



- Letters
- Voicebox
- Chintito
- Newsnotes
- Cover Story
- Interview
- Straight Talk
- Special Feature
- Personality
- Law and Order
- Culture
- Travel
- Humour
- Perceptions
- Language
- Music
- Dhaka Diary
- Sci-tech
- Health
- Book Review
- New Flicks

SWM Home

Perceptions

Eyes Wide Open

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Insomnia *noun* habitual sleeplessness; inability to sleep.
DERIVATIVES insomniac noun & adjective
ORIGIN early 17th cent.: from Latin, from *insomnis 'sleepless,'* from *in-* (expressing negation) + *somnus 'sleep.'*

So my dictionary informs me. What, did people never have this problem before the 17th century? It's certainly a part of the 21st. And there are times in your correspondent's life where he would win a gold medal at an Insomniacs' Convention.

A typical night goes like this: I fall into bed at about midnight, dog-tired. I am already asleep mid-fall, and immediately the darkness swims around me like a silent sea. Bliss for a while. But then it happens. Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, wakefulness jars my eyes and me are wide open, staring into the glaucous night, taking in the velvety silence of another dead day. A gnawing feeling begins to eat away at me, aided by the usual melancholy clues. It's dark as hell not even a sliver of light yet. There may be the silken sound of the azan in which case I know I'm lucky and have lasted a few hours down in those depths. But as often as not, there is not even that consolation. The minaret is silent, the muezzin sleeps: you're all alone, my friend. My hand fumbles familiarly past obstinate folds of mosquito netting and reaches for the illumination button on my alarm clock. Please God, not again. But the bright numbers have no mercy. Time waits for no man, but it hangs around quite a bit for me. It is still only 2.00 am, and another day in the insomniac's calendar has begun. Only twenty-two more hours therefore until I sleep. And this state of affairs will last for days, sometimes weeks. Then one fine day, out of the blue (the black?), the curtain lifts, the forgotten sleep patterns I used to know and love take over once again, and I revert to my typical middle-aged habits, the peaceable afternoon snooze, the gentle lulling of easy slumber, and the pure joy of actually being jolted out of sleep by the sound of an alarm clock, as silvery morning light seeps into the room.



Doubtless down in the archives of my mind there is something stimulating this. Various websites suggest a whole variety of causes. I try them on for size, but leave them all in the changing room: none of them seem to fit. Wikipedia, for example, offers up the following: "It is often caused by fear, stress, anxiety, medications, herbs, caffeine, depression or sometimes for no apparent reason". I think I'll settle for the latter: I'm not stressed, fearful or anxious. Or at least I don't think I am. The only stress in my life is usually someone blasting their horn behind me as we drive to work. Don't do herbs. Not too much coffee either. Not depressed actually I'm quite a jolly chap, a little sunbeam most of the time. But it goes on. "An overactive mind or physical pain may also be causes". Aha, now we are getting somewhere: I plead guilty to an overactive mind, but am not sure what to do about it. With fundraising, music and writing there's a lot happening at the moment, all of it exciting. Perhaps the only cure lies in a lobotomy.

The entry concludes, "Finding the underlying cause of insomnia is usually necessary to cure it." Oh thanks guys, that's easy then. Anyone know a good therapist? Someone who'll tell me it's all because of an incident with a pineapple when I was thirteen and a half?

But is insomnia entirely a bad thing? In some ways, no. It is, for example, only 4.29 am as I write this, so there's certainly more you can pack into a day if you leave out the sleep part. Besides, it's a good time for writing, this graveyard slot where nothing moves except the breeze through the treetops, and there are no sounds apart from the occasional whistles of chowkidars and the chirruping of early birds.

It doesn't seem to have much of a knock-on effect on my life either. Once I spoke to a doctor about it and she fired off a volley of questions. Work performance affected? Mood swings? Did I do things like walk into doors? No, no and no. She packed me off and told me not to worry. She also reassured me that you can bank hours in which you are deprived of sleep, and reclaim them later. It's a nice thought: if she's right there's going to be a whole week in October in which I don't wake up at all.

But there can be odd instances too when you suddenly realise you need to do something about it. For example, during my Bangla lesson this week where I actually fell asleep during one of my own sentences. In my defence, it was a particularly complex grammatical structure I was trying to manipulate. Still, I hope I caused no offence to my lovely teacher. Or the other day when I took a nap, woke up to see the alarm said 7.00 and went downstairs in a panic, thinking I'd miss the minibus to work. I ate my breakfast, went upstairs for a shave, and then realised it was in fact evening. No, please don't send in the men in white coats it was an isolated incident, I promise.

A weird enough one, however, to convince me to look again at ways of getting round the problem. Back to the internet. One site offers 41 simple tips, ranging from the screamingly obvious to the downright barmy. Yes, I could try having a massage, drinking warm milk. I could even, at a push, give up coffee. But none of this explains why I sleep like a dead man during other times of the year, despite sipping large cups of purest Italian caffeine.

Another suggestion is "take a warm bath", but I guess first I'd have to buy a bath, so that's out. It goes on: "Wiggle your toes"; "Visualise something boring". Well, wiggling your toes is pretty boring so that's two birds with one stone, but I wiggle away in vain. Alternatively "visualise something peaceful". I try, honestly I try. I think of Japanese raked gardens, of meditation, of serenely smiling statues of the Buddha. But, like a petulant puppy, my mind has scented the open space and scampered off already, disappearing into the distance before I can run after it and put it on a leash. "Smoke yourself to sleep". Sorry? I don't smoke anyway, and I certainly wouldn't want to smoke myself even if I did. "Yawning; counting sheep; facing south not north". All tried and found useless. And then, the final helpful piece of advice reads simply: "Don't think".

If only, my dear readers, if only...

The sole advice I can really offer myself is not to worry about it. Like all things, it comes and goes. It passes. All I can ask is that if you see me falling asleep at a café, on a rickshaw or even at my desk (hope my boss doesn't read this), you have some mercy and do not disturb. You may even want to fish out a blanket and tuck me in the way my mother used to do when I was four: the reassuring hand on my shoulder, the soft voice in the shadowy darkness, the lilting lullaby.

OK, it's now 4.49. Time for bed I think, while it's still crow-black out there. Another try, and with any luck this time I'll wake to see the amber sun hovering, a lozenge of early golden light shimmering on the floor under the window, and the promise of a new day.