

MY FATHER'S SLEEPLESSNESS

BY WILLIAM SAROYAN



MY FATHER when he was thirty-three and had had four kids began to be unable to sleep at night, or at any other time. This went on until he was thirty-seven, when he died.

A man will hear odds and ends about his dead father that won't mean very much for a long time, and then all of a sudden they will mean a great deal. I began to hear that my father hadn't been able to sleep the last years of his life more than thirty years ago, and I couldn't figure out why he had lost this gift.

In fact, I felt a little superior about the matter because I could sleep so well. I could fall asleep the minute I got to bed and I could sleep straight through the whole long night without waking up once, but my father couldn't.

He used to get up and walk around in the dark, or turn on a light somewhere, or light a lamp... I'm not sure they had electricity; most likely they didn't... or a candle, and sit down and read or write. He used to be forever writing notes for books he was going to find time to write some day.

I used to be able to sleep at school on my folded arms. It was deep sleep, too, full of dreams of money and love, but mainly money. Being so good at sleep, I couldn't understand my father's sleeplessness. I was able to guess at some of the more obvious reasons why he couldn't sleep.

First of all, he was poor, and that can drive the sleep out of any man.

Second, he was trying to live like a writer in an area that expected every able-bodied man to live like a day laborer. Third, he was always wanting to get things straight. That was why he made notes about things all the time.

Yes, these were circumstances that could cheat a man out of his sleep, and finally of his life. Still, I also did not have any money but could sleep; I also was trying to be a writer in the same area in which he had tried and the situation hadn't improved any at all, but I could sleep; I also was eager to get things straight and wrote notes about everything, but could sleep.

So if my father couldn't sleep, he must have been less tough than his son, myself.

And so I felt superior about this.

There is an advantage in having a father who has made a poor showing. This could of course be a disadvantage, too, but as I remember it it was not a disadvantage for me.

I sometimes even felt sorry for my father. The hard world of the California vineyard country had been too much for him, but it wasn't being too much for me, and it never would be.

He was too sensitive for this world, I told myself. He was a poor student of reality, I said.



Ուիլյեմ Սարոյանը Ս. Ղազարոս Զեհարայանի մոտ

William Saroyan, in the Armenian Manuscript Library



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William Saroyan, in the Cloister Garden of the Convent, talking with the Fathers

My father's sleeplessness was very bad the last three years of his life, but there appears to be a good deal of evidence that he began to know sleeplessness much before that time.

He began to be unable to sleep in Bitlis, in Armenia, as a boy. At first he had been willing enough to sleep, but had had to get up in the middle of the night in order to do work that would keep his brothers and sisters going and keep his own schooling going; and then he had had to stay up late at night trying to learn how to write down the poetry he felt and the stories he wanted to tell, so that even when he was only twelve or thirteen or fourteen he wasn't getting a lot of sleep. But that kind of sleeplessness, or loss of sleep, is another matter altogether: it is staying awake on purpose because you've got more important things to do than sleep.

In the end, though, there is scarcely anything more important for a man to do than sleep, and a man begins to know this when he finds that he is willing and eager to sleep but cannot do so.

In any case, this willing loss of sleep I have just mentioned was well-known to me also most of my years until I was thirty. Then, I knew the time had come to take things easy, to recuperate, to catch up, to sleep, and I did.

I went to bed very late of course, but I slept very late, too. I went to bed at two or three or four in the morning but I didn't get up until around noon, and sometimes not until later. I began to know the refreshment of extra sleep, of waking up after five hours of sleep and going back for another two or three or four hours of it.

My father apparently hadn't been that lucky. He hadn't apparently been able to feel that he had earned that kind of sleep, and I imagine he had felt that if, after having gotten nowhere at all as a writer, he were to enjoy such sleep as that, it would amount to nothing better than his accepting the fact that he was a failure and didn't give a damn that he was. But he did give a damn.

By the time I was thirty I had no reason to feel I had not made the grade, at least after a fashion. I had had a half dozen books published and I was recognized as a writer.

Hence, I wasn't charitable about my father's sleeplessness. At least not until his sleeplessness caught up with me and I began to know from actual experience, as the saying is, why he couldn't sleep. And why I also couldn't sleep.

In other words, when I was thirty-three or thirty-four I also began to be unable to sleep at night, or at any other time. I could take a nap in the afternoon perhaps, but it wasn't the real thing. And I knew why.

