

## Sleep

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It's hardly a house at all, Guinevere's dollhouse, nor was it meant to be, more just a suggestion of house and what that might mean — its distillation. Guinevere's small head is bent over the brightly-colored slope of its roof and the barely-sketched stage set of its three shallow walls; she's prying another mysterious narrative from its blocky stove and sink and tiny plasticked inhabitants, using fingers that only a few months ago were practically too uncoordinated to handle a spoon.

"Looking in the window, looking in the window, looking in," she chants as Eleanor passes her bedroom door with a stack of just-folded laundry. "Open the door up!" Her voice trails off into the businesslike impenetrability Eleanor only recently realized was an imitation of an adult muttering their way through a long to-do list.

"No no," she adds conversationally, "Sit down, mister daddy; stay with us, and have donuts!"

This early morning hour, when astringent winter light warms the colors of the braided rag rug in Guinevere's bedroom and she entertains herself with the dollhouse while Eleanor folds clothes or scours the dishes left in the sink or —rarely enough — sits down with a second cup of coffee, has become the best part of their day. It distracts Eleanor from the fact that when it's as cold as this, the day goes on forever; it makes her forget, at least for a bit, that she and Guinevere have spent weeks tamped into the house by the gray weather.

Eleanor tells herself a winter spent cooped up like this will bestow maternal wisdom on her. But really, she knows the fact that she has come to view the dollhouse as a talisman, the single thing able to keep Guinevere's attention, shows just how little about life with children she has learned. That Guinevere can be entertained by anything for more than five minutes has nothing to do with the dollhouse, just as it has nothing to do with Eleanor, either. Who knows why Guinevere ever does anything?

All the same, Eleanor's grateful for the moments of peace the dollhouse has bought her over the past few weeks. Sometimes she finds it almost as engrossing as Guinevere does. It's *house*, whittled down, with the compact allure of a treehouse. Its front door actually works, it swings open and closed with a satisfying *snick*, as does the lid to its square gray toilet. Its inhabitants are jointed enough to sit, or lie down in bed, or stand up.

"Look, Mama," Guinevere says, tugging at her leg. "Come with me." She pulls Eleanor into her room and over to the dollhouse, where the family is perched in a row on the roof, their mouths identical, tilted commas. Guinevere squats before them. They stare back at her, eyes black as apple seeds.

On Guinevere's birthday two weeks ago, she'd torn open the paper wrapping from around the dollhouse and quickly, solemnly introduced the family inside to Eleanor and Josh as *Mama, Daddy*, and the two *Girls*. One of whom had been clad in the suggestion of overalls, the other with a plastic hairstyle that contained the suggestion of pigtails.

There'd only been one Girl included with the dollhouse itself, and Eleanor had stood indecisively in the aisle at ToysRUs, leaving in the end with another, auxiliary set of figures that included the Dog and Cat, and the second Girl with pigtails.

*Voilà!* — instant family. The requisite number of children, the pets Eleanor already understands loom in her future. She stoops next to Guinevere. "Stay there, stay there, stay there," Guinevere exhorts, holding her small palm out flat. Except for the differences in their sizes and the fact that the father doll is anachronistically tie-clad, each member of the dollhouse family could be interchangeable with the rest. But Eleanor has come to find the dollhouse family expressive in its very inexpressibility. Its members are unaware they lack noses and eyebrows.

"They fly," Guinevere says.

"They *flew*." The family lines the roof as stolidly as a row of dominos, as stiffly as the cheery, primary-colored blocks that were Guinevere's favorites until the dollhouse took their place. "They flew?" Eleanor repeats. "Good for you, making them fly."

If Guinevere were just a year older, she'd roll her eyes. "Not me. They can fly up there." She scrutinizes the dollhouse. "My dollhouse is fascinated, Mama," she adds.

"Fascinating," Eleanor says. "Not fascinated."

"Fascinating," Guinevere repeats. Eleanor tries to remember when she might have used the word. If Guinevere picked *that* up, just what else is she learning? It could be anything.

Guinevere reaches out and sweeps the dollhouse family from the roof. Because their arms are molded to their sides, they have a soldierly air, even when she starts to stack them like cordwood. "Stop it," she shrieks.

"Gentle with the dollhouse."

And just like that, Eleanor swamped by a wave of —what? —boredom? guilt? How will she ever measure up to the figure who now looms so largely over her life? The good mother.

