

The Sleep Story / James Mechem

This is a story for myself and for persons who can't sleep. It should keep them awake or put them to sleep, either of which should be worth something.

My name is Hopi. I talk in the first, second, and third persons. I hope you can get used to that. I have a few readers I correspond with and see regularly. I would like you to become one. Write me when you can't sleep. I want no other readers. Not for this story. This story is for insomniacs only.

It's not designed for you. If it were designed to put you to sleep, I'm sure it wouldn't. You're tired of all those devices, because none of them work. You have to be bored to sleep. If I succeed too well with this, it will keep you up and that won't do. Either I bore you to sleep or I make you fight it.

You don't have to worry as long as you have me around. You can look forward to the night with comfort. Just pick up old Fred. I've got plenty more for you, so you don't have to worry. If you'll just buy this one.

I don't want a beatnik audience, or any other kind of audience but a club of insomniacs.

I'll be your private Scheherazade. Expect nothing from me and I'll expect nothing from you. Look forward to a year of good nights.

No strings attached. I demand nothing from you except concentration one moment and patience the next. This will do something for you. You're part of the book.

My one problem remains to get it through the hands of a publisher. To get it through the hands of a reader. My only hope is to find an insomniac reader and an insomniac publisher, both looking for something to read, except work.

Asleep yet? Fight it. I think you should set yourself to read ten pages a night religiously. Even if it keeps you awake.

Please don't feel I have any sympathetic understanding of insomniacs. I'm not that kind of person. I don't know what it is not to be able to sleep. If I can't sleep I get up and do something worthwhile.

No—I won't pamper you. I'll repeat myself—but that's all in my bag of tricks. I'll repeat myself and repeat myself and repeat myself. It may help you to find sleep.

And so I am writing to myself and to a world of imaginary insomniacs. And to all you other good people. Just follow the old sandman, Hugo Hopi.

Your logical little minds have trouble following my jumps. That's all to the good. Just follow the old sandhog. Slogging it out, every step of the way, in the old familiar ways. Just follow the whole sandhog.

But I have no sympathy for you. Only a workable knowledge and con-

tempt for your dilemma. You poor people out there. What did you ever do to deserve me? Wake up and fight like human beings. Do your exercises! One, two, one, two. You've got seven more pages to go through. Don't worry, I'll keep you posted. You'd get sore as hell if I didn't. That's what I'm counting on. You couldn't care less. The feeling is mutual. I can't care how you feel. You've got a chore ahead of you and I'm going to make it difficult for you. You've got to adopt a religious attitude.

Just follow old Fred. The sandhog king. Hugh Hopechild, guardian of the deep. Catch me in a clearing sometime, Fanchon.

You'll learn the names of the characters soon enough. I can't be concerned about naming them. It would bore you. (You don't want that.)

I set a little trap to get you to reading. I'm not about to bore you. I'm going to set off some Roman candles very shortly. Fanchon walks in on two feet and slinks around. Dallas wanders by and lifts a finger. Greta disrobes and lies in her black hair. Old Fred steps gingerly among them, Hugo the hopeful.

Riva the Rich steps down from a ladder and giggles delightedly. Robbie gooses her.

"Fanchon always did love an orgy," Galanna in her smooth and silken girdle giggles.

Greta is accustomed to brushing the black hair from her eyes. Fanchon is habitually pulling her lip over her teeth. Galanna throws herself about with abandon.

Dallas flicks at his cigarette, shaking in his fingers, and barks a few garish words of mawkish sentiment. Fred Hopi bites his hand and looks thoughtful.

Riva the Rich combs her blonde tresses. Della, slim in jeans, looks soulfully out at her cigarette smoke. Fanchon stands up and swings her hips. "Let's get with it," she shouts.

A bunch of beatniks. How did I ever get mixed up with this crowd, I ask myself in a quiet corner where Dallas finds me brooding.

And so the real test of your sleepless indiscrimination comes into play. The stage is set, the characters introduced after all.

There's Della, gentle soul.

Fanchon, bitter clown.

Dallas, maudlin teenager.

Robbie, sorrowful little mother.

Riva the Rich, burning icicle.

Greta, hopeless newlywed.

Galanna, a nymphomaniac.

And little old Fred, your leader, friend and sandman, spinner of tales—your cross to bear for five more pages tonight.

Who have I left out? Yourself, an insomniac with indiscriminate tastes and a hatred and prisoner of commitment.

I'll introduce you to some more tomorrow. This is enough for one night's dreams. Wait till I drop into nineteen pages of cataloging—then you'll know what patience and boredom are! Wait till I start reciting nonsense from the back of my head. New friends, you have something to look forward to.

Greta rises from the grave, her black hair streaming in front of her white and transparent face. "The ghost of Ouled Nail," she cries in a small voice. And dips back into the green earth.

Sleep, my gentle ones!

Galanna's girdle has slipped a fur piece. Fanchon retrieves it. Dallas begins to sing. Della looks down her nose. Robbie winks at Riva Rich. The whole show is beginning to roll. Back and forth. Fanchon is humming a melody. Dallas chants beside her. The cacophony of sound increases.

Galanna has now stripped from her girdle and stands in wonderment. Hugo the hogwinder is making strange noises in the corner, whimpering to himself. Fred looks out of his own eyes. He stands up to refill his drink and falls on the floor beside Fanchon. They begin quietly to wrestle. Greta tries to interfere. She jumps on Fred and holds him down. Fanchon is willing to help. But Greta, hair swinging in front of her face, snarls obscenities at Fanchon, who crawls backward away.

