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Mermaid

Robin Baudier

The first time Nate saw the Mermaid, she was climbing into bed. It was a narrow hospital bed with railings on the side that were raised as a protocol to keep the study's subjects from rolling out and injuring themselves. He'd just walked into the observation room, hidden from her by the two-way mirror and sound-proofed walls. Jason, the medical intern who'd attached her sensors, handed Nate her clipboard, said, "Congrats, you've been assigned Ariel," picked up his Redbull and Fritos, and left the room.

The "congrats" made sense, since the woman was a lot nicer to look at than the study's average participant—90% of people with REM Sleep Behavior Disorder are men and most of them are over 50—and she had long, strong legs that were worth a second look. But this was a double-blind study. Unlike Jason and the other medical administrators, Nate, like the other psychologists partnered in observing, wasn't supposed to know anything about the subjects except the number designation written on their clipboard and what they observed. Nate considered saying something to Jason about the name slip next time he saw him, but he looked at the ring of condensation and Frito crumbs Jason had left next to the expensive monitoring equipment, and it just didn't seem worth it. Nate switched off the fluorescent lights in the subject's room.

The dim blue glow of night observation lights turned her pillow blue and her blond, wavy hair splayed across it a surprisingly pleasant green. Nate always felt uncomfortably voyeuristic watching subjects settle themselves in bed, so he leaned back in his chair and opened a book. It should have been his laptop he was opening, either to work on an overdue peer review or start compiling some of his own data he'd been collecting. Publish or perish, as they say, and Nate's position as a postdoc was an inherently temporary position. But Nate took out a book to read because that was what he wanted to do. And he'd been so numb from exhaustion lately, wanting to do anything was a relief.

It took the woman a while to fall asleep. This was not uncommon considering the unfamiliar surroundings, the sensors stuck to her forehead and chest, and the knowledge that someone was sitting behind the "mirror" in her room watching. In the end, it was only a little over a half hour of tossing and turning before her face went slack and her breathing became shallow. Nate glanced up at the EEG screen every couple of pages to monitor her progress. Early on, the swells of sleep spindles showed her thalamus working hard to keep her asleep, but after a little more than an hour, the delta waves of her deepest sleep looked normal. If she were a sleepwalker, this would have been the point of

interest, but this study was focused on parasomnias who lacked muscle atonia in REM sleep. They didn't get up and walk around, but there was no paralyzation to stop their bodies from acting out their most vivid dreams. All told, it was only a bit over an hour and a half before her brain waves resembled those of her waking self, indicating she'd reached REM. He'd known it was coming soon so he'd been watching the screen, but he needn't have bothered. He never would have missed what happened next.

In the room's blue glow, the woman straightened her right arm next to her ear then stroked it downwards as she started the same motion with her left. She was swimming, Nate realized. The movement of her body was graceful, but strange; it wasn't the measured, regular movements of someone swimming laps. It was languorous, like she was relishing the motion rippling through her torso and down her legs. Her face didn't have the focused look of an athlete, and there was no turning of the head to gasp for air. Her smile was beatific. She undulated onto her side, twisting into a breast stroke, and the sheet flapped around her legs as they moved together through imaginary water. Together, as if her legs were joined.

"Mermaid," Nate said, finally understanding Jason's comment. He stood up and walked to the glass, barely noting the dull thump when his book hit the ground.

* * *

"Tell me another one." Elia took a swig of beer. Her bare feet were propped next to Nate's shoes on her porch railing, socks balled up in her clunky nurse sneakers under her chair. It was just after dawn, but still gray on their street. Nate could barely make out his satchel sitting on his steps next door.

The first time he had come home at dawn to see his scrubs-clad neighbor drinking on her porch, it had seemed like kismet. But then he considered that he lived 15 minutes away from the University of Florida Hospital complex where his Health Sleep Center was located, and 15 minutes in the other direction from the North Florida Regional Medical Center where Elia was an ER nurse. When he looked at it that way, it felt more like a coincidence that they were the only two nightshifters out on their porches at dawn.

"In honor of October." Elia held up a finger to indicate she was modifying her request. "Tell me a really creepy story this time."

