

Sally Didn't Sleep Here

Karen Rosenbaum

"SALLY SNORES," SAYS ED, and I sink into my shoulders and smile uncomfortably at Gemma and Frank on the couch.

"I don't snore," I say defensively. "I don't even sleep."

"Ho," answers Ed. He leans back into the recliner, so I can see the bottoms of his Birkenstocks.

Gemma emits a half-yawn, then smothers it with a giggle. "Frank could snore up a storm, and I wouldn't know," she says. "Once I'm out, I'm out. Cat walks across my face, kids shriek, throw refrigerators—nothing bothers me."

"There goes my theory," I say. "I thought maybe insomnia was a Mormon thing. Tied in with guilt. Duty. Pioneer legacy. You fall asleep, you fall off the covered wagon. But you don't have it, huh?"

Gemma shakes her head.

I sigh. "I'm jealous. Ed has to have the radio alarm up full blast, but I thought that was because he was a convert. Me—cat door creaks and I'm wide awake."

Ed points at me with his chin. "Before she hits the sack, she wants Rachel, Teddy, me all tucked in. She even lies awake waiting for Homer to come home from his nightly gopher prowling."

I look at Ed and sniff. "I don't think I've had a decent night's sleep since I was five years old," I say to Frank and Gemma. "If then."

"That's highly unusual," says Frank, who is a pediatrician.

"I can't remember before I was five." I slide onto the rug. "But when my folks would drive from L.A. to Salt Lake, they'd drive at night, to avoid the heat, you know, this was before most cars had air-conditioning, and they made my brother a bed on the back seat and me a bed on the back floor—"

"This was also before seat belt laws," Ed interrupts.

"Right. I know I never slept a wink. The whole night I'd keep track of the cars going the opposite direction. I'd hear the click when my dad went from brights to dims and then there would be this pattern on the car ceiling."

"Was this before interstates too?" asks Ed. "Maybe this was before the combustion engine."

"Ho," I say. "And remember naptime in kindergarten? I *never* napped."

"So you didn't sleep." Frank looks almost interested. "Even in more normal circumstances? At home?"

"My mother finally took me to the doctor," I say. "He said to buy me a radio and have me listen to soothing music."

"Did it work?"

"Naw." I stretch out my legs. "The radio gave off enough light for me to read comic books."

We all look at Gemma. She jerks awake and smiles sheepishly. "That was a great dinner," she says. "Can I get your recipe for the lemon pie?"

"Gees, are they boring!" Ed says as he pulls his sweatshirt over his head. "Are *we* that boring?"

"No." I flip on my control for the electric blanket. "We're scintillating. Did you check on Teddy?"

"Sound asleep. Maybe the sleep gene's on the Y chromosome."

"Rachel is more like me. But she'll at least stay at Cindy's till after breakfast. When I used to stay over at a friend's, I'd never even doze. I'd get up about five and come home."

Ed bounces onto the bed, opens his arms, and motions me towards him with a pucker. His kiss slides off my mouth. "What was really awful," I say, "was sharing a twin-size bed with someone. I'd lie stiff as a floor plank, so I wouldn't touch her."

"Who's her?"

"Whoever. My friends. My cousins. And the worst was once at camp when five of us wanted to stay in the same cabin and instead of cots there were only two double beds, and I was considered one of the *little* ones, so I ended up in the middle of a bed with a girl on each side of me." I shudder. "Sometimes they would both roll towards me." I flip over my pillow and mash it against the headboard. "And sometimes they would both roll away from me, and they'd tighten up the covers, and there would be this big gap of air between me and the blankets."

"Oooh awful," mumbles Ed, and he is asleep. I was just going to tell him about another year at camp when the youngest counselor sneaked into the cabin during the campfire sing and put on all of our pajamas and zipped herself up in her sleeping bag. I might have already told him that story. I have a big pile of books on my nightstand. I pull from the bottom and the stack collapses, but Ed doesn't stir. I admit it—I do snore. But he only hears me if he's up and on his way to the bathroom.

