

the
IOWA REVIEW

Fall 2017
\$8.95 US
\$10.95 Canada



FEATURING T.C. Boyle / Jenny Bully
Margot Livesey / Christopher Merrill
Rusty Morrison / Tim Taranto / Marcus Wicker

47/2

Excusing myself for the bathroom,
I walk out the kitchen door and into the wet yard.

Above me are stars
but no constellations.

They won't join tonight—
even with their own kind.

I think, had they worn
the woolly clouds as wigs,
nobody would've mistaken
their bright eyes for bald spots—
not even themselves, poor critical things.

RACHEL LYON

The Monkey Magician

If you really want to get into it, I never would have started taking Exhiliby were it not for Facebook. I was scrolling through my feed one night after Katya and the baby had gone to bed. I don't think it was really that late. Ever since the baby came, Katya had been keeping weird hours, going to bed sometimes at six p.m. So I was hanging around on the couch, trying to exhaust myself enough to turn in, too. Maybe I was a beer or two in. And there was this post by this jerk I know from magic school back in Vegas.

I guess this guy had fallen on hard times. Tell you the truth, I'd been following his fall from grace via social media with a certain degree of schadenfreude. He'd had this sweet gig touring with the Bailywick Brothers, but they ended up downsizing and cut him from the core cast. Now he was unemployed. From the typos, I imagined he was drinking again. His posts were deliciously pathetic; when I saw his name pop up in my feed, I admit I looked forward to getting a glimpse into his self-pity. It ended up being your typical woe-is-me type of thing—I don't even remember what, it doesn't matter. What matters is that, scrolling through the comments, I saw something that made my belly fall into my butt.

It was a comment by another jerk I happen to know.

At least you're not the monkey magician! the guy had written.

Eight likes. Eight likes! Eight likes by eight jerks, all of whom I happen to know. Eight magic school jerks, all of them laughing at me. One by one, each of them had thought, *Hey, sure! I like that!* and joined in on the fun.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I finished the six-pack and paced the dim kitchen, trying not to wake up the baby, listening to the racket of crickets outside. Not to reply was not an option. A man's livelihood is his dignity.

In retrospect, finishing the six-pack before commenting was probably not a great choice. Whatever I ended up posting, I felt great about it in the moment, but I'm afraid it was kind of a diatribe. I finished around four a.m., hit Enter, and went to bed. I felt pretty vindicated, pretty holier-than-them. But when I woke up later that morning, I had a feeling I'd committed some fairly vindictive thoughts to eternity.

I checked to see what the response had been, but here's the kicker: the whole thread was gone. I couldn't find it at all. I searched through my

so-called friends, and found that both jerks were missing. Jerk Number One: couldn't find him at all. Jerk Number Two: it suggested I "follow" him. *Follow* him! Christ.

With one self-righteous post, I'd alienated them all.

Katya was nursing the baby. I was marveling at how unrecognizable her tits had become. Back when I used to suck on those tits, they were small and firm. Now they're, what's a good word, pendulous. They've got these blue veins like marble.

She said, "I don't know why this shit bothers you so much. You've been saying since back in Vegas that they were all jerks."

"They are," I said, "but they're my colleagues. What really gets me is they just don't get me. I may be the monkey magician, but they're the monkeys. Dancing around in front of whatever unimpressed crowd. *Magic*, ha!"

Katya shifted the baby from one tit to the other. Rather loudly she said, "My sister's been seeing a shrink."

I said, "Good, maybe she'll leave us alone."

She said, "This woman is pretty reasonable—sliding scale."

"Oh, you're not suggesting," I said.

Katya sighed.

"Give it a rest," I said.

"Ugh, Terry. You are miserable."

"I'm not miserable," I told her. "Humiliated, sure. But I'm stoic."

"I'm not saying you *feel* miserable," she said. "I'm saying you're miserable to be with."

"You're telling me I'm making *you* miserable."

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Yes, right," she said.

The baby sucked happily.

The shrink's office was in a strip mall upstairs from a consignment shop called A Second Wind, which propped its door open with a long clothing rack and smelled like farts. I waited in a cramped, windowless hallway where a waterfall ran continuously over a small hunk of imitation rock. It didn't do much to drown out what was going on behind the shrink's closed door. Some woman was crying in there and talking about death.

"I just don't want him to go," she was saying. "I feel like if he goes, the last twenty years of my life will have been a waste."

