



**Nightlight  
Magazine  
Ellipses  
Volume 3 Issue 3**

# **Nightlight Magazine**

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# Ellipses

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# **Disclaimer**

Warnings for thoughts about death and sadness.

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## Foreword

The pause between breaths. The hesitation between phrases. A moment of silence, of reflection, of wait-wait-don't-tell-me.

For those of us suffering from depression, our lives become a silent stretch of indecision and doubt, an interminably long period of time with hyper-criticism of self where all you *do* is reflect, it seems. You don't have the energy to do anything else but nitpick, but overthink, but choose your words over and over again so that none escape. Depression feels like the icon that pops up on an iPhone when someone is texting you back, but that text never comes, just the floating little dots indicating something is coming, but not to you, after all.

For those of us suffering with anxiety, the rest of the world can seem so loud that those moments of pause can feel like sweet islands in a vast sea of chaos. A quiet second to yourself can mean everything in that state, can grant the clarity of thought that helps you realize you don't need to stress-buy \$45 worth of lipstick in one go. Anxiety is living with a nitpicker in your head so personal and real and incessant that moments of blissful silence to gather yourself and have your mind to yourself are moments of tearful joy.

Earlier this year I wanted to have an issue where we explored the loud explosions of emotion that accompany mental illness and life in general. For this issue, I wanted to do the opposite, and the writers did not disappoint. Enclosed in this issue are stories of aching poignancy and quiet, both literal and figurative. I am, as always, humbled to have created the vessel in which these artists have chosen to convey their art, and am proud to present this issue to the rest of you, the readers.

Respect the ellipses and observe the pauses. They have their uses, after all.

# Poetry



## **Rest**

*Emily Wheatley*

So many places I could go  
But my legs hurt  
I press my pulse to my ear  
It sounds wet and deep  
Like being underwater  
Like being in the womb  
I lie with my knees pulled up over my head  
I'm not sad  
I don't cry  
I just need to rest

## **danse macabre**

*Kayti Mayfield*

death dances with me slowly

to some it is a tango  
something fiery  
adrenaline meeting euphoria  
it ends when he catches you

to some it is a flash mob  
something you don't see coming  
he sweeps you along  
and leaves as quickly as he came

for others  
it is a waltz  
calibrated steps  
and a foregone conclusion

he never asks you to save the last dance  
who else would you save it for?

death dances with me slowly  
an intimate shuffle  
circling the drain  
leaving me for a time  
to dance with someone else perhaps  
but always  
always  
coming back  
with his lover's hands  
and warm embrace  
and silent breath

is it time? i ask  
with my head nearly nodding against his chest  
but he spins me around  
and gently  
he says  
Not Yet

# **Fiction**

## **The Long Drive**

*Melodie Nichols*

It's a long drive, but he's a good traveler. He sits next to me on the front seat, the top of his head just coming past the door. He doesn't seem to mind that he has to tilt his chin up to see out the window; he likes to watch the scenery. The seatbelt cuts across his chest, just below the neck, and I wonder if it's uncomfortable, if he should be in a booster seat.

He is four years old. His eyes are grey-green, and his hair is sandy. It was almost black when he was born, and I wonder when it got so light. I try to imagine what he will look like when he is grown, when his baby-features harden into those of a man. Will he have his father's strong chin? Will his nose get that little bump in the middle like mine?

I want to stare at him, take in his childish beauty before it is gone, but I am driving. I grip the wheel tighter and keep my eyes on the road. It seems we have a long way to go.

His toy dinosaurs lay in his lap. He named them himself: Keep, Honk, Beep and Stop. I can't tell them apart, but he can. He gave them names that are not nouns, and I marvel at the creativity of his child mind that hasn't been bent, molded—corrupted.

“Thank you, Mommy,” he says.

“For what, Buddy?” We always call him our little Buddy, never his given name.

“For making one side of the road beautiful, and the other side is just plain.”

I don't know what he means, but I smile. One side of the road is lined with trees, the other is a concrete barrier that he can't see over.

He says a lot of funny things. Kid things. Kid logic. I try to remember them.

He'll spend a whole morning running around, climbing trees, constantly chattering. Then, later, he'll be quiet, pensive, serious with his books and toys; making potions with soap and water in cast-off cosmetics jars, imagining worlds of his own.

“Why are you so hyper sometimes, Buddy?” someone once asked him.

