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Sleep Walking

by Victoria Cooper

His eyes followed her move around the riffled landscape of the bed. He never intended this to happen. Dreams are what you wake up from, he told himself.

They met at an unlikely marketing conference, he thought he would be at home sitting blankly while muted on a laptop screen. Somehow the event had gone ahead, somehow, he had found himself in a cheap motel on the Basingstoke ring road in the summer between lockdowns of 2020.

The usual sweaty palms had been replaced with awkward elbow bumps as he circled the corporate blue of the hospitality suite. It was difficult to mingle in the age of social distancing but that suited him fine.

Then Louise had introduced herself. She was vivacious, witty and unnervingly attractive. He was flattered by her attention and started to enjoy the coffee machine cappuccino. They laughed about the absurdity of the situation; the face masks, the empty seats, all for pointless seminars on end of year figures. He relaxed but sucked in his stomach when he noticed her long tanned legs and the way she threw her auburn hair back as she laughed at his jokes.

It was only at the restaurant, that he noticed her sad almond eyes. She told him about the child she had lost, the pain between her twisting fingers had resonated deeply and slid across the vinyl tablecloth towards him. Her pain obliterated any doubts he had. It had just felt natural they should head to the lift together. As he opened the door he felt her breath on the back of his neck, he knew he had crossed a border and did not want to turn back.

The next morning he felt a knot of pain tighten in his stomach and he wondered if he was sick. Her sleeping face acutely reminded him of the morning before when Tilly and Rose had bounded into their bedroom, trying to wake up their sleeping Daddy.

Unlike then, when he was strangely comforted by their joyful zeal, he now felt hollow and tired.

Their conversation of last night, the intimacy of two strangers alone in a strange world of bright lights and faded furnishings had tricked him into believing he was someone else, someone who did not belong. He was seduced by her naked eagerness for human touch and connection. She kissed him and the dull ache of months of domestic incarceration had melted on his tongue.

Now, as she applied her make up, he stared up at the gilt framed print of the Titanic behind her head. He reached for his phone; the photo of his wife and daughters smiling back at him lit up his face, piercing the muted colours of the room.

Dreams are what you wake up from. He could not remember where he had read that line, but he wished he could still be the somnambulist of before, not the prisoner he felt now.