

## Sleepers

Josephine was a sleeper. The best I ever knew. She could go to bed early and sleep the whole next day, wrapped in beams of diffused sunlight and a fluffy white, cotton comforter her mom had bought her one year for Christmas. She lived in an apartment, a big fourth floor studio that looked down on an old, industrial, mostly abandoned section of Chicago.

The city never seemed to touch her. You had immunity when you were with Jo; everything slowed down. Time could even reverse.

She had posted a personal ad in a coffee shop. That's how I first met Josephine. It was a very intriguing flyer, hanging there with all the other banality that spoke of nothing but the practical:

*Roommate Wanted  
Apartment off Red Line  
475.00 mo plus utilities*

*1998 Honda Civic  
Low Miles  
CD/Cassette player  
5500.00 or B/O*

Josephine's ad was simple:

Sleepy girl seeks same in boy.

It had a phone number at the bottom.

I called the number and got her voice mail. I said I was calling about the ad. Two o'clock that morning I got a message from a very sleepy sounding girl saying that if I wanted to get a hold of her, I should call tomorrow at such and such a time. Eight PM,

I believe it was. I called her, and we ended up getting together that night.

I thought she was real pretty, even though she was quite pale and looked like she would bruise easily. She had a babyish face. Her lips were small but fat; they sort of pursed out in a cute way. She had long lashes and light blue eyes that were slightly droopy, as if someone had placed their thumb and forefinger on her cheekbones and pulled down.

She didn't dress for it, but her body was sexy. Soft and curvy and maybe twelve pounds heavier than most girls her age would want to be. She was like a cross between Drew Barrymore and Zelda Fitzgerald.

She sat up in her bed and talked to me. It was an interview, really. I think she wanted to make sure I wasn't the kind of guy who would expect her to go places, someone who was "into life" and would complain that she wasn't.

"D'you like movies?" she asked.

"I love movies."

"What kind?" she said.

"I don' know... good kind."

"Yeah, but like what?"

"Um, well I love apocalyptic motifs in film."

I later found out that scored me quite a few points.

"Do you like to do a lot of stuff?" she asked.

"Um... yeah, I like to do stuff. I mean, whatta you mean?"

"Well I just mean like, do you do a lot of stuff? Like go places and stuff?"

"Ah... no, I guess I really don't. I like to do stuff at home."

"Like what?" she said.

"I like to watch movies. I love food. Sometimes I like to cook."

"Do you drink coffee?" she asked.

"No, don't touch it."

"Me neither," she said.

Then she said, "Do you like to sleep? You ever sleep in?"

She cut right to the chase with that one.

"I love to sleep," I said, and watched her think it over.

She was wearing a thin pair of blue and white striped boxer shorts and a white t-shirt. She ate three bowls of Cheerios in the course of the interview and was good enough to offer me some, which I accepted. She kept a pair of slippers by her bed but I noticed they were too big for her. She slipped them on when she got up to go to the bathroom or get something to eat, and slid across the hardwood floor without lifting her feet up so they wouldn't fall off. I later found out she wore boxers and a t-shirt almost all the time. She would occasionally get dressed to go to her mom's or go out and buy stuff, but she spent most of her time in that old building.

I liked her. She was sweet, in her sleepy way. She wanted a friend to hide away with, and I guess I wanted that too. That's why we found each other.

And I loved that big, spacious old building. The brick was dusty and faded and the hardwood floors were gouged, but it was beautiful. I loved the late sixties style

elevator, and the way the radiators clanked at night in the winter. The ceiling in Jo's apartment was high and the plaster had been done in round swirls, like frozen whirlpools of vanilla.

There were only two other tenants in the building, so I could walk around the halls and explore without disturbing anyone. One guy had taken the first floor and had been there forever, and there was a woman on two who was a painter. We mostly felt as if we had the place to ourselves.

It was early Fall when we first met, cold enough to bring out our hibernation instinct, and even though the studio was big the temperature was always cozy. There was some kind of archaic steam boiler in the cellar and no way for the landlord to heat specific parts of the building. He had to keep the whole thing nice and warm through the winter, the radiators hissing like they did in an old elementary school I remembered from childhood.

Josephine kept her bed in the corner, next to a window. During the day if it was sunny she twisted the shades open halfway- they were big, long shades to fit those windows- so sunlight got in, but not too much. She liked light but it had to be just right. She loved to pull the shades open in the late afternoon, a few hours before it got dark, when the end of the day sunlight would turn the hardwood floor a pretty amber.

