

The Sleepwriter

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1934

Ellis Covett has always been a sleepwalker. He assumes it's because of his overactive imagination.

He has so many words that it is overwhelming attempting to find somewhere to put them. He's almost glad that he runs on such little sleep. When he gets a full night, his imagination thrives like moisture feeding a fungus.

Imagination is a blessing and a curse, if Ellis believed in blessings. Somehow, Ma still did, making wishes on stars and eyelashes, even if they were fished from her eye. She argued that they counted anyway, and she and Ellis needed all the luck they could get.

She tries finding purpose in everything in a desperate manner. She has a mantra: "*expectin' the worst, hopin' for the best.*"

Ellis doesn't have a mantra. Ellis has school and a journal and somehow, he still has time to think up a universe that only he has access to. He loses hours to paper and pen, writing faster than he can think. He starts new projects before finishing the multiples prior, hunched over his desk until his back ached. He writes until the sun goes down, or until his father gets home, and then he would lie in bed and think of stories to write until he falls asleep.

Ellis often wished that his father had died in the war. Then it would be him and Ma and he wouldn't have to hear crashes or see Ma pretending like she hadn't been crying, and he wouldn't have to live with the stomach-curdling guilt of knowing he can't do anything but make it worse.

Instead, Ellis goes away. He goes away when the world is too loud, when it's too quiet, crowded, stifling, when he wants to be anywhere but where his physical body currently is.

Sometimes he can't figure out if he's awake or if he's sleepwalking, and he doesn't hate the feeling.

Ellis wakes on Christmas day, shivering. The mountains are frozen over and

capped in white and the cold seeps through the window like smoke. He bundles up and pads to the living room, where Ma is stoking the fire. She's wrapped in fabric, and when she turns, she smiles a quirked, lopsided twist. Ma's smiles are rare, and Ellis thinks they're as bright as the center of a flame.

"C'mere," she says. She walks on her knees to the center of their sad excuse of a rug, where a lump sits, hidden under a blanket.

Ellis goes. He sits cross-legged next to the thing and waits with his hands in his lap.

"Open 'er up," Ma says.

"What's it?" Ellis asks. He lifts the very corner of the blanket and finds a hard, black case.

"Open 'er up," she repeats. She's almost grinning. The skin on her nose wrinkles.

He opens 'er up. The thing is a latched case with a leather handle. It's an odd square shape and a bit clunky, but it would be useful when he could go back to school in person. Ellis thinks he should be more outwardly excited, but excitement is a foreign feeling. He isn't sure how to show it on his face.

More than anything, Ellis is confused. He hasn't done anything to deserve this, and the depression wiped the school out months ago. He thinks about asking why she's giving this to him, but he doesn't know if that would seem ungrateful, so he decides not to.

"Thanks, Ma," he said quietly. He pets the dust from the sides of it.

It takes him a few more swipes before he realizes she hasn't responded. When he finally looks at her, she's hiding her mouth behind a fist. Ellis frowns, because he knows he's not funny. "What?"

She nods towards the case. "Open it."

Ellis pops the latch and lifts the lid.

He immediately slams the case closed again when he sees circular keys. Denial is the safest and easiest option for them both, so Ellis pulls the blanket back over the typewriter and pushes it over to Ma.

After three or four tries, Ellis is able to choke, "No."

Ma waves a hand like it's unimportant, leaving Ellis at a loss for words despite the number of notebooks he's filled.

"Ma," Ellis repeated, more urgently. He glances down and finds he had subconsciously tucked the blanket around the typewriter like he was putting it to bed. When he blinks, he sees "Remington" branded onto the back of his eyelids. "This is—Ma, what'd this cost? It's too—we're not...doin' good." He cast a quick look over his shoulder, as if mentioning his father would summon him. "Pa's fixin' to flatten us—"

"Nope," Ma said firmly, "he won't. We ain't gonna say nothin' to him."

Withholding information from his father was an unspoken safety precaution. Never once had they spent money on unnecessary purchases, and Ellis can't imagine his mother doing such a thing. She struggles enough to find food to put on the table. Not to mention his father would notice the money missing, and the consequences of that are too dire to be worth any happiness.

