

f o r r e s t

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

There're only zero to nine hours a week where you could be awake.
The other one-hundred-and-fifty or sixty or thereabouts, you are in an infrangible and fictive sleep.
A sleep, hard as I've tried, I cannot wake you from.

This was never a normal dream.

An aluminium perimeter so familiar to us stood near and ahead of shore. Impossibly transferred from where it always had existed bounding our school perimeter. Where, for a while, I taught, and you learnt. Then it was here. On a short, flat and stone promenade that steeply dropped off into seaweeded water. It wasn't a concern, why or how the fifteen-foot, metal netted fence moved all by itself. Why it felt sentient without voice, or a face.

Whether the school came too with its border, whether it existed here, teleported to this shore, I couldn't determine. And if I was on that side, the side inside with the school or if I was on the outside closer to the water, I again couldn't determine. My presents all at once felt arrested and omniscient.

Out to sea, came dread. Inescapable, existence-altering disaster. More paradoxically, I felt I brought it into actuality. Invited it in. By fearing the unlikely happening, fearing undecided problems until it is encouraged and decided and brought on abruptly by my own thoughts. So... as I saw it, it became.

A wave. Materialised. Embodied.

An enormous water wall coming towards shore.

Few other misplaced souls, faces semi-familiar, scattered in illogical directions. Some in fact, strolled toward the wall. Treading on a pebbled beach. Others vanished, when they instead neared the fence.

The water reached the shore-

'Mum.'

Awake. The dream dissipated. The water was gone. I was conscious.

My room was set in complete darkness except for rare moonlight cast through the curtains I'd never changed. A still figure stood over me. The silhouette short, and very close. Unsettling at first. Until I could see that it was you, Loe.

'Loe'.

'He's awake,' you loudly whispered.

Was I asleep still?

The inflicted feelings, quietness, terror, dread, loss from the infrequently recurring dream sequence wore off. Melted from my thoughts. I moved my arm from where it was pinned under my chest and fought to free it from floral covers. 'He's back? Where is he?'

'In his room,' you answered. I hear it still, 'in his room' in your voice, Loe. 'He came into my room,' you said, 'and woke me up and asked for a glass of water.'

My breathing staggered as I tried to hold it. 'He's awake?'

'He asked for a glass of water,' you explained over like you'd forgotten... then 'He's in his room.'

Throwing bedding off me, I hurried, half dressed, bed shirted. Snatched whatever folded trousers were nearest and pulled them over my pants. I raced across the hallway that connect our three bedrooms upstairs to get to your brother. To you, Charlie.

You were flat on your back, entombed by expensive duvet. Head poked out from the fold, turned away from the door. Whether your eyes were open, I couldn't see.

Had I missed a chance? If I had, I would've been breaking down any moment. Sobbing on the floor and once again desperately wanting time to fast-forward.

'Baby?' I said, stopped at the threshold. Thoughts begging. Skin, teeth shivering.

But you turned your head.

'Mum?'

All I needed. All the cold fell out of me. A *different* emotional turbulence took over. 'Hi,' I answered, with unchecked enthusiasm. Getting away from tears.

‘How’re you doing, baby?’ I approached your side, ‘You’re awake,’ I considered the notebook tucked a reach away in the drawer. Spoke without first fully processing spillage of my own reactive determination. ‘...where’ve you been?’

‘Mum?’ you repeated. Eyes were bloodshot, reading over the faded slogan on my chest.

‘It’s mum. Not anyone else. I’m here,’ I reassured, learning from past awakenings and intermissions. I came low. *Lower*. To my knees, to the side table, glancing at the IV hung over to the other side of the bed. Reflected glow from the nightlight held hostage and obscured inside its bagged liquid. I’d not dared yet to turn on more lights. Concerned for your over-rested and over-sheltered eyes, and concerned still, it might’ve all been unreal. That the exposure would’ve proven the moment’s fraudulence and I’d wake up again without you.

There was growing discomfort in your small expression. ‘Am I in my room?’

‘You are, baby. You’re in your room. You’re in your bed, Charlie. I’m with you.’

‘Loe?’

‘Loe’s here, too. He’s here. He’s in my room.’ I coddled your hair in a palm. ‘He told me you were awake.’

You were awake.

‘...you’re awake?’

