

Sleep Rhythm
by Max Evans

I remember picking up a party platter of empanadas for a delivery service when these old heads got loud in conversation.

“Kids these days don’t know about keeping it real,” one said.

“How can they keep it real?” the other said. “Always on their phones, filtering selfies, googling.”

If those old dudes were in my studio now, I’d sit them right on this futon where I’m recovering from a hangover. And I’d be like, “You wanna keep it real? Cool then. Let me tell you about my weekend. I’ll keep it real with you. Realer than the realest real can get.”

What would I tell them first? I could start with the cops slapping on the cuffs...or maybe the heated argument with Angela’s mom...can’t forget the scrap with my sketchy neighbor... what about the cherry stem in that girl’s bra...or skateboarding with my infant through Long Beach...then there’s getting kicked out the bar for my birthday. Speaking of throwing up, that’s how this whole thing began.

This past Friday night, Shawna was crying insanely. Teething phase. She spent the week in my arms and Daddy didn’t complete any food deliveries. But when Daddy’s back tightened, he placed baby girl on the floor so he could fold in half, torso bobbing, twisting this way and that way.

All the while Shawna erupted a volcano of vocal cords. She rejected the chilled ring from the fridge and her sweaty hands squeezed the air. Before giving in, I needed a minute. Request denied—her mouth hinged wider. The irritated gums were red as chewed licorice all except the tissue up front. The engorged membrane was puffy with puss. Inside that thin film, I could see a race between her bottom teethies, the taller one growing in crooked like mine.

I so badly wanted to pop that bubble with a mechanical pencil. But when I joked that with her pediatrician this week, all I got was no, no, no.

“Don’t do that,” she scolded. “Everything will be fine.”

“Alright,” I said.

“You must let nature take its course.”

“Got you.”

But the lady would not let it go. She explained what I already knew: botched jobs, infections, child abuse reports. Her voice was pitched as if talking to a five-year old. Nurses talk to me with the same wah-wah voice. Or sometimes they talk really, really slowly.

Okay, I get it. You have a young, baby-faced dad in your office. But don’t act like my daughter isn’t with me half the time. And don’t treat me like I wasn’t there for her first breath, first step.

By the way, your clinic walls are thinner than wipees. I can hear you explain shit to the moms with your regular voice, some who have never passed Franklin Jr. High! And I’ve read every pamphlet in the lobby, including “How to Talk with Baby.” But I’m gonna type up one for you that explains talking at Da-da with a wah-wah tone is a nuh-uh-uh.

So yeah, *Miss*, I know what scratch mittens are. And never would I nuke her baby bottle either. Just because my nipples don’t pump milkshakes does not mean I’m clueless with my daughter. And just like you, I memorized the three most important letters in the alphabet: www. Because a cell phone fits in my pocket too.

Baby girl continued to cry at my feet Friday night. Her screech hit a frequency guaranteeing another visit from the property manager. So I scooped up Miss Wiggle and she

shimmied in my grasp. I bounced at the knees while she mimicked inflatable tube men at car lots.

“It’s okay,” I repeated.

But Shawna flung her twenty pounds in every direction. My back throbbed from old injuries: failing rail slides, slipping off the roof at a party.

Remember the old woman who lived in a shoe? Well, I live in a Vans shoebox. My studio is a bottom floor corridor. Long and narrow. A small window with bars looks out to a glassy condo under construction. Dad mentioned the cranes are the highest in the city and the orange checkered flags flapping at the top are to warn low flying aircraft. The elevator lifts resemble orange cages, ugly cousins to the scaffold walkways advertising amenities: rock climbing, private bowling lanes, rooftop hammocks. Meanwhile, the sunlight dies in my apartment more each month, the walls dimmed to a shade of cardboard.

And the fixtures in my shoebox are super random. They remind me of a giant kid late on a project who threw in a bathtub, heater, and cabinets then shook the contents with a squirt of glue. Because upon entry, you’re already in the kitchen. Without taking another step, you can take a gander at the world’s smallest bathroom. If you shifted your eyes lower... little bit lower... and zoomed in, you’d discover where all the frozen burritos stacked in the freezer eventually land. To block the view of the toilet through the empty doorframe, a shower curtain hangs from a pull-up bar.

Along the back wall of the studio is half of a mantle—the owners cemented the log part—with the other half stretching inside my neighbor’s apartment. The brick top holds my keys and wallet. To the side of that, the metal security door leads to the alley where Shawna’s stinkies stabilize her diaper can. Homeless in search of soda cans cuss when they lift the lids, the Santa

Anas blowing the stench to 4th Street. (My buddies know the spare key to my place is taped underneath.)

