

Sleeping Your Life Away
by Kim Switzer

“You're going to sleep your life away!” Mama's voice chirped from the doorway.

Lil dragged the covers over her head and rolled away from the light streaming in the open door. “Gonna sleep a little longer, Mama.” She heard her mother's deep sigh, then the door closed. She thought briefly about getting up, then let the warm darkness of sleep wash over her again.

When Lil finally woke up, she felt groggy and achy. And she still felt tired. She wondered if she was coming down with something. “Really dark in here,” she murmured, reaching for the water glass on her nightstand. Empty. She was sure she had filled it up last night. It was dusty, too. She rubbed her eyes and the bridge of her nose and looked closer. “Dust. Why is there dust all over everything?”

She dragged herself out of bed and pulled on sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, shoved her feet into sneakers, and opened the bedroom door. It was dark in the hallway, too. How long had Mama let her sleep? She wouldn't have let her sleep all the way 'til night, would she?

“Mama?” Lil called out. The house was eerily silent, and her voice echoed back to her. She tilted her head but heard nothing. No television, no radio, no traffic noises. “Mama?” she called again, feeling panic clog her throat.

She rushed through the dark house, banging her shins against the coffee table as she stumbled toward the front door. Yanking the door open, Lil stepped onto the porch and stared out at a nearly pitch black night. No streetlights. No car headlights. No lights from other houses. She breathed rapidly, panting in fear as she strained to see anything beyond shapes and outlines up and down the street. Nothing.

“Power outage,” she whispered. “Must have been a storm.” She didn't let herself think about why everything seemed dry and there was no thunder or lightning. She didn't let herself think about why there were no people anywhere.

Lil ran back into the house and grabbed the flashlight from the kitchen junk drawer, as Mama always called it. She flicked the switch. Nothing. She shook it and flicked the switch again. Still nothing. She swore, using words Mama would be horrified to find out she knew. She pulled the drawer open again and rummaged in the back until she found a couple of candles and a box of matches. She lit one of the emergency tapers, comforted by the dim yellow glow but a little spooked by the jumping shadows the light cast around the room.

She went back outside, shielding the candle with one hand from the slight breeze rustling the overgrown box hedges lining the sidewalk. “Those need to be trimmed,” she said. Then she froze in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at the bushes. Jerry had been over last weekend and trimmed all the bushes, pruned Mama's trees, planted some new flowers for her. The same routine they went through every spring, with Mama pretending she wasn't sure what she would plant, poring over seed and plant catalogs, then picking Sweet Williams, Black-eyed Susans, and Zinnias the way she always did.

With a deep breath, Lil moved toward the street. She turned left, toward the Davidson's house. Their car was parked out front. Maybe they were home and sitting in the dark because of the power outage. She started up their walkway then turned to look at the car. It was pocked and pitted as if it had been in a severe hail storm. “What did I sleep through?” she wondered. She leaned close to the car, holding up

her candle. She could see rust where the hail, or whatever it had been, had torn away the paint. She frowned. She didn't think rust could form in one day. "How long did I sleep?"

Lil looked at her neighbors' darkened house then turned and went home, barely keeping herself from running. She slammed the door shut harder than she meant to then locked the bottom lock, the deadbolt, and slid on the security chain, something they rarely did in their quiet, safe neighborhood. If Mama came home before the lights came back on, she'd just have to knock to be let in.

Lil wandered from room to room noticing the same dust she'd seen in her room covering everything. Maybe there had been an earthquake, she thought. Maybe the dust was plaster from the ceilings. But surely Mama wouldn't have left her sleeping while the house was shaking itself apart, would she? Lil gasped. "Maybe she got hurt." She ran back to her room and dug in her backpack for her cell phone. Dead. She knew she had charged the battery yesterday. She always kept her phone fully charged.

"What the hell is going on around here?" she yelled toward the ceiling. She waited as if expecting a response. When none came, she headed back to the kitchen.

"Peanut butter and jelly doesn't need power," she said, the sound of her own voice making her feel a little more normal as she moved through the silent darkness. She opened the breadbox and pulled out a flaccid bag filled with lumps. The flickering candlelight revealed green spots of green dust and mounds of what might have been bread slices at one time.