“Oh, you know how kids are,” he says. “It's just my style.”

I may think I know how kids are, but I was never prepared for what he is. Each day I am in awe of him. He is clever and sweet and funny and sometimes he is sad.

His eyes get a certain look in them when he is telling a lie. I let him lie, but I can always tell.

He never cries when he is hurt. I wonder whether his stoicism is a defense for future hurts that life will bring him.

I watch him eat goldfish crackers. He puts his hand into the bag and pulls them out one at a time, putting them in his mouth with his little hands. They are a child's hands, but the fingers are long and dexterous, like those of an artist. He will be good with his hands.

I pull my gaze away and concentrate on the road. It's a long drive and the traffic is heavy, distracting. I have to pay attention.

After a while I look over at him again. But he's gone.

A man sits beside me now. A man with a face more like his father than me; strong chin, no bump on the nose. The same grey-green eyes. The hair, dark again, receding at the front. He doesn't call me Mommy anymore. Even his name has changed.

"Mom?" he says, "Are you tired? Do you want me to drive for a while?"

A child cries from the backseat. A baby trussed into a car seat the way we never imagined when he was young. His daughter is waking up.

"No, you take care of her. I'll keep driving." *Pay attention to her, I want to say, don't look away.*

I turn my eyes back to the road. I wonder how long we've been driving.

**Amity**  
*Melodie Nichols*

Dale and Maud Chesterton were at that stage of married life where they didn't have much to say to one another.

Most days, they didn't need words to communicate. Maud could tell what Dale wanted for dinner, when he wanted a drink, if he was worried or angry, without a word between them. Dale knew if Maud was tired, wanted to take a walk, or see a film, by the time she had said, "Do you know what would be nice...."

They were at that point where they would have been looking at their cellphones at dinner, if cellphones had been invented. As it was, they were staring into their coffee cups in silence without any compulsion to fill it.

There was enough conversation going on around them, and Maud liked to listen to people at other tables. She deduced the couple to her right was on a first date; the girl was pushing food around her plate, gesturing with her hands as she talked a bit too loud. The boy was leaning forward, listening, the way he would do for a few months yet, until confidence dulled his fascination with her.

At a corner table was an older man dining alone. Recently lost his wife, Maud decided, watching how he would start a conversation with himself that trailed off when he realized there was no one sitting across from him anymore.

Three men, business partners, sat in the middle of the restaurant. Martini glasses cluttered the table, and she could tell at least one of them wasn't happy to be there. Hostile takeover. Someone was losing his business interest to the others.

Maud turned to her husband and said, "You know what would be nice..."

"Would you like to split one?"

"Lemon meringue, unless you prefer..."

"Lemon is fine...."

"One lemon, one cherry?"

"Oh waiter!"

He put some of his cherry pie on her plate and she scooped lemon onto his, without the meringue. Dale disliked egg whites.

“Anything interesting happen today?” She ate a forkful of meringue.

“Oh, well. It was a typical day, you know.”

“So no more of...”

“No, no, of course not. He’s been sacked, you know.”

She nodded. The waiter brought more coffee and Dale put sugar in it.

“And you? Did you get the...”

“Indeed I did! The last one, too.”

“Huh. Good thing you...”

“Yes, I know.”

She looked out the window for a while, wondering if it would rain soon.

“You know what we should do on Saturday...” Dale said.

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. It’s been ages since we’ve been there.”

“Excellent. Should we ask...”

“I’ll call Trudy tomorrow.”

They finished their pie in silence. She watched the couple on the first date as the boy tried to order dessert. The girl demurred; probably watching her figure. Maud licked her fork.

She turned to her husband, “Are we ready then?”

Dale summoned the waiter and paid the bill while Maud glanced at her reflection in a little compact mirror.

They stood to leave. At the door, she put her hand on his arm and gave it a squeeze. Dale gave her a smile that conveyed more than anyone watching could guess.

As they disappeared through the door of the restaurant, the girl turned to her date and said, “How sad they look. Imagine, after all those years, having nothing to say to each other.” She shivered. “I hope we never end up like that!”

