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Sleep

by Laren Grey

The stale air pressed against the walls. It smelled like hide; leathery and drab. In waves the ceiling fan wafted cedar and mothballs from the closet door he left open. Memories in a box. A small clock on the nightstand hammered like a pickaxe against his granite brain. It slowed, yet it stayed in rhythm. He pressed himself up in his bed and shifted his eyes at the clock. It expressed a disappointing hour and hovered there, resisting the dawn. The importance of tomorrow could not be exaggerated, but the clock would not concede. It was wound tight and had extraordinary endurance. It pounded his skull into the corner, into the late rounds of the fight. Every tick and tock vibrated spider webs in the corners of the ceiling.

A dry swallow pulled at the flesh within his esophagus like sand. He grabbed a tall glass of water from the nightstand and drank it all while snorting into the glass, then

set the empty glass next to a pill bottle that had been watching him all night. On the label was written NATHAN TANNER, under the name the word THALIDOMINE stood out like a Martian language. He turned the bottle label away from him as he was still catching his breath from the drinking marathon, then wiped beads of sweat from his brow. The clock matched his breathing. He could feel wool as thick as thorny brush on his ankles, so he tossed the blankets aside and rubbed them. The clock was ticking louder with each second. He snatched at the ticking pest, then stuffed it into a folded blanket in the closet and pressed his body against the door while listening for the latch to catch. After lying back down in bed and sorting the blankets, he closed his burning eyes again. A rush of thoughts came over him: What if this happens again tomorrow? What if I can't think during the office meeting tomorrow? I need this promotion. Oh, Suzy. She won't marry me. She'll love the bouquet of flowers when they arrive in the morning. What about Easter? Are they going to drop more bombs? I don't trust Duckpin Eisenhower. Maybe McCarthy will round me up and burn me at the stake for being a red witch. Maybe then my book sales will go up. A new 1954 Impala. What was I thinking? Why do I need a new car? I would never have purchased such a luxury if I hadn't hit that darn deer. If only I could sleep. Nathan Johnson Tanner, get some sleep.

Sleep.

He opened his eyes; they pulsed like his heartbeat. The moonlight was blinding. It felt hot against his skin as it beamed through the window like a burning sun scorching a world too close. It sucked the atmosphere from the room. He leapt over the bed to the window and pulled the curtains shut. They had no effect. Now the light was pale blue,

but no less intense. He sat back and turned on the lamp, then found the headboard with the back of his head. The little filament inside the bulb vibrated like the wings of a beetle. He shook the bottle of pills like a rattle, twisted the cap, and dumped several pills into his moist palm. One fell into the sheets. He placed two at the back of his tongue and swallowed, then threw two more into his mouth like popcorn. He fished for the one in the sheets and put it in his mouth and strained to swallow. The book on the nightstand found his hands, he opened it to any page and yawned. The first sentence made no sense, so he read the second one instead. It made no sense either, so he read it again and again until his eyelids half-blinked across his dry eyeballs then dropped shut. His thumb twitched and loosened. The pages flapped away from his grip like the wide wings of a startled vulture.

A mass of midnight black wings rustled in a churning mid-day wind. They pointed and morphed and twisted in a mound. A horrific undulating mass devoured and pulled and rearranged.

The shotgun was cumbersome in his small hands. It was longer than he was tall and he made sure the end of the barrel didn't hit the dirt as his father had instructed. He picked up a shotgun shell that had masking tape over the end and shook it to hear the rock salt rattle inside. He shook it again and scanned the ground for rattlesnakes, then concentrated with his tongue sticking out and loaded it into the barrel.

The nearby wake of vultures paid no attention as they plucked at the ribs of a carcass nestled between lichen-coated rocks and dry grasses and spiked cactus. In flashes the white bones were becoming more visible, as if discovered after a million

years. There appeared to be four or five winged devils dancing and stripping the lifeless beast like demons tormenting the helpless and holy. I bet I can get all five with one shot, he thought as he took aim at the black mass of writhing oily feathers. His heart raced when he touched the cold trigger. A long breath leaked from the corner of his mouth.

