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INSOMNIA AND ITS CULTURES

Introduction: Wide Awake

I can't sleep.

If those three words in that sequence constituted a prayer, I would certainly be an earthly saint by now, if not a blessed, white-winged angel, because I say them every night, night after night, and all night long. I've done so since I was ten.

My earliest memories of insomnia come from the long winter nights of the third grade, the deep and deadening black-outs of February in rural New Brunswick in the mid-1970s, an era and geography wherein light or noise pollution would have been purely aspirational on the part of the locals.

There I lay, in my little twin bed, beside my snoring brother, listening to my parents talk in another room, listening to the always-on-but-barely-audible television, listening for ghosts, demons or whatever monsters preoccupied my mind at the time. Listening while my mother brushed her teeth and my father urinated, while my mother pattered about looking for her nightie and my father double-checked all the already-locked doors and windows, while my mother fussed with the thermostat, and, true to his obsessive nature, my father rechecked the locks.

Soon, all was quiet. Horribly, accusingly quiet. Everyone was asleep. What was wrong with me? What, I wondered, was keeping me awake, and was it something I was responsible for? Or was I under a spell, haunted, possessed by the devil? In horror movies and cautionary tales, children who didn't go to sleep met terrible ends, or were snatched in the night, or were themselves malevolent demon seeds.

Midnight would come, and pass, and there I lay, guilty and frightened and angry, wrapping myself tighter and tighter in my blankets, trying to make a cocoon.

I realize now that I was afraid of the dark as a child because I was awake during hours no child should be awake, the hours

when small noises echo down hallways and bubbling plumbing sounds like ghostly chatter. I hated the night, hated its staggancy. I still do.

I am now fifty years old. I have lived in a variety of places, travelled a bit, learned far more than I imagined I would and written several books. I've had a reasonably accomplished adulthood – I stuck to the path of education, followed by a carefully built career and reputation, complete with both clichéd and unusual stumbles. Nothing has changed, however, between me and sleep. We are still at war.

The fact that I have normalized and absorbed my insomnia, adapted myself to its constraints, to the point that I live a relatively productive and stable existence, is indicative of how large the problem is, not of any special talent on my part. It's not hard for an insomniac to live and work and love and play in a world populated by insomniacs. Everyone is sleepy; few of us sleep. The numbers of people reporting sleep difficulties are alarming: 40 per cent of Canadians (Université Laval, 2011), 63 per cent of Brazilians (Instituto Datafolio, 2008), 30.3 per cent of Germans (Robert Koch Institute, 2013), 59.4 per cent of Nigerians (Obafemi Awolowo University, 2013), 40.3 per cent of U.S. residents (National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2008).

Everyone is awake all night every night and, weirdly, many of my fellow sleep dodgers seem to like it that way, and to cultivate a kind of up-all-night bravado, as if sleep is a time waster meant to be conquered. (These would be the same people, of course, who spend hours online watching pets take baths or pride themselves on sitting through an entire season of a cable dramedy in one go – but insomnia, an archetypal blend of keen desire and slapstick frustration, generates irony after irony.) We live in an insomnia culture.

I have watched this culture grow and fortify itself over the decades, as it has played out in my own body and in the

cultures that surround me. I've been an insomniac for so long I can't tell if I'm at the vanguard of a new way of living or simply watching a fashionable discontent cycle back to popular prominence. After all, neurological complaints are the Newtonian 'other hand' of technological and social revolutions. According to John F. Kasson, in *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, times of massive industrial and sociological overhaul, neurasthenia, a 'distinctly modern ... disease of nervous weakness and fatigue' believed to be caused by 'excessive brain work ... constant hurry [and] rapid communications,' was the most talked about, and medicalized, social anxiety of the age. The term is now extinct, but the symptoms and alleged causes are remarkably familiar to me.

But it is too easy to suggest that insomnia, and insomnia's cultures, are just the latest unexpected cost of technological advancement, of our Information Age (and thus not a cost so much as a permanent tax, as there is no going back from non-stop connectivity, because that state is too profitable), or that it is merely a faddish preoccupation, the 'new neurasthenia' or the 'new _____' (fill in whatever disorder or disease you last gave money to help cure).

Insomnia is a health issue that has morphed into a cultural condition, like alienation or bullying/being bullied. Insomnia is not just a problem of the body; it's an all-encompassing, polysymptomatic, deeply embedded and perhaps irreversible environmental condition. Insomnia has a culture and has bred new cultures. Insomnia takes a toll on public health, and yet we continue to create environments and attach ourselves to new products and habits that allow insomnia to become more entrenched and more widely experienced.

