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Fable
Approximately 2400 words
First Serial Rights

The Stressmonger

by Andrew Kass

Joe Prince was a trader. He had a fine house on an acre of land, a comely wife, a willowy daughter, a strapping young son and a setter named Rowlf. But Joe Prince was not happy, for he rarely saw any of them.

Early each morning, Joe drove off in his stylish sedan to work in the City. Every day, he ground along in traffic and promised himself to knock off early, and not worry so much. The promise evaporated in the rush of e-mail, voice mail, the to-do list left from yesterday, before the phone had rung even once. Through the meetings, calls and memoranda, the pictures of his family floated in the background, slightly out of focus. Eventually he would look up from his terminal to a clock reading 9:45 or so, and a

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window dim with distant streetlight. He might then drive the long way home to kiss a wife, son and daughter already abed, and to walk the night with Rowlf.

This is a poor way to live, he told his wife one weekend morning.

Then let's do something about it, she replied.

But neither of them knew what to do. The fine house and grounds had a mortgage and upkeep. Their daughter would soon start college. Their son needed braces. Rowlf had fleas. While his wife's real estate sales brought in commissions, it was not as steady, and not as much, as Joe's princely salary.

Willie Nelson informed them, through Joe's lips,

It's not a good life, but it's my life.

So things continued as before, until one day Joe was called out of town on business the day his daughter was to graduate from high school. He spoke with her on the airphone. She said it was alright, but it wasn't.

This is wrong, he said. I'll make it up to you.

Sure, she said. Sure, Daddy.

He sat for some time after, listening to the drone of the jet in the darkened cabin, wondering what he could bring her from the city to which he was bound.

Suddenly he noticed a clatter from the lavatory across the aisle. This was odd, as he did not recall seeing anyone enter. It sounded like somebody straining and kicking,

making such a racket he thought to call the steward. But no head stirred before him, so he waited and listened.

Presently the door opened, and from the dark cubicle emerged a being best described as a troll. He was short and thick, clad in shapeless homespun, with great crescents of ears, a pronounced brow and jaw.

Seat taken? he croaked in a seldom-used voice.

No, replied Joe.

The troll squeezed by to the window seat. He smelled of chemical flush.

You seem tense, the troll said.

You could say that, said Joe. I don't know who I'm talking to, for starters.

I stow away, the troll replied, for that tasty blue cocktail they carry in the cabinets. So I pick up things from my visitors. And, sometimes, I make a deal.

What kind of a deal? asked Joe.

Something no man of affairs can refuse, the other leered. There is a beverage much finer than airwine. It is called workahol. To get the main ingredient, I barter: You give me the essence of your tension. When I distill my liquor, there is a by-product that your kind holds dear. That I give to you.

And what is this by-product? asked Joe.

Diamonds, the troll said.

Joe blinked, rubbed his eyes and switched on his reading light. The troll seemed as real as he.

That's it? Joe said. Stress for diamonds?

The troll nodded shrewdly.

But how do you gather the stress? Joe asked.

In the stresspot, of course.

From his tunic he produced a flask attached by hose to what looked like a flexible funnel.

This goes on your head during the incantation. The next morning, you will find diamonds under your pillow.

Joe readily agreed, and in a wink the troll was standing on the seat beside Joe with the funnel on Joe's head.

Per spiraro ergo sum, said the troll.

Joe felt his body relax as his mind cleared. When he looked back, the troll was gone. Joe chuckled to himself: the things your mind will do on a red-eye flight. Then he noticed a card on the seat beside him. It read:

ECTO PLASMUS
Stressmonger

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The meeting went well. Everyone commented on how relaxed Joe looked after his overnight trip. Joe told them he had slept on the plane, and had this funny dream about a troll. This started a round of stories about strange trips each had taken. Joe had such a good time dining with his colleagues that he forgot to buy a gift for his daughter. He resolved to do so the very next morning, before the next meeting.

He awoke with something in his hand. He withdrew from beneath the pillow a plain cloth sacklet. It was at once very light and specifically heavy. The bottom was dense with white diamonds, a carat or more each.

Joe jumped clear of the bed for joy. He fumbled the diamonds onto the hotel room desk and turned on the lamp. Even to his inexperienced eye they were all flawless. As his heart leaped, a note fluttered out of the sack and settled among the jewels with its message facing up:

More. Tonight.

He went to the meeting, saying nothing. Negotiations were intense, but with Joe's sensible guidance they concluded well. That night, Ecto Plasmus entered from the bathroom and drew off another measure of stress. And in the morning, Joe found another bag of diamonds with another note.

He flew home that night. Somewhere within the dome of night he felt a presence at his side redolent of chemical flush.

You've been tipping, he told the troll.

Hair of the dog, the troll slurred. Thish was the fffinest wo-- it was very good.

Vintage.

Thank you, said Joe.

Not a'tall, said the troll. I jush-- I *just* wanna know, can you keep it up?

Joe asked him what he meant.

Well, you're not poor. No worries there. You still have a fire in your belly?

Joe assured him that he did, though his stomach actually felt pretty tranquil, even after the in-flight fettucine.

Yah, well, can't fool me. Not ferasecond. I'll *know* if you're slacking off, an' I warn you, that'll change the deal.

Joe shrugged.

It's your deal.

But, turn it over as he might the whole way home, he saw no way to lose. If he worked hard, he'd be rewarded. If he kicked back, he had diamonds enough.

At home, he gave half the diamonds to his daughter, half to his wife. They could not believe their eyes.

Where did you get these? his wife asked.

An old investment paid off, Joe told her.

Daddy, they're beautiful! his daughter yelled.

They will not bring back your graduation, Joe said, but they will reflect your beauty.

What about me? his son asked.

You want diamonds?

The boy said no.

