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Insomnia Is a Place: Nighttime

Luckily, I have rarely been there; at one time I visited more than I would have liked, whether on account of daytime anxieties, getting up later than I should have, or mere whim—whether physiological or psychological I can't say—since I really don't know if sleep is a function of the body or the mind. Needless to say, I still visit some nights, fortunately not very often, because for me insomnia remains a distant, and to a certain point unfamiliar, place. Nonetheless, the few times I went there, added to the sporadic nights when I still visit, authorize me to write about it, not from the perspective of a citizen but from that of a traveler who arrives, looks, and departs, taking with him some anecdotes, two or three images,

some sensations. In addition to my own experiences, I have also heard the testimony of others who have done battle in those dark regions, and on returning, puffy eyed, found words to describe their experiences in the fearsome land of wakefulness.

I say insomnia is a place because one enters, spends time there, and leaves; because while there are variations—from the color of your bedsheets to the season of the year—the landscape is always identical, recognizable, and true to itself, and because, unlike time, by nature intangible, it is so palpable that in fact one can toss and turn in it, wander around in it for hours on end and feel it in one's entire body, almost weightless but unquestionably present. To get to insomnia one need only want to sleep, at night, as people do, and not be able to; you must be meticulous and keep your eyes wide open, since, in a moment of carelessness, you can miss the station and leave it

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irrevocably behind for a night or forfeit your right to enter, as if, just before crossing the border you realize your passport has expired.

Once in its territory, the decor of insomnia is monotonous and unbroken by any surprise: always the same warm sheets, the darkness that, as the minutes pass, becomes mere gloom and announces objects reduced to their shadows; the ceiling that, while not clearly visible, feels low, almost stifling. The gloom makes insomnia a place more of sounds than of objects. No silence is more misleading than the silence of insomnia, which is there only to amplify sounds, to isolate them and let them echo in all their wildness. Because all the sounds of insomnia are earsplitting. If you sleep with someone else, the snores of your bedmate, invasive to the point of being insulting, are emitted by a beast rather than a sleeper; the distant music from a party sounds as close as if the band were playing in your living room, and the rasping ticktock of the clock changes its exasperating predictability for the digital arbitrariness of cell phone messages. Of course, you can move to another room, another house, even another city, but sooner rather than later you will be looking at the same landscape, because you do not get to insomnia by following a route on a map, but, as if it were a magical place in another dimension, by means of a simple ritual that consists of wanting to sleep, at night, as people do, and failing.

It might seem that in insomnia nothing ever happens, that time stands still and you are transported out of this world, the world of those awake, but also of the other world—the dark, the oneiric, the unknown— of the sleeping. Real insomnia is jealous and brooks no distraction; it wants your full attention for itself; it demands that you think of nothing else than the fact that you cannot sleep. It is a lie. Insomnia is like that because it hums with activity, because in it events are condensed, projects take shape, and frustrations and regrets, always punctual, put in an appearance to sign the attendance sheet. In these interminable nights, some of which last only an hour or two, irrelevant events from the day merge simultaneously with distant scenes from one's own life, which may as easily be transcendental as insignificant in one's life, to the point that they had gone unremembered until then, and might not have resurfaced had it not been for that sleepless night in which the brain, perhaps as revenge for its lack of rest, wandered onto unexpected paths. This

immediate or distant past alternates with the future, either in the form of optimistic enthusiasms or justified fears, which, for better or worse, will linger the morning after —albeit faded— when one has to make breakfast and brush one's teeth, activities providentially remote from existential reflections.

As if it were not enough that past and present overlap in insomnia, parallel worlds, the existence of which is confirmed by both quantum physics and science fiction, also coexist there. In insomnia we respond with the right words —ingenious and opportune— to the hurtful remark someone made which left us slack-jawed and resentful; in insomnia we make the choice —yes or no—opposite to what we chose before, without being overly aware of it, which ultimately shaped our destiny; in insomnia we have a whole parallel life, in which we remain ourselves even if we are almost unrecognizable, because we live somewhere else; we have a different profession; and we are single or married, as the case may be, as long as it is not what we are in the daytime of this world. How many lives are lived in insomnia, as insomniacs know better than anyone, which is why they do not want to fall asleep to awake and discover that, like every other morning, they are still themselves and their lives are still the same as they were the day before and will be the day after.

