

The Insomniac

“He’s a loner. More than a tad odd,” fumed my father, wiping a quivering blob of marmalade from his freshly-shaved chin.

“It’s his insomnia, James. He’s exhausted,” said mother. Her voice sounded cheery but her eyes didn’t match.

“If he’d make himself rise and shine, he might be tired enough to fall asleep at bedtime,” said father. “And, weary or not, respectable people begin their day sociably. They join their families at the breakfast table and put a good face on the morning.” The scowl on his own face said the rest: *Those enjoying free room and board should make an effort to conform to the lifestyle of their host.*

That Father wasn’t fond of mother’s older brother Jake came as no news to me. He’d maintained for years that Jake was a “weird one.” He’d never married, never shown the slightest interest in the ladies. He had no male friends either, as far as we knew back then. “More than a tad odd, that one,” was father’s often-repeated verdict.

Uncle Jake had always been a little different, mother would acknowledge when pressed. He’d been in his teens when she was little, but even then, he’d stuck to himself. He used to say

he liked animals better than people, she recalled. “What he lacked in companions, he made up for in critters,” she said. He was forever collecting bugs and larvae in glass jars, so he could sit and stare endlessly at them. When his considerable collection began to give their mother the creeps, she disposed of the whole lot one day while he was at school.

Speaking of school, Uncle Jake dropped out of there the day he turned 16. He was never academically inclined anyway, mother always said. He worked for 28 years on the afternoon hog kill line down at the meat packing plant. When they closed the plant in the spring of '58, they pretty much shut down Jake's life too.

Father saw only someone who hadn't had the sense to set aside something for a rainy day “in spite of having no responsibility for wife or family, all these years.” He was as dismayed as mother to learn that by June, Jake could no longer pay even the modest rent on his walk-up apartment in that stinky area downwind of the meat packing plant. Father was particularly disgusted at the jars and jars of horse racing bet ticket stubs he happened upon while helping Jake clear out that apartment. And now he was truly appalled to have an insomniac living under his own roof.

“Odd as God makes 'em, and can't sleep to save his soul,” he would rant as he spooned marmalade onto his second slice of blackened toast, day after day.

If breakfast was our sacred family ritual, marmalade was its catholic cornerstone. Our incense was a heady perfumed blend of fresh-squeezed navel oranges, ever-burnt toast and father's beloved Aqua Velva aftershave. Mornings had always been my favourite time of the day, mostly because father was usually cheerful, which meant mother would be as well. I loved to sit and listen to them laugh and talk, while I rolled marmalade chunks of orange and lemon rind

around on my tongue. Ten hours later, father might return from the office out-of-sorts and slamming kitchen cupboard doors in search of scotch instead of orange juice. But Ridley Road mornings were sweet and sunny things – at least until Uncle Jake moved in.

Mother must have weighed the edge in father's voice, and decided against trying to further defend her brother. Instead she reached over to stroke his razor-smoothed cheek with her long pianist fingers. She knew how to handle father. You had to give her that. You could actually see him relax. After a minute, he shrugged and smiled. "Perhaps your uncle should try lying at the foot of the bed, Annie – that way, he might drop off!" Mother and I tittered at father's little joke. Our breakfast table sun was shining again.

Why it bothered father so much that Uncle Jake couldn't sleep, I could never understand. After all, he and mother slept in the downstairs bedroom of our wartime storey-and-a-half – in the room most of our neighbours, all of whom had identical houses, used as a dining room. They'd moved down there a year ago, when the new mahogany bedroom suite mother had ordered from Eaton's proved too large to make the required U turn at the stairwell landing.

Uncle Jake slept – or tried to – upstairs, in their old bedroom, across the hall from mine. I was the one who had to listen to him pacing the creaky floor at all hours. I'd hear him pounding his pillow to dent in a new head hollow, and flipping it over to find a cool side. I should have been the one who hated him. But I couldn't. I knew the sound crying makes when you try to muffle it, face down in your pillow. I'd done it often enough myself.

When I finished breakfast and went up to my room to brush my hair, I was surprised to see Uncle Jake dressed and sitting on the end of his bed. I watched him twirling his suspender around his stub of an index finger. He'd left the tip of that finger on the pork cutting room floor before

he even turned 18, mother had told me. That accident convinced him his short, stubby fingers would never be nimble enough for knife work; he transferred into hog kill, and worked there till the day the owner pulled the plug on the operation.

I was fascinated by Uncle Jake's fingers. They bulged, red-gold, like over-stuffed sausage casings. More like toes than fingers, really – miniature pork bellies, ready to burst. And one fat, little tip gone missing. One little piggy gone to market.

He saw me staring at the stub. "Don't matter," he said quietly. "Don't hurt none." His eyes were red-veined, his voice weary.

