

Nightmare Fuelled

With a jolt, Gia cracked open her gluey eyes and debated what to pick up first: the mug, the bottle, or the notebook. The usual nightstand decision. This time, she let her better judgment win. Pale fingers trembling, she reached for the notebook and dollar-store pen, scrawling out all that she could remember. Fog obscured the important details, placing them *just* out of reach, but Gia pressed on. *Gawd. Come on, brain.* She focused her blurring eyes on the paper, observing wryly, *Good thing they tawght handwritin' in middle schoowl.* Scribbled fragments materialized under her cheap pen, but nothing seemed to make sense. A pasture of dead grass. The flash of sharp canine teeth. The dry rustle of scorching winds.

Gia pinched the bridge of her nose in an attempt to fight a migraine. “Screw it awl,” Gia said, shoving her work aside and grabbing the plastic orange bottle. She had to dig to find it, tossing aside loose paper, a canister of pepper spray, a trashy paperback novel, and other tidbits of a typical bedside table. Hands still unsteady, she shook the bottle, hand waiting expectantly for a rattling red capsule that *should* have prevented the need for this early-morning doodling session. *Screw it awl, but I migh' need to up my dose.*

Her heart skipped a beat.

She shook the bottle again, but nothing came out. Tiny stabs of light began to attack Gia's retinas—or was she imagining that?—and at that moment, the carelessness of the previous day came back to her in a rush. She had *promised* herself she'd go to the pharmacy before work. But before work, well...

She basked in the warmth of her blanket cocoon. The same bed that, as she tossed and turned under the cover of midnight, was either too hot or too cold, now, inexplicably, seemed perfectly, pleasantly warm. *Six o'clock...qu-wahteh afteh, really...but I'm so comf-tahble...I'll go afteh wahk. I jus' need a couple moe-uh minutes.*

Well, Gia supposed, that hadn't worked out either. Although she couldn't recall the exact events that led her to collapse in bed without a second thought. She pointedly ignored the empty glass bottle near

her feet. Crossing her arms, she nudged the cold glass with her bare toes, rolling it under the bed. *Did I even take a pillw las' night?*

Sucking in a breath, Gia attempted to slow her thudding heart. *Stay cawm, stay cawm, stay cawm, staycawmstaycawmstaycawm.* Gia steeled herself to take a swig from the mug, the final item on her nightstand. Even so, she retched at the cold, rank coffee, but proceeded to drink it to the dregs.

Gia rolled out of her narrow, creaky bed, making no attempt to break her fall as she *thumped* to the floor. She ignored the tortured groaning of the wooden bed slats. Everything was going to be okay. All she had to do was make it to the pharmacy.

Not bothering to change out of the previous day's clothes, Gia pulled on her shoes and resolutely took a deep breath. The fog in her head refused to clear. *I hate eahly mownings.*

Gia tiptoed down the stairs. The effect was considerably less stealthy with her steel-toed boots, but a quick peek down the dim hallway proved that the landlady was still asleep. Satisfied, Gia descended into the little corner bodega, the bottom floor of her "apartment." As she skipped the creaky bottom stair and emerged from behind the bodega's dining counter, she felt a greasy film cling to the dark hair of her arms. *Stay cawm, stay cawm, stay cawm, staycawmstaycawmstaycawm.*

The flickering ceiling light was too bright.

The smell of old pizza sauce sent her stomach roiling.

Even the snapping of her shoes breaking from the sticky tiled floor made her want to rip off her own skin. *Stay CAWM.*

Gia opened the front door of the bodega, stretching her slender fingers up to silence the tiny bell attached to the doorframe. The moon was still glowing strongly, surrounded by a host of twinkling stars. The black sky *almost* sported a tiny twinge of blue, but the sun hadn't quite made a true attempt to rise.

THE HALVED MOON IS THE BREAKING POINT, THE BALANCE OF GOOD AND EVIL, THE OMEN OF CHANG-

"NO!" Gia cried, gripping the sides of her head. *Stay cawm, stay cawm, stay cawm.* Unwanted fragments of last night's dream, voiced by a harsh, rasping shout very unlike her own voice, burst through

the fog. Before, a few random details broke through, but they were a tiny trickle compared to this onslaught. *A PASTURE OF BLACKENED GRASS. FOUR SHEEP, WITHERING, WITHERING, WITHERING ON THE BRINK OF STARVATION. WOOL, ONCE SNOWY, MATTED AND DANK. SHRIVELLED STOMACHS, RIBS POKING THROUGH. THEY. WISH. TO. FEED! SAVE THEM, SAVE THEM!*

Fuelled with new energy, Gia broke into a wobbling run. It took far too much effort to move her body properly; every flat-footed step sent jolts of pain shooting up the length of her legs. As she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, Gia forcibly tore her mind away from the shrieking voice in her head.

