



PROMPT: You had developed a habit of sleepwalking. But you weren't alone now — it seemed like the whole town had started sleepwalking at night, too.

Living the Dream

by **Emily Bargo**

I stare down at my body lying in the road eating asphalt. Honestly, while this is better than cramming for my physics exam, it's a close second.

For the past month, I've developed the embarrassing habit of sleepwalking. Which usually, I end up in the dorm common room or in the bathroom flipping the light switch on and off. Yet, lately, leaves stuck on my socks and an open window reveal I've been traversing further. The idea that the whole town joined me on my midnight strolls was crazy until I fell asleep with my sneakers on and the laces untied.

Who knew being awakened from sleepwalking could separate your soul from your body?

I sure didn't.

A shock jolts up my spine as my roommate walks straight through me. He doesn't see me, and neither does the rest of the town. Like zombies, the whole town shuffles down the road drooling and moaning, eyes closed. Whatever, something weird like this was bound to happen this year anyway.

Before my English teacher steps on my physical face, I drag my sleeping body onto the sidewalk and prop it up on a garbage can. Jesus, I need to start running again. Freshman fifteen?

More like sophomore thirty.

The mob doesn't move fast, and I catch up to the front. Being the only person conscious in a 100-mile radius is an eerie feeling. I continue to follow for another half hour before we arrive at the dog park near the edge of town. I almost trip again when everyone halts in the middle of the field. The night is quiet except for the heavy mouth breathing of the sleepers. A grinding

noise emanates from the empty, granite fountain, and I sway on my feet as the ground beneath it begins to split open.

In place of the fountain, a spiral staircase descends into the ground. Everyone begins to stumble down the steps in an organized line. Now I'm positive everyone is asleep because the lady with the cat pajamas cut in line at lunch this afternoon. I go through the motion of taking a deep breath and descend into the darkness.

The bottom of the staircase opens up into an enormous cavern. An opaque, white lake dominates the center and onyx marble bridges and pathways form an intricate web throughout the grotto. Luminous, violet algae glow from the ceiling and red poppies entangle pillars lining the sides. The flowers' intoxicating smell relaxes my tensed shoulders.

The sleepwalkers disperse and stand slumped over, waiting for something. Enchanting music spills from unknown sources, echoing throughout the chamber. It sounds familiar and soothing, but when I try to focus on the lyrics it becomes muffled gibberish. In random synchronization, the horde begins to sway and dance to their own beat, eyes still shut.

Presiding in the middle of the pearly lake is an onyx marble gazebo covered with thick ivy and more poppies. I think it's time to get to the bottom of this nightmare.

Worn steps ascend to the gazebo flanked on both sides by small waterfalls. Under the darkness of the dome, a golden throne occupies the space as its centerpiece. My focus shifts to the man reclining on it. He wears long robes of fluctuating reds and purples. Two wings sprout from his temples and fold over his eyes.

"Uh, sir?"

He tilts his head in my direction, and something about his mannerisms reminds me of a condescending parent.

"Yeah you, creepy guy," I say louder.

"That is no way to address a god, boy." His voice is quiet and sonorous.

"Well, first of all, I'm an atheist." I take a step closer and wave my hand in front of his still covered face. "Second of all, I'm sleep deprived and stressed out because I've been studying the conservation of linear momentum all night."

He smiles up at me, and it's like he can read my thoughts.

“What must possess this mortal, child specter to speak to Hypnos god of sleep with such disrespect?”

“God of sleep, huh? You must have a lot of worshippers nowadays.”

I pace back and forth, my hands sweaty even though they're not real.

“Well if you're a god, can you put my soul back into my body? I kind of tripped while I was sleepwalking, and not saying it's your fault but you were the one who made me sleepwalk in the first place.”

He doesn't respond right away.

“And anyways, why kidnap everyone for this?” I gesture towards the still erratically dancing sleepers.

Hypnos sits upright and leans on his knees, steeping his hands together.

“You try spending thousands of years alone, everyone asleep while you're awake.”

“Ever heard of different time zones man?”

“Time is relative, I am not bound by petty human ideals!”

I roll my eyes and press for more answers.

“Forget it! Can you help me or not?”

Hypnos sighs and lounges back into the crook of the throne. He rubs his chin as if contemplating a difficult problem.

“If you retrieve three items for me, I will owe you a favor.”

“Deal,” I say, holding out my hand to shake his, but when he doesn't move to reciprocate it, I awkwardly cross my arms.

“Listen closely, I will not repeat myself,” he leans forward conspiratorially. “I need you to get me the moon in a bottle, nature's casket, and the tears of a weeping willow.”

“Jesus, can't I just, I don't know, mow your lawn or buy you groceries?”

“Wrong god to ask.”

I take that as my cue to go.

Pushing past a large crowd at the base of the gazebo's stairs, I find a bench and lay down. My heart races from the stress of needing to do something, anything at all, but confusion and fear of failure weigh my limbs down. If only I could sleep.

My view of the heavenly lights above me is obstructed by a butt. A greasy, middle-aged man sits on the bench and right through my face.

"Ah gross," I say sitting up and snapping out of my daze.

"Wooooaaaah, ghost," he says, words slurred by sleep or drunkenness or a combination of both, and I'm not even sure how he knows I'm here considering his eyes are still closed.

He looks away from me for a second then turns around and notices me again.

"Hey man, you see a ghost around here?"

"Nope."

I stand up to leave before I have to hold another conversation. He goes to snatch my wrist but when his fingers clasp air, he resorts to patting the seat beside him. Moaning, I oblige and sit back down.

"What do you want?"

"Woah, what's the rush blue guy? Why aren't you out dancin'?" His warm, sour breath hits my face.

