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## **The Other Man**

**by Rodes Fishburne**

**A couple of weeks ago, at three in the morning, I woke up to find my wife in bed with another man.** She likes tall men, he was short. She likes broad shoulders, his were narrow. I don't think I'm offending the parties involved when I say that at 37 pounds he was literally a bit of a lightweight. If it came right down to it, and it might, I was pretty sure I could take him.

Sadly, this wasn't the first time I'd caught them together. For the past month, it had been happening two or three nights a week, including weekends. Sometimes I was even in the house! Had they any shame? Nope, came the answer, clear as the blinking alarm clock next to the bed, they did not. I had delayed the inevitable long enough. So with pure intentions, but mixed feelings, I kissed my son's forehead and left to go sleep in his room.

As I curled around the cat-sized warm spot he had left behind in his small bed, I felt the plastic knights lurking in the sheets running sorties against my kneecaps. It was not going to be a great night's sleep.

And so my mind turned. And turned. This was just perfect. You fall in love with your dream girl, move to San Francisco, marry her, have a child together, and then, at the age of

three, the boy—sleepwalking through his Oedipal debut—displaces you from your rightful position in bed. It was tragedy. It was farce. It was fatherhood. And there would be no intermission.

As I lay there another fearsome truth revealed itself: the love my wife and I shared with one another had created something that *literally* got between us. It was like having a fire hydrant bolted in the middle of your bed. Resistance would be futile. And feudal.

This shift in family dynamics is disorienting to even the most stable of male psyches. What father hasn't walked up at the end of a long day to his house/grass hut/igloo and been greeted at the front door by a little feller whose first response is:

“Where's Mom?”

The mature thing to do would be to register a jolt of sympathy for the fact that the other male in my household was struggling—just like me!—with a strong urge to be with Mom. And there *was* a tiny jolt allocated on his behalf. On the other hand, only a fool fails to recognize true competition.

I tossed in my son's bed. What else was in my blind spot? The mind reeled: “First a blind spot, then a bald spot. Then you're dead.” It sounded like a fortune cookie written by Samuel Beckett.

How do men get themselves into this situation? Very slowly. For starters no alien takes over our bodies for nine months, our feet don't swell, we never stand naked in front of a floor length mirror howling, “I. LOOK. HUGE!” in order to signify to our (admittedly) slow, (admittedly) reptilian brains that *something is coming*. Men are selfish, and selfishness is best preserved in a cocoon of ignorance. Preferably one made of beer and pork ribs. So we hang

onto the coat-tails of someone else's biology, winking and cooing supportively, without the foggiest idea of what is about to happen.

Only later do we realize that, in addition to all the other things that fatherhood requires—patience, sacrifice, the ability to change diapers with one hand while eating a piece of pizza—we must add the notion of second place. Silver Medals all around.

I asked a female friend about this. I wanted a woman's perspective. If I'd asked my wife she would have told me everything was going to be alright. She would straddle the fault line with more finesse than a Swiss diplomat. My friend wouldn't be so gentle. She had children. She could provide feminine insight that transcended my own beer-n-pork rib cocoon.

“Oh yeah,” she said when I brought up the subject of silver medals, “that's a totally real thing.”

Oh boy.

“And I have to tell you, I loved it.”

Oh no.

“The snuggling and the nuzzling. To be honest there's a part of me that really enjoyed my son's attention. It's not sexual, it's not even sensual. It's animal.” Her eyes drifted a bit, as if recalling a particularly far away cosmic mother/son snuggle that a father wouldn't understand. “And . . . there's a little part of me that also enjoyed the hunger in my husband's eyes. Both for my attention, but also for my son's.”

Oh dear God.

“You know, before my son was born I would have nightmares about my husband drowning and I would dive in to save him. But about a week after our son was born I started to have nightmares about my son instead. Funny, huh?”

Hilarious.

It's four a.m. now. If I hurry up I can get just enough sleep to make the day bearable. Hurry up and sleep—the motto of new parent's everywhere.

I reach for the shrinking ball of warmth, now the size of a quarter. The paranoid part of my mind is tired. In fact, it's selfishly asleep. Which is good, because the words that come are my father's words, who offered them whenever I did something that amused him, or bewitched him, or caused him, I see now, to contemplate *his* perch in the cosmos and the ineffable mystery of why fathers even have sons in the first place. He would quote a bit of old poetry:

“The child is father to the man...”

Which, when you are the child, sounds like a ridiculous adult riddle unworthy of unraveling. But when you are the man, it doesn't need to be unraveled, because the answer is lying right in front of you, next to the women you love. The dead-of-night idea comes slowly, but it comes: this curious earthly rotation we all take turns on is made real—is made indelible—by the appearance of the next generation.

This same epiphany must have dawned on my father, and his father, and your father, on and on, back through the family tree of sleepless nights.

I wish I could remember the rest of the poem, but it is getting very late now. Finally time to rest. Reason and memory both fading. Led into the darkness by the last of the plastic knights.

RODES FISHBURNE's first novel, *Going to See the Elephant*, will be published by Bantam Dell in December 2008. For more information, or to sign up for his mailing list, visit: [www.RodesFishburne.com](http://www.RodesFishburne.com)