

SYNDROME

©2002 Andrew McAllister
All rights reserved.

Katrina's gentle snores yanked Walter awake. The sound of her slow, shallow breathing ripped through his head like a bucksaw with a burly lumberjack hauling on each end—back and forth, over and over again.

He opened his eyes, squinting until he could stand the dim moonlight that filtered in through the window. Faint shadows writhed on the bedroom wall as tree branches outside swayed in the breeze. The movement was enough to make him lightheaded. He closed his eyes so his jangly nerves could settle down.

Unfortunately, Walter was all too familiar with this problem—he had forgotten to take his medication again. It was like someone had cranked up the input level on all of his senses. He sometimes enjoyed the heightened perception, but only if he realized what was going on before things became too intense.

This time he must have slept through the more moderate phase. The world rushed at him from every angle, threatening to drown him with a flood of sights and sounds.

He remembered taking the green oval-shaped pill the previous morning. Katrina had joked that he should use Timothy's baby bottle to wash it down instead of the glass of water. As for the bedtime pill ... no, he couldn't recall taking it. But then, his memory was spotty when he was off his meds.

Still, he didn't have to remember—if he had taken his bedtime pill he wouldn't feel like this.

Walter looked at the clock on the bedside table. Four-twelve a.m. The green numerals glared out of the darkness at him but now that he was more fully awake the sight was slightly less overwhelming.

Waking Katrina made no sense. She could snore all she wanted now; he was going to be awake for a while anyway. And she needed her sleep. The twins had already been up once in the night to breast-feed.

"Don't be so lazy," he muttered. "Just go to the bathroom and get the pill yourself."

He rolled out of bed as quietly as he could and stumbled into the hallway. Soft light from the night-light in the twins' bedroom spilled onto the beige carpeting. Walter decided that after he took the pill, he would sit with Anna in the rocking chair while he waited for his chemical-induced normality to kick in.

He paused by the doorway to check on the two sleeping lumps. His eyes adjusted slowly to the brightness of what was really a dim light. Pink bunnies frolicked on the blanket that lay neatly on Anna. The dinosaurs on her brother's blanket, however, struggled to climb the folds caused by the more restless Timothy. Walter and Katrina followed the current wisdom of sleeping the babies on their backs, but at a little over three months old, Timothy could now roll over. His cheek and knees were down and his bum was high. In other words, situation normal.

As Walter turned to resume his bathroom quest, a hint of movement from within the bedroom flashed at the edge of his vision. In his jacked-up state the flicker seemed to carom inside his head a few times before dying out.

He looked back into the bedroom but saw nothing unusual. Then another glimmering, directly over Timothy's cherubic face. As Walter focused on that spot he had an experience similar to staring at a computer-generated 3-D picture. At first nothing and then ... pow! The image that was there all along suddenly swam into view.

Walter had the immediate feeling—no, certainty—that what he saw was pure evil. He was blasted as if he were at a rock concert standing directly in front of speakers that spewed vileness and cruelty instead of sound.

He stumbled back against the wall opposite the doorway, catching himself with both hands splayed behind him. He leaned there with his mouth open, barely able to breathe as he watched dozens of diaphanous, bug-like creatures swirl in the air over his son's head. The members of the tightly knit swarm wrestled viciously to get close to Timothy's face, slashing at each other with wide mouths full of tiny, pointed teeth. One of them managed to struggle free of the group and, impossibly, to disappear as its four-inch length squeezed into Timothy's nostril. The infant twitched in his sleep. A moment later the thing emerged looking plumper and less see-through; somehow more there. It drifted to the top of the swirling scrum, seemingly content for the time being to let the others struggle.

Walter realized they were somehow feeding on his son! He emitted a strangled cry, pushed himself off the wall and lurched into the room.

The reaction of the creatures was immediate: they all froze. When Walter took another step in their direction, they swooped as one to the edge of the crib, where they formed a ragged line. He could see their features plainly for the first time. They had segmented bodies lined with thin, pointed limbs. Two rows of fern-like appendages took the place of eyes on each bulbous head. The ferns fluttered over gaping mouths as the bugs tried to locate the source of the interruption.