"Eew!" she threw the bag away from her onto the counter and backed away. She wasn't hungry any more. But she was thirsty. She got a glass from the cupboard and turned on the faucet. Not even a trickle. "Great. Water's out, too." In the pantry she pried a bottle of water out of the plastic-covered case and twisted it open. She wrinkled her nose at the flat mustiness of the water but drank it anyhow. "Better than dying of dehydration, right?" she said, but the sound of her voice in the emptiness was starting to be more distressing than comforting.

Finally, Lil headed back to her bedroom. She didn't know what time it was, but it seemed late. Maybe she could sleep a little more and in the morning find out what was going on. She pushed the curtains open a little in case the streetlights came back so she would see them. She pulled her comforter off the bed and shook off the dust, then rolled herself in it and lay back down, counting her breaths until she drifted off again.

Lil woke to sunlight streaming across her face through the curtains. She sat up, pushing the comforter to the foot of the bed. She sat very still, listening, but she still couldn't hear any sounds of life from inside the house or outside.

Finally, she forced herself out of the bed. She drank more of the stale water, then grabbed her backpack and her brother's backpack and stuffed them with everything she thought she might need. At the front door, she took her key from the dusty hall table and put it in her pocket. "Just in case." She looked around the dusty, abandoned house through a glitter of tears caught on her lashes, then she stepped onto the front porch, locking the door behind her.

At the end of the sidewalk, Lil paused to look up and down the street. Nothing had changed since last night, except that in the light of day she could see that the cars were all rusting where they sat, and the

houses all had shingles and siding missing, broken windows, cracked driveways, and other signs of disrepair.

“It had to be an earthquake,” she said. She headed toward downtown, walking past the Manson's house where the bird bath was toppled and lay in half a dozen broken pieces in the middle of their straggly, overgrown front garden. Mrs. Manson always had the most beautiful, well tended garden in the neighborhood, and seeing it destroyed this way. “Earthquake.” She nodded, trying to convince herself. “But what made the cars get all rusty? And shouldn't there be **some** survivors? Maybe everyone from this part of town got evacuated. Yeah, that would make sense. Maybe there was some sort of chemical leak or something, and that's what damaged the cars, and...” She snapped her mouth closed, realizing that she was babbling and getting close to hysteria on top of talking to herself.

Lil trudged through the silent streets, observing block after block of rotting houses and rusting cars. With the sun directly overhead, beating down on her, making sweat run in rivulets down her back where the backpack pressed against her spine, she finally reached the old downtown area. This used to be the true center of town, long ago, before Lil could remember. This used to be where all the shops and services had been before the town sprawled out and big stores came in and pushed the smaller stores out of business. Some new businesses had taken over a few of the boarded up buildings, started sprucing things up and opening new stores to replace those that had faded away. And the police station, fire station, and town hall were all still here around the town square.

This was where she expected to find people, survivors, authorities. The streets were empty, the buildings quietly crumbling just like everything else. The gazebo in the center of the town square had collapsed in on itself, and its cracked and splintered gingerbread pieces looked to Lil like broken bones. She shuddered and turned away from the sight, facing toward the town hall.

Something white, with battered edges, was hanging from the main doors of the town hall. Lil headed toward the still-beautiful, battered neo-classical building. She could see that a painted plywood sign had been nailed to the carved wooden doors, and she winced slightly at the destruction then shook her head with a twisted smile. “Like holes in the doors are something to worry about right now.”

Lil read the sign. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. “Town evacuated December 8, 2014. Permanent evacuation ordered as of June 1, 2037 by order of the governor. Proceed to the city for quarantine.”

“2037. It's 2012.” Lil turned to stare down Main Street. Nothing made sense. Yesterday morning she told her mother she was going to sleep a little longer. Now it was twenty-five years later, and the town was evacuated?

She realized the high, keening sound she was hearing was coming from her. She sank down on the marble steps, setting down the backpack she carried and letting the other one slide off her shoulders. She pressed her hands over her mouth, rocking back and forth, but she couldn't make the sound stop. Her breath panted out through her fingers and caught in her throat as panic washed over her. As the wind pushed debris down a street she no longer knew, she closed her eyes and started screaming.