Sonata appears in the doorway. Yes, I know, reader. It is Sonata Comedy, a genuine little goddess. She has come with Gascar. They are sober.

Meanwhile, little Fred is forming spit in his mouth and throwing it up at Greta with his tongue. She shakes her head this way and that, her black hair shielding her face.

Fanchon gets up to greet the new arrivals. Galanna has disappeared. When she comes in again she is clothed from head to foot in green.

"Here's to the ghost of Ouled Nail—and everything else sacred," little Fred says and spits at Greta. It catches her in a lucky moment on the chin. She wipes it away and Fred struggles up. They roll over and over. Finally they tire. It is an old story. I've told it before. An old dream.

They sober and sit on chairs. Sonata nods to Fred and smiles. Fred grins in several colors. His voice arrives from a bruised throat with a squeak. Gascar nods at Fred and looks with interest at all the players, gets up and goes into the kitchen to talk to Fanchon.

Robbie and Riva Rich come downstairs hand in hand. Della hardly notices. Riva is stoned. She approaches Fred and throws back her arm for a haymaker, swings and clobbers him on the side of the head. Fred goes down, rolls gently from the chair onto the floor.

His face screaming, he rises to his feet. He moves toward Riva Rich, but Robbie intercepts him. She says, "Just hold it, Buster."

Fred leers drunkenly at her. The room spins. He snatches at Robbie's jeans, pinches her pubic hair, pulls her off-balance, and out of the room. He returns, seizes Riva in a choking hammer lock, bites her cheek.

Gascar clears his throat; he moves restrainingly. "This is getting a little out of hand, isn't it?" In the interval, Fred has seen Della's countenance. Her lips curl, her eyes glint.

Riva Rich and Robbie attack Fred. He is backed in a corner. He goes down under blows, kicks; none of it does much damage; it stuns him.

Sonata stares in disbelief. Greta watches from the sofa. Della talks earnestly to Riva and Robbie. She talks them into stopping. They help Fred to his feet; he falls into Robbie's embrace. Robbie cries through her tears. Fred comforts her and kisses Riva Rich. Riva clings to his body with fire. She is crying.

The drunken slobs!

Galanna hands round screwdrivers of vodka and orange. Dallas talks heatedly to Della. The sandmaster talks heatedly to Sonata. Fanchon quizzes Gascar. Galanna peels, unobtrusively, carrying on a stranger's conversation with Riva Rich.

This is just a little story to get you drowsy.

At three, the party picks up speed. Gascar and Sonata leave. Fanchon dances lewdly with Della, Dallas, Galanna and Hugo, your stargazer. Riva and Robbie comment on the dance. Greta lies on her belly.

You've done your stint for tonight. You can go to sleep now.

There is a sound of breakfast and pleasant but sleepy conversation in the kitchen. Fred is greeted warmly by Riva the Rich, the cheerful Robbie, bustling Fanchon and a tender Galanna.

Upstairs, Dallas can be heard using the toilet.

"I've never had a night like that," Fred says.

Riva Rich pulls him out of his chair, throws her arms around his neck and pushes her lips and body against him.

"I can't live like this," he says.

Galanna hands him tomato juice with vodka.

"Drink it!" she orders.

Dallas enters and sits in Fred's lap. Fred gets to his feet. The vodka swims in his head and he sways and falls in Galanna's lap. Greta laughs as she walks in and chooses Dallas.

And you, reader: Did you sleep well last night? After your ten gentle pages? Back with us tonight? With the drunken bums? Irresponsible dervits?

Their drunken brawl continued through the day. The vodka ran out late in the morning. Late in the afternoon, Fanchon and Robbie and Galanna fixed a meal. It sobered them.

When that was done, they told personal stories of their lives. Each admitted to a loneliness and wished for spiritual communion.

Every sin was confessed, every desire expressed and the sinner absolved. It was the marriage of a group.

"But we'll pay," Hugo the moralizer remonstrated.

Riva Rich kissed him on the cheek. "You idiot."

Della kissed him. "Of course not."

Dallas kissed him. "It's your guilt."

"You ass," Greta said.

"When you're with us you don't need to feel guilty obeying our rules," Galanna said.

"We could be arrested," he said.

"Nudism isn't against the law," Riva said.

"Just leave him alone," Robbie said.

"It seems so unreal," Hugo the remonstrator said.

Foolish people, all of you! In your real, real world. In case you came in late, I'm writing for people who can't sleep. That is, in case you're thumbing through. I'm writing for a special market. I'm thinking I can establish a following in this market for boring books.

Meanwhile, back at the party, Riva has just asked if they will ever get together again and Della has made the statement:

"Sex isn't so important as communion of spirit."

Their adorable Della!

They talked through most of the second night, of everything under the sun, sharing experiences. It was all unreal. All of it like a dream. They had supper at midnight.

"Put on your clothes, Galanna. And do a strip for us!" Greta pleaded.

Galanna dressed and stripped. It was the end of the entertainment. Fanchon went through the house and gathered up every blanket she could find and padded the floor with them. The company bedded down. Each in his little cocoon of self. Dreaming their little dreams of the real world outside, doubtless.

Fanchon / James Mechem

Fanchon was lying in the road.

I bent down. "Dimensions, please."

She breathed in my ear for answer.