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For Lack of Sleep

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For Lack of Sleep

The small lamp on the table next to his head radiated brightness like a big torch. The light had made me feel safer when he first laid down but now it was becoming more and more like an unwelcome chaperone.

"What do you remember most about today?" As he asked me, he started to look more comfortable, rolling over onto his side, facing me, though there was a conscious ten or twelve inches between our bodies.

"I don't know." I looked in his eyes for a trace of what he wanted me to answer, but the light behind his head was blinding. "I guess when I met that girl that I was supposed to stay with, complete with red fishnet hose and a black leather skirt; people at a poetry conference just are not supposed to look like that."

"Ya, she is scary. I wonder what her writing's like. I've never had her in any of my writing classes or anything."

Something that sounded like a pan crashed to the floor in the kitchen with all the glory of any loud noise in the middle of the night. Chris just looked at me and said, "Kenny always gets hungry about this time of the night. He's not too graceful."

My sweater was getting all tangled up as I strived to take up less space in the bed than I had needed in elementary school. Chris looked even less comfortable with all six feet of him trying to do the same.

"Look," I said, "its your bed. I don't mean to put you out. Go ahead and take off your shirt or something. I don't know how you're going to sleep confined by all of those clothes and no bed space. This sweater has to go." I sat up and pulled the sweater over my head as gracefully as possible, which was not very. I thought quickly how I was glad that I'd put on a descent t-shirt under my sweater that morning. He followed my lead and unbuttoned his shirt, then stood up and walked over to the closet. I'd forgotten about the rest of the room and now that he was at the other side of it, all the space settled in around me and left me with a chill.

"Mine was when I sat down in the group and met you," he pronounced, carefully reassuming his position on his side of the bed. "Hay, this light is kind of bothering me, it has a real glare. Do you mind if I turn it off?"

"Sure, go ahead. What about sitting down in the group?"

"My most memorable moment of today, until now. I can't believe how easily I can just sit here and talk to you. I'm not even tired anymore."

"Ya, its like being at a slumber party, how you never feel tired once you get talking." Just as I finished my thought, a piercing wail, a cross

between the sound of an animal crying and a car alarm, cut through the hush of the room. Next thing I knew, I was upright at the foot of the mattress and about to go find Parker, I'm not sure why, when the noise stopped.

"Marvin always plays with my alarm clock when he parties in here. Sorry it scared you."

"That's your alarm clock? Doesn't it wake up the whole campus?" My heart was still beating fast; my veins felt like ropes that were being whipped around.

"Marvin always turns it up to highest volume when he plays with it. Listen, while I'm up and have the light on, what time should we set this for tomorrow?"

"Oh, I don't know." All the blood crowding in my head right then wasn't making room for any thought, especially about the morning. "'Breakfast is at eight, but before that I have to go shower and get ready in that girl's room, where I left all of my stuff."

"Okay, how about seven? Wow, its almost three now. That doesn't give us very much time left to sleep."

"Ya, I know. Dr. Strayer's not going to be too pleased with me if I doze off during the workshops tomorrow. And I'd hate to sleep through the reading."

"So," he said with a tone of resignation, "do you think that we better stop talking and go to sleep?"

"I guess," I agreed. In my head it made sense. I waited for sleep to envelope my consciousness the way that it usually did, like a candle quickly extinguished. But my drowsiness had slipped away.

"I don't have anything to do tomorrow night or Sunday." I don't know how long we had been lying there in silence, but his voice was a welcome change. "I can definitely catch up on any sleep that I miss tonight," he continued. "What about you? I mean-"

"Oh ya, I can always sleep the whole way home on the van tomorrow night. So I'm sure that I'll catch up on all my sleep."

"And besides," he paused, smiling, and I could see the brightness in his eyes through the darkness of the room, "I'm sure that one of the aims of these conferences is to make sure that the writers from different schools get to know each other. So we'd be letting them down if we didn't use all of the limited time that they've given us."

The limited time that he was talking about was becoming a blur. Only a few hours before, everybody had cleared out of Chris's room in search of space and sleep like spores blown by the wind from a dandelion. We'd all been together too long. For a while I was alone in his room. He was in the bathroom and I was resting at the head of the bed; but the second that he came back, I made myself alert.

"Listen, should I go find Parker, and just share his couch?"

"No, stay, please."

"Sleep is all that I'm going to do, you still want me here?" A couple of scary encounters with guys that I thought I knew but really didn't made me leary of getting in bed next to a guy that I didn't know.

In the back of my mind lurked the revelation that Parker had mentioned sleeping on the couch right outside of Chris's room. Parker and I worked together on the university literary magazine and he met my criteria for being a safe male good friend.

Earlier, at the reception, Chris had come to sit down in our group to meet Parker and tell him the sleeping situation. Just when Chris had started to make his way out from behind the curtains that are his big round eyes, he asked the guy next to him what university he was from. When he replied that he also was from his school, Hillsdale, the host school, the curtains closed and before long he found a way to excuse himself from the conversation and go find more familiar people.

Standing at the foot of the mattress, he looked down at me and I could see the opportunity waiting to get past those eyes and I didn't want to lose it.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks, I'll stay here." I moved over to the side next to the wall, thinking how if I yelled or hit the wall really hard, Parker would wake up and come to my rescue.