Rainy days were best. Jo loved rainy days, and I got to love them too. The gray sky and constant downpour took away any vague sense I might have had that we should have been out there doing something. Plenty of nights I went to bed hoping it would rain the next day so I could go over after class, get in bed with Josephine and sleep the day away with the rain beating outside those big windows.

It was what we did best. Josephine didn't have a lot of interest in anything else. She'd gotten a full scholarship to Duke University out of high school, attended for a month and a half and then dropped out. She said she couldn't stand the lighting. She got an apartment and went to sleep.

She could write, that was the one other thing. She had a laptop and a printer and she wrote good fiction, I felt. In her waking hours she read a lot. She said books were the best escape in the world, after sleep. She ordered three or four of them a week from Amazon. The UPS guy used to leave packages underneath the mailboxes on the first floor; he refused to use the elevator. I would pick up a box for Jo on my way in at least once a week. They piled up on her bookcase. Josephine read everything: novels, short stories, screenplays, a lot of non-fiction. She loved anything to do with science.

And I liked her writing. She could have committed more time to it, but when she did write it was good. She liked to dream up scenarios with me sometimes. They usually involved some kind of end of the world scenario where we had to hole up in an old building, take care of each other and survive.

Sometimes she would tell me about her mom and dad, and what it was like for her growing up.

Josephine's dad was a politician. He was a powerful man with strong business ties who'd been caught up in a scandal involving kickbacks, overspending and blatant corruption with this mega-corporation contracted to support US troops during the Gulf War. I had read about this before I met Jo, but she was in a unique position to lay it all out for me. It was not pretty. The company had cut corners and cheated the soldiers

wherever they could, and stolen hundreds of millions of dollars in the process. They grew fat while others fought and died. They did it all with the complicity of the presidential administration and high ranking officials like Josephine's dad, who profited handsomely from the sleaze.

You ended up with a situation, Josephine explained to me, where the people who started a war were the same ones who stood to profit from it. She said it made her sick to her stomach to think about it. I think she was just too smart, too sensitive not to get it, and after a certain age she wanted nothing to do with her father. It just wasn't in her.

Josephine's mom had left her dad six years before I met her. Jo told me it was because he was a pig, that he had slept with whores and treated her mother miserably around the house. The fights had been awful, and the chilly atmosphere worse than that. She told me she admired her mom for not just sticking it out and keeping up appearances like a lot of other wives did. She said that when the divorce came down her mom had named her terms. She was set up for life. I guess that meant Josie was too.

I met Josephine's mom three or four times; I liked her. But she was tough. Underneath it all, you could tell she was tough.

She let Jo do whatever she wanted, though. She didn't approve of all the sleeping, but she accepted it.

We went to visit sometimes at this big stone mansion in the country.

"Is she still sleeping all the time?" her mom asked me once, when Jo had gone out of the room. She shook her head with a disapproving look as she asked it, as if she already knew the answer.

But Jo could have done anything she wanted. It was the consolation prize, the cocoon of narcotic bliss that protected her from the truth they both knew was lurking there.

She sure knew how to hide away. Josephine liked to make appointments just so she could sleep through them. She was famous for it. She would schedule a doctor's appointment at 8:45 in the morning and then sleep in until noon. She set her alarm sometimes just so she could wake up, decide not to go, fall back into that big, comfy bed and go to sleep.

I met her doctor once. He thought Josephine was depressed. He gave her this medicine called Dexedrine and urged her to try it. Jo took one pill and hated it. It kept her up all day and into the night, and made her nervous and edgy. She sat there at the kitchen table and pumped her leg up and down. She didn't know what to do with herself. She slept for a long time after that, just to make up for it.

Jo could hang with you; don't get me wrong. She just needed to do it in her apartment, usually sitting up in her bed. We would stay up late most nights- talking, burning candles, and eating yogurt. Josephine had a special recipe. She said it helped her sleep. She took a good quality whole milk yogurt, no sugar in it just maple syrup, mixed in a teaspoon of vanilla, a few drops of lemon, and three drops of almond extract from a square little bottle with a glass dropper. She whipped all that together and served it cold. It was a great recipe.

She used to talk sometimes about taking me to Paris. She showed me pictures of the old style hotel rooms there, and we planned how we might stay in bed all day, order room service and take long hot showers. We said we would find an old building to explore, or take a walk through the streets- only if it was raining of course. But in truth we never really wanted to leave that apartment. We were happy there.

We started a life together. Weekends were best. I would finish with classes on a Friday, rent a few movies and pick up some food, go back to my apartment for an hour or two, shower, then go over and stay at Jo's for the next three days. I loved the way I always felt alone when I walked in, like it was Josephine's building and I was the only one around for miles. I loved dragging the old elevator door shut on my way up. I loved the dry, dusty smell. It was like another world.

