

Unsound

Lately, I've woken up with an immediate desire to have sex with something. Can't even look the desire in the eye, but I know it's there. Usually, it's not long before I realize I didn't piss before going to bed, then there's the painful erection to negotiate, and the day's generally an infinite slide from that point.

However, some mornings I've emerged with the idea of cocooning into my blankets and going into indefinite stasis. I think this is better than the raging sex awakenings, where some kind of primal energy feels wasted. Not that the indefinite stasis is a cakewalk.

Here we see the Classic Suburban American Male in a period of longing for the good times with his ex-Lady, the times he seemed to notice more of the special world around him, how everything is quite beautifully connected. He remembers her protracted leaving and, for the first time, worries about where he fits into the puzzle of this place Earth. Finally, the lady is truly gone, and with no one around spending their free-time thinking about our Classic Male anymore, he thinks: Well, I'll just sit around and worry about myself all the time. Boo hoo hoo.

So, this one particular morning I gave in and webbed myself in blankets, attempting existence from only inside my brain. My computer was asleep and my phone's battery had died the night before, so I thought I'd lie there all day and go through every selfish Oh-Poor-Me thought, get them over with once and for all and I could graduate from my typical inner whining.

At first I simply fell back asleep. I dreamed of a man and a woman doing laundry, separately, washing the same clothes over and over. They would pull the clothes out of the dryer, bury their noses in them, then make a disgusted face and start the washing cycle over again. This lasted an indeterminate amount of time, but I was transfixed. I had this Scrooge-watches-his-

past/present/future type view; though, never in the dream did I feel like I was watching myself or anyone I knew. It became clear that the man and the woman were trying to get rid of each other's smell on their clothes. I don't know how I knew this; it was just one of those weird dream revelations.

When I woke up I immediately longed to smell my Ex—anything, I might have settled for gas or B.O. It was so powerful I almost broke my brain-only existence and called her, even though we hadn't spoken in a couple years, maybe she had a new number by now, and anyway it would certainly have been a strange request.

Under the blankets I slowly rolled to my right side, like a great ship keeling, and felt the pressure in my head change. The air was hot and stale with the smell of unlaundered human, in the way that you can simultaneously love and hate your own stink. I wasn't air-tight in there, but there certainly wasn't much getting in or out in any hurry. As the longing for my ex-Lady's smell grew in intensity, my breathing increased to a panic rate and I started thinking for too long about how uncomfortable I was, how I might actually pass out right there, and maybe I might do serious brain damage from lack of oxygen if I didn't just get the *fuck* out of this blanket cocoon. I became viciously antsy. My legs writhed around autonomously like sliced off serpent limbs, and I ground my teeth to the point where I was sure I tasted gritty enamel. There was then a very real and urgent need to pee, and I fought an even stronger urge to burst out of the cocoon. But I was determined to stick with it and get through all my selfish thoughts.

I let go and pissed myself.

It was powerful. I thought: Yes, I am above societal norms, not to be constrained by notions of where one can and cannot piss!

Pretty soon, though, the reality of lying in my own filth hit me and I felt like the dumbest person, barely alive. It was as if the piss released within my brain a couple of truly moribund thoughts, and a dark, selfish antigen into which they coalesced. I was pretty sure that one of the thoughts was insane, or at least not nearly rational. That I could tell it wasn't sane gave me some kind of relief, a view of the idea that the personal hurt I felt that minute wouldn't last forever, that the world still goes on no matter how badly you hurt. The insane thought was that I would never, in even infinite time, be happy again. It came with a dull pressure in my chest, but as long as I kept my breathing steady I could almost laugh at how illogical it was. In fact, I'd had the thought before and had returned to happiness at some point. I called myself a dummy and kept on rolling about my brain-existence day, albeit in a grumpy cloud. By what I perceived as early evening that feeling had washed away.

Unfortunately it was accompanied by an unfathomably worse second thought, the same one I had avoided each day of the first year after my Lady left me, especially the days I lied and told people I was fine. The thought and its attendant pain came at me like one of those unbearable slowed-down movie scenes where two folks are battling to death with a knife—one guy's pushing as hard as he can to keep from being stabbed to death, yet slowly the knife gets plunged into this terrified guy as his strength visibly weakens, and he finally goes slack.

This selfish thought was that the specific type of happiness I had during the best moments with my lady would never again occur.

The powerful dread that came on after I watched that thought scroll underneath my eyelids made me physically incapable of moving. I had to practically will myself to breathe what little air was left in the blanket cocoon. It was so horrible because it was true and direct, and seemed to encompass every bit of my self-centered agony. The kind of agony that thinks it's so

special it wipes out what others might be feeling, too. There was nowhere to bury it, not that that would have done any good.

