

My Baby Only Sleeps in Storms

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My baby only sleeps in storms. Only *really* sleeps. On calm nights he tosses and turns and kicks his little legs against the bars of his crib like he's trying to simulate thunder.

I do everything I can. I rock him with my whole body, like he's pitching around on a ship. I turn the "stormy night" white noise on my Bluetooth speaker up LOUD until the growl of a hurricane fills the trailer. They say babies like white noise because it reminds them of the sounds they heard in the womb: rushing, gurgling, the thrum of a heart. But my baby doesn't like the meditation rhythms or womb recordings. He only likes storms.

My baby only sleeps in storms and when there is a storm, he's out so fast and so deep it scares me. I can pick him up and he's limp and unreachable, his eyes darting around behind his closed eyelids. I put his crib under the window where the wind wuthers against the pane and slams the corrugated edge of the roof up and down and he'll dream and drool until the morning.

One night, a stolid night in July when only sounds were frogs in the ditch and the honking of cars out on the road, I got really desperate. Nothing I did was working. I left him squalling on a blanket while I stood on a chair and unhooked the glass light fixture from the ceiling. Then I looped a rope through the hook and tied either end securely around the handles of my plastic laundry basket. I put my baby in the basket and backed up all the way to one wall and let go.

The basket swung in a huge arc, almost but not quite scuffing the floor, then came swooping back to me for another almighty shove. I stomped my feet on the floor for effect and in no time at all, probably only five or six big swings, his shrieking fell silent. I let the basket swing itself out until it dangled in the middle of the room and there was baby, out like a light.

My baby was a happy accident. I take full responsibility. This is how he happened:

It was April of my grade twelve year. Provincial exams were just around the corner but the main problem on my mind was avoiding the curse of graduating a virgin. Grad was on the first of June, so I was on a hard deadline.

I had a kind-of boyfriend and had run out of time to find a better man for the job. Given that, I had accepted that it wasn't going to be an earth-shattering experience or anything. To make up for it I wanted to go all in on atmosphere. That way at least I could think of it as memorable.

"I've decided I want to do it on the beach," I told him. We were sitting in the back of his truck while his dogs chased each other in a field.

He twisted his mouth sideways in that objectionable way he had. "Sounds sandy," he said.

"We don't have to be in the sand," I clarified, "it would be in a tent. I want to go out to the West Coast and camp out overnight."

He looked hesitant. "I guess the dogs can sleep in the truck," he said.

“Can’t you leave the dogs with your parents? Just for one night?”

“I wouldn’t want to be out there without them,” he said, “it’s been a big year for bears.”

“Fine,” I said, staring straight ahead to stop my eyes from rolling.

“And have you checked the weather?” he asked.

“It’s supposed to be a bit blustery,” I said, “but nothing outrageous.”

He hemmed and hawed but in the end he said we could do it. His conditions were that the dogs would come and sleep in the truck, and that after we had sex we had to go to sleep right away and head back early in the morning because he had softball practice.

It wasn’t one of the nice big beaches frequented by tourists in the summer, it was a small cove accessible down a twisty and very potholed logging road. The road ended abruptly just above the beach, then there was a shin-breaking criss-cross of logs to clamber over and then a short stretch of sand with billowy rocks sticking out into the ocean at either end.

I pitched the tent above the tideline and rolled the charred tire ring we’d brought as a fire pit off the back of his truck. Meanwhile he’d let his dogs out of the truck and was watching both of them bound down the shore, unsettling a pair of ravens picking at a fish spine.

It had rained the night before. The logs were slick and a band of iron grey cloud constricted the length of the horizon. The waves lapped quietly at the sand but with a ragged quality to their

rhythm that suggested turbulence emanating from further out. In retrospect, I don't remember seeing or hearing any seagulls, which should have told me something.

The food we hoisted in a bear bag down the other end of the beach; he wouldn't leave it in his truck because "they can pry open windows." We left out a six pack of Lucky and the hot dogs and as late afternoon faded into evening we roasted them over the fire, tossing chunks to the dogs. I'd brought a card deck and we played blackjack and king's corner and go-fish for what felt like a very long time. Eventually we fell into silence, sitting on our mats in the gloaming and scrolling through photo reels on our phones. I think both of us were suddenly shy about being the one to suggest we head into the tent and get started.