A typical Friday went like this:

I take the L to Halstead and walk another seventeen minutes to Jo's building. I'm totally by myself as I walk in. I step into the old elevator, ride up to the fourth floor, step out, walk down the hall and slide Josephine's big gray door open as quietly as I can. I set my green army surplus bag down in a corner against the wall, take the groceries out and put them away for later. Once I'm all settled in I walk quietly over to the bed, lie down next to Josephine and wrap my arms around her. Jo wakes up, stretches her arms up over her head and smiles. Her wavy brown hair falls carelessly around her face.

"Hi baby," I say to her, running my fingers through her bangs, pushing them back from her forehead. "Sleep okay?"

"Mmm... ." She sounds like a little girl who's just woke up from a nap.

"That lady from downstairs gave me some Vicodin," she says.

"She did?"

"Mm hmm. I took one."

"How is it?" I ask.

"Nice. It makes me twitch when I sleep."

"Interesting... . I brought some movies,"

"Whatta you got?" she asks, stretching again with one hand over the other, her fingers locked together.

"The Thing," I tell her. "I felt like watching it."

"Okay."

We love watching apocalyptic, end of the world stuff when we're together. It makes us feel safe for some reason.

Jo gets up and goes to the bathroom. She leaves the door open while she pees, then she comes back and gets into bed. I take off everything but my t-shirt, get into bed and spoon her. I wrap my arms around her chest and pull her in close to me, and after a little while she starts to push her body back and forth against mine. We draw it out for a long time, till we're both turned on and can't wait any longer, then I slide her boxers down and we end up making love right there, lying on our sides.

Afterwards, we fall into a long, satisfied sleep.

It is dark when I wake up, but I don't mind getting out of bed because the apartment is nice and warm. I squeeze Josephine once, my arm around her stomach and my legs tucked inside of hers, and then slide out of bed. I switch on the black and green

lamp next to me, the one with the inverted metal shade that flares out with the soft yellow light pointing up at the high ceiling and its vanilla swirls. I put on some clothes and walk over to the kitchen to start making dinner. I'm going to make a good red sauce with shells.

I start the tomato base in a big, stainless steel pot that has handles on it like in a restaurant. I add thinly chopped carrots, then quickly fry some zucchini with breadcrumbs and drop that in too. I sauté onions and green peppers, push them into the sauce with a spatula, and then fry some free range, all natural chicken sausage in the same pan. I add salt and pepper to the chicken once it starts to sizzle, and cook it until it's plump. I set aside three of them on a plate to eat whole with our meal, chop the rest up right there in the skillet and then dump the whole thing into the sauce: chicken, oil and fat. I add basil, a touch of oregano, salt and pepper to taste, and then just let it simmer.

The smell permeates the studio, acidic and sweet. It wakes Josephine up. I usually know when Jo wakes up; I keep one eye on her while I'm cooking and I can sense movement. I walk over and sit down on the edge of the bed. I lean down and kiss her cheek, but I don't touch her because my hands are sticky from the sauce. Josephine stretches. Her bare feet jab out the bottom of the comforter.

"How was your sleep?" I ask.

She smiles. "It was good..."

"You want some food soon?"

She breathes in deeply, then she stretches again.

"Mmm..." she says, talking through her stretch. "Love some."

I go back to the stove and stir my red sauce. Josephine sits up, puts on her slippers and scuffs across the floor to the kitchen table. She sits down and lights a candle while she waits. I boil some water, cook the shells just right and then shake them out steaming in a metal strainer over the sink. I fix a big plate for Jo, one for myself, bring them over and set them down at the table.

We take our time eating dinner. We talk about movies, my day at school, and a book Josephine is reading about particle physics.

After dinner we clean up, and then step into the bathroom to take a long, hot shower. I took the dime sized economy filter out of Josephine's showerhead back when I first started staying here, and now the water just comes jetting out. I love to feel it pounding on my shoulders and backbone.

I soap Josephine from her feet up to her breasts, front and back, her pale skin turning pink under the hot water, slippery against my hand with the suds on it. Steam fills the bathroom, clouding up the mirror and the shower door. I wrap my arms around her from behind and press my body into hers, and we stand there for a long time underneath the steamy spray.

Eventually, we turn the water off and step out. We dry each other off and then get back into that big, cozy bed, our bodies relaxed from the hot shower, Josephine's hair still wet and smelling like sandalwood. We watch movies, laugh, and talk until late into the night.

Later on, we get tired. Our voices hush down and we lay on our sides facing each other... smiling, talking softly, and drifting off into a long, lovely sleep.

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