

From the upcoming short story collection “The Man Who Screams at Nightfall”



## HERE

He plunged his arms into his kitchen trash can, digging down, way down, past coffee grounds, that morning's scrambled eggs, that night's macaroni and cheese. Yogurt and honey mustard sauce smeared his forearms until he reached his destination: a pack of American Spirit menthol cigarettes crumpled at the bottom.

The pack was well-smashed. Six mangled sticks were inside, crooked, broken, and torn, each bent right above the filter. He took Scotch tape out of his miscellaneous drawer. Fingers trembled a bit as he straightened out one cigarette, snapped off a piece of tape, and wrapped it around the tears in the paper. Pressed it carefully to seal the hole, but not too hard so as to break it further. He did the same for one more. Two. He'd definitely need two.

It was just past nine p.m. He stood in the doorway of his daughter's bedroom before heading out to the patio. He had fed, bathed, and read to her, and now she slept in her Dora the Explorer bed, her straight black hair sprawled across her pillow. A nightlight glowed from a corner socket. Her chest rose calmly up and down.

On the patio he lit his first cigarette, keeping his fingers pressed over the taped-up slits. The smoke burned beautifully as he inhaled it into his chest. First one in almost twenty hours. Hey, it was progress. Quitting drinking (again) for the past three years had been easy compared to how deep the claws of this shit ran. He knew kids do what you do not what you say so yes, he had to quit for his daughter's sake. The daughter he had been raising on his own for the past three years, since the moment right here—right here on this patio thirty-six months earlier— when his wife had said she never wanted to have kids, never wanted to be a mother, it was all a huge, huge mistake, so, I'm sorry but you keep her, you take care of her, I'll see her whenever I can. Goodbye.

So, he did. He had taken care of her—every meal and bath, every pickup and drop off to daycare, aftercare, summer care, every earache and runny nose, three books read to her every night before going to bed, games, and toys on Saturday mornings, and planning for college — fuck! college! — he loved it all.

This cigarette was his reward. Another deep drag, another deep exhale, watching blue swirls of smoke dancing across the night air, disappearing into the dark arms of a magnolia tree.

He heard the pitter-patter of little footsteps: now she stood behind the screen door. "Poppa?"

He threw the cigarette to the concrete floor and smashed it with his toe, the hot ash burning just below his nail. He waved his hands through the air in front of his face. "Yes, sweetie?"

"Can I come outside with you?"

"Sure." He opened the door for her and as soon as she was clear, he scooped her into his arms and tickled her belly. Both of them collapsed into the cheap, canvas chair he had bought from Walgreen's. She settled in his lap, pressed her head against his chest. He rested his chin on top of her head. A huge, bright, full moon sat in the sky just above their tree-lined street.

"You remember when you got pink eye a couple of months ago?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Well, when I lived in the village in Africa, the people there called pink eye 'Apollo'. You know why?"

She shook her head.

"Well, they say that when astronauts went to the moon, they stirred up all the moon dust and it has been falling in people's eyes ever since."

"Is that true?"

"No...maybe. Who knows?" He brushed his fingers through her hair. "Why are you awake?"

"I heard you go outside."

"I'm sorry. I tried to be quiet."

"It's okay. I just wanted to make sure you were here."

He squeezed her a little tighter. "Of course. I would never leave you alone. You know that."

She nodded. He felt in his shirt pocket, confirming the continued existence of the other taped-up cigarette.

An early fall breeze moved through leaf-covered branches, kicking up a little dust devil in their driveway. She rested her tiny hand on his forearm.

"That is one thing you never have to worry about," he whispered and kissed the back of her head. The taste of Johnson and Johnson shampoo tingled on his lips.

"I will always, *always*, be here."

END