## **No Coverage**

*Jakob Cordes*

It had been an easy job up until that point, just locating and retrieving the DJ boyfriend of some B-list actress. He had been on the club circuit up and down the West Coast for months, though I'd never heard of him till I got the job. Apparently, after a show at the Monarch in San Francisco last week, he walked out for a smoke and didn't come back. That usually meant rehab or an unexplained hospital stay, but finding him at a yoga retreat outside of Yuba City wasn't too much of a surprise. It *was* a bit of a shock when he'd taken off his headphones, claimed car sickness and, after I got out to check on him, dashed over to the driver's side and taken off with my Civic (which, if my luck held, he'd wrap around a tree). It was hard to tell with my phone dead, but judging by how far the sun had sunk, I guessed he would be in Napa by now.

In the distance, a chainsaw kept up its interminable whine. According to my phone, rapidly dying even as I struggled to get a signal, I was halfway between Winters and Napa on the 128, which is to say, I was nowhere. My options were limited by geography (a steep slope on either side of the road, down in one direction, up in the other) and the exceptionally bad mountain reception. Two ways to go then and I was never one to retrace my steps. Forward, then, to Napa, with no bars and only one person to blame.

It was not a good day to be Maria Mendez.

It was, however, a nice enough day to get left behind on, at least, no baking heat like back in the central valley, a little peace and quiet. A lot of quiet, actually. There were no cars around, and the breeze barely seemed to move in the treetops. Even the distant sound of the chainsaw was little more than a faint whine. A few cars had passed by earlier (not bothering to stop, of course), but the 128 wasn't a commuter road, so my chances of catching a ride were slim to none. I walked for a while along the gravel verge on the downhill side, towards Napa, though there was no chance of making it that far before dark.

The walking gave me time to think about Derrick Westmoreland, AKA DJ D'West, AKA the reason I was walking in the first place. I was angry, of course, but more than that I was confused.



He'd been on edge since I picked him up in Yuba—the yoga must not have been all it was cracked up to be—but back in Winters I'd left him with the keys when I went into the gas station, so it wasn't as if he needed the opportunity to run for it. Another car rushed past and I stuck my thumb out instinctively, which gave me the direction of the breeze and not much else.

About an hour later, as I reached the top of another rolling hill, I saw a mailbox down the road, marking an incongruous driveway in what I'd assumed was national forest. I made my way down the hill and turned onto the gravel track, just as a silver Prius pulled out onto the 128. For a brief moment the driver, a blond woman in athletic wear, caught my eye with a level gaze, scanned me up and down, frowned, and then peeled off towards Napa, spraying a bit of dirt and gravel behind her.

Down in the trees, just visible in the low, late afternoon sun, a wood building sat, and as I walked towards it the underlighting switched on, flooding the area with fluorescent glow. For a moment it appeared as if the building itself were being grown violently out of the forest floor. As I got closer I saw other low wooden buildings arrayed behind the main one, and then I stopped dead in my tracks because at the end of the driveway I saw a car, MY car, Nevada license and all, parked neatly beside a beat up red pickup.

The driver side door was unlocked, so I checked the cupholders and glove compartment for the keys, but he'd taken them with him. My bag was still sitting on the floor in the back though, so I pulled it out and removed the file with his information and photo, then slung the bag over my shoulder to bring in. I could see lights on through the windows, and right above the stairs leading up to the front door was a sign that read 'Silent Spring Wellness Retreat'. Beside the door a neon sign, terribly out of place, blinked 'Open'.

Inside was a well-lit lobby, empty except for the eco-generic lounge furniture, some vaguely abstract paintings, and a reception desk. The only remarkable thing was a bookshelf set up behind the counter, its sagging shelves barely holding up frayed paperbacks and a single ornate bookend.

The man behind the desk hadn't noticed me entering, and as I walked over he glanced up

from his book. He was evidently surprised to see someone coming in this late (or maybe at all), but he almost immediately shifted to an inscrutable customer service smile. It was too late, and I was too tired for explanations, so I just removed the glossy photo of Derrick from its manila envelope and placed it in front of him. He glanced at it briefly, the smile never leaving his face, and reached under the desk, producing a key tagged with a cabin number. He placed the key on the photo and then went back to reading. I picked both up and walked around to the rear door, emerging into the cool dusk of the courtyard.

The key was to Cabin 10, which was nestled to the right about 100 yards back. The path was almost completely obscured by years of fallen pine needles, and they muffled my footsteps. Cabin 10 was cleaner than those around it, though the wood still showed years of wear in worn corners and chipped paint. The screen door was unlocked, but the inner door was deadbolted from the inside, so I knocked sharply, the sound seeming to fade immediately to nothing.

