



DISCHARGE Alison MacLeod

When my wife Angelina is aroused, ball lightning slips from between her legs: a sphere of plasma, sometimes the size of an orange, sometimes the size of a basketball.

Usually it is reddish-orange. Sometimes fluorescent white. More rarely still, that glowing green you see in pictures of the Borealis.

We can feel the heat of it as it passes over our naked bodies, a small swift-moving sun. It rolls through the house, setting off overhead lights, my electric toothbrush, the breadmaker, the toaster, the juicer, the Moulinex, the TV, the computer, before finally settling under the dining room table like an intransigent child. We know the behaviour.

In the bedroom, we stare at the ceiling, listening to the air pop in its wake, like the 'poof' of a dozen magnesium flashbulbs. The dog will start to bark — we no longer call to him. The doorbell might ring

intermittently. The microwave will bleep.

You think I exaggerate.

You can pull the plug of a lamp from the socket and the lamp will continue to shine. You can watch the digits on the stove clock spin. Later of course we'll find the fuses are blown, but no circuit breakers are tripped. The phone lines aren't down. There are no scorch marks.

On occasion, we have known it to pass through windows, storm windows too, a trembling globe that nestles deep within the bushes outside the house. Once, only the once, I saw it keep pace with a car, steady outside the passenger window, at forty miles per hour.

It pulsates, an observation that is consistent with reports of ball lightning. More remarkably, it seems to display a kind of primitive intelligence or curiosity — also consistent. We have seen it bounce, zip, float, skim surfaces, change direction, and seemingly, follow one of us or the other. Usually, it will dissolve into a light switch, an antenna or, sometimes, my power drill.

Of course we know that ball lightning is associated with atmospheric disturbance. With damaged pylons, turbines or utility poles. In a few reports, with the gases arising from swamps or landfill. I've done the research.

We know it is not typically associated with states of arousal.

We make love less and less.

David is afraid, though he won't say he is. He is afraid it's like sticking your finger in a socket. And perhaps it is. Sometimes he's okay with a condom, though he rolls it onto himself furtively, saying nothing. He doesn't want to have to say to me that rubber is non-conductive.

So we pretend it will go away; that it will simply stop, like a

minor venereal infection. And each time, I think, There, it is gone from me. Gone, like that unfathomable baby in the bubble, freefloating at the end of Space Odyssey. Expelled. And I feel relieved. I can hear David saying, 'You're cold. Your skin's gone so cold,' and he's piling the duvet over me as I watch a small white sun orbit his left shoulder.

He prefers me cold.

At the Family Planning Clinic, I try to describe it. I try to be offhand. I say I feel like one of those Virgin Mary statues that weeps tears — it can't be happening. The nurse humours me. She gives me a leaflet and a card with the address and opening hours of a discreetly named clinic. She says my partner or partners will also have to be treated. She says it shouldn't affect my fertility if it is caught early. She recommends cotton gussets.

David started as an assessor at a small insurance firm in the eighties and branched out into Risk Assessment in '94. It was a smart move. Network monitoring. Security management. System audit investigation. Surveillance. Environmental hazard estimates. Nothing, he will tell you with a grin, is without risk — it's merely a case of making people feel it.

He merged with another consultancy in '99, and the company has grown exponentially. He and Walter get calls now from the UK, Australia, Brazil. They say there's no telling what a day will bring. From Japan yesterday, it was a case of data protection — standard, except they wanted the figures to represent the threat posed not only by viruses, worms and the latest spyware, but also by 'zombie computers' and 'swarm intelligence'. In Dallas last month, it was more probability flow-charts for bio-terror. In Montana last week it was a

Men's Liberation Group wanting projections on the threat to male reproduction 'in light of residual oestrogens and the new cloning technologies'.

Walter and David didn't take the Montana case, of course. But David wasn't laughing it off either. He was remembering how all the cloning stuff started with sheep eggs in Scotland; how an electrical pulse and not a sperm activated the development of the embryo. And for a moment, as he talked between mouthfuls of smoked meat on rye, he studied me.

No information, he says, is trivial. No event is outside the net of risk methodology. Everything is Threat, Vulnerability, Control or Attack. He's got 3-D relational models in moulded plastic that balance on his desk, and animated, interactive versions on CD and DVD for the client to watch at home at their own convenience. Threat is black. Vulnerability is yellow. Control is blue. Attack is red. When I ask him if he isn't merely peddling paranoia, he smiles oddly and tells me it pays to be paranoid these days.

Soon he will have an affair. He will have an affair to punish me. Because he cannot see that he is the source of the charge that lies at the center of me.

Angelina is laughing at her white wine sauce. Spoiled. And the fish is overdone. Walter and Kate have arrived over an hour late for dinner. A four-car pile-up off exit ten.

Kate is laden with apologies and chrysanthemums. Walter glowers over the drink I slide into his hand. It's obvious they've argued — always more risky in a car because there's little eye contact, so you're bound to be less human to one another. I take the situation in hand. I call, book a table. 'What do we tell our clients, Walter?' I

say.

