



Fever

BY JULIAN NEUER

You check the alarm clock for the third time in half an hour. You give up and tiptoe out of the bedroom. You don't want to wake the wife. You close the door without a sound and go downstairs to your home office.

The house is immersed in shadow. A few appliances, those that are always on, produce a drone that tries to pass for the silence of the night. Your head too is humming with thoughts that won't turn off. You enter the office, flip a switch, the shadows vanish, but your thoughts stand firm. Another sleepless night. You look around the office, try to derive some comfort from the familiar surroundings. You spend most of your days in this room. Everything is in order, each object in its place. This should make you feel better. Good idea, open the windows. Look at the city outside: lights on in other buildings, cars and buses on your street. No people in sight, but inside those apartments, cars and buses, other sleepless lives are following their own courses.

You are not interested. You're not the kind of man that finds invisible people useful at a time like this. You get away from the window, sit on the sofa, admire your home office. The bookcases. The books. The desk. The computer. The lamps. The chair. This is really the workplace of an intellectual. And the sofa, that's the special touch. The sofa is a sign that this is the office of a professional of the future, a true artisan of ideas, freed from the hours and spaces arbitrarily appointed for work by the obsolete principles of the industrial age. Your best ideas have occurred to you not at the formality of your desk, but in the comfort of the cool, synthetic-leather upholstery of your sofa.

You clear your throat once, twice; the third time, it comes out as a cough. In the end, you don't say anything. You think talking to yourself can be embarrassing. But your throat hurts, as if your Adam's apple contained all the sins of Adam and his descendants. You feel you have to do something about it. You decide to fix yourself a drink. (The small refrigerator in the office was a nice idea, too. Never let thirst or hunger interrupt your work again. You've thought of everything.)

You hesitate. At your age, a glass of whiskey can mean a bout of heartburn, or worse. The shots that will certainly follow the first are the promise of a nasty hangover in the morning, maybe an entire workday lost. (You wonder if you've really freed yourself from the hours and spaces arbitrarily appointed for work by obsolete principles and all that.)

On the other hand, whiskey or no whiskey, tomorrow morning is already gone down the drain. You are always complaining that at your age you should need less sleep each night, but your body keeps demanding more and more. The truth is, a sleepless night like this will give you at least half a day of foggy thinking and low productivity tomorrow anyway.

Go on, fix the drink.

What the—? No ice in the fridge?

But you always keep the trays filled, you always refill them after use, precisely to avoid a situation like this. This was not supposed to happen. You've made it clear that your office is off-limits to the other members of your family. Your wife always states her business and asks for permission before she enters. She's taught the children to do the same.

Your children. A teenage girl, sixteen, and a younger boy, nine. They're asleep now, in their respective rooms. You consider waking them up to interrogate them, the main suspects of breaking into your office and doing away with the ice. The girl has been acting strangely lately. She has become more rebellious, has scoffed at your orders, rejected your advice, ignored your decisions. She too asks for permission to interrupt you in your office, but she does it in an overly formal tone of voice, as if to mock you. She must have taken the ice as a prank. Or maybe it was the boy. He is still young enough to think that he can break any rule if he is sufficiently convinced of the reason, however childish. The kitchen is too far away, after all.

Relax. Tomorrow you can call a family meeting to discuss the disappearance of the ice.

You tell yourself it's better not to fix the drink after all. But you're not fooling anyone. You know it was not really your decision. No reason here for pride at your self-control. The ice is gone, you hate your whiskey straight, you are not really in control. Your Adam's apple still hurts, and now your eyes begin to burn because of the bright white light from the lamps. Turn some of them out. That's better.

Since you're out of the sofa, you decide to sit at your desk. Your behavior changes instantly. You start to move like a machine with a purpose: you turn on the computer, open files, consult calendars, check balances, run electronic errands. For the next quarter of an hour, you try to get into the familiar rhythm of work. But you know it's all useless. You can't concentrate. The only conclusion you have reached is that your last month was below average in productivity.

You should try to think of something else instead of work and the pain in your Adam's apple. Say, your family. (Forget about the ice, though.) Maybe you should spend more time with your wife and kids. But you often feel that the more you make yourself available to them, the less they tend to value your presence. Take your own history as a son: your parents were always there for you, and now you do your best to avoid them, as you are sure they have nothing — absolutely nothing — to offer you today. Maybe your girl is starting to feel that way about you. And you have so much to teach her, if she would only listen.