A moment later the deadbolt slid back, and I was face to face with Derrick, looking abjectly remorseful. I pushed past him into the sitting room, taking in the ratty carpet, upturned suitcase, and mail-order paintings. There wasn't much else to look at, really. Derrick shut the door and went to sit on the other side of the room.

“Where are my keys?”

He shifted slightly in his chair, pulling the keys out and tossing them over. “Sorry about that.”

“You paid for the cabin?”

He nodded.

“We can go in the morning.”

I sat down across from him, on the sagging couch. The sun had set outside, and for a moment we sat under the light of the room's only lamp. He finally broke the silence.

“I left my headphones in the car.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You've got a lotta nerve.”

“I’m sorry. I had—it’s quiet here.”

“What, something...?” I pointed to my ear.

He half-smiled. “Tinnitus. And some other stuff. I had to get away. Yuba City didn’t work.”

“And what? You found this place on Yelp?”

He leaned back in his chair then and dropped his head back, his voice coming out a little strained and muffled. “It got quiet for the first time in weeks, and I knew you wouldn’t stop. I’m sorry. We can go tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Take the couch, I’ll see you in the morning.”

---

I slept through my alarm the next morning, waking only when the light came across the room. Out in the sitting room Derrick was already up and packed, and we walked silently together to the main building. The same guy as last night was sitting in reception, reading his book, and cereal and yogurt were set out on a buffet. We took a table near the door, and in the silence of the empty room our spoons seemed to scrape too loudly in the bowls.

Just as I set aside my cereal, someone stomped up the front steps and slammed open the door. All three of us looked up at once to see a man in a grey suit, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. He strode over to the reception desk and flashed a badge, but before I could get a good look at it, Derrick stood up and grabbed my arm.

“Something’s telling me we should go.”

We left our bowls on the table and hurried towards the door, but when I looked back towards where the agent was standing I noticed that the shelves behind the desk had been cleared.

Outside, a black sedan, presumably the agent’s, was parked next to my car. Derrick threw his suitcase in the trunk, and I got in and checked my phone. There still wasn’t any coverage, but it was charged, at least. I turned as Derrick slid into the passenger seat.

“You didn’t steal anything, did you?”

My own voice sounded distant to me. It was no use panicking, but there I was. The job was

probably blown, and jail time would mean I never got another.

He shook his head.

As we pulled out onto the 128 I tried to turn on the radio, but all that came out was a gentle hiss. It seemed like me and Derrick were destined to travel in silence.

Once we got down into the valley I pulled my phone out again and pulled up the number for my employer, Derrick's girlfriend. I was at full bars, but the thing didn't even ring. I tried the radio again, but even the valley stations were out. I tried drumming my finger on the steering wheel, and realized with a sinking feeling that they made no noise at all.

When we hit a clear patch, I pulled over to the side of the road, got out, and walked around to the trunk. Derrick got out too, confused at first and then rushing to intervene as I pulled out his suitcase and pushed aside a blanket to find a small statuette hidden underneath. It was the bookend from the lobby of the retreat, and up close I could see what it was—a detailed monkey, no bigger than my hand, with mother-of-pearl eyes and its hands clasped tightly over its ears. It seemed to be made of a dark, grainy wood, but it felt as heavy as iron.

I slowly placed it back in the trunk and replaced Derrick's suitcases, careful not to meet his eyes. We got back in and sat for a moment, as a few commuters passed on their way South. The rest of the drive was a single tense moment, made far too long. We parked in a garage down the street from his hotel, and as we emerged from the concrete darkness the noise of the city, which had been shut out on the ride in, came rushing suddenly back. The screeching of the trolleys alone was deafening.

The hotel itself was modern and sleek, with an enormous glass window covering the whole street-side wall. I kept watch on the street as Derrick phoned up to the room, and just as he came back to get me I saw the agent's black sedan pull into a two-hour spot across the street. He didn't even glance at the hotel as he stepped out of the car and walked into a coffee shop directly across the street.

Derrick followed my line of sight. "Was that...?"

I nodded and headed briskly towards the elevators. Upstairs, I hardly had time to knock once on the door before a very worried looking roadie opened it and waved us in. I left them to catch up for a bit, assuming Derrick'd have some explaining to do, and went over to the window overlooking the street. We were on the fifth floor, and down below I could see the agent sitting at a sidewalk table with his coffee, reading a paper. After a few minutes of watching the foot traffic down below I turned and pointed at the roadie.