So Friday night, I carried Shawna with limited real estate. From the front door to the backdoor. From the backdoor to the front door. While skirting the futon, I imagined us ollying the flattened cushion, catching air over Shawna's bag. The only strip I've cruised more times on this Earth is the skate park by the beach. I spent entire weekends there, smoking and grinding well after my Arizona Tea ran dry, sun sloped behind the Rite-Aid where I'd buy the cans.

On the days my ankles were bugging, I'd lean against the short chain link fence and lounge with elbows over the top. Just laughing at the scene. Like when dogs escaped their owners to chase down a squirrel and stopped on a dime to piss on a fire hydrant. Or the out-of-towners claiming they were sponsored but couldn't nose grind farther than a can of Krylon. At the same time, the resident skater who rocked an eyepatch was nailing every trick while juggling soccer balls. Skillage. Then there was the lesbo bartender with fat gauges who mollywhopped a new kid for snaking her turn. We tried to warn him but his earholes musta been packed with slide wax. And what about those drunk dads who demanded a board because they thought they still had it, only for gravity to spank them back to reality. A round of golf claps for those classic falls. But the best days ever where when pros on tour would dish free merch out their trunks.

Yet I will never forget the day that everyone froze in place. Not just those of us paying dues to the concrete. I'm saying everybody at the park paused: guys knocking dips between benches, parents filming kids on slides, schizos barking about taxes.

The cry was indistinguishable. Definitely not the wail of a human. The thrust of sound was too rapid. Closer to a demanding meow yet more powerful than any cat. Everyone searched around, wondering what the hell it was, until fingers pointed toward the street.

At first glance from behind, I thought a turkey was roaming the LBC. But the clawfoot squawker emerging from the shadows had a curvy neck that gleamed a metallic blue in the sun. With traffic rushing past, the glittery bird recognized his audience in the park and stopped to shimmy. The peacock's purple back sprouted hundreds of iridescent green feathers, a bouquet of olive-shaped eyes in bloom, the wide fan ruffling over the sidewalk. Just as many cell phones popped out to record.

Crazy to think that was three years ago during senior year. My legs used to kill me from the daily grind sessions. Yet they were not as fatigued as my arms were from carrying Shawna.

Typically my little girl relaxes with her bottle on my lap and is mesmerized by skater docs on YouTube. But she'd been clingy and with my patience running low, I became the old woman who lived in the shoe—I didn't know what to do. Whatever happened though, I didn't want to rush back to ER after being there Wednesday night for her earache.

All week, I tried to distract her by any means possible. Netflixing her favorite baby shows. Cruising PCH with the windows down. Watching airplanes land at the airport. But no matter what I did, she'd lose interest. And those hands would open and close to be lifted.

My last shot was to visit my buddy Jerry. She loves his brown chihuahua. But little Chewbacca grew tired of the screeching and the patient dog escaped through the pet door. Zero tail movement.

"Chewbacca," Jerry called, "come back here."

But I knew how it felt to reach a limit with Shawna.

"No worries, dude," I said. "Really."

I buckled her into my car again and while she yelled more, Jerry motioned a pint glass to his mouth, confirming the boys wanted to grab drinks the following night. Three weeks prior, I

turned twenty-one. Shawna was with me then and the following week they had online finals. But then I had Shawna again this week. I couldn't wait to celebrate with friends. Legally.

I'm the last in our crew with a sideways ID. Since my daughter's birth, the few times we have gone out, they've passed me drinks under the bathroom divider. I pay them back on our taco runs afterwards yet the totals have gone up ever since I gave up weed. I've been sipping more than ever before.

The humidity and the state fires had been relentless but while perspiring in the shoebox with Shawna, I had to wait another night to slam kamikazes with the boys. She refused to be put down. Not even for two seconds. Not even so Daddy could take a leak.

Inside the bathroom, I pressed her to my chest and aimed the yellow stream. The toilet seat had been permanently raised since Angela moved back in with her mom. Honestly, and I love my daughter with everything I have, but I couldn't wait to drop Shawna off the next morning with Angela. My black tank top fit loose from the stress. My nerves were cracked from dealing with a sick baby.

Once the paternity test had proven Shawna was mine (Angela will never forgive me for demanding that blood work), I vowed to stop smoking. And trust me, I love my herbage. It's legal and all but in a few years, she will start elementary school. I'll be the youngest parent there and I don't want to be the flannel burnout who's fiending for a toke on Back to School Night.

If I look raggedy-tired by that point, it won't be from staying lit and playing Fornite. It'll be from working my ass off, doing whatever it takes to ensure Shawna's straight. I dumped my last bit of kush down the same toilet where I was peeing at that moment.

I was mid-stream when Shawna bucked. A few tinkles sprinkled the rim. I held her tighter but when she jerked, I pressed both hands to her back. I refused to let her slip because she

mighta hit her head on the tub. Yet by the time I secured her wiggle motion, my boxers were belted to my balls, the elastic band slanted across my sack.

