

## BAKER ARTIST PORTFOLIO Short Story Sample

### Memory Foam

Mr. Sandman. Bedding Barn. Mattress Warehouse. Captain Winkie's.

Four mattress joints line this one-mile stretch of Route 1. I've noticed them before—it's hard not to notice a huge red barn with an appliqued cow-shaped mattress on the roof—but now that I am in the market for a mattress the lunacy of it strikes me. What's the strategy? Do surveys say that people driving fifty miles an hour think about purchasing a mattress every seven seconds? Passing store 1: Jesus, my neck is stiff. Passing store 2: I hate my lumpy mattress. Spotting store 3: You know, I really should get a new goddamn mattress. Honing in on store 4: Fuck it I'm getting a fucking mattress right now! Sharp right turn across three lanes of screeching traffic.

No traffic today, a Wednesday, because it's New Year's Day. I'm the only one out looking for a resolution.

Mr. Sandman immediately plants an ear-worm of the song by The Chordettes that I can't shake. The word "warehouse" strikes me as overwhelming, and I want this chore over as fast as possible. Captain Winkie's sounds childish, and I need to be a man about this and set things straight. So I pick Bedding Barn and pull into the empty lot. Sucked in by that heifer mattress mooing over Route 1. I'm an hour early before the joint opens and wait with the engine off (didn't matter, the pickup's heater went up before Christmas), two circles wiped out through the foggy windshield, a cup of Dunkin Donuts pinched between my legs. I crack the window and smoke; white plumes swirl from cigarette, coffee cup, and breath like three trains on a collision course. I carelessly sip too much coffee and grimace as a burn radiates around my heart and into my lungs. I imagine

internal organs blistering, melting and gnarling like styrofoam cups over a campfire. An empty pint bottle rests on the passenger seat, so I pull its partner from the glove compartment. Like a scout, always prepared. I tip vodka into the coffee, blow across the surface, sip. Still too hot. So I pull directly from the bottle and swish it around in my mouth. I wait and chug along—drag exhale sip swallow drag inhale—until entirely cocooned in frosted windows. Metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly springs to mind, psychedelic wings unfurling from a crack in the chrysalis, which leads to flashes of that bed-ridden bug from that story I read freshman year before dropping out. I imagine the roach flailing as flames engulf the mattress. I don't want to exit the cocoon of the truck.

Drag exhale sip swallow drag inhale. Repeat.

Purified by fire, is that how it goes? Burning away our impurities. Forgiveness for the unrighteous. A mouthful of brimstone. All consumed. Burned for what's at stake. Going down in a blame of whoring. Oh Babylon. Smart asses Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If you can't take the heat... The vodka summoned an altar-call of forgotten sermons that amount to flambéed clichés. I take another hit of holy water to drown them. Abednego. I need "a bed to go."

The store opens at 10AM sharp. The rooftop Holstein-patterned mattress begins to slowly rotate like a weathervane. Then again, the whole dashboard is starting to swim so maybe I'm imagining the cow-tress mooing...moving.

*Pull yourself together.* Flick cigarette. Lid coffee. Cap vodka. Stare. Re-open, swig, rinse again. Pat jacket and stench of last night's toxic bonfire billows up. Perfume jacket with dabs of vodka. Cap and replace in glove compartment along with its drained

twin. Rest coffee cup in cup holder. Palm a half dozen Tic-Tacs into mouth. Emerge from truck. Feel no different. Same as after every Sunday sermon. No metamorphosis today.

Bung, bung, bung, bung from that Sandman song pound my eardrums as I steady myself across the parking lot. Earwig. Worm. *Give him the word that I'm not a rover. Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over.*

When I reach the door of Bedding Barn my mouth is still filled with minty rubble. I spit the Tic-Tacs out onto the sidewalk one at a time, the way Curley from the Three Stooges spat teeth after being walloped in the jaw. A bell jingles upon entering. It sounds just like when Clarence earned his wings; Darlene and I watched that movie again a few weeks ago before she left on business. The holidays are always busy for her.

Bedding Barn is bright and white the way a cloudy heaven is pictured. The fluorescents above sting. A strange hum settles into my ears. A salesman at the back of the store startles and heads toward me.

