

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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one

Insomnia, noun.

The chronic inability to fall asleep or remain asleep for an adequate length of time.

Some people call two hours of sleep a midday nap; I call it an accomplishment. For most, sleep is normal. You wake up, get your day done, go to bed. Every day, it's the same thing. After twenty or thirty years, it's like a clock counting you down.

Tick.

Over the whole of your life, you'll sleep more than you'll be awake.

Tick.

That's counting the waking coma of day-to-day life, of course, because sometimes sleep is more than just the time you spend under the covers. Sometimes, it's staring into space, or a blank spot on a wall when someone's talking to you, and suddenly you're woken up and brought back into reality.

You aren't getting enough rest, you tell yourself. If only you really believed that.

An entire lifetime spent trying to catch up on rest pushed aside by—

Insert any modern convenience or productive lifestyle decision you like here. Step-aerobics classes and ready-to-eat meals filled with words like *sodium benzonate* and *polysorbate 80*.

Tick.

With all this motivation, I can't wait to see what my tombstone looks like.

Here lies what's left of David Preacher, the worm-eaten remains of a sickeningly morose human being.

It's funny, but in the same way airplane crashes are funny. And believe me, I know what that's like. I've read the stories. I know what funny is.

They don't recover half of the bodies in water landings. Funny is being at a funeral without the guest of honor, because he's tangled up in rusted debris under a half-mile of salt water.

I used to read a lot.

I once read that Leonardo Da Vinci slept for two or three hours at a time, then got up for five or six and went back to sleep. He did that up until his death at sixty-seven. I don't know how true that is, but let me tell you something.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

The long, slow spirals that kill us all.

Tick.

You go to sleep at eleven so you can get up at six to shower in your mildewed shower silo—because it isn't really a shower, just a tall box with a faucet and a place for a bar of soap—shave with your fifty-dollar goo-dispensing shaver, and eat a stale breakfast carefully so your striped power tie doesn't get covered in crumbs. All this to make sure you're in your chair at fifteen minutes to the hour, seven hours and forty-five minutes after you downed a quick muscle relaxer to *assist* you in filling the center of that pillow.

The great measure of a civilization is its drugs.

You have to be there, because that Big Project depends on your six collated pages of input. Nobody ever leaves the copy machine on, either. The fax machine stays on, but it never works. Not as well as the trash can. Toss something in there, it goes away. Never fails. If only everything else were as easy to use.

You'd never worry about crumbs on your ten-dollar power tie, would you?

Why people from other departments keep taking the pens from yours, you'll never figure out. The cabinet gets filled with more boxes, and as if everyone else were transferring them straight from the cabinet to the Trash Can Multiappliance, the new boxes are gone. Like gum on the sidewalk, eventually the empty ballpoint boxes just blend in with the clear, magnetic paper clip wells. The stapler refills. The big box of rubber bands no one can come up with a use for, but everyone must deplete. Peel-and-stick labels that end up under shelves and desks.

It's all attrition, you tell yourself. Forced losses in a battle no one's really winning.

If only those muscle relaxers were still working. This would be cake.

So you find your keys and watch the last fifteen minutes of the day scroll by. A runner at the starting block. You're so close, you can taste it. Salt, from cupfuls of pretzels that pretended to be lunch, in the cracks of your lips.

You're so tired when you get home, you don't even care about the moron who almost hit you on the expressway coming home. Not like he could have heard you screaming at him, what with that tiny little phone grafted to the business side of his head. Trying so hard to be important. Needed and connected.

But you're awake again, because naps never last long enough for you to catch your breath, sooner than you thought. It's just about time for bed now.

An extra hour won't hurt.

A sandwich. Well, meat and bread. It passes for a meal. Snack. Something.

Check your e-mail. Surf your daily list of porn sites. Seventy-two channels, and that's all there is?

It's after midnight, but that's okay because it'll only take a few more minutes to finish this letter.

It's after one.

By the time that muscle relaxer goes to work, it's two o'clock.

Like you're having a blast, you repeat this.

Alarm. Shower. Eat. Paper clips. Idiot drivers. Nap. Terrible diet. Three o'clock.

Every night, it gets a little later. It only takes a week or two before you're sleeping through the day, eyes red and pupils dilated from single-point sources of light at three in the morning.

Sleep therapists call it *phase shifting*.

Cold and slick eyelids. The sunrise is your cue to pin the heavy curtains to the window and fall asleep before light starts to pour through your pathetically dreary apartment in a seedy section of town. You only took that place because you're not paid anything respectable. Twenty-two thousand dollars a year, and a hundred years on your body.

Now what do you do?

I quit my job, that's what I did.

