

Nyquil Dreams of Starr Garden

By Allegra Armstrong

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A beautifully written, beautifully titled 'quiet desperation' story in which the narrator navigates through her days in a Nyquil induced fugue as if she's standing outside of herself, observing—observing but not connecting. The sedative, ironically, demonically, turns her waking hours into a dream state—neither sleep nor its opposite. Masterful characterization, vernacular prose (tryna, shitton, woulda) and the use of the first person passive voice, make it a read you really wanna read.*

Quote: 'I leave Evan's and go out into the sun. Evan sleeps late, stays inside most days until dusk, but I like the full midday heat. South Street pops. The line outside Jim's cheesesteaks stretches down the block and into the alley. I whistle as I walk home.' *And, this ravishing paragraph:* 'She's trying on this Nanette Lepore sundress that I would die to wear to a party or something-- it's got all these flower patches on it, but it's not gaudy like you're thinking, it's real delicate. But it's six hundred dollars so I just look at it sometimes and settle for thinking about how consumerism is destroying the environment.'

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"I think it would be really hot if we filmed ourselves doin' it," Evan says. His bed is just a mattress on the floor, trash and dirty clothes scattered around. The house itself is beautiful-- a three-bedroom, big-windowed place off South that he shares with two female bandmates. Evan's a few inches taller than me, and he fucks like every other short guy I've known-- greedy. But I like Evan's eyes. In the light they turn liquid, clear, and it's like I can see into his loneliness.

We resolve to film ourselves doin' it until we realize we have no camera. Then we give up, lay down next to one another on the mattress, resigned.

"It's okay," says Evan. "I wanted to work on some music stuff this afternoon, anyway. I have some new song ideas. I was thinking of doing a song about my mom. We'd go to the beach

together when I was little, and I have this one memory in particular where she's holding me, all wrapped up like a burrito. I felt so safe."

I kiss Evan's eyelashes. I kiss his nose. I want him to be safe.

"I was thinking of a song that's joining together that memory with the time she was driving me to school drunk and we crashed. And just how that mom that put me in danger was the same one that was holding me."

"People being multiple things instead of one thing," I say. "Or you were thinking someone was one thing but then you glimpse her from another angle."

Evan makes a grab for his laptop, starts to type out some notes. "You're writing this now?" I say. "I thought we were gonna hang out."

"Come on, baby," says Evan. "You knew I had to work later."

"Later, like tonight," I say. "Not now."

"I'll make it up to you," Evan says. "How about I come over after work?"

I know I'm pouting but I can't help it. "Okay."

I leave Evan's and go out into the sun. Evan sleeps late, stays inside most days until dusk, but I like the full midday heat. South Street pops. The line outside Jim's cheesesteaks stretches down the block and into the alley. I whistle as I walk home.

In the park I watch an old guy yell at pigeons. I haven't been sleeping well, and the sun cuts through my blurry vision, like part of me is still stuck inside at Evan's, and part of me is out here, struggling to wake up. I get like this on days off, sometimes, like I'm waiting for work to start and wake me.

I sit down on a bench and call Lydia, whose vibrancy makes life clearer.

“Hi,” I say when she answers.

“Hi,” said Lyd. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know,” I say. “I figured I’d drive down to Penn State to surprise you.”

“Dude, I wish,” she says. “It sucks here without you. All I do is sit in a windowless lab and wonder when I’m next gonna see the sun.”

“Well, you’re coming home soon, right?” I say. “The semester’s gotta be almost over, it’s fuckin like ninety degrees here.”

“That’s climate change,” says Lydia. “It’s actually December.”

“Stop,” I say. “I’m sad enough without your gallows humor.”

“Welp,” says Lyd, “Only you can help you with that.”

“Damn, Lyd,” I say. “No fuckin’ sympathy.”

