

Short Story Contest

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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.

The Sleepwalkers

by Margy Ragsdale

I shouldn't have been surprised; ever since the pandemic hit, everyone's sleep patterns have changed. It's just that no one thought covid-19 would also cause a pandemic of somnambulism—you know, sleepwalking.

I've been a sleepwalker all my life. From the time I was able to stand on my own two feet, those two feet have been taking me on moonlit strolls out of bed, to the kitchen, the living room, sometimes even out of the house, without me being awake or aware. I have showered, cooked, cleaned, and eaten—and once I even drove—while seemingly completely asleep. I accepted it when my parents, sleepover friends, dorm mates and others told me I had been walking and talking in my sleep again, and frankly, I felt a little special, having the ability to navigate the world wide asleep. But then the pandemic hit and I wasn't special at all any more.

I don't know why I'm bothering to write this down, it's stupid. Everyone knows what happened, and maybe even why, but I'm still processing the whole thing and this is how I process. Write it down, write it all down.

Okay. Approximately seventeen lifetimes ago, we first read about “novel coronavirus COVID19”, whatever. Seems it hit a few cruise ships, but what's so new about that? You couldn't get me on one of those germ incubators on a good year, so no skin off my nose. But, damn, these poor people stuck in their cabins for weeks and weeks and their poor stewards and servers and cleaners and cooks and whoever—they were all stuck on these ships and no one would let them into port and it was crazy. And people were getting really sick, too, some of them even dying on these cruise ships, and it was starting to look like the only way you could leave one was in a body bag.

But you know what happened after that, it hit Washington state and people were like, Who cares? Old people in nursing homes anyway, and really? Washington state is practically Canada, no skin off my nose. (Yeah, I know, I got a lot of skin that isn't being rubbed off my nose, shut up. My journal, my nose.)

But it didn't stop there, of course. It spread rapidly in New York, L.A., Miami, all the port cities, the big cities, the "who cares, they're not real Americans like us" kind of cities. Until it was real Americans like us kinds of cities and towns and villages and well, pretty much everywhere. And at first we were all like, well, at least it's not as bad as Italy, until it was a lot worse than Italy and then we just stopped even looking at what the rest of the world was going through because now it was time to buy toilet paper and bake bread and get a mask or don't get a mask and then to get into fights with strangers about the damn masks. All that happened. Maybe not in that order, I don't know. I don't know anything about order anymore.

Because, did I mention, we got hit with this damn pandemic and back in March everyone stopped going in to work, we all just started working from home and it's pretty damn weird because my job was mostly filling out travel paperwork for my colleagues and helping with event planning and now there isn't any traveling going on and there aren't any events to help with because I don't know anything about Zoom anyway and I don't even have a webcam, either, and now my timesheet is X hours a day of me filling out my timesheet for the work of filling out my timesheet and it's about to be cut to X minus Y hours a day of me filling out my timesheet with the work of filling out my timesheet and I'll take it while I've got it and

Maybe I got sidetracked there.

But that's just it, isn't it? Nothing feels linear anymore, it's just a slow-motion series of small events while waiting for bigger events, and meanwhile you hope you don't get sick.

Anyway. The sleepwalking.

Since the pandemic, people's sleep habits have changed and so have their dreams. People are having weird dreams or boring dreams about work, waking up in a panic because in the dream they didn't socially distance or they forgot their masks. I've had those dreams, haven't you? But here's the really weird thing for me: I'm no longer sleepwalking.

When I was a little kid I never thought about my sleepwalking, I just didn't. Mom and Dad didn't make a big deal about it; if they were up or heard me when I roamed the house in my sleep they would just sort of herd me back to bed and that was that. It just wasn't a big deal. But of course, once I got old enough for sleepovers and my friends found out, they thought it

was pretty funny to watch me do my thing. Sometimes they'd stay up just to see what I might do, or they'd see if I could play a video game in my sleep (yes); I was major entertainment in the ten year old crowd. But the novelty wore off and we outgrew sleepovers anyway, so again, no big deal. Same thing in college, only it was eighteen year old dorm mates who were surprised to find me cleaning the suite bathroom in my sleep. Whatever. I mean, yeah, it was good for an icebreaker or something, *I'm a poli-sci major and a sleepwalker, what about you?* that sort of thing, I guess. A little unusual. But no big deal.

Until now. Because now I'm awake all night and I can't sleep and I'm not sleepwalking anymore which is fine but it's so weird because now everyone else is sleepwalking and it's weirding me out.

Why are they sleepwalking????

It's the pandemic, I know it's the pandemic, everything is the pandemic.

So, okay, I can't sleep, I mean, I try, I lie down at night and I get just right in bed and I'm fine and I do fall asleep, I do, at first, but then like an hour after I lie down I start having weird dreams about how I'm supposed to be sleeping. I mean, like how I should be physically positioning myself to properly sleep. Like, last night it was some weird, stupid thing about me being a s'more and my legs were the graham crackers and the sheets and blankets were the marshmallows but I didn't have any chocolate to put on my legs and it wasn't right, I couldn't sleep unless there was chocolate to put on top. So I woke up. And I'd go back to sleep again and then I'd be the stupid s'more and there wasn't any chocolate and I'd wake up again. That's what my nights are like. So some nights I just can't do it, I just can't handle how stupid and pointless and ridiculous these dreams are. I mean they're not even nightmares, they're just stupid and irritating. So I get up.

Usually I get on the computer, read the news or see if anyone is up on Facebook. That's how I first found out about the sleepwalking thing, on Facebook. A friend posted something on Facebook—I can't even remember what it was, but it was just really weird. Something like, "but the toys are too", something that just didn't make any sense—I mean, it wasn't even good vague-booking. So I commented on the post like, Huh? and my friend and I started commenting back and forth, but he was saying such weird shit that I just figured he was messing with me, that it was some kind of new Facebook thing, like having a conversation with just emojis or just repeating the last seven texts you got or something, you know how they do. So, okay, fine, whatever. Then the next day I got back on there and saw he was on there, so I messaged him and asked him what the deal was and he didn't know what I was talking about

so I told him to go to his home page and look at the post and he did and he freaked out, like he thought he had had a stroke or something, but I pointed out he probably wouldn't have been able to type that well.

Anyway, he wasn't the only one. Lots of folks were finding themselves quite surprised to see these weird posts they had made, with pictures of baking they had done but didn't remember doing, and crafts they didn't remember creating, and places they had visited in the middle of the night, apparently obviously. Until eventually, it was what we have now.

I don't understand it. I mean, of course I understand it, it's the damn pandemic. People are scared, they're frustrated, they want things to be normal. So now, every night, they have "normal". Now whole towns are filled with sleepwalkers, going about their lives in ways they can't while awake. It was real entertainment when the phenomenon began, just like my sleepwalking was so entertaining to my ten year old buddies. Lots of articles about what was going on and why, no big surprises; it made psychological sense. Actually there were a few surprises, but this was the biggest one for me, that a large percentage of people wear their masks while sleepwalking. I mean, you'd think that if they're sleepwalking to escape Pandemic World and are doing all these things to feel "back to normal", then they wouldn't wear the masks. But they do. Weird. I don't know. I guess we're just getting used to it, but I just miss... everything. Even sleepwalking.

How long has it been now?

I'm really tired.

I'm going to go to bed now, and maybe I'll fall asleep and stay asleep, and maybe I'll get out of bed and put on my shoes and take a long walk in the cool night air, still asleep, still sleeping, sleeping all night, sleeping all night long.