“Happy new year, Slick!” he says, extended arm weaving like a Moray eel. I can’t tell if he’s doing it deliberately or if the alcohol pooled behind my eyes is turning everything to rubber. The eel takes the bait, my hand, and shakes the life out of it, turning my own arm into a vibrating jelly-log. “First customer of the year. Must be a discount for that. The name’s Jack B. Trimble.”

I laugh, then try to suck my breath back in to avoid gassing him in mint and vodka and Marlboros.

“What’s the joke, Slick?”

I wait for his punch line: “Jack B. Trimble. Jack be quick. Jack sell you a mattress, Slick.” It does not come. He is unaware. The nursing rhyme unsticks the Chordettes song and repeats in my warm ears.

Jack does not ask if he can help, he just starts helping.

“Look at you, strapping specimen, what six-one, six-two?”

“Six-two.”

“I knew it. Mattress men and casket men, we’ve got an eye for such things.” He chuckles, slaps my back, which sends up another barely visible charred cloud. A small cough escapes his throat.

“I imagine you’re a spring man.”

“Spring man?”

“Spring, foam, latex...all kinds of mattresses.”

“Cheap,” I say.

“Cheap? Slick,” he says, then chuckles heh-heh-heh-heh a little longer than I thought the moment deserved, “don’t do yourself a disservice. A long laugh and a good sleep are the best cures in this doctor’s book.”

“Haven’t been doing much of either.”

“Well, let’s tend to that then. Follow me.”

Two aisles divide piles of mattresses into thirds, some showcased in bedframes and some splayed open to reveal bed guts—padding, foam, fiber, springs, wood. Most are stacked high on pallets floor to ceiling, some wrapped in thick plastic like autopsy cadavers. Despite variations of quilt patterns and stitching, they all look the same to me, like choosing between various brands of vanilla ice cream. Jack walks past several

seemingly fine possibilities toward the back of the store, turning to catch me huffing into my hand to check my breath.

“No need to waste time with those, they’re the inferior models marked-up for suckers. You? I can tell you’re a man who knows a thing or two. A discerning man. A man who needs his backbone.”

He suddenly stops and turns, produces a piece of paper and unscrolls it like a town-crier reading a proclamation. He remains silent and turns the scroll toward me. It depicts three images of a naked woman in panties with tar-black hair, like Darlene’s, lying on her side turned from me, like Darlene of late. Her spine and hipbone appear as if I have x-ray vision. Maybe I actually *do* have x-ray vision. I squint to sharpen the focus of the rays beaming out of my eyes. In the first picture, her body is hard against a too firm mattress. A pink X covers her spine, which curves into the hip. In the second picture, she drowns into a mattress that’s too soft. A pink X covers her spine, which forms a bow. In the third picture, the mattress gently meets and follows the curves of her body. I use my x-ray vision to look through the pale green checkmark to her smooth shoulder blade snug into the mattress, which conforms to the contour of her waist and rises to support her thigh and ascends with her long slender legs to perfect feet, one cradled on top of the other. It’s hot—sexy hot, not Hades hot—and I sway a bit but catch myself before Jack notices. I am thirsty and I stink.

“I know,” Jack says. “Take a long, good look. That’s some backbone, huh? Natural spinal alignment. Good blood circulation. Optimal pressure distribution. That’s what you need from a mattress.”

“Never thought about it much.”

“And yet you spend a third of your life in bed. Need to think about it, Slick. Never go to bed angry, and never go to bed on a cheap mattress.”

“Got it,” I say.

“Now, types of mattresses. Here’s where the rubber meets the road, or as I like to say, the butt hits the pad.” Jack sits on the edge of a mattress and pats the space beside him gently, inviting me to sit next to. He comes across a little too “come hither.”

I sit. He bounces.

“Feel that?” Jack says. “Individually wrapped coil springs. Just the right amount of give versus support. Now kick off your shoes.”

I pause. He stands. “Come on, kick them off,” he insists. I comply. “Now lie back and scooch up there.” I do as I am told. I stare at the fluorescent lights. It feels like an operating theater. A heart attack. “Huh? Huh? Is that something or what? This is the El Sueno 600. Most queens have 400 coils. This baby gives you fifty percent more springs, which translates into more points of contact for greater pressure distribution. Got to take care of the pressure, Slick.”