I burrowed even further into the covers to suppress as much outer-world sound as possible and focus on my dread. As a little kid constantly filled with intangible anxiety, I called this Unsound. I carried a favorite blanket everywhere, wrapped around my shoulders like a superhero's cape. I'd call out, "Mommy, Daddy, I'm going Unsound!" then drop to the floor and completely cover myself with the blanket, and it was understood that I couldn't hear anything of the outside world nor could the outside world hear me. When I came out and my parents asked me what I'd been doing in there, I would say something like, "Concentrating very hard." The only times it didn't appear to work were when I used Unsound to try to get out of something bad I'd done. I'd call Unsound, but Dad would use what he called his Ultimate Powers of House Ownership to disable my blanket and lecture me about, e.g., the vase I'd smashed with an errant lightsaber.

I must have passed out, because I eventually woke up the following morning with the sense of a slight shift, like wearing a new pair of shoes for the first time. I was running late and quickly threw on some pants and a shirt, then drove up to the university where I worked. I walked into my department and Elena, the German graduate student at the receptionist desk, audibly gasped.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

I stepped through the foyer toward her desk and looked around hesitantly before answering. Suddenly my brain was made of yarn and began unraveling. All I could say to Elena was, "Not sure."

I hadn't worked here in three years, after being fired.

“Are you ok?” Elena said. I must not have looked it. Her face sweetened into that of somebody watching a child attempt, and fail, a simple task. I heard footsteps coming up the porch and gave Elena a panicked look. It appeared I could only communicate in two-word, vague questions. This time I said, “I don’t...?”

“Shit—here, hide under my desk,” Elena said.

Under the desk I snuck glances up her floral skirt while she nonchalantly chatted with the director. I was ashamed with myself for looking. I didn’t remember her wearing skirts to work; she mostly wore the graduate researcher’s standard uniform of jeans and t-shirt. The shame brought on a wave of concomitant shame, three years late, for never having called or texted Elena after my grand departure from the research center. I had no idea why my body had brought me back here, and no idea why I didn’t realize it until I saw her.

“Umm,” Elena whispered after the boss went upstairs, “You smell like pee.”

“Jesus,” was all I could say, then, “Elena, I have no idea what’s happening.”

“It’s ok. You really have to leave, though. Can I meet you somewhere?” Anyone else probably would have kicked me in the balls and called the police.

I couldn’t think where to go in the area, and actually I was starting to realize I couldn’t really think at all. I had trouble even remembering where I presently worked, though I knew it had something to do with editing and was boring. It was as if my brain had been restarted and most of the same files were there, but were somehow in different places. Elena looked a little frustrated but seemed to pity me enough to play along. We crept out to the front porch and stood there silently for a moment.

“I can make up some excuse and get out of here in half an hour or so—will you answer if I call you to meet up?” Elena said, finally.

I was back to two words of response. I said, stupidly, “My phone...?” and Elena sighed, eyes cast to the ground. This gave me a rush of desperate adrenaline. “No wait! I’m sorry. Please, meet me somewhere. You pick. I’ll go there now and wait; I don’t have my phone.”

Elena and I started out as perfect office buddies who never hung out outside of work. You know those kinds of people you can tell anything to, because it’s just incredibly unlikely that your personal relationship will in any way continue outside those office walls. In fact, the thought of even seeing them outside that office feels supernatural. When life with my Lady started going south, Elena was just about the only one I could talk to about it, and she seemed to honestly want to help me. She was also of course stunning in the way that only a dirty-blonde German woman can be. Obviously I entertained multiple surreal sexual fantasies involving her (any man who knows her and says otherwise is not to be trusted), but I generally assumed I was out of Elena’s league. I can only tell you that, at first, I never realistically thought of her in *that* way, and maybe you’ll believe me. But after months of terrible flirting when the Lady officially left me for good, and after getting stoned with Elena on the roof of the research center, I went for it. I was probably feeling like I had nothing to lose.

Eventually we were caught making out in an upstairs office we thought was normally vacant. One of our bosses had rushed back from an all day conference to find a binder that was in, of all places, that office, and there we were—Elena awkwardly straddling me on one of those horrible office chairs, her soft yellow sweater halfway up with my help. She had a lot to lose, specifically a Fellowship and the student visa that kept her legally in the U.S.A. I, on the other hand, was an editorial assistant who didn’t know, or care, what he was doing or where he was going. I only knew I enjoyed editing Elena’s World War II research papers. Our bosses were less

than pleased, but I was able to persuade them that the whole thing was my fault, that if anyone was going to be punished it should be me. They agreed pretty quickly. I didn't exactly expect to be fired.

