

Sleepy Boy

Didi shook his shoulders, patted his cheek. Poor little guy was really sawing logs. She whispered his name. Looked like she had sleepy boy on her hands. She said, “Asher” with true volume. Still conked. Then, loud enough for Collin to hear in their bedroom, “Wake up, buddy, sleep time’s over!”

An hour later Collin put the Urgent Care on speakerphone while Didi spritzed Asher’s face with saline solution. He won’t wake up, they told the worn out nurse on the other end. Is he breathing? Yes. Is he having convulsions or other seizure-like behavior? No. Does he have any allergies to recent foods or medication’s he’s ingested. No. Bring him in then.

The doctor cracked a pouch of smelling salts under Asher’s nose, filling the examination room with the scent of bleach. Frustrated, he asked the parent’s permission try something more drastic before he pressed a thick needle into the pad of Asher’s heel. Sweet heart barely flinched, kept snoring away. The doctor, bewildered, put in the transfer to New Hope General.

Initial scans reveled no evidence of somnambulism, apnea, paralysis, narcolepsy or coma. A month and a few dozen consultation calls with the Mayo Clinic later, the head of the somnology department approved a formal diagnosis: Asher’s pineal gland was congenitally enlarged and produced an excess of melatonin. His brain would not allow him to wake.

“Does it – this condition - have a name?” Didi asked the doctor.

“We’re informally calling it Asher’s syndrome,” the doctor looked at the floor.

The good news: as far as they could tell, he wasn’t suffering at all. The bad news: treatment at this stage was too risky, neurology would need time to study Asher before a plan could be conceived.

Didi's social media feed was mostly her other mom friends posting pictures of their kids awake and alert, living full lives in the sunshine. She took to avoiding bus stops, parks, farmer's markets, anywhere she might see parents with their animated children. The sight of a man lifting his toddler into the air sent her into a spiral of wondering when Asher would wake up. Why wouldn't he just wake up? Wake up, damnit, Asher, just wake up! You're missing everything! Your whole life is passing you by!

On the other hand, she considered, in quiet moments of laundry doing or cat feeding, a butt load of tragedy had been avoided by his endless sleep. He dozed right through the pandemic and various other horrific world events that seemed to be lapping at their doorstep. He didn't have to worry about skinned knees or eating his vegetables. He wouldn't have to hear her and Colin fighting about whether they would have another child.

Close family was under strict instruction to keep the situation under wraps, but someone, probably Collin, let it slip. *Boy Takes Up Permanent Residence in the Land of Nod* a tabloid headline read. Despite the law prohibiting reporters from divulging Asher's identity, it wasn't that big of a town and within 48 hours everyone knew.

Did you try dunking him in the lake?? Didi's Mom's friend texted.

"This sounds disgusting," Collin's boss said, "but a coffee enema will wake anyone up."

It's the mother's fault, the anonymous internet said, *she drank during pregnancy, I'll bet. It's usually the mother's fault.*

Colin left after the first six months, only came to see Asher on holidays, showed up to the hospital smelling like beer from the night before, or maybe beer from the parking lot.

The neurologists threw up their hands and discharged Asher for home care, figuring a familiar environment might help. Routine became Didi's religion. Morning was for diaper

changing, sitting him up in bed, hooking up a feeding tube, propping an iPad in his lap that played his favorite cartoons.

Afternoons were for strapping him to an exercise machine, a medieval looking thing that moved his limbs in such a way so his muscles wouldn't atrophy. She couldn't bring herself to watch as the machine went through a disturbing perversion of what Asher's life should have been, automated movements recreating skipping through meadow of wildflowers, practicing cartwheels with his friends, squatting down by a creek to discover a hidden biome in an eddy.

Didi loved being a mother, she thought as she sat outside his room and listened to the machine whirr and clink. She'd happily changed diapers and cleaned spit up. Wouldn't dare trade all the sleepless nights in the world for a life without Asher. But this illness revealed a compact she was unaware she'd proposed the universe. She would sacrifice her body, her mind, everything she was and would ever be, and in return her child would have the opportunity to grow beyond her, even if only incrementally. This infinite slumber breached the contract.

Around the time new hairs and pimples showed up all over Asher's body, news came to her that Collin cleaned himself up and was looking to get back together. Didi had a real good laugh about that one and sent word through the appropriate channels he was welcome to go fuck himself. Collin hadn't visited in years, only sent these rambling, drunken voicemails he expected her to play for Asher. She deleted them as soon as they popped up on her phone.

Didi got lonely sometimes, sure. But Asher kept her company, weird as that sounds. She talked to him endlessly, about everything. She let his hair grow long, would braid it for hours while telling him about what happened on the way to the grocery store, how many people asked about him that week, update him on the current social standings of various community members.

