



Life seem messy? Sleep on it.

Adapted from a recent online discussion.

Hi, Carolyn:

At the moment, most of my life is a shambles. My husband of 16 years has been unemployed for the last 2½ years. We had a baby earlier this year, never dreaming when we got pregnant that he would still be unemployed. We've just moved in with his mother, who is 83 and deaf as a rock, forcing me to yell at her to have a simple conversation and leaving me unable to sleep for more than a few hours at a stretch until her blasting TV wakes me up. (She won't consider a hearing aid, because "they're a waste of money and don't work.") I'm dissatisfied with my job (although thankful I have one) and looking for an opportunity to move on.

The one bright spot in my life is my daughter, who is my joy and my passion. However, I went through quite a trauma during her delivery, ultimately spending two weeks in the hospital, and I haven't quite gotten back to myself. I'm venting a lot at my husband, who already blames himself and is being treated for depression. I make sure I apologize, but I am mad at him and tired of being mad at him. I've told him this, too.

People keep asking me how I'm doing and how I'm adjusting to all the changes. I try to minimize or put a humorous spin on my angst, but really I'm just tired of dealing with it all. I want to curl up someplace calm and quiet with my girl and ignore the rest of the world.

I plan on bringing this up with my doctor, but I was wondering if you had any advice before then.

Orlando

As I read your question, I was looking for the terrible, and what I saw was mostly the annoying and stressful — which is good news. Your husband's unemployment is, of course, the linchpin, and you're both understandably going to feel stressed unless and until there's some kind of resolution there.

However, you have shelter, you have your income, you have each other, you have your beautiful baby, you have at least the promise that your health will return in due time.

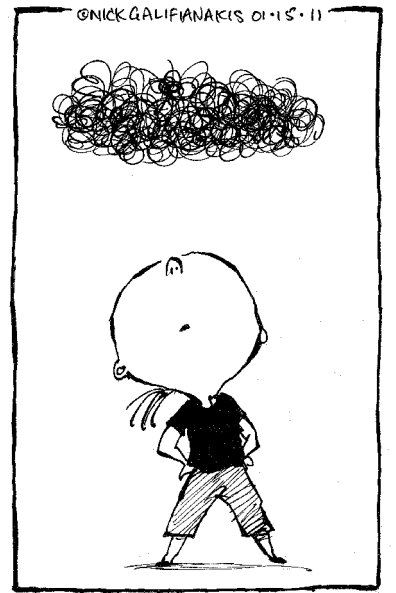
Put all that together, and the most terrible thing I see is that you're not sleeping. That one area of deprivation has the power to drain you of the resources you need to deal with the other stresses and annoyances, be it showing patience with your mother-in-law, taking the long view with your job, being supportive of your husband, healing from childbirth, everything.

Please direct the energy you have — or, better, some of the energy your husband wishes he were taking to work every day — and address the blaring TV problem. Earplugs, headphones, changing rooms, soundproofing, white noise, a timer for the TV?

Brainstorm till something works, then sleep, then think more clearly about your circumstances. The unemployment issue may seem like it's just about finding work, but it also means your husband has time, and time means opportunity. For what? That's the question you want to answer, when you're rested and ready to.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays at www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.



NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

THE STYLE INVITATIONAL

REPORT FROM WEEK 899

in which we gave you a filled-in crossword grid and asked for creative clues. The Empress received thousands of entries for the 37 across-words and 37 downs; here are the best. Note that some of these clues require you to think flexibly; for example, the clue for T00 featuring Stedman has to be read as "To O." Bob Klahn, who constructed the crossword just for us, reviewed the entries below and thought the funniest was for OHOH, the cleverest for the MINIMALARIA combo.



21 Down, MINIMAL: With 2 Down (ARIA), disease transmitted by teensy flies. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

- 2 ABBA: Hebrew for father and Swedish for pop (Kathy Hardis Fraeman, Olney)
- 3 PAYSCALE: So-Pay-Me-I've-No-Lat-te-Dough (Barry Koch, Catlett, Va.)
- 4 LEPEW: Where to put your derriere on Sunday (Michael Baker, Elkridge)

COMING UP SHORTZ: HONORABLE MENTIONS

HARDC: Last three syllables from Michelle Rhee's mouth on her way out the door (Paul Burnham, Gainesville)

ABBA: Blood type for Chang and Eng Bunker (Craig Dykstra, Centreville)

TRIAL: Heene balloon destination (Kevin Dopart)

TRIAL: For O.J., a Cochran-bull story (Barry Koch)

OWOE: What Elmer Fudd exclaimed when he saw the caviar (Bern Saxe, Springfield)

SLOB: Acronym for "several lunches on blouse" (Beverly Sharp, Washington)

PALERMO: Udall compared with Vaughn (Christopher Lamora, Guatemala City)

TEACAKE: Christine O'Donnell takes it (Tom Murphy, Bowie)

TEACAKE: The "Girls of the Glenn Beck Rally" calendar (Gary Crockett, Chevy Chase)

SAIDSO: What the fifth Von Trapp kid did (Danny Bravman, Chicago)

TOKORI: Ancestral home of Lloyd, Beau and Jeff (John Shea, Philadelphia; Dixon Wragg, Santa Rosa, Calif.)

