

Forty Winks

Lynn Magill, 2019

There are two kinds of change: proactive, and reactive. The proactive kind you see coming, because you are actively striving and working towards it: it is your choice, your goal. Whereas reactive change is when something happens *to* you, for better or for worse. (Not much change happens with inertia.) It's even weirder when it comes from something unlikely, like a train you never saw coming; hell, you didn't even know you were on the tracks.

I spent the upper half of my teenage years in a state of anxiety so paralyzing that looking back, it's a wonder I functioned at all. I like to say that my childhood was unconventional, which is like saying that a tornado is a slight breeze, but it works for mixed company. I was raised primarily by my mother, who was formidable, but not in the classic way that compels you forward. I was an "accident" and reminded of it weekly. She and my father met when she was 18, both farm kids rebelling against small-town church life, with big egos and even bigger ideas. As my late aunt Helen once said "I can't think of anything that the two of them probably wouldn't do." That didn't change after I was born; they married three days prior to that, without fanfare or approval. I was my father's 7th child by as many women; my mother's first (and only).

I'd gotten caught in the middle of my parents' mutual dysfunction when I was 15. Usually it went like this: mom would decide that life was unfair to assign her single motherhood, and the next day I'd be on a plane halfway across the country to my father's for 6-12 months. (The cops were also getting suspicious about who, if anyone, was supervising me during her stints in jail for various DUI and drug offenses. The truth was: nobody except the T.V.) Dad would wait a respectable amount of time to appear that he wasn't shirking his parental duties, then he or his new wife would trump up an excuse, and I'd be told after dinner to have my bags

packed by morning – and it was back on another plane, to another household, another reminder that I really wasn't wanted in either place.

The final time it happened, I was old enough to start calling bullshit on this game, and started wondering what my other options might be. Foster care (again)? Group home? Orphanage? Where do they even put teenagers who aren't getting in trouble, but have nowhere to go? (Teen shelters not being a thing yet back then.) The time that ended it all my stepmother had been in rare form, and piqued at having to have another mouth to feed, sent me packing in a dramatic fury of red-faced screaming, spit-flying, object-throwing curses about both myself and my mother, and whatever else she could think of just for good measure.

Another car ride with my father. Another plane trip back. Going back to Seattle again was the lesser of two evils; at least I had friends there, and things to do. Relieved to at least be back in my own room again, I turned the doorknob of my bedroom and pushed it open, dragging my old blue Samsonite suitcase behind me in the hallway.

“Mom? Where's my stuff at?” The room was empty. Cleaned out. Bare.

“Oh,” she yelled back from the kitchen “I didn't think you'd be back, so I got rid of it.”

Nice. I walked down the hall and spoke to the back of her head, where she was standing in the kitchen, popping open a can of Budweiser. “Where am I going to sleep?”

“With me.”

You have got to be kidding me. I'm 16. Sleep in the same bed as my mother?

The snoring. The beer breath. The thin polyester nightgown (if I was lucky). Rolling into the sunken hole in the middle of mattress halfway through the night. And that was the best of it; I had acquired something new from my last stint at my father's: nightmares. In retrospect, it was clearly PTSD, but therapists aren't an option when your kid might rat out your dealing operation

to their psych. Waking up every hour on the hour, every single night, my stepmother spitting in my face, became my new normal. “*The only time I have problems is when I sleep.*” – Tupac Shakur.

“Come on, loser. I know you have to work tomorrow, but you need to get out. If you go to the show tonight, you can stay at my place and I’ll give you a ride to work in the morning.” Eric was the original frenemy. A tall, portly, blonde Norwegian-American; he bleached his long, spiked hair until it was like straw and wore more eyeliner than I did: he was an 80’s hair band poser extraordinaire, black spandex and all (to make him look slimmer, of course). I’d known him since I was 14, and having made it through high school, he would frequently call on me to be his “date” at local concerts. We had an understanding: he kept his mitts to himself, and I’d be his pseudo-date. Nobody had to know he was friend-zoned so far out that you needed binoculars to find him. It had nothing to do with his appearance and everything to do with his questionable behavior mean-spirited humor.

