

Futures

Digging foxholes in the dark

A safe place. By Wendy Nickel

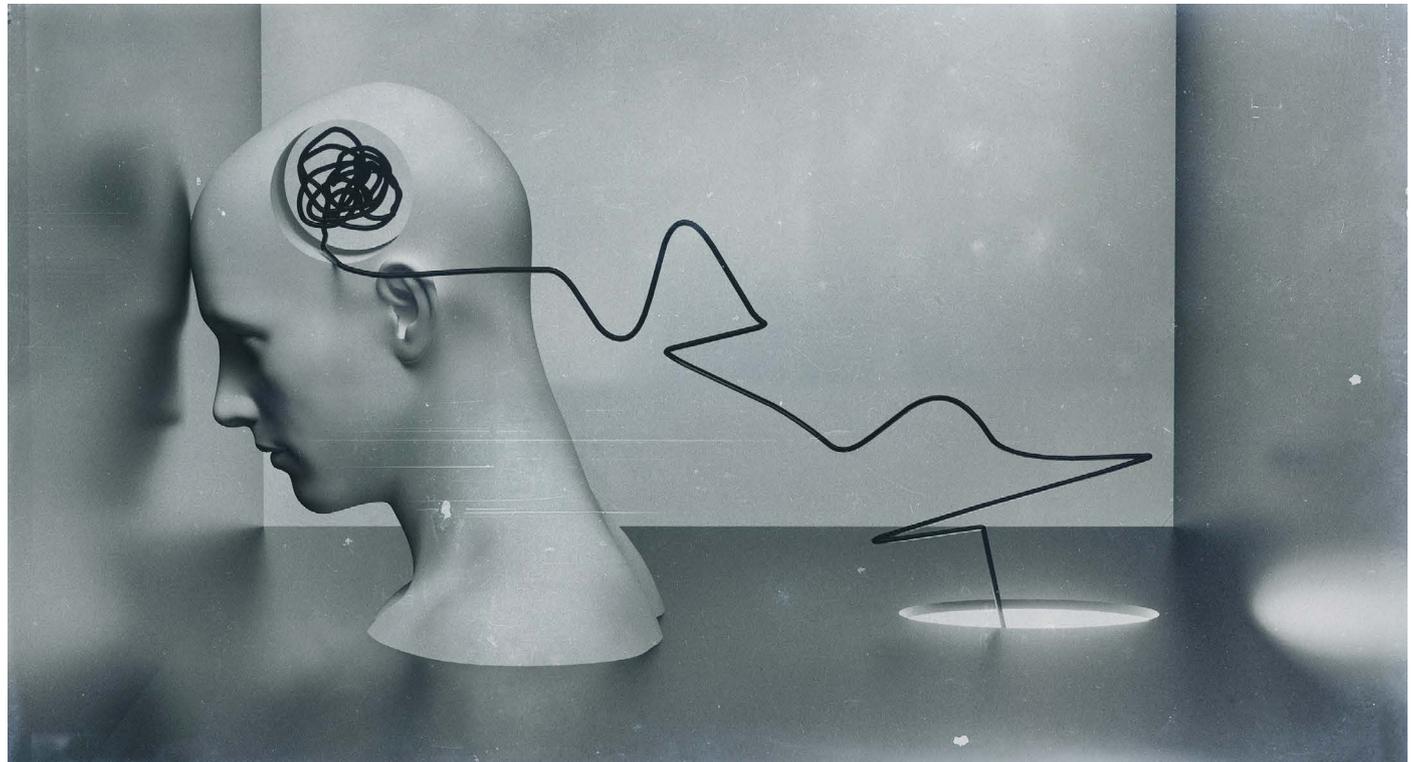


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I've marked today's date on my calendar app, knowing that Henry won't see it there. Three years, and he still finds smartphones mystifying, regarding them with the same visceral distrust he has for Ouiji boards and men who say *Gesundheit*.

"Seeing family for the holiday?" The Lowe's cashier asks me as he rings up the shovel.

"No," I answer, too quickly, recalling that first disaster of a trip. Henry and I had only been married a few weeks when my parents had invited us up to their cabin. Our courtship had been a whirlwind of surprises, followed by a hasty elopement – a challenge to the forces of the Universe that might dare try to separate us – so my family knew little about this peculiar, yet gentle man who'd dropped so unexpectedly into my life.

But that sticky summer night on the lake-shore, Henry had been flung into a state of terror that no one – Henry or myself included – had anticipated or fully understood. I was sick to my stomach the entire time, convinced

that he would disappear before our eyes, and I'd be left alone to explain.

Henry kisses my forehead, reads a book in bed, then goes to sleep with the sun. "Waste of oil, staying up past dark." It's funny which little things stick with us: little habits, little comforts, little fears.

In the yard, my jogging headlamp illuminates a circle of ragged crabgrass. This corner of the yard between the fence and the garden shed is well hidden from prying eyes, but I still worry that someone might start asking questions.

I dig until late into the night, until I can feel the blisters forming on my palms. Then I cover the hole with a tarp and head inside to bed.

"Have you thought more about this weekend?" I ask in the morning over breakfast: canned fruit and fried hominy for him, Lucky Charms for me. "It's not too late to stop at the pharmacy if you've changed your mind about that prescription."

Over the edge of his Pennysaver, Henry's brow furrows. He tries – I know he does – but even penicillin is like magic to him and words such as *neurotransmitters* and *serotonin* like incantations.

"I think I'll be fine this time," he says with the unflagging confidence of a man who's seen so much and been through so much that his perception of 'fine' has been incurably warped. "What about that invite from your friend Sherry? That barbecue? Why don't you go, and give them my regrets."

I'm not going without him, but I don't argue. He just doesn't want a repeat of last year, when I could do nothing but stand there, helpless, and watch as he tore around the house, crying out to long-dead friends. He'd spent hours panicked, scrambling for a secure position that our suburban rambler can't provide.

Even worse than feeling helpless is seeing a loved one in that state.

The hole grows by shovelfuls: deeper, wider, longer.

Futures

Clouds block the moonlight. If it rains, will my work be ruined? Will the whole thing be flooded or collapse? Then again, being rained out could mean they'd call it off, and then I'd have done the work for nothing.

No, not for nothing. For him.

We've packed the day full to avoid the thought of night. Holding hands at a concert. Smiling at parade floats. Wading at the beach. Picnicking in the park. Then finally, walking home slowly, worriedly, watching porch flags flap in the evening breeze.

It's dark by the time the first fireworks flare, filling the sky with colour and light.

Henry freezes, mid-sentence, reaching for the remote, and suddenly, he's half back over

there, in that war-torn night near the Somme that was somehow terrible enough to rip a hole in the Universe – in time and space itself – and deposit him here, in my life, a century beyond.

"George? Where's George?" he yells. "Hank? Phillip?"

Another rocket flares. He collapses – "Take cover!" – but this modern world has left him exposed. Armchair, sofa, coffee table, desk – so insubstantial against enemy fire.

"Henry." I speak his name and take his hand and refuse to let it go, and together, we navigate the no man's lands of our overlapping worlds. We crawl over barbed-wire garden hoses. We evade sprinkler-head mines. We drop to the muddy crabgrass at each firework's detonation. Until, behind the shed, behind the trenches, we drop into the foxhole.

Once inside, Henry still startles at each flash of light, but the pulse in his wrist, pressed to mine, no longer pounds as if bursting from the vessels.

"We're safe here," he says quietly and squeezes my hand, with a reassuring smile and a forehead kiss.

The bombs keep falling in a haze of mustard-gas smoke and dying screams, but, huddled in the dirt, we hold each other.

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.