

The Master of Sleep

by Jacob Russell

Once upon a time, when he was still young and before he learned the Secrets of Sleep, there had been a wife whom he loved, and she bore him three daughters; two lived to old age and one died with her mother at birth.

Think now of the daughter, the one who is telling the story. She is sitting on the edge of the bed, white sheet turned back below the foam pillow, white cotton blanket neatly folded at the foot of the bed. The pillow seems to levitate over the sheet, plump and smooth, no sign that it had ever cradled a sleeping head. Her toes just reach the floor, her ankles are crossed, her back straight, her hands folded on her lap, lotus style, like an ancient anorexic Buddha.

One of two remaining daughters, she grew up, she would tell you (speaking in the third person, as befits a teller of stories), and like her sister, married and left home (as children are destined to do) to fashion a life of her own; but now (another *now*, another *present*--it is so because we name it so) --now that their children are grown and scattered to the far corners of the earth, and their husbands long in their graves, both she and her sister, (the daughters of the Master of Sleep) have come back to live out their last days under their father's roof. Though he was very old and by the rules of the world should have reached the end years ago (it seemed to them that he would live forever, that surely they would die before him, their father, the Master of Sleep).

It was shortly after the marriage of the eldest daughter, that his wife had died. This wife, who had never slept well, would wander the house till the small hours of morning, sleep fitfully, if at

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all, only in that hour or two left before first light, so he could not help but reflect as he stood at her grave on the day she was lowered into the earth--that here she would find the sleep which eluded her in life and this thought, this simple metaphor, this natural association was enough--the line tossed into the night, the beginning of his journey--the one that made him into a fisher of dreams, the old man of the sea of sleep.

The Master of Sleep had lived alone for many years, so when his daughters first moved into his house he welcomed them, seemingly glad for their company. All that time he had thought of them as the children they had once been: little girls, quick and bright, or as young women--confident, full of love and beauty and eager for life--and for him, it was as though nothing had changed. They remained, as visitors in a dream, always young, always the same; there was no thread connecting the children he remembered to these two withered old women who somehow came to inhabit the house at the same time, the waking reality that shimmered dimly around him like light from the surface, far, far above him. The old women were strangers to him and as their impression grew stronger in his mind, he began to feel that line slipping away, began to feel himself a stranger in his own life.

It was not because they had been out of touch. There had been letters and visits--phone calls in the middle of the night announcing the births of grandchildren, holiday dinners, whole summers together by wooded lakes--but all this passed him by like a dream--and like a dream, it failed to take root in memory the way the events of his youth had done--as had all that came to pass before the death of Abigail, his wife, the love of his youth--before he had become the Master of Sleep.

His eldest daughter was very conscientious, solicitous of his every need; but for all her eagerness to demonstrate respect, to show him the honor she thought he deserved--or perhaps because of

that, she seemed to him, in both her manifestations, old and young--distant, cold and unapproachable. Under her care, the house was immaculate; she would enter a room and before she left, the books that had been lying about were all back on the shelves in proper order, newspapers and magazines picked up, dishes, glasses and cups carried to the kitchen, washed, dried and put away--nothing out of place, everything in order, like period rooms in a museum.

She saw that he was warmly dressed in winter, closed the blinds against the sun on the hottest summer days and in the afternoon she brought him biscuits and sweet tea laced with brandy. Later, as he lay in bed, he could hear her breathing in the chair beside him, whispering her prayer like a mantra... pleading with him to tell her the Secrets of Sleep.

Why, he could not understand. She retired early, slept soundly, and woke seemingly refreshed at the break of dawn. Her sister, on the other hand--he often heard moving through the house in the dark, like her mother before her. Sometimes, it seemed she *was* her mother-- pregnant with death. The youngest daughter was quiet, a little absent minded perhaps, but cheerful enough, always about some private task, always with something to occupy her mind and give her pleasure. She never mentioned her father's eminent achievements, gave no note of his fame--and in this, was the complete opposite of her sister, who did not miss a chance to call attention to his genius or to show how much she knew of his reputation in the world of the waking.