"I'm...*mighty* grateful for this, Ma." Ellis's voice cracks, as it's been doing recently. He swallows the burning coal of righteousness, "but we can't be throwin' money at that."

"Darlin', it ain't cost nothin'," Ma says. "Rich folks'll toss out just 'bout anything."

Ellis blinks. He waits for more stipulations, but Pa's ignorance to the typewriter seemed to be the only one.

He doesn't quite know what to do. He's never received a gift. Pa says that how hard he works to provide for them is a gift enough. He said that people get gifts if they earn them, but that Ellis hasn't done anything worthy of one.

Ma said every day was a gift, but every day Ellis wakes and can't find it in himself to be grateful for receiving it.

Ellis opens the case and frowns at the typewriter, a gift, and he still doesn't understand what he did to earn it.

"Why?" he asks.

Ma's face seems to melt, almost curling in on itself. Ellis wishes he could shove the word back in his mouth or take the typewriter and run so he didn't have to look at sadness he'd put on her face.

“Cuz you’re a good boy, Ellis.”

“Thank ya,” he says. He avoids her eyes and hopes she moves on, even if Ellis’s confusion hasn’t been cleared.

She doesn’t seem assuaged. If anything, she looks conflicted. Ellis doesn’t know how to handle soft feelings, but Ma does. She caresses his face like she might cry, and the sentimentality makes him very desperately wish he could hide.

“I wan’cha to be happy. Be some’un’s and make ‘em happy,” she says. She takes a sad little breath. “Wan’cha to be a good man.”

They were more than aware of his father’s negative traits, but they were never discussed. Ma’s implication feels almost illegal. She lets it simmer for a moment, but it quickly boils over. She withdraws her hand, and Ellis’s face burns when he registers what else she’d said. His stomach turns when imagining himself as “someone’s.”

He’s never liked the idea of going with someone, even when he sees Beth from school looking at him, and he sees the way the other boys look at her. He doesn’t think he feels those things for people. His mother mentioning this makes him wonder if she somehow knows that his romantic feelers are broken, and his cheeks hurt from the heat. On top of this, if his Ma and Pa are an example of what it is to “be someone’s,” that is the last thing Ellis wants.

“Do anythin’ for ya. Ya know?” she whispers, bringing Ellis back to the present. “Anythin’.”

He hates himself for his immediate bitterness. He nods anyways, rolls a shoulder and stretches his neck and notes where bitterness and shame feel in his body for when he needs to write about it next. Shame, right there in his trachea. Bitterness, in his cheeks and his clenched teeth. And that other lingering feeling, that nauseous dread in his stomach when he thinks about being someone’s.

But he needs to look excited. And grateful—and he is, he *really* is, but there is such an overwhelming mixture of surprise and confusion and anger and discomfort that he ends up unfocusing his eyes in the way he does when he needs to power through something.

He says, “I know, Ma.”

She tugs at the blanket under his knee, teasing him. “I’d even pick through some’uns trash.”

He snorts so he can hurtle the emotional moment back to lightheartedness and tries not to focus on how tired Ma sounds when she tries not to sound tired.

“Can’t wait to see what’cha come up with,” Ma says. Ellis knows what a conclusion sounds like, and he nearly vibrates with the anticipation of being alone with the typewriter. She closes the case, latches it, and waves him off. “Go, go. Best get started now.”

Ellis got started then. He sets the case on his desk with the softness one would handle a newborn baby with and pops the latch, which he wouldn’t do with a baby.

The typewriter is made of a sturdy metal, painted a glossy black with a red trademark sticker on the top left of the cover. The typebars are a bit crooked, and when he presses a key, they show themselves and disappear again like ground-hogs. “Remington Portable” is in gold lettering, impossible to miss over the black.

Ellis rips a blank page from one of his notebooks and fiddles with loading it until he figures it out. He scans the keyboard for the letters he wants, running his fingers along each key and memorizing the order they’re in, testing them, feeling the steel that he swears will never be cold again, and Ellis writes.

Ellis sleepwalks less and writes more.

1938

Ellis dreamed that one day, he would be a writer talented enough for he and Ma to have a house that she chose, with her own car, and a larger garden where she had the freedom to grow more than vegetables.

