

Adult Essay

Third Place

Now I Lay Thee Down to Sleep

By Carolyn Sherman

I crouch in the rocker motionless, not breathing lest the tiny bundle I'm holding explode.

My new granddaughter seems to be sleeping—for now. My right leg is going numb, my left shoulder is throbbing.

How long have we been here? Twenty minutes? Two months? The only sound is the noise machine's faux ocean storm, and yet, another sound, so quiet it's nearly inaudible—the soft rise and fall of a little body's breathing.

Here in my arms is the most precious thing in the world to me, the eight pounds I would kill for, die for, fling myself in front of a truck for, the glorious new sun in my universe.

Good Lord, will she ever go to sleep? Now my other leg is numb. Can I *finally* get her into her crib? One false move and the outraged shrieks will begin. I look down to check, certain that even my glance may startle her awake. No, her eyes remain closed. I jiggle my numb arm half an inch. Nothing happens. Yes!

But it occurs to me as I ponder the situation, that short of tossing her across the room or using a drone, both bad ideas, there's no way to get her out of my arms and into her crib until I pry myself out of the rocker, stumble through the dark, and somehow plop her in—all while she's blissfully sleeping. The ocean storm continues unabated and I, without shifting even a fat globule above my waist, using leg vigor not seen since high school PE, power up to a stand, baby not dropped, upper body aching, but steady enough to fool this little tinderbox.

Squinting, I make out something crib-like across the room and very s-l-o-w-l-y, with true baby steps, home in on my target.

@\$%&*! What did I step on? She's been jiggled. Her eyebrows wrinkle in dismay, her mouth curling indignantly. I stop, foot balanced in midair, until she drifts off. Then I kick Elmo out of the way and move on.

The moment of truth: the transfer from my cozy arms onto the cold sheet. Should it be the slow, gentle slide—or the fast drop? The wrong choice and it's squawking square one.

Bending down, I hover over her crib, then, tingling arms giving way, I slip her in. My back yowls, but who's listening? She stirs, her tiny eyelashes fluttering like moth wings, and I blanche (I think—it's too dark to tell).

I can't stop myself. I pat her blanket one more time. She sighs, wriggles and settles into a deep sleep, her fingers curling under her chin. How could a person love anything, or anyone, this much?

Now to navigate in the dark around Elmo, find the doorknob, open the door and pray it doesn't squeak, hope the light from the hallway doesn't wake her, and get the hell out.