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Dean Engle

Humboldt State/San Francisco State

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Sweet Nightmares

Dean Engle

“At least insomnia means no more bad dreams,” the matron tells me, as she flips the switch and steals the light.

She says this as if no nightmare had ever awoken her from soundless sleep, as though she did not live, like me, in half-remembered dreams. Of course, she was grown, stout and gray with years of minding children and extinguishing their hopes. She did not mean any real harm my conscious knew, but to my unconscious, to my seething skull at sleep, she was a witch or an ogre, a devilish woman sent to block the sun and make the darkness come.

The dormitory is dark now, the rows of empty beds and trunks unseen. A faint light creeps through the window, but really, it just lets the shadows in, to shake and rustle against the otherwise unrelenting black. During term it isn't so bad, the dreams are small and short, as though the other boys lying around me keep the worst at bay. But now they're gone for break, and I have nowhere to go, except to sleep.

I lie, somehow feeling small in a twin bed, which I didn't know was possible, the covers pulled up to my chin. They're course, starch cotton. I curl into them, as if they could protect me, as if what's after me will come from the outside. It won't, it will come from inside, like always.

I stare into the dark, at what I know must be the ceiling, trying to stay awake. I don't know how long. I could count the ticks of the clock, but I lose track too easy. Hours maybe. Or minutes. It's hopeless, I have to sleep at some point. Every night it's the same, trying to stave of the impossible for as long as possible. Just one night of clear, dreamless sleep. That's all I ask. Please...

When I wake up, I'm no longer in the dormitory. I'm in a room I recognize, the upstairs parlor of my grandmother's

stately Victorian. It looks just like I remember, a row of books with brown spines and yellow pages near the fireplace, a phonograph and smattering of records on the end table, and the window, round, shaped almost like a porthole set high on the wall. Sunlight cascades through the window and falls to the floor in a cloud of yellow dust. I walk toward it, moving slowly as though I'm wading through water. If I can reach the light, if I can see the sun, the outside, I'll be ok. It's so inviting here, everything laid out for me, but none of it's real, my grandmother's house only had one story.

I'm almost to the window, to the sun, when a figure blocks the light. I look up and see my mother, dead now for five years, towering above me. She looks suspiciously like the matron.

My mother smiles, flashing her pearly yellows, teeth stained by years of coffee and cigarettes. "Son, it's so good to see you," she says.

"You too ma," I croak back.

"How long has it been, son?"

I swallow hard. "Five years ma, you...you had an accident."

She's not my mother, not really. My mother would use my name. I don't know how whatever this is doesn't already know my name, but it has never used it. I think it gleams my thoughts, and perhaps I don't think of myself enough.

"An accident?" my almost-mother asks. "What happened?"

"You hit the gas," I reply. "I think you were aiming for the brake."

Her face contorts, as if she were remembering, as if she saw the crumbled metal of car and guardrail mingled and mashed together. "Of course, it was an accident," she says, her voice strained. "I would never leave you."

"What's my name ma?"

"I don't know. I can't remember, but I remember you. I miss you, please it's been so long, give your ma a hug." She

reaches out her arms, and begins walking toward me, the light still covering her back, her shadow stretching forward across the floor, coming closer and closer to me with every step.

I want to. What I would give to see her again, the real her. To reach my arms around my mother and feel safe, to feel like a little kid again, happy, dumb, and untroubled, like the boys who usually sleep around me.

She lurches forward another step, and then another, and I can't move either forward or backward, stuck as if I'm glued to the carpet. It's just a dream, it's just a dream and even if it's not her, it's close enough, right?

The edge of her shadow leaps across the floor and grazes my foot. I stumble backward, propelling myself away from the thing that looks like my mother, away from her shadow, which keeps pushing itself closer and closer even as I scramble in the opposite direction. It tried to drain me, a quick claw that grabbed my strength and energy, that, given a moment longer I'm sure, would have grabbed my soul and devoured it.

"Why are you running from me?" she asks, her voice echoing as if from some great distance.

"You're not my mother!" I yell back.

"Give your mother a hug." She smiles, flashing teeth just as yellow but sharp and crooked. I turn and run.

I've never been to this place, but it is somehow familiar, a place I've memorized from other dreams. I know instinctively that beyond the parlor is a hallway, and from there a staircase and a bedroom, replete with a four-poster and drapery to match. I run, and my mother follows me, snarling at my heels, seeming slightly less like the matron now, who would never stoop to such barbarity.

I rush down the steps, leaping two at a time, round the corner, find the bedroom, and slam the door just quick enough. The thing on the other side starts to scream, and begins to pound on the door, shaking it. With each beat the door rattles more, the wood quivers, and the ear-piercing scream

grows louder. Logically, if this is a dream, I need to wake and to do that I have to sleep. I wish I had better reasoning, but with this thing pounding at the door trying to steal my soul, there are only so many options.

