

THE Night the Bed Fell

JAMES THURBER

I suppose that the high-water mark of my youth in Columbus, Ohio, was the night the bed fell on my father. It makes a better recitation (unless, as some friends of mine have said, one has heard it five or six times) than it does a piece of writing, for it is almost necessary to throw furniture around, shake doors, and bark like a dog, to lend the proper atmosphere and [verisimilitude](#)¹ to what is admittedly a somewhat incredible tale. Still, it did take place.

It happened, then, that my father had decided to sleep in the attic one night, to be away where he could think. My mother opposed the notion strongly because, she said, the old wooden bed up there was unsafe: it was wobbly and the heavy headboard would crash down on father's head in case the bed fell, and kill him. There was no dissuading him, however, and at a quarter past ten he closed the attic door behind him and went up the narrow twisting stairs. We later heard [ominous](#) creakings as he crawled into bed. Grandfather, who usually slept in the attic bed when he was with us, had disappeared some days before. On these occasions he was usually gone six or eight days and returned growling and out of temper, with the news that the [Federal Union](#)² was run by a passel of blockheads and that the [Army of the Potomac](#)³ didn't have a chance.

We had visiting us at this time a nervous first cousin of mine named Briggs Beall, who believed that he was likely to cease breathing when he was asleep. It was his feeling that if he were not awakened every hour during the night, he might die of suffocation. He had been accustomed to setting an alarm clock to ring at intervals until morning, but I persuaded him to abandon this. He slept in my room and I told him that I was such a light sleeper that if anybody quit breathing in the same room with me, I would wake instantly. He tested me the first night—which I had suspected he would—by holding his breath after my regular breathing had convinced him I was asleep. I was not asleep, however, and called to him. This seemed to [allay](#) his fears a little, but he took the precaution of putting a glass of [spirits of camphor](#)⁴ on a little table at the head of his bed. In case I didn't arouse him until he was almost gone, he

2 Literary Analysis

Listen to the [audio](#) passage. What details indicate that this will be a [humorous essay](#)?

3 Reading Strategy

How do you know that the father's decision to sleep in the attic is a [significant event](#)?

4 Reading Check

What does the narrator say this story will be about?

5 Reading Strategy

The descriptions of Thurber's aunts are not part of the action on the evening Thurber's father decides to sleep in the attic. Explain why they are not [significant events](#).

said, he would sniff the camphor, a powerful reviver. Briggs was not the only member of his family who had his [crotchets](#).⁵ Old Aunt Melissa Beall (who could whistle like a man, with two fingers in her mouth) suffered under the premonition that she was destined to die on South High Street, because she had been born on South High Street and married on South High Street. Then there was Aunt Sarah Shoaf, who never went to bed at night without the fear that a burglar was going to get in and blow [chloroform](#)⁶ under her door through a tube. To avert this calamity—for she was in greater dread of anesthetics than of losing her household goods—she always piled her money, silverware, and other valuables in a neat stack just outside her bedroom, with a note reading: “This is all I have. Please take it and do not use your chloroform, as this is all I have.” Aunt Gracie Shoaf also had a burglar phobia, but she met it with more [fortitude](#). She was confident that burglars had been getting into her house every night for forty years. The fact that she never missed any thing was to her no proof to the contrary. She always claimed that she scared them off before they could take anything, by throwing shoes down the hallway. When she went to bed she piled, where she could get at them handily, all the shoes there were about her house. Five minutes after she had turned off the light, she would sit up in bed and say “Hark!” Her husband, who had learned to ignore the whole situation as long ago as 1903, would either be sound asleep or pretend to be sound asleep. In either case he would not respond to her tugging and pulling, so that presently she would arise, tiptoe to the door, open it slightly and heave a shoe down the hall in one direction, and its mate down the hall in the other direction. Some nights she threw them all, some nights only a couple of pair.

But I am straying from the remarkable incidents that took place during the night that the bed fell on father. By midnight we were all in bed. The layout of the rooms and the [disposition](#)⁷ of their occupants is important to an understanding of what later occurred. In the front room upstairs (just under father’s attic bedroom) were my mother and my brother Herman, who sometimes sang in his sleep, usually “Marching Through Georgia” or “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” Briggs Beall and myself were in a room adjoining this one. My brother Roy was in a room across the hall from ours. Our bull terrier, Rex, slept in the hall. My bed was an army cot, one of those affairs which are made wide enough to sleep on comfortably only by putting up, flat with the middle section, the two sides which ordinarily hang down like the sideboards of a drop-leaf table. When these sides are up, it is [perilous](#) to roll too far toward the edge, for then the cot is likely to tip completely over, bringing the whole bed down on top of one, with a tremendous banging crash. This, in fact, is precisely what happened about two o’clock in the morning. (It was my mother who, in recalling the scene later, first referred to it as “the night the bed fell on your father.”)

Always a deep sleeper, slow to arouse (I had lied to Briggs), I was at first unconscious of what had happened when the iron cot rolled me onto the floor and toppled over on me. It left me still warmly bundled up and unhurt, for the bed rested above me like a canopy. Hence I did

6 Literary Analysis

How does the description of the relatives that leads up to this point contribute to making this a [humorous essay](#)?

