

**In The Still of the Night**  
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Jocelyn ought to go inside. It's gone two already and she's got an aerobics class at eleven the next morning, but sleep seems such a trivial waste of time right now. It's such a beautiful night, with stars scattered across the sky and she wants to be a part of it. Her street is usually busy, full of people bustling in and out of its many terraced houses but now it stands empty. All hers. The world in fact seems all hers at the moment, for Jocelyn is in love.

She met him in the club tonight, though it wasn't like that sounds. He wasn't any drunken lad pushed to chat her up by a group of even more drunken friends. No. Adam was different, special. He was there with one mate and mate's girlfriend, dragged out to stop him moping at home alone. And thank God he was. *He* said that, not her, although she was quick to agree. They danced all night and then they kissed. At the end. So shyly. Not all grab and guzzle like so many of them can be but tender, gentle, promising. He took her phone number, promised to call, suggested lunch – tomorrow. And he's sent her a text already: 'can't stop thinking about you'.

Jocelyn sits down on her doorstep as the taxi pulls off up the street, and hugs the phone to her. So this it; this is love. She knows it is. It's so obvious, because she's not thinking 'bit keen isn't he?' and she's not thinking 'what will we talk about at lunch', or 'what will I wear', she just can't wait to see him again. So no, she won't sleep. For she is young and in love and there'll be plenty of time to sleep later, once she's married, once she's got kids, once it doesn't seem so exciting any more.

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Sarah hears the low chug of a diesel engine down the street and smiles to herself. There's someone just coming in from a night on the town and here she is, dragging herself

up after three snatched hours in bed. She was the one out and about once, now she can't imagine being that free - or that alone.

She reaches down and picks up her baby. His plaintive little cries hush immediately as he nuzzles into her, his tiny, squirming little body locking perfectly against hers.

"There, there," she soothes, sinking into the nursing chair by the window.

He whimpers again, impatient now as she eases her heavy breast out from her dressing gown and then he latches on. There's a sigh of contentment from them both and Sarah settles back, rocking gently, feeling the strange tug as, amazingly, her baby draws life from her.

She's tired, yes. She can feel sleep nagging at her eyeballs but she blinks it away. What's a little bit of sleep compared with a moment like this? She reaches down and places a finger in the tiny hand of her baby and feels her heart contract as his own tighten around it.

She glances out into the street. Tomorrow they will put little Thomas into his pram, push him out. Maybe go down to the river, stop at a pub, buy food for dinner. Nothings really, but such sweet, sweet nothings. And together, so very together. But for now he is hers, all hers, and she loves this sneaked time in the night. She will have time to sleep when he's older, when he's worn out from playing with his mates, when he doesn't need her as much.



Mary, easing up the road, going carefully over the speed bumps, casts her eye over all the cars parked neatly on drives and pavements and is pleased to have the road to herself. In the back the children shift, trying to get comfortable, trying to find a path back to the sleep they've been dragged from. It's early. Much later and they might be more restless, too excited to sleep, but they're not ready for that yet. A few minutes more and the hum of the engine will lull them off. With luck they won't wake til she reaches the ferry port and

then they'll be up, stiff necks thrown off instantly with the smell of the sea, the sight of the boat and the imagined horizon of France and holiday.

Beside her, Graham turns and opens his eyes.

"OK?" he murmurs and she nods.

"Not too tired?"

"Not too tired, no."

And it's true. She feels wide awake, although she barely slept at all, too nervous of missing the alarm. It's been a long year for them all. New schools for the kids, a new job for her, Graham working hard too. But now they are off together to relax and be a family. It will be hectic, yes, even exhausting, but fun. Definitely fun. And for now, it's all hers.

A soft sigh from the back makes her smile. She glances in the rear view mirror at a T-junction and sees a head loll, a teddy being cuddled in, a pink cheek pressing against a pillow. They look so young again asleep, so vulnerable, so very precious. And they're hers. Hers to drive through the night. She pulls over to let a taxi past then moves on to the end of the road. Right at the old folks' home and she is off down the main road, heading South through her stolen night. When the kids are older, when they're gone off to their own lives, maybe she and Graham will fly to exotic islands at civilised hours. There'll be plenty of time to sleep then.

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Susan steps onto the terrace and watches the car disappear down the road. It's strange, being up in the night. It's as if there's a whole different world going on that you've barely glimpsed before. Lives being lived in different patterns to the ones you've got so used to. Including her own.

She draws her cardigan in close around her and shakes her head. She thought she was all set in life. With the kids gone it was time to do what they'd always planned: go out more, travel more, enjoy their freedom. They'd had so many plans. Mark's redundancy,

however, had not been one of them. Suddenly life had all gone upside down and she'd found herself working at the wrong end of life and the wrong end of the day.

There'd been nothing else for it though. Mark had been so down, so miserable, it had been up to her to get a job. It was only fair really, after all those years at home, but she hadn't wanted to. She'd been scared stiff. She'd come here, to the old folks' home because looking after people was all she was qualified to do. And thank God she had, because she loves it. The old folks are so sweet, most of them, and so interesting and so damned funny at times. They have her in stitches. And the other carers are great too. A real laugh. And it's amazing getting a pay cheque, amazing going out and spending her own money for the first time in so many years.

As for the nights? It's only one week in four and, actually, she doesn't mind it. It doesn't seem like the wrong end of the day at all any more, more like a whole new one. Mark is setting up on his own now and already doing well. He says she can stop work again if she wants too, but Susan isn't sure she does. It'll be good to get back to normal at home, to go out a bit after all, travel even but maybe that's not enough for her any more. Somehow, these nights have lent her time, snatched, secret time to face the possibilities of new life, new patterns.

There's a call from inside. Someone needs her. They're in pain sometimes, her old folks, or scared, or just lonely. Not often. Mainly it's quiet. Mainly they sleep whilst she keeps watch, guards their frail lives and what could be more important than that? There'll be time enough to sleep when she's frail herself.

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Rose looks up. There's someone calling for attention along the corridor. Not her. It's never her. Sometimes that nice new carer brings her a cup of tea in the morning and praises her for sleeping so well. Rose just smiles, nods, takes her tea. Well, how should they know? It's not an intrusive place, this. They don't come unless you call and she'll never call. She wants the night all to herself.

She picked the room specially. It had the biggest window.

“But it only looks out on the street Mum,” Kate had said, “and it’ll make the room cold.”

“It looks out on the sky,” Rose had corrected her, “and I like it.”

Kate sometimes complains now, when she visits. Well, not complains, just comments,

“How come you wanted that window so much Mum but you never sit at it?”

Rose doesn’t tell her about her midnight vigils. It’s mean, probably, paranoid even, but she doesn’t want anyone checking up on her or hustling her back to bed. She’s old enough to manage without a bit of sleep now. Besides, she’s not up every night, and not all night either; she’s no obsessive and she’s getting old. She knows that. But still she’s glad when she does wake. Glad when she can make it to the window and find time with the night, time with herself and her thoughts without any interruptions from the waking world.

She looks out now. Her eyes are failing. They can barely focus to read these days but still they spot the girl on the doorstep down the way. She’s sitting looking up at the sky, smiling. Rose draws back a little, smiling herself, happy to know that there are others out there who love the night too. There’ll be time to sleep later.