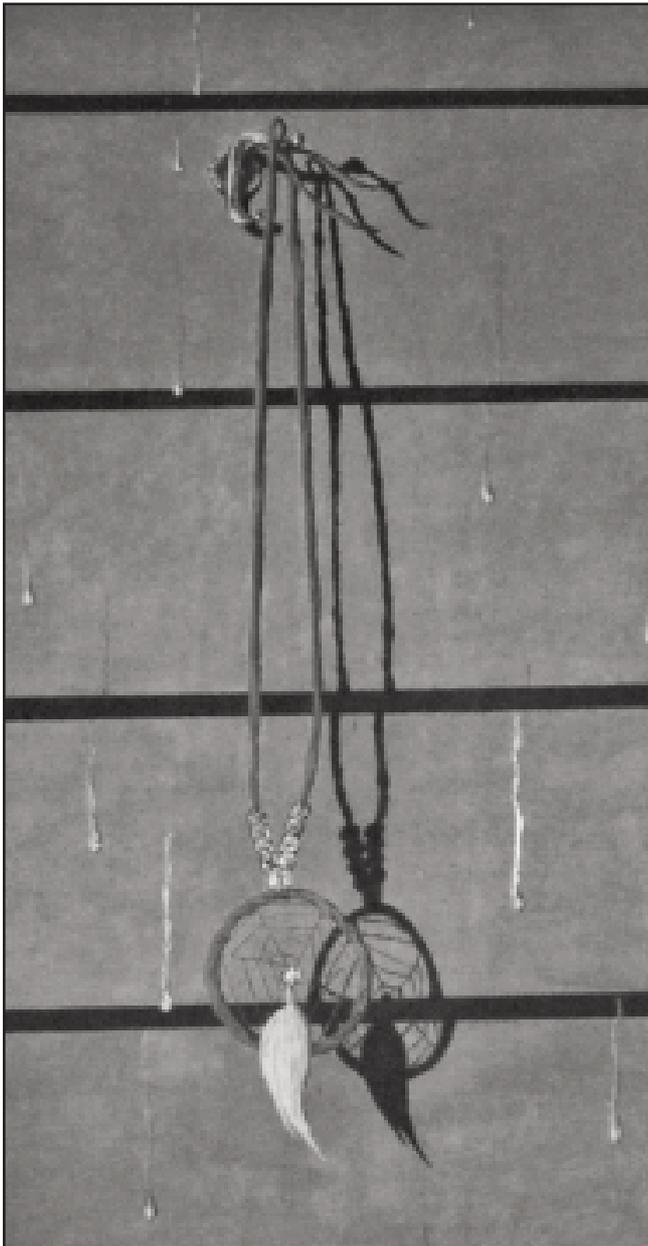
The boy, he listens. He asks questions that you can answer. He wants to be like you when he grows up, work and all. You feel it would be nice to have your boy speak for you and for your vision to the future generations.

You ask yourself why you can't speak for yourself and for your own vision.

No, the future generations are too far to reach, maybe even

*You look at your own reflection on the computer screen.
You see the gaze of a lunatic, your hair dishevelled,
your forehead bathed in sweat.*

so far as where your daughter stands now. You should accept the injustice underlying most parent-child relationships: in the beginning, the child is helpless and ignorant, and you, the parent, are aware of every single detail of the child's surroundings; like a god, you hold the secrets of the world, the power to make it rain, to make it shine; but as the years go by, the child's experiences accumulate faster than you can account for, and now, try as you might, you cannot control the child's world. If you are lucky, when the child becomes an adult, the child will try



Dreamcatcher by Arnold Isbister

to understand what you were, what you felt, what you thought. But time can be opaque; in old age, the mind falters, and a crueler injustice presents itself: when the child is ready to understand your thoughts, your thoughts may not be there anymore. That may be why you are so worried: you're afraid your mind may go before you are able to answer the questions your children haven't even asked yet.

You are still sitting at the desk, but you have stopped typing. You look at your own reflection on the computer screen. You see the gaze of a lunatic, your hair dishevelled, your forehead bathed in sweat. You've done your best to ask questions and collect opinions for almost half a century, waiting for the moment to give something back to your children and to the world. Now you worry you may never get around to it. You have wanted to start a personal journal for years, but have always found a reason to postpone it, as one postpones a diet. The time has come to lose that weight, to make your soul lighter.

Go on, do it.

You stare at the cursor as it sits indifferently at the top of a blank page in your text editor (which you have customized to display white text on a black background). That cursor blinks like a beacon, a lure — or a warning sign. You are drawn. You decide to write a long letter to your children, a manual containing all the explanations, so that their questions about life may never go unanswered. That would be a good way to justify your existence, to do your job, to give the world something of yourself. To recover your peace.

Minutes pass, and you haven't pressed a key. You don't know where to start. It is not a simple task. You stare at your own face reflected on the screen again. Pale. Expressionless. Still. Like a dead person.

