

SLEEP
By Laren Grey

“How blessed are some people, whose lives have no fears, no dreads; to whom sleep is a blessing that comes nightly, and brings nothing but sweet dreams.”

-Bram Stoker

“The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague.”

-Edgar Allan Poe

Stale air pressed against gray walls, leathery and drab. The scent of cedar and mothballs wafted from the open closet door and fell down a column of air from the ceiling fan. It smelled like memories in a box. The hands of a small clock on the nightstand hammered like a pickaxe against his granite brain. Its ticking slowed, yet stayed in rhythm. He pressed himself up in his bed and shifted his eyes at it. A disappointing hour hovered, resisting the dawn like a vampire. 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 pulled by a retreating wave. He chugged a tall glass of water while snorting into it, then set the empty glass next to a pill bottle that had been watching him all night. Written on the label was his name, NATHAN TANNER. Under the name, the word THALIDOMINE stood out like ancient Greek. The name seemed unfamiliar, so he turned the bottle label away from him as he was still catching his breath from the drinking marathon. Beads of sweat from his brow evaporated in the ceiling fan breeze. His breath slowed. The clock matched it. Wool blankets twisted around 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. He 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 second and third hearts. The long, silver moon seared through the windows. It burned against his skin, like scorching a world too close. It sucked the atmosphere from the room. He leaped 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 turned on the lamp, then leaned back against the headboard. The little filament inside the bulb vibrated like the wings of a beetle. He rattled the bottle of pills, 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. He read the second one instead. It made no sense either. He read it again and again until his eyelids half-blinked and 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 rustled like shredded paper in a churning mid-day wind. Wings pointed and morphed and twisted in a mound. A horrific undulating mass devoured and pulled and danced and rearranged.

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

The nearby wake of vultures paid no attention. Meat ripped from the ribs of a carcass nestled between lichen-coated rocks and spiked cactus. In flashes, the white bones protruded, as if now discovered after a million years. There, winged devils flapped and stripped 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. The 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 by the hundreds from the haunted edges of the world. The boy dropped the shotgun and ran 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. High-shouldered gargoyles perched in the night breeze. Their silhouettes breathed

against the deep blue night like puppets in a horror show. Bald heads and gnarled beaks turned with every move he made. The room warped and skewed in their x-ray vision. He stumbled out of bed and reached for the wall, then fell out of the front door with his pants, shirt, and hiking boots on. He staggered 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 long slivers of orange and white stretched 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. Soon, ten miles had rolled under him. The Impala raced past a deer carcass with vultures dancing on it. Its head cocked sideways with its tongue hanging limp. Gray lifeless eyes, like a fish on ice, preserved its last moments. Several gangling necks turned and watched the Impala until it disappeared over a hill, then resumed pulling at the flesh and sinews of the carrion.

Another mile rolled past. The winding road became a hypnotic pendulum. It swayed and seduced 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. 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 white-walled wheels crunched into gravel at the side of the road and rolled to a stop. The trail-head 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. He ducked and pulled himself through the low branches and brush of hills and ravines. The reward was worth the work. A large circular prairie appeared 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 hiked 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 at the edge of the field. Fruit pears atop cactus 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 flittering bird songs faded in the waving grasses. 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, the gargoyle vultures hissed and perched with high shoulders. Their black pearl eyes peered at him from leathery, wrinkled heads. Their oily stench sank to the prairie floor like winter fog drifting through the stagnant warmth of the fading

afternoon. They smelled like rot-stuffed turkey painted with tar and licorice. 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 a pried-open casket. The sweat of a thousand grave robbers lingered. His sleepy hands gripped the silken earth around him.

“Go away!” he shouted. The gusts of two more vultures swooped to the ground near him. Three more followed. One by one, seven more leaped from the branches and surrounded him.

“What is this? Get outta here!” His yell echoed across the scenery.

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

“Get off me, you damned devil.” The silk-black buzzard gazed into his eyes. The stench of a hundred dead rats blew from its nostrils. 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. No echo answered.

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. His ribs and spine and appendages lay there for months and slowly scattered across the prairie. His skull stared into eternity.

Sleep.

She walked into the office past her desk, where a bouquet of pastel carnations was prominent. Gold hair curled around her face. Black heels and a cream-trimmed blue-gray dress revealed curves from her ankles to her neck.

“Good morning, Mr. Dawson,” she said, looking 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 had animated eyes and trembled within his loose brown suit.

“Miss Suzy, I have terrible news.”

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

“It’s about Nathan.”

“What about Nathan?” Her heart pounded. Her chest tightened.

“He... he... It’s hard for me to say.” His lips quivered.

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

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

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

The old man spun to Nathan. His open mouth closed shut and his eyes peered like glass. He turned back to Suzy, then rushed 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 struck a match.

“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.