



SEPARATE DEREK

by Joseph Newfield

It's gotten to the point where Derek, when he wakes up, doesn't open his eyes. Instead he tries with his eyes shut to guess where he is.

This morning he can tell he's in a bed. He's drunk and has the familiar seasick feeling that his body is slowly spinning. Where is he, what bed is this? He keeps his eyes shut and remains still and tries to guess, imagining that something big hangs on his decision. The room has a muted, dead silence. Faint light presses through Derek's eyelids. What did he do last night? He can't quite remember. He runs through a list of places he might be, including the hospital, but still can't be sure and so, his eyes still shut, gingerly reaches beside himself in the bed, looking for a clue. Nothing. Nobody there, just the edge of the bed. It comes to him then. He's in a hotel. "I'm in a hotel," he mouths, committing his answer, and then with some effort opens his eyes, first just a crack, then all the way. They fasten and slowly focus on a dirty light fixture faintly illuminated by a streetlight outside a window. Derek thinks, *Oh, I'm still at Fran's*. He sits up, feeling his head throb, and sees that someone has put him on a small bed in the back room at Fran's, the bar where he has been spending his days and sometimes his nights these last few weeks, since he was laid off. *Here at Fran's,*



Derek thinks as he slides his feet to the floor, *there are nice people.*

The next time he wakes up, Derek knows he's at home because the air is filled with the Saturday sounds of activity in the suburbs, of yard tools and indistinct voices and the not infrequent car drifting past Derek and Maybell's two-story brown and gray home.

Derek again reaches beside himself in bed but Maybell has already gotten up. She must be off someplace making things happen. Casting an eye to the clock, 8:54, Derek swings his feet to the floor with a grunt, pulls himself from bed and walks to the mirror over Maybell's dresser. At this angle it reflects the middle third of his body. He's wearing a white undershirt and jockey shorts. The reflection reminds him that for the first time in his life he's put on some extra weight. On his lanky frame he'd not thought it possible. Derek bends to peer at his face and is startled by his own puffed-up eyes, by his skin, pillowy despite his narrow features. At least his hair hasn't begun to recede. And no gray is creeping in to mingle with the brown. Straightening, he grasps some of the extra flesh at his lower back and arches backwards while yawning. Hangover's not that bad, really. He goes to the bedroom's partially open sliding glass door, which he opens further and passes through to a small balcony so that he can see Maybell in the back yard below. She's standing with her back to him, long, pale legs exposed beneath cut-offs, one hand on her hip, the other pumping the contents of a spray bottle onto a tall corn plant. Derek has been married to Maybell



for eleven years and is, he admits to himself as he watches her, scared of her.

The morning light has of late adopted the bright, cool look of winter under an infinitely distant sky. Long, crisp shadows extend onto the lawn from trees that edge the yard. Like a tickle, a faint, overly sweet smell of burning leaves enters Derek's nose. Maybell is 36, a year younger than Derek, and works part time as an assistant to a local veterinarian. Her blonde hair, pulled back today in a ponytail, falls several inches down her back, and seems to glow against her violet t-shirt. She is an efficient person and her love strikes Derek as being the same whether applied to her garden or their son or a dog or Derek. It's turned out to be hard love to get close to. In Maybell's garden, shocks of silk burst from the tops of the corn — it won't be long — and the squash has sent runners into another section where they threaten to overtake the fading tomatoes. Over the fence in the yard next door, Derek and Maybell's neighbor Hal is rolling a push mower out of his work shed. His balding head gleams in the bright sun and his colorful Bermuda shorts, pulled up so they wrap his belly like a barrel appear to Derek jaunty, lighthearted, depressing. Derek stands and watches as Hal pushes the mower onto the lawn and begins the job, first circling the edge of the lawn and then working back and forth, cutting the lawn in neat parallel stripes. The mower's whirring voice reminds Derek, as Hal with stop and start steps presses the machine forward, of a turkey: gobble, gobble, gobble. Goble gobble, gobble.



“What’s been happening with work?” Maybell asks, “How’s the bid going on that new project?” She’s holding open the mouth of a green plastic bag while Derek uses a rake and his free hand to lift leaves to the bag. Derek had been Regional Sales Associate for Bingham Brothers, an installer of commercial air conditioning systems.

He says, “We’re putting together a great bid. I was there with the whole team until after midnight last night working on it. I really think we’re going to be unbeatable.”

“So it’s a sure thing?”

