

Toxic Dreams

Madi DiMercurio

The day was a happy one for both wife and husband. A family was being reunited after two years of war separating them. John walked slowly up the sidewalk as it started to drizzle. He wasn't sure what to do but move forward. The pure drops of water falling from the sky burned on his skin like acid. His hand shook, the one holding his suitcase, but he blamed that on the heavy weight. John didn't want to think about the other possibility that his doctor mentioned. He refused the doctor's diagnosis, that was meant to explain the dreams and panic attacks.

The front door of his house came into view as he looked up, away from the concrete sidewalk. He was home, not only a soldier's dream but a hope they all had.

Amy was home with her daughter. It was a Sunday. Unbeknownst to her, he was right outside. At that moment, she was finishing a grilled cheese sandwich for her six-year-old daughter, her ears zoning in on the sizzle of the bread. She cracked open a can of tomato soup and sprinkled Goldfish on top. "Emma, honey, lunch is ready!"

Amy heard Emma's soft footsteps thump across the second floor of the house -- she smiled. Soon her daughter bounded down the steps and climbed into her spot at the

table.

"There you go, baby," Amy answered Emma's arrival, placing juice down as well. Amy caressed Emma's golden locks before she walked off to make a quick salad for herself.

Sitting across from her daughter, she ate her salad and watched Emma practically gulp down her soup -- occasionally dunking her grilled cheese into the bowl.

"Are you ready to go back to school tomorrow?"

Emma shook her head and wiped a drop of tomato soup, that didn't make it to her mouth, off her chin with the back of her hand.

"Use a napkin, please."

Emma huffed and used the napkin to wipe off her hand -- instead of using her tongue like most times when Amy hadn't caught her.

While they finished up lunch, Amy telling her daughter to bring her half eaten plate to the counter -- thankfully before she ran up the stairs, escaping -- the doorbell rang.

Amy paused at the sink and turned to give the door a long look. Unlike her daughter, who ran for it, Amy was afraid of what it could be. She didn't know who



would ring the door on a Sunday. The dreadful idea that something might have happened to her husband fluttered across her mind, like a nagging fly that wouldn't buzz away.

Emma had been looking at her mother in expectancy from the door, knowing she shouldn't be opening it on her own. The man or woman on the other side could be a stranger. Talking to strangers is not safe. Even the teachers at school tell her that.

Seeing that her mother wasn't going to open the door, Emma reached on her tiptoes towards the knob and opened the door herself.

The door swung open slowly, teasing the nerves inside Amy. She breathlessly called out for her daughter. Amy was afraid of the possibilities, and the anxiety glued her to the floor. In the back of her mind, she chastised herself for letting her six-year-old daughter answer the door.

"Mommy," Emma called, and Amy heard the wavering uncertainty in her voice.

The tone in her little princess's voice snapped her out of it.

Walking with a slight hop in her step, she looked out the wide-open door. It was

John and he was looking down at their daughter with interest.

Amy gasped, "John." That got the poised man in uniform to look at his wife for the first time since she appeared in the doorway. It took Amy all her might, plus little hands weighing down her pant leg, not to step back. John's gaze was hard and unfamiliar. He almost scared her.

"Amy." John simply stated her name as if she didn't mean anything. But he was trying to hide the evidence of his doctor's diagnosis. The only way he knew how to hide was through his military training. Sometimes John felt like a robot, because he was always just going through the motions of everyday life. Trying to get away from the demons of war.

John's wife wanted to whimper in fear. Something was off and she had no idea how to fix it. His tone was far from warm. They were both uncomfortable and didn't know what to do next. Emma looked on in confusion and seemed to expect something to happen.

In her small voice, she sighed and grabbed Amy's shaky hand. Then Emma grabbed onto her not-so-familiar father. "Come on Mommy, Daddy it's raining and you're getting wet." Emma took this opportunity to act like a big girl and show her father how old and mature she had become. But of course, in the process she stated the obvious. She wanted to smile when both her parents looked down in shock.