He didn’t expect that his first publication would be Ma’s obituary.

The *Sheridan Post* arrives in what is now his front yard, and Ellis unfolds it to find his mother’s face on page two. Her smile is posed. It is not the smile with the wrinkled nose or the lopsided quirk.

He starts to read, but he doesn’t need to. He’d toiled over it up until the day the funeral home needed it. It is not his best work, and he hates that.

Just to torture himself, Ellis scans it. He gets as far as:

Dorothy A. Covett (Preston), 39, died at her home on Thursday, October 20th

before he curses at it, drops the paper on the kitchen counter, and retreats to the typewriter.

He makes himself think of new stories he can write instead of how sick he feels, and how the house still smells like cleaning supplies, and how lucky he is that her blood blends in with the red bricks of the hearth.

Ellis knows he isn't funny, but he jokes to himself.

At least Pa's dead too. I can write whenever I want now.

1940

Ellis works enough to keep himself afloat and writes when he's not working. Writing brings in very little income, but it keeps him sane, and Ellis thinks that has to count for something.

1942

When Ellis checks the mailbox, he's hoping for a congratulatory letter from one of the seventeen magazines he submitted his story to.

Instead, it is an order to report for induction.

Ellis says goodbye to his mother in May. The sun is still bleary-eyed in the early hours of dawn, and Ellis needs to head towards the train station.

He'd learned young that dwelling on the carelessness of the hand he was dealt was a futile thing. Fairness is an unfamiliar concept; one he seldom knows or understands. Waiting on fairness to show its cowardly face is an otiose endeavor.

Though he'd attempted for years to rationalize this, Ellis still can't help but dwell on how unfair it is that Ma is buried next to the man that killed her.

Ellis doesn't want to make friends, but Gabriel Cassidy is quietly adamant and talks mostly about his family. Ellis thinks he might just need someone to talk about them with. Gabriel has six siblings. He'd hoped that he and his brothers would be stationed together, but one was assigned to the Air Force and the other was already dead.

“What about you?” Gabriel asks.

“Only child,” Ellis says.

Gabriel doesn’t push. Ellis thinks that if he has to have a friend, he’ll keep Gabriel.

“What are you always writing about?”

Ellis passes over his small notebook. Gabriel scans the framework for a scene he wants to write for a story he hasn’t fully fleshed out yet. He nods, passing the notebook back to Ellis. Ellis scans it himself, trying to read it from the eyes of someone who’s reading it for the first time.

“Nice,” Gabriel says. “So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?”

“I think so,” Ellis says. He scratches the stubble on his jaw. “Dunno how, though.”

“Well, I’d read it,” Gabriel says. “Write me when it’s done, yeah? Or mail me a copy?”

“Will do.”

1943

Ellis watches the other men write letters to their loved ones. He taps the back of his pen on a piece of paper and tries to think of ideas for a story. His imagination has subdued with age, but it is still there.

Gabriel asks him, “You don’t have anyone at home?”

Ellis shakes his head and writes a new idea instead of verbally answering.

Writes in dead loved one’s voice, sends to no one, returns to sender, reads them as if received from loved one.

“Cuz he don’t talk to anyone,” Johnston says. His words are spoken towards his lap, where he scribbles chicken scratch onto a piece of paper. His words are obscured through the pen cap between his lips. “Hard to talk to someone who only knows two words: his first and last name.”

“Man, why do you always have to be a dick?” Gabriel asks.

“Cuz I know you’ll always defend him,” Johnson laughs. “Y’all fags or what? Acting like a fuckin’ knight in shining armor over here.”

A few other men snicker. Ellis hears someone else say something, but he doesn’t bother listening.

Lieutenant McCavy says, “Enough.”

Gabriel shoots Ellis a look, but Ellis keeps his eyes on his paper. They finish writing in silence. Ellis thinks he feels Lt. McCavy looking at him, but he doesn’t turn his head to check.

“Shit,” Lt. McCavy says. He crouches at the entrance of the foxhole, looking back and forth between Ellis and Gabriel. “Thought this one was mine.”

“s’alright, sir,” Ellis says.

