

Can't Sleep
Grade 10

I grew up on the rich side of town where the tinkling of coins on the pavement was a background noise. Every house was an American dream: a white picket fence, pristine windows in dainty little frames, a park just nearby, and a lawn uniform with all of the other houses in the neighborhood. Every kid I knew who lived in a two mile radius of us walked themselves to school.

I used to cuddle up in my fluffy down covers, fresh from the dryer and still roasting with heat and comfort while Mom read books to me. I'd plead with my puppy face, pouting lower lip, and big blue Bambi eyes for her to read me adventures about cops chasing down bad guys, cuffing them up, and bringing them into the blinding light of justice. She'd hop under the covers with me and we'd stay up late, shrieking siren whales and gunning each other down with loaded fingers. When I started yawning and struggling to keep my lead weighted eyelids open, she'd kiss my five year old baby fat cheeks, ruffle my short auburn hair, and flick off my bed room lights.

That was twenty-eight years ago.

Mom died on my eleventh birthday in a car accident while on the way to buying my birthday cake. I'd insisted on a marble cake with buttercream frosting and a big green army tank on top. I'd replayed that last moment I saw my mother a million times, each time wishing that I hadn't asked for the cake. I never could forgive myself.

I graduated from college and then got a certificated from the police academy. Five years later I found myself deemed the best man on the force, and before I knew it, I'd invested ten years into my job. I loved it. I loved what I did and wouldn't have given it up for anything, but there was one day, just *one* day, that made me quit my job.

I leaned back in the passenger seat: hands folded beneath my head, my cop hat snug over my eyes, irritation causing my lips to twitch. Jack, my old partner, was driving, his barrel of a belly flush against the wheel. It was our lunch break and we were heading towards a run-down Chinese restaurant that went by the name of Lucky 7.

Can't Sleep
Grade 10

"Come on Jack, this is the fourth time this week." I try for the millionth time, "Can't you be a little more creative than Chinese takeout?"

"Sorry man, but the driver's got first pick. Who told yah to pass on driving today?" He winked at me and I returned it with a fierce scowl. Boy did I hate that wink. "If you really want to though, we could drive through that hot dog place you like afterwards." I glared at him. That was Jack for you, always buttering you up with deals and making you feel less cheated than you always were.

Once we pulled up beside red neon lights that read in big, bold, letters: Lunch Specials! we got out of the car. I was about to follow Jack's thick, swaggering figure through the dirty glass door when something over my left shoulder caught my eye. A girl in her late teens dressed in a light green hoodie, casual loose fit jeans, and red converse, ran down the sidewalk at a break neck speed into a pharmacy right across the street from Jack's new-found favorite restaurant. My eyebrows snapped together as she disappeared into the store, but then I shook it off and reached for the cool brass handle of the glass door. I noticed with disgust the rain of chewed gum on the pavement and the great network of spider webs hanging from the nooks of the ceiling.

All of a sudden, an alarm went off. I spun on my heel and saw the girl in the green hoodie gush out of the pharmacy. "Jack. Jack!" I shouted without bothering to glance over my shoulder to see if he heard me, "Time to go."

"Aw, come on man. Can't a cop get lunch without having to run a marathon?" He rolled his eyes and sighed.

I sprinted into the driver's seat of the car with Jack right on my heels. He buckled himself in and we were off: sirens wailing, tires screeching as we rounded the corner. Scot came on the walkie talkie, "We've got a case of thievery on 31st Hampton Street." I picked it up, "Roger that. We're right on her tail."

The girl ran. I expected her to dodge into the nearest alley, but she headed towards a neighborhood of old buildings with chipped paint, vibrant graffiti, and shoes dangling off power lines. I wrinkled my brow, "That's new." She was 300 feet ahead of us when she turned into an alley. "Aha, there we go." I thrust the gear shift into park and the car jerked to an abrupt stop.

Can't Sleep

Grade 10

Flinging the door open, I flew after her, one hand on my gun. I could hear the distant cry of sirens coming towards me. Subconsciously, I knew Jack was thirty paces behind me, breathing laboriously while the gap widened between us, but my mind was focused on gauging her next move.

She rounded another corner, her jet-black hair a rapid stream flowing after her. A veil of amusement fell upon me when I realized she'd turned into a dead end. The girl searched frantically for an exit, and found a rusty metal door. She tried the knob but gave a piercing shriek of frustration—devastation almost—and banged the door twice with a closed fist when she found it bolted shut. Something white in her fist caught my eye, but I swiftly returned my attention back to her lightly freckled face. Pulling out my gun with practiced familiarity, I recited my routine, “Put your hands up and nobody gets hurt.”

Suddenly her bright green eyes were locked into mine. They'd lost their fit of panic like cooled lava and became solemn and still. She slowly lifted her hands above her head, surrendering, and then I saw it again: a white bulky object that looked almost like a tube. Her grip was so tight on it I thought it would snap like a dry twig.

The sound of weighted footsteps tore through my thoughts like a tiger's claws shredding fabric. For a split second I turned my head to check on Jack. He was wheezing heavily, and sweat dripped down his face like fat rain drops. It only took a microsecond to realize my huge mistake, but when I did, it was already too late. I swore as the girl zipped past me, slamming the gun out of my grasp. Jack was too shaken from the run to react in time. I'd invited him to work out with me on weekends, but he had always found an excuse to turn me down.