He lay down fully dressed, on top of the covers. He crossed his arms and legs, somehow managing to lie down the same way that people stand in crowded elevators. I thought how I must have really made a strong impression on him when I said that I just wanted to sleep.

"I'm so tired," I said.

"Me too," he said, turning his head to face me but leaving his body in the same uncomfortable position.

"Nah, you're just baked." He looked hurt, so I redeemed myself with, "What time did you get up this morning, anyway?"

"Ten. My first and only class was at eleven. I'm not baked anymore."

"We had to be ready and waiting for the van at 8:30 this morning, only to end up getting here an hour early. I could have had another hour's sleep. I guess I can't complain, though, because I have to have gotten at least a couple of hours sleep on the van." I never imagined when I was sleeping on the van, or even when I was telling Chris about getting the sleep, how long it would sustain me. But as time passed and hours grew in scarcity and value, sleep somehow lost importance, or at least precedence.

Knowing that we were dealing with only a limited time to spend together, I wanted to learn the absolutely most important things about him. I thought how I was learning things about his family and his past

that I'd never even thought to talk about with my closest friends, friends I'd known for years. Time began to pass with increased speed, the way water speeds up as it approaches rapids, and the is gone.

"I bet that you probably ran your high school," he said, jabbing me in the stomach and laughing.

"No, remember, I told you about my big football player sweetheart and our sweet, innocent relationship. He was too busy playing in all the games and I was too busy being cheering for him. I've rethought alot of things since then. I never thought that three years could make such a difference."

"Ya, I know what you mean." He'd stopped joking; I felt like I'd lost his attention in the whole conversation.

"What about you, in high school, I mean? You never said anything about a girlfriend. I'm sure that you must have broken some hearts."

"Ya, well its just weird how I used to be able to do that without thinking about things, the future, you know, implications."

"Sorry, Chris, I'm trying hard to follow you, but you've lost me."

"No, I don't want to put you through listening to this. I've never put anyone through it. Its just for me to. . . no one can understand."

"I know that we're just new friends, but that's what makes me sure that you can share this with me if you want to. I mean for all we know we only have tonight." Something inside of me had become obsessed with having as much of him, at least spiritually as possible.

He looked to the ceiling, almost for an answer to what he was thinking about. When he looked like he'd come to an agreement with himself, he rolled over to face me and looked straight into my eyes. Right then I felt the closest that I'd ever felt to a person.

"A month before I left for school freshman year, I got this call- it was my girlfriend from high school- for a while-and anyway. . . ." His voice trailed off and he rolled onto his back, directing his comments more to the ceiling than to me. "You know, we'd decided with school and all the different people, other people, to just break up. I hadn't talked to her for about a week."

I could hear someone moving around upstairs; the steps weren't quick or deliberate, they were more like I imagined a ghost would sound lingering in this old house. The light reaching over from the closet was like an intruding visitor, and the tone of Chris's voice was strong but distant, as if he were addressing one of these ghosts.

"I was surprised to hear from her-but anyway, and how was I supposed to know, but- well, she was pregnant."

He was lying on his side, facing me, and the space heater beside the mattress was illuminating the right side of his face and shoulder. About an hour ago, when the room was full of people and the bright colors of

their tie-dyes and his madras shirt, he'd brought out the heater because I was cold. Now I was warm. too warm. And his honesty wasn't helping.

"I wonder- I mean, if things had been different."

The clock uttered an annoyingly loud tick as if to draw attention to the fact that I hadn't yet verbally reacted. I waited. I wanted to see what was hiding in the shadows of the left side of his face. I wanted to touch it until my fingers became familiar.

Earlier it was easier, with everyone in the room. "Chris-are you high?" My palm covered his nose and my fingers were manipulating his face. He was baked and that made him an easy target. Still, he wasn't hassled. He was sitting as easily as a big throw pillow where the mattress backed into the corner. There wasn't that much room, either. I know there were at least five of us sitting on the mattress against the wall, our makeshift couch. The couch that somewhere around 2:30 AM became the bed.

"So, did you go through all of it with her?" I was under the distinct impression that there is no way a man can even pretend to go through all the hell of an abortion, but he was reaching out to me and I wanted to reach back.

"I guess- I mean- as much as- well, I took her to everything, and afterwards, I- brought her back to my house. I fed her ice cream."

"Were your parents there? Did they know?" I couldn't even imagine what my parents would have to say about my brother bringing back an old girlfriend to the house for ice cream after he'd taken her to have their baby aborted.

"Ya, I had to tell them, I didn't know what else to do. And we needed the money. But we didn't tell her parents. They'll never know."

"How'd your parents react?"

His eyes wandered to the ceiling again, and then over to the closet. "I couldn't believe my Dad. He was mostly just shocked that I'd been sleeping with her. I think he was proud of me. I don't think that he even thought about her. . . about. . . ." As his thoughts became less verbal, he had the disillusioned look that a boy gets in his eyes after breaking a rule that he didn't know existed.

I wanted to be able to explain the rule, or at least explain why it was broken. I wanted the hints of sunlight to stop trickling in through the window. I wanted to understand where a hurt goes when it hides away for that long, and what in me made it surface. But, most of all, I wanted to touch his face until my fingers became familiar.

Amy Judge