They still stood there and she wanted to roll her eyes. Grasping both their hands as firmly as a six-year-old could, she pulled them away from the front door and into the living room.



Climbing up onto the couch, Emma patted the cushions on either side of her. Amy looked at John, still enraptured by his presence. John, on the other hand, felt unwelcomed and uncomfortable. His wife could only look at him with love, and uneasiness. When he looked down at his expectant daughter, it seemed like she had taken control of the whole situation.

Minutes ago, Emma wanted to roll her eyes at him, yes he knew that look, and now she did. “Come on, sit.” There was a girly squeak at the end of her plea, filled with excitement.

Amy sat down first, and John followed. Emma was pulled into Amy’s lap like she needed protecting from her father. But when John was situated, sitting as comfortably as possible, Emma pushed herself away from her mother and into his lap. Emma was so excited that both her parents were on the couch at the same time. She didn’t seem to notice the tension and unease pulling at an invisible rope between her mother and father.

She wrapped one arm around his shoulder, and her small cold fingers touched his neck. Emma was still facing her mother, but all her attention was on her father. Her eyes were open and innocent, once again waiting for what wasn’t coming.

John was very aware of his daughter, but he was taking in everything else. All his senses were alive. There was the television in front of them. The coffee table had stained rings of dried moisture from cups that weren’t set on coasters. A doll sat in John’s chair, and the corner of his mouth turned up for the first time. He could smell slightly burned cheese, remnants of lunch, and his hands touched the leather couch as well as instinctively holding his daughter’s legs that rested on the middle couch cushion.

John was brought back to both of his girls when Emma shifted to kneel in his lap, then faced him completely and asked, “Daddy, how are you?” Emma’s knees stabbed John’s thighs. Both of her hands were on his shoulders.

Immediately, John felt as if knives were plunging into his legs. What was wrong with his legs? Would the doctors have to cut them off? John knew they had great doctors these days but he hated the idea of surgery. John could feel the cloud of anxiety pushing in, and he clinched his jaw trying not to throw his daughter off his lap.

“Emma.” The sound of his wife’s nervous voice brought him back.

Amy could tell something was wrong with John when she saw him at the door. She hopes being home again would help.

That night, John couldn’t sleep. As he laid in bed, tense, he couldn’t shut his eyes. The static silence of the night was deafening; his ears rang like he had just gotten back from a concert. Every sound made him flinch. His jaw hurt from clenching it. When he heard the even rhythm of Amy’s breath, John rolled up out of his bed and



headed downstairs to the couch. He hated being alone, but maybe the sound of the T.V. would help.

“Daddy?”

John paused and turned outside of Emma’s room to see her slender form sitting up in bed. He inched into her room watching as she smiled sleepily. “What are you doing up so late, baby girl?”

“Umm, well I had a bad dream. Then I heard you.”

John nodded, understanding all too well. “Do you want to talk about it?” John asked, feeling like a real father more and more, as he sat on her twin bed.

Emma nodded slowly. “But if I tell you, you have to lay with me.” When she saw the hesitancy in her father’s eyes, Emma explained, “Mommy does when I have bad dreams.”

John smiled slowly, accepting her requirements, and waved his hand to indicate for Emma to make room in her small bed. When they were finally lying next to each other, with Emma’s small body in John embrace, Emma started telling him her bad dream. While she talked about this mean girl at school teasing her about John, her voice lulled him into a half sleeping state.

John slightly jerked awake in time to answer his daughter with reassuring words. “Well, your daddy came back because he fought all the monsters. I’m home with my two girls now, and you have nothing to worry about.”

Both Emma and John fell asleep that night, laying together in the small bed.

*

Shots pierced through the burning air. John could hear the constant pop-pop of the machine guns and the whop-whop-whopping of helicopters descending from the sky. It was a constant cacophony of sound every day, and the harsh music of war rang in his ears at night.

“Someone help!”