‘Plan on Plan B.’ Walter forces a laugh.

‘You promised,’ Angelina says, grabbing my hand.

I smile broadly. ‘I did: work is officially out of bounds tonight.’

‘Or else,’ and she winks at Kate. I hold onto her hand.

We show our guests through the kitchen and onto the deck. The evening is bright. The drone of random lawnmowers drugs us fleetingly. We listen to the receding calls of kids on the street, spectral as radio waves in space.

‘A drink, folks?’ I offer.

Back in the kitchen, I chop limes, scoop chopped ice, and mix spritzers in tall frosted glasses. ‘You might as well relax out there,’ I call through the screen door. ‘We’ve got an hour till the reservation.’

‘Great,’ I hear Kate say as she leans back into a lounge. ‘The garden’s looking wonderful, Angelina. Are those hollyhocks over there?’

‘Yes, incredible, aren’t they? I sketched a sort of plan when we moved in, one for each bed. But the soil’s so acidic, it seems miraculous to me every time something actually grows.’

‘Angelina’s the brains around here,’ I say, emerging, hands laden, ‘and I, as you can see, am the brawn.’ Angelina smiles, rolls her eyes and takes the tray from my arms.

‘Dip, Walter?’

‘Thanks. In our case, Kate’s the brawn, and I’m just obedient.’

‘Kate, dip?’

‘If only you were, Honeybun.’ Kate helps herself to smoky cheese flavor.

We play married couples. We mock-fight to give the illusion that

we are not fighting. We banter to show sexual spark. Walter, I notice, has given up flirting with Angelina. At one time, it was flattery when she appeared in the office; jokey repartee on the phone; womanly advice gratefully received. Now nothing. A sign not only that his wife is in the room, but, in all likelihood, an indication that Walter, after six years of business partnership, fears he is actually in love with my wife.

Our spaniel, Perry Mason — Perry to family — finishes his bowl of Pedigree Chunks, and runs onto the deck, eager for attention. Kate and Angelina fuss, oblivious to canine drool and Dr. Ballard's Pedigree breath. Walter throws Perry's red rubber ball, and Perry bounds into the backyard, straight across Angelina's alpine rock garden. I survey the evening. Walter and Kate are still not speaking. Angelina and Kate are awkward outside the clockwork of a four-course meal. Walter and I are not permitted to talk about work and are busy feigning equanimity. Angelina and I pretend that we are as always. We are two childless couples without the white noise of birth weights, school antics and orthodontistry to lull us into a sense of intimacy.

'David,' Walter begins, red ball once more in hand, 'in case I forget to mention it tomorrow, I sent a copy of that consultative report for Boeing to — Oops.' He looks at Angelina with a sheepish smile.

'That's one demerit for me, I guess.'

'Afraid so,' Angelina says with a tssk of her tongue. 'Which means we need a forfeit for Walter.' She puts down her glass and claps her hands. He laughs. I watch Kate watching Walter who's busy looking at Angelina. 'Okay. I've got it. What do you think, Kate? For being so dull, Walter has to regale us with — with a good true-life story or an amazing fact. Something none of us knows.'

‘David,’ says Walter with a grin, ‘I don’t recall you warning me about your wife.’

I shrug, a seemingly helpless man.

Angelina alights from her wicker chair, runs into the house and returns with a plastic egg-timer and one of my golf gloves. ‘And listen carefully, Walter,’ she says, ‘if anyone does know the story or fact already, you lose and we up the ammo.’

‘Which means?’

‘We’ll want a confession out of you next.’

‘Can I call my lawyer first?’

‘You could, honey,’ says Kate, fingering the rim of her glass, ‘if you hadn’t tried to sue him last year.’

Walter ignores her. ‘Okay, but one thing, Angelina. If none of you does know it — and clearly we’re operating on the trust system here — that’s game over, right?’

‘And pass up your chance for revenge? Now where’s the fun in that? Noooo. You get to throw down the golf glove to any one of us, Walter. Same terms.’

‘What time did you say that table was ready, David?’

‘On your mark, Walter. Get set. Your time begins — NOW.’

Walter doubles up in his chair, resting his head between his knees, like a winded man. Kate and I exchange smiles while Angelina watches the sand in the timer trickle away.

‘Beeeeeep. Right, Walter. That’s your time up.’

‘Okay. Um, this is the only amazing fact that comes to mind. Well, it amazed me. In London, one of the bridges that spans the Thames is Blackfriars Bridge. And apparently, it was considered quite a good one to kill yourself from, don’t ask me why. Anyway, I don’t

know what colour this particular bridge was, but they decided to paint the whole thing green, and guess what?’

‘Laura Ashley objected,’ says Kate.

I tip my glass to her. She passes me hers for a top-up, our fingertips touching briefly.

Angelina is not distracted. ‘What happened, Walter?’

‘The suicide rate, the rate of jumps that is, dropped by thirty-four per cent.’

‘Really? Wow. And because of such a simple thing as green paint.’

Angelina is looking at Walter like he is the Buddha in a viscose jacket and bad tie.

