

Insomnia

By Sadie West

Fandom: *Riverdale* (Jughead + Betty)

Jughead scaled the front steps and knocked on the door, pounding the side of his thigh with his fist in quick, sharp jabs.

Betty opened the door and flew into his arms. The clean scent of her hair and skin surrounded him in a sweet cloud of relief. For a moment, but only a moment, he felt safe again.

His face buried in her neck, he sensed her tossing exclamations and questions at him, but he didn't register much of it. Her excited words all ran together.

With his eyes closed, he lost his balance for a sec.

"Jug?" Betty grabbed him hard by both arms, and he winced. "You ok?"

"Yeah, of course," he assured, forcing a smile. "I'm just so happy you're back. How was your grandma's lake cabin?"

She didn't answer, but her eyes trailed across his face and down his body.

Jughead knew she couldn't see the bruises through his clothes, but did she notice the bags under his eyes? Or the stress lines around his mouth and across his brow?

"Something's wrong," she decided.

Jughead shrugged her off. "Nothing's wrong. Just didn't sleep very well." The truth was, he hadn't slept in two nights. And for days before that, his sleeping had

been sketchy, all starts and stops.

Betty seemed to accept the excuse. She relaxed a bit, even smiled. “I missed you.”

“Me, too,” he assured.

“You wanna come in?”

It wasn’t a matter of wanting to. If he went inside, he and Betty would end up snuggled on the couch or the bed, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder. He’d be asleep within minutes.

The nightmares would attack—tiny hands around his throat, a knife under his flesh, fists falling like hailstones.

“How about we take a walk instead?” he countered, glancing up the block. “Get some fresh air?”

She seemed suspicious, but Betty eventually slipped her hand into his, and they ambled across her lawn.

“You know I didn’t want to go to the lake, right?” Betty asked. “I mean, not now. It was a required mother-daughters bonding thing—”

“I know,” Jughead said.

“Not with everything that’s been going on.”

“I know,” he repeated, though he couldn’t wonder if he’d be as screwed up as he was if Betty had been with him the last three days. Her presence alone was a salve to his wounds, both internal and external.

But she hadn’t been here, and shame at what he’d done and become in such a short amount of time kept him from opening up to her now.

They approached the first intersection, quiet and deserted.

Her hand grew clammy. “How’s Mr. Andrews been?” Betty asked. “Have you heard from Archie?”

Rather than share some of his pain, Jughead snapped, “Just peachy. Fred’s been killing himself to find a way, any way, to get his only son out of jail, and my best friend’s in juvenile detention for a crime he didn’t commit.” Jughead snatched his hand from hers and started hitting the side of his thigh, harder, relishing the spike of pain as old and new bruises complained. “So, no, Betty. Fred’s not great. Archie’s not great.”

“Jug,” Betty frowned, scrutinizing him again. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He turned his back so she couldn’t see his face. “Go home, Betty. I’ll pick you up for school in the morning.” He took a right, crossed the street, and hurried out of sight before she tried to follow him.

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Jughead left his cellphone behind and spent the night at the lake, whipping rocks across the water and stomping through the trees. Betty would be calling, but how could he explain the dreams? The self-inflicted bruises? The hallucinations?

The good news was he didn’t suffer nightmares so long as he was awake. The bad news—he couldn’t think straight as he walked through his daily life in a fog of exhaustion, his hands shaking like an old man’s. But he didn’t dare sit down out here and fall asleep.

Hours later—exhausted, unshowered, and without patience, Jughead pulled up to the curb and rolled down the passenger window because it was important to do

normal things, especially when his life was crumbling around his ears.

“Morning, beautiful.”

Practically glowing, Betty bounced into the seat beside him, gave his cheek a soft kiss, and enveloped him once more in her sweet perfume. “Morning.”

Her normalcy was a huge relief. Jughead swung into the street, feeling that tricky safe feeling again. Something about Betty took away the panic.

Except panic was one of the only things keeping the exhaustion at bay.

Zooming down Main Street, sleepiness stole over him, beginning in his legs and crawling up his torso. His limbs went tingly, then numb. He yawned loudly.

That’s when he realized Betty had been talking to him this entire time, and he hadn’t even noticed.

“What?” he asked, trying to focus on the road, but his eyes were both burning and fuzzy. No matter how many times he blinked and rubbed them, he couldn’t clear his vision. Not completely.