Lydia makes a noise with her mouth, I think to represent static. “Oh sorry, were you calling for the sympathy department? You have the wrong number. This is Other Side of Pennsylvania and Yell At You to Break Up With That Goatee-Having-Motherfucker. I’ve worked retail before. I know nobody likes it.”

Lyd knows life’s shitty, and funny all at once. For a moment I feel less like I’m moving through water, more like I’m part of the world. I smile at yelling guy, who’s quieted down, now that pigeons have dispersed.

“And also,” says Lydia, “Bad news. I got a fellowship up here for the summer. I’m assisting this guy with his skin research. I’m not gonna be home for awhile.”

I can’t tell if it’s my tiredness that’s making me dizzy or Lyd’s news. All I can tell is that I feel weird again.

“Damn,” I say. “Damn. I would never say that’s bad. I mean, it’s bad for me, but it’s so good. You need to do your career. I’ve always known you were gonna be something big.”

If Lydia can get out of Philly, she should run and not come back. I see myself for a second in an endless swirl, water in a bathtub, a vortex too strong for me to pull myself out. Lydia is on the side, safe from the drain, cheering for me. I was supposed to quit Evan and stay in school, so what the hell happened?

We stay on the phone for another hour, but my heart’s not in it. My heart hasn’t been in anything for so long.

I was supposed to be a sculpture major. But there were certain classes I had to take as a sculpture major, including wheel sculpting, a required class. Wheel is a class about making the same bowl over and over for an entire semester and fucking your back up while you do it. On the day I was supposed to leave Evan I texted him to say we needed to talk and he said how about right now and I hated the class so much I just left, like I was going to the bathroom but forever, and I swiped all of my stuff outta there, too, my sculpting tools and the clay I’d bought from the school and even the two shitty mugs I’d already made and fired.

We met at Starr Garden, and I was so tired, and I said I was done, I wanted to be done with him, at that point I could have still gone back to the class and been fine, but somehow along the way my plan changed. I was so tired, and Evan had brought a bottle of whiskey, and I said, Evan, I want to be done, and he looked at me with his golden eyes and said, how about we drink this instead and go back to my place, and at his place he held me and he was my comfort and that whiskey was his.

So I don't sculpt anymore, because I don't have a studio, and I don't go to class, cause it hurts my back and I dropped out, and I don't see my parents cause they're absolute nutcases, which means I spend a good amount of time in my apartment reading novels, or sketching, which is what I did way back in middle school before I knew I was an artist. Sometimes I walk, too, there's a lot to see around here, like that screaming guy, or the weird crocheted sweaters people put on the poles, I think they're some kind of street art, but mainly they just get gross and grey and dirty when it rains.

I shouldn't take so much Nyquil to get to sleep. It's wild to me that Lydia has a summer internship doing medical research this summer and I've been absent basically this entire last year, high on Nyquil. And I'm scared to stop.

I haven't been sleeping well, maybe because of how little I've been doing, and I hate not sleeping well. If I'm awake lying in bed I'll start to have this feeling like I have to pee every twenty minutes and then I'll convince myself I can't go back to sleep until I pee, so then I absolutely have to get up and out of bed and pee. Every night before bed I measure out a capful of Nyquil. It makes me too nervous not to have it. Even on nights when I'm super tired, or nights like tonight when Evan's promised to come over later and I'll have to wake up to let him in, it just makes me feel better, knowing I'll be knocked out no matter what. Knowing I have no choice but to sleep. It's too freaky otherwise, thinking about what if I forget how to sleep and also thinking about what happens to my consciousness when I sleep. I hate it.

It's five AM when Evan calls me and I pull myself out of bed to let him upstairs. I kiss him sleepily. "Where were you?" I say. "The bars closed hours ago."

“I was just drinkin’ in the park with some friends,” he says. “Beautiful night for it.”

