

The Boy

WHO

couldn't sleep



The Boy Who Couldn't Sleep

On the day that he was born Max slept for most of the time. And in the first weeks of his life he slept like other babies. But when he began to look around him, he didn't sleep so much. He slept for a few hours at night and a little in the daytime. Then he stopped sleeping during the day. He was awake for twenty hours. His eyes were always open!

His mother, Samantha Price, was very surprised. She said that the world was a very interesting place and perhaps Max wanted to see everything. She thought this was because he was intelligent.

The doctors and pediatricians were also very surprised; but they said that they didn't know why Max slept so little. Then a child psychologist studied Max's case. He said that it wasn't a very strange case.

His studies showed that a lot of modern babies were sleeping less. He wasn't sure why, but he had some ideas about it.

'Two hundred years ago people went to bed earlier than today,' he told Samantha. 'Generally, life was slower in the past and people slept longer. They worked a lot and they didn't have much money, so they often stayed at home after work and went to bed when it got dark. You see, there was no television and there weren't any electric lights. Electric light is different from candlelight; it is brighter and it keeps you awake. Babies are influenced in mysterious ways by the world. And if the world is fast, noisy, and bright, and if people often go to bed very late, babies will feel this and they won't sleep so much.'

'Are you sure, Doctor?' Samantha said. 'I think that Max doesn't sleep because he finds the world so interesting. He's very intelligent.'

'Yes, that's possible, Mrs Price. But it's true that our society is becoming more nocturnal.'

The psychologist's words surprised Samantha. She couldn't believe him. But when she told her husband Derek, he said, 'Yes, it seems crazy but our world is crazy! The psychologist may be right. But we'll see. Perhaps it will pass and Max will sleep like other babies.'

When Max was five, the doctors said he was a hyperactive child. Every night Samantha tried to put him to bed at eight-thirty but he wasn't sleepy. Samantha became angry; Derek was angry too. They shouted at Max and finally he went to bed at about half past nine. But he cried and cried, and he never fell asleep before eleven o'clock. Then he woke up between four and five in the morning and he wanted to play. Samantha and Derek were always tired and nervous.

When Max was eight, he slept about two hours at night. Now Samantha and Derek went to bed while he continued to play quietly with his toys or his computer. He did lots of things to pass the time and he didn't often feel bored. He liked the electronic light of the TV or computer. He was always in the light!

If he was always in was in the dark for a while, he became nervous and depressed. It seemed that he needed light.

'I think he's a mutant,' Derek said one day, and he laughed. But he was half serious.

'What do you mean?' asked Samantha.

'Nature is trying to produce a new kind of human and Max is an experiment,' Derek replied, laughing. 'He's a child of the future.'

When Max was a teenager, he was awake for most of the day. At night he went to discos or all-night parties. He watched videos or late-night films on TV, and he listened to music. He went to school every day, but he didn't get up in the morning like other children. At school his friends were surprised because he wasn't sleepy. And he worked hard. He liked learning new things and he read a lot of books. He wanted to know all about life and the world. When his friends asked him about this, he said, 'I want to understand everything. The world is a big, interesting place and life is short. We sleep too much. Sleep is a waste of time.'

Samantha and Derek were feeling better now because they usually slept well. Derek accepted Max's condition more than Samantha. He said it was true that Max was different but in other ways he was normal. He liked sport, clothes, music and girls.

'How can you say he's normal?' said Samantha. 'A normal person can't always live in the light of day or electricity. Normal people can't live without sleep. It's impossible! Max must sleep or one day he will die!'

One evening Samantha put some strong sleeping tablets in Max's tea to see what would happen. When he began to look sleepy, she called Derek.

'Look!' she said excitedly. 'He's going to fall asleep!'

Derek was surprised and happy. 'That's wonderful! Perhaps he's normal after all!'

'Ssh! You'll wake him up!'

After about half an hour Max opened his eyes.

'What's happening?' he said, looking around.

'You fell asleep,' said Derek with a big smile.

'Asleep? Me?' Max looked angry. 'How long?'

'About thirty minutes.'

'Oh no! I don't want to sleep. There's too much to do and see in the world. But how did I fall asleep?'

Samantha said quietly, 'I gave you some sleeping tablets.'

'You - what?' Derek shouted.

'Give them to me, Mum,' said Max.

Samantha looked very unhappy. 'Oh, you must sleep,

Max! Why don't you sleep?'

'I don't need it. When you sleep, you don't know anything. You can die in your sleep and you won't know about it. When you sleep, you can't see or hear anything. I don't like that.'

'But everybody in the world sleeps, Max!'

'I know - but not me. I want to see, hear, and know. Now give the tablets to me, Mum.'

Slowly Samantha put the packet in his hand.

But she couldn't stop herself. She was always thinking about Max's condition. One day she wrote to a famous neurologist who was an expert on sleep. Dr Somaz answered her letter, asking if he could do some tests on Max. Max said yes. After the tests, Dr Somaz said that Max's brain waves were different.