I drove home to take a quick shower. Everything seemed the same as usual, though also smelled like piss. I threw my bedding in the wash, and then headed to the Portuguese bakery where Elena suggested we meet. You travel through several countries getting around this town—College Town, Irish Town, White-Mothers-on-Maternity-Leave Town; when the Samba dance clubs pop up, you know you've crossed into little Brazil/Portugal. Everywhere in between are late-20s and early-30s folk like me who think they have worldly experience and could hail from anywhere, but really only hail from book knowledge of all these places.

The bakery was nearly empty. I sat outside under a canopy of white grapes on the vine. I drank coffee and waited for it to make me feel less like I was up on strings, and things almost too quickly mellowed; somebody had left a window open in my brain and there was a real nice breeze happening. Usually I would have fidgeted, checked my phone a thousand times (if I had it with me), or tried to ignore the thought that somebody was watching me and laughing at some awkward movement or sound I'd made while desperately pretending I wasn't aware of someone watching. Not this time. The motherly waitress, not busy at all, made small talk that normally would have annoyed me (and later make me feel ashamed for being annoyed for such a silly reason); instead I chatted with her and was awarded a free muffin.

As I saw Elena walk through the archway to where I was sitting, I realized I was happy in a way that I hadn't been for quite some time. Though I was confused, my body felt much lighter than before, and I took deep breaths of the surface air. The more I thought about it, I found that I

just didn't care about so many things that would have usually agitated me. Or, rather, I cared enough to know the agitating things were still somewhere, but not enough to let them affect me in any meaningful way. Maybe this sounds like a numb defense against pain. I thought about the possibility that I was having a psychotic episode, though I doubted that one of those felt this quiet, and anyway no one seemed to be rushing to take me down with a chemical restraint.

"I didn't expect you'd actually be here," Elena said in her arousing German accent, which gave everything she said a kind of sassy flair.

"That's fair," I said, displaying what I can only presume was a dumb smile.

She changed her clothes back into what I remembered, jeans with a hole or two in the legs and a snug yellow t-shirt with something German written on it. She always did look great in yellow.

"So," Elena began as I was staring at the little patches of visible skin through the holes in her jeans, "you're going to have to explain some stuff."

The screen flash in my brain was that of a hippo I'd once seen at the National Zoo making an annular path in its pen, stopping only to jet-spray piss all over the place. I told Elena only that my life had seemed gruesome since I'd been fired, how the loop in which I was stuck led to my day of Unsound, and how I emerged and without thinking drove straight to where I thought I worked. I was instantly bored with talking about myself and my inner peace threatened to up and leave. My body revolted against the Me-talk the way a heroin addict's does if he shoots up after taking Suboxone. I wanted to hear about *Elena* and I told her so.

"It doesn't seem like three years. It's like I've been underwater since you left," she said. "All I do is read-read-read, but haven't actually written anything in forever. I think they just keep me on because Dr. Rochefort likes me—as in likes me too much. He basically made me his full

time secretary, so now I get to endure that one supposed lazy eye that always seems to lock onto my chest.”

She sighed while I nodded and stuffed food into my mouth, trying not to let my giddy inner feelings spill over and clash with Elena’s gloom. I had the strangest urge to shake her by the shoulders and yell that she was the world’s most beautiful human, inside and out. How in the world could she not see this? But something magical happened to me almost instantly: I realized that this is the quintessential dumb male reaction, thinking that every sweet, beautiful woman has no right to be unhappy with her life’s meaningless direction. Pretty much anything I said would have sounded like a belated greeting card—or, worse, could have slowed her own attempt at working through the myriad layers of emotions crisscrossing her brain. The thought practically hit me in the forehead, that if I listened to and watched her carefully enough, I could intensely experience her thoughts and fears as if they were my own, but still stay objective, like that genius Rumi who watched his thoughts flow down the river of time, plucking them out to inspect before letting them go.

Elena fidgeted and some awkward air hung between us. Finally, she stared at a sweet roll and said: “When you left and gave up your job to save mine I thought that was the most courageous thing. This is so dumb, but I just assumed this childish fantasy would come true after that, that my hero would come back to save me and we’d move into a different stage in our lives. That now that we weren’t working together, we’d talk even better than we used to, no more awkwardly wondering whether one of us was just putting on some fake office persona. Now I’m not even sure I know the real you, and I can’t remember any of the million things I thought I wanted to tell you.”