Insomnia is the enemy sleeper cell (sorry) in the body public – a body about to shut down. The perpetual cycle of hoping

for sleep while never getting enough sleep weakens the body and enrages the mind. Insomniacs are grumpy people, as are all disappointed optimists.

Similarly, insomnia culture has created a perpetual cycle of denial and renewal in the arts. I don't subscribe to the notion that creative people are naturally more prone to insomnia. First off, everybody is creative in some way – the 'creative class' of Richard Florida's imagining is a myth that creates a false hierarchy between clever bakers and clever painters – and I have compared notes on sleeplessness with everybody from my barber to my editors. However, insomnia culture, a culture of perpetual restlessness, has a unique side effect on the arts: it creates a default response of endless relativism, of forever looking around, looking for the next bit of stimulus, and thus a reading of contemporary art as being forever up for reassessment and overturning. A painting equals a magazine cover equals a night at the theatre equals an animated GIF of a cat.

As a writer, artist and lifelong insomniac, I know exactly how much insomnia takes from a body and a mind. Some days, I simply can't think. I can't make sentences or complete the simplest projects, but I'm wide awake and easily distracted, indeed craving distraction, as if compensating for my inability to make things by hoarding new information, brighter and faster stimuli. I also know that no two insomniacs experience sleeplessness in the same way, nor exhibit the same symptoms. We are a unique lot, tiresome as that may sound.

So, nowhere in the book am I presuming to speak for other insomniacs, occasional or chronic, and I am certainly not qualified to present any cures, prescriptions or sleep-inducing practices. There are enough people making quack fortunes off Western culture's most persistent, and increasingly dominant, disorder. What follows contains no links to motorized beds,

hypnotists, Bane-esque nasal-channel-inflating face masks, pills or herbs or cute behaviourist tricks.

In the following chapters I explore the look and texture of current insomnia culture, and contemplate the long-term socio-economic and cultural consequences of this sacrifice, made in the name of the ever-elusive goal of ‘total productivity.’

Over the course of writing this book, I spoke with several sleep experts, my own doctor, another sleep doctor recommended to me, the writer and artist Douglas Coupland and many friends. Two distinct patterns of thought emerged from these conversations: first, that widespread sleeplessness is affecting public health because not sleeping has become normalized in our shared ideas of what constitutes ‘good health’; and second, that a culture deprived of sleep is not only a less healthy culture, but also one that looks very different from the culture of even a decade past, because creative people, no matter their field, ultimately make work that mirrors their society.

This book *asks* rather than answers. If the world around us is being run, ordered, financed and even entertained by people who are not sleeping well or not sleeping enough (or, in my case, sleeping barely at all), what kind of culture will we be sharing in the future? More important, is an insomnia culture sustainable? Is insomnia now the new health normative, like extra poundage or blood vessels oversaturated in sodium? And is the wakefulness that surrounds us actually of some value – have beautiful things been made in the wee, twitchy hours?

Insomnia as both a condition and a symptom is a massive topic. People build their entire careers around studying single iterations of the problem. And sleep disorders of other kinds – such as sleepwalking, sleep eating, sleep paralysis, night terrors – are not the focus of this book, as alarming as they are and

as much as I feel for their sufferers. This book is my attempt to sort out my own chronic sleep disabilities and, from that highly personal viewpoint (and learned experience), look outward toward a world that increasingly mirrors my lifelong problem, a world that no longer sees the inability to sleep as exceptional, and perhaps even reads *not* sleeping as valuable.

Finally, a note on terminology: the word *insomnia* is an umbrella term for any sleep-disrupting disorder, both chronic and occasional. When employed in this book, the term relates to any medical or psychological situation wherein a symptom is the inability to sleep. Insomnia is both a symptom and a condition that creates symptoms. Subsequently, terms such as *sleep-deprived* or *sleep deprivation* or *sleeplessness* do not refer to enforced sleep deprivation, as might be experienced by abused workers or prisoners, but rather are to be read as events that thrive in a culture that no longer puts value on sleep. For instance, one may be sleep-deprived because one must work late hours. In this case, the term is not exclusively used to describe the imposition of a lack of sleep but also to describe a culture that normalizes and privileges the lack of sleep.