

## Young Writers Award 2011, highly commended entry

# Sleeping Patterns

by Jarryd Luke

<p>1. Dominic's process is always the same.</p>	<p>2. First he takes a photo of a friend or someone he works with. He asks them to sit up straight and stare at the camera, but apart from that he doesn't care what they look like.</p>	<p>3. He draws a grid over the photo, dividing it into squares.</p>
<p>4. He draws a larger grid on a canvas (at least three meters high) and copies the contents of the photo's squares onto it. He starts in the top left-hand corner and fills in the rows from left to right.</p>	<p>5. He uses an airbrush with diluted acrylics and adjusts the details with razors and rags. Each portrait takes at least a month.</p>	<p>6. He never shows his works in progress to anyone but his wife. A colleague pressed him about this once and he responded: 'Showing your friends a draft of your work is like showing them your perineum tattoo. It doesn't really matter if they like the design.'</p>
<p>7. At the moment he's painting a black-and-white portrait of Lizzie. Her photo was taken by one of his other students shortly before the accident. Her head is crooked and slightly out-of-focus, but it's the only photo he could find.</p>	<p>8. She's in the friend's backyard at night and the light from the swimming pool lies like pale oil in the hollow above her clavicle. Her hair is bleached blonde and her mouth is slightly open. She has a line of freckles on her neck like a <i>glissando</i>.</p>	<p>9. Six weeks ago a van smashed into the side of his car. He cracked his skull on the steering wheel and ever since he can't remember what people look like, even his wife.</p>
<p>10. He's been painting every day for more than a month and he still forgets what Lizzie's face looks like every time he shifts his gaze from photo to canvas.</p>	<p>11. When he tries to visualise the portrait of Lizzie in his mind it appears utterly devoid of human expression, like a landscape.</p>	

In the tired light the street outside Dominic's window looks like it's made of scorched foil. His studio is quiet except for the repetitive echoes from a cello lesson across the road. He always feels self-conscious when packing up his brushes and washing the paint off his hands, perhaps because he's seen these actions performed in films, but in these idle moments at the end of the day he also feels more confident about his work. In the morning he will review his efforts with dismay and dismiss them as untidy or immature, but for now he is almost content.

He hurries downstairs; Carla's last class finished at four, so she'll be home soon if she doesn't stay back to read the Master's thesis she's marking. In the bedroom he changes into a pair of dark jeans and a collared shirt, but as he grabs his keys off the kitchen bench he hears her car pull into the driveway. He squeezes the keys in his fist.

Carla walks in and dumps groceries on the bench. He recognises her by her earrings. She used to have a pair of diamond studs like the ones his first wife wore, but he threw them out after the accident. If she's not wearing earrings he recognises her by her eyebrows. The university offered her a teaching position at the end of last year, after she finished her doctorate in law. As soon as she finished the last chapter of her thesis she started planning classes. She's at the office most weekends.

He makes two cups of coffee and opens one of the bills she brought in. Carla's never fought with him about money, unlike his first wife, Helen. He met Helen in the last year of his study and showed her his graduate portfolio on their third date. While they were living together Helen had two jobs, but apart from the occasional work here and there—sign-painting, illustrating a children's book—he spent all his time in the studio. It would be another six years before his paintings started selling and he got the job at the technical college. 'The problem isn't that you're an artist,' she'd say. 'It's that you never do anything else. You just spend all your time painting. What *makes* you a painter?' Still, she agreed to sit for him sometimes, in the studio he'd set up in the basement, and once she even let him make a plaster cast of her torso.

Now, as he stands in the kitchen and jams his finger into the corner of his left eye and rubs the tear duct, everything Carla asks him—How's the painting? Is he ready for the exhibition?—takes a conscious effort to answer. He nearly spills his coffee when a dead flower head from the bouquet Carla's brother sent them snaps off its stem and thuds onto the table.

'I'd better go,' he says, interrupting her. 'I've got a class at seven.'

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His new car, a sky-blue hatchback, has a scratch on the door where he banged it into a column in an underground car park, but he's putting off dealing with the insurance company. He parks in a side-street a few blocks away. The evening joggers are starting to come out.

The exhibition—his first exhibition in four years, a solo show at one of the galleries in the city—opens in two months and he has no new material. When he got home from the hospital he tore up two paintings he'd been working on for three months. He keeps making mistakes with the portrait of Lizzie, going back, fixing things; it always looks wrong.

He passes the roundabout where discharged patients get picked up and enters the main building of the hospital. The walls are covered with works by local artists—linocuts, leaf rubbings, fairies, rainforests—the kind of thing he sees all the time in class. There are no

clocks on the walls. On the far side of the ground floor is a cafeteria; at each table a sick person (crutches/bandages/gown) eats with a healthy relative.

Dominic catches the lift to the fifth floor and follows the signs to intensive care. He checks the receptionist's nametag (*Brenda*). She places a form on the counter as he approaches. He pretends to fill it in and slides a fifty-dollar note towards her. She says he's right to go in.

He washes his hands with disinfectant for the mandatory two minutes. The water pressure keeps changing. He walks down the corridor, past tacky laminated posters about suspicious moles and cervical cancer.

He peeks through the window in the door. Cards and letters are stuck to the wall above the bed. One of the cards looks new: on the cover is a bunch of blue irises sprinkled with glitter. He enters the room and, to make sure it's Lizzie, looks for the birthmark on her eyelid—a light brown circle slightly smaller than her pupil. Her skin is wet and white.

He sits beside the bed. Through the window he can see six or seven cranes, with the building companies' names written in neon. He idly loops an elastic band around his index finger until its wrinkles stand out like the increments on a syringe.

