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I Am a Weak Man

Abstract
I am laying on the roof, wearing night vision goggles and squinting through the sights of a secondhand paintball gun, waiting on her '81 Chrysler K-Car to come farting down the street towards my house. The truth of this immediate scenario, that this should be embarrassing on several levels -- I'm an adult, for God's sake -- nudges at me but I remain focused.

Her car slows to a flatulent stop across the street and my breath seizes up a moment before continuing in short puffs. I'm thirty-two years old and terrified of this woman who still thinks this house is mine. Now I live in a storage unit she doesn't know about.

Keywords
pregnancy, sterility, weakness, relationship

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BOOTH

A JOURNAL

I Am a Weak Man

by the editors

John Baum

I am laying on the roof, wearing night vision goggles and squinting through the sights of a secondhand paintball gun, waiting on her '81 Chrysler K-Car to come farting down the street towards my house. The truth of this immediate scenario, that this should be embarrassing on several levels—I'm an adult, for God's sake—nudges at me but I remain focused.

Her car slows to a flatulent stop across the street and my breath seizes up a moment before continuing in short puffs. I'm thirty-two years old and terrified of this woman who still thinks this house is mine. Now I live in a storage unit she doesn't know about.

* * *

Six weeks into the relationship, I went to her place with a plan to let her down gently. She'd started making unannounced visits and leaving random dinners of catfish or spaghetti casseroles in brand new Igloo coolers on my doorstep. A new cooler each time. I have a collection now. She called me "honey." She wanted to spend time with my parents.

We had not slept together yet.

Recently, sitting in my storage unit, I imagined how that night should've gone,

how peaceful my life would be if I could have just ended it like I'd planned.

But instead, we slept together because I am a weak man.

We were sitting on the porch watching the final breaths of a late afternoon rainstorm rise from the sidewalk. The tiny beads of sweat above her lip were oddly enticing. She smiled and leaned forward to kiss me, but something green and Florida-shaped was lodged in her teeth. I drew back and with a finger, gestured to my own mouth, something you can't do without making a face.

She covered her mouth and jumped into the house. I counted the steps from her stoop to my car. Across the street a woman beat a brown rug over a porch railing. I counted the swats with the broom. Then the door opened behind me and I had my opening line ready. But she spoke first.

"Better?"

She had changed into a white lace number, and I could've plopped a grape into her cleavage from ten feet. My car was thirteen steps away. The woman across the street had stopped beating the rug at fourteen whacks. I'm sure she was stunned, too.

I have no illusions that some of this is not my fault. I am well aware that I held on a while longer, only because the sex was melt-your-face good. I am a weak man.

Several weeks later, she took me to a bookstore, bought me a coffee, and told me to wait at an outdoor table. She went inside and returned with a brand new copy of What to Expect When You're Expecting. Her eyes were alive as if something were chaotically spinning behind them.

Suddenly, I envied everyone else in the world.

She slapped me when I asked was she sure. It was a movie slap that everyone notices.

And now, from the false safety of my roof, watching her step out of her grumbling car, I see that moment as an unhinging in my soul. I cried. I stood in the parking lot and yelled that it had to be impossible; I asked how she knew it was mine, and she herself became unhinged.

Then I made an appointment at a fertility clinic because I am one testicle short of a pair.

* * *

When I was sixteen, I jumped from a trestle into a lake and didn't quite stick the landing. The resulting injury sent me to the emergency room with a dislocated testicle, the left one having lodged itself in a place it did not belong, damaged beyond repair. The prosthetic looked real enough. Even my mother said it looked authentic. The doctor made it clear that implanting the neutical could harm my potency but I just wanted to look normal. I was sixteen and if anything, a lack of reproductive power was a gift.

* * *

With an eye on her, I stand, bracing myself against the chimney, finger on the trigger. As I start to squeeze, two gunshots, real gunshots, shoot-to-kill gunshots, rip through the night and I flinch, lose my grip and the gun slides down the roof, clattering over the gutter, into a holly bush the size of a Volkswagen. My footing slips and I follow the gun, shingle grit digging into my knees and forearms as I scream, briefly airborne, before crashing in the holly bush. There had been no maniacal gunfire, only the two cannon shots of backfire from the K-car tailpipe.

Branches jab my ribs and face. I wipe beneath my eye and blood darkens the tips of my fingers. My right arm, perhaps slightly fractured, throbs intensely and I feel nauseous. The sky, grainy and green, appears twice, cut in half by a crack in the goggles.

After I extract myself from the bushes I see she is crying. Not laughing, raging, or yelling, but crying softly at the end of the driveway; her entire, skinny, seemingly unpregnant body gently trembling. Just above her quiet sobs is the whisper of a heavy mist that makes the trees sound as if they are hissing at us both.

When I remove the goggles the real world–stark, beautiful, vibrant and true, is like the shock of cold water. My nausea is gone.

I limp towards her and her hands move, rubbing circles over her flat belly.

I'd planned on lighting her up with the paintball gun and then showing her the letter from the fertility clinic, informing me, that I am sterile and will never procreate. All I'd wanted to do was rub her face in the hard fact that she was insane and her delusion impossible.

But all resolve crumbles and I ask to touch her stomach just once.

I say, "I'm sorry."

Her hand covers mine and together we comfort the baby that is not there.

John Baum's work has appeared in *The Blue Mesa Review* and *The MacGuffin*. He earned an MFA from Georgia College and State University and currently teaches high school English. He is also at work on more short stories and a novel. He and his wife Libby live in Macon, Georgia with their dogs, Charlie and Stella.

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