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According to all the books Eleanor had devoured as soon as she suspected Guinevere was on her way, there would be a sweet spot during mid-pregnancy when she'd glow with perfect health. When she'd sit, hands folded on belly, content to be

nothing more than perfect, unfractured vessel. Just as there would be another sweet spot later on, one that would occur seconds after her offspring slid, sleeked, easily as a otter, from her womb.

This second sweet spot was of course when Eleanor's heart would swell, grown heavy with love and the enormity of motherhood.

What had Eleanor been thinking about instead? A shower and a strong cappuccino? How overwhelmingly hungry she was? Before she'd known it, both those idyllic sweet spots had slipped past her.

Sometimes she feels as if she fell asleep one night in one country and woke up the next morning in another. The battered jeep that dropped her at its border long ago sped off, a plume of sand tossed up like smoke to mark its departure. She has no compass, no map. No instructions, unless you count the pratfalled events embedded in sitcoms. And whenever she begins to toil her way toward the far distant, brightly-tented souk she can see barely, shimmering like a mirage in the distance of this fantastical place — and o, how she wants whatever it is that they have there! — she has become more than willing: to trade time for sleep, to bargain away what's left of her own looks for the endlessly miraculous stocky curves of Guinevere's legs, on which she now stands as sturdy and strong and *other* as some shaggy little Shetland pony.

Guinevere. Who at the moment is in the middle of her bedroom, stomping one foot.

"Family hungry," she informs Eleanor slyly.

"Hungry for what?" Eleanor asks.

"Donuts. Donuts for lunch."

"We'll have a snack on our walk." She sits down on the edge of Guinevere's bed. "But no donuts. We're not having donuts."

She's embarrassed to admit just how much it means to her that though she missed the supposed sweet spots set forth in all the pregnancy books she only recently dropped off at Goodwill, she's been handed these few moments when the early-morning sun through the windows lays itself against the wooden floors and fingers the cowlick at the back of Guinevere's bent, curly head, this early hour when the fact that Guinevere woke her up at five a.m. doesn't yet mean she's been awake almost 16 hours.

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In the beginning, Eleanor believed wholeheartedly. That there was some cord connecting her to Guinevere, as strongly and truly as the actual umbilical cord Josh had been too terrified to cut, and Eleanor too exhausted. Why else did she always wake seconds, mere *seconds*, before Guinevere started to cry?

She tried to explain her theory to Josh, who looked at her with sleep-bleared eyes. She *knew* the way she always woke up before Guinevere did was supernatural, was just another illustration of the peculiar situation in which they found themselves.

Now, of course, she realizes the truth is not that she wakes up before Guinevere because of some invisible connection to her but just that Guinevere cries until she finally wakes up.

She's not as vigilant as she thought she was. Nothing more than pragmatism prods her from bed the minute Guinevere summons her with a cry at five every morning, nothing more than pragmatism makes her coax Guinevere into the stroller every day.

"Pants or dress?" she asks.

"Dress."

"Dress means tights, too."

"Dress." Guinevere opens the closet door. She points to the purple dress with cats appliquéd on its pockets, a present from her grandmother that, because it offends Eleanor's aesthetic sensibilities, has become her favorite. Eleanor pulls the dress over her head.

"Look!" Guinevere cries, pulling her hand out of one pocket. Dollhouse Mama balances there on her palm, green skirted and yellow sweater-clad, her small eyes rounded in either interest or surprise.

"Did you put her there, in your pocket?" Eleanor asks.

Guinevere shakes her head. "Snack," she demands. "Snack for me, snack for Mama."

A year ago, when Guinevere sustained herself on little more than love and breastmilk, Eleanor had wondered why so many of the women she met fed their children in their strollers, as if they hadn't just minutes before finished their breakfasts. Now she knows the stroller pockets crammed full of dry cereal and raisin boxes for the shameless bribery they are. She walks into the kitchen to dole crackers into a Baggie. "Snack for Guinevere, snack for Mommy. And let's try to call Daddy before we go out."

The voice that answers Josh's phone is the same unhurried one belonging to his voicemail that Eleanor despised for its unruffled disembodiedness back in the early days, when Guinevere was a newborn and Josh was newly back at work and Eleanor called him every morning to give him an update on how things were going. The Voice was probably computer-generated or a woman in Manila prized for her flawless American accent and what were the updates Eleanor had for Josh except that the mail had come, or not come, or that Guinevere had slept, or not slept, or that she was still eating?