The phah-macy.

One step.

One moe-uh.

One moe-uh.

“Ow!” Gia’s foot caught on the lip separating sidewalk from pavement, causing her to tumble to the ground. Bright pain exploded on her palms and knees, leaving bloody scratches. *SAVE THEM, SAVE THEM!*

After steadying herself enough to stand, Gia shook herself viciously, attempting to clear her head. *The phah-macy. Just keep going. Stay cawm.* Gia took a few shaky steps forward. *Left ou’ the bodega, tuhn on Oak Street. Tuhn on Oak Street. TUHN ON OAK STREET.*

Gia turned on 1st Street. Powered by something akin to Nightmare Fuel itself, Gia’s feet moved of their own volition, propelling her onto the broad pavement of 1st Street.

YOU MUST SAVE THEM!

The Fuel ignored Gia’s mental and physical protests, pushing her forward faster and faster. *Please. No.* She felt hot tears well in her eyes—one of the few body parts she still had control of—and tasted salty tears as they trailed off her chin. Gia, tears falling and gait stumbling, looked worse for wear than even the ragged man perched on the sidewalk’s corner. He wore a tattered brown overcoat, but

by stark contrast, his face was clean shaven and his hair looked only freshly mussed. Victim to The Fuel, Gia didn't have time to wonder at 1st Street's new resident beggar before...

THE FIRST SHEEP. HIS WOOL IS STILL WHITE! REMEMBER YOUR DREAM! YOU'VE SEEN TOMORROW'S FATE. INTERFERE!

Sucking in a lungful of smoggy air, Gia croaked out a sound of pure anguish, turning the heads of every denizen of 1st Street. Most, the worn and dull-eyed victims of the early morning, turned their gaze back to the sidewalk and continued their purposeful stride. In a moment of self-awareness, Gia saw herself as they did: just another drug-addict up too late. *Which*, Gia supposed, *isn't fah off the mahk*. Gia's need to reach her pharmacy was now desperate. Life-and-death desperate.

Holding the image of a red pill in her mind's eye, Gia resisted her body's palpable urge to move toward the brown-coated man, breaking free of the otherworldly fuel propelling her against her will. She turned on her heel and dashed in the opposite direction, making her way against the sparse flow of traffic to 2nd Street, a destination slightly closer to Oak.

Icy headwind froze her tears to her face, and, like a moistened finger held aloft in the breeze, the dampness of her face accentuated every shift of the wind's current. Panting, Gia began to drag her feet to conserve her small reserve of energy, but the second she slowed down, she regretted it. Gia halted in her tracks with an audible *snap*.

"No," Gia whimpered aloud as her head, without her consent, turned to lock eyes with a woman, bent over the sidewalk. 2nd Street was not as well-traveled as some other parts of the city, so the woman's artwork remained mostly intact. The woman bent over, allowing a curtain of auburn hair to fall over her face as she added more chalk to the beautifully blended landscape drawn on the sidewalk.

THE SECOND SHEEP. HER WOOL IS STILL WHITE, WHITE AS SNOW. DO NOT LET HER GIVE IN, THE HUNGRY GLEAM ALREADY SHINES IN HER EYES! INTERFERE! I COMMAND YOU!

The phah-macy! The pillw! FOCUS! Gia once again began to run, using the remainder of her sleep-deprived energy to resist The Fuel. She ran, relishing in the burning pain that grew steadily in her

thighs and calves. She ran. And ran. And ran. Her heart soared as she spotted a green road sign, heralding the crossroads between 1st, 2nd, and Washington Street. One more block and she'd reach Oak.

I COMMAND YOU!

Gia lost her balance, and her mental shield that kept The Fuel from fully controlling her mind tumbled down with her. No longer caring in the slightest what any onlookers thought, she curled up in a ball on the edge of the road and screamed, attempting to crowd the disembodied commands out of her mind.

LOOK! THE THIRD SHEEP WAILS AS YOU DO! HIS WOOL IS WHITER, EVEN, THAN THE REST. INTERFERE! INTERFERE, I COMMAND YOU!

Tearstains soaking her sallow face, Gia turned her head. The dejected light of big-city street lamps illuminated a small boy as he half-heartedly called for his mother.