I should be very clear: I am no Rumi, not even close; because in this conversational gap I felt compelled to say something, and this time wasn't able to stop myself. I said, "I'd promise to leave you alone if that's what you want; I'm sure I've already hurt you enough."

"That's the last thing I want!" Elena started crying in a very neat, contained way—the way you can tell someone is about as sad as they can get. For once, though, anxiety didn't sweep me out to sea.

"Well, how about you tie me up in duct tape and make sure I never go anywhere again?" This made her smile just enough, a hairline fracture in a manmade dam that had ruined an entire ecosystem.

"I learned to play the piano," she said. "That was one of the things I wanted to tell you."

After brunch, Elena rolled a joint and drove us around Irish Town, eventually stopping at a small memorial park for a Sergeant Henry Oliver Hansen, born and raised right here in 1919, killed all the way over there at Iwo Jima in 1945. Friends called him Hank. Elena had been researching traits of wisdom and leadership among WWII non-commissioned officers, at least while I had been working at the center.

"I come here when I'm thinking too much about myself," she said. "It helps me to stop ruminating on things I can't change, and focus on what I can."

Elena told me about how, after I was fired, she dove into the sergeant's short life, trying to learn everything about his time on this planet. He graduated from the local high school in 1938 and joined the Paramarines. Elena scoured military archives and could only find instances where he acted completely selflessly: giving his remaining water to dehydrated platoon members, volunteering for the most dangerous objectives, sprinting into enemy fire to grab a wounded

buddy. If he kept a journal it wasn't part of any military archives. The only words of Hansen's Elena could find came moderated through his mother, who remembered the last time she saw him on leave before heading back to the Pacific Theater: "He dreaded going back, but he felt that he must," was all she said.

Elena did find journals of men who served with Hansen. She carried with her a copy of one particular entry from a combat correspondent: "Hank was like our own personal cheerleader, except he never really said much. We used to call him The Count. He always radiated this exaggerated optimism, even under terrifying conditions, that sometimes made you want to shoot him. But on those ghoulish nights of utter anguish, when the constant inner struggle to maintain some semblance of sanity boiled over, Hank's spirit was about the only thing that kept a man from turning his rifle on himself."

As we stood before Hansen's memorial plaque, Elena said: "I fucking fell in love with him, in a way that I knew was so weird. But I couldn't help it—it obviously helped that in all the photos I found he was so attractive, but it went deeper than any kind of infatuation I'd experienced before. I got past the sexual stuff so fast and fell head over heels for his story. I read so much about him it kind of pissed me off how amazing he seemed."

His story is a tragedy, though. Elena told me that not long after conquering a ferocious objective at Iwo Jima, Hank was apparently killed by a sniper while being treated for other wounds. At this ending of his narrative, Elena felt dark waves sweep over her. Why was it always the quiet people who did the most amazing things, but disappeared just when it seemed like they had so much more to offer to the world? It seemed to her like all the human examples of total empathy were long gone. She needed someone living and real, someone she could touch

who embodied all these traits, a real-life partner in a quest to rid the world of its global self-immersion.

Elena happened to finish researching around the anniversary of Hank's death, March 1, and just after midnight went to visit his memorial in an icy Northeastern downpour. Whatever positive ideas she had in her head began to be drowned out by a tinnitic crescendo as she stared at the inscription below Hansen's photo on a granite marker:

When you go home

Tell them for us and say

For your tomorrow

We gave our today

Elena was drunk and getting angry; her mounting frustration added a jagged outline to everything. When she read it aloud it came off sounding self-righteous, and she pictured generations of mistranslation from the original inspiration for the epitaph. She told me that an Englishman, John Maxwell Edmonds, had written it in a collection of 12 epitaphs for World War I, except his had the lines, "Tell them *of* us and say, for *their* tomorrow..." Somewhere along the way it had been changed to get right in the face of the passing stranger. In her drunken gloom, Elena read it a little bit like, "Hey dummy—just so you know, I died for *you* even though you weren't even born yet." Edmonds' version is a little less demanding, but in Elena's view it still strays from the original inspiration, which was an epitaph written by the Greek poet Simonides to commemorate the Spartan soldiers who died at Thermopylae in 480 BC. The soldiers were all killed, and, with no one alive to send word of their deaths, Simonides crafted for their souls a simple plea to the passing stranger for pity. An English translation goes something like this:

Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by

That here obedient to their laws we lie.