EMPRESS: Mars Co.'s candy-labeling machine (Kevin Dopart; Pie Snelson, Silver Spring; Jeff Contompasis, Ashburn)

T00: A kvetch's favorite word (Lawrence McGuire, Waldorf)

T00: Opening words of Stedman's love note (Chris Doyle, from a cruise ship off Cozumel, Mexico)

PAYSCALE: The wages of fin (Ann Martin, Bracknell, England)

H	A	R	D	C	K	A	T	Z	A	B	B	A
T	R	I	A	L	O	W	O	E	B	E	R	M
T	I	A	R	A	M	E	E	K	S	L	O	B
P	A	L	E	R	M	O	T	E	A	C	A	K
A	L	O	T	S	A	I	D	S	O	F	O	Y
A	L	O	T	N	O	U	T	U	R	N		
T	O	K	O	R	I	R	O	P	E	D	O	F
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L	E	A	N	T	O	S	S	P	E	C	T	R
P	L	U	G	H	E	F	T	P	E	R	O	N
H	I	D	E	O	D	I	E	A	N	I	M	E
A	C	I	D		H	O	R	N	L	E	P	E

BY BOB KLAHN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

WHOWON: A question Washington fans rarely have to ask (many entrants)

WHOWON: What happened at the U.N. intramural softball tournament (Gary Krist, Bethesda; Todd Carton, Wheaton)

ARSON: Our boy the pyromaniac (Lindsay McClelland, Fairfax, a First Offender)

ARSON: Directions for British toilet seat (Mark Barbour, Fairfax)

LEANTOS: Diet corn chips (Edward Gordon, Austin)

PLUG: Hair-brained idea (Kyle Hendrickson, Frederick)

PLUG: Gulp down the wrong way (Jeff Contompasis; Edmund Conti, Raleigh, N.C.)

PERON: Juan or another (Phyllis Reinhard, East Fallowfield, Pa.)

HIDE: Cab Calloway's favorite "working girl" (Nan Reiner, Alexandria)

ACID: What a casino worker wears in New Jersey (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)

ACID: El's more accomplished brother (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.; Peter Boice, Rockville)

HORN: Naughty nurse (just about everyone sent this)

HTTP: Letters that launched a thousand leaks (Jeff Loren, Manassas)

TOETOTOE: Pre-electronic form of digital flirtation (Howard Walderman, Columbia)

TOETOTOE: You may have to go this way if you can't see eye to eye (Steve Hoglund, Washington, who last got ink in 1997)

ABSCOND: "Nice ____," said Hillary to her predecessor in the State Dept. gym (Nan Reiner)

ABSCOND: To steal because you're in a crunch (Christopher Lamora)

BROKE: Since the banks ain't this, we don't fix 'em (Kevin Dopart)

SURREAL: Artsy people's term for "What the hell?" (Jeff Contompasis)

LOLA: Highest grade awarded for a tweeted joke (Tom Murphy; Tom Panther, Springfield)

PLEASEDO: How Molly Malone's lover felt when she cried, "Cockles and muscles!" (Nan Reiner)

SAUDI: "Naw, tain't Volvo" (Craig Dykstra)

SAUDI: He's at the top of the OPEcking order (Chris Doyle)

OH OH: What Santa says when he can't get back up the chimney (many entrants)

Next week: Dear us, or Letters entertain you

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 903: Bill us now

Dold-Boozman-Carney Act to regulate Tilt-a-Whirl operators

A congressional shake-up is swell news for the Invitational, since it means that we'll have plenty of freshmen's names to work with for our (usually) biennial "joint legislation" contest — beloved by many, beheaded by a few. **This week: Combine the names of two or more new members of Congress as co-sponsors of a bill.**

See a list of the more than 100 new members (with pronunciations) at washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives a set of fabulous 5-by-7 charcoal-and-pastel prints of the four "Golden Girls" actresses in a lovely zombie motif, complete with white eyes and bloody mouths, drawn by Los Angeles artist Chuck Hodi. Donated by Denise Sudell of Cheverly, who asks to be identified as "a Loser groupie."