"Hi," she says now, after the Voice's oiled obsequiousness. "Just wanted to check in before we headed out on our walk. Give me a call when you get a chance, O.K.?"

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This Eleanor knows: there's no future, no past. Only the present moment, which is babies. She and Guinevere wait at the corner, exhaling in short, frosty puffs, watching The Duck and The Bunny come closer. The Frog, swathed in lurid green and yellow Polartek Guinevere spotted from over a block away, is being wheeled toward them from the other direction. Guinevere, whose own footed Polartek snowsuit is electric blue, and like the others is padded, bundled, and lashed into her stroller, stoically clutches Dollhouse Mama in one mittened hand, tearstains visible on her cheeks.

Agitated greeting rings in the cold air; it sounds so much like the gaggle of noncommittal pleasantries Eleanor's mother used to exchange with women in the grocery store thirty years ago that Eleanor can't help but mark it. Exactly when did she learn how to do this?

During the height of summer, when the neighborhood hydrangeas droop over the sidewalks, as big and blue as dinner plates, the group of women pushing strollers through the neighborhood expands, absorbing new mothers at loose ends who haven't yet figured out their post-baby routines and those with a little more experience who've convinced themselves they need to walk those last few pregnancy pounds off.

But now it's winter. The new moms stay snugly put inside their houses, and those who meet at the corner are, as Josh points out, either stir-crazy or die-hards. The Polartek suits their children are clothed in are just another sign of their efficiency, last fall's Halloween costumes of ducks and bunnies and frogs become this winter's warmest layers. They themselves are clad in worn-out leggings probably four seasons too old and sensible shoes.

The Halloween costumes that do double-duty as winter wear, their own close-to-frumpy sweat pants — Eleanor hasn't figured out whether these frugalities are evidence of some system the stroller mommies have figured out how to beat, or one that's sucked them in. Her relationship with them remains frozen in a no-man's-land between professional life and friendship.

"Cold," Bunny's mother greets her.

"Oh, my God," wheezes the mother of Frog.

"Looks like somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed," says Duck's mother, seeing Guinevere's scowl. She's the wry one, at least on walks.

"Josh's out of town again," Eleanor explains. In addition, Dollhouse Daddy has been misplaced. "Vanished," she says. "I can't figure out how, though."

"Gone," Guinevere grieves, for Eleanor neglected to spell the distressing news out. "Under bed. Down hallway. Gone outside." She opens her mouth to wail.

Bunny's mother bends to tuck a stray corner of blanket under her son's legs, her expression unruffled. Sometimes, when Eleanor looks at Bunny's mother's neatly

French-twisted hair and serene face, it comforts her to remind herself that this is the same woman who has repainted her living room four separate times since her child was born a year and a half ago.

"How is everybody?" Frog's mother asks. Eleanor looks up from wiping Guinevere's red nose with a tissue.

"Sadie's still not sleeping," Frog's mother adds. The four women turn their strollers, looking more likeminded than they actually are.

It bothers Duck's mother, who plans what meals she'll serve a week in advance according to a spreadsheet, to deviate from their usual route. Eleanor tells herself that the monotony of walking the same way every time they meet is a small price to pay, and better than the same two mornings a week spent at home.

"Schedules," Frog's mother says as Eleanor falls into line beside her. From her stroller, Guinevere regards Frog without a change of expression. Frog's eyes and the tip of her nose peep from her blankets and wrappings like the small bit of view extracted from a fogged-over windshield, and her mother pursues her topic heroically, as singlemindedly as is possible while pushing a stroller down the street at eight-thirty on a Friday morning; as singlemindedly as only a woman who wants sleep more than anything else in the world can.

Sleep. Frog's mother would give rubies for it.

"Schedule," she repeats. "The books say it's lack of schedule that screws up their sleeping. And I know the worst thing I can do is sit in there with her. Last night I rocked her for two solid hours. But she just can't fall asleep on her own," she adds wildly. "And I can't stand the *crying*."

At that, Frog begins, as if on cue, to cry. And Eleanor understands that Tina — for that's Frog's mother's actual name — is hooked and caught just like a fish, she's struggling against the slack played out and left in the line but she can never, ever win. *Sleep* will win, her sleep, her daughter's sleep, the mirage of her own sleep, her husband's sleep, the way they used to sleep *together*, sleep the way it once was. The books that tell her that she should let her daughter cry until she falls asleep alone, and the others, that say she should invite her daughter into her own bed, will beat her.