"There was never going to be a reward at the end," came a soothing voice.

The first voice sobbed.

"Can you accept," said the soothing voice, "that love and dedication are their own reward?"

I have a habit of wondering what would be the worst sort of afterlife. It's sort of a game I play. I thought it up the first time I heard that phrase *personal hell*. I was waiting in line at the DMV. I guess I was about seventeen. I heard someone say, *The DMV is my own personal hell*. That stuck with me. It got me thinking. Idly in the car, or trying to fall asleep at night, or up at some ungodly hour trying to soothe the baby, I weigh the options. What is *my own personal hell*? Now, in the strip mall therapist's waiting room, overhearing some Debbie Downer sob about death and love, I considered a new option.

The door opened, and a woman in khaki slacks came out, shielding her eyes from me as a celebrity might from paparazzi. When she was gone, I stood up reluctantly. There's still time, I thought. I can still run. Katya doesn't even have to know. But there was that soothing voice again. "Come on in!" it said. "Don't be shy!"

She was a perfectly normal-looking person: late forties or fifties, smooth, graying hair. In a weird reversal of my expectations, she happened to be sitting on one end of a couch that ran the length of one wall. The only place left for me to sit was either on the other side of the couch, beside her, or behind her desk in the corner, or in a stiff chair by the door. It was a test, I thought, standing uncomfortably in the doorway. I chose the stiff chair by the door.

"Hello!" she said and cocked her head to the side sympathetically, as one might do to a dog that got its foot caught in a drain. "You must be Terry."

"Yup," I said.

"You can call me Doctor Janet," she said, a little smugly, I thought.

"Okay," I said.

"So. What brings you here today?"

I stumbled, "My wife, uh."

She frowned sympathetically. "Marital troubles?"

I looked around desperately for something else to discuss, but it was as if the room had been decorated with the express intention of being undiscussible. There was some sort of carpet on the floor, but if it had a pattern or any color at all, I couldn't tell you now what that might have been. There were images on the walls, framed and hung just as art might be framed and hung, but to call them art would be wrong. Maybe beside her there was a lamp?

"People come to me sometimes almost without knowing why they're here," Doctor Janet said. "All they know is that *something* is wrong. And

that something has been wrong for a very long time. Is that the case with you, Terry?"

"Um," I said.

"All right, why don't you tell me a little about your life?"

Obediently, or because there was nothing else to do, I began to talk about my situation: my underemployment, money issues, the inescapability of our debt. About how Katya was nearing the end of her maternity leave and how soon it would just be me with the baby most of the time. I wasn't exactly prepared for that, I realized. I wasn't even sure I *liked* the baby that much. That startled me, saying that out loud. I didn't mean to say it. It just came out. As I talked, I'd gotten myself into some dark territory without even realizing it. Almost against my own will, I found myself telling Doctor Janet about how disappointed Katya seemed to be with me, with our life: how exhausted we were all the time; how we hadn't had sex in, Christ, over a month. Sometimes I barely even recognized her.

Doctor Janet kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her, as if we really knew each other, as if we were cousins or something. "And what do you do for work?" she said.

"I'm a—" I began. But I couldn't continue, and you want to know why? Because I fucking burst into tears.

Doctor Janet leaned forward, and the look on her face was less concern than curiosity.

"I'm sorry," I said, wiping the snot from my nose, gulping loudly. "I had no fucking idea that was coming. I—"

"No, no, it's all right," she said, handing me a tissue box. "Stay with it. Stay with the feeling."

I blew my nose. "I'm the monkey magician," I said bitterly.

Did she stifle a laugh?

I explained, "I get hired by zoos, or great ape sanctuaries, or animal testing facilities or whatever, to come cheer up the animals they keep. I graduated magic school in 2008. Not a whole lot of work for magicians out there since the economy crashed."

"It seems like your job is a trigger for you."

Reluctantly, I told her about the whole Facebook thing.

Doctor Janet regarded me, squinting. "Would you say you have recently experienced a loss of appetite?"

I said I hadn't finished my McMuffin that morning, but that was just because it was gross.

"Have you become numb to things that once moved you?"

I said I didn't know.

"Do you often feel humiliated? Full of shame? As if you are different from others? A second-class citizen? Do you find it difficult to communicate? Do you feel you don't understand things that seem to come to others more naturally?"

"All right!" I snapped.

"I'm sorry to irritate you, Terry. These are simply procedural questions. The reason I ask is, I'm currently participating in a clinical trial. Maybe you've heard of this company, Santoman?"