Note: Starting with next week's Invite, we move back to Sundays after three-plus years on the Saturday shift. Find us on the back page of the new Sunday Style tabloid section, inside the Arts section, Jan. 23.

Other runners-up win their choice of a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or yearned-for Loser Mug. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Loser magnets. First offenders get a smelly, tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fir Stink for their First Ink). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Jan. 24. Put "Week 903" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results to be published Feb. 13. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, or their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results was submitted by Roy Ashley. The honorable-mentions subhead is by Pam Sweeney.

Online discussion Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational at washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

BOOK WORLD

Pulling hard time just to get through a first novel

BY JENNIFER HOWARD
Special to The Washington Post

Nice things don't happen in maximum-security prisons. Ditmarsh Penitentiary, the setting of Keith Hollihan's first novel, "The Four Stages of Cruelty," is no exception. Smuggling, doping, shanking, beating, raping, murdering: The inmates and guards of Ditmarsh have pretty much seen or done it all.

None of that fazes Kali Williams, a fatefully named, 39-year-old corrections officer (her parents inadvertently gave her the name of the Hindu goddess of destruction). She's one of 26 women on a prison staff of more than 300. It's a tough job, but Kali seems qualified by temperament as well as by name. Divorced, "a personality of sharp edges and bruising elbows," she's an ex-soldier with a penchant for law enforcement and an ability to keep her emotional distance from most of the inmates and her fellow guards.

She's also given to philosophical musings that don't quite fit with those sharp edges and elbows. "The thing that stays with me, like the memory of a limb now gone, is the mystery of human compassion," she says at the beginning of the story. "The twisted variations of it, the love and the hurt, the obsession and the neglect, the abuse and the need, all commingled and bound."

That soliloquy stems from Kali's involvement — emotional but not romantic — with a young inmate named Josh, who is doing time for shooting his ex-girlfriend. Josh and Kali meet after one of her supervisors asks her to break protocol and escort the kid to his father's funeral. During the outing, Josh gives her a handmade comic book called "The Four Stages of Cruelty." Full of violent images, it depicts the adventures of a character called the Beggar, who returns to a prisonlike city and is captured and tortured by the authorities.

Kali finds the book impressive in a technical sense, "a series of incredibly precise, almost photographic ink drawings, the kind inmates generate when they have the talent, too much time, and too little paper." But she's mildly revolted by "the flourish of brutality, the muscular pornography" of the violent images. Josh can't or won't explain the meaning of the Beggar's story. But he hints to Kali that it has something to do with an inmate named John Crowley, who has been targeted for abuse by other inmates lately.

Crowley, like Josh, doesn't really fit in with Ditmarsh's population of hotheads,



THE FOUR STAGES OF CRUELTY
By Keith Hollihan
Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's. 293 pp.
\$25.99

I wanted to care about the answers to those questions, but I couldn't. Mostly I longed for the story to come to any kind of end.

rabble-rousers and sadists — the kinds of characters that any number of prison films and stories have conditioned us to expect. Hollihan fills Ditmarsh with an assortment of rogues who, I'm sorry to say, are as hard to tell apart as they are unpleasant. Halfway through the book, I'd assigned most of them to the general category of "mean and dangerous" and tried to concentrate on more promising things, like the plot.

Hollihan wants very much to serve up a dark tale about a conspiracy that penetrates the ranks of the guards as well as the inmates, with the comic book holding the key to the mystery and Kali a reluctant detective.

As she gets closer to the truth, however, the story gets murkier rather than clearer. Hollihan lets it bog down in his heroine's angst-filled ruminations about her own and other people's motivations.

Is the Beggar, the hero of Josh and Crowley's comic book, a symbol of resistance to authority or a real inmate who will return to Ditmarsh as an

avenging angel? How much will Kali bend her principles in order to get to the truth?

I wanted to care about the answers to those questions, but I couldn't. Mostly I longed for the story to come to any kind of end.

Eventually, Kali's sleuthing takes her into a literal underworld, a series of abandoned tunnels and cells/torture chambers under Ditmarsh's central hub where she makes a gruesome discovery. Worse things happen. Bad people and a few good ones die. Then, mercifully, it's over.

Reading a novel, even one set in a maximum-security penitentiary, should not feel like a prison sentence. By the end of "The Four Stages of Cruelty," I felt like I had done a long, long stretch of hard time.

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Howard is a senior reporter at the Chronicle of Higher Education. Her fiction has appeared in the Collagist, "D.C. Noir" and elsewhere.

DOONESBURY BY GARRY TRUDEAU



CUL DE SAC BY RICHARD THOMPSON