BANG. Wings exploded in every direction as dozens of scraggly scavengers took flight from the small mass. Their thrusting wings were bloody and heavy. They struggled and lifted to nearby branches and studied from their perches. Some had revenge in their eyes. Others plotted a better position at the carcass and swooped down to continue feasting. They grew in numbers, arriving from the haunted edges of the world by the hundreds. The boy dropped the shotgun and screamed as fast as possible to a house on the hill.

His eyes opened. Sweat poured around them. Long shadows formed angles across the skewed room. He reached for the lamp and pulled at the chain. The room went dark except for the glowing pale blue curtain. Branches swayed in the moonlight and high shouldered gargoyles perched in the night breeze, forming breathing silhouettes against the blue like a puppet show of horror. Their bald heads and gnarled beaks turned with every move he made. The room warped and skewed. He stumbled out of bed and felt for the wall, then fell out of the front door with his pants, shirt, and hiking boots on, and stumbled through crisp juniper and under the high twisted branches of the lifeless tree. The vultures sneered and turned in unison as he ran past.

The moon was nowhere and a sliver of orange and white stretched in lengthy lines over a hill of dry cedar trees. The brand new 1954 Impala roared and found the

road and purred. He gripped the wheel and focused through his blurry vision as the road became narrower. As the dawn filled with light, he felt more alert and before he knew it ten miles had rolled under him. The Impala raced past dancing vultures tearing at a deer carcass. Its head was cocked sideways with its tongue sticking out. Its eyes were gray and lifeless like a fish on ice. Several gangly necks turned and watched the Impala until it disappeared over a hill, then continued pulling at the flesh and sinews of the carrion.

Another mile rolled past. The winding road became a hypnotic pendulum, swaying and seducing his eyes into narrow slits. The wheel pulled itself, the steel Impala swerved drunkenly into the oncoming lane. Just around a bend a giant truck too large for the road appeared and blew black smoke and screamed a raging horn. He pulled at the wheel but it would not respond to his weak, sleep-lagged arms, then it broke right as the truck roared past and melted away. He shifted up in his seat and opened his eyes wide. The Impala purred.

The Impala crunched into gravel at the side of the road and rolled to a stop. The trailhead invited him into mossy pines. He marched forward and took in a deep breath of mid-morning air. After a five-minute walk he stepped off the path into natural mulch and spent another fifteen minutes ducking and pulling himself through low branches and brush as he navigated hills and ravines. The reward was worth the work: a large circular prairie at the edge of a hill. The pine forest ended at one side and twisting dry oaks and god-like pecan trees stood ancient on the other side. Several jays and cardinals flittered through the open air and called across the prairie each time they changed position. He went to the middle of the field and laid in the sweet brown grass. It swayed gently and

lulled him. Every muscle surrendered from his bones. Weeks worth of tightness melted and poured into the soil. Bluebonnets sprang up in patches and fruit pears atop cactus at the edge of the field blossomed yellow petals. The sweet morning blooms in the dry rye field were like artisan jam spread across the grooves of fresh bread. Red, white, and blue wings flashed overhead like silent skyrockets against a baby blue sky dotted with cotton clouds. If only I could sleep, he thought. He resisted for a moment to savor the surrounding sights, but his eyes sank and closed. The fluttering bird songs faded in the breeze. Then everything faded.

Sleep.

He opened his eyes to shadows casting long across the prairie. The sun was now sinking effortlessly to the other side of the world. He shifted and focused his pupils from side-to-side, scanning for the colorful birds. Their songs had disappeared with the breeze. Motionless air was turning orange as dusk announced itself. He studied the disfigured oaks and followed their branches. Silhouetted in the purple-orange sunset were the gargoyle vultures, perched with high shoulders, their black pearl eyes peering at him from leathery, wrinkled heads. He could smell their oily bodies as the scent drifted through the stagnant warmth of deep fading late afternoon. They smelled like rot-stuffed turkey painted with tar and licorice, and they belched the decaying organs of roadkill. He held his breath and wretched.

