

Sea of Tranquility

by Peter Barlow

We weren't sleeping much, either one of us. We went through the ritual, Pat and I. I brushed and flossed and got into bed and read while Pat took her contacts out and applied a pore-cleanser to her face. She joined me in bed, switched off the lights and we discussed the events of the day before heading to our own sides of the mattress, dreaming about sleeping. Pat would lie on one side, adjust her pillow every few minutes, then turn over on her other side and repeat. I just stared at the ceiling, counting the ripples in the texture until the relief came. I beat her to sleep most nights, she tells me.

I woke up at two o'clock one morning, can't remember why, and she was gone. She'd been gone a few times before. I found her in the kitchen usually, sitting over a freshly brewed mug that was guaranteed to keep her awake the rest of the night. If I found her late enough, toward four or so, she was making breakfast for herself, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast. That morning, the morning I woke up at two, she wasn't there. In the kitchen. She wasn't in the living room laughing at an infomercial. She wasn't in the bathroom sobbing on her knees in front of the toilet. She wasn't in the house.

I found her in Hempstead Park, two blocks away from our house, where she and Jack would go every few nights to get away from the glow of the village and stare up at the stars. They would pack a few snacks and spread out a blanket as Pat taught him about the stars, about the constellations and the mythology that explains them. It was quiet time together for mother and son, it got them out of the house, whatever — they were enjoying themselves, and it helped Pat feel closer to Jack. They took me along because I was the only one strong enough to lug the telescope to and from the park. Pat is five-foot-nothing; the silly thing's bigger than she is. I don't know what Jack's excuse was other than he was carrying the picnic

basket and the blanket. They would've used it at home except our neighbors on both sides have outdoor lights.

The last time they'd had me do this for them, the celestial object of their affection was the moon. Pat aimed and focused the telescope and stepped back to make room for Jack. "There," she said. "Have a look. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Wow," he said, muffled a bit by the telescope. "What's that big empty spot there in the center?"

Pat looked in the telescope. "That is the Sea of Tranquility," she said and launched into an Apollo 11 history recitation straight out of her planetarium presentations.

The park seemed the obvious place for her to go. She'd been doing a lot of that in the days prior, day and night, eyes to the sky as if she were waiting for some sort of astronomical signal. I found her fetal on the metal merry-go-round, green and red silk pajamas intact, asleep. One of us had to be, I guess, or deserved to be, so I carried her home and let her do the rest of it in her own bed.

She made her way into the kitchen at eight the next morning. I thought I'd do something nice for her and make breakfast: eggs, bacon, and my attempt at pancakes. She stood there in the doorway, with a look like she thought she'd crashlanded on Mars or somewhere. "Have a seat," I told her. "The eggs are almost ready."

Pat scratched her hip and turned to go. "I have to get ready for work."

"Sit down. You're not going. I called in for you, told them you weren't ready yet, you'd be in tomorrow or the next day." I would rather it was closer to a week given the night before, but I couldn't tell her that. She hadn't been in for eight days. Another one or two wouldn't hurt.

"Tom, you had no right," she said, but there was nothing behind it.

"Pat, you look like hell. Now sit down and have some breakfast."

She sat at the kitchen table and I placed a mug of fresh coffee in front of her. The rings beneath her eyes were red and black enough that no amount of make-up could hide her lack of sleep. In between scrambling the eggs and flipping the pancakes, I caught glimpses of her adding cream and sugar to her coffee like she was underwater. Her stirring took so long that I had her breakfast plated by the time she finished.

I put the meal in front of her and watched her ponder it for a solid fifteen seconds before she said, "Thank you," and that in a quiet tone. She'd used up all her energy walking to the kitchen.

"Go back to bed, Pat," I said.

"Can't. Wasn't asleep anyway."

"Go back to bed."

She went. I ate the breakfast.

Pat listens to Pat. That's how it is, really. It might seem from the outside that she listens to me, but we established without saying so very early on in our relationship that what I would say to her was more suggestion than instruction. I'm not complaining. Half the time she did the right thing by ignoring me. Jack knew that too. Jack knew that Mommy did whatever she wanted no matter what Daddy had to say about it. When he worked that out at age eight, it became fascinating watching him play one of us against the other. He would ask me for something, hockey lessons or some new toy or some such, and I'd say no. A couple of days later, I'd be rearranging my schedule all the same so I could pick him up from practice, or trying not to trip over the newest thing in the living room that makes more noise than anything should. All thanks to Mommy.

What — what do I *do*?

