

Hands of the Ticking Clock

The clock had struck 2:34 AM and the house of 10-year-old Jerry Hu had gone eerily silent. It seemed a shame that he'd been awake long enough to make that observation, but there he was, lying in bed, his mother's rosary so close to his face that he could feel its phantom shadow tickling his cheek. Ticking. He turned back to the clock across the room, squinted at it, and then turned onto his side. He could try counting sheep again, the trick the books told him always worked. Or maybe he could do those breathing exercises again.

Hands on his chest, counting his breaths like hands on the clock. Ticking. He couldn't get the clock out of his head. He turned back onto his side, mashing his face into his pillow. He strained his ears, hoping to hear footsteps in the hallway: his mom, his brother, *anyone*, but there was just the infuriating ticking of that clock.

He wanted to step on it, smash it under his feet, crack the battery between his toes. Could he even do that? 2:47 AM. He had school tomorrow and that meant he'd only be able to get 3 hours and 13 minutes of sleep before he had to get up.

Most people have experienced some form of sleeplessness in their life, maybe from the stress of a psychology exam, a driver's test, a job interview. But for most people, this is less of an everyday occasion and more of an occasional annoyance.

For an insomniac, on the other hand, it looms over their night like an overly long shadow. Every night is a math exam, calculating the hours between the clock and alarm. Every night is a line of sheep in waiting, ready to jump over that invisible fence in preparation for the count. Every night is a claw ready to squeeze out those dreaded breathing exercises like a torture

method pulled out of a vampire novel, and every night just seethes with anger and irritation and wishing that the clock would die and the darkness would drown their rampant consciousness.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, researchers have started calling insomnia a “problem of your brain being unable to stop being awake.” The brain will keep itself awake if it feels that it needs to expend energy thinking about something—taking its focus away from sleeping. There are many medical conditions that can cause insomnia, the most notable of these being nasal allergies, gastrointestinal and endocrine problems, arthritis, asthma, neurological conditions, and various kinds of pain. Sleep apnea—when a person’s airway becomes partially blocked in sleep—is also a huge cause of insomnia. My dad suffers from it. My brother and I always joke about what he sounds like when he snores—a dying whale, a gasping freight train, an untuned orchestra of pots and pans—but occasionally his rasps peter out in the night and I freeze, terrified, wondering if he’s breathed his last.

Sleep apnea and physical problems like it aren’t the only disorders that can cause insomnia. Mental disorders such as anxiety and depression are often just as responsible. They usually lead to a host of their own problems: tension, stress, feeling overwhelmed. Likewise, stimulants like nicotine and caffeine can add to these tensions. My dad labeled caffeine as one of the chief culprits for his sleeplessness.

“Drinking tea in the late afternoon is not good,” he said with a laugh when I asked him about it. “Kept me up until the wee hours of the evening.” He paused and then added as an afterthought, “Soda or coffee ice cream are somehow ok though.”

He might have just been trying to qualify the argument—since he does, after all, love soda and coffee ice cream—but his point does seem to show that the causes for insomnia are

different for everyone affected. From the outset, caffeine seems like one of the few causes of insomnia that can be controlled, but the unpredictable nature of the stimulant makes it just as likely for its effects to catch someone off guard.

The statement “I have insomnia” is usually followed by one of a few follow-up questions, the most frequent of these being, “Oh! So, do you get a lot of stuff done?” People who don’t have the disorder often assume that insomniacs keep full control over their brains during a bout of sleeplessness. It’s more time to be productive, less time drinking coffee and straining to keep their eyes open and more time, well, working. It’s not that insomniacs can’t sleep, they think, it’s that they don’t need to.

This isn’t actually the case. Insomniacs, according to the National Sleep Foundation’s Symptoms page, don’t just have difficulty falling asleep; they also struggle to stay asleep and wake up at a normal time. Insomniacs often complain of non-restorative sleep that leads to irritability, difficulty at work, difficulty in relationships, anger, impulsiveness, difficulty concentrating, and crippling fatigue. With all of these problems dragging them down, it’s difficult, if not downright impossible for an insomniac to get anything done. Most often, like my dad, they spend their nights lying in bed wide awake, hating life, counting sheep and wishing that the clock could tick just a little bit quieter.

