

**Sleep Stories: The Night Watch by Jenn Ashworth,
introduced by Dr Diletta De Cristofaro**

TRANSCRIPTION

Introduction: [music swells] [whispered] Sleep Stories.

Jenn Ashworth and Diletta De Cristofaro in a Sonderbug Production in association with Durham Book Festival and New Writing North, and with music by Jayne Dent. This is Sleep Stories.

Dr Diletta De Cristofaro: I'm Diletta De Cristofaro. I'm a literary and cultural studies scholar. I write about narratives of crisis. And I'm the principal investigator on 'Writing the Sleep Crisis', a research project exploring representations of sleep in contemporary culture that has collaborated with Durham Book Festival on the Sleep Stories commission.

So you're about to listen to Jenn Ashworth's story, 'The Night Watch'. 'The Night Watch' engages with lack of sleep in our 21st century society. It's about a shift worker and her job and how this might impact her sleep. There's a lot of debate in sleep studies around this idea of the sleep crisis and whether it is, or not, the case. There is this sense today in society, which is very much reinforced by kind of apocalyptic headlines in the news about risks around sleep. I think that the jury is still very much out on whether we are indeed sleeping less than in previous centuries.

As a literary and cultural studies scholar, what I find interesting is that, although we don't know if we are in a sleep crisis, narratives of sleep that surround us are very much about the sleep crisis. So really, the sleep crisis has captured the

popular imagination. I think, in general, you know, there's a lot of pressure on us to conform to certain ideas around wellness, for instance, and sleep often falls into that. So if you're not sleeping well enough, or long enough, you might suffer from health consequences. So there's definitely this sense that we need to talk about sleep, because lack of sleep is seen as a potentially public health emergency. And I think that Jenn's story really engages with this idea, quite a lot, about lack of sleep, and what it means for our health, but also our lives, ultimately.

The idea of sleep deprivation, the idea of a sleep crisis, is so pervasive in contemporary culture, because it really helps us tease out and express a series of issues and anxieties about living in 21st century society. You know, sleep is really a kind of historical and social phenomenon. So it really does depend on the world in which the sleeper sleeps or fails to sleep. And so I think that one of the main reasons why this idea of sleeplessness and the sleep crisis has captured the popular imagination is that it really helps us express anxieties about work. And again, you'll see in Jenn's story that she really does explore this.

Work in the 21st century has shifted quite a bit. It's often precarious; it's often incredibly totalising, so people do struggle quite a lot to switch off from work and that, in turn, might impact their sleep. Another kind of key anxiety that I think the sleep crisis and sleeplessness helps us express is around technology. So you know, we often see for instance, phones popping up in narratives about sleep, because of course, we all know that we have a very specific relationship to our phones, where we're constantly on our phones, and this in turn is often a vehicle of work. So again, there's this kind of vicious cycle where we can't basically switch off work because we're very much addicted to our phones. And so narratives around sleep in which

sleep and sleeplessness feature are often also about technology and our relationship with technology. And again, you'll see that in Jenn's story, this is brilliantly explored.

Jenn Ashworth: 'The Night Watch', written and read by Jenn Ashworth.

These days, their evenings go like this:

Lee gets in, takes his supermarket uniform off at the door, puts it on a hot wash and showers right away. He's so worried about bringing something into the house with him. Once he's clean he kisses Kim in the kitchen and she settles on the settee with her laptop. He takes charge, serving tea and doing the bath, story and bed routine for Roisin and Ryan. Once the kids are down he clears the wreckage from tea and hangs up his uniform on the kitchen pulley. He always does that, and leaves the window open a crack and the radiator on, so it will be near enough dry by morning.

'When are you coming up?' he says, on his way to bed.

'I'm on until three.' He's pale. 'You all right?'

Kim remembers that he had his vaccination that day. She pretends that's what she meant.

'My arm hurts.'

'Get some rest,' she says, and goes back to the screen where the workflow has backed up already. Three pieces of content a minute keeps her satisfaction score where it needs to be. She clicks, swipes. Two death threats and a Holocaust denial video.

'Come up quietly then, yeh?'

She nods without raising her eyes and Lee kisses her on the side of her head. She shields her screen with her hand.

‘Roisin’s had earache this afternoon. There’s Calpol in the bathroom.’

‘She’s sick?’

Kim feels a stab of guilt. He was so ready to go to bed. She shouldn’t have said anything.

‘It’s nothing. It’s her teeth,’ she says. ‘She’s not been around anyone except for me for weeks now.’

‘And me,’ Lee says, looking down at himself as if contaminated.

‘Go to sleep. I’ll check on her later.’

Kim goes back to work. Her eyes scan along a quickly moving digital conveyor belt of horror, and their living room, cluttered with toys and shoes that nobody ever remembers to put away, disappears. Her team leader once described them – the online content moderators – as the ‘tonsils of the internet’. The first defence. And before the tonsils started work he outlined to all of them what they should expect: images of children being abused, cruel things done to animals, the incel stuff, the self-harm, the beheadings.

There are thousands of us invisibly online at any one time, he said, in a speech that was supposed to be rousing, and we’re there, saving them from the worst of it. They can scroll their feed in bed at night and still get to sleep afterwards thanks to us. While they’re arguing about the real reason it’s taking them so long to get through to their GPs, we’re making sure they don’t run into anything that would give them nightmares.