I shook my head.

"They manufacture something like two-thirds of all the world's processed food. It doesn't matter. Recently, they acquired a large pharmaceutical company. You'd think that would set off alarm bells. It certainly did for me! But they're actually doing some *really* interesting things. One of those things is Exhilify."

"Exhilify," I repeated.

"It's been very successful in the initial testing phase. Now they're going into round two."

"You're a psychiatrist?" I asked, confused.

"I trained as a physician," she said. "Podiatrist, actually. Before I became a certified counselor. I realized I was just disgusted by other people's feet. Isn't that funny? But, bonus! I can absolutely write you a prescription. Would you be interested in trying this stuff?"

The only drugs I'd ever taken were recreational and plants. "I'm not sure," I said.

"Do you think Katya would be interested in your trying this stuff?"

I hesitated before asking, "What does it do?"

"Everyone has a bit of a different reaction," she said. She hopped up onto her bare feet and padded over to the desk, where she wrote me a prescription.

"Let me know if you experience anything unusual," she said, handing it to me.

"Unusual how? Unusual like what?"

"Oh," she said, "changes in mood, changes in perception, changes in how you feel physically."

That seemed awfully broad. I said, "What if I don't know whether or not it's unusual?"

"You'll know," she said cheerfully, and looked at her watch. "Whoops! Looks like our time is up. So lovely to meet you, Terry. I'll bill you. Goodbye!"

The baby was making a racket, doing that thing where he'd wake us up screaming bloody murder and then, when he saw us appear by his crib,

would quiet down, even laugh. Every time I'd get up, he'd quiet down; as soon as I turned to go back to bed, he'd scream again. It was some manipulative bullshit, I'll tell you that.

"Why does he keep screaming?" Katya moaned from the bed.

"He's fucking with me," I told her.

"Don't be a goddamn child," she said. "Pick him up!"

"Why don't you pick him up?" I said.

"Why don't you spend nine months growing him inside your uterus, and then let him tear you apart from the inside?" she snapped.

Again I reconsidered my own personal hell. "Come here, butthead," I told him. I picked him up out of the crib, and he grabbed the tip of my nose. He smelled like poo.

I changed him at the table by the window. Outside, it was still so dark. An animal rustled the underbrush. "Sometimes, I hate you," I whispered, wiping the baby's butt. He gave me a fat, toothless smile.

Was I humiliated? Full of shame? Had I become numb to things that once moved me? It is true that the day he was born was the best day of my life. I'd held him in the hospital while Katya slept and just marveled. I could hardly reconcile the sweet, hiccupping, red-faced homunculus he'd been then with the pain in the ass he'd become. Now, he was like a psychopathic, mini Orson Welles. He laughed at me just as they all laughed at me. With dizzy dread it occurred to me: Christ, he could grow up and become a jerk, too.

I was supposed to take the Exhilify twice at the same time every day, but I didn't want to wait. With the baby in one arm, I opened the little paper bag and pressed and twisted the childproof cap. The pills were small and green. I popped one into my mouth without water. It went down so easy I barely felt it. Then I took the baby outside onto the porch.

It was trying, slowly, to be daytime. The sky was sort of maroon. I knew the baby was underdressed for the chill, but he didn't seem to mind. We sat there together in the expectant early morning and listened to things: the rustle of leaves, a cricket, a faraway car. He played with the button on my pajamas, twisting it and pulling it and slamming it into my chest. I let him. I was waiting for something to happen.

Eventually he fell back to sleep. A bird awoke in the maple tree and started to sing. The sky brightened, and I could see the mist hanging in the air between the trees. A shaft of brilliant, pink light appeared and broadened over the slats of the porch. A car pulled up to the gas station across the street, its engine quieted, and a young guy got out. He was just a teenager, probably—baggy clothes and an unfortunate haircut. He stood on the concrete curb at the door to the gas station and fiddled

with his keys. Below one torn cuff of his pants, I could see the sole of his sneaker had come unattached. While he tried to unlock the door, that sole flopped against the pavement. Something about the boy's posture: even without seeing his face, I felt I knew him. I felt I knew every poor slouching kid in the world. I was that kid. The baby was asleep in my arms, snoring lightly and smelling of warm cotton, and the bird was singing like a zealot in the old maple. And watching the boy with the busted shoe—I don't know—the whole fucking scene was so beautiful I wanted to cry.