"Alright." Nate picked at the label on his beer bottle, searching his memory for something Elia would appreciate. "There was a guy in Canada, I forget his name, who was out on bail for fraud. He'd been caught trying to cover horse racing debts by embezzling from the company he worked for, and his wife let him come home on the condition that he go to her parents the next day and ask

them for financial help. This guy idolized her parents, and he went to sleep on his couch that night dreading telling them about how he'd screwed up their daughter's life. But it turned out he never had to." Nate took a long pull of beer.

Elia flicked condensation from her bottle at him. "You always do that. You milk your pauses."

"That night," Nate continued, his voice dropped low, "after two days of sitting awake in a jail cell, he fell asleep. When he woke up, he was in a hospital bed with deep cuts all over his hands and a police officer standing over him." Nate arched an eyebrow and tried to leer like Vincent Price.

Elia shook her head in disgust. She was slouched so low that her ponytail ran back and forth across the back of her chair like an increasingly disorderly rodent. "Milk, milk, milk."

"This guy had gotten up in the middle of the night, driven over to his in-laws' house, let himself in, strangled his father-in-law into unconsciousness, stabbed his mother-in-law to death, then driven himself to the police station and confessed. All without waking up."

"Holy shit."

"He was acquitted of all charges."

"Holy shit!" Elia's dark eyes were wide. "How did they know he wasn't lying?"

Nate shrugged. "You can be the best liar in the world, even fool yourself into believing your own lies. But bodies know the truth. They know when you're stressed, afraid, depressed. And bodies don't lie about pain. His hands were cut down to the bone when he walked into the police station, but he didn't show any pain until after he woke up. Then, all he could do was scream."

"Damn." Elia stared out into the lightening sky. "And the only weird stories I ever have to trade are about the things I pull out of people's butts."

"Yes." Nate toasted her with his mostly-empty bottle. "But you tell them so well."

She inclined her head to indicate that she accepted this compliment, and they fell back into comfortable silence.

Nate thought about the Mermaid, hadn't really stopped thinking about her all night, but he didn't bring her up. There was pleasure in keeping her a secret, intentionally hiding her existence as if she really were a mythical creature. Because even if she wasn't one, she was something equally rare.

Night after night, Nate sat watching strangers act out the dreams that moved them. His study participants didn't mime walking around opening kitchen cabinets; they enacted what they felt deeply enough to override their malfunctioning neurological safeguards. Mild mannered men and women climbed into bed, only to reveal deep wells of rage, fear, lust and violence. This made sense to Nate.

Sleep was always escaping him. Sleep was a perverse creature that became increasingly elusive the harder he chased it. And when he did catch it, his dreams were much like the ones he saw others act out at work—impotent punches, arms flailing defensively against attackers, fierce strangulation of a pillow, shouts, moans, tears. To see a woman climb into bed like everyone else and escape into something beautiful, become something beautiful, by abandoning herself to a dream? It calmed him.

“What has you smiling like that?” Elia was watching him. Her eyes were tired.

“Nothing.” Nate closed his lips around the secret of his mermaid and smiled with his eyes.

When the sun was up high enough to rebuke them over their neighbors’ roofs, Elia reached for his hand to lead him inside. It was the same gesture she used every morning he ended up on her porch. And every time he was grateful for the gesture, the invitation. He still was, but this morning, Nate caught her narrow hand in his, gave it a quick squeeze and told her goodnight.

The first time he’d slept with Elia, it had been because she was pretty and interested, but also because he hoped that it would relax and release him into sleep. Instead he’d lain awake next to her while she twitched and frowned through her dreams before letting himself out to return to his sleepless bed. He never asked her what she’d wanted out of it, but the awkward, quiet way she moved to the opposite side of her bed afterwards told him it had more to do with avoiding loneliness than looking for love. As free and open as they were with each other on her porch, they were silent strangers inside. Why they were still going inside together two months later was the real question. Maybe for the same reasons they had the first time. Maybe because it felt like part of the contract of their friendship, and they were afraid that if they reneged on one clause they’d lose the rest.