I could have made it through work that day. I wouldn't have been worth a damn, a two-hundred-forty pound lump for one and all to avoid, but I would have been there. That would have been a welcome change, being there as opposed to where I had been for a

week. Work as opposed to home. All the past eight days had done was reinforce how bored I was within my own four walls. Nice place to visit, but living there was terrible. I had visions of Pat waking up and disappearing while I was gone. Lord knows where she'd turn up if that happened, wearing her pajamas or something else that screamed, "I'm not well, do as you will to me." That I'd found her in the park, that her energy had gotten her as far as the merry-go-round and no farther, had been an educated guess, but still just a guess. Where would she be next time? The playground at school? The field where Jack played his little league games? I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave her alone.

I spent the days rediscovering soap operas, their twists, their turns, their incredulity. Spouses cheated on one another, parenting children with the babysitter who turned out to be a long lost cousin. After three days of that I rediscovered the off button and turned to our bookshelves and read, one eye on the text, the other on the hallway leading back to our bedroom. Pat then had to go past me to get anywhere else in the house or outside. She kept mostly romance novels on the shelves, little things only slightly larger than my hand, with as much thought put into them as the soap operas. I stomached four in a two-day period and gave up. The alternatives were in the horror genre, vampires and spooks, things from the early days of King and Rice. Somehow my stomach and heart couldn't fathom pulling one off the shelf, let alone attempting to read one. It would be the romances or nothing.

I think, most of the time, Pat just lay in bed, tossing and turning and praying for sleep. Or something better.

A fella down the hall from me at work lost one of his kids the year before last. Leukemia. Very sad thing. He didn't have the luxury of going from upbeat to suicidal in a fleeting moment, poor guy. He had to have it drag on for I don't know how many years. You could see it in him, the eyes getting more and more sunken over time, the wrinkles on the forehead deepening, the graying of the temples, the growing reluctance to talk about his only son. I'd ask him every now and then how his boy was doing, if the leukemia was

in remission or any other good news. When I started working there his answers were, "He's good," or, "He's fine. Doing well." Over the next couple of years the answers came a little more slowly, seemed a little more forced. I could see him tense up when I asked about it. His eyes would widen a bit, like somebody'd just nudged him with a pitchfork, and he'd sit for a long moment before shrugging first and saying, "All right." It was never more than that toward the end. "All right."

He was gone from work for two weeks and some when his son passed away. When he came back, he looked like hell, as if he hadn't slept in a year and he was down to three brain cells that weren't on speaking terms anymore. He was, you know, just *there*, less worthwhile than parsley on a cheeseburger platter, not worth a damn to the company, but he wanted to get out of his own house. I know how he felt.

I'd fallen asleep in the easy chair pondering the news events of the day and dammit if she didn't sneak out on me. Not in the bedroom, not in the bath, not in the kitchen. The only upside was that I'd finally gotten a little nap, for all the good it'd done.

She was in one of the swings in the play area at the park, a few dozen feet away from the merry-go-round I'd found her on before. The other three swings were occupied by children busy trying to psych each other out with how high they could go before jumping off. That there was this woman in the fourth swing just sitting there, staring at the gravel, was of no consequence. So long as she didn't get in the way or remind them how what they were doing was dangerous, they didn't care.

At least she'd gotten dressed first.

I walked up and stood in front of her swing. "Pat?" I said, hands in my pockets. She didn't acknowledge me. "You okay, honey?"

The children next to us kept playing, swinging and shouting about how one of them was going to break his neck jumping from as high as he was. But he didn't listen. By then he'd gotten a lot of momentum going, and when the swing peaked at six

feet in the air, he jumped, arcing in a feet-first dive, and landed safely. Pat watched all this from the comfort of her own swing and let a tear form in one eye.

I held out a hand to help her out of the swing. She took it, stood up, wiped away the tear. "Did he know any of these?"

She knew he didn't. Jack's friends were in and out of our place constantly, invited or self-invited to countless dinners, sleepovers, baseball games in the backyard. They called us Mr. and Mrs. Hertzman when they called us anything. They knew enough to chew with their mouths closed, keep their elbows off the table, admit when they broke a neighbor's window, deny it when they broke ours. They had been absent since the funeral. "No, honey," I said. "Too young. Jack's friends were older." Pat nodded, and I led her home.

Actually, that's not entirely true, that bit about the friends being absent. Two days after the funeral Jack's girlfriend Tina turned up to claim some things of hers. "He borrowed, like, a couple of CDs last month. I just — you know, thought I could get them," she said after I let her in the house.