I’m stiff, like a corpse. I fold my hands across my stomach.

“Now, is that your natural sleeping position?” Jack asks.

“I guess not.”

“Didn’t think so. Be natural.”

I turn onto my side. Fidget. Sit up.

Jack rubs his chin. “Maybe you’re not a spring man, after all. Come on, let’s try memory foam.”

I rise and follow him with my shoes hooked on two fingers. “Memory foam?”

“Memory foam. Temper foam. Visco-elastic foam. It has several names, but it’s all polyurethane meant to absorb shock. Cushion the blow, so to speak.”

Memory. Temper. Shock. I should have pocketed the vodka before coming into the store.

Jack blathers on: “NASA invented it, then the Swedes got a hold of it. Imagine that material in the hands of people who improved the monkey wrench! They changed the entire way the world sleeps.”

Jack stops and turns on both heels, hands spread wide open like two starbursts.

“Check this out,” he says, peeling back a mattress pad to expose material the color of durum wheat, the color of Darlene’s skin. Jack presses his star-burst hand hard into the mattress and releases. An imprint of his hand remains in the foam shaped like a child’s outline of a turkey. We watch in silence as the handprint slowly, barely noticeably, rises like dough until no trace of the depression remains. The amount of focus required and the amount of vodka absorbed causes me to wobble again, a bit more charismatically, like stalks swaying in the breeze.

Jack grabs my arm to steady me. “Huh? Huh? Ain’t that something, Slick?”

“Can I take it for a test drive?”

“By all means.” Jack takes my shoes and sets them on the floor. “You won’t be disappointed with this Jagarledsen brand, straight from Stockholm.”

I pivot and plunge—an impromptu “trust fall”—bouncing twice before coming to a rest. Another noxious cloud puffs off me. I think I hear Jack shout “woo-wee!” but turn on my side before I can register his expression. Trails from the fluorescent lights shoot across the ceiling like comet tails. Through stubble on my cheek, I feel the taut surface

recess under the weight of myself. The memory foam takes me in, takes me down, slowly like quicksand. One eyelid unfurls and I scan the mattress's infinitestically...infinite...small cratered landscape close up. I am a splotch soaking into a sponge. I am minuscule. I am in deep shit with Darlene.

"Still with me, Slick?" Jack asks. He kicks the bedframe as if checking car tires.

"Hmmm...", I say.

"Feels good, feels right, doesn't it?"

"Riiight. Goood."

"Say, I have this mnemonic device I use. I think you could use a mnemonic device right about now."

"New maaahnick."

"SLEEP!"

"Sleeeep..."

"Stands for: *Select* a mattress. *Lie* down in your typical position. *Evaluate* the level of comfort. *Educate* yourself. *Partners* should test beds together. S. L. E. E. P. See, it's perfect and it really helps."

"Hell-puh."

"Let's take inventory. Select a mattress, check. Lie down, definitely check. Evaluate comfort, check. You are comfortable, right Slick? I can tell that you are. Educate yourself, Jack B. Trimble is helping with that, so check that off. That just leaves testing with a partner. You got a partner, right Slick? A strapping specimen like you, of course you do."

"Daaarleeene..."



“She didn’t come with, huh? That’s a problem, with a Capital Pee and that stands for *partner*.”

My arm levitates as if lifted by a ghost, cinch I fired no notor morons along no axiom, then crashes to the mistress. I sense my balm—pee...pee...*palm*—patting it twice the way Jack did before.

“You know, Slick, as a salesman I’d do anything to close a deal, but that’s highly irregular.”