That, it turns out, was the Exhilify. I can't tell you how it works, but I can try to explain what it feels like. It's like you're hyper connected to everyone else in the world. No—it's like you and everyone else are part of the same organism. It's like every light is brighter, every shadow is darker, and every color is so deep and rich that the world before Exhilify compared to the world after is like Kansas to Oz. It's like you're looking out at the world through an Instagram filter designed by God, a filter not just for what things look like, but for how they feel, too. It's like if anybody—I mean anybody—said to you, *Know what I mean?* you'd say, *Yes. Yes.*

Later that week I got a call from an outfit about an hour north of us called Illbrio. It's a medical testing facility where I work from time to time. I don't much like the people, and the work doesn't come in often enough to count on, but big pharma's big money. When they do call, I don't turn them down.

Illbrio is on a kind of campus several miles from the highway. It's a whole manufactured little town, in fact, with a couple of stores and a daycare and dorms for employees who are working around the clock. Right in the middle, there's even a little manicured town square, with a drug store and newsstand and soda fountain. The vibe is like Disneyland meets Silicon Valley, but without any of that ruthless California sunshine. The day I drove in was gray and flat as if the light itself were a layer of ash. I killed the engine in the visitors lot and sat there a moment before deciding: What the hell? I popped an Exhilify, grabbed my briefcase, and walked the quarter mile to the main building.

A marketing rep by the name of Rick Zigfield greeted me at the front desk with a firm handshake and a clipboard full of forms. When I was done signing everything, he stepped back and started walking away at a fast pace in his good shoes, talking the whole time, clearly expecting me to follow. It was like he'd learned how to behave from Aaron Sorkin.

"Good to see you, Terrence," he said, glancing at the clipboard.

"Terry's fine," I told him.

"Coffee?" he said. "I am zonked!"

Turned out, we were walking toward the cafeteria. It was four p.m., squarely between meal times, and all the chairs were stacked on top of the tables. At an industrial-sized coffee maker, we filled up paper cups with sour coffee. Rick Zigfield took two cups from the stack and filled them as one. "Insulation!" he said. I took one.

"Reason we called you in, Terrence, is we've got a situation with this orangutan."

"Huh," I said. "Never seen one of those except on TV. Me and the wife used to get high and watch *Planet Earth*."

Rick Zigfield was leading me back into the hallway. "Among the forms you signed back there is a very strict nondisclosure," he said. "We're going to need you never to indicate to anyone, ever, that you saw this animal here. As you may know, being in your line of work, medical testing on orangutans is highly illegal. But this particular animal—Julius—we saved him from brush fires in Sumatra, so."

"So he owes you?" I joked.

He shot me a look. "It's a goddamn shame what the palm oil companies are doing in Sumatra," he said, "I'll tell you that. Burning the whole goddamn island to the ground. Julius's parents went back for his baby sister, and they were trapped in the blaze. He watched his whole family burn alive."

"Jesus," I said.

He unlocked a nondescript door I'd been through before, and we were in the room where Illbrijo keeps the animals they use for testing. It's a large, bright space full of floor-to-ceiling cages and lit from above by skylights. All around us, behind aerated plexiglass, rabbits dug into piles of cabbage and shredded lettuce; rats climbed obstacle courses or ran around in plastic balls; rhesus macaques climbed rope lattices, clung to each other, and screeched wildly. I recognized a couple of them from previous jobs. One had a golf ball-sized tumor growing out of his neck.

At the far end of the room was a glass wall. Behind it was a room about the size of a walk-in closet, stuffed with wilting greenery. Crouching next to a pile of branches was the orangutan. He was holding his knees, rocking a little, and looking down at the ground.

Julius, I presumed.

Rick Zigfield and I stood together on the people side of the glass. "We've done everything we can think of to reach him," Rick said. "Our handler's in there three times a day *interacting*. But he won't do a thing. He won't budge.

"You've got to understand, Terrence, we're working on a highly exciting project here. This is a highly exciting opportunity. It's an entirely

new class of drugs, and these are not drugs you can test on rats or rabbits. Why? They're too subtle, too sensitive. They have too much to do with what you might call, broadly, *humanity*, in the sense that they affect one's capacity for compassion, yes, but in the sense, too—and I don't want to sound like a wing nut, here, but—that they could truly change the course of human history.