“Move, move, move, move!”

“Get down!”

The earth exploded above Lieutenant Thompson, and he braced himself against the wall of the trench. The picture that was clinched between his fingers trembled and John watched as the photo fluttered delicately, unlike the harshness that swirled around

it, to the dirt floor.



John swooped down quickly, holding onto his helmet and shouldering his gun, to pick up what he held most dear during times like these. Before his fingers could grasp the photograph, someone shoved him against the wall.

“Watch it Lieutenant!” The sweat and dust smeared face of his captain stared back at him. “You’re safer against the wall. I wasn’t planning on you dying any time soon.” The Captain yelled to be heard over the soaring bombs and deadly bullets. He rushed further down the trench, yelling out similar words to others of Thompson’s rank. John found the picture that lay heavy on the ground and risked picking it up quickly. Looking at his wife smiling down at a daughter he’d never met, John nodded with confidence and climbed up the ladder to protect this country against the hell that was war.

Distantly John came out of sleep when he heard the whining of his daughter.

“Daddy, you’re squeezing me too hard.” He could feel her small body try to wiggle free.

“Daddy, wake up, please.”

His eyes snapped open. John registered his heavy, fast, breathing first, and then his white-knuckle grip around his daughter.

“Emma, oh God. Emma, I’m so sorry.” She scooted away as soon as John’s grip released her. He could tell she wanted to run. John’s fingers were sore from clenching them and he tried to relieve the aching feeling by clenching and unclenching them.

“Emma, baby, did I hurt you?”

“No, Daddy but you scared me. Your grip was getting tighter.” Emma sat on the edge of her bed looking down at him with uncertainty and fear. She seemed to seconds away from finding a more trusting adult. This was the first time they had spent time together after all.

“I’m really sorry princess, Daddy...Daddy has been having some bad dreams lately.” Immediate understanding sparked in her eyes. “Oh. Well, do you want to talk about it?” John was amazed. At six years old Emma understood more than he thought. He sighed trying to find a way to tell a six-year-old about his nightmare. “Well, let’s just say the monsters that I chased after like to visit my dreams.”

Emma nodded slowly. She came closer and laid her head on John’s chest. “It’s okay Daddy. Remember? You got them all.”

I sighed, “Yeah, princess, that’s right.”

*

“Night Hun.” John leaned down and kissed his wife goodnight, and then went to leave their bedroom.



“John, where are you going?” Amy’s brow was furrowed, and the bed-side lamp was reflecting two tiny stars in her tired brown eyes.

“I don’t want to wake you four nights in a row with my bed dreams. So I’m going to sleep on the couch.”

“Babe, you aren’t bothering me with her nightmares. Come sleep with me. I’ve missed you for two years.” She patted his side of the bed.

John still shock his head. The nightmares were increasing in severity. In the mornings, he wakes up with aching muscles and he knows his muscles tensed up for long periods of time all through the night. What if he lashed out and hurt his wife without knowing it? “I’m sleeping downstairs for a while. I’ll see you in the morning.”

It didn’t take long for another nightmare to surface that night. It was vivid and very real.

The U.S. army had raided the other sides trench. Throwing gas bombs and taking anyone alive as prisoners. The wave of soldiers had slowed so the U.S. Army, including Lieutenant Thompson, were ordered to find any last survivors and bring them in as prisoners.

There were two teams and Thompson was sweeping the eastern part of the trench. It was eerily silent no more bombs or gunshots. The air was still and yet still had some charge to it. Everything seemed to be covered in shades of grey.

Then Thompson rounded the corner and came face to face was one of the others. His arm with the gun in it snapped up and the barrel of the gun was pointed at the enemy. “You’ve lost. Put the gun down!” There was an edge to lieutenant Thompson’s voice.

But the soldier didn’t put his gun down and he started talking quickly in German.