I scrambled for my gun against the crumbling asphalt, skinning my knuckles as I did so. She was already halfway down the alley when I straightened up. I had to admit, she was one of the fastest I've ever chased, but not fast enough. I smirked, an inside joke I had with myself. Contrary to what I expected, she suddenly stopped, sending tiny asphalt meteorites spewing from the tips of her shoes. I traced her gaze to Scot leaning his belly into his cop car, gun in hand with three others as back up. Seeing this as a perfect opportunity, I snuck up on the girl, and before she knew it, I twisted her hands behind her back and clicked hand cuffs into place. She gave a shrill cry of fury and whirled like a wild horse on the Western Frontier.

Can't Sleep
Grade 10

Normally I had everything under control, but there was something different this time, although I couldn't quite put my finger to it. I grabbed her arms to keep her from running. She swung her upper torso at me, but I had her right arm locked in my grasp. Instead of bashing into me, she became off balanced and fell onto the ground, taking me down with her. Before I could react, her head smashed onto the ground and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

Everything happened so fast. One moment she was standing up, the next moment she was lying on the ground with her eyes closed, and her hair a mass of tangles. For a second, I thought I saw a tear drop slither down her cheek, but I must've seen wrong. The tube tumbled out of her hands, the sound almost like the clanking of horse hooves on uneven cobblestones echoing in the deserted alley.

Scot came up next to me, hands on his hips—a look we'd grown used to. “Who would've ever thought that someone would steal an inhaler?” His laugh was forced, but was open for a joke. I couldn't bring myself to respond. I just stared mutely at the white tube laying inches from her still fingers, thinking fiercely, trying to make sense of all this.

An ambulance came shortly, and everyone got in their cars and drove off. “Hey man, ready to go?” Came Jack's voice like hot chocolate on a cold, winter night, but I couldn't peel my eyes from the spot where the inhaler had tumbled out of the girl's fingers.

Six hours later we tried to contact her parents. No one responded, so two guys on the force went to the girl's house to report that she was in jail. She was still a minor after all.

Don and Joe came back a lot later than I'd expected. A thick stack of papers stamped with tiny print were falling apart in my hands as they pushed through the double glass doors of our department. “So, what took you guys so long?—dinner break?” I flashed them a grin.

Jack joined in, “Must've been Chinese takeout.” He winked at me and I couldn't decide whether to laugh or fume. Neither Don nor Joe seemed to have gotten the joke. Their faces remained grim and the smile slid off my lips like a shoe on grease. Joe was first to talk, “The girl's mother is dead.” I looked at him blankly and threw the stack of papers onto my desk. They fanned out like a deck of cards, but I couldn't bring myself to care. “We knocked awhile and

Can't Sleep
Grade 10

nobody answered, so we tried the door and found it unlocked. When we walked into the kitchen we found the women dead on the floor.” Jack swore.

I crossed my arms and leaned my back against the wall. “What about the father?”

Don shrugged, “No sign of him. It looks like it was just the two of them.”

I nodded thoughtfully, my eyes lowered solemnly onto the floor. Even after ten years of this, I still couldn't help but feel sorrow fall on me like a thick, wet blanket whenever I heard about someone who'd passed away. “Gang shooting?”

Joe shook his head, “No bullet holes.”

He was holding out on something. I lifted my eyes to him, reading his face, but his eyes averted mine. “Drug overdose?”

“Asthma attack.” For a second I couldn't breathe.

Don told me later on after I'd splashed water on my face that the girl was mute. It all made sense. The pieces fell into their places. There was nobody close enough around to get help in time. She figured it was the fastest way if she got an inhaler, but she found out that they had no money...and I—and I'd hand cuffed her.

I stared into blank space.

Flashbacks of my mother's sweet smile flickered across my brain. She kissed the top of my head, ruffled my short hair and got into the driver's seat.

“Jack,” I took a deep breath. “I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore.”

He raised an eyebrow at me, a barely-there grin on his face, “Do what?” When I didn't respond, his tired face fell. “What are you talking about?” I cleared my throat but the words wouldn't come. “What are you talking about Carl?” He demanded.

I sighed and took my badge off, “I quit.”

Can't Sleep
Grade 10

He stared at me like he didn't understand, and then suddenly he was furious. "Damn it Carl! Don't pick a time like this to throw a fit." I opened my mouth to speak but he cut me off before I could even start. "You're not the only one who feels horrible about this."

I wanted to snap back at him, but I knew it'd be futile. We'd been a team for as long as I could remember. These ten years had been used to learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. We operated on what the other could and could not do. Sure I was deemed the best man on the force, but I couldn't have done it without him. Jack wouldn't understand. He wasn't the one that hand cuffed the girl. He didn't see the pain and panic dancing like fire in her eyes. He didn't know what it was like to lose a mother when you're still just a kid. I took away from the girl what I could never give back.

I removed my belt adorned with all my equipment, and set it on the table. Jack swore even louder this time, but I ignored him and threw on my coat. Opening the door, I walked out into the cold, pitch-black night.

Hands stuffed into my pockets, I started thinking about the story of Robin Hood, and pondering a very simple question: was it me, or was the girl who played the role of the bad guy?