

# To Sleep

by Bretton B. Holmes

There sits a woman on the bench inside across from me, I'd say probably fifty or so feet away. Her face belies her state; which is, in a word, beleaguered. This is not an uncommon occurrence here at the Jumping Palace. The 19 year olds the management is fond of hiring in these summers months see it every day.

She appears in a meditative state. Her eyes, mere slits to the bright lights inside as the fluorescent bulbs bounce their wavelengths off the enormous inflatable structures that surround us. I have managed to find a not so sticky table at long last where I can see the small careening bodies as they hurl themselves down a double sided slide in the rear of the establishment.

There is an older couple seated at the table to my left. The woman wrings her hands again and again, reaching up to place one under her chin, then to her cheek as though there is some pending trepidation no one else can see. The sounds of the children screaming with delight rests solidly incongruent. The man next to her; hard-lined face with deep burrows to his jowls, skin baked by the sun has his arms propped on the pink topped circular table where they sit, their respective gazes fixed on the meditating woman. He is ready for anything should the North Koreans decide to cross the border, and the woman next to him worried they just might.

'Can't believe this' I hear him mutter in guttural emphasis. His wife looks at the woman and shakes her head slightly. I'm even more intrigued now as it seems their relative worry and chagrin is directly related to her and then I see it, the meditating woman is their daughter.

I take quick furtive glances at them while watching my own two little hooligans. Beauties they are and I am not entirely sure they are mine...they are somehow too perfect to be part of me, part of this thing people call a father. But what kind of father? The ex would say not too much of one most likely. Anything else would be a surprise,

but I do try, and I try to remember that their path is not entirely up to me. It is difficult to remember that you are not God to your children when they look at you as though you were. I try to remind them that I am just a man, that they can depend on me while they are learning how to depend on themselves, but this is often met with confounded stares. Hopefully they will understand one day, but for now, they play as though tomorrow might not come and I see my heart in their abandon. I sometimes remember what that was like.

The woman's face is red and I wonder if she knows this, knows that I am looking at her. She is not terribly pretty, but she has a kind face. She wears a frumpy outfit with those shoes that look like feet, which I still cannot believe ever found a market, I mean, why not just go barefoot for Chrissakes? Dare to be different and you might just end up looking like a dolt in your best effort. Reminds me of that none-too-male-Kardashian joker wearing a fur coat. Oh, it's alright if you're a Bolshevik, people just figure it's part of the charm...

This woman, simply has no charm as far as I can see, but then it shows up...

The child looks nothing like her for the most part, except around the eyes. She comes barreling around an inflatable, sees her mother's face and her expression takes on an immediate air of panic. Her step slows suddenly, as though she is interrupting something which she does not understand. The man and woman to my left perk up suddenly as though some intervention might quell whatever negative thoughts the child might have in regard to its mother, but the woman opens her eyes and I see her face go from dour to full of light in an instant. The child, seeing this, runs again, full on into her arms. Once the child is nestled in her bosom and her eyes are hidden, the woman's face is pained in an instant. I see her look to the man and woman next to me. She screams at them silently for their judgmental consistencies, for their misunderstanding. For their disdain of their own flesh and blood.

The grandmother tries to make the best of things. She has always been the peacemaker in the family; the voice of reason that somehow always helped to keep grandad's tongue in check and

moving out to his workshop in the garage where he could muster whatever shred of courage he might have left from the war. He is certain that if he ever finds the male who did this again, he will surely make him pay somehow. But to what end? He doesn't care. All granddad knows is that the sonofabitch has it coming...his little girl was raised better, even though she's said a thousand times in the last year that she loved him, that man, the one who left them and their child whom he has never seen.

The child knows something is amiss to be sure, even at the age of her mere six years old. She can sense it at the dinner table as grandma does her baby-talk and granddad grumbles over his mashed potatoes and the woman forces a smile while her mind races over how her life took this turn. She goes over the process in her mind's eye now as she watches her child play, oblivious, for the moment, to the politics of who it is that will read the story at bedtime.

The mother seems to long for that time to come and go, as swiftly as possible, get the story done, hold fast in the face of the adversity, *never let on anything is wrong, it might somehow scar the child in unforeseen ways, get to the room, get to the room...*

The mother will cry and scream into her pillow after some story about Tommy The Turtle and how he learned to fly, and her futile wish of a different fate will once again drag her to sleep...