I’m happy when I’m back in bed, Evan scrambling around in the kitchen to find something to eat. I don’t let myself drift off fully as I wait for him, because I don’t wanna get woken up again. I can hear the fan turn on as Evan fries eggs. But I must fall asleep accidentally because when I wake up again he’s holding me, burrowing his boozy mouth into me, his dick hard against my ass.

I roll over and kiss Evan. I wrap one of my legs around him. I fall into a NyQuil dream as he fucks me. I’m still awake, but dreaming, and I dream of the playground at Starr Garden. As a teenager, I’d hang out there in big packs, twenty or so of us meeting there at dusk to smoke and play on the swingset in a way that wasn’t cool during the day anymore. In the dream I am with Lydia, it’s only me and her, and I’m showing her a skate trick I’ve perfected on the basketball court, and she winces every time I do it. In the dream I realize I’m gonna hurt myself with this shit, that’s why she’s wincing, and I come over to her on the swings instead, where I’ll be safe.

I come out of my NyQuil dream when Evan puts his thumb in my mouth, and I’m already nostalgic for the three-sided fence of the playground, and for Lydia, at Penn State now.

Evan finishes, and asks if I wanna finish, and I say no, and I love him.

When I was younger I thought there’d be more rules to working life-- that everyone would sort of drop their personalities when they got in the door and put on a professional mask. That might be true in some workplaces, but retail is a bizarre clash of personalities that I wasn’t prepared for.

I don't mind it. The air conditioning is *cold*, and free, as much of it as I want. All of my eating is done on the clock. The sick part of working retail is how much lying I have to do to get through the day. I thought of myself as an ethical person before I went into sales.

It's 11:35 now, and my cream cheese bagel is gone, and Rochelle is headed to a noon barre class, which is relieving because I'm exhausted and if no customers are here I plan to stare into space like a zombie. No one comes in before noon, generally, which means there's this nice hour cushion between when I get to work at eleven and when I actually have to do work. I've worked some dumb-ass retail jobs where they had in between tasks for me, like dusting and shit, when customers weren't in the store, and "security cameras" where they could see if I was actually doing the tasks. But Rochelle is a pretty lax boss. She just looks at her phone, mostly, when there aren't customers, and I look out the window, and then she leaves to walk her dog or get lattes.

Rochelle goes to barre and this one regular, Rachel, comes in, which I think is Rochelle's real name from when she lived in Arkansas and didn't own a clothing store. I ask how her day is going and Rachel says real good cause she biked sixty miles this morning and I say nice even though I'm thinking about how brittle her bones probably are from not eating. I show her this Chloe jacket that just came in that I think would look real pretty on her. I like the jacket for a lot of our customers cause it's soft and skinny people are always cold.

Rachel picks some stuff out and I pick some stuff out and she goes into the dressing room with all of it. She doesn't close the curtain, I think cause she's lonely and wants to see me while she's talking to me, but it could also because she wants to make sure I see her bod while she changes.

“How have you been?” I say. She’s trying on this Nanette Lepore sundress that I would die to wear to a party or something-- it’s got all these flower patches on it, but it’s not gaudy like you’re thinking, it’s real delicate. But it’s six hundred dollars so I just look at it sometimes and settle for thinking about how consumerism is destroying the environment.

“Things have been really hard,” Rachel says. “Glen’s been saying we have to cut back. I guess things haven’t been going well with his business-- I’m not too sure how that works with investments-- and he’s asked me not to spend as much.”

“Aww man,” I say, neutrally. “How’s that been?”

“Not good,” says Rachel. “Because it’s not just spending less, it’s that he’s hardly ever home. And when he is home he’s looking at his iPad, ‘working.’ I think he’s seeing someone else. And it’s so heartbreaking. It’s like he barely even makes eye contact with me anymore. I talk to him about my day and he answers into his iPad.”

“That’s unsettling,” I say. “I hate when people can’t even look up from their phones to have a freaking conversation.”

“And not just people!” says Rachel. “This is Glen! We exchanged soul rings in Lanikai. Now it’s like I barely know him.”