Now Kim knows better. They don't take the nightmares away; they just have them on everyone else's behalf. The way a tonsil will gradually go rotten because of the job it does. Not that she slept that well herself, of course. A can of Monster at two in the morning will do that. Her sister thinks she's being paid to read people's private messages: the digital version of a peeping Tom. Kim doesn't have the heart to tell her most of what they see is the stuff people are willing to broadcast to the entire world.

Lee checks on the kids. He hurries the cat out of their bedroom. He's pissing about with the nightlight on the landing and singing to Roisin, who is crying as Kim deletes two porn videos and sends a self-harm-in-progress post to the second-level moderation queue. The rest of the shift passes. Mainly a whole load of Covid denier 5G hoax stuff, which the algorithm is supposed to get, but it never does because it can't tell news from satire from conspiracy theories.

Her neck hurts. Her eyes hurt. She hasn't moved from the settee in hours. She checks the clock and sends her last video – of a man watching a toddler sleep – to top-level moderation. It could be nothing, but someone has pixelated out the man's face and the toddler is positioned strangely. She's not supposed to get these type of videos – none of the homeworkers are – but there it is, the man looming over the child, the child's eyelashes fluttering against her cheeks. Sometimes she cannot tell the difference between a watchful parent and something more sinister. Not anymore. She checks the clock and logs off, thinking of Lee upstairs, the new vaccine running through him.

When she gets to bed, Lee doesn't stir. She slides in and listens to his breath. She feels his skin: he's hot and clammy. She doesn't sleep, but her eyes are moving around under her eyelids. This isn't REM but a kind of automatic twitch she's developed from weeks and weeks of scrolling and scanning, flicking between images, allowing her gaze to alight on a video for just two seconds before moving her head away once she's seen enough.

Lee shifts in his sleep and mutters something. It's hard not to let all those conspiracy videos get into your head. You've got to watch them. Got to pay attention or you make mistakes and your accuracy rating drops. You only get the higher hourly rate if your satisfaction and accuracy ratings are high.

Say they're right, and the government has put a chip in Lee along with the vaccine and someone is listening to his thoughts right now – someone like Kim herself perhaps, sitting on her couch with a family sized bag of kettle chips and an enormous mug of coffee at her side as the stream of his dream-content gradually slips past her. Say that was true. Then what would that person be seeing right now?

She puts her hand on his back, which rises and falls gently and is too warm. What you don't know can't hurt you. That's the premise of her job: keeping the world from knowing what people are really like. She'd like to moderate what goes on in Lee's head, just to be sure. Because while what you know might keep you up at night, what you know you don't know – the content running through the unviolated privacy of Lee's head right now, for example – can keep you awake too.

He's a good dad. She rests her forehead between his shoulder blades. Most of what she's seen tonight has been posted by people who have someone else who'd say they were good dads, good girlfriends, attentive daughters and loving

grandfathers. And still. How terrible it is to love someone. How terrifying. Her eyes buzz and jerk inside their sockets automatically now, the way a drummer will bash out the rhythms his body remembers while he's watching the telly. That's what's happening to her: even as she lies in the dark next to her husband, who is groaning in his sleep and is slightly hotter than he was before, her eyes are still trying to jerk themselves away from what they are not seeing and from what they can't stop seeing.

'Lee, wake up. Wake up.'

He blinks, groans and heaves himself upright against the pillows.

'What's wrong? Is Roisin okay?'

He gazes past her shoulder to the open door, the dark hollow of the landing beyond.

'They're both asleep. She's fine. You were dreaming,' she says. 'Restless.'

'What time is it?'

Their words slide past each other.

'What were you dreaming about?'

He rubs the back of his neck and reaches for his glass of water.

'I wasn't dreaming. I was sleeping.'

'Tell me,' she says, not liking the way her voice has gone high-pitched and wheedling, is paranoid and desperate, the way a woman woken unexpectedly in the night with bad news might sound, though she hasn't been asleep properly – not really – for days and days now. 'Tell me what you were dreaming about.'

She wishes they had fitted him with 5G. How else could she stand to close her eyes and lie down next to him? How else could she be safe enough to rest

unless she knew there was nothing frightening to know, and how could she sleep if she needed to be awake to know it?

‘I don’t remember,’ he says, and turns away.

She lies there a bit little longer, her eyes searching and scanning the dark, which does not give up its secrets.

These days, their mornings go like this:

Lee sneaks out of bed to give Kim extra time to doze. When she finally emerges, Roisin is screaming and banging at the tray of her highchair and Ryan is spooning porridge onto a stack of unpaid bills and final reminders on the kitchen table.

‘I’m sorry I woke you last night,’ Kim says.

She won’t mean it. In fact, she’ll only say it to give him the chance to say what he always says next, which is, ‘Were you having a bad dream?’

She shakes her head.

‘Was it a bad shift?’

If she can manage to nod, and she can’t always, not in front of the kids, then he’ll come and put his arms around her and she will be able to safely close her eyes.

‘Rest,’ he says, because if you’re tired enough you start micro-sleeping, which is nodding off just for a second or two at a time. It isn’t decent sleep, but it will keep you alive, and towards sane. Kim’s eyelids flutter and Lee puts his hand on her head until her darting eyeballs find their way to stillness. One minute with her head against the fleece he wears for work still a little damp as there wasn’t time for it to dry overnight. He’ll wear it damp tomorrow too, and the next day: this little thing he does

for them all, washing it like that, to keep them safe. Kim's eyes close and she does not dream.

[close music]

[white noise]