There is nothing more different from an insomniac than a night owl. The insomniac, person of habits, retires at the same time —it matters little if it be early or late— only to confirm that he or she cannot sleep. The night owl, in contrast, undisciplined to the point of scandalizing the routine-bound insomniac, spends the night in revelry and drinks at the city's gayest parties if she is sociable, or spends the night reading or watching Netflix if she prefers solitude, and as soon as she lies down she falls asleep. In fact, the night owl needs to fall like a sack of rocks in bed and sleep like a log, because that is how she

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shows that if she stayed up it was not because she was unable to sleep, but to dance or read or whatever she might like to do. Nothing resists the night owl, who can as easily imbibe as sleep, whereas for the insomniac even the simplest activity of all, sleeping, which in principle requires only that one shut one's eyes, is complicated. Assuredly mornings are equally hard on them both, but while one will remember the night before with hurried guilty nostalgia, for the other it will be a storm that presaged that which will return the following night and the night after.

It is disturbing that the insomniac enjoys literary prestige, as if literature were written merely because he/she cannot sleep and not, on the contrary, to create a targeted dream, as Borges defined it. Apropos of Borges, for whom one man is everyman, it would appear that in the nights of the worst insomnia, one would become the protagonist of several of his stories. In insomnia memory is sharpened, cruelly, and one remembers everything. Borges confessed that he conceived the plot of "Funes the Memoriosus" in a night of insomnia, when memories were rattling around in his brain, lengthening the night, as if it would last forever. And the fact is that sleeplessness triggers memories, which may as easily be of something that happened the previous afternoon as events from childhood, because insomnia, among many other things, is also the realm of memory. And insomnia is also a miniscule and obscure aleph, that magical point that simultaneously reflects every point in the universe: in the dark of insomnia one sees all. It is a pity that sooner or later one falls asleep and loses all the knowledge and sensations acquired with such sacrifice.

To classify insomniacs, we can divide them into the enthusiastic, the greedy, and the resigned. The first, realizing they will be unable to sleep and with absurd airs of self-importance, get out of bed and proceed to read long novels, write letters to people they have not seen in decades, get ahead on the week's work, or, even, like some-

one I know, try to learn German (and thereby neither sleep nor memorize the declinations). The greedy ones, in contrast, make several trips to the kitchen; first, hypocritically, they go for a clear glass of water, and on the second or third visit they reveal their true intentions and have a second supper or early breakfast. Last, the resigned stay in bed, having renounced their intention to make good use of their time, and spend sleepless nights wondering why they cannot sleep until, always too late, just when they were about to find the answer, they fall fast asleep.

If the insomniac is mysterious, more enigmatic are those who have never suffered from insomnia for even a few nights. Does nothing ever worry them? Is their imagination so limited? Is never having insomnia proof of a shortage or surfeit of willpower? No one denies that they are fortunate, and in the morning always appear refreshed, active, optimistic, but they must have missed something. And it is not that the insomniac has brilliant ideas, solves problems, or finds the impetus necessary to make important decisions; on the contrary, the insomniac is good for nothing, not even to fall asleep. Nonetheless, there is a time for the insomniac where, in spite of himself, of the frustration and exhaustion brought on by lack of rest, he stumbles upon a small, useless but decisive discovery. This moment, when we are not fully awake or asleep, may be when we are truly ourselves just when our thoughts start to resemble dreams and our dreams are still thoughts. Then, inevitably, the insomniac tells himself that that is how it must always be, that the days should be more nocturnal and the nights more luminous. But that is not how things work. And against that certainty, that things don't work that way, nothing is to be done but to spend the night wondering why, and when no answer is forthcoming, the ruminations will continue through the next night, and so on successively.

The night is the hell in which insomniacs burn, and it is a uniquely cruel hell because there is nothing heavenly about the daytime. Nevertheless, insomniacs persist until their disorder ultimately becomes an identity. No one defines him- or herself as someone who sleeps soundly; in contrast, insomniacs claim membership in a sect of loners. Before their nationality or their profession, those who cannot sleep at night define themselves as insomniacs, because only they know the secrets the night holds for those willing to pass the hours looking it straight in the eye. ■■■



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