Although, playing tortoise. Trying to retract arms, shortening your neck and shrugging, uncomfortably. Squeezing your eyes shut.

‘Keep your eyes open, baby,’ I begged. ‘Keep your eyes open.’

A first tear. Fled from your sleep, crossed south across your cheek before I caught it with a fingertip. More followed. Slow tears. Tears in almost slow motion. ‘My head hurts.’

‘I know, baby. We have something for it, if-’

‘I don’t know where I am.’ You were becoming stressed, tensed as you cried and tried shutting your eyes even tighter.

‘Please, baby. Keep your eyes open,’ I countered, patting, gently dragging down your cheeks, ‘I know. I *know*. The pain will go. It always does.’ I fitted myself around you. ‘We’re here,’ wrapping my arms under yours, ‘I have you,’ lifting softly, holding your head against my shoulder. ‘Where were you?’

Do you remember when this started?

Once you were eleven.

Near to a month after your birthday. After you unwrapped books, and games, and some socks and stationery. Blew out eleven candles and wished, I bet, for something special.

It was a Friday. I finished marking mock tests, English, Literature, from my last sixth form class, leave the assessments printed mistakenly onto yellow paper on my desk. I tucked under chairs and half tidied the classroom before I hustled over to the older sports hall.

Once a year, gymnasts visited. Set up a flock of trampolines, evenly planted over the permanently drawn lines for different sports on the polyurethane. They were always enthusiastic, the gymnasts who came from I’m not sure where. Desperate to inspire. Swerve the uncorrupted pursuits of secondary school students.

I spotted you. Near a sideline, waiting for your turn. You smiled when you saw me.

When your turn started, you had ten minutes, and free rein. Freedom to repeatedly throw yourself upwards and fall. The landing wouldn’t hurt. Wouldn’t weaken your young bones. And you were supervised, which anyway supplied me with enough relief to not worry and ruin what joy you could have.

The gymnasts, the few athletic men and women wearing fleeces and tights and visitor lanyards and immediately peeling white stickers with names scribbled on with dry marker stood guard beside each trampoline. They stood with arms apart, attentive and prepared to save any overzealous then miss-slung student.

You tried no tricks, Charlie. Just bounced. Up and down, and up and then down.

The gymnast closest spoke up. He told you, ‘Good job, Charlie,’ and tracked the stretching in the outlining springs. ‘Good control.’

A minute left on the clock, you went up just noticeably off course and came down as off. The slightest reangle threw your balance enough. Momentum took you.

I stepped forward, didn't shout so much, but instinctively called out, 'Charlie!'

The gymnast was well ahead. He grabbed you without much pull and kept you on the trampoline.

Stumbled then saved, you rested. You sat, close to the springs. Sat for a moment rather than get straight back up. I came over, pressed the gymnast's arm, thanked him and asked you, Charlie, 'Are you okay?'

You nodded. You smiled at me again and rubbed your forehead.

I imagined, 'Did you hit your head?'

'No,' replied your little voice, and politely asked, 'Can I get down?'

I held out my hands. 'Of course.'

'You did great, Charlie,' the gymnast offered. 'Really impressed.'

You were sweet enough to say, 'Thank you,' before you took a hold of my hand and we left school.

On our way home, the day quietened and disappeared. No light lasted past Five.

You watched junctions and houses and pavements out of the window and let one album play through rather than swapping over CD after one or two songs like you usually would. You were unusually distant.

We dropped into the supermarket after the notably long turn through English woods, along the last main road that gets us home. Picked out on offer pizzas and something for after. Stopped next at the video rental shop. I called home to get Loe's vote on what film. You didn't answer the landline, Loe, and let me worry whether leaving you alone was going to be the worst mistake I could've ever made.

But you were fine. Voluntarily confined inside the dystopian-postered walls of your bedroom. Immersed beneath heavy headphones.

Charlie, you further sunk into sunken cushion dislodged from our lone corner sofa and fidgeted and rolled about the carpet in front of the tv.

Feet up, needing to pee, I woke to credits. Second Unit Directors, Sound Department, Special Effects. I'd let myself fall. Mentally relax and finally slip into doze as the film came to its crescendo. You were asleep, too. Crashed out on the floor where I last saw you.