"Why aren't you?" I snap back. "Look I am in a rush. I have a big test tomorrow, and if I fail, I will never get into grad school which means I'll never become an astrophysicist and contribute to society."

I take a deep breath. "So if you don't mind, I have to go put the whole freaking moon in a bottle."

I get up once again, and once again, he reaches out for my wrist. This time though, his hand doesn't phase through. Jumping up off the bench, he pulls me out into the mass of dancing bodies.

“Loosen up blue guy!”

Passed from person to person, I’m forced into a merry-go-round dance unlike anything from the past 200 years. Their arms flail and feet sweep in a coordinated, aimless pattern. The music, which was before soothing, swells with an intense crescendo. My muscles tense up as my panic to get out rises and their hot, sweaty masses get closer. Someone pushes me into the middle of their weaving ring, and all at once, I relax. Outside of the chaos, I can see unity and allure.

Something glints off the lights and shines in my eye. In the oversized, sweatpant pocket of the greasy man is a whisky bottle. I smack my forehead.

“Moonshine, that pretentious jerk!”

Running up behind the man, I steal the bottle of moonshine and sprint off towards the main pathway before he notices. Now that I know the items I’m retrieving are in riddles, my confidence is restored.

I slow down to a walk once I round the curve and end up in a garden with a rectangular pond down the middle surrounded by pillars. I keep the glass bottle clutched tightly in my hands while I pace along the pond’s bank.

“Hmm, casket.” I kick a stone into the water. “Can’t be an actual one, too obvious.”

Despite knowing what strategy I need to take, the answers won’t come to me. I plop down and sit in the grass, my adrenaline acquired confidence gone. If this was a math problem, I wouldn’t have an issue. My reflection in the dark water stares back at me with its unnatural aura. What will everyone do when I’m missing tomorrow? Will anyone even notice? Jesus, the only people who will care that I’m in a coma propped up against a garbage can is my parents. I’ve spent so much time perfecting my grades, I never bothered to make friends along the way.

“You too, huh?” I say to a dead bouquet of poppies next to me.

“No stinkin’ way.”

The shriveled flowers are in a small, clay goblet.

“Good enough for me!” I dump the flowers out and wash the goblet in the pond. “Two down, one to go.”

I figure if I need a weeping willow's tears I should find a weeping willow first. Willows tend to be near water, so I head over to the bank of the lake. It takes close to an hour, but I walk half the perimeter. Nothing but dead grass grows by the water's edge, and I give up after some of the water splashes onto my foot leaving a burn. I decide to head back to the gazebo where I started and maybe ask Hypnos for another clue.

Along a diagonal shortcut, a marble tile shifts beneath my feet, and then another and another. The pathway collapses and my stomach drops as I roll down into a pit. Luckily, the moonshine bottle and goblet remain intact. I come to rest at the edge of a grassy plot. It stretches for several feet before it plunges into a steep cliff. At the edge grows a willow tree with lavender bark and crimson leaves. Incandescent fireflies flutter through the willow branches in lethargic circles.

I get up and expect a headache or scratches, but my new form leaves me unharmed. It seems selective in what it physically interacts with at any given moment. I leave the moonshine and goblet at the base of the dirt slope. Walking towards the tree, I step on a twig causing it to snap. The fireflies warm glow begins to turn an irritating red and their flight transforms into an agitated, buzzing swarm. Diving, they arrow for me. I fling myself to the ground and cover my head with my hands. They must be magic because their teeth gouge into my skin like hot needles. I stumble upright and wave my hands to smack them away. Looking behind my shoulder, I rush forward and the willow branches slice into my face as I pass beneath the canopy. At the last second, I remember the cliff, but it's too late and the ground crumbles and breaks off along with me. The wind surges past me and my body becomes numb. Grasping for air, I manage to snag onto one of the sprouting roots of the tree. My shoulders strain with the effort of holding on. The swarm nose-dives over the cliff's edge after me, but in their commotion they keep diving further down the abyss, not noticing me clinging onto the root.

After a lot of grunting and heaving, I collapse onto the grass. I crouch up and lean against the tree's trunk. My hands come away from the bark sticky. A few small drops of amber fluid leak out between the cracks in the bark.

"Sap, of course."

I jog back to the dirt slope and retrieve the goblet. Using a rock, I pry back a bit of the bark and allow the sap to flow into the goblet. Once it's filled to the brim, I retrieve the moonshine and climb up the slope back onto the pathway. I take my time heading back to the gazebo lingering around the still energetic sleepers and their never-ending party of the night.

I pause on the steps and look back once more before I take a deep breath.

“Took you long enough, I was beginning to think you had given up,” Hypnos says, still smugly reclined in his throne.

I hold the moonshine bottle in one hand and the goblet filled with sap in the other and lightly shake them. He beckons me forward with a wave of his hand. Taking them from me, he wastes no time pouring the moonshine into the goblet of sap. Using his hand to cover the top of the goblet, Hypnos shakes it up and then chugs the mixture like a frat boy.

“Did you seriously just force me to make you a cocktail?”

He arches his eyebrows as if to suggest the idea of him doing work is ridiculous.

“So I suppose I owe you a favor now?” He tosses the goblet behind him and it cracks on the marble floor. “I know you’re going to ask for the unity of your soul and body, but out of tradition, I will remind you that you may ask for anything.”

“I want to stay here.”

He sputters. “Come again?”

“I want to stay here. I’ve done more living in one night than I have my entire life.”

Taking a step forward, I cross my arms. “Besides weren’t you the one who said you were lonely?”

“Hmm, a disrespectful nerd, I suppose it could be worse.”

Honestly, I can definitely say this is better than cramming for my physics exam.