Gabriel mumbles something and rubs his eyes. While Ellis is sat up, he fixes the blanket barrier between him and Gabriel and tucks Gabriel’s arm back under it.

Lt. McCavy looks Ellis up and down, then leaves without another word. Ellis thinks of stories to write until he falls asleep.

1944

Gabriel is killed in Ireland.

Ellis knew the army would inform his family, but he still wrote to them.

Ellis doesn’t have any ideas for stories that don’t have to do with death. He lets his letter for Gabriel’s family be the last story he writes.

Ellis goes away while it happens. He sees his lieutenant and he sees the barrel of a pistol and he closes his eyes and goes away until it’s over. It hurts. He’s had worse. McCavy breathes down his neck and then the moisture there is cooling and he can breathe again. He doesn’t want to. Breathing means he’s alive which means it’s real. The zip of McCavy’s pants sounds to Ellis like a gunshot. He

throws Ellis's blanket back over him, says something, and climbs out of Ellis's foxhole.

He wants to shoot McCavy and then himself. He wants to scream, even though he isn't sure his voice is capable of it. He wants to tear into the soil with his bare hands and only speak with his fists from now on. He wants to shroud himself with his genetics and become someone he swore he'd never be; a shell-shocked caricature of a person so irate that they send him away for the safety of others. He wants to terrorize, like a rabid dog until someone has mercy on him and puts him down.

Ellis does none of those things. He lies unblinking in the pitch black until he needs to get up and pretend like he doesn't wish a shell had been dropped on him in the night.

Ellis's unit is deployed to Germany.

He bumps into a German soldier. He looks probably about as shocked as Ellis feels, but Ellis's shock resides in the fact that he thinks, for a moment, that this man is his father. They look unsettlingly similar. He freezes, like he used to when his father pinned him with the same look this man is.

Muscle memory forces Ellis from inaction as the soldier raises his gun.

Ellis checks the soldier's pockets after he's killed him. There's a picture of a woman and a little girl in his lapel pocket. Ellis flips the photo and tucks it back in with their faces pressed against the man's heart.

Ellis gets deployed to Belgium.

1945

He's moving through the woods and from the corner of his eye, a tree bursts. Ellis drops to the ground, and an artillery shell explodes in the branches above him. He's not fast enough to tuck his legs away before hot steel is flying towards him, slashing into his lower half. He doesn't know if the pain forces him into silence or if the explosion has deafened him.

He doesn't look down when a medic wraps his legs in splints. They pull open his shirt and something pokes and prods him and he realizes that his torso was hit

as well. In the medical tent, they try to put a mask over his face, and he recoils from it.

“It’s going to hurt, and we need you to be still,” a medic says. She tries to wrangle the anesthetic mask back over his head, and he jerks away from it.

“I’ll be still,” Ellis says. He fears he won’t have a choice on his consciousness anyway. He wants the choice. He wants to be awake when they touch him. The loss of blood is making his lips and face tingle. The vicious battering of his heart against his ribs makes his vision swim.

The mask goes over his face.

Two minutes or two days could have passed by the time Ellis opens his eyes next. He’s at a real hospital. The doctors have British accents. One pries his eyes open, shining a light into them.

Ellis feels his chest vibrate with what he assumes is a growl. His hearing has returned. It is a dog-whistle shoved into his ear canal, and he would choke out as many medical professionals as needed if it meant they would stop touching him.

“Get off,” he thinks he says.

“We can’t do that,” someone says. They pull the splint off. The blood that glued his wound to the fabric comes off as well. Ellis makes a noise that sounds more animal than human and lunges for their hands.

More hands. They grab his wrists and hold him down at his chest and his shoulders. They cut his pants from his legs. They rub his shoulders and it feels worse than the shrapnel did. They try to squeeze his hand, so he tucks his hands under his thighs. The surgeons prod at his legs and turn them this way and that and look through the holes that should not be there. His legs look like they’ve been butchered. One looks purple. He tries to swing them over the bed to stand, but they don’t move. He knows he can’t walk. He doesn’t know why he’s not able to stand. A cool hand rubs over the back of his neck. He feels the coldness of a gun and hands on his bare legs and hips. He leans over the side of the cot and vomits.

