

Allan Reeder
from *The Good Sleeper*

For years, the bed-wetting had kept him occupied, or had given him at least a short mission in the night. And usually, afterward, sleep was not too far off.

Hugh Otterman had never been what is called a good sleeper; he belonged to that class of moderate insomniacs who, with the aid of reading material, fall asleep without much difficulty—in his case, still holding the newspaper open before him, and only when his own snoring led him back to the porch of consciousness would he lean in and fold up the words, drop the news to the floor, remove his reading glasses, and switch off the light, all without opening his eyes—he belonged to that category of poor sleepers who can drift off without a problem but who are more than a little familiar with early-morning hours spent wide awake, silent, eyes open and collecting the dark.

Even in childhood, Hugh—or Hughie, as he was known—frequently woke in the night feeling as fresh and alert as if he'd just leapt off Moses Rock into the chill of Pickett Pond. And as it was no fun remaining in bed waiting for sleep to take him again—especially with the unbroken rhythm of his sister's breathing passing over the wall that separated their bedrooms—he would, at ten years old, often make use of the time to get his chores done, to sweep out the kitchen (he could see the rise of his mother's eyebrows when, in a few hours, she'd realize) or even to step into his father's rubber boots and head out to collect the latest of Digger's ample "contributions to the Otterman Empire," as his father was fond of describing the dog's constellations of s*** in the backyard.

To work while others slept, to set himself ahead of the day to come, and to please his parents—though at his age, of course, Hughie didn't analyze the matter, these were the multiple satisfactions that proved soporific. He'd lay his head back down on his pillow, and a light lethargy would fall with the sheet over his limbs. It took only a minute

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or two of his sister's breathing to ease his young mind back to sleep. When he next woke, sunlight would be shining on what he'd gotten done.

How different is any man from the boy he was?

Some thirty years later, a father himself, Hugh would rise in the night with his task. And other similarities between then and now were not lost on him. His sister dozed through her nights thousands of miles away, but his wife, Alice, usually delivered as steady a wash of *inhales, exhales* into the dark air. And though no wall separated him from that sound, there was nonetheless a distance: the narrow corridor, just the width of Alice's nightstand, that ran between their twin beds, where once, in the old apartment in Rye, had stretched a queen. "The Great Divide" he called it, though not out loud.

If one of the boys ever came shuffling into their bedroom now drawn by the idea of settling in between their sleeping bodies, as Jacob had been, for a time, before the move, dragging his pillow behind him, he would find only that rectangle of hard floor available, beside Alice's pink slippers. But then, the notion of Jacob, nearly six feet tall and proud of his "pecs" and "abs" and the sparse stubble on his chin, crossing the room in the dark with his pillow was ridiculous. Disturbing, even. And Lucas, too, was past the point of desiring or needing that drowsy intimacy. Yet he had never known the queen. He'd been born in the Twin Bed Era, after the move, and if he had ever tottered into the room in the night, Hugh didn't recall it.

Instead it was Hugh who, in his sleeplessness, would make his way down the hallway to Lucas's room and, often, hoist him off the plastic-coated mattress and carry him into the bathroom. There he'd set the boy on his feet in front of the toilet, one hand remaining at his elbow to make sure he was awake enough to stay upright. Then he'd bend to tug down his pajama bottoms and whisper into his ear from behind: "Go pee now, Lucas. You can pee now. Come on, now. A little pee."

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If it was a successful night, as most nights eventually became, the two of them having arrived at an unspoken nocturnal schedule, thankfully—if Hugh entered the boy’s room to find the bottom sheet still dry, in the bathroom he could count on Lucas’s head to dip as his fingers moved to pinch his young penis and, without any more coaxing, he’d aim his stream. How many nights had Hugh stood there behind the boy, facing the faint ghost of himself in the medicine chest mirror, waiting for the weak, finishing spurts into the bowl?

“Shake now,” he’d whisper, and Lucas would thrust his hips forward as he wiggled, sleepy but fastidious about delivering every drop into the bowl. “Okay, now. Good boy. We’re done.”

The trip back to bed Lucas always made on his own, though Hugh would follow down the hall, just to be sure of his safe return.

These were the good nights, when he didn’t have to strip the sheets off the bed, strip the pajamas off the boy, who stood there rubbing his eyes in mute understanding of the mistake. The good nights were a practice in prevention. Pre-emption. Not getting ahead of anything but simply getting there in time. And not an effort to please anyone. In the morning, in fact, the boy would have no recollection of their joint project.

Not even of the night, at the start of the summer, when Hugh had had to go himself, and took up position to Lucas’s left. Together they’d foamed the bowl, his thicker stream adding a running bass line to Lucas’s trickle, provoking giggles. But the boy never mentioned it later, which was just as well. Better not to excite him about any middle-of-the-night activities.