When she ran out of mundanities she would tell him of her childhood, her and Colin's early courtship, would pour details and confiding's onto Asher she wouldn't even commit to a diary for fear of someone accidentally finding such a document. Occasionally, she would worry that the sordid details of her life were sinking into his subconscious, and that one day he'd wake up and have all this information about his mother in his head he'd rather not. But this worry supposed he might wake up one day. And she began to feel stupid for holding onto that hope.

Word got to her that Collin was publishing a tell-all book about his son titled *The Boy Who Wouldn't Wake Up*. Blinding rage washed through her. *She* should have been the one to tell Asher's story. It was mostly *her* story! All the sacrifice, the caring. All the plans she put on hold. Her entire life! On hold! Each day was a funeral for her child that was still alive. What right did Collin have?!

And what a dumb title. What did he even have to write about? Was the book only one page?

Dear reader,

One morning my son wouldn't wake up. I tucked my tiny dick between my legs and ran away instead of taking care of my supposed loved ones. I spent ten years drinking and puking all over myself. Then one day I got sober and I wrote this book to cash in on the tragedy.

The end.

Ignoring the publicity campaign was easy enough. Most of her friends and family had cut Collin out of their lives. Then the gifts started to arrive.

First it was pillows. Soft white ones. Then others encased in silk. She piled them up on her porch, not sure what to do with them. The UPS driver was just as clueless as her. If it was an

ordering malfunction from an online store, the return address would be from a distribution center. Each one came from an individual sender.

The mystery came into focus when a cross stitch arrived, elegantly woven in pink/green ornature and mounted in a glass frame. At the center of a baroque wreath of laurels was a message in dainty cursive script:

♥ Don't ever wake up ♥

Collin was involved with this. Had to be. She summoned him to the Kroger parking lot near her house, threw the frame at his feet, cracking the glass.

“Why am I getting pillows and blankets, sent to my doorstep, Collin?” She heard her own echo across the flatness of the parking lot.

“I don't know!” Collin sounded like a little boy scared of an imminent paddling.

“Why are strangers calling at all hours singing lullabies, Collin?”

“I – I don't know. I think, and I'm not sure, it has to do with the book.”

Didi closed her eyes and breathed into that information

“I, uh, I wrote at the end of the book, like, maybe it's a good thing if Asher doesn't wake up. Like, maybe all of humanity is a dream inside Asher's head, you know? And if he wakes up we'll all die.”

Didi was quiet for a moment, then started to laugh. A manic, uncontrollable, laughter that crept up from deep inside, a survival reaction to save her from the indignity of crying in front of a man who'd humiliated her at every possible juncture. She laughed herself all the way back into her car, laughed the whole drive home, only started sobbing when she parked in her driveway.

The gestures escalated. Warring factions of clinically disturbed book fans showed up at her house, either trying to wake Asher up with bull horns or keep him asleep by throwing canisters of nitrous oxide into his window. A friend from a support group of parents of physically debilitated children advised her to move to Canada. The healthcare was marginally better and Americans seemed to care very little about what happened north of the border. A month later she unpacked boxes the living room of a townhouse in Toronto as Asher dozed on a daybed in the living room.

A new neighbor woman, Gale, also divorced and collecting social security, befriended Didi. They went on walks, the occasional pickle ball game. Eventually, Gale met Asher. She was kind enough to talk to him like a sentient grown up. Most people who encountered Asher treated him like a wax statue. So lifelike, they would say, you'd never think...

Over tea, Didi could tell Gale was working up the courage to ask something.

“So,” Gale pinched her thinning eyebrows together, “What’s the plan for Asher when you’re not around anymore?”

This was a gracious interpolation of what Didi knew most wanted to ask her. Why did she let Asher live this long? Why not give him a dignified death? Why let yourself be burdened by this half a life?

Didi changed the subject and Gale never brought it up again.

One day Gale showed up with a wild look in her eyes.

“I know what you need. A vacation.”

“What? No. I have too much to do around here. Look at this place.”

“When was the last time you got away?” Gale softened her mania.

The prospect forced Didi to confront a depressing realization: she'd never been more than a brief car ride away from her invalid son in almost 20 years now, which was far too big a chunk of her adult life than she was willing to accept.

“You need this, Didi. I've seen you. In the quiet moments. I look through the glass of the door before knocking. I peek around the corner before coming into the room. I see you staring into space, holding Asher's hand. Talking to him like that movie where Tom Hanks talks to the volley ball.”

Well, she didn't appreciate that comparison, but she understood what Gale was getting at.

Didi hired a Hungarian nurse named Janos based solely on his football player physique. Years had passed since a cross stitch or a pillow had arrived at her door, but she was still worried about the crazy book fans. No one would dare bother Asher with Janos around.