It's all downhill from here.

"Here's my two minutes notice," I said to my boss. The fat, malignant tumor. I was already

gone, he just didn't know it yet. I'd been gone for months. I had the look down like a dance recital: My eyes pushed back into my skull. My monotone speech. My love for all living things.

"Don't you mean *two weeks*?"

Did I say two weeks?

Does it look like I want to be here two more weeks?

You can't make me stay here two more weeks. I'll just stop showing up.

I took a boatload of those stupid rubber bands with me, too.

I could have been passing nuclear arms secrets to the lowest contact of my greatest enemy, or I could have been approving the machining process for the one-centimeter bevel on the front-right piston in our overseas sister company's new V-8 engine. The work would have been the same. It was the same cookie-cutter template of a job that everyone else goes to in the morning. The same type of job Starbucks makes a killing on.

Money is the solution to your lack of power.

Mildly retarded tree sloths for coworkers. The rolling, rippling, piercing ring of the constellation of telephones everywhere around you. Trash cans overflowing with tall paper cups and the stupid little brown paper collars they wear. Twice-used coffee filters thick with wet grinds like volcanic debris.

It's like some kind of surreal elephant graveyard for office supplies.

Overhead fluorescent lighting hidden above frosted glass panels.

There are no instincts in offices, just reflexes.

Ring. A half-second. Ring, somewhere next to you. A half-second. Ring, just past that. Every time a call came through our floor, the phones did that. The caller would hear two rings, and we would hear eight. When everyone would get busy, that's when there would be a caller determined to let the phone ring until the collapse of the free market system. Luckily for me, my complete breakdown was scheduled in my day planner right before that, so the two events couldn't have collided. A *mis-scheduling*, it's called.

And they rang, like dominos collapsing all around me.

Ring, my desk. I'm already on my cell. I can't take this.

Ring, next to me.

Ring, two cubicles down. It won't take long to get to the wall. Ring, near the coffee maker.

Ring, ring, ring, to the receptionist. Why couldn't it have started there?

Ring, someone pick it up. Ring, not everyone's on the phone. Ring, I can hear you talking about last night's game.

Ring, I'm holding my pen like a dagger. Ring, shut up and answer it. Ring, I'm going to kill you. Ring, my desk.

Take an order request call, route the order transit number to the predetermined transit tracking identification department, and verify order routing with the department receiving coordinator. Memo the entry, take an order request call. If there's a problem with the order transit number, the transit tracking identification department may send you e-mail notification, providing you with a checkpoint disallow code for the administrative contact for the transit order.

What I was really doing, I didn't know, and never asked. I don't think anyone knew, honestly. Take the call, process the order, move on. It had to be the departmentalized engineering of society's downfall, I thought. One day, a corporate superpower would rise from of our work, and there wouldn't even be a war fought, because every possible enemy nation and state

would already be part of the machine without realizing it until it's decades too late. The enemy defeated before the war.

People like us, we're all dead in the tomorrow of big corporations. We're recycled and replayed over and over until we can't tell what's public relations and what isn't. We're statistics, and statistics are numbers, and numbers can't be alive.

In the future, our bodies will be made of seventy percent Pepsi-Cola.

Maybe there's nothing that can save us but ourselves, I thought.

Ring, my desk.

You're always expendable, even if you're the only one who can do your job. The words *job security* don't mean anything anymore.

And I didn't care.

The sun made the sea of cars in the parking lot shine like diamonds on the asphalt. I dropped my briefcase right there on the sidewalk. Useless. Briefcases are there to hold the things that make someone important. If you remove all the things in your briefcase, and you're no longer important, what does that say about you?

Still and surrounded, warm and open, the Sun held me in place. I could ignore the smog. The smell of the baking Tarmac. Everything was water.

I was reborn. David's gone, welcome the new owner. He wants to open your eyes. He wants to show you the sport utility vehicle you never take out of the suburbs and city, that gets two miles to the gallon, doesn't make you any smarter or more valuable than you already were. He wants to show you everything by showing you nothing at all.

It's not enough just to evolve anymore.

Rebirth is constant. A flower falls dead to the ground, just to become someone's mulch for an unborn bed of petunias in three months. Let me tell you something about cycles.

I left my levelheaded, mid-sized sedan in the lot with the others and walked until night fell, until I was home again.

This didn't happen all at once, now. This had been a long time coming. I'd developed a few habits which led up to my *Exodus*, and not just my rotating sleep schedule. One month it was during the day, one month it was a few hours at night. There was my dictionary collection, for example. Stacks and stacks of every reference book and magazine you could imagine, from wall to wall. Then, there was Maura.