But that morning he walked away picturing the calm, early waves of sleep with a mermaid stroking steadily through them. If an unspoken contract had been broken by him leaving, Nate didn’t glance back to see its fallout. A calm had settled over him. He’d heard a siren song to join a mermaid in sleep, and his mind floated in a soft, blue haze as his body went through the rote movements of his nightly ablutions. He reveled in shutting his blackout curtains and the gentle friction of sliding between his sheets. That morning, for the first time in what felt like years, Nate closed his eyes and within minutes fell asleep.

* * *

Two more nights, Nate watched the Mermaid swim. Each night, he watched her lie still as her brainwaves spindled and ebbed before bursting into action as her

body did the same. The first swim of the night would be the shortest and the last the longest, but every ninety minutes or so, when she cycled into REM sleep, Nate closed his book and sat up straighter in his chair. She flipped and kicked, grinning with the pleasure of moving through water that only existed in her mind. Her motions were sensuous without being overtly sexual. A couple of times, she vocalized. It wasn't any more articulate than the usual grunts of Nate's other subjects, but there was a tonality to it he'd never heard before. As if she were singing in her dreams and her sleeping body couldn't quite control pitch or shape words.

After each night of watching her, Nate went home, and he slept. Not the restless tossing and turning that he had become habituated to. Not the stoned stripping away of all inhibitions that had forced him off of Ambien after one too many middle of the night online purchases he didn't remember and barefoot, shirtless walks through his neighborhood that shame wouldn't let him forget. Not the sedated unconsciousness of heavier sleeping medications that left him groggy throughout the following day. Sleep had been stressful for Nate, and so he had braced against it every night as he climbed into bed. The Mermaid abandoned herself to sleep. And somehow from watching her, Nate was able to do the same.

He tried to enjoy it while it lasted. Accept this temporary respite from the insomnia that strung him out over the past few years until he felt like he was going through the motions of a tamped-down, muted simulacrum of life. But on the fourth day, the day the study really began, Nate woke up midafternoon to a feeling of dread.

Since each subject's disorder manifested differently, each was observed sleeping for three nights to establish their personal baseline of activity. The fourth night, each subject would take a pill thirty minutes before climbing into bed. Half of the subjects would be ingesting a placebo. The other half would be ingesting a hefty amount of Melatonin—a hormone naturally produced in the pineal gland to induce sleep and hence had fewer side effects (and also, admittedly, less efficacy) than the regularly prescribed Clonazepam. Additionally, all subjects would sit for half an hour each day in front of a special lamp—the control group sitting in front of a regular florescent lamp they were told was a sun lamp, the experimental group in front of a special polychromatic polarized lamp designed to align their Circadian sleep rhythms with the sun. The hypothesis was that doubling down on these natural sleep aids might be enough to mute into harmlessness the manifestations of this disorder, sparing patients from suffering through the difficult side effects of heavy medication.

Nate did not know which group the Mermaid belonged to.

That night at work, Nate didn't open a book. The first hour and a half crawled by as he watched the EEG screen. When her brainwaves finally indicated she'd reached REM, Nate stood and moved closer to the glass, but her arms

remained still at her side. She rolled onto her side, and Nate's heart jumped when her legs gave a little kick, but then she stilled. Small gestures and a dozen or so strokes and kicks were all she gave him that night. He knew he should be glad. He knew that if the rest of the experimental group were doing nearly as well as she on the first night of treatment, being listed as first author on some of the ensuing papers would be good for his career. Instead, he was bereaved.

* * *

Elia was sitting on her porch when he got home. She hadn't been the previous two nights, and he hadn't let himself wonder about whether she had been off work and gone to bed early or whether she hadn't wanted to see him. That night, he left his satchel on his steps again and walked over without waiting for her to beckon. A beer was waiting for him on his chair. An unexpected gush of relief washed over him at seeing it and the bland smile on her face.

"Hey, buddy." She angled her head away from him to look back out into the sky. She was slouched low in her chair as usual, and the movement made a wreck of her ponytail the way it always did. His pulse picked up at the memory of the enormous snarl he'd created at the back of her head more than a few times.

"Hey, stranger," Nate said. "I missed you the last couple of nights."

"I went home for a couple of days. My mom's been having a rough time, and I was overdue for a visit."