The ghost is angry. It pounds my fist into the mattress twice and leaves two soft divots. The rest. The rest imprints itself like a script across a teleprommer. Jack B. Trimble sits at the foot of the bed, pauses, stands and decides to remove his jacket, sits again, kicks off his own shoes, clears his throat, falls back, and twists away from me onto one shoulder. I snuggle up behind him and spoon. A thin ridge of memory foam divides the two valleys that our bodies carve. My arm automatically drapes over him. Fucking ghost. For a moment, all we hear is the hum of the showroom’s fluorescent lights. At least I think Jack hears it, too, but maybe he’s so used to it he no longer notices. It reminds me of the pump’s whir last night while I filled up the gas canister. I lingered over the can’s opening and let the fumes spiral into my nose. Sweet, like my father’s collar doused with benzene aftershave whenever he returned home from business trips. After his hugs, he’d shoo me upstairs where I’d hear my parents’ voices rise into yells with the heat the kitchen ceiling into my bedroom before I fell asleep. Glasses rattled. Sobs muffled. I hadn’t thought of that for years. Darlene travels a lot, too, repairing tech for the state’s casinos and it’s a big fucking state. So I gamble when she’s gone. She was out of town for most of December, the holidays being gangbusters for casinos, and when she

was home all we did was watch stupid holiday movies slumped silently on the couch. Barely spoke civil. We'd fight about all the mundane bullshit I need to handle when she's not around much, and when she is around I'm too drunk to give a shit. On New Year's Eve, I left her to get more champagne. Big fucking gamble. I left even though she asked me not to; she had been working so hard. More champagne would help her relax, I said. I returned empty handed with a story prepared about driving from Liquor King's to World of Beer to even that snooty place over at Orchard and Halliwell, but every place was cleared out of bubbly. That would explain being gone for ninety minutes. I thought I was slick, but the house was dark when I came home after midnight. Lights off, TV cold, candles extinguished. When I entered our room, she was sitting on the edge of the bed crying. The sheets were slashed and pillows split open, everything piled in a corner. The stripped mattress, marked with stains like Rorschach blots, sagged in the middle. The long red grill igniter dangled from one of Darlene's fingers like a spent six-shooter. She rose, stood in front of me, and, without looking me in the eye, lifted the igniter and clicked it. Two inches of fire flickered closer to my bangs than I think she intended. Then she lowered the torch below my belt buckle.

"Think you can jump over this without it blowing out?"

"Babe, what do you mean...?"

Darlene released the igniter's trigger and pressed the thing hard into my chest so that I had to take it from her. "Haul it to the fucking woods and burn it."

"But it is a perfectly good..."

"Do it."

“Then what?”

“Then maybe I’ll give you a chance to jump over the flame, see what the future holds. Maybe, you asshole.”

“I shrimply don’t unnerstand...”

“You’re mumbling.” Jack presses an elbow into my ribs. “I’m not sure, in fact, I am positive that I am not, a suitable surrogate.” He sits up and shakes me hard. I force myself to look at the white lights until my eyes tear. Then their hum returns. I sit up next to him and cluck my tongue against my dry mouth. Our impressions in the memory foam evaporate along with the remnants of vodka in my bloodstream.

We sit and stare at our stocking feet. Jack is wearing navy blue socks with little white anchors all over them. Mine are black with a left toe trying to escape through as hole.

I ask, “How is it for, for not sleeping?”

“*Not* sleeping?” Jack asks.

“Yeah, you know.”

“Reading?”

“Do I look like an earworm, bookworm? I mean sex, which ones are best for sex?”

“That’s not part of the mnemonic device, unless I guess you interpret the P-for-‘partner’ part that way.”

Capital Dee and that stands for Darlene. It has been ages since we made love. She’s always galavanting around this huge goddamn state doing God knows what with these high-rollers, so I roll the dice now and then. “Snake eyes” are bound to come up.

Too close to the flame. What would Abednego do? What would George Bailey do? I just can't wait for an angel to rescue me from the pit's edge.

Jack says, "You should really be having this conversation with Darlene."

"You're all I got," I say. "You should come up with another acronym."

"Well, speaking completely on my own and not on behalf of professional mattress salesmen everywhere, I suppose one should consider resilience, resistance, *squeak* quotient I imagine. I am not sure there even are industry standards."

"Okay, let's think this through, Jack. Resilience meaning?"

"Elasticity, bounce."

"Bounciness, I like that. You want it comfortable but without too much give.

Motion of the ocean, know what I mean?"

"I'd give memory foam a D on that. Too firm. Go with a spring mattress."

"Resistance?"

"For stains and such."

"Right, stains and such. Such stains."

"Then definitely not memory foam. Might want to go with a water bed, they have washable mattress pads over vinyl or rubber, or you could just hose it down I suppose."