"In other words, Terrence, Julius is incredibly valuable. The number of times we've been able to get a great ape in here? Let's just say I've been working here eight years, and I've never seen it happen. That's why we brought you in."

I knelt down and put a hand up to the glass—more for the sake of proving I was worth my paycheck than for any other reason.

"Julius," I said.

Rick said, "You'll have to talk louder than that."

I repeated his name more loudly, "Julius!"

The animal's thick index finger twitched. We waited.

Rick slapped me lightly on the back. "I'll leave you two alone," he said. He finished the last of his coffee and set his double coffee cup on the lip of the shelf that held in the glass. Then he swiveled around on the heel of one fancy shoe and walked away quickly, leaving me alone in the roomful of cages.

I started with a simple scarf thing. I opened my briefcase and got out this rainbow silk scarf. I let it lie on the ground and pulled at it sporadically, making it twitch ever so slightly. Julius didn't seem to notice. I waved a hand over the scarf. I made it disappear. Nothing.

I retrieved three juggling balls from their velvet bag and began to juggle. Then I grabbed a few more and added them to the mix. Soon I was juggling six balls. Then twelve. I could see the arc of them, their movement reflected in the glass. But Julius kept his head down, his eyes fixed on the ground. There was something so sad about his old-man face, his black eyes, his weird thumbs and protuberant muzzle. Could a muzzle be sad?

With a few quick gestures, I began to disappear the balls one by one, until I was only juggling two. Then I reappeared them one by one, until I was juggling nine altogether. I'm a slick juggler, I have to say. I always got the highest marks for juggling in magic school back in Vegas. But with Julius, I got nothing. I felt like a cliché. He was making a monkey out of me, so to speak. It was like: Who's on what side of the glass?

I don't know how much time passed before a door in Julius's walk-in closet opened, and a figure in white scrubs and a baseball cap appeared. Startled, Julius sprang up and cowered in one corner of his little room.

The figure in scrubs set down a plateful of vegetables and a bowlful of water and then produced a pill bottle from its front pocket. Julius raised his arms over his mouth. The figure approached him. He evaded it. The figure pursued him to the other side of the little room. It was only a couple of feet in perimeter. He evaded it again and hopped back to the side he'd been on.

The figure put the pill bottle back into its pocket and knocked on the door it had come in through. In a moment, two more figures in white scrubs appeared. Then the first figure produced a syringe, while the other two held Julius down. His mouth was wide open. His eyes rolled back in his head. They stuck him with the needle. I could hear the sound he made through the glass. His howl sounded like the cry of a full-grown man. Then the first figure took the pill bottle back out and shook out a little green pill. Julius squeezed his lips shut, but together, the three figures forced it open, dropped a pill in, and made him drink from the bowl. His body drooped. He seemed to submit. They petted him on the head and made their way out.

God, I thought. That poor fucking animal.

Then I thought: Be professional. You've got a fucking job to do.

I turned around to face the rats and rabbits and raised up my arms like a champion.

I'm the monkey magician, motherfuckers!

They didn't look up.

At least I could maybe improve poor old Julius's afternoon.

Rick Zigfield's coffee cups were still sitting there on the lip of the window. That gave me an idea. I gulped down the last of my own awful coffee and turned my back to the window so the cups were concealed. With the pocketknife on my keychain, I made two slits in each of the three cups to make a sort of tab in the paper. I put a juggling ball in each one and, turning back around, arranged all three cups face down in a row by the glass.

Whatever Julius had been given from that syringe seemed to have slowed him down. His gaze rolled toward me.

I lifted up the cup on the end to reveal one colorful ball. Then I lifted up the middle one, squeezing the tab I'd made, so it looked like there was no ball underneath. I lifted up the third cup the same way, squeezing the tab so that it looked empty.

Julius shifted his body ever so slightly, so that he was a little closer to the glass. He seemed to sense the suspense of the set-up.

I did a little flourish with my hand as if to follow the movement of the ball from the cup on the end to the cup in the middle. I lifted up the

cup on the end, squeezing the tab, and then lifted the cup in the middle to reveal the ball.

Julius raised a hand to the glass, as if to touch the paper cups himself. Now we were cooking.

I did another little flourish as if to follow the ball from the middle cup to the one on the other end, then squeezed the tabs on cups one and two to lift them up with their balls inside, and finally lifted cup three to reveal the ball underneath it.

Julius's posture changed. His body seemed to lift. He brought his old-man face closer to the glass.