“Well, you know, nothing is for sure but we’re trying.” He pauses and looks directly at Maybell and his tone changes a bit. “There’s only so much I can do, either way.”

Maybell’s features, her large nose that somehow is striking, her light complexion, the smooth curve of her jaw, surprise Derek by forming into a smile. “I know, Derek. That’s why I asked. I do find some interest in what you do every day.” She shakes the bag, settling the leaves and he stands with another rake full. She says, “But if you lose the project, do you have other good prospects right now?”

“I think we’re going to get this one, Maybell.”

“But if you don’t?”



“Maybell, look, we’ve never worked harder on a proposal. We’re not going to lose the project, and I’m not going to lose my job, since that seems to be what you’re getting at.”

She makes an “mmm” sound and then is quiet.

For several minutes there is only the scratch of leaves being raked and scooped up and crunched in the bag. Derek asks, “How is Dr. Samuel?”

“Fine. An elderly woman brought in a monkey yesterday. A spider monkey.”

“Where on earth do you get a pet like that?”

“Some pet shops have them. It was the most beautiful animal, its face so full of emotion and perception. It had a kind of flu and I kept thinking of when Brian was two and was so sick he couldn’t keep anything down. It’s spooky, Derek, to look at a little animal that people call a pet and see its face and its tiny hands like ours.

An image Derek has seen someplace, of a monkey in a laboratory cage holding onto a doll, enters his mind. The thought is interrupted by Derek’s son’s voice calling from the house, “I’m finished, Dad.”

Brian is Derek and Maybell’s only child. Several years back, when they bought the house, the idea was to give him a brother or sister, but somewhere along the line that desire faded. It’s on hold for a bit they said when people used to ask. Brian appears in the back doorway to the garage. He’s ten. He’s about five



feet tall and slight, with dark hair and a face that glows with enthusiasm.

“I’ll be right there, Brian,” Derek calls to his son, and then turns back to Maybell and says, “Do they have a cure for monkey flu?”

Maybell shakes her bag again and twists the top. “No,” she says as Derek puts a twist -’em on the bag. They stop and look at each other. Derek shifts his gaze, surveying the yard, and says, “so, are we through, Maybell?”

Maybell continues to look at Derek looking away and says, “I can finish under the fruit trees.”

“Okay, I’m going to see how Brian’s doing.”

In the garage is a railroad tie, about four feet long with one hundred shiny new screws in it, scattered randomly as if delivered from a shotgun. Brian, his hands on his hips, stands beside the large gray piece of wood, a power drill and a small empty box at his feet. He says as Derek enters, “Okay, Dad, I’m ready to build something real.”

“Well, let’s see how you did here first,” Derek replies.

“They’re perfect, Dad.”

“Okay, let me look.” Derek crouches beside Brian and inspects the screws. “Yeah . . . yep . . . they



do look pretty good. All in straight. How're the heads, did they strip at all?"

"Nope."

Derek extends an arm around Brian's waist and says, "So you should be able to take one out then?"

"Sure."

"Let's see."

Brian takes the drill, which has attached to it a large round apparatus from which protrudes a screwdriver blade, changes a switch and inserts the screwdriver tip into one of the screws. "All you have to do," Brian says, "is put it in reverse." He slowly squeezes the trigger on the drill and the two of them watch as the screw rotates and with a squeaking, swiveling rhythm extends up out of the railroad tie. Brian hands the screw to his dad and says, "Can I help build something?"

"Sure. Soon as you take out the rest of the screws."

"Oh come on!" Brian says. "I just put them all in."

Derek moves and sits on the railroad tie so he's facing Brian, and sees that Maybell is standing now in the doorway to the backyard. The light is from behind so he can just make out her profile, arms folded, as he says to Brian, "Your mom wants a new wine rack. I have to tell you, though, Brian, I've seen a lot of people qualified to do the job." He looks for a moment over Brian's shoulder at Maybell and then says, "But



I like you, kid. Do you think you can do it?"

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Derek gets the sense as he's driving Monday morning that the woman on the radio telling him about traffic must be just about to slip under, to drown. The desperate way in which she gasps for a breath between bursts of words makes him uneasy, brings to his mind a young woman's face, not-quite attractive, with water lapping against it on all sides. The water keeps threatening to spill into her yammering mouth.