The day the ladies left for Acapulco, Didi put Asher's hair into one long braid that reached to his thighs. She wrapped it in a tight spiral on his chest, each coil interlocking perfectly, as Janos and Gale watched from the doorway. She kissed Asher hard on the forehead. Didi probably wouldn't have left at all if Gale hadn't taken her gently by the elbow and coaxed her out the door. Janos shed a few tears but hid it well from his employer.

Sea air filled the hotel room upon waking the next day, her eyes still tired from crying. Gale found them a spot by the pool where they sipped colorful drinks, giggled playfully at the oiled Speedo men tanning on the beach. But mostly her thoughts were with Asher, whether he was okay, if Janos could confidently work the exercise machine, and what if, after all these years, he woke up while she was gone?

What if it was Didi this whole time? Like Asher had some allergic reaction to his own mother? What a horror that would be for Asher, waking up in the body of a grown man, in a

house he didn't know in Canada, a large Hungarian changing his diaper. Gale had to stop her from constantly calling Janos.

The following morning over orange juice and yogurt parfait Gale's maniacle eyes returned.

"I've arranged for a medicine retreat."

"Hard pass. I don't see how drugs are the answer to anything."

"It's not like that. It's medicine. It helps people work through their issues they might not be able to work through on their own. Five years of therapy in one day. I thought it was crazy too but then I tried it. I couldn't have gotten through my divorce and substance abuse without it.

Didi scoffed, "I don't have a problem with substance abuse."

Gale placed a gentle hand on hers, "I've seen the loose Ativan's in the kitchen island clutter. The empty bottles of Xanax and Vicodin in the trash. Adderall sitting around the bathroom sink."

"That's not addiction," Didi insisted. "Those were just to get through the day. A little-pick-me-up here, a cool-me-down there, a little something to chase away the Sunday Scaries. Everyone's medicated these days, right? You have to be, these days."

As she heard her own self-defensive rant, it hit Didi. Damn. She had been spending these last few years in a haze of pills and calling it a life. So much was unresolved with her and Collin, and as much as she hated to admit it, with Asher. She resented them both, these men who had tethered her to the sea floor, keeping her from breathing the air above.

The Shaman's home was a 30 minute hike into the mountainous jungle. A cinderblock shack with a corrugated tin roof, no glass on the windows, the corners of the walls caked with orange soil. Despite the rough accommodations, it felt safe, and welcoming. Meaty and crunchy bits floated on the surface of the drink he gave the women. It tasted like mud. She went to spit out the

dregs, but he gestured for her to eat those parts too. When she felt like she would throw up, he helped her down on a cot, placed a clean towel over her eyes.

In the dark, she listened to the squawk of forest birds, the wind blow through the canopy, the Shaman's soft, looping song. The smoke scared her at first, until she realized the old man was cleansing her with some burnt offering that smelled of pine and lemon.

The visions came to her. Great waves of light expanding and contracting, a boundless living breathing organism, flowers coated in glossy enamel, layers of petals perpetually blossoming and withering. At the center of the confluence, Asher's face, old as he was now, hair shorn from his scalp, eyes open. She'd forgotten his emerald green eyes, the way they shimmered when the early evening sun caught them right. Here they were now, luminesced by infinitude.

He was sad. Immediately, she knew why. Not for missing his own life, he was a part of this great expanse of light now. He mourned for his mother's life, the one that had passed her by, the one she'd many opportunities to go and live, if only she'd allowed herself to. Didi wept heartily at the realization.

She begged him to speak to her, to say something. Just once she wanted to hear his voice, see life flow through him.

"Let me go... Let me go... Let me go.... let me go let me go let me go let me go..."

Dusk settled as they left the jungle on shaky legs.

Janos must have seen something in her face upon her return, some profound change in the way she carried herself, a flower rebloomed after decades of dormancy. He knew what was happening when she asked him to assemble his massage table in Asher's room. They laid Asher face down on the table, placed some plastic sheeting underneath him. Didi lit some candles and put some quiet flute music on her Bluetooth speaker.

The sheers moved through the top of Asher's braid smoothly, gently, and as the final hairs were cut, she wrapped a rubber band around the snakelike thing and placed it in a bag with the aspiration to donate it to one of those places that makes wigs for people with cancer. They used manual clippers to cut the hair closer to his scalp. When the hair was buzzed down to the millimeter, Janos covered Asher's scalp in warm foam and, in little deft scratches, worked his way across Asher's scalp with a straight razor until his scalp was smooth and waxy to the touch. Didi washed his head, cleaned all the tiny hairs away before massaging the skin with oil.

She asked Janos to hold her hand. It was dark outside, the only light a reading lamp over Asher's bed.

"I'm going to rest for a second."

The machines monitoring Asher's heart rate and oxygen levels beeped and booped quietly. Not long after she closed her eyes, she could feel Asher with her, standing over her, his palm resting on her cheek.