I lie in the four-poster, cover myself with dusty, unused sheets, and close my eyes.

When I open them, I'm in the girl's dormitory. Even though it's dark, I know it's the girl's dormitory because the sheets are pink. The matron lacks imagination and has to color code everything. Sighing, I breathe slightly easier. There is no beast here, and, at the very least, this place exists. It may not be reality, but it's one step closer.

Then I hear crying, a soft whimper, and across the room I notice a shape, huddled in the twin bed directly across from mine. I stand, and cautiously approach. The girl might be my age, but she is not wearing pajamas, instead she sports the school uniform, but of a slightly different design. The blue is a lighter shade, the skirt longer, and the stockings higher.

I reach out and gently touch her shoulder. "Are you alright?" I ask.

She turns to me, revealing pale blue eyes, shining huge behind a mist of tears. "Are most people who cry themselves to sleep at night alright?"

I smile half-heartedly. "A fair point."

"What are you even doing here?"

"In the girl's dorm?" I ask, looking around. "It's kind of hard to explain."

"Not the dorm," she shakes her head. "Here, wherever this really is."

"Oh," I say. "You're dreaming too, aren't you?"

She nods and brushes the tears from her eyes with one hand, "I don't like to cry in front of people," she says, "but seeing as you barged in on me, I think it's you who owes me the apology."

I shift awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Um, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

She glares at me. "Forgiven...this time," and then she smiles.

I smile back, unsure of what to say.

"Eliza, by the way," she says, reaching her hand out.

"Will..." I begin to reply automatically, before I realize my mistake. I step backward shaking, my hand still stretched toward her, but out of defense, not politeness.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asks.

I look around hurriedly, and gesture vaguely at the door.

"Are you one of them, are you trying to find my name?"

"I'm trying to find your name so I can stop referring to you in my head as 'that gangly boy,'" Eliza replies. "Besides at least Will's not your real name, short for William, right? That's something."

I shrug, but it really doesn't feel like anything. "Are you dreaming now?"

She smiles sadly. "I don't remember the last time I was awake...When were you awake last?"

I don't know how to answer her question, so I say, rather lamely, "Tonight, I think."

"You have to be careful," she says. "It's easy to go beyond."

"What do you mean?"

Eliza begins to speak, but footsteps down the hall silence her.

"Do I hear voices?" someone shouts. She sounds like the matron, but the intonation is off, the phrasing not right. My matron would never ask when she could tell.

Eliza motions for me to hide, so I lift her covers and ensconce myself in the darkness beneath her bed.

"Just praying ma'am," I hear Eliza say from a long way off, and then silence, as intent and all-consuming as the darkness. Maybe this is death, a void that I alone exist in. But as soon as I wonder that, I am borne into a new plain, crawling out from under the bed into the school library of all places.

This is not the floor of a house that doesn't exist or a

dormitory I have never been to, this is, or at least seems, like the real library, full of shelves and dust, tables and reading lamps a shade too dim. All the lights are on, perched upon the tables, casting faint iridescent shadows across the room. This is the library, the center of knowledge at this God-forsaken school, there must be something to help, right? A book on dreams maybe.

I cross the room, walking between the tables, searching the rows of books surrounding the main room. The lights give just enough to see, but barely. I scan the shelf where I think books on dreams should be and find nothing. That's when someone strikes a light. I turn around to see a figure in black, a woman I think, walking from one table its lamp snuffed out, to the next table. She reaches out and kills the light, making the room grow darker. She does not seem to notice me, no, she is intent on the lamps. She moves to the next one.

I run to the next shelf and then the next as another lamp and then another grows dark. The wall of black is growing closer to me as the woman continues her path. It's so hard to see, but still I try, another shelf, and another shelf and not a single book on dreams. Another lamp goes out, and then another. Only three lamps remain.

I rush forward to the last shelf as the room closes in. The third goes out.

Nothing on this shelf.

The second goes out. I'm standing at the end of the row, there are no shelves left. The woman looks up toward me, but I can't make out her face, it's probably my mother or the matron or Eliza, I don't suppose it matters. She reaches toward the final lamp when I see it, not a book, a plaque, next to the final shelf. The plaque reads, "This library is dedicated to the memory of Eliza DeLane. 1931-1945."

The final light goes out and I wake in my bed, breathing deeply. The world outside is dark, but the lights are on, though I have no idea what time it is. It feels like I've been dreaming for hours, but maybe not. Maybe it had been minutes, maybe

days. There is a knock at the door, and a second later the matron bustles in.

“You have to turn the lights off, Will,” she tells me, leaving no room for argument.

I try anyway. “Can I please leave them on, just tonight?”

She glares at me. “You need to sleep, Will.”

“Please,” I beg. “I can’t sleep anyway. I can never sleep.”

“At least insomnia means no more bad dreams,” the matron tells me, as she flips the switch and steals the light