"Sure," I said. "They're probably in his room. Help yourself."

Tina was a sweet girl. He'd brought her home maybe the year before, did the whole meet-the-parents-dinner thing wherein she didn't say a word and made eye contact with me and Pat twice each. Jack tried like never before to initiate conversation, get Tina to talk about what she was into, and I swear the transformation Jack underwent that night — from self-involved teenager to outgoing conversationalist — was a stunning and, as we discovered the next night, singular experience when he talked about Jack and nothing but. I'm fairly certain that Tina found her way back to Jack's room at least once, and Lord knows what they did in there. She seemed to know the way; Tina went ahead down the hall to Jack's room as I sat back down on the couch and resumed reading a fifth-rate romance called *The Pleasures of His Flesh*.

Maybe a minute later she came back to the living room.
“Mr. Hertzman?” she said behind me.

I didn't look up. “Yeah?”

“I was wondering, could you, maybe, you know, go in and get them for me?”

I marked my place in the book, walked down the hall, and got as far as putting my hand on the doorknob. We didn't have any plans for Jack's room — still don't. We hadn't touched it, hadn't opened the door. There was too much of him in there. I had my hand on the doorknob and I couldn't turn it. Dust was probably already gathering inside on everything, from the clothes in his hamper to the cable TV on top of his dresser, from the bookshelf to the desk. In months it would become an allergist's wasteland, a dust bunny paradise in an otherwise spotless home. Jack would never have suffered it, nor would he have suffered our entering his room without him. There was everything of him in there, and out here, right next to me with this look on her face like a rabbit who's being teased with a carrot it's not even sure it wants, was his girlfriend. She just wanted her CD's, and she wanted to violate — wanted *me* to violate the sanctity of Jack's room. An image flashed in my mind of what must have happened a minute before; she'd stood where I was, hand at the ready, primed to turn the knob, and frozen like a Medusa victim.

“Can we do this some other time?” I asked, hand still on the doorknob.

She took a minute. “Yeah, sure, no problem,” she said and left. I pried myself away and went back to my book.

I tried again with the cooking to lure Pat out of the bedroom. Half an hour later the steaks were sizzling over the coals. Pat trudged herself into the kitchen as I came back inside with dinner. She sat down at the table which I'd set while the food was cooking and waited blankly as I put the plate of beef in front of her, and I wondered for a few moments if it had registered that I'd made her favorite. She got around to saying, “Thank you,” and ate like she'd been fasting for a week, which wasn't too far from the truth.

We went through the same motions after the steak was eaten. I brushed my teeth, climbed into bed, and stared at the ceiling. Pat applied the whatever to her face, took her contacts out, came to bed and tossed and turned. We pretended as if each other were asleep, preferring to be alone in our miseries.

At two thirty Pat got out of bed, put her robe on, and walked out of the bedroom. I stood up and followed. She walked through the house to the kitchen and out the back door, fluffy house robe, green and red silk pajamas and all.

I got dressed and caught up to her where I expected to: on the merry-go-round in the park. She was staring at the moon again, clutching the metal pole attached to the platform, the one children held on to and screamed for their lives in joy as the merry-go-round spun and spun.

"Pat, you can't keep coming back here," I said.

She looked down at the dirt track around the merry-go-round, her expression saying, "I can and I will."

"You need to come home, Pat. You need to sleep."

Pat looked up at the moon. "Where do you think he is by now?"

I looked up at the sky, to the full moon that shone in the bright darkness like a beacon guiding someone home. The moon Jack died under was half full, a sign of a life not yet complete or completed. "Right now, he's standing on the Sea of Tranquility, gazing at us through the highest power telescope heavenly money can buy. He's looking at us, moving constellations on the face of the Earth, and he's smiling because one day his mother will stand beside him, and see what he's seeing, and be in just as much awe as he is. More importantly, though, they will be happy just to be together again."

Pat stood up and buried her face in my chest. "I miss my son, Tom."

"I know, honey. I know."

That was how I walked her home, leaning against me, both of us crying, and when we got there we slept for hours and hours.

We went back to our jobs the next day, received what consolation our co-workers could give us, and by degrees came back around to the business of living. When we open the door to Jack's room — a couple of months from now, I think — it will probably be me who goes in. There's a large phosphorescent poster of the moon on the wall directly opposite the door, and seeing that would be a bit much for Pat.

Some nights I look at the sky, at the moon, and I see my son, his face, his smile. And years from now, when I remember how to forget —