Middlemarch. In school I never had time to read *Middlemarch* even though I was an English major. Now I run herd on ESL kids from 9 to 4

and our own kids from 4 to 9, and if I weren't an insomniac, I wouldn't have time to read anything. This is a very old paperback—\$1.50 is printed right on the cover. I'm only at the start of chapter 3, page 34, which isn't even one-twentieth of the way through the book. Someone has been here before me, Ed's first wife, Judy, who was also an English major. Since she got custody of the camping equipment, Ed got away with as many of her books as he could. Judy has underlined important passages with a ruler. It's very distracting to have to figure out why she thought these were the important parts. It shows how different we are. I scrawl little notes in the margin ("Don't do it, Dorothea!") and make stars and wiggly lines down the sides. I can't imagine taking time to underline with a ruler.

I don't think Judy snored either.

One of the perplexing things about not sleeping is that I don't get any more done than other people. Maybe less. Other women at church manage to keep their kids fed, bathed, laundered, and combed *and* go off to work every day and still come up with enough time left over to prepare and teach their Sunday School classes. I'm convinced my days are shorter than theirs, and though my nights are longer, there are only so many things you can do in the night. You can't weed the geraniums, and you can't make a really serious grocery expedition, and you can't visit the sick and afflicted, unless they have e-mail. Sometimes I get up and grade papers, but it's hard to be charitable when everyone in the whole world is asleep but me. I ought to attack the furnace room. The way we keep the rest of the house navigable is to stash stuff in the furnace room, and in our house, 75% of our stuff is paper. Rachel writes poems and has a penpal in Winnipeg and saves every paper she gets an A on, and that is every paper she writes. Teddy collects comics and baseball cards. Ed won't throw out any magazines except official church ones. We have seven years of *New Yorkers* that he's going to read some day, maybe when he trips over a stack and breaks both legs. They're virgin *New Yorkers* except for the cartoons which Teddy and I have examined, but not always understood. I've been campaigning for chest beds so we can each store the things we don't know what to do with underneath us, especially since nobody ever sweeps under the beds anyway, but maybe we'd sleep less well, rolling about on top of all the things that then would hang unfinished *under* our heads.

The furnace room makes me feel terrible. I grew up in the kind of house where my grandmother said, "What if the Savior came today? Would you want him to see your bedroom?" I was never very quick on the retort, like my kids who point out that eating all their Brussels sprouts will not help the little children in Bangladesh. Besides, my grandmother would not have been amused by my suggestion that the

Savior wouldn't be interested in looking in my closet, and I was a lot more scared of her than I was of the Savior.

I resemble her, my grandmother. I don't think she slept much. Her mind and her mouth were always moving, and they were rarely in sync. I was a teenager when she came to live with us in the winters because Vernal was nasty in the cold. Vernal was nasty in the summers too, but heat she could handle. She was a lean, beak-nosed woman, taller than my granddad, who took revenge for all her criticism and nagging in the only way he could take revenge. He died at 62.

How awful, I think, I am most like the relative I like least. My mind races all the time, usually a circuitous race. I know why I don't sleep. There's nothing I can leave alone. I worry about my parents. They drive up to see us, and I worry all the time they're on the road. Maybe my dad'll fall asleep at the wheel. Maybe a log will slip off one of those logging trucks on the freeway and ram their windshield. I worry about Ed and the diabetes in his family, and I worry about Teddy and his soccer team and his reading comprehension skills and his eczema. I mean it would make sense if he were a pariah or below average, but no, he's very normal and really quite happy, and still I worry. I'd worry more about Rachel, but she does a pretty good job of worrying about herself. I worry about God. Is he the Greatest Worrier of all, and does he mind if some Sundays I pour coffee for the homeless at the East Bay Street Project rather than twitch through lessons and talks in which I look around to see I'm the only adult in the whole row who is awake? Insomnia works against me even at church.

The phone jangles, and I'm out of bed before the first ring ends. "Hello," I whisper hoarsely into the receiver.

"Mom?" Rachel. "Can you come and get me? I've got a headache."

I sigh. "What's everyone doing over there?"

"Cindy's dad fell asleep during dessert. The rest of them zonked out during the slide show of their trip to Yosemite."

This is bad. "Torpids bodies lying all over the living room?"

"Naw. They woke up when I flipped the lights on. They all made it to their bedrooms. But Cindy didn't even brush her teeth."

"Oh," I say. "Well, I can see why you wouldn't want to stay. The possibilities of contamination are frightful."