“You, give us five.”

She stopped talking and looked to Derrick, who wouldn't meet her eye. She got up and went to the door, looking back once at the chair where Derrick sat, looking pointedly at the featureless ceiling. After she shut the door I sat down across from him and leaned forward.

“The agent's downstairs and doesn't look to be going anywhere. Am I gonna get charged as an accessory if I don't turn you in?”

He shook his head. “I told you, I didn't steal anything. I got up before you this morning, and when I went out to get some breakfast the guy gave it to me.”

“And you're sure he didn't steal it? You've got proof?”

“No. No of course not. I just put it in the car.”

“He say anything about it? Tell you what it was?”

“Yeah, told me it was his to give. Told me that if I had to, I could give it away blind.”

“Christ, okay. So we've just gotta find a stranger to pawn it off on. No help at all.” I got up and walked over to the window. The agent wasn't at his table anymore, but I could see his paper still folded neatly on the table and his sedan parked nearby. “You can't keep it. You know that, right?”

He nodded, and I closed the curtains, throwing the room into darkness. “All right then, let's go.”

We walked out the same way we'd come in, no point trying to hide, especially since the agent was nowhere to be seen. The parking structure was nearly empty, and no one else was on the top lev-

el, where my car was parked. The statuette was just where I'd left it, and in the dim light of the of the garage its eyes seemed luminescent. I glanced over to where Derrick stood a few feet off, looking around nervously.

“What did the guy say again? About the statue?” The distant echoes in the parking structure sounded somehow louder than my voice itself.

“I told you. Said it was his, said I could pass it on to whoever if I needed to. I got the idea the government was probably the exception to that.”

“No, you said it differently before. Said you could pass it on blind, right?”

“Yeah, it's a turn of phrase, what're you—”

“Do you have a knife on you?”

He pulled out a pocketknife and handed it to me. I slid the blade under the right eye and carefully pried it loose, holding the shivering piece of mother-of-pearl up between my thumb and forefinger. I waved Derrick over, and he stared numbly as I placed the eye in his outstretched hand. The other eye came out just as easily, and I slipped it into my left pocket, before handing the knife back to Derrick. The statuette lay in my other hand, lighter now, as if it were all it appeared to be, and nothing more. Where the eyes had been there was now the carved crease of an eyelid, as if the monkey were sleeping. Deaf and blind.

I pulled a grocery bag out of the trunk and slipped the statuette inside. I could feel the eye against my thigh, warm even through the denim pocket. The trunk hardly made a sound as I slammed it shut. Derrick was still staring down at the sliver of light in his palm.

“Put that thing away.”

He reluctantly slipped it into his hoodie pocket. “What now? The agent's still gonna want answers.”

I handed him the bag with the statue in it. “You're gonna come clean. Give 'em the monkey, say you didn't know. Keep your head down, keep the eye hidden, you'll be fine. What you do after

that's not my problem."

"And you?" He sounded genuinely worried. As if this were anything but an especially annoying job.

"I've got a job. I'll be fine so long as your girlfriend pays me, and now," I patted my right pocket, "I've got some peace and quiet."

Traffic was bad across the bay, so it was about three hours before I got back to my apartment in River Park. It was midafternoon, the sidewalks busy with families and students, and for a moment I let myself enjoy the bustle and noise, muffled though it was. I passed some neighbors on the stairs up, made small talk. I'd done work for all of them, one point or another, mostly pro-bono. The apartment was just as I'd left it, and as soon as I put down my bags I went to the kitchen and opened the cabinet above the stove.

Some of the objects inside looked like they belonged in a museum, though no museum could have identified the origin of the distorted looking-glasses and elegant, impossibly curved bracelets. Some of the other objects looked like thrift store rejects, mangled tape players and water-logged books. They were just as important, of course, as the beautiful ones. I put the eye up with them and took down a rusted kettle. The 5:00 commuter rumbled past just outside my window, but although the window shook in its pane, for once, I didn't hear a thing.

# Special Thanks

As always, huge thanks to those who share Nightlight's posts and boost our popularity; we couldn't do this without you!

To Marci, for agreeing to do our cover again; your work is always beautiful and I'm glad to showcase your talents.

To our readership, for whom this magazine entirely exists. Thank you so much for supporting us.