Joe produced a baseball cap with a famous autograph. His son whooped for joy.

His wife and daughter made plans to set the diamonds. And, since it was morning, Joe prepared for work.

The bathroom door opened a crack.

A moment, came the troll's voice.

After his stress extraction, Joe felt so relaxed that he decided not to go to work.

He called in to say that he would file a memo remotely, went out to the hammock in the back yard and was asleep before it had fairly stopped swinging.

Unused as he was to napping, Joe drifted in and out of scenes that might or might not have been dreams. In one, the troll was lying in the hammock next to him, overpowering the grass and hyacinth with his own pungency.

This won't do, the dream troll said.

I'm entitled, said Joe, who had accrued one hundred and twenty-five unspent vacation days in the last ten years.

You've breached the deal, so now you'll have to make good, the troll said.

Tomorrow, Joe promised.

No. Weekends are bad enough.

But I work weekends. Believe me, I'll take care of you.

Until you get enough diamonds! the troll snapped. I know your kind. That's why I'm taking some security.

Security?

The troll leered.

You'll see. I'll have your ears by the throat.

When he woke, his daughter was home, sparkling white fire at her earlobes and about her neck. He shrieked, clearly not the reaction she had sought.

Don't you like them, Daddy? she asked, her eyes huge with bruised merriment.

They're beautiful, he said. Why don't you put them away now for safekeeping?

His daughter's eyes took a glint, and she laughed coquettishly.

Oh, Daddy, I'll be fine. Jordy's taking me out on his motorcycle. What could happen?

Before Joe could say a word, her swain arrived with a clarion blast of his throttle.

His daughter was hardly gone before his son appeared with a baseball and two gloves.

Hey, Dad, wanna play catch?

Joe thought about dialing up the office to file his report, but it would wait. His mitt was dry and stiff from lack of use. He threw the ball across the yard, feeling his shoulder twinge. His son's return throw surprised him with speed. He threw his glove up to protect himself, and the ball ticked off the thumb through the glass of the patio door.

That's okay, Dad, said his son. I've done that lots of times.

Joe and his son cleaned up while his wife called the glass company.

I didn't know.

Yeah, Mom took care of it. Can you come to my game tonight? You could probably coach, it's Mr. Cameron's late night at the plant.

Uh, we'll see, son.

To which his wife said,

I'll stay with the glaziers. You two go have a good time.

What surprised Joe most, sitting halfway up the grandstand with a hot dog and a soda, was the tension surrounding the play. Parents screamed, threatened, and cajoled, then preened when their children achieved some success. His son was pitching; Joe had not known he pitched. The boy was so cool against the palpable sluggers, so calm with runners on base. Joe was a wreck. His boy won the game.

His daughter had not yet returned by the time they got home. His wife sighed.

I told you I don't like this Jordy fellow. But what can you do? It's infatuation, probably.

As they ate dinner, a catalogue of chores was brought to Joe's attention. His son could mow the lawn, but what of the hedges? The gutters needed cleaning. The downstairs toilet ran. His son had loaded a game on the computer, and now it wouldn't start. Joe excused himself.

Joe sat on the toilet to ponder. He noticed a presence over his shoulder without surprise.

Interesting, the troll said, his voice not improved through use. You're more anxious now than when we made our deal.

Joe, having no reply, made none.

Still, man is adaptable. So just remember -- your daughter has a little piece of me at her ears and throat. I can turn you up any time.

Joe stood and faced him.

The deal is off, he said.

The troll laughed.

You would pass up a guaranteed fortune, the hard bright fruit of your labor, for a mere daughter?

Joe thought about it, and said Yes before he could think about it some more.

All right. I'll take thirty days of your stress and keep the diamonds. If you get through that time without asking for more, I will release your daughter, and release you from the bargain.

Joe agreed.

It happened that the family had a run of bad luck over the next few weeks. Joe's son was hit in the ankle by a line drive, which broke it. His daughter's college tuition was due. His wife needed a root canal. Joe crashed his sedan on a wet road. Even with expensive insurance, all of this cost money, of which the family was suddenly short.

Every night, Joe gave his angst to the leering troll. And every morning, the only thing under his pillow was bedding. By the twenty-ninth day, he was so tense that the troll gazed at him in apparent concern.

Your stress is an excellent vintage. It is unfair of me to take it for nothing. I will pay you in the morning.

Joe brightened, only for a moment.

But our bargain?

Would resume. It's for the best, you know. My other partners have done quite well.

Joe looked up, and caught himself in the mirror.

No, thanks, he said. We'll get by.

The next day was awful. Joe's back hurt so at work that he couldn't concentrate, and nearly lost a client. When he came home his son was grumpy with cabin fever. His wife was fatigued from oral surgery. High daughter's college claimed they had not received his payment. When all that was settled, his daughter bounced downstairs, bejewelled at the ear lobes and throat.

Daddy, I'm going out--

She stopped, and regarded him tenderly.

You okay, Daddy?

Joe nodded.

Out again with Jordy?

His daughter said, Nah. Jimmy Handler.

What about Jordy?

I needed a change of pace. Gotta go, Dad. Love you.

Joe watched her go.

I just wish she wouldn't wear that jewelry.

Well, you started it, his wife said. And anyway, they're not real.

Joe stared at her.

Can't wear the real thing on the street. We put yours in the safe deposit box, and traded one for that beautiful zirconia set. Are you angry?

Joe wasn't angry. That night, knowing what he knew, he toyed with the idea of extending the deal. Instead, he said nothing. This kind of thing always had a rebound. Joe solemnly said farewell to the troll, who shook his hand and zipped down the drain.

The next morning there was another little bag under his pillow, with a note that said,

There's always a first time.

Joe went back to work in the old way, and found this to suit him just fine.

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