"Mom!" She makes it two syllables. "You were awake anyway, right?"

She has me there.

"So it wouldn't be a big deal to throw on a coat and get into the car and drive on over. You wouldn't have to get dressed. I'll watch out the front window for you."

"Rachel, it isn't a very bad headache, is it? You're mostly bored, aren't you?"

"Well," she says.

"You have a book." She has a giant paperback, one of those dragon sagas. "You read your book there, and I'll read my book here, and we'll telepathically keep each other company." The dragons are telepaths. "You don't want Cindy to feel she failed as a hostess."

There is a moment of silence. "I'm hungry."

Mental note. Send graham crackers in her pajama bag. "Creep into the kitchen," I say, "and find the rest of Cindy's dad's dessert."

"Oh Mom. All right. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Love you," I say.

I put the phone receiver back in the cradle and look over at Ed. Not a twinge. I feel hungry too. When I'm the hostess, I'm too busy fussing to eat much. But I know where to find the left-over dessert. I grab a sweater and slip downstairs.

Homer wanders in from the garage, where he has probably been making tracks in the dust on the Datsun, and brushes against my legs. He looks mildly curious. I scrape some of the whipping cream off the lemon pie and put it in his bowl. I keep a pack of cards in a kitchen drawer. As I eat a few forkfuls of pie, I lay out a solitaire hand. I'll only play one game. My grandmother used to cheat at solitaire. She was not pleased when I intimated that the Savior wouldn't approve.

"Actually," I tell the Queen of Spades, who looks a lot like my grandmother, "according to Aunt Myrt, the Savior doesn't approve of cards at all." I slap her down on a red king. "You may tell the Savior I'm not ready for him." Now I'm addressing the front of the refrigerator door where my grandmother stands shaking her head at all the cartoons and highlighted articles and school memos and magazine diets. Her spirit has, no doubt, been pulled out of the grave by the hundred or so magnets. She wouldn't like the inside of the refrigerator any better than the outside. There are dozens of herring bottles filled with dabs of spaghetti sauce and wilted salad and the other halves of onions. When the bread ends turn green, when the lettuce turns black, when the contents of the herring bottles have produced a new white crop of fleece—then I scrape things into the garbage disposal, not before.

"We lack faith, you and I," I say to my grandmother. "We don't believe our families will survive if we take a good long nap. We can't even die with conviction. Look at you, hovering around, haunting us." I cover up her flat-faced surrogate with a red jack, but the game is soon lost. Three of the aces must be underneath that seven of clubs. "Sorry, grandma," I say. "Go back to bed. We lose."

Padding down the hall towards our bedroom, I look in on Teddy. His Masters of the Universe nightlight shows me he has kicked off all his covers and there are crumbs in the little canyons of his bottom sheet. I brush them onto the floor for the ants and draw the top sheet and a flan-

nel blanket over him. On his desk are the remains of more ants, last week's science project. The two of us spent most of the weekend trying to lure into a fishbowl the same insects that I labor to eradicate the rest of the year. When it came time for them to perform for his class, a few bewildered ants wandered about the sugar-specked sand and the herring jar lid of water, but we hadn't been able to find a queen, and most of the workers escaped. The teacher wrote "good" on Teddy's project paper, but I was not deceived. The same teacher wrote "excellent" on Rachel and Ed's lever project two years ago. Fortunately, neither Teddy nor Rachel remembers that.

I slide into my side of our bed. Ed has rolled over on his back, which he usually doesn't do, and he is breathing very loudly. One might even call it a snore. I consider getting Rachel's cassette recorder and garnering evidence to rebut any further accusations of my own nasal congestion. But my feet are cold, and anyway the sound is kind of comforting.

I settle down to chapter 3 of *Middlemarch*. I read the sentence that begins, "For he had been as instructive as Milton's 'affable archangel'" about five times, then count the words—69, too many words for a sentence one is reading at, according to the clock radio, 1:04. The archangel melts into Moroni atop the Salt Lake temple and then the White Dragon of Pern, and I send a few thoughts Rachel's way. The next sentence is shorter, and the next, and the next, and in a few paragraphs I escape into the ruminations of the heroine's ever alert, ever troubled mind.