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## Sleep Rx

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All I want to do is sleep. Breathing heavily as my heart skips beats, I check the clock, realizing that only an hour has passed since my last dream. Awake again for the third time, I'm shivering and drenched in sweat, staring at the blurry, red lines on the clock. Sharp pains slither up my thighs as I stretch to revive my stiff, stuporous legs. Three Ambien are in my system, but they aren't enough to put me down. Stagnant from sleep yet livid from lack of sleep, I struggle to grasp the container of sedatives on the bedside table. Swallowing the fourth dose comforts me as I set down my water, knock over the opened pill bottle, and scatter two dozen tranquilizers across the floor. I rise, force my legs over the side of the bed, and wonder if dispersion equals dependency. The hypnotic drugs that will cure me mirror chalky specks on the floor, due to my blurred vision and the light blocking curtains covering the windows. Several tablets crush underneath my feet as I limp across the room to turn on the light. My legs resemble tree stumps, like I haven't walked for fifty years, like I'm breaking through barbed wire. Did I even sleep at all?

I collect the medicine that had strewn across the floor, then open my bedroom door and enter the kitchen to rehydrate. The bleak, lifeless weather reflects my mood. My morning shift at Brookwood Grille begins at 11 A.M., only three hours away. I walk into the living room to turn on the television and hear the familiar creak in the cold, wooden floor. Noticing my empty pack of cigarettes, I change clothes and exit my apartment, locking the door behind me. While walking down the stairs, I almost slip and fall on the fifth step because of my distorted balance, and my heart skips beats again. Realizing I can't drive due to intoxication, walking becomes my only option. The Chevron rests only a half-mile down the road, so my trip should be safe. I exit through the side door of the building and take a short cut through a vacant alley. The frigid air provides a strange comfort until I enter the gas station to stand in line like a statue. Approaching the counter, I speak my first words of the day:

"Pack of Pall Mall Blues, please."

"Can I get you anything else?" asks the cheerful girl behind the counter.

"Nah, that's it," I reply.

"\$4.40," she says.

I hand her the bills and change and remember a time when these same cigarettes cost less than three dollars. I feel my age, light my first cigarette of the day, and begin my journey home. The smoke entering my lungs provides the first relief since my awakening. My short trip fills me with energy, and as the alley draws near, I regret not walking farther.

Passing the first garbage dumpster in the alley, a man springs out from behind and grabs me. Screaming as he lifts me off the ground, I bite his hand after he tries to cover my mouth. He drops me, and I hit the concrete. My legs shake as I try to rise, noticing that no one else stands nearby. I turn around to face my attacker who corners me next to another dumpster. He stands a foot taller and weighs a hundred pounds heavier than me. A weathered smile shows underneath his disheveled gray and brown hair as his bloody hand pulls a knife from his pocket. He releases the blade from its sheath. I don't stand a chance against him.

"Give me all your money, bitch," he demands. Shaking and dry heaving, I toss my wallet on the ground in front of him. He lines his pockets with my credit cards and six dollars cash and then throws my wallet. He preys upon my fear and points his knife at my face. Refusing martyrdom, I jolt to the edge of the garbage dumpster to sneak past him. Attempting escape, I feel a deep pain in my right thigh which causes me to fall. I cry out in pain as my enemy laughs and rushes towards me. Then, I remember the pepper spray attached to my key ring. I rise up and turn around to mace him in the face. He yells as he wipes off the pepper

spray with the sleeves of his coat and stumbles as he escapes. Face laced from backlash of the mace's spray, I scream and limp towards the entrance of my building. I enter my code at the callbox after punching in the wrong numbers several times. Crying, I approach my apartment, turn the key, and lock the door behind me. After washing my face and searching for a piece of cloth to tie around my thigh, I grab my phone, sit down, and dial 911. I inform the dispatcher of the attack, and she advises me to remain calm and apply pressure to my wound. I try to relax, knowing the paramedics will soon arrive. Exhausted and heavy, I rest my head on the back of the couch, facing a deep sleep. I consider lighting my second cigarette for the day.

I feel a brief moment of peace before waking up in my bed drowning in sweat. Was the attack just a dream? I spring up, open my bedroom door, and stand motionless and confused, examining the living room. I pace silently across the wooden floor towards my window and notice the sun rising behind the static clouds. Horrified, I stare at the bleeding wound from my dream. Someone knocks on my door, and I clench my jaw in nervousness. Opening the door, I encounter another door. Frozen in shock, I can't even breathe. I open the second door to find yet another door. Retreating in terror, I hear a distant, muffled sound that grows louder and mimics foot stomps on the ground. The noise gains momentum and resembles a sledgehammer beating against the outside walls of my apartment.

"Ma'am? Are you okay?"

