

I.  
*Introduction*

It's far into the night, but sleep won't come. You turn over. Perhaps a different position will quieten the mind. Or maybe the other side was better after all. Panic sets in. Not sleeping feels like a disaster. For very understandable reasons, our culture has arrived at extremely negative assessments of insomnia. It is a curse, to be overcome by art or science, by a sleeping pill, chamomile tea or sheep counting. But given how much time we may have to spend in the territory of sleeplessness, it is also worth attempting to map and understand the landscape – to learn to feel a little more at home with the idea of not being able to sleep and to view our insomniac hours as a challenging yet legitimate part of being human.

Our wakefulness can be interpreted as an artful revenge on the part of all the many deep, grand, significant and rich thoughts we did not properly attend to during the day. We can't sleep, in part, because we have so much unfinished thinking left to do.

The Danish painter Kersting hints at the virtues of the sleepless state. We can guess that it's very late for the man reading in his study; more conventional people have



Georg Friedrich  
Kersting, *Man Reading  
by Lamplight*, 1814

long ago turned in, but the man has stayed up, to finish a book, to think, to talk with a long-forgotten person: himself. Late at night is when big things may at last have a chance to happen in the mind. During the day, we are dutiful to others. At night we return to a bigger duty: to ourselves. Night is a corrective to the demands of the community. I may – in daytime hours – be a dentist or a maths teacher, a parent or a politician, but night is a reminder that I am also a nameless, limitless consciousness, a far more expansive, un-anchored figure, of infinite possibilities and rare, disturbing, ambivalent, peculiar, visionary insights. The thoughts of night would sound weird to my mother, my friend, my boss, my child. These people need us to be a certain way. They cannot tolerate all our possibilities and for some good reasons. We don't want to let

them down; they have a right to benefit from our predictability. But their expectations can choke off important aspects of who we are. At night, with the window open and a clear sky above, it is just us and the universe – and for a time, we can take on a little of its boundlessness.

We are naturally very inclined to want to be normal. Yet thanks to insomnia, we are granted a crucial encounter with our weirder, truer selves. We can learn of our own apparent strangeness. The daytime self is a misleading picture of what everyone is like. Insomnia is a gift – and a latent education.

Lots of books attempt to tell us how to sleep. This one will attempt to show us some of what happens while we can't sleep – so that we may feel less persecuted by, and alone with, our sleepless nights. It is a portrait of some of the more valuable, interesting and less-discussed things that happen in our minds at night, when we're supposed to be unconscious but

are, in fact, more and more acutely conscious than at perhaps any other moment of our lives.

2.  
*I'm going to die...*

In our waking hours, for much of our lives, we are granted an unwarranted luxury: a sense that we are immortal. Our organs function normally, our joints give us no pains, we are focused on the next few financial quarters in the business. Dropping dead is the last thing on our minds.

But this is not the case in the early hours. Suddenly, there's an odd gnawing twinge in the stomach. It isn't anything major, and it might pass by tomorrow. But this might also be the start of a tumour that will fell us by New Year. Also, our chest feels a bit tight. When we breathe, there can sometimes be a sense of strain. There was an incident a little while back at the airport, running for the distant gate. Could it have been a heart attack, one of the quiet ones that passes largely undetected but tears fatefully at a valve? What about the slightly odd mole on one's back? Has it always been there or is it new, spreading aggressively and malignantly? Why can't we remember the name of that really nice colleague we worked with a few years back? Is reason beginning to crumble? This would be just the moment for a stroke which will leave us half-paralysed; paramedics will urgently wheel us along the A&E corridors on a trolley bed. We'll need to have our bottom wiped by a nurse and be fed with a tube coming out of our nose.

The sheer implausibility of being, and remaining, alive grows overwhelming. How is it possible that one can keep living, given everything that might go wrong? It isn't hypochondria any more, that macabre, almost fun state of mind you can adopt as an adolescent; this is a realistic assessment of the risks. It's the imagination correctly deployed.

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This present ache or twinge might not announce the end – but something will happen. The abstract possibility of death turns, at night, into a concrete, decisive fact. Perhaps we'll fall off a ladder trying to get a suitcase out of a high-up cupboard and lie on the floor for eight hours with a broken neck, blood filling our lungs, before anyone finds our discoloured limp body. Or maybe we'll be lucky and it will be a quick aneurysm on the way back from a party celebrating a friend's birthday. Whatever it will be, it's getting closer. Others will be deeply distressed for a while; a few people will be sad even years later when they happen to think of us. But they'll cope. It won't matter to anyone the way it matters to us right now.