I took our plates away to the kitchen. I left them beside the sink and came right back into the living room. The credits had ended, switched back to the short loop of snippet footage behind the main menu, and Charlie, you were gone.

I checked all of the rooms downstairs. 'Charlie?'

Went upstairs when I couldn't find you.

'Charlie.'

You were collapsed. Laid on the floor, a little beyond the verge, inside of your bedroom. On your front, arms unsymmetrically out to the sides, head incidentally beside graphic novel.

When I tried to wake you, you'd quietly grunted then shuffled. Your eyes kept shut as I picked you up and helped you to your old bed, tucked you under, and said 'Good night, satellite.' An unsatisfying reference to the film we'd just watched eighty-five percent of.

I'll always have questions. And know that, they're never going to be answered.

One of *those* questions, is whether you fell.

If you would remember. If I'd ever ask.

Then do you remember the following day?

You did not wake up.

I couldn't wake you, Charlie. I could not wake you up.

When I'd peaked in a few times to check on you, you appeared peacefully sleeping. I finally tried as late morning approached to disturb you. I petted you. Pressed on your chest, your face, and softly shook your collar. I peeled back your eyelids when you didn't respond, and while thankfully you were breathing with no trouble, you were not waking.

Sirens cut, and the ambulance pulled over, blocking our kinder of two neighbours' drive. The paramedics came in, single file through our home, asking for directions, to where you were. They set down zipped green bags. 'Can you hear me, Charlie?'

As they addressed your state, they asked, 'If you can hear me, Charlie, show me. Let's see it. Wriggle some toes, move your fingers. Make a face. Weirdest face you can make.'

No wriggle, no move. You were unresponsive.

'Any allergies?' I was asked, 'Any conditions? Other symptoms? Medications?'

'Could you do that for me, Charlie? Can you hear me?'

If you could hear them, I'm unsure still.

The paramedic with the most active voice felt your neck. 'Are you awake, Charlie?' Gradually, they appeared more concerned. 'I don't want to spoil any epic dreams.'

And then, almost as though a reply to the remark, you reacted. You set back your shoulders. You opened your eyes again.

'Hi, Charlie,' greeted the paramedic in charge. 'Are you awake?'

They checked over you before leaving. Measured your heartbeat, skin, and breathing. Checked movement in your fingers, and if you had strength in your limbs. They felt your stomach, chest, spine, throat as I imagined feeling my own. They took blood, shone focused light over your pupils and asked, what you last remembered.

Uncertain conclusions made, they advised me there wasn't anything further to action unless and until there was an indication of something from blood results. The for-the-time-being suggestion was I increase your intake of sugar and keep an eye on mood and motor functions.

That night, Charlie, I read to you a short story from the softbacked anthology Loe gifted. A story you were less interested in compared to the others.

Afterwards, I said 'Good night, Fort.' An unsatisfying reference to that story.

And you closed your eyes, and you fell asleep.

And you slept for eighty-four hours.

Paramedics tried again to wake you.

You were moved to a hospital.

I berated you.

You didn't return any sooner than eighty-four hours.

What you have.

What you experience, Charlie, never existed before you.

Versions have, or so I recall and researched.

As rumours, as fantasy and folklore. Casted spells, potion effect, hypnosis. In stories told when I was your age and I feared sleep, and certain nightmares and being in darkness. In cartoons. One animated daughter whose big, exaggerated eyes rolled. Hand drawn lashes slow clapped before she fell under a spell, the screen faded to black, and the music changed. And comas. An aunt whose eyes closed. Whose body was still for four months. My other aunt who spoke to her. Wondering whether she could hear her.

Lesser conditions are on record. Prolonged sleeps, changing comas, evolving hypersomnia. Patients who're unconscious for hundreds of days. Except, once they're awake, it doesn't reoccur. They aren't lost again. Under another spell.

What *you* have, has no history.

It may have never existed in another person. We sleep all our lives, but we are awake twice as much for the accelerating time we have. You have slept for days, weeks, months, at most close to a full year. You sleep without intermissions of full consciousness.

Intermissions, intervals, breaks, semesters, fissures, awake periods. Whatever researchers and doctors subtly compete to coin these short, but compassionate stretches that are days or sometimes weeks where you are given back, you are awake and with me.

Awake. Wide awake, eyes open. With me.