7 Reading Strategy

Listen to the [audio](#) version of this paragraph. How do you know that this crash will be a [significant event](#) in the story?

8 Reading Check

Whose bed falls?

not wake up, only reached the edge of consciousness and went back. The racket, however, instantly awakened my mother, in the next room, who came to the immediate conclusion that her worst dread was realized: the big wooden bed upstairs had fallen on father. She therefore screamed, "Let's go to your poor father!" It was this shout, rather than the noise of my cot falling, that awakened Herman, in the same room with her. He thought that mother had become, for no apparent reason, hysterical. "You're all right, Mamma!" he shouted, trying to calm her. They exchanged shout for shout for perhaps ten seconds: "Let's go to your poor father!" and "You're all right!" That woke up Briggs. By this time I was conscious of what was going on, in a vague way, but did not yet realize that I was under my bed instead of on it. Briggs, awakening in the midst of loud shouts of fear and apprehension, came to the quick conclusion that he was suffocating and that we were all trying to "bring him out." With a low moan, he grasped the glass of camphor at the head of his bed and instead of sniffing it poured it over himself. The room reeked of camphor. "Ugf, ahfg," choked Briggs, like a drowning man, for he had almost succeeded in stopping his breath under the **deluge** of **pungent** spirits. He leaped out of bed and groped toward the open window, but he came up against one that was closed. With his hand, he beat out the glass, and I could hear it crash and tinkle on the alleyway below. It was at this juncture that I, in trying to get up, had the uncanny sensation of feeling my bed above me! Foggy with sleep, I now suspected, in my turn, that the whole uproar was being made in a frantic endeavor to **extricate** me from what must be an unheard-of and perilous situation. "Get me out of this!" I bawled. "Get me out!" I think I had the nightmarish belief that I was entombed in a mine. "Gugh," gasped Briggs, floundering in his camphor.



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Critical Viewing

The drawing shown was created by James Thurber to accompany this essay. **(a)** What scene does the drawing show? **(b)** Why is the drawing effective?

[Analyze]

By this time my mother, still shouting, pursued by Herman, still shouting, was trying to open the door to the attic, in order to go up and get my father's body out of the wreckage. The door was stuck, however, and wouldn't yield. Her frantic pulls on it only added to the general

banging and confusion. Roy and the dog were now up, the one shouting questions, the other barking.

Father, farthest away and soundest sleeper of all, had by this time been awakened by the battering on the attic door. He decided that the house was on fire. “I’m coming, I’m coming!” he wailed in a slow, sleepy voice—it took him many minutes to regain full consciousness. My mother, still believing he was caught under the bed, detected in his “I’m coming!” the mournful, resigned note of one who is preparing to meet his Maker. “He’s dying!” she shouted.

“I’m all right!” Briggs yelled to reassure her. “I’m all right!” He still believed that it was his own closeness to death that was worrying mother. I found at last the light switch in my room, unlocked the door, and Briggs and I joined the others at the attic door. The dog, who never did like Briggs, jumped for him—assuming that he was the **culprit** in whatever was going on—and Roy had to throw Rex and hold him. We could hear father crawling out of bed upstairs. Roy pulled the attic door open, with a mighty jerk, and father came down the stairs, sleepy and irritable but safe and sound. My mother began to weep when she saw him. Rex began to howl. “What in the name of heaven is going on here?” asked father.

The situation was finally put together like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. Father caught a cold from prowling around in his bare feet but there were no other bad results. “I’m glad,” said mother, who always looked on the bright side of things, “that your grandfather wasn’t here.”

10 Literary Analysis

 In your Reading Log, underline some of the sounds in this passage that contribute to making this **humorous essay** increasingly funny.

11 Reading Check

What does young James think has happened to him when he senses the bed on top of him?

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

- 1. Respond:** Do you think you would enjoy visiting a family like James Thurber’s? Explain.
- 2. (a) Recall:** Who is in the house on the night described? **(b) Compare:** What quality or qualities do these characters share? **(c) Support:** What examples illustrate the shared qualities?
- 3. (a) Recall:** Describe the layout of the rooms. **(b) Analyze:** Why is the placement of the rooms in the house important?
- 4. (a) Recall:** When did the bed collapse? **(b) Analyze:** In what way does the time of the collapse increase the characters’ confusion?

Post-Reading Log

Click the gray button above to record your responses in the Post-Reading Log.

5. **(a) Recall:** What do Briggs, Aunt Sarah Shoaf, and Aunt Gracie Shoaf do before going to bed? **(b) Infer:** What is the narrator's attitude to these actions? **(c) Analyze:** What details show the narrator's attitude?
6. **Evaluate:** Do you think Thurber's essay is funny? Why or why not?

Literary Analysis

Humorous Essay

1. At the beginning of the [humorous essay](#), Thurber writes that he prefers to tell the story orally because he can add physical effects. Do you think such antics would make this funny tale even funnier? Why or why not?
2. Contrast what actually happens when the bed falls with what each character thinks happens.
3. Would the essay be as funny if you were as confused about what happened as the characters were? Why or why not?

Connecting Literary Elements

4. [Characters](#) are the "actors" in a narrative.
(a) Which two characters are afraid of burglars? **(b)** Why is this detail important?
5. What details make these characters and their fears humorous?
6. Complete the chart to identify different types of characterization.