“Mommy? Mommy, where are you?” He fidgeted nervously with the hem of his cargo shorts, the waistband of which was obviously meant for a boy twice his width. He made do with a bit of string as a belt.

A lone woman, laden down with a bag of flour and the task of pushing a stroller, began to make her way over to the little boy's perch on the window sill of Beth's Bakery. “Hi, sweetheart. You lost?”

Black dread coiled in Gia's stomach. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. The Fuel forced Gia to sit up abruptly, scraping her already-raw knees on the rough concrete. Through her mouth, It called to the blonde woman, “STOP!”

The woman, situated all the way across the street, barely even turned. Again, self-awareness hit Gia—at least, the corner of Gia's mind that remained hers—like a tidal wave. She probably looked a lot less trustworthy than the little boy. But looks can be deceiving.

“You're not my mommy! Go away!” He began backing away from the woman's advances, his little legs carrying him surprisingly fast.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, her eyes darting between the boy and the bakery. It looked, to Gia, like she was debating whether setting her bread to rise was more important than the safety

of this little lost boy. The mother in her won out. “No, sweetheart! I can help you.” She extended her hand in a soothing manner.

“STOP! I COMMAND YOU!” Gia called. This time, the woman didn’t even turn.

In a split-second, Gia debated her options. *Run*, she decided. It was futile, however, for she did not have the strength to take control of her body. The plague of her sleeping mind happily ignored her, using her aching legs to stagger *toward*, rather than away from, the action. Even as The Fuel held Gia’s face in an expression of utter confidence, fear skittered into Gia’s heart. Here she was, alone in the dark, screaming at a stranger. An innocent stranger unlucky enough to be in her presence. And a potentially dangerous stranger. *Three potentially dan’rous strangehs*, she corrected, feeling oddly humorous considering the gravity of her situation.

Gia’s mind played and replayed a hundred scenarios in an instant. Truly, Gia thought, it was a wonder of biology that her brain could move so quickly in a moment of crisis. As she locked eyes with the little boy, she knew it was too late. The Fuel disagreed. It pumped her legs faster, making the coarse fabric of her pants *swish-swish-swish* together chafingly.

As the blonde woman disappeared into the alley, stroller in tow, Gia *felt*, rather than saw, the brush of auburn hair and the rustle of brown fabric follow the blonde woman into the alley. The Fuel allowed Gia to stop in her tracks. All at once, the three white sheep closed in. It wasn’t the fact that they took what they needed to buy food that bothered Gia, but the fact that they took plenty to compensate their black-hearted choreographer.

Feeling an uncomfortable sweat prickle at the back of her neck, Gia turned her attention away from her mind’s eye to gaze out of her physical ones. The Fuel whipped her head around, craning it upward to scan the flat concrete rooftops bordering the alley. Gia’s gaze met the retreating shape of a salt-and-pepper-haired man.

THE FINAL SHEEP. I AM TOO LATE. WE ARE TOO LATE.

Gia, still helpless in her own body, slipped into an adjacent alley and huddled behind a dumpster before any of the sheep—the people, Gia corrected forcefully—could give chase. At least, that’s what Gia hoped.

WE ARE TOO LATE. AH, BUT I TOLD YOU TO INTERFERE SOONER. AND YOU FOUGHT ME. MY RETALIATION AFFLICTS. The Fuel abruptly relinquished control over her body, and Gia felt her consciousness surface as if from underwater. She flexed her fingers. After the wave of relief came one of dread.

Gia winced, resigned, as the jaws of four invisible canines sank into her forearms. *The retaliation afflicts.* Four bite marks, welling with dark blood, dripped onto the shadow-ridden concrete as the half moon gave way to the rising sun.

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Gia’s conscious demanded she find and help the blonde woman.

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A baby’s wail rose from the next alley over.

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Gia had been through so much trying to protect this woman. This woman that she didn’t know. This innocent woman. This stranger. This victim. She’d failed, but the least she could do was help in the aftermath.

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The best I can do is keep this from happenin' again. Gia rose, extending her arms for balance, and made her slow way to the pharmacy to retrieve her bottle of red pills, ignoring the shrillness of an infant's sobs.

Ist will be downroight crowded by now. I wondelh when this street willw start to get some traffic.

As if on cue, Gia heard the tinkle of a doorbell as a haggard bakery-owner, likely a competitor of Beth's Bakery, flipped his "closed" sign around, announcing the first activity of the day. *Not too lon' now, baby, and somebody'll helwp ya out.*