A yearning eagerness emanated from them in waves—a desperate hunger directed at Walter. Involuntarily, he found himself edging backward.

Walter awoke the same way he did every morning now, to the faint sound of crying coming from down the hallway. Katrina moaned as she rolled to a droopy seated position on her side of the bed.

"That wasn't long enough," she said, then stood up and shrugged herself into her white bathrobe as she shuffled out of the room. "You coming?"

Walter's grunt was intended to mean "yes."

Six-forty. A little later than usual, thankfully.

And then he stiffened with fright as he remembered the ghostly images flitting over Timothy. Mother of God, did that really happen?

The world was behaving itself now, so he must have taken his pill. But how had he gotten back to bed? Katrina's scream knifed through the house.

"Walter! Oh my God Walter come here quick!"

He rushed into the babies' room wearing only his underwear.

Katrina held Timothy in one arm while she patted him on the cheek as if to wake him. The infant's face was a pale, mottled gray.

"He's not breathing!" she wailed, with panic in her eyes.

Walter tried to speak but nothing came out. Anna continued to howl from her side of the room.

"Call 911!" Katrina said as she laid Timothy back in his crib and began mouth-to-mouth.

Walter raced for the phone in their bedroom.

Walter wasn't able to keep the speeding ambulance in sight as he tore through the streets toward the Clyde County hospital. Tears streamed down Katrina's face while Anna nursed hungrily in the passenger seat.

He held the steering wheel with one hand and gripped Katrina's hand tightly with the other. The paramedics had passed by Walter when they carried Timothy out of the house to the waiting ambulance. They

wouldn't meet Walter's eyes when they passed, which told him more than he wanted to know.

"It is referred to as SIDS, or sudden infant death syndrome," the doctor said. The nametag on his white coat said: Dr. S. Viswanathan, Pediatrician.

"You must not be blaming yourselves," Viswanathan continued. "There is not a thing you could have done. In fact, many instances are on record where witnesses have seen an infant stop breathing and care started immediately. Even in such cases, it is often impossible to revive the child."

Walter stared dejectedly at the doctor. Sure, people had seen babies stop breathing, but did they see what was really happening, like he had? The chances seemed astronomically low of someone else with Walter's condition being present at such a rare event and off their meds at the same time.

Of course, Walter didn't know if SIDS always involved the same ghoulish parasites, but he sure as hell had seen them this time, and still he had been no help to Timothy. How could he possibly not blame himself?

Anna burbled away on her mother's lap. In stark contrast to the adults in the tiny ER consultation room, she was happy and content now that her belly and bottom were looked after. Two index fingers went into her mouth at the same time, a move that reminded Walter of Timothy so forcefully that he had to look away to keep from choking up even more.

When Walter looked back, he saw his wife staring at Anna with red, puffy eyes, and could not tell if Katrina was listening to the doctor. Katrina's shoulder-length black hair, normally so shiny and neat, gave her a bedraggled, just-out-of-bed look. She seemed about to cry again, and her voice sounded the same way when she spoke.

"What about Anna?" Katrina said, looking up at the doctor. "Could she...." Katrina bit her lip, obviously struggling to get the words out. "Can this happen to her, too?"

Walter felt as if someone had just stabbed his gut with an icicle. It had not yet occurred to him that Anna might be at risk, as well.

"She is at the upper end of the age range during which most SIDS events occur, so she should soon be out of danger," Viswanathan said. "However, statistics are showing a somewhat higher incidence among siblings."

Walter huddled miserably in his seat. Statistics had nothing to do with it. He had seen how ravenous the little bastards were.

The cow pulsed with bright silver and orange light, as did the moon over which the cow perpetually jumped. Anna slept on, unaware that the mural over her crib was behaving so oddly.

Walter closed his eyes and rubbed them. His world was becoming over-bright once again.