Taken literally, it's a modest plea to let those back home know that the soldiers died honorably and fulfilled their assigned duty. Different translations can pick out deeper layers of meaning, but what's common among them is a lack of pretense. There's no self-aggrandizing sentiment, letting the whole world know they died for *you*.

Elena said: "God it was the worst night of my life. I was like a jealous lover, building Hank up in my mind based on all these stories others had written. I came here that night only wanting to quiet my mind and let him speak for himself, but at his memorial somebody else was ascribing words to Hank that he probably never would have said. True heroes don't consciously go out and try to give away their today for some random person's tomorrow. Those words right below Hank's photo made it look like his smug advice from the beyond for future generations who are doing it all wrong. It hit me so hard that Hank would never again be able to speak for himself, and that others would always be filling in the gaps."

That night, when the white noise in her head hit its highest note, Elena said she snapped and trashed the memorial park in a drunken rage. She smashed her wine bottle over the granite marker, cutting her hand, and then wiped her blood over the epitaph. She ripped flowers out of their beds lining the edges of the grass, and destroyed a few of the cacti-looking landmarks that held pictures of Hansen's service. Eventually she grew tired, threw up on the granite marker, and passed out in the little park's well manicured grass. When Elena woke up to a crepuscular glow she couldn't believe what she'd done. I actually remembered reading something on a local blog about the park being vandalized and was amazed to learn it had been Elena. But she cleaned up the mess and soon started tending to the park on a weekly basis, and no one ever found out she was the vandal. Some people who would see her watering the flowers or picking up trash even

asked if she was a relative of Hank's. They must have been surprised to hear a German accent coming from the young woman tending an American WWII veteran's memorial.

By the time we left Hank's memorial it was close to 5PM, and the streets were beginning to get noisily clogged with impatient worker-bees. Massive traffic sounds erupted almost without warning and crisscrossed the air; we ducked our heads and dodged the insane people piloting cars at twice the speed limit just to get to the next red light faster than somebody else. Back in Elena's car the silence was nice for a few moments, but then enhanced the awkwardness between us. I knew we were both thinking: What should we do next? We sat facing straight ahead feeling the weight of the whole day start to close in and pound against the rolled up windows of Elena's car. Everything that had happened to this point seemed perched atop something very sharp, and if one of us didn't do or say the exact right thing it would all get neatly sliced away, like unwanted fat trimmed off the bone. I was about to give in and let my earlier inner peace wash away when I remembered.

"You said you learned to play the piano?"

Elena blushed. "I guess I should say re-learned. My mother taught me the basics before I could even speak in complete sentences."

Elena was renting a room in a house owned by a professor of Japanese literature. The previous owner had apparently passed away with no next of kin, and the realtor was going to donate a beautiful Steinway grand piano, but the professor asked if he could keep it even though he didn't play. When she met with the man to inquire about the room, she marveled at his vast collection of classical records and tentatively plunked out a few lines of *Claire de Lune* while the professor made tea. He immediately offered her the room under the condition that she took up

playing again. Now the professor was on sabbatical back home in Japan, and Elena had the piano and the whole record collection all to herself.

“Mom of course annoyed the whole family by falling in love with Frenchmen like Debussy and Ravel.”

By the time we got to Elena’s house, we had slipped back into what felt normal for us so long ago, that peculiar mental setting of knowing someone well enough to feel alone, but not lonely, even as they sit right there next to you. I had the thought that neither of us seemed to realize we were together throughout the whole day, which suddenly felt like one long hill we had climbed, choosing to focus only on the glow emanating from the top as we advanced. Now at the top, we marveled at what we didn’t remember conquering.

Elena took me to a mythic France with Debussy’s *La cathédrale engloutie*, the legend of an ancient city beneath the waves and a magical cathedral that, with the tide, seemed to emerge from the water on pellucid mornings. I stretched out on the cool hardwood floor underneath the piano to immerse myself in total sound. Her first languid notes, tentative and purposefully muddled, hinted at a much larger presence; the echoes suggested an absence we overlooked. Each note hung in a transient and translucent world as she brought the ancient church out of the waves. The sounds of its belfry reflected through me, each note seeming to evaporate into an entirely new one, every sound begging to be absorbed as an isolated texture.

Then finally, with almost agonizing patience, Elena’s hands exalted the cathedral’s final push out of the water and into fresh air with resounding chords of infinite ascent. I gulped down huge sonorous breaths and my lungs strained against the influx. But it was worth the effort—the cathedral wouldn’t be around very long.

Elena marked the cathedral's descent just as patiently as its rise, the bells eventually murmuring themselves to sleep, leaving what was left behind—our vague, cloudy dreams—to crystallize into something much sharper.

-End-