As I rest on the couch, two paramedics hover over me, checking my vitals. To their right stand two police officers.

"What's going on?" I ask, confused.

"You called us, Ma'am," a paramedic says. "Do you not remember? You were unconscious when we arrived. We broke your door."

"Yeah, I remember now," I respond.

"What's your name?" He asks.

"Emma," I say.

"Ma'am, my name is Harrison; he's Jeff. We're Hall County paramedics."

He points to the other paramedic. Jeff nods. As they both examine the wound on my leg, the two police officers introduce themselves and ask about my encounter. I explain to both Officer Jaxson and Officer Nichols what happened, until Harrison interrupts me.

"Ma'am, you're going into shock," he states. "You need to be taken to Northeast Medical now."

"Okay," I reply.

"You were talking in your sleep when we arrived," Harrison remarks. "Are you taking any medications?"

"Just Ambien," I tell him. "I've had insomnia for most of my life."

"How many per day and what dosage?" He asks.

I hesitate. "Um, about three or four of the ten mg pills a day."

He doesn't respond. They both lift me up onto a stretcher and push me into the hallway, then inside the elevator, then into an ambulance. At the hospital I took twelve stitches. Hours pass. As I lay in bed, Officer Jaxson and another man both enter the room. The second man introduces himself.

"Hi, I'm Dwayne. I'm with Georgia Crisis Line. How are you, Emma?"

"I'm fine," I mutter. "I'm just tired and nervous."

"I received a call from the Hall County Police Department stating that you were having hallucinations," Dwayne continues. He turns and looks towards Officer Jaxson.

“We've notified the landlord of Seven Pines about the incident,” Officer Jaxson says. “He scrolled through the surveillance footage from the cameras overlooking the alley.” He takes a deep breath, like he's about to tell a lie. “Emma, there was no footage of the man you described.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, alarmed.

“There was no man in the alley, Emma. No one attacked you. We saw you leave at the time you stated in the report. Then we saw you come back, walking alone and uninjured.”

“What are you talking about?!” I yell, sitting up and edging my body closer towards them.

“It's true,” Dwayne announces. “You reported that you have been taking four times the recommended daily dose of Ambien. How long have you been on this drug?”

“For about a year,” I answer.

“You've developed a tolerance,” Dwayne asserts. “Withdrawal from Ambien can cause some of these symptoms. I'm sorry, but may I ask if you have experienced any other hallucinations?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I disclose.

“What kind of hallucinations?” Dwayne asks.

“Well, sometimes I think I hear my sister's voice, but my sister has been dead for ten years.”

Dwayne's voice shakes as he asks, “Have you or a family member ever suffered from any mental health disorder?”

“I've had horrible insomnia for years,” I claim. “My mother developed schizophrenia in her early thirties.”

“Do you remember how you received this injury?” Dwayne questions.

“Well, I thought a man attacked me, but now you're saying that you saw nothing on the cameras.”

“Have you experienced any other unusual symptoms lately besides the hallucinations?”

“My legs hurt sometimes. The pain is pretty bad, actually. My back hurts, too. I forget things. I lose things. Um,” I pause. “I almost fell down the stairs earlier today.”

“Well, maybe that's how you hurt yourself,” Dwayne suggests.

I regret not lying to Dwayne as he turns towards Officer Jaxson to whisper something in his ear. My eyes still burn from the backlash of the pepper spray. Or do they burn from lack of sleep?

“Emma, we think that,” Dwayne pauses. “The best thing for you at this point is admission to a crisis stabilization unit. They will be able to further assess you since you appear to be experiencing psychosis.”

“What's a crisis stabilization unit?” I ask, shaking.

“It's a hospital that specializes in psychiatric treatment,” Dwayne replies.

“How long will I be there?”

“Usually three to seven days, but your stay could be longer.”

“I just want to go home,” I growl. I'm fuming. Both of them can probably hear my heart beat. I look down and bite my lip. I feel almost as scared as I felt in the alley earlier. Dwayne pulls out a manila envelope filled with forms.

“You need to go to Laurelwood,” he demands. “You don't have a choice. I'm going to have to fill out a 1013 form.”

“What's a 1013 form?”

“Involuntary admission,” Dwayne says. “We’re concerned about your well-being because you’re experiencing hallucinations. You’ve wounded yourself and can’t remember how. You’re unable to take care of yourself.”

“Why did this happen?” I wail. “I’ve never had any health problems. I just can’t sleep.”

“Sleep deprivation does horrible things to the human body,” he mentions.

My body feels like a thousand miles away from my soul as they escort me to the back seat of a police vehicle. I feel like a criminal, and I don’t know why. I have a thousand questions and no answers. Will this ruin my life? What will my parents think? What will my sister think? What’s happening to me? I’ve never been so afraid. All I wanted to do was sleep.