“I like this dress a lot,” I say, looking at Rachel in my dream dress. “Come out so we can admire you.”

Rachel’s shoulder blades poke out like wings. But you can see how, ten years ago, before anorexia attacked her body, she was stunning. “Picture it with a tan,” I say. “I don’t think you can pass it up.”

Rachel twirls, admiring herself. “This is perfect. I’ll have to hide the bag so Glen won’t know I’ve been bad.”

I smile. "When he sees you in this, he'll forget everything else."

I think a lot of times, like in stories or movies or something, girls don't have friends, or their friends are flaky as shit so their boyfriends can be the focus of the thing. I have a shitton of friends because it's normal when you live in a society to have friends and also if you had a boyfriend like Evan you would probably have friends too.

My friends think Evan is shady and I think Evan is like my dad. That's because only fifty percent of what Evan says is true, but you just never know what fifty. And anyway Evan hardly ever takes drugs which makes him better than my dad in most ways. It's good that I have friends because it means I don't have to hang with my coworkers outside of work. I think it's one of the saddest things in the world, when people like, work with their coworkers all day and then that's who they call on the weekends to chill with and talk about work some more. My one coworker Lauren is always tryna chill and she's annoying as fuck. Lauren has a special shift that starts at 1:15 (?!, right?) because she goes to her noon AA meeting every day. Rochelle is all nice and like, buys that shit, but I woulda been like, go to a different meeting, I know there's more than one per day.

Lauren is also sneaky. She's sneaky cause she wants me to come to the AA for people with boyfriends who are alcoholics. One time, no joke, she invited me out to Indian food, and then on the way was like, oh yeah, Margaret, there's the place where the Al-anon meetings happen in case you're interested. Fuck you. But then we went and ate the food and it was kinda fine. I like hanging out with people, even if it's draining people like Lauren who ask the waitress four million questions and are dairy and soy free (?!).

Lauren might be sneaky but I'm sneaky-er. Cause the next day I sneaked to that meeting without her knowing. I mean, it would be super lame if I like, couldn't break up with Evan and needed help with that. I'm a grown woman. I like Evan. But I can't break up with my drunk ass parents so I wanted to check out what other people do, like sad old housewives who need to stay with their drunk husbands cause they will be destitute otherwise. I figured the meeting would make me feel better about myself cause other people's lives were worse than mine. But it was honestly even sadder than I was hoping.

There was this one guy, who was like, totally disheveled looking, whose wife would get drunk and masturbate really loudly in their bed. There was this other lady talking about how she has to get eye surgery now because her parents beat her so badly as a kid. The saddest thing was how all these people thought saying some prayers were gonna help them. Someone would be like, yeah, my boyfriend went to the ER last week, heroin overdose, but I know God is helping me, and I don't even know where I'd be without the love and support of this program. After that whopper I got real sad, and we said the final prayer and some old lady with red glasses tried to talk to me but I bolted and went to the art museum and stared at a painting of Prometheus getting his liver eaten until the place closed. Art school is all around us.

I never went back to that meeting after that, and usually I chill with friends after work but today I go to my brother's place after work. Stu lives in this giant rowhouse on Delancey that he's split up into apartments. My parents helped him buy it and he has this really sad soul sucking money job that helps him with the rest of the mortgage. Also he gets rent from his three tenants. To deal with his soul sucking money job Stu smokes a ton, and takes kratom which is

this weird potpourri you can buy at the gas station to make your car smell nice or smoke to get high. And money job is not all bad. It's allowed Stu to buy some really nice art.

Stu's pretty high when I get there. On the weekends Stu'll roll up blunt after blunt until he falls asleep in the gold easy chair our Grandpa spent his retirement in.

I talk to Stu for a little about some dumb shit someone was saying at work. Someone is always saying some dumb shit at my work about how they don't vaccinate their kids and I'm always saying interesting back and smiling and telling them the crop top they're trying on looks great on them.