We're appalled and awed by the deep strangeness of being alive; it's so fundamentally improbable that the delicate web of our thoughts and feelings is being sustained by a bunch of pulpy, fragile organs. All our complicated ideas and lovely movements of the soul depend upon tiny mindless white blood corpuscles, oxygen molecules and the rhythmic spasms of the sinoatrial node. Why does the machine keep going? Why aren't we dead already?

The thoughts are horrific – and the full panic may go on for half an hour or more. But as we gradually grow used to the idea of being obliterated and forgotten, the thought of death sharpens our resolve: we have to do the important things while we can. We need to finish our work and dare to take up new initiatives. We need to forgive more. We can let a stupid comment pass; we can give up on a feud, even though the other wronged us.

The visceral knowledge of our approaching death renews our appreciation of existence. It's incredible to be able to hear a car accelerating in the distance; it's fascinating to have feet; the pillow feels so nice on our cheek; it will be lovely to look tomorrow at a tree or to hear a song or bite into a fig. We're brought back to a proper sense of the charm of things that ordinarily seem too slight to notice but which are close to why life is worth cherishing. The veil of jaded familiarity is pulled back – at least for a little while. A year starts to look like a huge privilege to have. A day when nothing much happens won't be boring; it will be magnificent opportunity to continue to exist.

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We had managed to keep it, more or less, under control: using the busy-ness and reassuring familiarity of the working day to stop us from panicking. But now that there is nothing practical left to do, now that the world is eerie in its silence, the bank of anxieties hits us with new intensity.

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If this were discovered, we could lose our job and our entire hard-won reputation; we might not be able to pay the mortgage or the rent; we might have to make a humiliating relocation; our partner might have an affair or leave us. Maybe the very stupid thing we did will be broadcast to the world; our worst moments will be made public – acquaintances will look on us with anger and contempt; our attempts at self-defence will backfire; we'll never work again; our partner will forever be bitter and harsh. Our children will hate us. We'll be ruined and humiliated.

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These thoughts don't come to us as theoretical possibilities or things that we suppose could possibly happen: at 3 a.m. they are what we have coming to us. After twenty minutes of ever-mounting tension, they build to a terrible high point of crisis: we are doomed, we have been moronic, our stupidity knows no bounds, our life is ghastly and pointless. It's unbearable. In desperation, we get out of bed and start to pace the room. Should we kill ourselves now? This isn't melodrama, just a sensible next step. Maybe we should go for a drive in the deserted streets? Or would we just be tempted to drive headlong off a bridge?

We are like this for another half an hour, a portion of a private hell that no one will guess at when they see our normal, steady face in the morning. We are crying, clutching our head in our hands, banging our fists on the pillow, kneeling on the floor in a position of imploring prayer to a God we no longer believe in.

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But then, just as it feels as if getting rid of ourselves is the only possible solution, another possibility comes to mind. It doesn't deny any of the ghastly eventualities. It doesn't try to comfort us by telling us that everything will be OK. Instead, it looks at what will happen after the very worst has come to pass. It looks at the charred, wrecked landscape and asks us to see that a life of sorts could still be possible among the ruins.

It's true: there will be utter humiliation, everyone will mock, we'll lose the job; we won't have the money we were counting on. But, actually and rather remarkably, the sun will rise once more. We'll lose a leg, so to speak, but we will hobble on. We will be capable of living on far different terms from the ones we're currently used to. Millions of people do every day. It's not ideal but it can – almost – be all right.

After the disaster, there will be other things that come our way that we haven't thought of yet: new friendships, new ambitions, new satisfactions – less worldly, less materialistic, but genuine and properly rewarding. We can't tell how life will turn out exactly. We'll adjust, we'll manage. We'll find new reasons to be hopeful. There will – though it seems implausible now – be other days.

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The way to reduce anxiety lies not in telling ourselves that the worst won't happen, but in exploring the way that even if the worst were to occur, we could find a way through. We need to make ourselves at home with the most horrific scenarios – and in so doing, we'll grasp that we're far less vulnerable to calamity than the spectres of the night insist.

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