Until again you fall back into repeating, cryptic dreams.

Selfishness.

Loe.

My worse selfishness, Loe, was, I was wrong to ever remind you of any moment from the past you wish to leave there. And not once, but over again. And despite the obvious discomfort it caused you.

Of course, it is a past I reply over inside my own head. There're loving moments I won't forget and want to think about again.

Hiding. Concealed, together, away from everybody else. Hiding, hugging, too. Holding onto each other when you or I had been especially hurt or upset.

I acknowledge what I've done. Not accepting it could be enough as *mum* to be comforted and assured on my own by these moments. These wonderful instances of your affection picked apart and remembered separately from more difficult memories. But, instead to weaponise. To *weaponise*. For a time, to fear you hated me more and more. Feel you thought less. Less of me. Thought I was less cool. And to then, as my only and unnecessary defence to speak like a saddened and shameless victim and repeatedly remind you of how you once were. How nice to me you could be. How you wanted *my* attention not long ago.

To guilt you.

To desperately make you want to be close to me once more. Unappreciative of your embarrassment. Of independence, and development and reputation. Despite how these moments I brought up made you feel as time went on and you grew up and a little away.

We ate dinner together at the table. Loe, you sat across from me. Picking carrots or swede out of what I'd cooked. You'd sneezed.

'Bless you,' I said once, a mouth busy with pasta.

Charlie slept. Had slept for sixteen days. I'd cooked him dinner as well, as I always would. Planted it closer to the stairs than the table, hoping, Charlie, hoping through smell some of the flavour would find you. Make taste to accompany your feed.

'Why did you change schools?' you asked, Loe. Curious, I expected. Or, suspicious.

I started then, unprepared, to tell you, but stopped.

That night you were awake until late. You don't reply when I call to you up the stairs. I knock first before I enter and flash the lights just to get your attention but not to disturb you anymore than that. I move in and as I ask you about plans for tomorrow, we both stare into your computer's screen.

I'm consoled that you take off your headphones and say 'good night' after I fold back your flopped fringe and kiss your wrinkleless forehead.

I think of a few things I wanted to tell you, Loe, but in the end, I said far less. I said, 'I love you' and 'good night'.

A great inseparability.

Until some years after you started secondary school, we really couldn't be apart. I worked as a less qualified teacher at another school. Every week, I'd need to leave 'unexpectedly', have one of two frustration-gaining TAs takeover, drive around the hills and closer to home because your school called.

You pretended to be unwell. You feigned headaches, acted out fevers and over-or-under acted interpretations of nausea. And when we settled in at home, you often made miraculous recoveries after some distraction. Part of me's sure your acting got worse or just lazier as you realised how small an effort you needed to make. How easily I would accept the circumstance and bring you home.

Rather than sleep, or rest in your own amusement-stocked room, you would stay with me. Remain near. Rest your 'weary' head upon me as I worked from the sofa, shifting my notes to an armrest and continue writing.

I realised you pretended. For a long time, I expected it was evasion. Evading school. Evading other children and other teachers, and, despite my thorough questioning of the head of school, I still worried something more was happening.

I didn't own the self-confidence to think your actions were course to assure us more time together.

It adorned resentment. From *lots* of others. Teachers, assistants, parents. Immediately unimpressed with my frequent absence and labelled 'addiction' to you. This was why I changed schools.

Of all the selfishness and of all the regrets I've recklessly collected, Loe, I'll never have regret about anything that granted me more time with you.

Instead, I apologise profusely for my selfishness. Times I said how I felt. Times I spoke ahead of hearing you. Uncompassionate utterances slipped past better judgement. You deserve to be more resentful and I'm fortunate and grateful and admiring how and that you're not. I could've ruined so much trying to change your impressions. Attempting desperately for you to involve me once again in your thoughts. Share with me the worlds you favoured and broadcast to screens smaller than the living room's television.

I'm more ashamed and sorrier for the following longer time afterwards. A time I am unable to even start to forgive myself for. Poorly pleading for your attention and affection, only to deny it once you'd needed it.

Letting you ever be less important.

Hospital.

Perfect teeth, big cheeks. Good sense of humour. *Dorothy*. Dot. Third place for the most gorgeous being on this earth. Joint first, of course are my sons. You both.