More voices. They say, “We’re just changing the dressings.” They say, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” when Ellis’s growls turn to puffs of panicked breaths. They speak in soothing tones, like mothers do to their children. Ellis feels like a little boy, running to Ma with a skinned knee or a busted lip. He doesn’t think he’s cried since he was that little, but something is coming from him and it sounds like a sob. They say, “Just hold on. Just a little longer. You’re so brave.”

The surgeon says, “The leg has to go before the gangrene spreads.”

Ellis says, “I don’t care, I don’t care. I don’t *fucking* care— *get off* of me. Get off.”

He does not have time to think of anything before his mouth is covered and the room turns hazy. Ellis hopes he dies.

Ellis learns that the sleepwalking has resumed when he wakes, sprawled on the floor of his hospital room. Pain flares and pulses from his torso and both legs, but when Ellis looks down, there is only one. It ends under the knee.

The nurses hurry in and he doesn’t know why he asks, but he doesn’t think it’d hurt.

“Can I have my leg back?”

The nurses look at him very sadly. Ellis takes that as a no.

Ellis is discharged.

He thinks he should probably sell the house. Just the thought of how much effort that will take exhausts him, so he avoids his parents’ bedroom at the end of the hallway and does not use the fireplace.

1946

He can’t always remember his dreams, but he can piece them together by where he wakes up.

He wakes up at the hearth, clutching the wheels of his chair. He assumes he dreamed about holding Ma’s cracked head together. He is squeezing the wheels of his chair, and his hands ache.

He wakes up at the backdoor his father killed himself outside of.

He doesn’t always wake up where he’s sleepwalked to. Sometimes he wakes up in his bed. He knows he’d sleepwalked because his crutches are somewhere

he didn't leave them. Sometimes he wakes up with his prosthetic carelessly donned and his stump aches.

Sometimes Ellis dwells on the hand he was dealt, and he decides that an amputated limb is not his most painful loss.

Ellis woke up at his desk.

He'd dug the typewriter from the closet in his sleep. It glares up at him. His fingers are poised to type.

He puts it away. He has nothing to write about, and the things that will come out of him are nothing he wants to see in words.

Ellis starts working at Hoover's Clock Repair. He finds that he likes fixing things that are fixable. His co-workers are nice, even on days where he can't speak or days when his stump feels like ice and fire at the same time, or on days that he wishes he didn't wake up.

1947

Ellis has been out of combat for two years, but he's spent the better half of this year battling with the sleepwalking and the typewriter. His subconscious wants him to fix something that cannot be fixed. He does not have it in him to try. He doesn't want to.

When he wakes up at the typewriter again, he sees that he'd loaded it with paper. Packing it up and putting it away sounds like climbing a mountain, so Ellis leaves it and hops back into bed.

1948

Ellis works and goes to his doctors appointments and physical therapy and finally sells the house. In his apartment, he reads books that have nothing to do with the military or any wars. He tries reading romance novels, because perhaps this broken part of him is fixable. Perhaps it is true that he hasn't met "the right person" yet.

He finishes a few, but he finds them very boring. He has never felt any of these feelings. He thinks he would be perfectly content living with a friend for the rest of his life.

He wonders if that friend could have been Gabriel.

Ellis hates romance books because he hates what they make him dream about.

Now that he's read what romance feels like to other people, his subconscious has taken those constructions of feelings and crafted them into recurring dreams where he enjoys the attack.

After he wakes, he thinks about when McCavy will die and feels relieved. He assumes he wouldn't feel relieved if he had enjoyed it.

He returns all of the romance novels to the library. He prefers horror.

1949

Ellis's dreams become more vivid. They force memories to the surface of his mind. Even in his sleep, he does not know what to do with them.

Sleepwalking feels like a physical escape attempt. In dreams where he wishes he could run or hide or fight, he wakes up somewhere he did not fall asleep.

The typewriter mocks him. He wakes in front of it and thinks, I could write about it, but his thoughts become so jumbled and desperate for release that he can't sort out one sentence at a time.

He dreams about finding Ma dead.

He wakes at the typewriter. In his sleep, he has written.

