

Sleeplessness

I once met a man who claimed he didn't have to sleep. Not that he was an insomniac, but that he had ceased feeling the need to sleep. While perfectly capable of laying still with his eyes closed for hours on end, he found no relief from it, no dreams to float away on, only darkness and boredom. The strange part was that he was convincing.

This was back when I was staying out late most nights of most weeks, habitually shorting myself on sleep to chase I knew not what, drifting with a grin on my face and a drink in hand between homes that led to bars that led to clubs that led to streets that led back to homes. I suppose the sport of it was in seeing whose home you returned to, because the most admired regulars, those with the best stories, were always ending up in too deep at someone's other than their own. The complication was trying to tell how much of what they told was true. Usually, I played along and assumed they were being honest, no matter how outlandish their story, as in this case.

"The world is made up by people who should be sleeping," the man insisted, after I didn't contest his claim. "When we're tired is when most of the singing and seducing and screwing and drugs get done. It's when you find out what really keeps people going through the day. For some it's sleep, and for some it's... something else."

This was at a dive in a strip mall where the far side of the city blended into suburbs, during the half-hour before last call. We were the only patrons still present, except for a couple women that had been loudly complaining about their ex-boyfriends as representative of men as a whole, whom I suppose both of us were too hesitant to approach and try to disprove their theories. The man had a receding hairline and protruding jaw, neck craning out a rumpled black polo. His eyes looked rueful yet alert, glassy and reflective. I got the feeling he had said all this countless times before and didn't much care to whom—a familiar feeling at places like this.

"It must be exciting for you, getting to live in that world every night then," I humored him.

"It was exciting for about a year. Then the possibilities started running out. I started to notice the same things through the differences, and the thrill of chance, or the chance of thrill, fell away. Don't get me wrong—I'll still have good drinks, good conversations, good fights or average sex, maybe even catch a hint of juicy crime... But it all leads back to the same place eventually. It's not that much better than just laying in bed closing my eyes counting breaths at this point. Especially if I'm humming a tune."

"Have you tried sleeping pills?"

"I've tried pills, therapies, sleep studies, picking fights to knock me out, almost overdosed almost a dozen times... Nothing puts me out. Nothing makes me forget who and where I am. The sun rises and sets, but I still see it all the same."

"Is it really that bad?" I asked.

"I'll put it this way: have you ever gotten to the point in your days, maybe just certain workdays, when even after-hours, it seemed like anything you could do would still feel like *work*? Then what would

you want to do? Sleep, of course. Maybe have a drink, sit on the couch, glaze over and watch TV—but always sleep eventually. Imagine that, taken a step further. Everything, every moment is work. Nothing is rest. Nothing is new.”

“But there must be so much you could do without the need for rest.”

“And what good does the getting done do? I may learn a lot of skills and trivia, and that may impress people to no end, but that doesn’t change my predicament.”

“Which is what? Too much time on your hands?”

“Too much time *and* attention. That’s what it is. I have this unrelenting supply of *attention*, and the endless need to consciously apply it somewhere. You may be young and still looking for something, a purpose, so that sounds like a blessing, but believe me, it gets old.”

“But you’d get to meet so many people, or go so many places.”

“If I had the appetite for it anymore, maybe. But people make me uncomfortable. Travel makes me uncomfortable. Just because I don’t sleep doesn’t mean I don’t still age and get sick. It doesn’t mean I don’t still see what’s happening around us. Just the opposite, in fact—I see too much.”

“What makes it too much?”

“I somehow see too much and too little,” he went on, barely registering my question. “I see so much I can see how little distinction there really is. I see how alike people and places are, when you really get down to it. There is a beautiful, natural world out there somewhere, I’m sure, but we aren’t raised for that world—we’re like animals in captivity, a maze where all the possibilities are carefully controlled and curated. You know how hard it is to readapt an animal that’s been domesticated to live in the wild again? I do—one of my favorite things, one of the things I can still really, consistently enjoy, is going to the zoo and watching the animals sleep. Then they don’t know how free they are or aren’t. But no, I don’t have the immune system or the disposition to really explore what’s out there anymore. More than that, I don’t have anyone to explore it with. Anyone who understands.

“You,” he raised his glass in my direction, empty but for a few suds, “you seem to be a good listener. I like the good listeners. But still, you can only imagine, even if you believe me. My ex-wife was convinced I was lying, so I could go sleep at another woman’s house every night. Even when I invited her to stay up with me, she thought I was just outwaiting and outwitting her. My parents supported me in sleep therapy, but when I stopped because it wasn’t working, I could tell they thought there was something wrong with me. They never stopped recommending me specialists to try and fix it, at least until they got sick. In the last few years before they died, they just preferred I didn’t mention it and make them uncomfortable. They wanted to go still pretending their son was ‘normal.’

“Mostly I don’t mention it to anyone now. I blend in, you know? Sometimes I wonder if there are other people like me out there, but it’s not worth drawing the attention to find out. It’s only late at night, when people have nothing else to look forward to, if they’re studying me or I’m paying for treatment, that people like to hear it.”

He stopped talking. I ran out of questions. We shared a long pause. Roy Orbison played from the neon jukebox in the nook between restrooms that must not have had a song newer than 1988 on it. “In

Dreams,” I remember it was, because I thought how oddly appropriate, and then I remembered he was the last one to queue up the songs.

I shook my head. “You want me to buy you a drink that bad, huh?” I said, thinking I could see right through him.

He rapped his knuckles on the bar’s water-ringed surface and smiled, a wincing, tightlipped smile so resigned it made me doubt my skepticism. “You’re going to do what you want to do,” he said, catching my eye for one last split-second. Then he turned and walked away. The bartender raised his hand in an unacknowledged farewell as he exited.

So that’s his game, I thought: he tells an incredible sob story to fish for a free drink or maybe a screw, but if his bluff gets called, he quits while he’s ahead and at least gets a good laugh making his mark question their reality.

I left and called a cab home as the place closed. That was one of the experiences that made me start listening to my senses and stop staying out so late as a rule. I stopped going to that bar before long, and to bars in general not long after that, unless I had a specific reason or someone to go with. It was getting old—I was getting old. I learned to say no and appreciate quiet nights in, nights I could actually remember in full. The earlier nights led to earlier mornings that led to me meeting the woman who became my wife, musing over the posted descriptions of bird species and habitat restoration on a park bulletin board.

I saw that man one other time, at another bar on the opposite side of town. We made eye contact across the place just long enough to affirm we recognized each other, before turning back to our drinks and the multiple screens flashing commercial images across the place. I didn’t order another. I considered sticking around and approaching him, but I didn’t know what we would say. That was the way it went sometimes with creatures of the nightlife—you shared your introductory spiels, offered what you were prepared to offer, then faded into the background of familiar faces roving for novelties.

I still think about him on occasion, mostly if I’m willing myself to stay awake somewhere when the tiredness is truly overpowering. Then I feel grateful to succumb to the tide of sleep, to surrender my attention and forget who or where I am for a good six to eight hours. Maybe that’s why he’s become one of the most frequent recurring characters in my dreams—up there with my parents and the best friends I made growing up. But I don’t think that means much.