Precisely. To be able to explain life like that, in such a definitive way, you have to be dead, because only the dead have collected all the answers. What you are really trying to do here is write the ultimate letter of farewell, a last will in favor of those who remain. That's why you have never started your journal: summing up your life like that would be admitting there is nothing more to be lived.

Nonsense! Think of your children, the ones who will inherit the treasure of wisdom and experience you are leaving behind. No one else can give them those answers!

Nothing. The screen is still blank. You don't want to write. Whatever you write will be the admission of your own end; worse, it will be a shameless bluff: if you know all the answers, please explain why you haven't used them in your favor. And even if you could bring yourself to write, you wouldn't know who to address. The meaning of life is not reading material for children — who, by the way, haven't even started searching for it yet. If you really want to teach your children what adult life is all about, wait until they've grown. If you write now, you will be writing to future ghosts, a multitude of invisible people, each one of them your son, each one of them your daughter,



WRITING THE LIFE - FICTION

traveling a labyrinth of space and time, where you will never be able to find them without losing yourself.

Maybe they don't want to be found.

Your crazy-eyed reflection on the screen sits between you and a text that you will never write. You get up from the desk. You go back to the sofa. You feel your Adam's apple burn. You hold your head in your hands and — finally, uncontrollably — burst into tears.

All alone in your office, you sob convulsively, letting out long, guttural moans, like an abandoned animal. You cry because it is not easy to understand the exact nature of your helplessness; then you cry because when you do get an inkling of the causes, you feel more helpless still. You make an effort to control yourself, you take a deep breath, you try to think your way out of this, and the cycle repeats itself: you cry because you're thinking, you think about the reasons why you're crying, you stop, you breathe, you think, then cry because you're thinking, and on and on it goes.

After a while — you can't tell how long — the cycle is interrupted. In the back of your neck, you get the unmistakable sensation of another human presence in the room. Still sitting on the sofa, you turn around. Standing behind you, motionless, is your son.

"I don't feel so good", he says.

His voice is weak. You find it puzzling that your helplessness should echo in your son's words. His hair in disarray, his eyes bloodshot, his face in a frown, he looks the way you feel. You don't know how long he's been standing there, or how much of your weeping he has witnessed.

"I don't feel so good", he repeats. "I think I ate something bad."

You struggle as if to wake up from a bad dream. You don't answer.

"I woke up with a headache. My belly hurts. I was going

upstairs to your room. Then I saw the lights on in your office. I don't feel so good."

The boy comes around and sits beside you on the sofa. He doesn't say another word. At regular intervals, he moans in a very low voice. He lets his body slide until he is lying on his back, his hands over his stomach, his head on your lap. You touch his forehead — he does not have a fever — and ask him:

"What would you like?"

"Nothing", he answers in a feeble voice.

"Can I do something to help you?"

"No, nothing."

"Are you in pain?"

"Just a little."

Your son smiles at you, as if to show you his pain is bearable. Don't worry, it's all right, it's just a little pain, says the smile. Then the boy closes his eyes.

After a while, eyes still closed, he whispers:

"Dad?"

"Yes, son."

He doesn't say anything.

"Yes, son?", you insist.

"I was thinking of something... I wanted to tell you, but I forgot what it was."

Your son's breathing gradually becomes deeper, calmer. The moaning stops. You too close your eyes and let your head hang back, feeling on the back of your neck the coolness of the synthetic leather. You are careful not to move, so as not to disturb your son's rest.

Half an hour later, the day begins. You and your son still lie motionless on the sofa. The sunshine crawls into the office, timid at first, growing in determination by the minute, obscuring the feeble light of the computer screen and wrapping both of you in its gentle, luminous warmth.

And you never thought to ask him about the ice.

Humours

BY ROLLI

She is not always somber, my Mistress. She will often, when she is occupied with something — a conversation, a game of draughts — grow vigorous, as if she has made a great discovery of happiness. She will sit upright; turn her head sharply; she will even smile. She outgrows herself at such moments, in the manner of an opening rose. It is a remarkable alteration. If my Master observes it, he will grin — though he is himself a reflective man. He will set down his novel, and watch her. He too grows animated. And yet his expression is not only of pleasure, but also anxiety. He is never more pleased, I do not

think, or more anxious, than when his wife shows enjoyment. It is a peculiar thing.

But they are not lasting, these humors of my Mistress. Soon again, she settles into herself. She closes. She grows distracted, and seems not to remember that she was speaking of her old companion, or crowning a piece. Her smile declines... She is once again melancholy.

And my Master. He *shudders*. He lowers his head; he opens his novel. He appears to read, but does not turn a page. He will remain so for many minutes — at times, the entire evening.

It is a peculiar thing.