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Dead Tired

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Author Bio

Dead Tired

The digital clock on the nightstand reads 4:42 am. I'm sitting on the windowsill with my back to the outside world, watching the red numbers wash over my white sheets, soaking in and staining them like red wine.

Or blood, for that matter.

I think this is the sixth week in a row like this, sitting up most of the night on my windowsill, watching my twisted sheets drown in the clock's red hi-beams. Or maybe it's the seventh?

I have never been this tired.

And who's counting, anyways?

I blink, my eyelids grasping each other like long lost lovers. When they let go, I can see dust bunnies filing out in lines from under the bed, marching along the floor like little soldiers, heading for the bookcase, the closet. They march towards my feet wearing dust bunny helmets, wielding dust bunny swords, ready to sacrifice themselves for the better of the whole.

This is what happens when you don't sleep. You fight wars against armies of lint. I used to sleep great. Like a baby, if you will. I could slip out of my work clothes, crawl into bed each night and die, only to be reborn again the next morning.

Now, well, now it's quite the opposite. I'm not the one dying anymore.

My alarm goes off, and the dust bunnies retreat back under the bed. The clock reads 6:45 am, and I'm still sitting on my windowsill. The sun came up when I wasn't looking, and now warmly rubs my back through the linen drapes.

I finally get up and make my way over to the closet, toeing lightly over the hallowed battle ground where the dust bunny armies once fought. Sliding open the doors, I can feel a heat flow from out of the closet and into the room, crawling up my legs like hot spiders.

As I peer into the closet for some clothes, I can see my old pant-suits swinging from the hangers, dancing delicately in the warm closet. They lift their arms slowly, gray sleeves covered in dust, blue sleeves with old coffee stains, reaching for each other. When they make contact, they begin to waltz, a soft, slow waltz that echoes from the dark corners of the room.

I haven't worn one of the dancing suits in two years. I haven't even touched one since I got a call late one night from the hospital, telling me Maria had been nearly beaten to death by her husband.

I used to work in life insurance. After my best friend fell into a coma for two weeks, I realized there's too much happening in our lifetime to worry about what's going to happen afterwards.

In the kitchen now, I try to remember the last time I slept. Like, really slept.

It's not that I can't sleep. I can sleep just fine. It's the dreams I've been having.

In these dreams, I'm not in a strange place. I'm in my apartment, in the park, at the grocery store. Generic places. Everyday places. I'm not with strange people either. Everyone in the dream with me, they're real people. People I'm close to. People I love.

Thing is, in these dreams, I kill the people I'm with.

For example, last night when I got in bed, I dreamed I stabbed my sister in the neck with a paring knife. Two nights ago, I shot my mailman in the balls with a nail gun.

I don't know where these things are coming from.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Second Chance Shelter for Battered Women, Maria and my gift to the community, to all women who experienced abuse like Maria had. When I got out of the car, I turned to lock it and noticed it swaying back and forth in the parking spot.

This is what happens when you don't sleep.

Last week, after a long day of work, I stabbed my mother with a pitchfork and woke up in a cold sweat. Later, I strangled grandma with a garden hose.

I don't know where these ideas are coming from. I'm a people person. Honest.

The cement walkway waves, the white building inhales.

One time, I went to the gym, came home, and stabbed my dog with a curling iron.

These things just come too easily into my head.

I sit down at my desk and just stare. Looking closer, I can see little shoots of grass start to sprout from around my keyboard. I can see vines spring out from behind my computer and start to reach for my monitor, first coiling around the base, then crawling up the screen like hungry fingers. As the grass grows, my mouse slides down and disappears, hidden now by tall green blades, laying in wait for the stapler to make a wrong move. Then...

I jump back as the phone lets out a loud ring, burning down the grass forest. I reach and lift, while I watch the ash slowly sink back into the desk.

"Louise?" the phone asks.

It's Maria. She's sending me back a girl to be checked in. I respond, searching for any remnants of my grassy field.

"You OK hun?" she says. "You sound terrible."

"Yeah, I'm alright." I mumble. "Just tired."

I lay the phone back to sleep in its cradle. The grass is gone, the whole forest now just flat brown oak. The mouse, with nowhere to hide, just watches the stapler from a distance, and the bare monitor laughs and mocks me with its blinking cursor.

I used to feel passionate. I used to make a difference.

Now I come to work and watch grass grow out of my desk. I go home and beat my doctor with a shovel.

A door opens at the far end of the room, and a woman steps cautiously through it, careful not to disturb the snoring door jam. She looks around and I wave, slightly, and she approaches with her head bowed.

"Are you Louise?" she whispers.

The first time a woman comes here, she always whispers. Maybe if she talks quietly, she can't give away too much information. Become too vulnerable.

These women have been taught the hard way not to trust anyone. Not even the ones they love the most.

She's signing her name left-handed. With each stroke, the pen grows longer. Like a lying Pinocchio. Like a bamboo stalk. Like the tongue I pulled out of my nephew's mouth. Only I'm not about to cut the pen in half with an Exacto knife.