Dorothy was an improbable friend. Only friend I trusted. That I was honest with my honesty, and worse thoughts, and who I trusted to stay with and look after you, Loe, when I wasn't with you. For the four months, Charlie, you were first admitted.

The hardest sixteen weeks.

A hundred-and-nine days unconscious with only two short intermissions. During those intermissions, I was abstinently hopeful which elongated each day. I expected everything could return to normal. It wouldn't happen again.

And Dorothy all but lived in our home and took my place, Loe, as I weakened and shrivelled and stayed beside the hospital bed for the hundred-and-nine days.

On occasion, I possessed Dot. Borrowed her perspective. Her *body*. Only intermittently, where she wouldn't know, inside my dreams. Inside the lullabied short motion pictures between other dreams I can't remember. *Greatest fear* productions. Cinema inspired by deep desire and deeper desperation to simultaneously be with you both. Split, evenly, between the hospital, beside the bed, talking and reading to you, comforting your unconsciousness. And in Dorothy's socks. In Dorothy's overnight clothes. Inside our home, not asleep but awake, sitting down together for dinner, and with films and hearing your music and sharing your thoughts.

‘Dot’, you’d utter.

But I’d reply. You wouldn’t know who I was. That I was playing Dorothy. Respond with a ‘hm?’ or a ‘yeah?’, dream dependant, and look up to where you appeared by the stairs.

‘Are you staying over?’ you asked, yawning. Too shy to look at us instead of the arm of the sofa or the television replaying old episodes.

‘I can’t leave,’ I answered as Dot. Not what Dot would have ever said, ‘I can’t leave.’

Then I left. Dot stayed in the room, in your memory, but I left from her perspective.

My eyes opened to slow, stuttering power lights. Flashes unable to liven the hollowness surrounding. Machines’ low hums. Unwarm walls. Pale walls, and pale floor, pale bed sheets and metal frames and monitors. I wanted to redecorate the room. I never asked the nurses if I could, never bothered changing any part of it. I thought it didn’t matter because tomorrow... tomorrow, Charlie, always tomorrow, you’ll wake up and we go home and it’s over.

The games console was meant for you. Instead, I once or twice tried my hardest to use it. I couldn’t ask for help. You were unconscious still. Somewhere else.

It never happened once we were home, but in the hospital, Charlie, like I with Dorothy, you appeared outside of yourself.

I didn’t have to rest my eyes for very long before and when it did happen. To see you suddenly sitting up right. Unresponsive if I spoke to you. Or wandering the room, without obvious purpose. Or you could feel me. Held onto my arm. Pressed my wrist but then I was fixed, couldn’t move or talk. Could only look.

While I hoped it was, this was never an overlap of our unusual dreams.

Between your descriptions of experiences from your ‘other side’, I told you mine. I told you how we saw each other in the hospital room. But you wouldn’t remember. Here or *there*, you wouldn’t remember ever sitting up, squeezing my arm, or looking out into the corridor.

I Can Save You.

I will save you. I’ll find you, Charlie, and I’ll save you. Save you, protect you and take you from evil slumber for longer than the short intermissions I’m allotted. Restore my rightful sole custody of you. Get my son back. Have every minute.

I’ll save you. The only outcome I would’ve accepted. Because you were not dead. You were not gone. Because oddities and coincidences quickly convert to fate or yet-to-comprehend meanings or experiences or quests when you are uncompromising and unsettled. When you’re unaccepting. You’re desperate. And I was, so desperate and up against, fighting this heart wrenching change.

There was a setting.

Bigger and amidst the gallery of environments formed from both memory and imagination inside your unconscious, a setting. Between the dreams you described to me like typical dreams – absent context, impossible physics, mouths without voices, objects without origin – there was a place. *One* place, where you’d always returned. A place not as unlikely to exist as the other landscapes. The infinite drop offs, ceilings with select furniture, car merged with cafeteria. This place could exist. It could be somewhere. It could be in our world. And if it did, and if I found it, it could have answers.

At the start of my ‘quest’, you were intermitting more often. Every few weeks. Waking up at three, four, five on quiet afternoons, or approaching seven on busier, priorly frustrated midweek mornings.