"Can I have some weed?" I ask him. "I've been taking a bunch of Nyquil to fall asleep and it's making me fucked up."

Stu laughs.

"I'm serious," I say. "Remember how I was taking it a bunch in middle school and Mom and Dad sent me to that camp in Maine?"

"I don't think you're supposed to take that much Nyquil," he says.

"I agree," I say. "That camp was shitty. And for awhile I was taking it cause I was sick and then I just didn't stop taking it when I stopped being sick and now I have been taking it for like a month. I don't think I can sleep without it. And it's weird, I'm always in this dream state now, in between sleeping and awake. It's fucking me."

Stu rolls me four joints, which sounds like a lot except Stu has twenty trillion dollars and doesn't care about four joints. And anyway Stu's the most genetically close person to me in the world. He doesn't want me to get stuck drinking Nyquil every night, forever.

I'm not sure how I'm gonna face off against the Nyquil monster except I know I have to. If I can make it through a full night then I can make it through tomorrow and I can make it

through the next tomorrow. In my apartment I gather my two bottles of Nyquil and three bottles of Zzzquil and even a bottle of CVS-brand Benadryl. I take em down the block to the trash cans that Michael Nutter bought with school district money, trash cans that if anything have made Philadelphia's litter problems worse. I open the little door on the trash can and I stuff sixty dollars of sleep aids down. I don't even give the Nyquil to a homeless person because what a terrible gift.

I lock the door to my apartment and I know that this is the big ending. I tell myself no matter what I won't go to the 24-hour CVS and I won't go anywhere until the sun comes up and when the sun comes up the majority of Nyquil will be out of my system and I will be more or less free.

I take melatonin, which I'm supposed to take one hour before bedtime, as per the melatonin instructions. I smoke one of Stu's joints out of the bathroom window. I really like having a bathroom window. I grew up in an apartment and it had an interior bathroom, so no window. I smoke the weed and then I pile up the new books I've bought, just for this occasion, next to my bed. I've bought three new books, and I lie down and look at them. I'm looking at this one in particular. It's this girl's memoir, about growing up with this super rich, shitty dad in Miami, and what I like about it is that the book is about being a badass feminist but the cover of the book is inset with glitter. In the early 2000s I liked glitter a lot, I had a glittery trading card of Britney Spears in a clear hardshell case, but also in the early 2000s feminism wasn't glittery. If someone called you a feminist, it was a way of ending a conversation, of pushing you out.

I lay down with my weed brain and my no Nyquil and I think about how when I write a book its gonna be similar to this glittery book, and my book is gonna be about how you can work retail and be nice to the skinny shitty women who come in and complain about how much their

backs hurt (from not eating) and how that, in essence, is feminism. My book is gonna be about a woman who is nice to other women, even skinny women, and doesn't hate them, and starts a revolution.

Evan called then, and I picked up, even though I was high and I hate doing anything when I'm high because everything when I'm high just feels like it takes a million hours of extra time. If I'm high and peeing, sometimes I get scared because it takes so long for all the pee to come out. That's why I only smoke weed when I'm trying to wean myself off of being addicted to something else.

What's up, I say, and Evan says he's here.

"Where?"

"Outside. I was just in the neighborhood. Can I come in?"

I can't let Evan in because tonight is the night of my Nyquil detox. "Sorry," I say. "I'm not feeling so good, baby. I love you, though. Can we catch up tomorrow?"

"Come on, baby," he says. I can see Evan's eyes flash sweetly in my mind. "If you're not feeling good, I'll take care of you. I'll love you. You know that. Just let me up, okay? I gotta piss real bad."

I sort of fall out of bed and cross to my bedroom window, look down at the street. I imagine Evan holding me, safe in his arms as I writhe in my withdrawal. "Okay," I say. I shuffle downstairs and unlock the front door. Evan runs up to pee.

