

Night Vision

By Kathleen Latham

The sound of a passing car wakes him. Tires hissing on pavement.

Rain, Tom thinks vaguely.

He registers his surroundings in fragments—the bulky shadow of the chair beside his bed, the strangled rush of the humidifier down the hall, the weight of his wife's arm draped across his waist. There is a moment of disorientation before this last sensation wakes him fully.

His wife. Touching him.

Tom blinks in the darkness of their room like someone startled from a dream. He is lying on his side, his wife warm and still beside him, holding him from behind. Something sick and liquid fills his stomach.

Yearning, perhaps. Or regret.

In his mind, other nights line up beside this one. He and his wife in this same bed. The two of them juxtaposed across time, like the picture puzzles his children loved when they were younger. Can You Spot What's Different?

It's amazing the effect one tiny detail can have. A mustache shaved. A flower without a petal. An arm across a waist. He would like to think it means something.

Tom raises his head carefully, as if even that small movement might wake her, and squints until the boxy red numbers of his digital clock come into focus. 3:57. He relaxes his eyes, and the world returns to a blur.

Despite a lifetime of myopia, it still surprises him how watery the world can be in the middle of the night without his glasses, how shapeless and vague objects become in the dark. He finds himself guessing at the once familiar. That object there? I think it's a chair. There's something strangely liberating about being unable to identify your surroundings. It's like giving up responsibility, admitting you don't know all the answers. But of course he doesn't know all the answers.

The humidifier down the hall gurgles once then falls silent.

Tom closes his eyes and sees every place he and his wife touch, sees it from above like a stranger. Her arm across his waist, her legs curled against his like a question mark. He feels the swell of her breasts against his back, the cotton of her nightgown, the smooth surprise of her bare thighs where her gown has risen like a gift.

It used to be that the worst he could expect in the middle of the night was a child wedged between their pillows unannounced. A tiny fist in his face, a foot in his groin. Now it is anger that usually curls itself there. Or resentment. Or some other emotion he can't quite name.

Not that he hasn't tried. Not that he hasn't spent the past twelve months trying. But his wife's moods are like the objects around him. Edgeless. Amorphous. Easy to trip over.

Years before, when they first married, he and his wife fell asleep clinging to each other, as if even a moment's separation was too much to bear. Eventually, comfort entered the equation. And complacency. Time made it easier to touch toes and leave it at that. Then one day an invisible barrier appeared down the middle of the bed, banishing Tom to the wrong side.

For the past six months, his wife has made it a point to honor that divide whenever she can, like it's a union line that can't be crossed without appearing weak. A traitor to her own demands. And yet, here she is.

Tom stares into the darkness at the shapes that are mere suggestions of things.

There was no single event. No particular fight. That would be easier, really. That, he could tackle. Instead, there was just a series of emotions strung together; mystifying him, leaving him behind, leaving him to wake in the middle of the night and pick at the knot his marriage has become, desperate for a loose thread, for something to work with.

Some nights his wife cries herself to sleep—noiselessly, inches away—the only hint of her distress a slight tremble of her shoulders, the occasional surprise of a snuffle. The last time Tom reached for her, she pushed him away with a throw of her shoulder, a gesture so full of desperation it left him speechless. Still.

Other nights she is asleep when he slips into bed. Or she's feigning sleep, her body already turned from him, her back an insurmountable wall, stiff and accusatory even at rest. On those nights, Tom drifts off holding his breath, afraid to relax into his own pillow, afraid to shut his eyes lest she accuse him of giving up.

Has he? he wonders. Is his inability to reach her real or merely convenient? Like the world without his glasses. We can't fix what we don't see.

If he thinks about it—and he tries not to—he understands that part of him has given up. That he's merely waiting for the end. But just when he thinks it has arrived, that his marriage has passed some terminal point, there is a night like this one, where he wakes to find her beside him, holding on. And then hope makes itself comfortable on the edge of the bed, pushing aside anger, elbowing fear.

Tom knows his wife's mind works in ways he can't fathom. She can take the word no and hear a hundred different nuances. The word love, and hear a thousand. Hers is a language of emotion, of flash storms, of sudden frowns and looks loaded with meaning. But this ... this lying beside her ... this is the language he speaks. He knows what a turned back means. He knows how to read an arm around his waist.

Tom feels a sudden, exasperating need to stretch, which he fights to ignore. He knows that if he moves, the spell will be broken and whatever delicate balance he's awoken to will shift. He is not ready for that. He is not ready, suddenly, to give up.

Don't move, he tells himself. Don't think.

He wants to lie there forever, his wife's arm around his waist, her hand cupping his heart. He wants to count the seconds between the small, warm breaths that brush against his back. He wants to feel her legs graze against his, skin electrifying skin. He wants to revel in the fact that in sleep, at least, she still reaches for him.

Reality will intrude soon enough. He'll need to stretch. He'll ruin everything.

Let me enjoy this, he argues with his body. Let me relish this truce, this moment of surrender, before she awakens, before the icy stillness of her silence begins, before I am helpless and wordless and always, always wrong.

But the need to change positions crawls through his muscles like an itch, a maddening betrayal.

There is always the chance that she won't wake.

That she'll draw closer.

That this time he'll follow her to the other side of the bed like he used to, that he'll wrap himself around her and bury his face in her hair.

Tom stares into the darkness and imagines a different marriage, a different future. He imagines himself a different man.

He knows he is getting carried away. Night blindness does that. It makes edges seem softer. It makes stories out of darkness.

Finally, he can take it no longer. He stretches his body slowly, straightening his legs until his knees pop with relief. He rolls towards his wife, encircling her, brushing her forehead with his lips. And then he waits.

Blindly.

For a moment, there is nothing. Only silence, a breath held. And then she sighs in her sleep, a sound of annoyance, and her hand pulls away like a creature escaping. She moves from him, withdrawing to the other side of the bed, presenting her back. Saying nothing. Saying everything.

Tom's own indiscernible emotions melt away into darkness.

Outside, another car passes in the rain.