Tina hasn't been able to walk because she's been trying to get Frog's sleep onto the schedule the books suggest and that, she concludes, yanking her stroller up and over a break in the sidewalk, *has made me crazy*. It's clear to Eleanor that she really does think she's going crazy, and also that she thinks she's just revealed too much by saying so.

Ahead of them, the mothers of Duck and Bunny are discussing an upcoming consignment sale for children's clothing. Eleanor is having the same strangely muffled conversation she had last week and the week before that. A conversation in which people reveal the most painfully intimate things — that they no longer have sex with their husbands, that they think they're going crazy — in such a detached

way that it's impossible to respond. Even the steady *tick tick* of the stroller wheels against pavement might be a continuation of the same stifled conversation.

"About the time you think you get anything figured out, they change on you," she says. Before Guinevere was born, she probably engaged in conversations like this once or twice a year—at funerals or particularly uncomfortable work-related parties. Now she can have them in her sleep. She can't tell Tina what she really thinks, which is that very little of what Tina does or doesn't do will change things much. Frog will go to bed, or not go to bed, depending on something as unknowable as weather.

"Making me crazy," Tina concludes. Up ahead, Duck and Bunny's mother are still talking about children's clothes, and Eleanor has hardly ever discussed anything with Tina before, in fact she has conscientiously avoided Tina up until now because the single thing she has ever heard come out of Tina's mouth before this morning was *chinese prefolds*, which she knows refers to cloth diapers, and how hard it is to get them.

Ahead, Bunny and Duck's mothers nose their strollers up the walk's steepest hill. Eleanor leans into her handlebars, the incline suddenly as insurmountable as Everest.

"Go on ahead," she whispers, letting Guinevere's stroller drift toward the curb. She bends over and rests her hands on her knees. "I'll catch up in a second."

The nausea she has been feeling all morning suddenly feels familiar, nags at her like the itch of a phantom limb. "Oh," she says abruptly, counting backward in her head. She looks up. Duck and Bunny's mothers brake their strollers, set their hips against them. Tina stoops over to retie a shoelace.

Eleanor wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Here," Duck's mother offers finally, drawing a crumpled tissue from one of her stroller's many pouches. "I don't think it's been used." Her fingers touch Eleanor's as she leans over.

"Thanks." Eleanor doesn't meet her eyes. For over a year, she has watched women walk more and more slowly, falling to the back of the group without admitting a thing, as if it were a crime they'd in a few weeks have to confess to. Because more than anything else, they're a tribe, complete with superstitions, and talismans, and warring factions. Those who lost babies, those who want more but can't have them. Twelve weeks of silence, a trimester, gives everyone time to get used to the future.

"Where's Josh this week?" Bunny's mother asks into the silence. "He'll be back before the weekend, right? You won't be on your own."

"Yes," Eleanor says. "He'll be back before the weekend. I'm o.k." Guinevere and Frog drum their shoes in unison against their strollers.

"Look!" Guinevere cries, extracting her hand from her pocket, revealing Dollhouse Daddy. "There he is!"

The mothers resume pushing the strollers along the pavement.

"How old is Guinevere again?" Tina asks Eleanor. "Younger than Sadie, right?" she pauses. "Are you potty training her yet? Sadie's in big girl pants already!"

There is no past, Eleanor thinks, no future. Only the present moment, which is babies.

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For almost two years, Eleanor has woken up in the middle of the night like someone just applied a life-restarting shock to her heart; you'd think she'd be used to it by now.

She sits up with a gasp, sheets and comforter clasped to her chest. Guinevere must have been crying seconds before, but the only residue Eleanor's left with is something else, part of a dream. It jerks her more fully awake — the memory of the sound of the front door closing.

Right after Guinevere's birth, when Eleanor had been awakened by her wails every few hours, coming back to life forced a round of Twenty Questions from her. *What day is it?* she'd ask Josh, sunk like a stone into sleep beside her. *What time is it?* *Where are we?* Coming back, coming to, had felt like the impossible paddle of a boat back upriver.

Josh never knew the answers to these questions any better than she did. These days he's away because of work at least ten or twelve nights a month, and she keeps the answers tucked close by, easily retrievable, even while she's sleeping. It's Tuesday, it's three forty-two in the morning.

At this hour, it pulls just like quicksand, her desire to be elsewhere. What was she dreaming? She fumbles for the baby monitor on the nightstand. She and Josh have never needed it, not once, use it only to eavesdrop on Guinevere when she recounts her day to the stuffed animals in her crib.