I did the whole trick again. This time, he really got into it. When I finished the trick, he opened his giant Muppet mouth, revealing two rows of squat herbivore teeth. He threw his head back and rolled backward onto the floor into a pile of hay, then threw his feet up and rocked back to a seated position, grinning like a fool, bits of hay stuck in his orange hair. Magic! I couldn't help but laugh with him.

With one big wrinkled index finger he pointed at the cups again. I repeated the trick. I did it three times, then four, then five. I tried a few other tricks, but he kept pointing at the cups. I was so wrapped up in the moment that I barely noticed how dark it had gotten in the cage room. It was late in the day. The sun was going down. We were laughing and rocking around together on the floor. He was pointing at the cups. I was doing the trick.

And then he raised a finger, and instead of pointing at the cups, pointed at me.

I raised a finger back at him, E.T.-style. I looked him in his two dark eyes. Was I imagining the connection between us? The depth of pain in his expression? I don't think I was. I moved closer to the glass and put a whole hand up to it. He put his monstrous hand up to the glass, too. I rested my head against it. He rested his head against mine. Julius the orphaned orangutan, my fun-house mirror image. Was I imagining that I could feel the warmth of his body through the double-paned window? I couldn't help myself: in the room full of cages, I began to weep.

Rick Zigfield strode in. "Success?" he said.

I looked up at him from my seat on the floor.

He pretended not to notice me wiping the snot from my nose. "I almost forgot you were in here!" he said. "We're closing up shop. Let's get you signed out and paid for your hard work today."

I got up. I packed up my things. I took one last look at Julius. His heavy hand was still pressed against the glass as he watched me leave. I wanted to say something to him—at least to say goodbye. I gave him an awkward wave and followed Rick Zigfield back out to Registration.

I walked to the visitors lot feeling uneasy. It was dark, and the trees at the edge of the pavement were black quaking shadows.

I tried to cheer myself up with positive thinking. When you're an orangutan in this world, I thought, your options are limited. At least I gave him something to think about.

Can orangutans think?

I tried again. Those jerks on Facebook should be so lucky, I thought. To do the kind of good work I was doing in the world.

None of it helped.

I was relieved when I found my car. I got in and started the engine. Everyone was going home for the day. There was a long line of cars waiting to leave, and the line was moving real slow. I pulled in behind a truck. When the driver got out to exchange a few words with the guy at the gate, I thought, Christ, here we go. I honked my horn. He gave me the finger. At last he got back in and pulled up and out onto the road.

When he turned, I could see the name printed on the side of the truck. What do you think it said? Santoman.

I came back from Illbrio feeling crumpled and drained. Katya was sitting alone in the kitchen with a beer. As soon as I walked in, she raised a finger to her lips. I tiptoed over the floorboards, which creaked and whined under my weight. Testily she whispered, "I just put him down!"

At her chair, I knelt and looked up at her, searching for I didn't know what in her face.

She sighed at me. "Not now, Terry. I've been giving, giving, giving all day."

I maneuvered myself so that I was under the table, between her legs. I put my head on her thigh.

"How did it go," she said reluctantly.

"Well, I had to sign all these nondisclosure forms, so."

"Good," she said. "I didn't want to talk about it anyway."

I buried my head between her thighs and breathed in the smell of her. I pulled on the elastic waistband of her sweatpants, nosed my way into her pants.

She let her head fall back against the top of the chair. "Giving, giving, giving, giving," she murmured. "For once, I just want to take."

I tasted her warm sour sweet, and she pushed back against my mouth. It had been so long. It had been too long. She breathed deeply as her body relaxed. I felt her pulse in my mouth.

And then, in the other room, we heard a rustling, a couple of exploratory cries. The baby had woken again.

"Fuck," Katya said. I gripped her legs.

He started to cry more desperately. It was like every time he woke up, he realized again that he was alone. The cries grew into a high-pitched mewling. The mewling crescendoed into a full-on wail.

"Fuck. Fuck!" said Katya more loudly.

I lifted my head briefly enough to blurt out, "Ignore him!"

"I can't, Terry. Jesus! Come on!"

She squirmed out of my grasp and scrambled out of the chair, throwing one leg over my head and arm to extract herself.

I could hear him wailing in the bedroom, and her voice through his wails. "Shh, shh, it's okay," she was saying, "it's okay, you're okay, Mama's here."

But out in the kitchen I was alone again, crouching under the table, mouth wet and stinking.