Following ads for insurance companies and banks and a humorous dry-cleaner ad that Derek absently mouths along to, he's heard it so often, the talk radio announcer comes back on with a caller who's in his car and asks why doesn't the guest just ban all the guns while he's at it, since it hasn't seemed to have made any difference so far what's legal and what's not. In terms of total deaths, the caller adds. Derek has some opinions on this one. He knows just what the guest should say in response, but he won't get to find out what the response is because he's arrived at Fran's.

Derek enters the bar with yesterday's paper under his arm and is pleased to see that, as have the last month of Mondays at Fran's, this one will begin with just himself and Vince in conversation."



“Good morning sir,” Derek says to Vince while removing his sports coat. Derek lays it across a barstool and then takes a seat at the next stool and spreads before himself the thick want ads of the Sunday paper. “I’d like an orange juice please, light on the vodka.”

Vince’s calm productivity as he moves behind the bar and makes Derek’s drink, places it beside the want ads, and then continues preparation for the day ahead, is pleasing to Derek. People are getting things done.

“And how was your weekend, sir?” Vince asks. Vince is a clean-cut man in latter middle age who has managed to stay slim, probably because he serves alcohol but doesn’t drink it. He’s pouring tomato juice from quart cans into a five-gallon jug.

“Not too bad, thank you. Spent most of it with my son, doing some woodworking together. He’s amazingly good with tools.”

“Chip off the old block,” Vince offers.

“Hopefully not,” Derek says. His head is down as he scans the want ads. “You know Vince, I have a good feeling about these ads today.”

“Do you?”

“I’ve decided that I don’t need a great job, just something to maintain cash flow, you know? Make



sure that Maybell and Brian are taken care of. It's not as if I'm picking a career here." He looks up at Vince for a moment to gauge the bartender's reaction to this latest philosophy and then, seeing that Vince appears agreeable, continues, "I just need to get past this little point. Sometimes you need to stretch over these things and then when I do I can tell them all about it. I'll tell everyone all about it." Derek sips the screwdriver and says, "Alright if I use your phone for a few local calls?"

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Derek is in bed. He's just woken up and is drunk and spinning and trying behind closed eyes to figure out where he is. His patience is shot through and he resorts right away to reaching, lunging really, with his left arm, at the space beside him. Nothing, nobody is there. Just the faint smell licking of Maybell, telling him he is at home. He's about to open his eyes and sit up but he's tripped up when behind his closed lids Maybell's intelligent gaze appears and looks in on him. The face is unblinking, emotionless. Derek opens his eyes and against the dark backdrop of the room at night the face remains and then slowly fades. Derek can feel sweat beading on his forehead. Under the sheets his body is clammy. He tries to clear his thoughts and after some time whispers, "Please." With an exaggerated flourish he yanks the covers away from his



body, swings his feet to the floor and stands, steadying himself for a moment with a hand on the headboard. A chill rushes over him. He passes through his bedroom door and goes left so that the upstairs balcony rail, beyond which lies a drop to the tile entryway, is on his right, and his son's bedroom, when he reaches it, is on the left. The door is open a crack. Derek leans back against the railing for a moment and listens. The house is silent and feels cavernous. His pulse, made audible by the alcohol, whooshes and thumps in his head. Pressing away from the railing with one hand, Derek steps closer to the door and listens, but still can hear nothing and so with two fingers carefully nudges the door open so that he can see, colored blue by stripes of moonlight seeping between Brian's blinds, a made, empty bed. A cupped roar, as if from a seashell, fills Derek's ears, overwhelming the sound of his pounding heart. With increasingly dizzy, unsteady steps he approaches the single bed and then his knees buckle and he collapses to a seat on the edge of the bed. Derek slumps forward into a fetal sitting position on the edge of the bed, his body hunched, elbows pressing against his hips, palms cradling his forehead. So many things. And this swirl of ideas and alcohol overcomes him so that he feels he must lie back on his son's bed to get a hold of it all.

The phone ringing down the hall shocks Derek to consciousness and sets him to trying to remember everything all at once as he clumsily stands up from Brian's matted bedspread. The house is still dark. Derek



stumbles out the door and toward the phone with his right arm extended from his side, hand splayed and bouncing along the wall and his left middle finger touching the balcony railing. As Derek enters his and Maybell's room, the roar returns to his ears and grows until he can't tell if the phone is still ringing by the time he picks it up or if he's just too late. He presses the receiver against his head, listening and listening through the roar until finally he hears just the squak, squak, squak sound of a telephone left off the hook.