Before your head would throb, and your legs ache, you spilled overfilled pockets of excitement. You sometimes tried immediately escaping out of bed, unacknowledging the iv and how much time had gone without any movement. You’d search, look for specific things in your bedroom and forget what for. You called out. You cried out if I wasn’t already there. When I was, and you were in bed and calmer, you tried to tell me about insects. About their ability to change form, exchange gestures and converse. How they

disappear. You described meeting weird and unhappy characters. Walking in third person. Having photo evidence and new possessions, holding onto these possessions and photographs until it unfortunately evaporated with the specific dream.

Could I tell you more?

Could I tell you more? About the bugs. About what they told you. What the specific gestures were, why these other characters were often sad. Why the landscapes and other worlds altered, changed gravity and colour and weather. How you reacted, why you were frightened, why you were laughing. What it all meant to you.

I couldn't tell you.

No. Because I was fixated on ending the entire nightmare. I let everything else, the appearing unmeaningful, the fantasies, the moments that interested and excited you, be missed. I concentrated on the building. The literal, standard structure within the setting where you kept returning.

We worked through tears. Yours and mine. And Loe's. Through crying and fights, and strains and sicknesses. Destructive headaches, migraine diagnosis. Stabbing pains in your sinuses, your cheeks and chest, and agony in eyes, ears and teeth, canines, incisors and molars. Growing pains and muscular pains worse. Pinching Achilles. Legs which desired a marathon and amputation all at once. Unaddressed dehydration and insomnia, delusions and nightmares, I suffered. Twitching in certain fingers. Repressed sweats, light-headedness, prescription side-effects and panic attacks. Bladder infections, cramps, broken toe. Loe's second degree burn. Loe's flu. Loe's choking. Loe's post-traumatic stress and his reasonably so developing anxiety around genetics and suffering a sudden and similar 'sleep imprisonment'.

I fed you pain killers and other medicine and picked the search right back up and got to asking you again what you remembered. Again, and *again*, 'What was the building?' 'Is it familiar?'

Your pain was excruciating, so you wailed. 'I know, baby.' I held your hand. *I know.* 'I know.'

Through pleases, I persisted. *Please.* Let me sleep. Let me go. Help me, *please.* *Please* stop. Stop it, mum. *Stop it.* Charlie, *please.* Loe, *please.* Tell me, *please.* *Please,* mum. Mum, *please.* *Please,* Charlie. My uncompromising fed shamelessly off fear that every intermission could be the last.

'Is it familiar?'

Is there anyone else there?

Progression was snail's pace. If that snail was submerged in long sleeps between interrogations.

You couldn't recollect the finer details of the building, or its setting where you were transported between short dreams. The more that I pressed you for information, the harder you tried to remember and the more it dissipated from your memory.

And over, *more*, more I pressed you for information.

'What's outside?', 'Can you see outside the building?'

My other methods were even more unfair. Irrational and shameful and idiotic. Just when you were returning, I encouraged you to squint or shut your eyes and try to keep 'one foot', one eye, there and the other here so you could see it still as I asked my questions, pricking a page with pen. 'Where is it?'

How do I get there?

It led nowhere. If the place is real, I can't know where or would have to give up everything to look. And I would. Sacrifice everything that *I* have, but *not* what *you* both have. Not anymore. Not more than what I've already surrendered and lost. The precious hours that could've been love. Expressions of affection, excitement. Laughter.

Time Together.

'Are you ready?' I asked as I prepared to draw the curtains.

'Okay,' you whispered with a receded voice. Covers up to your chin.

Slowly, I let sunlight into your room, and it touched your chestnut eyes for the first time in five months. My heart raced. This was a chance to be in each other's fully conscious company. What were we going to do with the undetermined time we had?

Other plans and routines, reliance and responsibilities were so many times abandoned. Long term savings diminished. Spent on last minute experiences organised to force an exciting childhood into the far less time available. Cramming a memorable past in ahead of a very uncertain future. Without insurance, trips had been rescheduled, costly adjusted and cancelled without compensation for the inevitable instances where you fell back to the other side and were not in your own bed.

Algarve, Portugal. We had both finally blacked out from exhaustion. I'd never allowed us more than turns at light dozing. My attention entirely on you on the flight, and yours on new pencils and lineless paper pads. Your drawings, writing, and out through windows on plane, train and coach. We carried our shoes, walked barefoot on beaches. Stalked crabs. Dug winding trails through the sand and waited for a strand of ocean to follow. We treaded carefully and spied through eroded, circular skylights in caves. Watched the sun rise and set from different balconies. Rushed the minutes in pharmacies, seeking foreign equivalents to what medication we swallowed back home.