"Squeak quotient, like 'if the bed's a-rocking, don't come a-knockin'?"

"In so many words, discretion, yes. Memory foam wins hands down."

"What are we overlooking, what about..." I grind my hips against nothing ...

"friction?"

"I'm not sure that's the best term. What about 'traction'?"

"Okay by me."

“Memory foam takes that category, too.”

“Bounce. Resistance. Discretion. Traction. B R D T. I’ve got nothing.”

“There are all sorts of mnemonic devices. Expressions like ‘Easter Bunny Gets Drunk After Easter’ for the order of guitar strings. Names like ROY G BIV for the colors of the rainbow. Rhymes like ‘In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.’”

“Beds Really Demand Time.”

“It’s a start. You’ll figure it out, Slick. Bottom line, memory foam is the way to go.”

We stand together and push our feet into our shoes.

“Price?” I ask.

“Is no object,” Jack says.

“I need to think about it.”

“Okay. Just don’t *sleep* on it.” Jack pauses, “That was a joke.”

Jack extends his arm in the same eel-like fashion that he greeted me with. We shake, and I shudder like having gulped even cheaper vodka than I had been drinking.

Out in the car, cocooned again, I fish for a cigarette, but the pack is empty. I yank the bottle from the glove compartment, but not a spit remains. A shallow pool of coffee in the Dunkins cup is cold. I picture Darlene, and maybe she is gone by now, too. I feel the same sting in my eyes as I did when staring at the ceiling lights. I torched the mattress as she told me to. The gasoline must have pooled into the saggy crater of the thing because in an instant the flames drew together from its four corners into the center as they braided up into a twisted rope of fire coughing sparks into the frigid night. Thought the overhanging branches were going to catch and bring out the goddamn fire department.

Love is a burning thing, all right. It took the better part of an hour to send that mattress to hell. Maybe coming home with a new one would be some sort of peace offering. And I'll cut it off with the others. Swear.

I decide to buy the mattress Jack wants to sell me.

The bell at the door jingles again, but the fluorescents have lost their hum. I look for Jack, brace for another earthquake of a handshake, but he doesn't rush toward me. In fact, no one does. Far to one side of the store, behind a counter, sits a kid furiously thumbing his phone. The bell did not disturb him, he doesn't deserve the wings that Jack earned, so I walk up to the counter all gruff and make a noise somewhere between a cough and a neigh.

"Hey," he says but continues to text.

"Yeah, I was just talking to Jack about a mattress."

"I'm the only one here, dude."

"I just spent an hour with him, maybe he's on a break."

With this, the kid looks up at me.

"Look, man, you're the first and likely only person to walk through that door today."

"We were on the other side of the store, maybe you didn't see us."

"Like I said, flying solo today. It's January first. Anyone with any fucking sense is still *in* bed, not shopping for one."

"Jack's his name," I say. "Jack B. Trimble."

The kid chuckles. "All right, that's original. Go sleep it off somewhere, Slick."

"Slick! That's what Jack called me."

“Look, I can smell the booze from here. Do I have to call the cops?”

“Come, come, come,” I rush past the cheaper displays toward the better models Jack showed me. “This way,” my arm is wheeling in circles to reel him along. The kid follows. “Here, here.” I touch the mattress where Jack and I spooned the way you check to see if an engine is still warm. I squat and eye-up the surface of the foam the way a billiard player inspects a pool table, but the two impressions we left have completely disappeared.

“We laid down together here, right here.”

“Okay, I’ll give you to the count of three,” he says, raising the cell phone and hovering a thumb above it. “Nine.” His thumb presses the phone’s screen.

“Right here!”

“One,” his thumb presses again.

“Jack. Jack!” I look around

The kid yells, “One!”

I jump and claw at the mattresses stacked floor-to-ceiling on pallets. “Jack!”

The kid says, “Yeah, I’m down at Bedding Barn. We have another 10-56.”

“I want the best bed for Darlene!”

“Yeah, liquored up real good.”

I spread eagle against the wall of mattresses as if being patted down and start grinding my hips again while sobbing, “For just Darlene.”

“No, wait, Jesus make that a possible 6-47.”

“I’ll jump through fire!”

“Yep, I’d say it’s pretty lewd.”

“I’ll take the memory foam!”