

Horror stories are often called "Bedtime Stories," or "Tales To Be Read by Candlelight." Technically, the following might be so classed; we recommend, however, that it be read in full light of day....

Nightmare

by Jane Roberts

"THERE GOES JERUSALEM!" MARIAH yelled jubilantly and teetered from the broken mountain. Bits of arms and legs, fragments of towers and uprooted cities boiled around her. She stirred them crazily with the finger. Yells of horror escaped like steam sizzling.

"Robert, Robert, help me," she yelled. "Robert." She lunged out and found his arm. "Robert, what will happen first?"

The dream-Robert had square eyes filled with anguish. He said, "First we'll starve. We'll sleep more and more, and then never open our eyes. We'll bloat and float like balloons over the mountains."

"For God's sake, Mariah, wake up," the real Robert said. He switched on the light. Her eyes opened gratefully to see sane bedroom walls, but beyond them swept Jerusalem and New York dying quietly under the sea.

"Are you awake now?"

"Almost, almost." But a headless purple body lumbered by, propelled by wind and debris, and she screamed. Then the real Robert was shaking her, hard.

"Mariah, snap out of it. Mariah. It's all right." He crooned and held her in his arms. Bit by bit the images in her mind dissolved, but somewhere in the background of consciousness, she felt them gather to destroy her.

"There, are you o.k. now?" he asked, and she smiled to reassure him. But he switched the light back off, and she lay staring at the ceiling, fighting to stay awake. Should she ask him to put the light back on? Should she? No, no, she thought. He needed his sleep. He worked hard, hard . . .

Hard, and he was the dream-Robert now, pushing away the rubble and debris. She nursed the baby. He didn't suck very hard because he was dead. That didn't make any sense, because in the

real world he wouldn't be born yet for two months. But the baby was here, and he was dead. She was getting hungry, and she staggered amid the broken towers finding only a dead bird to eat. The heat was unbearable.

"Robert, oh help me," she cried again, overwhelmed at the chaos. But there was no need begging or demanding, she could tell by his face.

"How did you know this would happen?" the dream-Robert asked, and her eyes grew hollow.

"I don't know. Maybe it's only a dream that means nothing." But the stench of decay was enough. "It really hasn't happened yet," she said, but something still would not let itself be known. Why was the baby dead? "Maybe it won't happen at all," she muttered, but the dream-Robert faded, and the real Robert said, "You're talking in your sleep, honey."

The words shocked her. She yelled, frantic now, "Wake me up! Wake me up!" knowing it was her last chance. She felt him shake her

shoulders, and tried to open her eyes. But there was only a blurred image of his face, a distorted picture of bedroom walls, and suddenly it was the dream alone that was real.

"Robert it is going to happen. It is," she yelled out, but the real Robert faded. The room disappeared, and the sun was turning inward upon itself. As she felt its anger, the explosion of energy too long controlled, she knew, suddenly, why the baby was dead and tried to call out. But it was too late.

The heat slammed her against the nothingness that had been ground, beat upon her from the nothingness that had been sky. From far away, she was aware of the real Robert waking in the dim bedroom. She screamed, knowing he could not hear, and the last image her eyes held was his, shaking her body in its lace nightgown. When he cried, she no longer heard a thing.

Two months later, it made no difference. Nothing did.