A neighbouring dog bark woke me up. Unsure of how I got there, I came to on the tile floor of the week-rented apartment. Day had changed to night. The windows were opened wide. The makeshift buffet staled on the coffee table. You were asleep, sat upright on the sofa.

We journeyed home on a ferry. You boarded in a wheelchair once I'd made up several scenarios plausible enough to be allowed aboard with you uninterruptedly asleep. The venture was cut short. All further plans cancelled or for longer postponed.

There was less room for my clothes. My worn-to-death boots were crushed beneath amounting presents wrapped and ready and waiting and waiting for the next opportunity to celebrate late. Rush out or order cake, banners and balloons. Afraid, I always joked 'make a wish,' and 'don't close your eyes', and every year whether it was July, October, or March that we celebrated, I asked 'Can I get one, too?'

A wish.

You remember.

Over time, we started to sense it. We couldn't explain how, or why, because there wasn't a cause or a pattern. I'm sure. I recorded every date, falls and reawakenings to the minute, put it to analysts and data scientists, there was no pattern. But we felt it. We did. Though you were symptomless in the days leading up. We felt when the next sleep was coming.

Over *more* time, I interpreted this sixth sense instead as something granted. Good.

Pretend to be brave. Be okay. Brace to restrain the melancholy and repeating loss of your son. Rest, quiet, together on top of his covers. Look up, look at each other. Talk forever. Know when to say, 'sleep well, gorgeous' and 'see you soon'.

Let go.

Only until next time.

Other Side.

Sleep Magnifier. Sleep Lyda. Sleep John.

Sleep Jen, Sleep Eliot, Sleep Hundred, Sleep Alexie. Sleep Cara.

Was only six days long, Sleep Cara. So, for that reason, Sleep Cara was a favourite.

A documentarian talked about Nanga Parbat and Gasherbrum in Pakistan. Like these mountains, massive and hypnagogic, we agreed to name every one of your long sleeps. *Only* choosing names we could agree on. Sleep Ruby you didn't like. Ruby, I knew was the name of a girl in your class. Sleep Patrick made me want to curl up and vomit for reasons that I'm not going to tell. You're not old enough.

The names are all historicised in handwritten form. Tiredly scribbled. Titling descriptions as though chapters forming a novel of dreams. Accounts more memorable than days in a real life in this quiet town, repetition, school, homework, haircuts, and often boredom.

The *Other Side* will never have you for good. I won't ever let it. *However,*

It is a big part of who you are. Who you'll become. And it's not absence or only sadness or pain, it is exploration, and imagination and otherworldly. It's rightfully important. Meaningful to you, the dreams. The impervious sleep. Therefore, it is to us as well. Loe and I. A part of our lives.

Obviously... I'd rather you and Loe both, all to me. Only, I've realised, that has become a very selfish hope as you've both aged and beat me to acceptance of our unique circumstance.

The time that I have. What I have I adore and am appreciative of. Memories made and not to forget, memories still to be made. Asleep and awake.

Finishing the story toward the second half of the anthology, I tell you about Loe's and I's lively plans for tomorrow, about Dorothy's new friend, about the newest school, about my writing. I rest the book down, I kiss your forehead, say, 'Goodnight, Catcher.'

Before bed, I leave the house. Go outside and into our garden and stare at the far end into the dark and upwards at the few stars in the sky.

Sliding off my slippers, my bare feet flatten the damp and overgrowing grass. I open the netting, scratch my elbow on velcro and roll aboard. Onto the trampoline.

I lay flat on my back and look up again.

I'd almost left once. For the Other Side for good. Not on purpose.

A little girl. A wave. Washing over me, unexpectedly pulling me under with my mother.

I fear how she felt. It's sudden. She can't fight what's happened, what's taken us both. Her control's gone, she's to hope and wonder if I'll make it without her.

Hear her words still.

Voice still young, afraid, 'Fo?!'

Forrest, can you hear me?

Can you hear me, boys?

forrest
re.occurrence
Copyright © 2026 by Leo Mara.
All rights reserved.