But then again, sometimes clocks aren’t even involved. Sometimes it’s just a man alone in bed, lying there with landscapes of autumn leaves and quiet brooks shimmering on the dark canvas of his eyelids. Sometimes it’s just Vincent Van Gogh lying in the dull glow of a slow-arriving morning in mid-June, 1883, commenting to his brother Theo in a letter that he “shall again sleep little tonight because of the drawing; but it is very cozy smoking a pipe in the night,

when everything is quiet; and daybreak and sunrise are wonderful.” For Van Gogh, drawing was both cause and respite for his insomnia; it kept his brain awake at the same time that it kept him relaxed and calm, sane. Through this he was able to absorb some of the beauty from those daybreaks and sunrises and turn them into the painted masterpieces that hang in our museums today.

Although insomnia caused Van Gogh many problems, low fevers and fatigue being a few, he seemed to revel in the beauty it brought him. As seen in a letter to Theo on September 9, 1882, Van Gogh marveled not only at daybreak, sunrise, and autumn colors, but also at “wood engravings.” He saw art itself, whether he had created it himself or not, with “renewed pleasure” during his sleepless nights.

All of this is, of course, subjective. Maybe Van Gogh was simply a sentimental person who grew all the more sentimental in his sleep-deprived state. Or, more interestingly, maybe his experience offers some proof that insomnia can give its sufferers a form of creative productivity, even as a coping mechanism.

The potential ability of insomnia to trigger creativity isn’t a new idea. In fact, the idea even has an accepted term: creative insomnia. Furthermore, Van Gogh isn’t the first to exhibit it. It’s even been seen in a few of our present-day musicians, the most prominent of these being Owl City’s Adam Young.

“I was up late and in the basement one night when I wrote Fireflies,” Young told the Daily Record in July of 2012. “I was sitting at the keyboard just fooling around, not really trying to write anything. Over the next couple of hours that song came together in the most natural way. I can’t explain it but it almost wrote itself.” Insomnia, it seems, loosened Young’s thoughts and

freed his creative process so that the lyrics flowed out of him in “the most natural way.” Here, insomnia didn’t act as a hinderance or an annoyance at all; it was a gift. Something about trying to pass the time, fooling around, and “not really trying to write anything” allowed him to find a muse where he may not have found one at all.

Young’s story perfectly fits the theory of creative insomnia. Studies have already shown that creativity and insomnia have at least some connection. Dione Healey and Mark A. Runco’s journal article “Could Creativity Be Associated with Insomnia?” shows that 57% of the creative children its study had sampled suffered from sleep disturbances compared to 27% of its control group. It’s not too far of a stretch to propose that insomnia could not only have a correlation with, but an actual hand in causing bursts of creativity. Adam Young might be quick to agree.

Sherri Dupree-Bemis of the band Eisley, on the other hand, might hesitate. Insomnia has helped her create as well, though not in the most pleasant manner. Sherri wrote *Louder Than A Lion*, one of Eisley’s most recent songs, as she recalled how she felt in her sleepless nights.

“This song started out as a bit of a dark love song to my daughters,” she explained to *The Huffington Post*. “I wrote it to them, wanting them to know they could always sleep tight because I’d always be awake, watching over them, keeping the darkness away. I realized that even if I can’t sleep well, I can at least watch over my daughters as they rest peacefully.” Sherri’s bitterness at her insomnia seeps into the haunting tone of her melody, as well as the protective shadow she throws over her innocent daughters. There is a sense that she has been tainted by her sleeplessness, changed into something monstrous and only capable of protecting and not nurturing. Insomnia has thus twisted Sherri’s creativity into something dark, aggressive, and violent.

My dad's most immediate reaction to my asking for his stories of creative insomnia was an apology. He couldn't think of a single moment when insomnia brought him a creative spark, apart from the fleeting dreams it kindled, and those always flitted away from him faster than he could catch them.

But he did remember the nightmares: sitting up rod-still in the dark with that insufferable clock still ticking, the shadow of his mom watching over him like Sherri Dupree-Bemis did with her daughters. Creativity was impossible to find in those tired times, when the last thing he wanted to do was grab a pencil and document a dream, a nightmare, the start of some story. All he could do was lie in the dark and breathe carefully counted breaths, waiting for his consciousness to ebb away.

This was how it went over and over again until one day, perhaps under the weight of university classes, it didn't. Even my dad isn't quite sure how he'd been cured.

"Somehow," he said with a shrug when I pressed him about it. I believe him. Insomnia would play such a trick. It had, after all, convinced Vincent Van Gogh to pour camphor over his pillow every night with the serenity of a dead man.

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