

SLEEPWALKERS
by Aimee Baker

I'd been following him for fifteen minutes when I noticed the sounds of traffic were missing. Alex lived in the same apartment complex as I did, and the noise of rushing cars coming from the nearby highway was a static sound we'd gotten used to living so close to it. The absence of noise should have been more startling, but I couldn't make myself focus on anything but my best friend walking in front of me, leading me on the journey his sleepwalking body was taking us on.

Not for the first time, I was glad that I paid so much in rent that management kept up on things outside, like having clear sidewalks and soft yellow streetlamps to cast us in steady light as Alex shuffled through the complex. Gasoline and fertilizer hung in the air, amplified by the humidity of August and the electricity hovering just above the pavement, echoing the oncoming storm that was written in the clouds looming over them. Storms made the tail-end of summer more exciting with rolling thunder that rattled the windows I leave cracked in the living room. It also made Alex's sleepwalking more dangerous, or so he feared.

"What if I walk out in the middle of it?" On my couch, his feet in my lap, ointment drying on cuts and scrapes and blisters that littered the skin from his toes to the back of each heel, he asked me for help. "I have no idea where I go at night, so what if I go and don't come back?

“Who would find me?” The dark circles under his eyes worried me almost as much as his feet did, but not nearly as much as the finger-shaped bruises around his ankles.

We kept walking, following gently twisting paths between buildings and common areas, under trees that shook their whispered secrets above our heads. It wasn’t late enough for everyone to be asleep, could hardly be past midnight really, yet as we rounded a corner and I finally took my eyes off Alex, no lights were coming from the buildings around us. Every sliding door was dark, every window closed and empty, devoid of light and any trace of humanity behind inky black panes.

Breathing in through my teeth, I ignored the taste of copper that filled the empty spaces of my mouth, brought my focus back to Alex, and the way his body lurched to one side of the sidewalk and back to the center. It reminded me of a dog on a leash, the pull of an invisible hand, directing him without his consent—a puppet hanging from strings, a marionette of a man.

I chalked up the phantom images of strings around his wrists to my insomnia, hallucinations created in lack of real sleep, my brain processing lack of sight with hazy distortions of the real world. I’d learned to ignore how shadows danced late at night in the dark of my room, reminded myself that nothing was standing in my doorway just because my brain was convincing me otherwise. The bruises on Alex’s arms weren’t bruises, they were his tattoos, blurred by the darkness and amplified by the buzzing in my molars.

Alex veered off to the side, through the partially open gate that led from our complex into the neighboring park, and I picked up my pace, so I didn't lose him. Between us was thirty feet of space, give or take in the darkness, enough that I was out of the way and still close enough to watch as he walked barefoot off the sidewalk and through the flower beds. It answered my questions about the state of his feet, watching him step on rocks and the branches of imported shrubs that had missed their weekly culling by gardeners in bright green; what it didn't do was get rid of the bubbling dread creeping up my throat.

The soccer field was a barren, yawning expanse under the vast moonless sky above us, deserted and lonely, save for the circle of people standing at midfield. At a distance, it was easy to mistake them for something else — a grouping of pylons, maybe, or forgotten landscaping equipment. Alex kept walking towards them, his steps making a wet sound in the grass as the mud beneath it shifted under his weight, even as the thunder started to echo around us.

Distantly, I remembered all of the nights in the last two weeks that a storm had come in, rattled my windows like something was trying to open them, groaned, and bellowed thunderclaps behind the clouds. Standing outside, there were no walls to shield me from the sounds, nothing to muffle the thunder and how it sounded like a language no one spoke anymore. A flash of lightning lit up the sky, revealed impossibly large clouds looming over us, and the strings that rose from the people in the circle. Faint lines that disappeared into the clouds above us, left no trace when the light died, and I was still shellshocked in the wet grass.

Alex had taken a spot in the circle next to an elderly woman, the soft pink of her nightdress stained dark where it hung at her feet, collecting moisture from the freshly watered grass. There was still an empty spot on his left, between one of his tattoo-bruised arms and a little boy in racecar pajamas. Another clap of thunder rocked the ground, the flicker of lightning casting false shadows in the clouds, hands reaching out of them as if reshaping their barely tangible forms.

I could hear it then, the beat of a drum, the endless blare of horns in the distance. Somewhere in the marrow of my bones, there was understanding. Acceptance. Terror. Again, thunder shook the sky, the storm rapidly approaching all around us, bringing with it wind that whipped my hair into my face, made the thin strands tied to my wrists tremble with the movement. Shadows danced as lightning illuminated the strangers in the field, light up the sky until it glowed red as ruby blood.

The strings around my wrists tugged, as soft as a reminder, and I walked forward into the circle.