By the time on my phone read 9pm I decided it was time to get on with things. Most of the light was gone. A wind had picked up, setting the cedars flapping, and the tent was tugging at its corner pegs. There was something *atmospheric* about it, I thought with satisfaction, considering my impending deflowering in cinematographic terms.

He came back from going pee, the dogs at his heels. I said I thought it was time to go into the tent. He said he was worried about that wind, plus he thought he'd heard something in the bush just now. I told him it would be fine, we'd come all the way out here and it would be a real drag to have to throw in the towel because of a bit of breeze. He said those were clearly altostratus clouds moving in from the West and that an average of seventeen people per year are

injured in weather-related camping incidents in BC alone. I told him he was neurotic, he told me he'd been planning to break up with me immediately after graduation, I told him I hadn't thought were we actually dating anyways and he said fine and he was going to sleep in the truck. I called after him that I'd be in the tent if he changed his mind and he wasn't going to get another chance. The dogs hopped up into the truck after him and he pulled the door shut with a bang.

It *was* getting windy. I could have gone after him, could have apologized and asked to sleep in the truck as well. There in the chilly truck cabin, amid the pong of pine air freshener and moist dog breath, it's even possible that one thing would have led to another after all. But now we had fought and my pride was injured. I extinguished the fire, grabbed the four cans left in the six pack, and crawled into the tent. I kicked off my shoes and squirmed into the sleeping bag fully clothed. Then I knocked back several more Luckys in the dark, sinking deeper and deeper into a sulk until it gave way to sleep.

I didn't actually expect that the guy would change his mind. So when I awoke sometime later to the tent being unzipped, I was momentarily alarmed.

I had more sensed than heard the presence at the tent flap: little was audible over the roaring of the wind and waves. Somewhere off in the night the dogs were howling. The tent was being buffeted as if beaten with clubs and the metal tent poles flexed and strained in their arch.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows. My head swam.

No answer.

I couldn't see a thing. I felt around for my phone to get some light but in the jumble of blankets and gear I couldn't lay my hands on it. I felt a flood of cold air as what little body heat had been trapped by the tent rushed out of the open flap. Now he was near me and I could hear heavy breathing as he rooted amongst the gear.

“What are you looking for?” I asked above the roar. As soon as I had spoken the rooting stopped.

In the next second I was seized upon. He grasped the chest of my sweater and pulled me up out of the sleeping bag in one big movement like something being uprooted.

“Change of heart?” I asked, startled and groggy. I leaned my face forward to kiss him and met with something wet and rough, tangled and twisting like a mass of rope clenching and unclenching, smelling of ozone and salt. I felt a surge of shock... but not repulsion.

Even now it's hard to put into words exactly what happened next. I was dragged this way and that as my clothes were wrenched off piece by piece. The wind hammered through the gaping flap, filling the tent and puffing it out like a balloon. I'm positive I was dreaming, because it felt like the whole thing came unmoored and we were clawed up into a gyre, hurtling around and around in a great vortex of air, the ocean convulsing somewhere far below us. I remember

sucking down breath in gasps, unable to speak or think, only feel. I think I even came, though in a way that felt like getting shot out of the mouth of a cannon.

In the morning I was flat on my back, naked on the floor of the tent amid the gear, staring up at sunlight shining through the green nylon. I wasn't sure how long I'd been lying like that. Empty beer cans lay scattered around me. I got up and dressed slowly.

Outside a scene of destruction greeted me. The beach was littered with flotsam: kelp bulbs and driftwood, netting and chunks of Styrofoam. The tent pegs were all pulled up and flung across the sand, though the tent sat apparently untouched just where I had pitched it.

I waddled over to the truck and tapped at the glass. The window was rolled down and the guy squinted out at me.

"You're alive," he commented, "sleep okay in all that?"

There was queasiness deep in my stomach, but I decided it was the alcohol. I put my hands on my hips and grinned at him. "I'll be honest, I didn't think you had it in you."

He looked at me. I looked back.

We drove back to town in silence, me wincing with every pothole.

Tonight the storm is a great inarticulate chorus howling through the dark. The tin siding of the trailer vibrates.

I hold my baby to my body. His chest moves up and down and his little fist grips the plastic hammer from his Bob the Builder set. Around him the whole inexplicable world revolves in the clashing black but in my arms he lies the quiet, all-dreaming core.

Behind the milk-blue skin of his eyelids, his eyeballs dance.