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He lies awake staring at the side of Carla's face. He got home late after sitting in a café for an hour and a half. She was in the shower. He lay down on the bed and after a while she came out wearing a bathrobe and rubbing moisturiser into her face. She was completely unrecognisable: no earrings, her eyebrows obscured by her hair. He couldn't make out the shape of her body inside the robe. She sat down on the bed and kissed him, fiddled with the spare button sewed to the inside of his shirt. Her fingers were as chilled as hinges. He felt the pale raised flesh of the scar on her right knee, put his hands on her thighs and slid them up under the robe to her breasts.

Lizzie had been in two of his classes. She wore vintage clothes from the local op-shops, unlike most of the girls out of high school, who came to class in baggy shirts with clashing colours and jeans hacked off halfway up their thighs. She liked working with charcoal and was by far his most patient and precise student, but she lacked confidence, could spend hours adjusting a section of cross-hatching or retracing an outline.

At the end of semester she came to his office to show him her preliminary sketch for the final assignment. She blushed when she handed it to him—even her neck went red. It was a portrait of a woman standing in an empty room. When he held it up to the light he realised the wallpaper behind the woman morphed into a strange design that seemed to suggest the inner mechanisms of telescopes and steam engines, combined with the fragile patterns of seashells, snowflakes and honeycomb. It was a naïve concept but the effect was striking. The woman's face was clearly modelled on her own.

It was six o'clock and she was his last appointment for the day, so he offered her a lift home. Her apartment was only ten minutes away. She told him about a climate change rally she'd participated in that morning. She had a beautiful smile but when she laughed she covered her mouth, as if cupping a flame. She showed him a Greenpeace logo dangling from her phone, and it was while he was looking sideways at this tiny swinging symbol that the van slammed into the car.

For a second the van's headlights cast the logo's shadow on her pale cheek and he watched it sway back and forth as smooth and dark as a double bass.

Carla's eyes flicker, half-open. She talks in her sleep sometimes, answers questions. His psychologist told him it was normal; when her eyes flicker like this she's in deep sleep, REM. Her eyes are following whatever she's looking at in her dreams. He's seen Lizzie's eyes flicker a few times too. He tries not to think of her in the darkened ward, empty except for the nurses who come around every few hours to check the patients' blood pressures.

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At nine o'clock on Monday morning he skips a faculty meeting and drives to the hospital.

Someone has changed Lizzie's sheets. They've got her on her side now, facing away from the window. He takes a camera out of his jacket and places it on the shelf beside the bed. He stands the camera on its end so her face will appear the right way up, switches it off, and listens to the nurses pushing patients back and forth through the corridor. The lino's grey, worn—scoured to colourlessness by wheelchairs and trolleys.

He came up with the idea on the weekend after finding a book of Robert Williams's paintings in a bookstore. He read the whole thing, standing in the aisle with his wet umbrella propped against his leg. Several of the paintings were inspired by an article Williams had found in a medical journal from 1948. The article told the story of a ten-year-old boy who came down with a fever; eventually his mum took him to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with salmonella. He was bedridden for several days and experienced strange hallucinations, often calling out to a mysterious 'friend.' When the doctor asked the boy who his friend was, the boy pulled, out of a small pocket in his underwear, the hidden source of his extended fever: his dead pet turtle. It was the boy's fever-dreams that inspired Williams's paintings. Dominic can only remember one of the dreams now, in which the boy's hospital bed turned into a huge tongue, and the room became the inside of a mouth.

Three hours later he glimpses movement under Lizzie's eyelids. He reaches over, turns the camera on and presses record. On the camera's screen he watches her eyes slide open a few millimetres.

He looks past the camera at the dark roots that are starting to show under her bleached hair, the tube that runs under the sheets.

He lets the camera record for twenty minutes, until he hears a shout in the corridor. He grabs the camera and stuffs it in his jacket. Lizzie's mother opens the door. He recognises her grey hair. He's only met her once before, a few days after the accident, when he was still faint and disoriented after his operation. She came into his room screaming at him, telling him he should have died in her daughter's place.

She shouts for someone to call the police. Dominic backs away, raises his hands.

Brenda appears behind Lizzie's mother and puts her arm around her shoulders. Lizzie's mother screams at her to get him out.

Brenda grabs him by the arm and pulls him into the corridor.

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In his studio he listens to a light rain plink and plunk like an out-of-tune piano. He rests his hand on the window. Ten fingerprints pull softly off his skin like a layer of dust and stick to the glass.

Carla appears in the doorway wearing a navy cardigan and they talk for a while about her plans for next year—she wants to do some more lecturing, maybe go to a conference in Germany during the holidays. He's taken down the portrait of Lizzie but she doesn't mention it. He swishes a brush around in a jar of water, lifting flakes of colour off the bottom.

A full moon bulges on the horizon, orange-red, stewing like an unhealed wound. He knows the full moon has a different name every month—Cold, Flower, Wolf, Worm, Harvest, Snow—but he can never remember the order.

When he's alone he switches the computer on and plugs his camera in. He plays the video in slow motion and Lizzie's eyes fill the screen.

He traces her eye movements on a blank piece of paper beside the computer, squinting at the tiny slices of iris between her eyelids. He's always found the physical process of drawing satisfying its own right, despite its tediousness; he could never work with a more abstract art form like poetry or music.

By the time he sees his own fingers close over the camera he's filled a dozen pages. He spreads them all out on the desk and studies them, runs his hands over the tangled lines. He already has a vague idea, a faint swirl of colour in his mind's eye, of what the paintings will look like.

