

UNTITLED

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She awoke suddenly from a deep sleep and screamed. It wasn't a loud, piercing scream. It was somewhere between a shriek and a whimper. She was accustomed to these episodes. Sometimes, the malicious dreams would slowly insert themselves into her slumbering mind, like a spider sliding down a thread. Other times she would jolt awake as though a concealed knife had stabbed her in the stomach. For her, deep sleep offered the most rest but also the most terror. She might awake the next morning feeling more or less ready to stand against the forces in her miserable life. But when some black angel decided to curse her with a nightmare, the next day would serve her misery with a side of fatigue. Sleep was her master, and she was at its mercy.

She needed to get some fresh air. She threw her covers off, pulled her jacket around her shoulders, and headed through the back door, being careful not to let the screen door bang behind her. She didn't want the other people in the house to know that she was out there. The other people were not her family; they were her temporary family. This was her first night there. They seemed nice enough, but she knew that before long, a thin, bespectacled man with a clipboard would pay them a visit. At all her old houses, someone like that would come and then a week later or so later, she would be put back in the children's home. That was just the way it worked.

This autumn evening was chillier than most, but she didn't care. Her body had suffered more than cold. The short grass tickled her feet as she crossed the yard to sit down on the weathered, wooden picnic table; she hugged her legs to her chest. As she did, she got a splinter in her pinkie toe, but she just plucked it out and looked up at the sky. There was no moon tonight, but the stars were glittering in their icy brilliance. They were brighter here than in the city.

She noticed a faint light in an open upstairs window of a distant house up the street. A light that late could only mean one thing. Even though she was only thirteen, she was no dummy. She had been around. In fact, that's what the night terrors were usually connected to. Her past haunted her at night. She had to leave her real dad and her third foster home because of the things that happened to her. The other houses were just "unsanitary" or "unfit for a child" or any number of things. Her mom was dead.

She had stopped feeling long ago. She felt numb to the cold, numb to the splinter, numb to the thin man with glasses and to all the people who had ever been in her life. She was hollow, but she didn't know anything else. Hollow and numb were normal.

Perhaps her scary dreams were her mind's way of filling the void, of making her feel something. She didn't know this; the thought never crossed her mind. She just wished the nightmares would go away.

The porch light switched on, and the back door opened. The lady came out in her robe and slippers. “Willow?” she said. “Would you like a pair of socks?”

Willow said nothing. The lady just stood there for a while. Willow wished she would go away. Eventually, the lady walked up to the picnic table. Out of the corner of her eye, Willow noticed that she came gracefully and quietly; she had a purposeful step, as if giving those socks to Willow was the most important thing in her world. The lady placed them on the edge of the table and said, “You don’t have to put them on. I’ll just leave them here. Please remember to bring them with you when you decide to come in. It’s chilly.” She went back inside, and was sure to close the screen door gently.

After a time, Willow agreed with her. She put on the socks and looked back up at the stars.