But *stay at his place*? Wait, what? He only had one bedroom in his Alki beach apartment, and I was definitely not down with those logistics or renegotiating our existing platonic arrangement.

“I don’t mean we’re sleeping *together*.” You could hear him rolling his eyes over the phone.

“You would be right about *that*,” I retorted. “Eight thirty? In front of McDonald’s on third? I’ll throw some hair spray and a change of clothes in my bag and change when I get off of work.”

I can’t remember what show it was, or where. I do remember the three bottles of Bartles & James *peach schnapps* wine coolers, though. I was underage and buzzed, looking like a

rejected extra from a Poison video audition, when we got back to his apartment after the bands were done. Eric was uncharacteristically solicitous, throwing a size 3x black TKO t-shirt at me. “Here. Go change and lay down.”

Easier said than done: the waterbed was tall, and I am not. Another thing I wasn’t: sober. I pushed my backside up over the dark wood siderail and leaned back, sinking into the warmth. The waves didn’t make me nauseated: that was a good sign. My priorities sorted out (not barfing), I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes, the room was considerably brighter, and someone – Eric, I assumed – had covered me with a comforter. Squinting, I looked up, examining the posters on the walls: *Motley Crue, KISS, Faster Pussycat, Ratt, Black & Blue*. I wasn’t sure if Dee Snyder from Twisted Sister was giving me the side eye reproachfully or not. I decided not: he always looked that way. *Wait, I’m in Eric’s room. This might not be good. AT ALL.* I took a mental inventory: *underwear on? Yep. Shirt intact? Yep. Where’s Eric? Not in bed with me. Thankyou babyJesusAmen.*

What time was it? I had to be to work by noon. *Ten O’Clock. Perfect.* Eric had kept his word, I didn’t have a hangover.....things were looking up.

Ten O’Clock. I stretched, throwing the covers over to one side. The apartment was quiet; I’d need to go wake him up, probably, if I wanted to get be on time (and I did). I opened the bedroom door quietly so as not to wake Frank, Eric’s roommate, in the room next door; in case he was home.

“Jesus. You were OUT.” Eric rasped from the living room couch as I crossed the hallway to the bathroom.

Half-smiling, half wincing, I simply threw back a “*yeah*” over my shoulder as I closed the restroom door. And then it started to fill in inside my brain, like an artist’s use of blank space on a canvas to make a statement about contrast. *I was out*. I’d slept without waking up every hour for the first time in over a year. Do you mean to tell me that my ‘safe space’ is a waterbed in the hair-band bedroom of a borderline obese hanger-on wannabe bass player who uses more mousse than I do, who’s been trying to get into my pants for 4 years? *This....this...is where I find my answers? Can’t you just send me a burning bush or something like a normal God?*

If there is a God, he was serious. And he had a sense of humor.

Riding the bus home after work that night, it was too dark to see much other than the illuminated office buildings and neon signs of restaurants. I had plenty of opportunity, in between keeping an eye out for pimps that liked to sit in the seats next to young women – I’d had my hair pulled more than once – to think about the *why*. I wasn’t predisposed to much introspection at 18, but I did want to know why I suddenly *slept*, because I’d really like to replicate that. From that initial, short-term goal sprung other questions: from *how can I sleep like that again?* to: *why am I waking up all night in the first place?* and finally: *you know, maybe normal people don’t live like this*. Baby steps, to be sure, but ones that opened a window to a world where I had options and choices, instead of living like an emotional fugitive from someone else’s collateral damage; in a constant state of fight-or-flight. Anxiety did not have to be my “normal”, and all this time I’d assumed that it was.

I was my own; not owned.

Works Cited

Jordan, Paul. "85 Famous Sleep Quotes." Sleep Habits, copyright 2009-2019.

<https://sleephabits.net/sleep-quotes>