'His brain produces very strong alpha waves,' the doctor explained. 'These are the normal waves when we are awake. But his brain doesn't produce any slow waves, which are normal when we are asleep. It's strange. I've never seen this before.'

'So he really doesn't need sleep?' asked Derek.

'Sometimes perhaps - just a little.'

'And he is a normal, healthy person?' Samantha asked.

'Yes, he is. But there is a problem. Sleep restores the body. If the brain is always awake, the body is not renewed. And so... it will get old faster than normal...'

Samantha was looking at the doctor with big, frightened eyes. 'Do you mean that Max will die young?'

'I don't know, Mrs Price, but it's possible. I would like to do some more tests.'

Dr Somaz's tests showed that Max's body was getting old faster than normal. He was eighteen but he had the body of a man of thirty-five. Samantha and Derek were shocked.

'How long will he live?' Derek asked.

'That's a very difficult question and I don't know the answer.'

'Oh, isn't there anything we can do, Doctor?' Samantha cried. 'How can we help him?'

Dr Somaz was silent for a moment. 'Well, I know of a drug that can make him sleep. But it's a very strong drug. If he takes it for a long time - or if he takes an overdose - it will kill him. And it is addictive. With time he will want more of it.'

Samantha and Derek said nothing. They only looked at each other sadly.

'So if he takes this drug, he will live longer - am I right?' said Derek.

'I'm not sure, Mr Price. You see, he will be a drug addict and the drug will kill him in the end.'

'Oh God, this is terrible!' cried Samantha with big tears in her eyes. 'Which will kill him first - no sleep or the drug?'

'Again I can't be certain,' replied Dr Somaz. 'I can only say that if my calculations are right, it seems probable that without sleep he will die younger than if he takes the drug.'

After a silence, Derek said, 'We must tell poor Max all this and he can decide what he wants to do.'

'He won't take the drug,' said Samantha, shaking her head.

'Are you sure?' asked Dr Somaz.

'Yes. He says he wants to stay awake, he wants to live with his eyes open. He told us that life is too short to sleep because there is so much to learn and do. He will never take any drugs.'

'But you and Mr Price must tell him that it's better to take the drug,' Dr Somaz said. 'When he understands the problem, perhaps he will decide to take it.'

That night Samantha and Derek talked to Max. They told him the situation and said that Dr Somaz thought it would be better for him to take the drug.

'And what do you think?' Max asked them.

'We agree with the doctor,' said Derek.

'No,' said Max. 'I won't take any drugs.'

'Take your time, Max,' said Derek. 'Think about it.'

'The answer is no. I don't want to spend half my life sleeping in darkness. I prefer to live for a short time awake in the light. The world is a miracle and I don't want to miss any of it.'

'But Dr Somaz said you will be dead before you are forty,' said Samantha, beginning to cry.

Max smiled. 'The number of years I live is not important. How I live is more important. What I do and what I am is more important.'

Samantha was very unhappy. 'Oh Max, my darling boy - please take the drug!'

'I'm sorry, Mum, but I can't.' Then Max smiled. 'Will you excuse me now? If I'm going to die young, I haven't got much time.'

So Max continued to work and play and live fast. But he lived a quiet, clean life. He didn't smoke or drink alcohol, and he didn't eat too much. He didn't worry about small things; he didn't think about money. And he didn't waste time. He travelled a lot and looked carefully at the world and people. They interested him. And he studied hard. He was always bright and awake; he always wanted to learn new things.

The medical experts said that Max's body and brain were not influenced by the diurnal rhythm, like every animal on earth.

'I'm sure he's from another planet,' laughed Derek.

He liked Max's strange condition now; it was different. But Samantha didn't like it. She did everything possible to make Max normal.

For years, only a few doctors and scientists knew about Max's condition. Samantha and Derek didn't tell anybody. It was a big secret. So Max lived quietly and he was happy. When he left school, he got a job in a bank. Then he met a girl called Wendy and they fell in love and got married. Max was thirty years old. He didn't tell Wendy about his condition so she didn't know anything. But she began to notice things, and one day she told Samantha that Max didn't sleep much but he was never tired. The two women talked, and finally Samantha told Wendy the secret.

Wendy was shocked and amazed. 'Is Max really going to die before he's forty?'

'Nobody knows. Dr Somaz said that if he lives quietly, he will probably live longer. But listen, Wendy! You must not tell anybody about this - not even your friends. Nobody must know. It's a big secret.'

'Why?' said Wendy.

'Because he must live quietly. Then he will be happy and he will live longer. So the world must never know, especially the newspapers and magazines. They must never, never know! Do you understand, Wendy? You must never say anything to the media. Promise?'

'Yes, all right, I promise,' Wendy answered.

Wendy was a good person and a good wife, but she liked money and she liked a lot of it. She loved spending money! So when she saw beautiful clothes in the shops, she was often angry because

she couldn't buy them. Max didn't get a lot of money as a bank clerk. So Wendy began to think.