"There's breakfast, if you want some," I said. "Toast with marmalade. And even Frosted Flakes today!" I did my best Tony the Tiger impression for him. That made him smile, but he still shook his head. "Did you sleep at all?" I asked.

"Maybe a little, toward morning." He didn't meet my eyes. I knew he was lying.

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Hula hoops were all the rage that summer, and my weighted, turquoise hula hoop was my second-most-prized possession, eclipsed only by the silver medal I'd won at the track and field meet in June. The medal hung by its silver satin ribbon over the corner of my dresser mirror, deliberately, so it would frame my face whenever I brushed my hair.

I hated my naturally curly hair for the way it frizzed up in the humidity, but mother had convinced me that frequent brushing just might "scare it straight." I was brushing without

reminders after that, determined to make the image in that mirror beautiful enough to be worthy of the shining silver medallion that framed it. My hula hoop stood guard nearby, ever at the ready for its daily workout. It was the key to my secret summer project: carving out a skinny waist, and thereby sculpting womanly hips into my boyish ten-year-old figure.

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“Sleeplessness isn’t fatal,” said father a few weeks later, as he scraped the last of the marmalade from the bottom of its glass jar with his coffee teaspoon. “He must be getting some small periods of rest; when the body is tired enough, nature takes over.”

“He is depressed, James. He needs medical attention, medication.” This was quite an admission coming from mother, who only last week had been attributing Uncle Jake’s insomnia to an iron deficiency, based on an article she’d read in *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Mother had taken to force-feeding her brother *Sun-Maid* raisins. She would thrust a baking-sized box of them at him whenever he wandered by. He’d roll his eyes at me, and I’d roll mine back. I liked nothing better than sucking the warm centres out of those fat, purple grapes that split their skins in autumn, but I hated dried old raisins as much as he did.

Uncle Jake would oblige mother, though, by shoving his chubby fingers into the box and withdrawing a fistful of her bruised, purple “sleeping pills.” Then, raising his rosy-red fist high for dramatic effect, he’d drop them, a few at a time, into his open mouth. Invariably, one or two would slip through the gap created by the missing fingertip and fall to the floor, to the delight of Davy, our terrier. Davy was starting to like Uncle Jake. So was I.

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Mother had reason to regret convincing her brother to seek a medical solution to his insomnia. The pills prescribed by the doctor were considerably more potent than raisins. And they worked, after a fashion. Uncle Jake finally slept – but he also walked. Before when he rambled around in the wee hours, he'd been wide awake. Now he was a zombie. We would be wakened by the sound of a crash and find him standing in the kitchen – staring vacantly, Davy's metal dog dish at his feet, dog food everywhere. Uncle Jake took to urinating into the laundry hamper, and, once – according to our neighbours, the Hadleys – right off the back porch. Mother finally flushed his pills down the toilet after Mae Hadley told her what her husband had seen. Uncle Jake reverted to warm milk, raisins and acute misery.

Sometimes I would see him, standing at his bedroom window, watching me work my hula hoop in the driveway below. I would swivel my very best then. I could do one hundred spins with ease by midsummer, although still without any sign of developing hips. But something would swell inside my chest when I knew he was watching. He would nod his head in appreciation and clap soundlessly. When I next looked up, he'd have vanished into the blackness of his room.

Other times, he would watch television with me. And sometimes he would nearly nod off, his head supported by the high winged back of father's old reading chair. I would study his stub of a finger then, marvelling at its smooth, square tip. It shone like one of the buffed, fake bronze dials on our Electrohome television set. "Caught ya, Annie," he'd say. "Caught ya, kiddo." Not that it mattered. Uncle Jake had long since become my friend.

It was TV that finally gave me the idea of how to help Uncle Jake get some sleep. A guest on the Ed Sullivan show, actually. Father always said he preferred the Perry Como show, but mother and I loved watching Ed Sullivan's guests. Uncle Jake didn't see the show that gave me the idea, though. He was in his room "puttering," as he called it. I told him later about how a lady hypnotist had waved a pocket watch back and forth until her subject fell into a sleep so deep she was able to convince him to break an egg over his own head.

"Don't care for eggs, never did," Uncle Jake told me. His eyes were shining, teasing. He stifled a yawn.

"Oh, I won't do the egg part," I giggled.

We both jumped at the sound of a slamming kitchen cupboard door. "... I won't have it! ..." came the sound of father's raised voice from the other room.

"James, hush now!" came mother's trembling vibrato. They were arguing a lot by then, and there were more empty Scotch bottles on the back stoop than I had ever seen before.

I looked up and saw tears begin to rise in Uncle Jake's eyes. "You can try to hypnotize me if you want," he said finally.

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We did it the next night. I sat at the foot of his bed and tried not to stare at the Hellmann's Blue Ribbon mayonnaise jar quarter-full of fingernail clippings he had on the dresser. It hit me that father had a point. Uncle Jake *was* a "weird one."