Almost from the day they moved in, in spite of all the anxious care of his eldest daughter, despite the cheerful presence of his youngest, the Master of Sleep found himself falling into an ever deeper gloom. He had become prisoner in his own house and could not find the key. And there was nothing that deepened the gloom and sense of isolation more than his faithful, elder daughters'

incessant campaign to convince him to pass on to her the Secrets of Sleep.

Every day she came to him--her efforts disguised at first, but more and more open, more and more demanding, flattering, begging, cajoling. Though it was no longer in him to feel impatience, he would listen with increasing agitation and despair to her efforts. "It is not a thing that can be told, or taught," he tried to explain, but she seemed not to hear, and at long last, his resistance began to weaken. At first she didn't even notice. She didn't see how on one afternoon his lips began to move as she spoke. She was too busy spinning reasons to explain her curiosity, to justify her questions. She chattered away, staring into nowhere while her father sat propped up with pillows in an easy chair, his eyes closed, his hands at rest on the arms of the chair, but his lips forming words out of silence

The youngest daughter, however, noticed right away that a change had begun to come over him, though she had no hint of what it was that was happening. One evening she carried his supper to his room because he had said he wanted to eat alone, but as she placed the tray on the rosewood chest by his chair, there was something in his face, something she had not seen before--and she was very much afraid--though of what, she couldn't say. The next evening, he again requested that his supper be carried up to him, and next night was the same. On this third day he left a mysterious and cryptic note outside his door requesting that from now on *all* his meals be brought up to him and that he should be left alone and under no circumstances should he be disturbed--with this single exception, that the visits from his eldest daughter should continue as before.

The younger daughter was, of course, a little hurt, a little confused, but she loved her father and had no reason to mistrust her sister; she accepted the shift in her routine. But it was also clear to her that some greater change had come over her father, and over

the house as well. Her first impulse was to tell her sister what she was feeling, but when she tried, it was as though she were talking to herself. Her sister saw nothing amiss, and would not hear of her concerns. She tried to convince herself her alarm was groundless but her fears would not be silenced and the absence of her father only made it worse.

She walked about the house in the dark when she could not sleep--which was more often than not--listening to the sounds a house will make when it talks to itself in the night--the heater switching on in the basement, the hum of the refrigerator, the untraceable creaks and moans of joists and rafter beams. Night held no fear for her; she was used to it--its familiar sounds were comfortable and put her at ease, but since the change, there were new sounds, sounds she had not heard before, and these new sounds deepened her fears. She began to guess what they were--though it seemed impossible, and at first she would not let herself believe what her ears and reason told her.

It was her father. She could hear him pacing in his room--all night it would go on. When at last she would climb into her bed and prepare, in the hours before dawn, to receive the small gift of sleep that would be left to her, she would hear his steps, tapping on the hardwood floor in the room above, and when she woke at morning's light, she would hear them still.

She did not concern herself at first with her sister's secret sessions with her father. She never asked what they talked about. She would ask about his health; *Was he eating well? Did he seem content? Does he sometimes ask after me?*

There was something else that came to occupy the younger daughter. It had begun as nothing more than a sudden flash of memory the first night, the night she had carried her father's supper to him: an image of him as a young man, holding a camera--

an old Brownie box camera--telling her to look at the birdie and smile. It was nothing extraordinary, aside from the peculiar clarity of the image and the acuity of its placement; she could recollect the year, the season, the day of the week, where, to her left and out of sight, her mother had stood holding the hand of her sister, who only a moment before had posed in the same spot.

But this image was only the first, and with each new memory, the focus sharpened, until they attained an almost hallucinate reality. She could close her eyes and move through them at will, altering her perspective within the composition. Later she found that by relaxing in a certain way, she could unfreeze the frames, and the images would move forward in time.

The aural memory was more slow in coming. There would be a single word from a voice she could not quite place, a snatch of melody, but in time, the full range of sound, even the background noise, birds, crickets at night, passing traffic--it was all there.

From a few each day, these flashbacks increased incrementally until they positively overwhelmed her. She grew confused. It became more and more difficult to keep past and present separate. It was like being under water. She wondered if she were going crazy--but this was only her practical nature, there was no feeling of panic or distress, and what saved her was the discovery that she could go back to any one of these memory-visions at will, that she was more than a passive victim of the phenomenon; she could enter into them, choose discrete memories, make connections, set up associations, relationships, and through exertion of will, give them order and meaning; she began, in short, to shape her life into a story.