He risked another look into the twins' room—Anna's room now—and saw that Katrina had finally fallen asleep on the spare bed. Walter had moved it from the guest room as soon as they arrived home from the hospital, after which Katrina had begun a nonstop vigil to watch over her baby girl. Anna had not been out of her mother's sight for more than a minute at a time during the past three days and two nights, a fact that was evident in the alarming dark circles under Katrina's eyes.

Friends had dropped by with food and offers of help.

"Thanks, but we're okay," Katrina said to each of them with a weak smile. "There's really nothing you can do."

Which was true enough, except that Katrina and Walter were far from okay. She did not even acknowledge most of his attempts to talk with her. Walter sensed this was not anger, just an inability to deal with anything except her own inner struggle. She sat in the rocking chair all day long, stroking Anna's forehead and murmuring gently. Her nights were spent watching the infant sleep, alternating between the rocking chair and the bed—but sleeping in neither.

Until tonight, when sheer exhaustion and the aftereffects of the funeral that afternoon had finally forced Katrina to surrender reluctantly to sleep.

Walter was also tired, but he was still glad for the chance to take over the Anna watch, even if it wasn't with Katrina's blessing. He was relieved to finally be able to do something.

His failure to save Timothy had been grinding away at him until he felt like he was going to implode from the guilt. Then Katrina had told him that Anna was rolling around in her crib at night. Katrina thought it was just Anna becoming more mobile, but Walter had an idea there might be another reason—one that terrified him.

And he couldn't even discuss his fears. Katrina would think he had popped his rivets if he started talking about phantom bugs, especially with his history. And how could he tell his wife he had noticed something unusual going on with Timothy that night?

"Why didn't you do something?" she would surely scream. "You should have woken me!"

After that she would never speak to him again.

No, the only way was to take action, which was why he had skipped his bedtime pill.

Walter looked over at Anna again and drew in his breath with a sharp start. The bugs were back, scurrying and squirming in a silent knot over Anna's head.

For a moment the sheer viciousness of the swarm shocked Walter into staying where he was, but then the thought of Timothy shamed him into motion. He crouched and eased himself into the room. The creatures continued their frenzy, seemingly unaware of his presence.

He had been right! The Dr. Viswanathans of the world didn't have a clue about Anna's real problem.

Of course, Walter knew all about the shortcomings of the medical profession. A long series of family doctors and head-pokers had taken a crack at figuring out why the world sometimes looked different to him. They stuck him with bullshit labels like "mildly schizophrenic" and "occasionally delusional." Not one doctor ever understood that his senses were simply too sensitive without the medication.

To hell with them. At least now he could try to help Anna.

Walter reached out slowly and lifted the pillow from the rocking chair. He gathered his balance and got ready to spring at the crib.

He would need to be fast if he were going to trap all of the bugs. The pillow would have to land squarely over Anna's face and be held there firmly until the bugs stopped struggling beneath it. It would take two or three minutes—and would seem much longer—but he knew it was necessary. Only then would Anna have the undisturbed rest she deserved.

He knew all this because he had finally remembered what happened last time. Timothy had looked so peaceful when Walter removed the pillow.

But it hadn't worked. Some of the bugs must have escaped.

Walter was determined not to miss any this time.

The stories, poems and artwork published by The Harrow are protected by the various trademarks and copyrights of the writers and artists who created them. It is illegal to copy, redistribute, and/or republish any of these works, including mirroring The Harrow's site and modifying or reusing any text or graphics on the site, without the express prior written consent of the owners and holders of the copyrights. Readers may, however, print copies of the information for their own personal use; store the files on their own computers for their personal use only; and reference hypertext documents on this site from their own documents.

Questions and comments about this site or the contents thereof should be emailed to Dru Pagliassotti (editor@theharrow.com), unless they pertain to the reproduction of any fiction, poetry or artwork within the contents or gallery of The Harrow, in which case queries should be sent to the respective authors, poets or authors who own copyright to those works.

