

Anniversary

They are in front of the blue light. She is on the floor, lying on her stomach. He sits on the couch behind her. He wonders how she can be comfortable, he hates lying on his stomach. She rests on her elbows. Her head full of blond hair like straw is bobbing with laughter. His children laugh with her. He doesn't know what they are laughing at; his drama is not in the blue light, it is in his head.

It is Sunday evening. Sunday evenings are not good for him. He has had all weekend to worry about Monday morning. The problems he has been worrying about all weekend now seem huge, insurmountable. He dreads the morning, when the alarm clock will go off and he must begin to solve the insurmountable problems.

Minor emergency will close in an hour. He has been putting off going all weekend, but he is coughing up mucous and he can barely breathe. His mucous is bloody and green. The only thing he dreads more than the sound of the alarm going off is it not going off because he has not slept. He needs antibiotics. He needs sleep to give him strength so that he can solve the unsolvable so that his family can laugh in front of the blue light.

He takes a seat in the waiting room. Across from him is a plain young woman in a thin coat. She does not look at him, she looks at

the floor. Her clothes are from Kmart. She doesn't have a man. Life is not what she had hoped. She lives alone. She is on food stamps and can not pay her rent. Her mother is watching her children so she can see the doctor who she can not pay. Two chairs down from her is a man in his fifties. In his youth he was almost handsome. He has produced children from three different women, none of whom he knows. They are angry because their father has abandoned them. His teeth are bad. He has not shaved for two days. His eyes are sad.

He thinks of the woman and children in front of the blue light. They are all that separates him from such despair.

The doctor looks at his eyes through the instrument, then his ears. He puts the stethoscope on his chest and tells him to breathe deeply. He asks him to cough. He consults his chart. A quizzical look fills his face.

"Do you know that you have been in the clinic the week before Thanksgiving every year for the past eight years?" he asks.

"No," he says.

"There's a pattern here," the doctor says. "An anniversary effect, maybe?"

He knows what the doctor is talking about, what happened the week before Thanksgiving more than twenty years ago. But there is nothing to be done about it.

"I need to go to work tomorrow," he tells the doctor. "Can you help me?"

"I'll write you a prescription for some antibiotics," the doctor says.

On the way home he stops at the drugstore to pick up his prescription and some sleep aid. This has become a pattern in his life, going without sleep for two or three nights, and then taking medicine to knock him out. He parks in the gray lot and walks through the cold into the store. The only other people in the store are a middle-aged woman and her teenage daughter. The bright fluorescent lights show the pores in the woman's coarse skin, the girl's makeup sparkles and shines like a doll face. The mother has a bag of potato chips, two cans of chili and a six pack of Keystone Light in her cart. The girl has two Snickers bars and a large plastic bottle of Dr. Pepper.

He finds the pharmacy in the back of the store. He gives his prescription to a woman in a white smock. Her black hair has turned gray. There are deep creases at the corners of her mouth, her upper lip. She looks down at him over her glasses. She looks like Judge Judy. He realizes that he hasn't shaved all weekend, that his sweatshirt is stained. I am innocent, he wants to tell her. I have a family, a job.

"It'll be about ten minutes," she says.

He wanders through the empty aisles. Occasionally he remembers to look for sleeping pills, but he has ten minutes, so he uses all of them. He finds himself standing in front of the napkins and paper towels. He is not sure how long he has been standing there, staring at the paper goods. He is not sure how he got here, with her on the floor in front of the television, the two children. He has scheduled the concrete, the pump truck, the finishers. Yes, he is sure he has scheduled them all. And the testing company. The forecast is for rain.

Bobby has football practice tomorrow afternoon. He has to pay bills before he goes to bed. He would like it if she sat on the couch next to him but that was over a long time ago. He pays for the prescription and sleeping pills and walks into the parking lot. Dark clouds hang heavily overhead, a sliver of pale sky lines the horizon. Street lights come on. His car is out there somewhere, waiting to take him to where he goes.