Beneath my knees, everything was hosed. TP tower, bathmat, floor. I stepped out of my damp bottoms.

Shawna's teething ring was on the ground. Rather than squat down, I tried picking up the ring with my toes. But between her slobber and my pee, the round plastic was difficult to grip. Took a few tries but I got the orange circle. Even though his mom woulda boiled off the germs, I ran the teething ring under the sink and gently slid it back into her mouth.

But Shawna wasn't about that life. Just as I flushed the toilet, she dropped the ring into the water.

I was like, "Dude, come on."

The plastic circle spun and I zoned out.

I imagined sending a text to Angela that said, "Fuck it...it's too much. I don't know what else to do. She won't calm down and shit. Can I bring her over tonight? Please, for real. Or maybe you could come pick her up. You know my car's been tripping lately."

But I knew Angela's mom would be over her shoulder. Saying, "See, I told you Gavin can't take care of Shawna. Why'd you agree to split custody? My God, you agreed to this!"

The water level in the toilet rose.

I stood there half-naked, trapped in a dead stare, hating on Angela's mom. She rejected the dreams we had been building. Vikki's her name, but I call her Miss Jackson. I never met Mister Jackson but I can understand why he left her.

The water stopped running.

Shawna turned silent as well.

“You better, baby?” I whispered. I patted her back. “You good, now?”

I was on the verge of grabbing the ring from the toilet when Shawna trembled. Her body stiffened before lurching.

At the first touch of wetness, I whipped my back toward the cabinet mirror. In its reflection, I saw apple-banana sauce sliding into my tank top. I peeled it off and into a pile with my shorts. That’s when I knew a long night was ahead.

Baby girl cried as I carried her to the futon. Cried as I laid her down on the bed. Cried as I rummaged through her bag. I found the thermometer and pressed the sticker to her forehead. The ER doctor said to return for antibiotics if the numbers passed the red bars.

The reading began in the yellow section: a subnormal temp.

I crossed my arms, wondering if she was sweating from fever and not from the weather. Should we had left for the hospital already?

The numbers climbed into the faint green section: low average temp.

My car had been running hot lately too. Would we make it? My credit cards were maxed out after the arrest and my bank account couldn’t cover an Uber, ER copay, plus medicine.

I brushed the hair off her temple. She felt fine to me. But maybe that had been wishful thinking on the part of my fingers.

The sticker went dark green; the next would be red.

Wednesday night before the ER visit, Shawna had been extra irritable prior to falling asleep. Past midnight, she woke up sick. All things absorbent—bath towels, drool rags, paper rolls—were drenched. I wiped her mouth with toilet paper on the drive to the hospital.

Once she was admitted, I texted Shawna’s mom with an update: earache, no medication, IV for dehydration.

Angela worked in a few hours but I assured her everything was fine.

No sooner did Miss Jackson show up. She was in a pink peacoat over PJs. Frazzled. She hit me with the twenty questions, all of which had been answered had she listened.

But no, at two in the morning, she pestered the doctor and the nurses. Then she reported what I said from the jump. Annoying. Perhaps she thought a ghost had been holding Shawna all week long. The same ghost who'd been floating around since her granddaughter's birth.

Miss Jackson can be on the other side of town and when I think of her caked on eyebrows, my chest tightens. But at that moment, while she stroked Shawna's head, she stood way too close. The energy from her palm transferred through my daughter's body and my ribcage hardened. Her pink peacoat grazed my shoulder and the rough fabric almost trip wired a throat punch. While staring at the white tile, I reminded myself to breathe.

The numbers climbed on the thermometer and my Adam's apple squeezed. I loved my daughter so much but her fussiness outmatched my endurance. I would never make her happy. I felt dumb. Tired. My fingers laced into my hair. The thought of another reception room full of weird-ass people was not possible. And having to deal with Miss Jackson again!

I remembered when Chewbacca had left through the doggy door and I looked toward my human door. I was tempted to escape the crying. For five minutes. Regroup.

At that point, after nine months of not smoking, my mind glitched like snaps of electricity, zapping each nook and cranny of the apartment to recall where relief might be stashed.

Kitchen cabinet!

I stepped away from Shawna and reached into the cupboard. Behind jars of carrots and peas, a long box was tucked into a corner. The tall case was blue.

I read the label. No, it's wasn't weed. It was Courvoisier VSOP.

While I had unwrapped my uncle's gift a few weeks ago, he said, "Yeah buddy. This'll grow the gorilla on your nuts and get you the monkey."

Shawna exploded sound from the bed. But this good Daddy was desperate.

I pulled out the bottle by its neck and stripped off the gold foil. The nubby cork slipped from its mouth and I poured a shot. I felt like a certified man with a mortgage, garage tools, and broken lawn mower. My first sip woulda run twenty dollars at the club, my right eye tearing up from the fumes. For the left eye to match, I swigged another.