She shuffled through reams of memory as one might page through the leaves of a photo album, selecting the right place for each picture, arranging and rearranging to emphasize this detail, to

diminish that, waiting for new inspiration, new visions to fill blank spaces--and as she retold her story, going over incidents again and again, she observed with wonder how they were growing more vivid, more *real* than they had seemed when they first occurred, as though her life till this moment had been a gathering of shadows and only now was she beginning to live them, only now seeing beyond the shadows, watching them take on *form* and *color* and *voice*.

The two sisters grew increasingly distant. They would sit in the living room together, without exchanging a word, as though they inhabited the same space, yet were moving through different planes of time. But while the younger daughter was certainly wrapped in her inner project, she did not withdraw altogether her usual, lively interest in the world. She was always a careful observer and this did not change; it was, in fact, what she saw in her sister that encouraged her reserve. While she would look up at the sound of a police siren or passing fire truck, her sister showed no sign she even heard. The younger daughter would stand at the window to watch children playing in front of the house, or the starlings congregating in the maple tree. She would busy herself in the kitchen, making tea, preparing the meals--but her sister did nothing anymore, beyond taking care of her most basic needs-- and keeping her daily

appointments with her father. Even the cleaning was left for the younger daughter now.

Each afternoon the eldest daughter would emerge like a shadow from her father's room,

descend the stairs and take her place at the table for supper. Her ancient features seemed to soften with every visit. The marks of age were less prominent, her face seemed smoother, her hair less starkly white, and yet she looked no *younger* than before. It was simply more difficult to tell; like her father, she had become, literally, ageless.

As time went on the younger daughter felt a certain pressure from within, a new urge, vague at first, but growing in clarity as her memories gained coherence. She felt the need to tell her story. When she looked at her sister now, she no longer believed she would outlive her, though she was almost ten years her junior and had always been the healthiest of the two. This only increased her desire, and made her more certain in her conviction that there was only one proper audience for her story: her father. She began to daydream of visiting him again, and the daydreams turned into scheming and the schemes became resolve, until the time came when nothing remained but to choose the time.

"It is over," came the voice of her older sister. She was standing at the top of the stair, the door to her father's room open behind her. "I have learned everything he has to teach." She looked down at her younger sister, and though the face looked familiar, she could not remember why this should be so, but it did not trouble her.

The orders still stood. No one else was to disturb her father, but the time had come. Her sister watched her pass but seemed not to recognize her, as though one of them were moving in a dream. She climbed the stairs, fearful--but prepared to face whatever she might find. When she came to the door, she hesitated, closed her eyes--and stepped into the room, and with the first step all the images fell apart, the edifice she had constructed over the past weeks and months came spiraling down like a deck of cards thrown to the wind; voices chattered and sang and howled in senseless confusion, the story she had rehearsed countless times over was wiped from her mind, and when she opened her eyes--there was only her father, unfathomably old, seated in the easy chair by the rosewood chest, eyes wide and blank as an empty winter sky, iris and pupil faded to an only slightly darker shade of yellow than what had once been their whites--emaciated, lost within his clothes, hardly more than ash and bone, and yet--breathing. Easily. Slowly.

The lapel of his jacket rising. Then falling. Ever so slight a movement.

"Estelle?" He asked, in a voice like dry leaves in a faint wind. This was the first time he had spoken her name since their return. She crossed the room, sat down on the floor beside him, amazed at how easy it was, amazed that she was able to do it at all. She curled her feet beneath her, supple as a girl--and with nothing in mind, without forethought, began to speak.

When the late morning sun touched the window, she laid her head upon his knee. She had no idea where the words had come from, but they had come, all afternoon they had come, and into the evening, and through the night, and now, if there had been more words, she would not have been able to speak them. Her voice was gone, her body numb--beyond pain, beyond sensation. And her father, no longer Master of Sleep--placed his hand upon her head, seeing her by touch, through his finger tips, like Braille--and the white expanse of time that separated them fell away, as a flower might shed its petals, as night surrenders to day, and he sank at long last into a full and fully human sleep.

So may we all.