SWF, 33, ISO LTR. NS, D&DF. BOX10235.

SBM, 40, BI ISO LMBM. NS, D&DF. BOX31290.

They just leave their personals box number for you. You're a message. You're a piece of voice mail. I read these for fun. Those people put their entire romantic goals and dreams into a three-line, forty-five-character non-paragraph. A by-line of love. Millions of people so lonely, so desperately lonely, that they turn themselves into advertisements at thirty cents a word. Newsprint is the new Cupid's arrow; a love potion made of press ink.

What's the difference, then, between that and reading the phone book?

I can't tell you now, and I couldn't have told you then when I started reading the White Pages one night at two o'clock. My fingers did the walking, randomly selecting numbers to dial.

"Hello?" they'd say in that been-asleep-for-hours voice.

My name's David, I'd tell them. If I got lucky, there wouldn't be a dial tone in response. If I got really lucky, there would be the threat of the police. I'm always up for something new.

But no one ever called the police. They just hung up or yelled a half-asleep, confused string of profanities and *then* hung up.

My name is David, and hello. Did you do anything interesting today?

“Fucking creep!” one girl said.

Hello, my name is David. Do you think it means anything that your name is under my fingertip, or do you believe in chaos?

“I have Caller I.D. you know,” they’d inevitably say. Star-sixty-nine.

Do you believe in destiny? Is fate only for the dying, or does it use everyone?

No one likes a conversation at one-thirty-three in the morning.

I was dead, and this was my way of feeling alive again. I knew I existed every time some creeped-out woman slammed her phone down on me. I knew I was somewhere, and someone else knew it. So it had to be true.

I was dead, and then I was alive. A rebirth at the right side of the first column on page one hundred fifty-two.

No one lets their answering machine pick up at this time of night.

No message boxes, no voice mail features. No sound of the beep. Living tissue on both ends of the line. It didn’t matter that conversations lasted only a few seconds. I was real for those few seconds.

Nothing could stop that feeling.

I was totally, completely satisfied. Content. My belly was full and my throat was wet.

Fate uses the dying for amusement. It uses us all. It’s anticipation, all of it. The salivation when you see that slice of birthday cake making its way toward you, that’s the same anticipation fate gets hard off of. The cake is never as good as you *think* it’s going to be, no matter how good it is. If it were, you’d salivate after it and crave it that much more, and then, it’s no longer as good as the moment right before the plate hits your hand. That’s why fate keeps pulling carrot after carrot in front of you.

Things can only be as good as the anticipation that precedes them.

But surprises hide around every corner. My surprise’s name happened to be Maura A. Spring. To this day, I still don’t know what the A stood for. Alice, maybe.

I did everything I normally did in preparation for a night of searching, as I’d come to call it. Phone, check. Phone book, check. Genesis, check.

Sometimes, I’d use a phone book from another city somewhere far off. I had quite the collection.

It seems rebirth can be an addiction, too. God must know how this feels.

I had my own little method for picking numbers. I would take the entire phone book and toss it to the floor. Whatever page it opened to, I’d drop a finger down blindly on it. Whatever I landed on, I dialed.

I sleep with a dead night-light under my pillow. What’s under yours?

“I think you have the wrong number, chief.”

If I use another Post Office to send a letter to my mailman, will he get jealous?

More expletives, more confused half-awake yelling. Click. If I’d like to make a call.

“I told you to not call back. It’s you or nothing.”

That’s what surprises sound like.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m David. I don’t think we’ve spoken before.”

“Who?” replied the frail, breaking voice with a sniffle.

David, you idiot. Get the Kleenex out of your ear and put it to your nose.

“He left me!” she cried. If this hadn’t been so out of the ordinary, I wouldn’t have cared. I would have gone to the next rebirth right then. I had my own baggage, and it didn’t have polished leather handles and convenient little wheels to help me haul it through the airport terminal.

Would she like to hear about my night-light?

“Who is this?” she asked. Didn’t we go over this? “My name is—”

Maura. I already knew this.

“How do you know my name?” Sniffle.

I found it in the phone book, I said. On page— Between— You live at—

“Oh my God. What do you want? Are you going to kill me? Rape me?” She was a bit panicked by then, but she had forgotten about whoever the Hell she was crying over before.

“You’re not hanging up?” I asked her.

“I wanna know if you want to rape me first. I’m also smashed.”

I said, “I wasn’t planning on it. I honestly wouldn’t know where to begin. I could kill you, though, if that’s more of what you’re looking for.”

A laugh came through her tears. A sick laugh.

I hung up. That click of finality when the receiver connects with the base, and the room is suddenly more silent than it’s ever been.

