

# Yes, I Know, How, When, Okay

Daniel W. Thompson

At first Anna's requests for Jack to sleep downstairs seemed reasonable. He was a restless sleeper, some nights going to the bathroom two, three times. While up he often stole peeks through the window blinds because their neighbor, a middle-aged divorcée, once left her curtains open and Jack had enjoyed the view. Or sometimes he just stood there, staring down at a sleeping Anna with no particular thoughts, only the sensation of stillness keeping him conscious and awake. But for the past month, Anna had asked him to sleep downstairs more nights than not because of her headaches.

The other night, Anna asked Jack to sleep downstairs again, and while rummaging in the coat closet for ear buds so Anna wouldn't hear him watching porn, he heard a voice, a man's voice. It came sliding down the wall from above the closet, from the bedroom upstairs, from maybe a computer or phone. Though faint and unclear, it was definitely a man's voice, deep and crumbly, and it was having a conversation with Anna. He heard Anna say, *Yes, I know, how, when, okay.*

Jack tried angling for a better reception but he was a tall man and had to hunch over. No matter how he turned his neck and shoulders, he couldn't grasp the man's words and after a few frustrating minutes, a stiffening Jack exited the closet with his ear buds.

All the next day, Jack suffered to hear the man's voice again, to catch the crumbs of words falling through the walls. He thought of the candidates. Anna's boss was divorced and rich, a private investment manager. He had muscular, veiny arms and always squeezed Jack's hand too hard. Then there was Anna's so-called best friend from college. A man of the world. Peace Corps, Red Cross. Every story started with a different country, and Anna told of her friend's adventurous and valiant missions with great bubbles of tears in her eyes. He has the most wonderful soul, Jack, Anna would say. Where's our soul? What do we do for the world, Jack?

That night Anna again asked Jack to not come up. She was in terrible pain, she said. She rubbed her hand across the back of her neck and limped up the

stairs. Jack gave Anna a few minutes to settle in and then went to the living room, turned the television volume down and waited for the central air, rattling the floor vents to cycle off. Then he slipped back into the closet and slowed his breathing, prepping his listening devices, something he had learned to do on a pre-dawn hunting trip with his father years ago.

Jack did not have to wait long in the dark of the closet. Crumbles of the man's voice began falling upon Jack's head, and again they dominated the conversation with Anna, spreading out in raspy muffles. Yet Jack still couldn't identify the voice and Anna continued to say, *Yes, I know, okay, how, when*. The words came over and over and Jack started to feel dizzy. Whether it was the confined space or the way he had twisted his neck, Jack could no longer stand and he slumped to the floor. There, he closed his eyes.

On the hunting trip with his father he heard the deer's movement first. His father stressed the ability to hear before he saw and that stillness heightened the hearing. Jack pretended to twitch his ears and rotate them like a dog. He shifted his eyes in the direction of the crunching leaves, but only the eyes. Against a backdrop of bark and roots and twigs stood a large, crowned buck. If not for the white tufts of underbelly Jack would have never known the deer was there. He thought the image magical, the grandest he'd ever seen.

At the base of the closet Jack opened his eyes and squeezed his lungs. He could hear his heart beating, gushing through its chambers. Stillness. The man's voice was no more. Their conversation was over and another noise fell from above. A rustling, a shuffling of feet. It was coming from the bedroom closet. Anna was moving around in the closet. There was an unzipping sound and hangers rattling against the metal hanging rod. More shuffling and footsteps moving over Jack's head towards the stairs. Anna was coming down the stairs, dragging something heavy, strangely heavy, behind her.

Jack told himself to remain still. That this was the moment. He slowed his breathing to a baby's breath, pretending a feather sat on the tip of his nose and if he breathed too hard, the feather, a bluebird's feather, would fly away. That's what his father had told him as the two of them huddled in the bushes that pre-dawn morning, and just when Jack thought no person could be more still, just as an orange beam from the rising sun flicked across that great buck's dewy eyes, an ear-splitting crack exploded out of his father's shotgun and all of the wild in Jack's world erupted.

**Daniel W. Thompson's** work has appeared recently or is forthcoming at *Bartleby Snopes*, *decomP*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Third Point Press* and *Cheap Pop*. He works as a city planner and lives in downtown Richmond, VA, with his wife and daughters, cleaning up diapers and dog fur.