I lay in my bed and think about all of Stu's stuff. He had this pretty cool patch in his living room, from a band we both like, but I'm more of a sewer, and I'd asked if I could have it. He said no, he needed to keep it, I guess like how I inexplicably need to keep Evan, rather than give him away to someone else, which is what I should do.

Evan comes into bed. His bush and mustache and hair are all pale blonde, and wiry. Evan is twenty four to my nineteen, and I like that, too. He's still a student at my old art school, a perpetual kid, taking forever to complete his music business degree.

Evan is telling me a story about how their drummer was too sick to play tonight and he ruined their gig. They've been needing a new drummer for awhile because Luis is always either trying to find heroin or too high or too sick from not having any. I feel bad, because when I met Evan, Luis was absolute fire. One out of every fifty people at art school was like Luis, a true artist, someone who'd make me wanna go right up to the studio, stay up all night sculpting, inspiration into life. A few nights after Ev and I'd met we'd all snorted heroin together in this weird carpeted mudroom at a house party and I'd thrown it all right up, the rum and cheetos I'd been eating and those fake slim jims from the corner store and \$25 of white which seemed like a lot but was also fine I guess because he and Evan were just happy in that carpeted mudroom together.

I'd gone outside and thought about how Evan and I were gonna be done soon because Evan was the kind of person who could handle a belly full of heroin and I wasn't. But Evan and I were actually not done soon. Luis started missing gigs and jacked his arms all up and that summer became a winter when me and Evan loved each other and I started working retail in the spring.

Evan and I always fuck twice when we see each other but I don't want to right now because being high makes my belly hurt. So Evan just holds me and pokes me with his drunk boner and whispers into my neck with his mustache in my favorite way. It's moments like this when I love Evan more than my own self. I wanna hold that little Evan on the beach in his towel forever. I fall asleep like this, with Evan's warm breath in my ear and his arm on my waist.

The sun comes up at seven, and I've slept for four hours with no Nyquil. Evan might sleep all day, it's impossible to know, and the last of the weed I smoked burns at the corners of my eyes as I get up. I have work in four hours, and my bagel with cream cheese there, and I start an espresso for myself on the stove. I look out the window at my block, and I think about how when I was younger my friends and I skated all over everywhere, no helmets, no elbow pads, nothing. We hadn't known yet to be afraid.

The fear had hit me all at once, the summer after high school, when Lydia broke her wrist skitching, holding on to the back of a truck on the Walnut Street Bridge. I'd seen the little scar on her wrist where her stitches were, and under that the metal that would be inside her until she died, and a few weeks later she went away to school and I started walking places, mostly, a way of slowing down.

I have four hours until work and I go into the kitchen to check on my espresso, and it's the kind of day that makes me sure I don't know anything yet, when everything is just getting started.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: : *I think for me this story is about safety, and characters who use drugs or alcohol or people or whatever they're addicted to as a way back to wherever they feel safe. It's a cool setup for a story 'cause it's such a trap-- if the only time you feel safe is when you're using, that's a terrible place to be in, especially if whatever it is you're addicted to is also what's bringing you down.*

So you have Rachel, who's wasting away, she's so addicted to not eating, Margaret who's so addicted to Evan she drops out of school, Stu's addicted to stuff and his weird incense drug, and Evan who doesn't care about anything except getting drunk. And I liked the idea of dropping Margaret in amongst all this, because she wants something different for herself so bad but she also wants to hold on to the safety of what she knows.

Literary influences: Kathy Acker, Alexandra Kleeman, Tao Lin, Sherman Alexie, Denis Johnson, Nico Walker.

BIO: *Allegra Armstrong lives in Spokane, WA and teaches Composition at Eastern Washington University, where she is an MFA candidate. Her poetry and prose have appeared in Cleaver, The Last Petal, Spokane Public Radio and elsewhere. She reads original poetry aloud at armstrongallegra.bandcamp.com.*