

Ren Ebel

Results of My Recent Bloodwork

I am sitting in my car parked outside the boy's home. I agreed to babysit today, having forgotten about my appointment with the allergist.

The appointment was made for me months ago by my former boss, a Buddhist production designer who lives in a wine-red duplex in Marina Del Rey. I had driven out there to pick up my last paycheck, and to tell her that I was sorry but I would not be doing the Walmart back-to-school Marvel superheroes commercial with her after all. I needed a break from commercials. Health reasons. Flare-ups.

She insisted I see her allergist Doctor Pat. He was, she said, a 'magic man'. She assured me I wouldn't have to pay because Doctor Pat owed her a big favour in exchange for some pro bono decorating she had provided for his clinic. I was uncomfortable with all of this, but she was ruthless and evidently itching to cash in the favour.

Had I known I would need to have my blood drawn before the appointment (at my own expense) I would never have agreed. But I've given them my blood and it's been examined at a price equivalent to three and a half babysitting hours, so I'm feeling sort of fatalistic about it now.

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I have a pretty good idea of what has been causing my flare-ups anyway. I recently got my own place, a half-sunken bunker on a damp lot between the 5 Freeway and the LA River. It is one of three old single-occupant units hidden from street view behind the carport of a new luxury condo. Each 'bungalow' is about the size of a tool shed. It fits one twin mattress, one folding card table, one mini fridge, a chair and me.

I'm in the middle unit, 5062½. To my right, in 5062¼, lives an Evangelical youth minister and CrossFit instructor named Lance. Lance is 30 and single. On the day I moved in, Lance told me that he is the property manager of the three bungalows and that our landlord gives him a discount on his rent because of this.

In 5062¾ lives Suzi. Suzi is 60 and single. She has singed black hair and a radioactive tan. She spends days on end shuffling around her bungalow like a sun-addled Bedouin succumbed to madness, chain smoking Camel Lights and chattering away with the TV blasting. She is addicted to amphetamines – this gossip delivered dutifully to me by Lance as I painted over the lime-green walls chosen by my predecessor, a failed fashion designer who, according to Lance, moved back to Cincinnati after a short and sudden stint in a psychiatric hospital.

The problem is that Suzi leaves food outside her bungalow in order to attract feral cats. The cats are her friends, and she has named them after the characters on the show *Friends*. She sits at her front door late into the early hours of morning, leaning against the inside of the iron-wrought screen, cigarette smoke drifting through the lattice into the chalky glow of the security light. One by one out of the shadows creep Phoebe, Joey, Chandler, Monica, leaping from garbage cans, hissing and wailing. In the light of day, Suzi is like a shy child: cowering, muttering to herself, a guilty look on her face. But with the cats, she is as casually self-assured and as abusive as a tenured professor. She's quick to enforce certain arbitrary rules with a harsh reproach.

'Phoebe, greedy greedy! That's Chandler's food you little *shit*! Eat from your own bowl! Nobody's gonna starve!'

Sometimes Suzi wears a shiny black wig with big feathered bangs and her twin sister drives in from Chino, then the two of them disappear for a few days. To Vegas, says Suzi. Suzi has a daughter around my age who came to visit her once. It was the only time her bungalow was ever quiet.

I think I'm allergic to the cats. The cats are causing my flare-ups. This, I think, is what has kept me up every night, listening to Suzi while wheezing quietly alone in my room.

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I will have to bring the boy with me. He'll be fine. He's easygoing. It shouldn't take long.

This is one of the best and easiest jobs I have ever had. I'd like to keep it so I don't have to go back to working commercials. The boy's parents are reasonable, plain-faced ex-goths from Louisiana. They treat me kindly and pay decently. They are screenwriters who collaborate on supernatural horror movies made for teen audiences, the plots of which usually involve a group of high school seniors who come into possession of an occult object that begins immediately wreaking havoc on their already complicated lives.

I found the job listing on Craigslist during a week of desperate searching following a particularly grueling shoot for a stock trading app filmed after hours in a dismal North Hollywood grocery store. I was surprised when, an hour later, the boy's mother wrote back to ask if in addition to baby-sitting I might teach the boy how to make movies and get him interested in the craft. The following afternoon I drove to the shrouded Mt. Washington cul-de-sac for an interview with the parents and to 'hang out' with their son. I brought along my laptop and a small, outdated camcorder which I stole from the university A/V checkout room where I once worked.





The boy had lots of ideas, so I followed his lead. He wanted to make a horror movie. He wanted to call it 'The Babysitter'. He would play an 11-year-old boy named Ryan, and I would play Ryan's new babysitter.