A sudden windstorm churned. Black frayed wings spanned the entire prairie. In one lazy flap a vulture swooped to the ground. It swayed from side to side as its eyes stared into his mind. As it wobbled closer, the smell of tar and licorice transformed into

the death-infused mothball satin of an unearthed and pried opened casket, like the sweaty clothes of a graverobber. His sleepy hands gripped the silken earth around him.

“Go away!” he shouted into the gusts of two more vultures swooping to the ground. Three more followed, then one by one seven more leapt from the branches and surrounded him.

“What is this? Get outta here!” He could hear his echo across the scenery.

The closest vulture stood next to him. Enormous. It examined his face and scanned him from head to toe, then let out a massive snap with its wings that backed the other vultures away. With wings still half open, it hopped onto his chest and balanced.

“Get off me you damned buzzard,” he demanded. The black devil gazed into his eyes. Its breath smelled like a thousand dead rats. Slime dripped from its dry face. The other vultures closed in.

It belched again, then stretched its gnarled beak like an elderly finger and plucked one of his eyes like a deviled egg from a tray. He screamed, but heard no echo.

The other scavengers pulled at his innards, exposing his ancient bones. The world spun as the large birds tore into him. Some pulled entrails aside to avoid the frenzy, others dug deep into his cavity and raised their bloody heads to gasp for air. The feast lasted twenty minutes and only bones and black blood remained. The purple-night cosmos twinkled overhead as if the bones were the birth of a new star. The ribs and spine and appendages lay there for months and slowly scattered across the prairie. The skull stared into eternity.

Sleep.

She walked into the office past her desk where a bouquet of pastel carnations was prominent. She had gold hair that curled and black heels and a cream trimmed blue-gray dress.

“Good morning, Mr. Dawson,” she said at an open office door. Her eyes beamed like orange juice.

“Good morning to you, Suzy. I see someone had flowers delivered to you. I wonder who that was.”

She turned her head down in a bashful smirk.

“I tell you,” continued Mr. Dawson, “that Nathan is a lucky guy. Don’t tell him yet, but he’s getting that promotion.”

“Oh, that is wonderful news, Mr. Dawson.”

“Well, you make sure that fellow takes you out to a nice dinner this week. Only the best.”

“I will, Mr. Dawson. Thank you.”

She returned to her desk and adjusted her shoulders, then brushed her fingers across the carnations and smiled.

An old man came charging in and removed his hat. He was animated and trembling within his loose brown suit.

“Miss Suzy, I have terrible news,” he said.

“What is it?” Suzy said. She stood and circled from behind her desk.

“It’s about Nathan.”

“What about Nathan?” she demanded. Her heart began pounding inward, tightening her chest.

“He... he... it’s hard for me to say.” His lips were quivering.

“Say it,” she insisted. “What happened?”

Nathan appeared in the doorway behind the old man. Her shoulders dropped into a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, what is it?” said Nathan. “What happened?”

The old man spun to Nathan. His open mouth closed shut and his eyes peered like glass. He turned back to Suzy, then rushed around Nathan and out the door.

“What’s with him?” Nathan asked.

“Oh, he’s just getting senile. Every Monday he imagines a tragedy. Last week Martians abducted his grandson. Thank you for the lovely bouquet. You look wonderful today.”

Nathan leaned against the desk and pulled a cigarette from a chrome case. He studied her flowing hair as he lit it.

“I finally got some sleep this weekend. Doctor gave me some pills. They seem to work. Strange dreams though.”

“I’m so happy to hear that, Nathan, and I’m not supposed to say anything, but Mr. Dawson has some good news for you today too.”

“Is that so? In that case we should have a nice dinner at The River Club this week, and this weekend I know of a beautiful little prairie where we can have a nice picnic.”

She beamed with joy.