Betty may have said something else, but he didn’t catch it. For just a second, he closed his eyes.

Her scream startled him back to consciousness. He jerked the wheel to the left and slammed on the brakes, sending the car into a one hundred eighty degree spin. Bouncing against the curb, the engine died.

“Oh, my God,” Betty exclaimed, scrambling out of the car like it might go up in flames. Jughead just sat there, his hands at ten and two.

He’d fallen asleep at the wheel. He could have hurt Betty. He could have killed her.

“Jug?” She leaned through the passenger window.

Oh, God, he’d really screwed up. Betty would never forgive him. Her mom would tell the sheriff. People would find out what a basket case he was.

Luckily, the car started right up on the first try and though the alignment was screwed and at least one tire was flat, he drove off, leaving Betty standing in the road.

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Jughead went home to the trailer park, not even bothering with fixing his car. He started a fire in the pit in front of his trailer and stood stiffly, trying to focus on the flames and not what a monumental loser he was.

When his phone buzzed, he assumed it was Betty looking for him. It was Sweat Pea. He and a couple of the Serpents wanted to ditch school and come hang out.

Stay in school, Jughead texted back.

Too late.

Jughead considered running for it, but he didn’t think his car would make it, and his bike was parked at the Wyrms. So, he stayed, refusing to sit. He stood until his legs cramped and his eyes felt sprayed in acid.

Someone approached on his right, and he flinched, but when he darted his eyes over, no one was there. His throat began to itch, and he scrubbed angrily at the spot.

Was he still awake?

He patted his pockets for his phone, but it was gone.

When was the last time he’d had his phone? Had his conversation with Sweet Pea been real?

He finally found it on a folding chair at the same moment a car pulled up.

“Jughead?” Sweet Pea called, examining the damage on Jughead’s car as he strolled over. “Everything cool?”

“Yep.” He bobbed his head. “You?”

His serpents spread out around him, holding their hands to the fire.

“You look like crap,” Sweet Pea observed. “Need to crash for a bit? I’ll stand guard.”

No chance. He couldn’t risk the nightmares. “I’m good. I just want to hang out for a while.”

“How about some coffee then?” Sweet Pea offered.

Actually, that sounded great. It might buy him a few more hours of consciousness. “Sure, thanks.”

“I’ll make some. Milk and sugar?” Sweet Pea asked as he opened the trailer door.

“Black,” Jughead called after him.

It got real quiet outside while his friend was banging around the kitchen. No one spoke. The crackling fire was the only sound until Sweet Pea returned with two cups of coffee and handed one to Jughead.

“It’s hot,” Sweet Pea warned.

Jughead didn’t care. He slurped a long swallow of scalding and bitter brew, thankful for the double punch of pain and caffeine.

“Easy, buddy.” Sweet Pea chuckled. “Coffee’s meant to be savored, not taken like a shot.”

Jughead ignored him and scalded his palette with another drink.

“You ready to tell me what happened with the car, yet?” Sweet Pea asked.

“Nope.” He finished the coffee and swilled the remains into the fire. Stepping back from the flames, Jughead stumbled. He was damned dizzy.

A figure approached from the backside of the trailer. Jughead scrubbed his eyes clear as Betty came into focus.

“What are you doing here?” Jughead looked from Betty to Sweet Pea.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I can’t carry you by myself.”

“What?” The world began to melt, starting with the sky and then the horizon, dripping away and revealing matte gray beneath. They’d tricked him. “How could you?” The coffee cup fell from numb fingers. She’d drugged him and gotten his friends involved.

Sweet Pea took a step nearer.

“No, stop,” Jughead pleaded, his tongue swollen and tingling.

“There won’t be any nightmares, Jug,” Betty said. “I promise.”

The world faded away until Betty was the only slice of color left. And then she melted to gray as well.

Jughead stumbled back and fell.

Several pairs of strong hands caught him before he hit the ground.

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Jughead came to consciousness like swimming through tar. Slowly, the world returned—a soft bed, a ticking clock, and warm light on his face.

With a groan, he opened his eyes and begrudgingly admitted Betty had been right. There’d been no nightmares.

A noise brought his attention to the doorway where Betty leaned, her phone in her hand.

Oh, God. This was going to hurt. His accident, her betrayal.

She spoke quietly into her cell, "He's awake."