I’m impatient with the game. ‘Your turn, Walter,’ I remind him. ‘Go on.’ He picks up the golf glove and, thinking it rude to throw it at either his host or hostess, throws it instead at his wife’s feet.

‘Not fair,’ she pouts.

Angelina picks up the egg-timer. ‘Ready Kate? Ready? Go!’

Kate has that feature particular to some women who have reached the age of forty. Her chin is tipped eternally upward so that her face seems to float, owl-like, without reference to her neck. ‘Right. Here goes. Amazing fact: the clitoris has over 8,000 nerve endings. More than twice as many as the penis.’

‘God love it,’ I venture.

‘He’d better because He’s the only one who’s going to find it,’ Walter snorts.

‘Sorry, Kate. I knew that,’ Angelina admits. ‘There was a programme on the Discovery Channel last week, wasn’t there?’

‘Confession time,’ says Walter. ‘Confess, my darling. That’s the rule.’

Kate stabs the lime at the bottom of her glass with her stir-stick.

‘So who died and made Walter God?’

‘Give me that thing, Angelina,’ and Walter turns over the egg-timer, jubilant. ‘The clock’s running, Kate. Confess.’

‘What do you know?’ she says, almost immediately. ‘I’ve suddenly thought of something. Firstly, Walter and I fought all the way here. Secondly, he’s been a complete bastard for — gosh, how long has it been, honey? Six months? A year?’

Walter doesn’t falter. ‘Now, darling, as Angelina already explained, you have to tell them something they don’t already know.’

‘Of course. Sorry. I forgot.’ She takes a sip from her glass. ‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Something true, Kate. Or something credible at the very least.’

‘We’re having a baby.’

‘We are not having a baby.’

She roots in the oversized bag at her feet and passes Walter a small cardboard envelope. The label’s big, in bold-faced caps. Difficult not to see. NUCHAL TRANSLUCENCY ULTRASOUND SCAN (11 WEEKS). The egg-timer cracks between his thumb and forefinger. A thin stream of golden sand spills like urine onto his shoes.

But I’m watching Angelina. I’m watching Angelina who’s staring helplessly at Walter. And in that moment I see it all. I see in her wild stare the sudden carelessness of someone who’s been overwhelmed by circumstances. Betrayed. I see he told her he was no longer sleeping with Kate, that the marriage was stale. I see Angelina loves him. And I say nothing. My heart is a blister, but I say nothing.

David watches me, but will not look at me. I say, ‘What is it? What have I done?’ and he says, ‘That’s interesting. Why do you think

you've done anything?' His pupils have contracted to almost nothing, as if he's disappearing from even himself.

Sometimes, we walk out in the early evenings, before dark, and the streetlights flicker into life as I pass, one after another after another, as if the charge inside me is getting bigger. And, as we walk, lost to our own thoughts, I see David smile to himself, as if my growing energy confirms some wordless suspicion.

In the stillness of our bed, he no longer touches me.

Kate's decided to continue with the pregnancy. She's forty-four, but she says that's nothing these days. She's traded the cocktail hour for yoga after work with a backpacker just back from Bali. She persuades me to go shopping online with her for maternity wear. She tells me she wants to flaunt rather than flatter; that she plans to look like an ancient fertility figure in Lycra and office neutrals. Walter appears pleased — their last chance, he jokes, to make it in the suburban family jungle.

Kate doesn't know that I know; even David doesn't know that Walter was sterilized three years ago. I say nothing to Walter — I pretend I never knew — and I know he is grateful.

I do not even ask myself who the father is.

Last week, David and I were eating dinner — a beef stew I'd had in the freezer for months. The evening news was still on in the other room. Neither of us got up to turn it off. Inertia settled between us like fog. Perry kept vigil under the table at our feet, begging as always for scraps. David said not to, but as I chewed, I bent down to slip him a chunk of meat and, as I did so, I started to choke.

David passed me my glass of water but I waved it away. I couldn't drink for coughing. So he threw down his napkin, pushed back his

chair and started clapping me on the back. My eyes were watering. Perry gazed up at me. I wanted to say, stop, stop, afraid David would lodge it deeper within me, afraid he'd kill me for my own good, but I couldn't breathe. He pounded my back harder. The broad beat of his hand sounded in my lungs. I thought I felt something crack, a rib, an airway, I couldn't tell. David was pulling up my blouse, unfastening the clip of my bra. I felt his arms encircle me, rigid and primed for action. My eyes strained in their sockets. Perry wagged his tail.

And suddenly, before the deadlock of David's arms tensed around me, something rose in my throat and filled my mouth. Perry started to bark and thump his tail noisily, as if I were beckoning him in some game, and, I thought, it can't be. How can it be? How can Perry's rubber ball be in my mouth? My jaws were locking around it. My lungs still burned. David was about to call 911 when I finally managed to spit it into my hands.

It wasn't Perry's ball. It was no ragged chunk of meat. It was a red plasmic orb that hovered, delicate and trembling, over the cup of my palms. My eyes streamed as I beheld it: a small blood-orange of a sun, bright and angry as a newborn's head.

Each day it grows.

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