It was because I knew that I too had failed. I had failed in a way that was my own, but I had failed just the same. I had made the grade all right, but it must have been the wrong grade, for it didn't do me any especial good. It might even be that my father's failure had been, after all, less profound than mine.

His failure had been certainly purer than mine. He hadn't even gotten started. I had managed to get started, but having gotten started I hadn't managed to get anywhere worth getting to. All I did was write, eat, drink, and be merry, as the saying is. All I did was enjoy myself and the girls who happened to feel like enjoying themselves with me; and all I did was have fun and not give a hoot (but you know what I really mean) about anything.

I gave a hoot about God, I suppose; I never could not give a hoot about God. I gave a hoot about right, too, or *relative* right; and truth, or relative truth; and several other things like that. I knew I couldn't really make much difference, so I didn't try.

And that's what finally brought my father's sleeplessness into my life, and made me understand what he had been up against.

This made the going very tough because unless a high-strung, restless, impatient, nervous writer can lie down and get some real refreshment out of some real sleep every night, he is soon in a bad way.

The black things happen to him. His eyes go bad. His nerves go bad. His thinking gets jittery. His dreams go haywire. The chemistry of his soul goes sour, so to say. He suddenly discovers that he hates so much more than he loves. He suddenly discovers that he cannot even be charitable about things he ought to find it impossible not to be charitable about. He loses or begins to lose his real power, too. The spring goes out of him. His heart isn't steel when it ought to be steel and it isn't tender when it ought to be tender.

Without the refreshment of deep sleep doubt grows in him about everything, and doubt is the end, it is the beginning of the end of everything. Doubt is the end of health, of style, of identity, of growth, improvement, achievement.

Without the inner calm that is the soul's bed a writer finds himself dying of doubt.

Knowing I hadn't really achieved what I had meant to achieve, knowing at last that I hadn't really written the way I should have written out of the infinite potential of my gift for writing, knowing at last that I had not been true to myself or to God, I began to know my father's sleeplessness, and soon this very knowing, this very sleeplessness, knocked out of me the skill, such as it was, that I had had until I had begun to know that I had failed.

I refused to write as I had written before because I had no taste for such writing any more, but at the same time I (much the same as my father, at last) could not discover or achieve a better skill, so that between refusing to employ my old skill and being unable to achieve a new skill, I was completely dislodged from myself, and my soul was completely banished out of my body, which is the only reasonable abode for it.

Thus, it has come to pass that I am at last charitable about my father's sleeplessness, his failure and early death. Thus, am I charitable about the next man's agony, whatever the source and nature of it may be. Thus, have I come to know how terrible the ordeal of living must be for any man who



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William Saroyan in front of the Bust of Abbot Mekhitar

survives. Thus, have I come to love the pain-wracked faces of those who hate and are tormented and do not know what to do about the agony they know. For the sleepless, the haunted, the harassed, the agonized are those who for one good or bad reason or another must struggle and are struggling, and I am one of them, wretched with them, ugly with them, a part of their failure and despair. The insane which are insane from this struggling I must now respect and perhaps love, though it is not easy to love failure so dynamic. The eccentric, the depressed, the demented I must now accept as brother, and cherish, for they were all put to it by the trouble and struggle in them which came not from themselves but from God, from neighbor, from stranger, from bitter enemy long ago.

Let no man be proud of his poor health, his poor good fortune, his poor achievement, his poor style, his poor way with the world, for no man is guaranteed immunity to any wretched illness man knows, and every man is in his own person the raw material, the makings of maniac, criminal, madman.

Let no man be smug about his good deep sleep, for it is his by accident. And accidents can happen to any man. Let the failures, fiends and fools be loved by their brothers above all others. Let that be the first responsibility of man to man if man would turn the tide of disease back and restore to children an easier chance to fail and to be graceful about it.

Let no man be uncharitable even about the multitudes which live in unimaginative smugness, which are not even capable of the drama of aberration, high failure, or crime. The good must know the mad are mad of trying, and they must know trying is never to be discredited, though the mad would seem to try for too much.

I have outnumbered already by three years the too few years of my father's life, but his sleeplessness is now my own, and the time ahead is a time of bitter struggle, for I must restore and improve the old skill of living, or achieve the new skill, and I must do so without the power that comes of the refreshment of the great sleep, the sleep which must be restored to all of us.