What the hell? He sat up and leaned against the bedpost of Betty's bed, realizing for the first time he wore nothing but his white undershirt and boxer shorts. They'd seen the bruises on his thighs and biceps, the pinch marks across his belly. They wouldn't understand why, but the self-inflicted pain kept him awake.

But there were enough drugs still in his system to make standing up too difficult to contemplate. So, he just sat there like a lump as Fred Andrews stalked up the stairs and fitted himself between Betty's dresser and the closet door.

"Mr. Andrews?" Jughead called, aghast. What was Betty up to? Didn't she realize how humiliating it was being seen like this? Not to mention the guilt Jughead carried over Archie's sentencing. How could she invite him here?

Before Jughead could say a word, his dad filed in, followed by Sweet Pea, Cheryl, Veronica, Toni, Mary Andrews, and a string of Serpents. They crowded around the periphery of the room.

Jughead panicked, pulling his knees up tight. What was going on?

Mr. Andrews cleared his throat and crossed the room to perch awkwardly on the edge of the bed. "Jughead?" he began. "You need to take care of yourself, son. Archie needs you. And I need you to help me find a way to get him out. You need to be strong, do you understand?"

Jughead nodded through a veil of tears.

His dad was next. As Mr. Andrews left the room, F.P. took his place on the bed. “Jug, I know what you went through with Penny. I know how hard it must have been. God, it was hard for me to see you beaten half to death.” He coughed into his fist, and Jughead wrapped his arms around his knees. “It’ll take time to get over it, and no one expects it to happen overnight. But you have to swear to me you’ll take care of yourself in the meantime.”

Jughead couldn’t speak. He nodded jerkily.

Sweet Pea punched his arm. “Hope you don’t hold the coffee thing against me. We need you, man. We all do.”

Cheryl kissed the top of his head. “I care about you, you know that, right?”

“Me, too.” Toni gave the back of his neck a gentle massage.

Mrs. Andrews looked solemnly down at him. “You’re the toughest kid I know,” she declared. “I’ve watched you grow up, and I’ve always thought so.” Her expression softened into a sad smile. “I just want to give that tough little kid a hug and say, I know you’ve been through hell.” She wrapped him in her arms. “But you can’t break now. I need you. Archie needs you.” Rustling his hair, she too left until it was just him and Betty.

“That was cruel,” he hissed. “I don’t need an intervention.”

Ignoring him, she sat on the edge of the bed. “I talked to a counselor who specializes in PTSD. This is her card.” She set a small white rectangle on the bedside table. “She has a standing appointment for you every Wednesday after school. I hope you decide to go.”

He couldn’t answer. Words were all bottled up inside. Things he couldn’t even

tell Betty.

“I’m sorry I drugged you,” she said, tears in her eyes, “but you could have killed both of us. You haven’t slept in days, I checked with F.P. Sleep deprivation can, well...”

The cork in his throat popped, and bile gathered at the back of his tongue. “The nightmares won’t stop,” he told her bitterly. “I see Archie in juvenile detention. And instead of Penny’s goons beating me to a pulp, they’re doing it to Archie.” Jughead’s gaze snapped up and lit upon hers. “I was conscious when Penny took my serpent tattoo. I remember all of it. And when she was done, she climbed on my chest and choked me until I blacked out.” Jughead buried his head, too affected by the memories to be seen by anyone, even her. “I thought I was going to die. I really thought...”

“We’re going to figure a way through this, Juggy.” He felt rather than saw her climb into bed beside him. “Because you’re important, and you’re loved, and I need you.”

Jughead felt it again, that illogical sensation of safety. Her presence was keeping the demons at bay. So, though he’d slept for God knew how long, Jughead slithered down under the covers and pulled her sweet-smelling body against his, feeling tired.

“I’m just so freaking scared,” he admitted. “I can’t stop feeling scared.”

Stroking his hair from his forehead, Betty swore, “We’ll find a way. Together. Deal?”

“Together.” He liked the sound of that.

Anna Abner lived in a haunted house for three years and grew up talking to imaginary friends. She married a tall, dark, and handsome United States Marine—her real life romance hero.

Currently, she writes edge-of-your-seat paranormal romances and blogs about ghosts and magic from her desert hideaway in sunny southern California. Her series include the Red Plague, Dark Casters, and Beasts of Vegas.

Anna also writes short, sexy LGBTQ stories set in high school under the pen name Sadie West.

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