Nate nodded sagely to cover for the fact that he didn't know what to say. He and Elia didn't generally talk about their lives, just drank and told stories that weren't directly about themselves. He wasn't sure if he should enquire further or if that would mar the unquestioning acceptance they could count on from each other. He settled for something in between. "Where does she live?"

"Tampa."

"That's not too bad."

"It's okay. I usually stay longer if I'm going to go all the way out there, but I didn't plan on going, so it was too late to request more time off."

They sat in silence a while afterwards, but it wasn't one of their comfortable porch silences. It also wasn't the careful silence of her bed, where they protected what they were able to give each other with their bodies from unwelcome expressions of emotion or lack thereof. This silence was uncertain. He'd raised questions between them by not following her inside. So he asked her another question to distract them both.

"Did you ever pretend to be a mermaid?"

Elia's eyebrows knit together. "What?"

"I mean, when you were a little girl. In the pool or wherever, did you ever swim around with your legs together and pretend to be a mermaid?"

She looked consternated for a moment, her lips pulling in tight against her teeth. But then she shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s possible.”

Nate let the subject drop. They finished their beers and kept the conversation to inconsequential things. When Elia got up to go inside, she didn’t reach for him, and Nate didn’t know whether he was glad or sorry.

That night, sleep wouldn’t come for Nate. He tossed and turned and felt as if he barely lost consciousness before waking up again. As a sleep scientist, he knew he’d been sleeping for hours in the lighter stages of sleep, and it just felt as if he’d been awake. He also knew that he was suffering from a self-fulfilling prophecy, that he’d decided that the reason he’d been able to sleep was because of watching the Mermaid swim. That it was his belief that he wouldn’t be able to sleep without her that now kept him awake. And it was fear that his respite was over, that he was about to enter another multi-year stretch of chronic insomnia, like the one that had built and worsened as he approached defending his thesis and lingered afterwards like a bad hangover.

It had felt like the more he learned about sleep, the harder it was to come by, even though he’d known that it was really stress exacerbating his natural problem. Trying to walk, talk and move like a normal person when he felt like a shambling old man had worn him down. Friends and relationships didn’t feel worth maintaining when trying to react or emote in an average way was an exhausting performance. Knowing that he was doing it to himself only made it worse.

At noon, Nate gave up on sleep. He was dressed and on his way in to work before he’d even decided what he was going to do.

* * *

He was told that Jason, the medical intern, didn’t get to the Sleep Center until 2 p.m. The nurses and receptionist kept giving Nate strange looks for being in so much earlier than his usual 9 p.m. clock-in, so he shut himself in one of the sleep observation rooms and actually worked on a paper until five minutes after two. It was another ten minutes before Jason got there. When he did, Nate asked him loudly in front of the receptionist to join him back in the sleep observation room to answer some procedural questions about the study. The quizzical look Jason gave him told Nate that he was completely failing at acting normal, but Jason followed him anyway.

When the door was shut behind them, Nate turned pleading eyes to Jason. “I have a favor to ask you.”

“Dude, what’s going on? You look like shit.”

“I feel like shit. Couldn’t sleep last night.” Nate pushed his hair back from his forehead and felt a sheen of grease there. “But that’s not what I want to talk to

you about. Do you know the woman I've been observing?" At Jason's blank look, Nate prompted, "The Mermaid?"

"Oh yeah," Jason laughed. "Crazy, right?"

"Yeah." Nate shifted uncomfortably, then plunged in to the conversation that could end the career that had been his entire life for the past five years. "Are you overseeing her light treatment?"

"Yup, she'll be here in thirty minutes for it."

"Could I administer it instead?" Nate hurried his speech when he saw concern cloud over Jason's easygoing smile. "I don't want to screw the study up or invalidate our double blind status, I just want to talk to her. You see," Nate tried to look embarrassed and hopeful, which wasn't too hard considering that was how he was feeling, "I want to ask her out after the study's over. And I'm worried that if I just pop out of my little room after her last night and say, 'Hey, I've been watching you sleep, want to go for a drink?' it'll be really creepy. But, I figure if she sees me beforehand and I get some kind of rapport going, it'll be less out of the blue, you know?"