She gets up, and turns to leave. As she walks away, the ground melts under each step like snow, steam rising in rings and waves.

This is what happens when you don't sleep. You get footprint potholes from your desk to the door.

The phone rings again. I watch it squirm and yell like it's being tortured. Like it's my neighbor, and I'm squirting hot glue in his eyes.

It's Maria, and she's wondering what I'm doing for lunch.

The windows at the Roland Diner are greasy, covered in a roadmap of fingerprints. I can see little grease cars driving along stretches of grease roads, turning this way, that way, never quite making it down to the sticky table.

"Louise?" Maria says.

I turn, and the waiter's standing there, pen in hand, looking at me as if the grease highway were on my face. I stumble quickly through my menu, and give him my order. He looks strangely at the window as he walks away, and I turn to see a grease car accident near Maria's side of the table.

"What's wrong, dear?" Maria says. "You've seemed lost these last few weeks."

"I know, I'm just having a lot of trouble sleeping." I say.

The waiter comes back with our drinks, and sits them down on the table. He looks a bit like my ex-boyfriend, though I know I've never broken this man's bones with a hammer, nor fed him his own scrotum.

A condensation track team lines up on my glass of lemonade, and gets ready for the big race.

"Are you even listening?" she says.

"Yeah, sorry."

"Well, why do you keep staring off into space?" she asks.

"I dunno, it's just, you know, I'm just kinda brain-fried right now." I say.

"You're not back on the stuff, are you?"

I look up at her, and she has that nervous, angry, disappointed look she's had since junior year in college. Her eyes are hot, and each blink sends a wind of heat over my face.

"Excuse me?"

"You're not back on it, are you? You told me you quit that shit forever." She says.

"No," I say, "I told you, I haven't been sleeping well, OK? I haven't dropped in five years."

"You sure?" she says, "Cause I can't have you in the shelter if you're trippin' again."

The condensation is marathon-ing down our glasses, the grease cars are flying down their expressways. Her eyes are on fire now, and start to melt and drip down her face.

"I'm not, Maria. I told you I quit and I did."

"Alright," she says, "alright. Then you won't mind getting tested."

My hand slamming the table is like an earthquake for the little crumbs, an act of God. Their whole plane shakes, and floods with tap water and giant ice cubes. The condensation races are brought to a halt when their track is sent flying towards a wall. But all of this and the grease traffic can fuck themselves 'cause my best friend doesn't believe a damn thing I say.

Swinging the door open, I knock a woman off her feet, but a car reaches out to catch her head before she hits the sidewalk. This seems strangely familiar, the blood on the bumper reminding me of my uncle, the cracking sound like a leather belt, but no tire tracks this time.

I head for the road, and watch the fire hydrants twirl around in circles like dessert displays. Round black ants carry cars slowly down long winding roads, and the wind blows my hair and my shirt, harassing me.

The traffic signs are bowing their heads and avoiding my glance. Trees bend away as I walk past, and houses stand tall and still like deer in headlights. Like my cousin at the end of a shotgun barrel.

I open the door to my apartment and it floats on the hinges. I turn on the light and it flickers and falls. The pans hanging over the sink knock a melody and the water

turns on and off. The carpet folds in the middle and tries to wrap my feet. I walk to the bedroom, and the closet has cracked. I turn and the mirror is melting off the wall, hot liquid glass cauterizing the screaming jewelry boxes. The dust bunnies are back, and clothes drip out of my dresser. My blanket trips me, and I try to step away, but it pulls me face first onto the bed. The pillow squeezes my ears and I scream and I scream.

At 6:45 am, my alarm goes off again. I look forward at the windowsill, and see the sun sitting outside on roofs, smiling. I look right towards my alarm clock, and reach out to shut it off. I sit up, the blankets falling lightly off my chest. The mirror sits reflecting me, and the jewelry boxes are silent and dead.

The closet is not cracked. The dust bunnies are gone. My dancing suits are just old work clothes being blown and chewed by time.

I didn't dream. I slept, and I didn't dream.

I put on some clothes and make some breakfast. The pans are not singing. The carpet is not folded.

I head out to the car, and get in. The trees are still, and the houses sit vacant.

Riding along the road, the music is on. There is no grease on the windows. The traffic signs just sit there idle and obedient. The hydrants decorate the sidewalk and are still as red pillars.

When I get to the shelter, I notice two police cars have pulled into the lot and are blocking the entrance. I park on the street and get out. The walkway is still, and the building does not breathe.

When I open the door, three cops turn their heads to look at me. The closest one walks over with a clipboard and a pen. He is right-handed, and the pen does not grow.

He asks for my name, and I give it. I look over his shoulder and the other two cops have turned back, going through papers, touching everything with yellow latex gloves.

"You work here?" the cop asks.

"Yeah," I say, "Maria and I started this place together."

"When's the last time you saw Ms. Patton?"

"Yesterday," I say. "Around lunchtime. Where is she?"

The cop pauses, and lowers his clipboard. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," he starts, "but Ms. Patton was killed late last night."

My breath falls out and my eyes drop.

The cop's badge looks at me, smiles, and winks.