She still smells like vanilla extract. I wrap my hands around her skull and hold it together. This feels like the right thing to do. The bones scrape together. It feels like potsherds. It's not too different from terra cotta. I want to throw up. I don't. I am worried whatever is left of her brain will fall out if I move. I want to salvage what I can.

In his sleep he had written the dream out, word for word. There are some details that Ellis hadn't remembered until now, down to the forgotten words McCavy spoke as he snuck from Ellis's foxhole.

"There are so many odds stacked against you, Covett. Remember that."

Ellis shoves the paper deep into the desk drawer and goes back to bed.

Ellis shoots awake at the ringing of a gunshot in his ears.

He dreamt that he made too much noise. McCavy shot him and said Ellis had killed himself. He is dripping with sweat, and it feels like blood pissing from a bullet hole, and he thinks, *Okay*.

Ellis has heard people say that they wouldn't take back the things that have happened to them, and he wants to laugh at the idea of someone not taking their chance to make their life easier.

Gabriel's voice comes to him.

"So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?"

Ellis thinks, *Wouldn't that be nice*.

He doesn't know what it says about him that he would rather the man that hurt him be dead than the woman who would have died for him to be alive.

He wonders if she'd still be alive today. He wonders how she would have fared, living alone, not knowing if Ellis was going to live or die. For a moment, Ellis feels relieved that she didn't have to experience that, and that he didn't add to her burden, and that he doesn't have to pretend to be coping better than he is around her.

Then he feels horribly guilty.

1950

For some reason, I am watching this dream in third person.

My foxhole is there. McCavy is getting closer to it. He is not walking away from it. I see that I am still sleeping, bundled up, and on my side. I am not face down, half naked, covered by a thin blanket.

I want him to change course. Good, yes. Go through the trees. Away from me. Keep walking. Keep walking. Away from the camp. Someone is calling after him. Make him wave them off. Keep walking. Walk him until he's far away from where I'm sleeping. Far enough away that I will get a good night's sleep, and not even his death will disturb me.

Get the pistol out. Push it hard against his temple. Yes. Hold it there. Let him struggle for a moment, just until his confusion is replaced with horror. He won't scream for help, but wrangle his mouth shut anyways, just because I can. Let his life memories begin to flash through his mind. Let him realize that he will lose against some invisible force. Let him beg for his body to cooperate. Good. Let him offer desperate prayers to a God he'll never meet.

Pull the trigger.

Ellis reads this with a frown. This is much to process first thing in the morning.

Lt. McCavy's death is something that he hasn't thought about in years. The confusion surrounding why he had committed suicide weighed heavily on Ellis for a few months after it happened, but truthfully, he hasn't thought about Lt. McCavy much in the last few years. He doesn't know why this is coming up now.

He plugs the context clues of what he's written into the mystery of Lt. McCavy's death and doesn't like what his mind comes up with.

Ellis digs through his desk drawer of papers. Some of them are unintelligible messes of ink. Some are limp with how beaten they are, covered in ink like Ellis had pushed the carriage back again, again, again, then flipped the paper and repeated. Some are neatly typed, legible entries. Some have only a few sentences. Some have only a few words.

Ellis scans one from last September; an assault, word for word, in excruciating detail.

I thought he was Gabriel, but then I thought that Gabriel would never touch me like this, and then I remembered Gabriel is dead. I assumed I'd suffered an injury of the sort. It was the logical explanation to why my lower half was exposed.

When I turn, I see the barrel of a gun.

McCavy says, "Shut up."

I shut up.

Ellis drops the stack into the drawer and slams it shut. He feels—as a distant memory, as a nightmare—hot breath and invasive pain and words that break his already feeble heart, and his stomach twists at how vivid it is.

Ellis remembers, *"So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?"*

Ellis thinks, *That's impossible.*

Ellis remembers, *"Write me when it's done, yeah? Or mail me a copy?"* and, *"Can't wait to see what'cha come up with."*

Ellis doesn't know what to do with the things he thinks he's learned, so he lets the ideas for the story he'd abandoned years ago come back to him.

He remembers Ma and Gabriel and thinks, *What if the protagonist could bring people back from the dead, too?*

Ellis loads a blank sheet of paper and writes.

And writes.

And writes.