Jason still looked uncomfortable, so Nate did his best to seal the deal. "I won't even technically be breaking the double blind because I won't ask her anything about herself, and I haven't even seen any of the lamps before, so I won't be able to tell which kind she'll be sitting in front of." This was a blatant lie, since Nate had worked with one of the tenured professors to select which lamps would be used in the study. But Jason either believed him or decided this gave him enough plausible deniability of wrongdoing.

"Alright. Fifty bucks, you tell no one I did this, and she's yours." Jason looked him over. Nate felt a flicker of fear. "Are you sure you want to though? Because you really do look like shit."

Nate let out a whoosh of held breath. "I'm sure. I'm so sure. Thank you."

* * *

It was weird to see the Mermaid awake. No, that wasn't right because he'd seen her awake when she was getting into bed every night. It was weird to see her with shoes on, in jeans and a blouse. Weird to have her look back at him when he walked into the examination room.

He told her that he would be getting things set up for Jason, who would be in shortly to take her physical examination (their compromise to ensure that Nate wouldn't screw anything up, like taking her blood pressure or other data they collected), and followed the intern's directions carefully about how to safely wheel the giant light over to where she sat on the examination table and plug it in.

She flipped her long, wavy hair over her shoulders and answered his greeting and explanations with short, pleasant sentences. Her voice was deeper

than he'd imagined it would be from her vocalizations. Nate was even more uncomfortable than he'd thought he would be. It wasn't until she shut her eyes against the light that he regained some of his resolve to say what he planned on saying to her. But instead, she was the one who led the way.

"I don't really buy this part of the experiment." She smiled. It was a friendly smile but only a shadow of her nighttime bliss. "I'm in the sun for hours every day all summer for work, and it's never made much of a difference for me. If anything, my husband says I thrash around even more in summer months."

Her eyes were still closed, so Nate didn't bother to hide his relief at the opening she'd given him for what he really wanted to say. "So, if you don't mind me asking, why are you in this trial? I mean, um." He stumbled when she opened her eyes and looked directly at him. "I've seen you sleep. Your manifestations aren't violent, in fact, quite the opposite. I've never seen anyone look so happy, so peaceful in their sleep. It's beautiful. Is that really something you want to lose?"

She laughed sharply and leaned forward on her tawny arms. "Are you serious? You think I want to spend my nights swimming around, backhanding my husband if he's brave enough to try to sleep in the same bed as me? Do you think it's fun to wake up hitting the floor and be out of work for a week because I've sprained my wrist?"

"I'm sorry." Nate stomach churned as if something had gone sour in it or died or was fighting to escape. He looked nervously over his shoulder at the door, hoping her voice hadn't raised high enough to reach Jason in the hallway. "I really am. I have sleep problems too, and the last thing I wanted to do was make light of yours. I just thought—" Nate broke off, wondering if he should just get up and leave. But the thought of going back home to the bed he wouldn't be able to sleep in kept him talking. "I just thought you looked so happy. It made me wonder what it felt like for you."

Her body relaxed back from the aggressive way she'd been leaning towards him. She looked tired, and Nate felt the same.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"No, it's alright." She shook her head, and some of her hair fell forward over her shoulder. "Actually, I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that, you were just asking a question. My little girl just started sleeping in a big girl bed?" Her sentence trailed up, requesting understanding. "She has nightmares. Not night terrors or anything, but they wake her up and she comes into our room wanting to get in bed with her mommy." One of her long fingers worried a crack in the vinyl exam table. "And I lie there with her, holding her, afraid to go back to sleep. Afraid to hurt her. Once she's asleep, I move to the couch or her bed, but I can't be there for her if she wakes up again."

Nate nodded. He felt like a heel. "I'm sorry," he said for a third time. It didn't sound any better than it had the first.

“No, really. It’s alright.”

Nate was halfway to the door before he realized he hadn’t asked her about the thing he’d wondered most. He turned back to see she’d already shut her eyes again against the rays of the polychromatic polarized lamp. “Why swimming?”

She laughed, this time a softer sound. Her eyes remained shut when she answered. “Isn’t that listed in my case history? I’m a mermaid. At the Weeki Wachee Mermaid show. Every summer, two shows a day Thursday through Sunday. I’m even on the postcards.” She smiled and it was her beatific nighttime smile. Her performance smile, Nate now realized. “If you have a daughter, you should bring her. Little girls love mermaids.”