"Mommy," Guinevere's small voice, magnified, calls out sadly from her room. "O, Mommy." The steady rise and fall of her breath travels through the monitor, lively with static. She might not be dreaming of Eleanor, but about Dollhouse Mama, who the two of them had placed on a chair beside Dollhouse Daddy at the dollhouse's tiny kitchen table before she'd agree to being kissed goodnight and being put to bed.

The night Guinevere was born, Eleanor's water had broken — *like a ripe watermelon being thumped*, she'd thought when it happened — and she'd called the doctor's answering service before ten. Later, when she saw from the insurance paperwork she and Josh filled out that they'd arrived at the hospital at almost three the next morning, she examined the hours in between with the thoroughness of an accountant. What had the two of them *done* all that time? She remembered pacing six squares of sidewalk in front of the house while Josh installed the car seat they'd

waited until the last minute to buy; how cold it had been, how bright and far-off the stars overhead seemed. There'd been a rain-smearred flyer stapled to the telephone pole flanking their driveway announcing a garage sale that had happened two weekends before. She remembers the sharp definition of all those staples punched over the years into the creosoted pole, and the sound of Josh swearing softly behind her as he tried to cinch a seatbelt over the infant carrier's molded gray plastic. What was taking so long? She felt aggrieved that she hadn't been able to make it to that garage sale before the baby came.

There's a sudden soft muffled *thunk* from the front of the house. She flings back the sheets.

Stopping in the hallway, she puts the flat of a hand against the door to Guinevere's bedroom and pushes. Before she and Josh left for the hospital that night, the two of them had practiced together, Josh reading from a book: all she had to do was think of the pain as a tide. Then, at the critical moment, when she needed him most, he was sleeping.

The stars had been so bright that night when he ran down the front steps toward their car with her impractically-packed suitcase, they had somehow seemed closer. The street in front of their house had been so quiet. Even the neighbors who lived on one side of them, who quarreled and drank late at night, who had rightly predicted Eleanor would start labor the night of the full moon, had been sleeping. In the bedroom, Guinevere's crib is white against the far wall, the milky blur of her face laid against the mattress behind its slats. She snuffles moistly. Eleanor hesitates to let her eyes adjust.

Guinevere stirs, settling her thumb more securely in her mouth. Her bedroom always has a faint greenhouse quality to it: a faint scent, not of nursery at all. It's not Guinevere's breath, either, but is somehow *of* Guinevere's breath, and contains both the life she extracts from the room, and the absence of her waking self that she all night exhales into it. It makes Eleanor think of wet dirt after rain, a storm's warning sizzle of ozone.

Guinevere suddenly sits up, luminous in her white nightgown, and uncorks her thumb from her mouth. There's an abundant rustle of bedclothes.

"Mama," she says distinctly. "I want up now."

"It's the middle of the night," Eleanor whispers in dismay. "Everyone's sleeping."

This time of night contains the ebb-tide, the retreat. It's when things are at their most slippery, the hour when children run their highest temperatures, when nurses nervously look in most often on their critical patients. These are the same hours she and Josh talked their way through when they were first together, unconscious of their import.

Guinevere lies back down and rolls over onto her stomach, tucking her knees underneath her. A small solid *chink*, like plastic hitting wood, comes from the direction of the living room.

These are the hours swaddled in the faint mechanical hum of the refrigerator and the settling pop of old floorboards, and maybe that's reason enough for Eleanor to be awake. What is she but a lookout posted at the periphery of camp, a night watchman making his rounds? She backs out of the bedroom and heads for the living room.

The domestic wreckage of Guinevere's dollhouse is still spread out on the living room floor where she'd dragged it in the afternoon. Skirting it, Eleanor sits down on the sofa.

Something was scoured away from her the night Guinevere was born, like grime from the panes of a window; some heavy curtain had been lifted back. Light from the table lamp on the other side of the room spills like moonlight through the tiny window of the dollhouse set up on the floor. The four small beds on its second story are aligned in a neat row.

This is the same time of night when Guinevere was born, when some tide slipped out, and then rushed back in, and in the process sanded something away from Eleanor, thinning something — her skin? The boundary between night and morning? Some sort of surface.

All four dolls are lying in their beds now; as patient as maids in a garret, as needy as orphans relegated to the poorhouse, as frightened as women in hospitals so many years ago, brought to childbed, lying-in.