He then proceeded to pull a picture of a woman and two kids out of his vest. Lieutenant Thomason kept his find on the trigger. John cut the man off not understanding a word he was saying as he gestured to the picture and tried to push it at John. He seemed to be getting angrier and more fearful. John had a feeling what the soldier was trying to say, but he had orders to follow. “I said put the damn gun down! I’m not going to say it again!”

The German’s ears turned pink with rage and John stood his ground. Then when the soldier finally stopped talking it was like he was waiting for something. Then he turned his gun on himself.

“No!”

But it was to late and the solder crumpled to the ground with a bloody built hole in his temple.



John woke with a start, and he felt cold and confused for a moment until he realized he was still on the couch and the blanket had fallen to the floor. Once his surroundings started to come into focus he noticed a familiar heavy, cold object in his hand. He cursed silently understanding what had happened, and so he went back upstairs to put the gun back in the safe. He saw that it was four in the morning so he decided that he needed to wash off that last nightmare.

After shuffling to the hall bathroom on shaky muscles, he pulled off his night shirt and found a rag to dampen with cold water. John then proceeded to wipe his chest and wrap the cold rag around the back of his neck.

John could still feel a creeping fatigue at the edges of his consciousness so he sat against the bathroom wall and dozed. Later that morning his daughter found him there with the rag still around his neck.

*

Three weeks later

“Dr. Peter Simmons.”

Amy shook the doctor’s hand and smiled back at his kind eyes. “Amy. Amy Thompson. Thank you for making the time.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem.” Dr. Simmons motioned towards the chair as he sat himself. Amy sat and placed her purse next to the leg of the cushioned, wooden chair. “So, how’s John?” His fingers were linked together, resting on the desk with ease. “Yes, that’s what I’m actually here about. John has been having a difficult time coming back home. He doesn’t act like himself.” “Define ‘difficult’.” There was a worrisome look to the way Dr. Simmons glanced at the computer in front of him, which had John’s file open.

“His emotions are all over the place. Some days he’s quiet and simmering with anger. He’s snapped at me once or twice, but then said sorry with tears in his eyes. Other days he’s looked at our daughter with guilt written all over his face. At night it’s a whole other story. It’s almost like he fears going to bed, Doc. I’ve noticed some nights he’ll leave and end up in Emma’s bed in the morning. He won’t leave the house and if he does it’s not for long. At dinner he spaces out, and I’ve noticed that he’s pulled away from me, but bonded significantly with Emma.” Amy paused to look towards Dr. Simmons, but then continued. “I’ve done my research and...and I think my husband has PTSD.” Dr. Simmons nodded slowly. “He never told you my diagnosis of him?” Amy sat there with glassy eyes. “Yes, he does have post-traumatic-stress-disorder. But, Amy, the good news is that it’s minor, from what you’ve told me.” His folded hands opened with reassurance. “So what’s next? H-how do we fix it?” Amy’s voice cracked with weariness. “I’m going to give you a name of a specialist that I recommend your husband go see.”



Dr. Simmons wrote a name in scrawled handwriting and slid the paper across the desk. “I also would like you to strongly encourage him to go out with you and your daughter. The more he leaves the house, the more he’ll become comfortable with his new reality. Amy, you have to remember he came from war. John was taught to always look over his shoulder and to sleep with a gun in his hand.”

Amy nodded. Tears stuck to her lashes at the reality of her husband's situation. She knew it was true, his PTSD, but it was hard to accept once heard aloud. The worst part was that she felt left out. Why hadn't he told her?

John did get better. It took time, but the Thompson family took it one day at a time. The monsters that haunted John's dreams began to pull away and he focused more on his daughter and wife. While Amy went to work, John took Emma to the park. It took months of talking with the specialist before John could open up to Amy.

John's mood swings were decreasing and he felt like he could breathe more as every day passed. Amy tried to understand what he was going through, sometimes it scared her, but she was happy when he felt like he needed to open up. Emma was very supportive of her father. Amy talked to her little girl and helped her understand what was happening. Emma took everything in stride.

The Thompson family would get through it all.