Nate’s mouth moved, trying to shape a response, but he could find none. So he nodded again and quietly shut the door.

* * *

It was almost three p.m. by the time Nate got home. He didn’t have to be at work for another six hours, but he was too wired to fall asleep. He sat in his car for a while, trying to decide whether to go inside or keep driving. Instead he found himself on Elia’s porch, quietly tapping on her door in case she was still asleep.

“Hey.” Surprise colored her voice when she opened and saw him standing there. “You look awful. Are you alright?”

“Yeah. No. Well, mostly alright.” Nate always forgot he was a full head and a half taller than her. He felt huge looming over her in the doorway.

“Well, come in.” She turned and walked back to her kitchen, rightly assuming he would shut the door and follow. Something looked different about Elia. Nate couldn’t figure out what until he realized that this was what she looked like at the beginning of her day, when her ponytail was still smooth and her movements alert. “I’m making breakfast. Are you a bacon and eggs man?”

“Yes.” He sat at her kitchen table while she bustled around. She cursed when a yolk broke and hissed threats when a grease spatter burned her bare arm. This relaxed Nate because it helped him recognize his nighttime Elia in this breakfast-cooking day-person. If she’d asked him what was bothering him, he might even have told her, but asking probing questions wasn’t the way between them. Instead she sat down with her plate across from him, and they ate. When they were done, she tapped her fork nervously against her plate a few times before carefully putting it down. She slouched down in her chair the way she did every night, but it felt intentional, like a pose, this time.

“Last night, when you asked me about pretending to be a mermaid, I had a story I wanted to tell you. I just didn’t feel like telling it right then, you know?”

Nate nodded. He turned sideways in his chair so that he could lean against the wall instead of the puny back of the chair.

“You’re going to laugh, but I used to pretend to be a manatee.”

“A manatee?” As predicted, Nate laughed. “What, you pretended to be gray and blubbery?”

“Manatees are beautiful,” Elia protested. “No, really. When you see a picture of them, they look like awkward, thirteen-foot-long, fat monsters. But, have you ever seen one move underwater?”

Nate shook his head.

“Oh, Nate.” Her face lit up. “When I was ten, my dad took me—just me, without my mom or baby sister—to the Three Sisters part of the Crystal River. In the cold weather, the West Indian Manatees migrate up this spring-fed river because it’s warm there. And in this one spot in all of North America, tourists and kids are allowed to stick a plastic snorkel in their mouths and climb into the water with this endangered species.”

Elia leaned forward with her elbows on the table, eyes bright. “There I was, floating with my butt poking up through the surface of the water, awkwardly kicking my flippers, and I see this shape. Its gray is hard to distinguish from the blue of the river at first. It looks like part of the water, like the water is alive and coming toward me, fast. I freeze, not kicking or breathing, and this manatee, the beautiful, graceful creature, glides right up in front of me. It’s everything I’m not underwater, no awkward elbows and knees poking out, just smooth, rippling lines of easy movement. I see it, and I’m in love. I’m still terrified, but so in love with it right then. The only pets I’d ever had were fish, so I was used to loving things that couldn’t love me back, but I was so enthralled with this manatee hovering in front of me that I reached my hand out. It didn’t swim away. Instead, it clapped my hand between its flippers and pulled me towards it. I freaked, sure that it was going to eat me, so I ripped my hand away and swam back to the boat. I refused to get back in the water, even after the captain told me that the manatee was probably trying to bring my hand in for a belly rub.” She leaned back in her chair, signaling her story was done.

Something in her face told Nate this story was about more than manatees, but he wasn’t sure what. “Did you ever go back?”

“No.” Elia’s lips thinned. “But it’s my favorite memory of my dad. Driving out there, just the two of us, then him not questioning why I got out of the water so fast, just telling me how brave I’d been to get in at all. Maybe that’s why I loved manatees so much after that. Or maybe I just felt guilty for swimming away, and I was trying to rewrite the memory into a happier story. I really don’t know.” Elia pulled in a breath and held it in for a moment before continuing. “He died two months ago. My dad.”