The film opens on the two of us shaking hands. 'I look forward to getting to know you, Ryan,' I say before turning and grinning menacingly toward Ryan's offscreen parents. 'You two have fun tonight,' I say. 'And don't worry about Ryan. He's in good hands.' Cut to a close-up of the boy's face. A look of utter dread. Crossfade to the boy sometime later, playing alone with a toy car in the driveway. The sound of approaching footsteps. The boy looks up. Cut to a man's silhouette, shot at an extreme low angle against the afternoon sun. The man staggers slowly toward the camera. Cut to black. A scream (youngboyscreaming_long2.wav courtesy of freesound.org). Cut to the boy's face, again in close-up, his eyes bulging, his mouth open, a garden hose wrapped around his neck. In the background, out of focus, I can be seen stalking off down the driveway toward my car. Credits roll.

The boy's parents adored the film. It seemed to put them immediately at ease. 'We're sorry we had to vet you a little,' the boy's father told me. 'We just have to be careful.' The boy's mother explained that their previous babysitter, an aspiring actress from the Midwest, had been let go after they found out she had been keeping a blog about her life in LA which had included some sensitive details about the family, their home and routines, the boy's school, etc.

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Most days I pick the boy up from his private Montessori school in Glendale and we go back to his house where I reheat leftovers and chat with him about his hobbies. He likes baseball and *Magic: The Gathering*. He knows how to play the opening riff of 'Blackbird' on the acoustic guitar. He is allowed 45 minutes of PlayStation on weekdays and two hours on Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes his best friend comes over and the two of them have passionate discussions in the impenetrable jargon of their video games, bragging casually of recent achievements like businessmen at a conference.

Alone with me, the boy is thoughtful, kind and casually mysterious in ways I envy and admire.

I let myself in through the side gate and knock at the kitchen door. The boy appears and asks me to wait a moment while he searches for his phone. The boy's parents are next door in their garage office. Right now they are working on a sci-fi project. I hear the muffled voice of the boy's father reading lines inside. Princess Orion, the seven amulets, Drogon's army of time-eaters.

Doctor Pat's clinic is in Pasadena, a private medical complex shaded by jacarandas. We enter through thick sliding glass doors and find ourselves standing beneath a vast two-story atrium with sloping white walls lit by an egg-shaped skylight. Every object inside the building appears to be at least partially see-through. A bouquet of blown-glass birds of paradise erupts wildly from a crystal pyramid. Beyond it lies a vast and shallow pool built into the floor. Rising from the water, a series of intertwined plexiglass tubes form a giant double helix. Beads of liquid swell and drip from tiny holes in the tubes, sending a cascade of droplets down into the pool, filling the space with the sound of artificial rain.

Near the stairs, there is a lobby furnished with Eames-style chairs made of transparent plastic. Several recent and soon-to-be mothers sit there waiting. They wear loose linen frocks and earth-tone coveralls. Some read from their phones while others cradle tiny infants. The babies are strangely quiet.

I find a directory on the wall nearby:

100 Sacred Midwife & Fertility, Inc.

200 Inhale Allergy Specialists

Dr. Patrick Chance, MD

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Upstairs, Doctor Pat's secretary tells me to go straight in, the doctor is waiting. The boy finds himself a seat amid stacks of *Better Homes* near the safety railing at the mezzanine's edge. 'I'm good here,' he says.

The office is minimally furnished, decorated with neutral grey wallpaper. Doctor Pat turns out to be an uncharismatic, potato-like man with long narrow nostrils that resemble a second, squinting pair of eyes.

'Cats,' says Doctor Pat. 'Cats to *some* degree. But frankly I don't think cats are your problem.'

Clearing his throat, he removes a small pack of laminated cards from his desk and fans them out face-down in front of me, very much like a magician. 'Take one' he says. I pick a card at random, tapping it lightly with my forefinger. He flips it over. Printed on the other side of the card in brown block letters is the word MITES. Below it, a photograph taken through a microscope: a gruesome little marshmallow beaver with nubile pink pincers nestled smugly in a crop of human hairs the size of bamboo reeds.

'Nothing much can be done,' says Doctor Pat.

Even if I vacuumed constantly. Even if I bought an expensive air purifier and left it running all day. They are simply everywhere: in the floor, in the air, in my car, in produce.

‘Grocer’s itch,’ says Doctor Pat.

He wants me to drink a cup of nettle tea each morning for the next six weeks. He is going to write me a prescription for two inhalers: a bronchodilator and a steroid for emergencies.

I am deeply lost in the drone of his words, as if he were reciting a mantra or trying to hypnotise me. I feel light and peaceful. I feel I could sit here for hours. I even begin to feel compassion toward the mites, a willingness to allow them space within myself.

A knock at the door.

Turning, I notice a small stone Buddha placed so discretely there in the corner of the room, smiling back at us like a hidden camera.

The door cracks open. ‘I’m so sorry to interrupt,’ says Doctor Pat’s secretary. ‘There’s been an accident.’

Her face is completely placid. All is calm. She looks at me. ‘Your son,’ she says.