There was a sour smell in his room too. I got up to open his bedroom window for some air, and glanced down at the driveway below. He watches me hula hoop from right here, I realized. Hula hooping would look neat, viewed from above, I decided. I was proud that I'd done a good job with it that afternoon. A hundred and forty-four twists and turns! I hoped it wouldn't take that many ribbon twirls to get him hypnotized.

"I don't have a gold watch to swing on a chain, so this might not work," I told him. "I just have my silver medal for running track. Silver's for second."

"Silver's not second with me," he said. He sounded angry. "Silver is *first* with me, Annie. *You* are first!"

Some hard thing was making my chest hurt. "*Next year you'll come in first,*" was what father had said when I'd showed him my medal. I forced myself to stare at the fingernail clipping jar until I stopped wanting to cry.

"We'd better get started," he said finally. "They'll be calling you for bed soon."

I took a deep breath, and tried to remember everything the hypnotist had done. "You have to relax, Uncle Jake," I said. "Lean against the headboard, maybe. I have to twirl the medal on its ribbon, slowly, wave it back and forth like this. You just lie back and stare at it."

Twirling very slowly was harder to do than I'd thought, but I finally got the hang of it. The silver medallion flashed in the lamplight with every turn. Uncle Jake was focusing on it, his head bobbing with each rotation. Good! He was trying. I kept the revolutions up longer than the lady did on television, trying to make sure it took.

Then I focused on making my voice as soothing as hers had been. “You are getting sleepy now,” I droned. Your eyelids are getting heavy, *very* heavy. You are sinking deeper, deeper. Let yourself sink deep to sleep, deep, deep ...”

I couldn't remember her exact words, but I thought I was doing pretty well. His eyelids were nearly shut now, his head tilted off to one side. For good measure, I brought the medallion a little closer to his eyelids, and started up again. That's when I heard it:

“Annie, *get off* that bed this minute!”

Father was standing in the doorway. The vein in his neck was bulging.

“How dare you, you son of a bitch!” he was shouting. Father – who never swore!

“I was trying to ...” I started, but he cut me off. “Get to your room this minute, Annie. And do not set foot in this bedroom, ever again!”

I ran down the hall, fighting waves of nausea. *How dare you call him that! It's you who's a son of a bitch*, I thought, and gasped at my own audacity. I threw myself onto my bed, covering my head with my pillow to try to shut out the angry voices. Davy jumped up and tried to nuzzle me, but I pushed him away.

Mother came in some time later. I pretended I was already asleep until, finally, I heard the creaky step signal that she was rounding the landing.

I lay awake for hours after the voices stilled, listening for sounds from Uncle Jake's room. *Nothing*. No pacing. No pillow pounding. Not even any crying. The only one crying into the pillow that night was me.

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The sunlight on the linoleum floor told me it was time. I heard Davy barking downstairs, and father hollering for me to come and let him out. I ignored them both. I was not going down for breakfast. I knew where I was going. No matter what anyone said.

I paused in Uncle Jake's doorway. He was sleeping – soundly! Lying face down, with his right hand up on the pillow. He had my silver ribbon woven through his bronzy fingers like some priceless basket; my shining medal was peeking out at me from under his stub.

Then I saw that the side of his cheek was deep purple. Purple, like the raisins spilled on his night table. Spilled raisins ... spilled *pills* . . .

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“An overdose. Apparently from a repeat prescription,” mother said later to Mae Hadley. To father she said nothing, not a single word. But she bit her lip till it bled, and drank tumblers of his best scotch.

I wanted Uncle Jake to be buried with my silver ribbon. Father wouldn't hear of it. I stopped speaking to him, then, too.

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There were only twelve of our relatives, and four ex-workers from Jake's old hog kill crew, there in the funeral home chapel on that miserable, rainy Friday afternoon. Uncle Jake hadn't

been what you'd call religious, father said, so he saw no need for having an Anglican funeral, or any other such fuss. Mother just bit her swollen lip and looked away.

We said our farewells to my uncle in the smaller of the two chapels at Eternal Rest Funeral Parlour. The room had a sickly sweet smell, like a bad Chinese restaurant, but I kind of liked the funeral home's name. I hoped maybe it was a good omen for Uncle Jake. I had to admit he looked peaceful. Like maybe, finally, he was getting a decent sleep.

Father gave the eulogy himself, to spare us the cost of a clergy honorarium. "Jacob Vonner was an unhappy man," he stated flatly as the rain pounded the chapel's flat tin roof. "He was a loner. And more than a tad odd." To keep from crying out, I pressed the silver medal I'd brought along in hopes of sneaking it inside Uncle Jake's casket, into the fleshy part of my palm. I dug it in deep and squeezed until it hurt. There was a giant crack of thunder. We all jumped.

"But he was greatly loved," father hastened to add. "Greatly loved."