account and leaves slurs on the pages of my enemies. Get a life, you’re a joke. She joins political causes directly opposed to her own. I spend an hour every morning cleaning up the digital trail.

The wife on Ambien shouts, Atlantis! Just that. *Atlantis!*

The wife on Ambien drinks an entire quart of milk. She washes out the slim jug and stands it up in the recycling bin like a soldier.

The wife on Ambien forgets about our children, Danica, eleven, and Morris, five. We named them after a race-car driver and a cat. It was her idea. She had it on Ambien. I get home from work after nine and see the kids attacking each other with belts while she sleeps, all the cushions and pillows piled in the center of the living room. Don't wreck our fort, Daddy, Morris says. That's more like a tower, I say. Then don't wreck our tower, Danica says. What about your homework? I ask my daughter. Homework's for losers, she says. Losers like you, Morris says. Honey, I call, but the wife on Ambien is sawing logs.

The wife on Ambien takes her vitamins, organizes the spice rack. She alphabetizes the shelves in the hallway and polishes my shoes. She wanders a while, adjusting picture frames that are out of true. Everything looks cleaner in the morning. But other nights she's knocking tchotchkes off tables, surrounding the wastebasket with coffee grounds in ritual fashion.

The wife on Ambien—how can I describe her? The way she tilts her head reminds me of pictures of her grandmother as a youth. The way she does a Bronx cheer reminds me of my first boss, who was in the Merchant Marine.

The wife on Ambien scrolls through her phone, swipes with her eyes shut. I can't wrench it from her iron grip. In the morning, she asks, Did you change the time zone to Dubai?

I sense a light. It's 3:15 A.M., and the wife on Ambien is playing online poker. Around the virtual table are Joker17, AceInHole, and Mr\_Bluepants. I would force her to stop, but she's winning by a lot. Someone has to bring home the bacon while my startup starts up. That's how I figure it. I'm seeking funding for a virtual-reality venture that will let you live in the home you grew up in.

The wife on Ambien can list the Presidents in order. The wife in real life can't.

The wife on Ambien tries her hand at painting. The tubes are open, the brushes stand in a coffee can of gray water, there's a becoming beige smudge on her brow, but where are the canvasses, whither the tableaux? Many years later, when we move out of the city, I find her art under a box of books in a basement storage locker. These are all pictures of toast, I say.

The wife on Ambien solves Danica's Rubik's Cube.

The wife on Ambien insists she doesn't snore. One night, I set up my phone to record her, balancing it on an eyeglasses case between our pillows, wondering if that's legal. In the morning, the device tells a different tale. It's just me, calling out her name, my voice thinning to a whine, like a dog that's strayed too far from its master. A voice that would keep the best of us up at night.

## **Now And Then I Look For You** **by Natalie Kusz**

Two alleys down from the bodega, where I found you that time. Under the defunct, overturned hot tub that once or twice served as your roof. Near the law-office dumpster brimful with secretary gifts, unopened and tossed and good for barter — evidence, you said, of a boss who got out of line.

At the needle-exchange room. In the shed with the rope-handled door behind the foreclosed blue house the neighbors stripped of copper plumbing.

In the newspaper's morning arrest report. On the jail roster. At the county coroner's lost and found.

At the food bank Wednesday, the breadline Friday, the missionary soup kitchen all other nights. At the food-stamp application window.

Beneath the overpass where street people stash their works.

Every last place I've ever ferried you to retrieve a hidden duffel of your own: the rock at the edge of the pocket park, the bullet-pocked power box for the city, the construction-site castoff heap, the evergreen freeway embankment.

If I find just a vestige, I think, I will rest.

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### **Questions to consider:**

1. What is the structure of this essay?
2. What effect does the title have? What information does it give you? How does it set the reader up emotionally?
3. What effect (emotional or otherwise) does the listing have of the different places where the narrator looks?
4. What do you think of the end? How is this part of the essay different than the rest? What is the effect of that change?

# Portrait of My Father

by Alexander Chee

His drink was Crown Royal, his candy bar, a Baby Ruth, though he didn't like chocolate much. He was good at poker, loved reading Tolstoy. His suits were bespoke.

In Korea, starting at the age of five, he ran barefoot in the snow when he was training for tae kwon do, so he was ready, during the Korean War, for when he and his oldest brother had to steal food from overturned army supply trucks, running the bags of rice home on their backs. After the war, he became the international tae kwon do champion in his age group at the age of eighteen, and captain of his college rugby team — the rice had helped two ways.

He left for the US while his father was away on business so he couldn't stop him. His mother gave him a gold belt buckle to sell when he arrived, as she couldn't give him money, and asked him, whatever he did, not to marry a blue-eyed, blonde-haired American girl.

He moved in with his oldest brother, a student by then at Georgetown Law, and then went to the University of Brownsville, living in Edinburg, TX, a few minutes away. He made his living teaching tae kwon do. I have a photo of him, flying through the air in a horseshoe kick, his legs and his arms stretched in front of him. He is breaking the boards they hold in the air with his snow-hardened feet.

He transferred after a year to Pomona College, for engineering, and his students sent him off to Azusa, CA, with a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. In his apartment building he found my mother, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American home economics teacher, working in the Los Angeles public school system, and living upstairs from him. He crashed a party she was throwing, a buffet beside the pool in the center of their building's courtyard. He lived with two other Korean engineering students and none of them could cook. She found him helping himself.

And you are, she said.

Chuck, he said. We go to the same church.

We do? she asked. I've never seen you there.

I enter from the side, he said. And stand in the back.

She accepted his offer of a ride that Sunday, and rode to church with him for months.

He was teaching tae kwon do in LA now, and had celebrity students: Peter Fonda, for example, who set him up with his sister, Jane, the same name as my mom. When he came home from dates, he saw her light on, and would knock, coming in to tell her how they went, and it was never very well. She herself had a boyfriend at Duke, very far away. On

her birthday, she received a dozen pink roses from the Duke man. And then my father appeared in her doorway.

Do you want to sit there and smell your roses, he said, or can I buy you a drink?

He took her to a jazz club, and as they entered, the band began to play Happy Birthday. The maitre'd brought them to a table in front of the stage, where a bottle of champagne sat on ice. As the band sang her name in the birthday song, she smiled and said, What would you have done if I said no?

And he said, But you didn't, and then he pulled out her chair.

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<https://granta.com/portrait-of-my-father-chee/>

**Questions to consider:**

1. How is this essay structured?
2. What do the details tell about his father?
3. What do the mini-stories tell you about his father?
4. Why do you think he chose to use the dialogue he did put in the essay? What does it show/tell about the father?