Nate nodded in sympathy. As if to say, yes, life causes us grief. Yes, I know this. He realized that two months ago was when he’d first seen her on her

porch. Short-term insomnia was common after the death of a family member; if Elia's father hadn't died, he probably never would have met her.

Then he realized what she was really telling him. Two months ago was when she'd first invited him into her bed. She'd been grieving the entire time he'd known her. It was unsettling. He'd always sort of thought of them as two of a kind. Two people who worked all night and still didn't want to go to bed. Two people who told stories about everything but themselves. Two people who were emotionally stunted enough to be sleeping with each other for two months without ever really talking about what it meant. Loneliness welled up inside Nate at the idea that this likeness might be a temporary condition. He nodded again.

"Today I endangered my whole career by talking to one of my sleep study participants."

"Why? I mean, why did you do it?"

"I can't sleep." The words felt hopelessly insufficient. Nate dropped his forehead onto the table, feeling defeated at trying to explain before he'd even really begun. "I'm groggy and out of it at work. The only time I feel fully awake is when I know I should be asleep. And then, this woman joins my study, and she looks so happy when she dreams. I felt like she was the first person ever who could just show me how to do it, how to sleep. But then the study starts working and she stops acting out her dreams and I stop being able to sleep, so I went in to talk to her. As if she really were some sleep guru and could help me. And not only do I find out that she was actually in the control group with the fluorescent lamps—meaning the only reason the manifestation of her disorder calmed down was from a placebo effect—I also find out her dreams aren't even really happy, she just smiles a lot at her work. I feel like such an idiot. Not for going in to talk to her, though that was blindingly stupid as well, but for building this whole thing around her in the first place."

"Well, yeah." Elia sounded amused.

Nate rolled his head to look up at her. "Thanks a lot."

"But so what? Sometimes we really need to believe in something. You needed to believe you could sleep, and so you found a way to do it." She smiled. "The question is, now that you've figured out that the woman was your placebo, can you figure out a way to believe you can sleep without her?"

Nate frowned. What she was asking felt impossible. Tantamount to asking someone with a genetic disease if they could just stop being sick.

"And if not," Elia continued, "can you find a less staggeringly stupid placebo to work for you instead? You know, one not in direct conflict with your livelihood. You perverse ass."

Nate laughed, sitting back upright in his chair. "Did you know they think that manatees are why people believed in mermaids? I mean, that they were what sailors were really looking at when they thought they were seeing mermaids?"

“Yeah.” Elia smiled a little skeptically, but let the change of topic go. “Like unicorn myths coming from people seeing wild horses running on the beach and then finding a narwhal horn.”

“Have you heard the theory about dragons though?” Nate was the one leaning forward enthusiastically now. “They think that cavemen would come across a python that had just eaten an entire antelope or something, carry it back to their cave or camp or whatever, drop it in front of their fire to cook, and all the hydrogen that had been building up inside the snake from the decomposing antelope would burp out of the snake and be ignited by the campfire.”

Elia laughed, her eyes crinkling up into a happy squint. She was dark and funny and beautiful, and he was why she was smiling.

“Do you want to go back there?” Nate looked at his phone. It was five hours until he had to be at work. “Right now. We could drive to Crystal River. It’s only, what? An hour or so away? We could go, stay for two hours, and still be back an hour before I had to go to work.”

Elia’s face pursed up, but not unhappily. “Hmm, maybe. I don’t know. Let me do the dishes, and I’ll think about it.”

“Think about it,” Nate said. He blinked and felt a reluctance to open his eyes again. “While you do, I’m just going to lie down on your couch for a minute.”

“Go for it. I mean, definitely don’t offer to do the dishes for me or anything.”

“I won’t.”

A dishrag hit Nate on the back as he exited the kitchen. The light was dim in the living room, and the bonded leather of the couch was more velvety than the real thing. He fell asleep with his legs dangling off the side so his shoes wouldn’t dirty the cushions. He didn’t wake up when Elia pulled off his shoes and tucked an afghan around his feet or when she left the house to go to work. But when his phone rang, and he answered, assuring the Sleep Center’s receptionist that he was on his way, just stuck in traffic, his body remembered the feeling of her hands on him. It felt the warmth of the sun on his face when he stepped outside and closed his eyes for one last long moment against the bright of the day.