

In 2006 I started a Bachelor of Communication in Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. I'm sure I would've learned a lot, if I had made it to the end of the first semester. As it was, all I learned was that it's hard to find time to study when you work three jobs, no matter how much you want the degree.

My eventual failure notwithstanding, I managed to write two short stories at the UC, both of which were later published. My first assignment, "write an 800-word piece," resulted in *Sleep*, which was printed in *Voiceworks* magazine shortly after my debut novel was released. It was something of an experiment – I'd never written in present tense before, or used a female protagonist. More significantly, *Sleep* was my first love story.

I'd like to thank Sophie Chapman and Amanda Rawstron – while the main character resembles neither of them, they were on my mind while *Sleep* was being written. Without them, an entirely different, and probably inferior, 800-word piece would've emerged.

I also want to thank Jonathon Hilhorst, who read my first draft and made some very helpful suggestions, and my parents, who were still proud of me after I dropped out of uni with nothing but to my name but love stories. Two fictional, two not.

-Jack



# SLEEP

BY JACK HEATH

She lays her hand gently upon his chest, feeling it rise and fall under her fingers. His breaths are slowing, becoming shallower as he drifts towards sleep. His heartbeat, racing only minutes before with the thrill of lust, is becoming even once again.

Always he falls asleep, she thinks. If I talk, he'll listen - but he'd die before being the first to speak, or the last. He only wants to sleep.

And already she knows that she can't.

The bedroom is illuminated briefly as a car coasts by outside. Grainy shadows clamber down the bookshelves, scuttle across the hastily scattered clothes on the carpet, and squeeze into the hollow under the bedside table where they settle.

She squeezes her eyes shut against the darkness, and shifts her head upon the cigarette-scented pillow. Blows a strand of hair out of

her face. Tries to time her breaths to match his, as if insomnia could be cured by careful imitation of the unafflicted.

It's no good. It's as if there's some trick to sleeping, a magic word uttered which others know instinctually, but she can never remember.

They've seen the movie about guns and death, eaten the salty and greasy food he's not supposed to have, gone back to his place and fucked in his bed; every weekend it's the same. During the movie if she takes his hand, he'll squeeze it. When she starts the conversation at the restaurant he will reply, smile, laugh. And the sex is great, but great isn't good enough, because she initiates it; falling asleep is the only activity for which he is prepared make the first move.

Now she realises - this is why she can't sleep. The conditions are right; quiet, darkness, cold air, warm bed - but she's lying next to a man she doesn't understand, or trust.

If, in the months they'd spent together, he had told her he liked something about her, asked her to do something with him, called for no reason at all - perhaps then she could bury her face in the pillows and escape into the ether, like him. But no, although she's exhausted; she can't relax enough to rest. She needs some indication that they're here not just because she wants to be, but because he wants to be here too. To know that he has chosen her, not merely taken the path of least resistance.

The air is icy against her still-moist skin. She draws the covers up to her shoulders, taking care to drape half over his body. His cold sweat soaks through the sheets.

At first, believing he was scared to open up to her, she'd tried to break the ice. She'd told him she was a little nervous too, but only because she cared about him. She was crazy about him. She loved him.

He'd absorbed all this with a quiet smile, and that same damn twinkle in his eye. Apparently, she had thought as he took a drag on his cigarette, there was no ice to break. He appeared neither alarmed nor encouraged. He listened, but didn't react. And once she had it all off her chest, suddenly she wanted it back. Secrets are there to be shared, but once she had told hers they felt wasted, like food sucked into the kitchen sink instead of savoured by appreciative mouths.

Currawongs have begun their distant screeching, though sunlight has yet to reach the window. The sudden noise is deafening after so many hours of silence; what time is it? How long have I been lying here?

She is snapped back to reality by a sudden movement. His hand reaches for hers; grasps her fingers tightly.

Does he want sex again? she wonders. No, his breathing is still shallow and short, nothing like the rough panting incited by desire.

There is no follow-up movement. He seems content to hold her hand under the sheets.

A slow smile spreads across her lips. This is a sign. That he sees her as more than a friend, more than a sex object; that simply being with her makes him happy.

And her feelings are more than grudging response; they exist independently of his. She would love him even if he hated her. She would love him if he never spoke another word.

And now, at last, the real world is fading. The corners of her vision are getting darker, and she can't help but yawn as she rests her head on the pillow once again. She snuggles up to him; his fingers, now limp once again, are wrapped in hers.

'I love you,' she whispers. He doesn't reply - but she no longer needs him to.

She lays her hand gently upon his chest. His flesh is already becoming cool, and only now does she realise that his heart has stopped beating.