I returned to check on the thermometer and braced myself.

Seriously!

I rubbed the sticker across her forehead.

Was I reading that right?

Her temperature had stopped in the dark green section. She had a regular temperature.

I picked up Shawna and kissed her on the thermometer. My lips smooched her soft cheek to confirm no fever. Elated as landing a kickflip, I spun naked but then had to work double time to bring her cry back down.

Although we weren't out of the woods, I took a long, deep breath. But that deep inhalation through the nose picked up the fact that I hadn't showered for days.

"Daddy stinks," I told her. "Bath time, bath time."

But a final glint from the weed I'd been feigning glimmered in my head. I probably could scrape the resin from my bong but then another thought hit me. Before it could fade away, I carried her to the kitchen. I dabbed my pinky into a shallow shot of Courvoisier and rubbed her

gums. They felt ridgy, warm. Shawna jerked but I repeated the motion. Her lips smacked, not liking the taste, but the brown liquor would numb that area.

Faster than a phone notification, my mind created a meme that showed my mugshot attached to a breaking news link. If we ended up at the hospital later and bloodwork was requested, how would I explain her blood alcohol level?

But parenting instincts said another drop wouldn't hurt her.

In the bathroom, I took off her diaper and we were both naked. The water ran in the tub.

I do my best to maintain the floor. The curled material at the base of the tub showed layers of linoleum, decades of trapped mildew, no matter how much bleach is dumped into the bucket. However, a few pumps from Shawna's no tear bottle sweetened the air.

I hand tested the growing foam and settled Shawna into her seat. Her tense frame relaxed. She swatted downward. Splashing splashing splashing. Her small feet stomped bubbles.

I slid behind her and gave my baby girl a bath.

I massaged her neck muscles. Then my finger pads stroked her scalp. She inherited that jutting bone at the back of her head from me. In addition to my fatty bottom lip and buggy eyes.

The slathered shampoo on her head resembled a swimming cap. I leaned her seat backward, the suction cups on the bottom giving way. My thighs held Shawna in position and her upside-down face resembled a guppy. I poured water along her hairline, remembering her mom.

Back when Angela was still fun, she would gather bubbles for a soapsuds mustache then pack on more for a beard. A bubbly eyepatch completed her pirate face and her hands would glide across my body.

“Arr, shiver me timbers,” she said. “I’m searching for me booty. Ahoy matey, what’s this I found—the peg-leg I’ve been missing.”

I wiped my baby’s forehead with a smooth white washcloth, the same one that cleaned her entire body as a newborn. Thank God she’s past that phase. I hated bathing her in the sink. Every part of her was delicate and I worried her skin would blister or I’d forget to support her neck or I’d press too hard on her soft spot. Now that she’s nearly a year old, Shawna can feed herself sliced grapes and can turn the pages of her favorite cloth book.

She babbled and played with her floating toys. I quickly washed my pits as couldn’t believe my ears when she giggled.

After the bath, a spray of goosebumps lifted across her shoulders. I forgot all our towels were dirty so I wrapped Shawna in my bathrobe and changed her on our bed. With her diaper strapped on and her Super Woman pajamas buttoned, I slid into my shorts and t-shirt. Then I brushed her hair which seems to help it dry quicker.

She was vowelizing when a yawn spilled out.

My breath stopped—it wasn’t even nine o’clock!

So I continued talking to her. Slower and slower. My fingers slid down her face. She knew what I was trying to do and her little eyes opened. Her whimper resembled Wednesday night’s whining but before she could slip back into that mode, I picked her up. I didn’t know any nighttime lullabies so I hummed whatever wandered to mind.

In a last ditch effort, Shawna bucked. But I patted her back with a heavy hand and she released a big sigh. Her face rested against my neck, tiny tears of defeat wetting my stubble. I knew better than to lay her down too soon. In the middle of our shoebox, I rocked her slowly.

Gnarly day, I thought, and wiped the tears off her face.

Her breathing steadied. I stopped moving just to hold her for a minute. The pure feeling in my chest told me I was doing my job in life. I went to the kitchen and drank a little more. We both would sleep well soon.

Finally, my hands secured her on the bed. I set the alarm on my iPad and I curled around her.

“Goodnight, my little Princess.”

My head hit the pillow and an image floated to mind: the ring in the toilet. I could deal with that in the morning. I fell asleep with the lights on and I entered dream mode.

No sooner was I awoken by my neighbor screaming at his girlfriend. She yelled back but I couldn't make out their words because of their loud TV. But the floor trembled from a chase. Our shared wall thudded and glass broke on their side.

Shawna's cheek twitched. Then her hands squeezed. I had no energy to pick her up.

Insane from robbed sleep, I jumped out of bed and rushed out the door. I would be goddamned if that heroin dealer woke her up.