She thought, 'I'm going to have a child soon. If Max dies before he is forty, what will happen to us? I must think about the future.'

One day she decided to speak to Max about it. At first he was angry because she knew his secret; then he smiled.

'Wendy, my love, don't think about the future. We love each other and we are happy. That's very important! You see, nothing is certain. Perhaps I won't die young. But I promise that when I die, you will have enough money.'

But Wendy had a different idea. She thought about it for a few days and then she went to the office of a big national newspaper and said that she wanted to tell them an incredible story. Of course, she got thousands of pounds for the story. And when the world heard about Max, the world wanted him. America, Japan, Australia, Europe... interviews, articles, talk shows, documentaries... The public and the media were fascinated. In a few days Max became world-famous - and Wendy became very rich. He tried to hide, he tried to escape from all the noise and attention. He ran away, but the media always found him.

Samantha knew that this was a very bad thing for Max and she was furious with Wendy. But it was too late. The TV journalists and personalities, the newspapers and magazines followed him everywhere. Film directors offered him millions of dollars to appear in their films. Big film stars and rock singers wanted to meet him.

Max became unhappy; he became ill. He didn't eat and he got very thin. He lost his concentration and he stopped working hard. He also lost his interest in the world, in people, in life. He didn't want to learn new things. He locked himself in his room and sat alone night and day. And Wendy continued to spend the money.

One day Samantha visited him and she was shocked because he had changed a lot. He looked grey and tired. He looked old. His eyes were heavy and there were dark shadows under them. Then, while Samantha was talking to him, the impossible happened: he yawned. She couldn't believe her eyes.

'Are you sleepy, Max?' she asked.

'Yes. I want to sleep.'

And in a few moments he was asleep. He slept for a few hours. But when he woke up, he was still tired. A few days later he slept again. And then little by little he began to sleep like a normal person.

'You sleep eight hours a day now, Max,' Samantha said, frightened. 'What's happening to you?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'I feel tired. I need to sleep.'

'But why?'

'Because I don't want to stay awake now. The world is boring; people are boring. It's better to sleep.'

When he fell asleep quickly, Samantha went home. She was very anxious and very unhappy. Now Max was beginning to sleep more than a normal person! He had no more bright energy, no more interest in life. He just seemed very tired.

Now the public and the media were completely obsessed with Max. Photographers stood outside his house all day and night and took photos of Max when he yawned and when he was asleep. Every day Wendy told reporters what Max was doing - for a fee, of course. All round the world people knew what Max was doing every minute of the day.

They tried to telephone him, they sent letters, telegrams and presents.

Samantha said to herself, 'If this continues, Max will die. It must stop.'

She thought about it day and night. And then one day she decided to appear on a TV chat show.

'He's very ill,' she said in the studio. 'You must all leave him alone.'

'Why is he ill?' the interviewer asked. 'Is the drug killing him?'

'No, he doesn't take any drugs!' said Samantha angrily. 'It's you - the newspaper and TV people - and you - the public! You have destroyed his peace and his world with all your noise and gossip. You won't let him live quietly. He always lived in the light with his eyes open but you have pulled him down into your darkness and he has closed his eyes. You - the media and the public - are killing Max with your stupidity. Leave him alone!'

The media and the public were very angry. Next day there was a lot of anger about it on TV and in the newspapers.

'Us?' one newspaper article began. 'Is Max Price's mother accusing us? Yes, she is saying that we - the people and the press - are destroying her son. But isn't he rich now? And isn't he famous? Hasn't Mrs Price asked herself who made him rich and famous? We are innocent, Mrs Price. We have helped your son. You told us to leave him alone. But we live in a democracy. We have a right to know about Max Price. We demand to know about him!...'

Etcetera, etcetera.

When Samantha left the TV studio, she went to Max's house. Wendy told her that he was sleeping so she went home. Next day Wendy phoned Samantha.

'I'm frightened,' she said. 'Max is still sleeping. Please come!'

When Samantha arrived, there were reporters and photographers and two TV cameras outside

the house. She pushed her way to the door and went in. Wendy was sitting on the sofa. She looked terrified.

'Why doesn't he wake up?' she cried.

The women went upstairs to Max's room. He was in bed. His eyes were closed; his face was very pale. Samantha touched him.

'He's very cold,' she said. 'Call Dr Somaz.'

Dr Somaz came and began to examine Max. Just then Derek arrived.

'There's a very big crowd outside,' he said.

Then he saw that the women were crying. He looked at Dr Somaz, who said to him:

'Tell the people to go away. Max is dead.'

Next day Max's death was big news all over the world.

The newspapers, the magazines, and the TV news all had the same opinion.

'The boy who couldn't sleep has finally found eternal rest. As the doctors always said, he died before he was forty. This shows that the people and the media are not responsible.'

- THE END -

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