# Falling Asleep Up North

# John Updike

Falling asleep has never struck me as a very natural thing to do. There is a surreal trickiness to traversing that in-between area, when the grip of consciousness is slipping but has not quite let go and curious mutated thoughts pass as normal cogitation unless snapped into clear light by a creaking door, one’s bed partner twitching, or the prematurely jubilant realization *I’m falling asleep*. The little fumbling larvae of nonsense that precede dreams’ uninhibited butterflies are disastrously exposed to a light they cannot survive, and one must begin again, relaxing the mind into unravelling. Consciousness of the process balks it; the brain, watching itself, will not close its thousand eyes. Circling in the cell of wakefulness, it panics at the poverty of its domain—these worn-out obsessions, these threadbare word-games, these pointless grievances, these picayune plans for tomorrow which yet loom, hours from execution, as unbearably momentous. Consciousness, that glaring fruit of evolution, that agitation of electrified molecules, becomes a captivity—a hellish churning in which the insomniac is as alone as Satan, twisting and turning and boring a conical hole in the darkness, while on all sides the wide world blessedly, obliviously snores.

One such night breeds another; wearily stumbling through the day, you arrive back in bed at last and the same electric barrier has been switched on, the same invisible shell bars the way into sleep. From over twenty years ago I recall a spell of such sleepless nights ending. It was in 1967, a year of riot and expanding quagmire but in my own tiny corner of North American domestic life noteworthy for Expo 67, a world’s fair in Canada to which my wife and I had promised to take our many small children. Our launching pad for the drive to Montreal was my wife’s parents’ summer house in Vermont, an old farmhouse up a dirt mountain road so steep that in one section, unless you had floored the accelerator at the bottom and made a wild, fishtailing run for it, the car wheels would begin to spin in the gravel near the top and you had to back down and try again. The house was surrounded by pine woods reputed to be haunted by bears, and my father-in-law, a theologian so liberal he considered both Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr to be neo-orthodox, had been accustomed by years of delicate health to having poised around him a household at all points respectfully alert to his comfort. It made for a lot of tiptoeing and unexpressed tension. Yet I couldn’t really blame bears or my father-in-law for my insomnia. Maybe it was the hard bed—a horsehair mattress supported by ropes laced through the maple side rails—or the stark moon-drenched mountaintop silence, or some internal romantic conflict whose terms I have forgotten. I was a passionate creature in those years, with surges of desire shaking my bones like loose bolts in the undercarriage of the old Ford Fairlane we bounced up the gravelly hill. My wife felt so sorry for me in my sleeplessness that, on the second morning, she begged a sleeping pill from her mother.

Her mother said of course. She thought nothing of it. Sleeping pills were a dime a dozen to her. She was, as theologians’ wives tend to be, an oddly free spirit, her one eye on permanent wink from the irritating smoke of the cigarette constantly in her mouth, and she had reached that happy advanced age when medical science no longer scruples at prescribing addictive drugs. My in-laws’ medicine cabinet—nicely made of yellow oak, with a mirror whose bevelled edge threw prismatic rainbows around the sunny country bathroom, into the long metal tub, diagonally across the bare plaster walls and nappy guest towels—brimmed with chemical ease. Care-freely she waved me toward the bottle holding the two-tone capsules that induced sleep. I accepted one, and, later, stole two more, scarcely believing that a single pill could quell the turmoil of my midnight brain.

Do I remember this right? Why would I have felt the need to steal what was as blithely given as I have described? A certain affection that existed between my mother-in-law and me clings to the incident, heightening the gloss of the green-and-white capsules, inviting me to linger here in the shade of the prose as it evokes those unexpected bathroom rainbows; they were one of the few elegancies of the austerely furnished, oft-robbed house. Once the snowmobile became common, annual break-ins occurred. Before, the house’s remoteness had protected it all winter. Heavy vines, as I recall, hung from the shingled eaves, darkening the long side porch. In the room behind this porch there was a big wooden loom gnawed by porcupines hungry for the salt that had come off people’s hands when people still used looms. There were also shelves of abandoned books, including an old-fashioned encyclopedia whose weathered spines I once, in my Vermont idleness, rubbed with chalk, so the identifying letters—*A-Ang, Nev-Ost*—could be read again, and the obsolete texts, on crinkled pages smelling of refrigeratorlike winter isolation, systematically consulted.

She was sexy, my mother-in-law, with her thinning gray hair, permed in tight curls against her scalp, and her quick-heeled, slightly tottering walk, leaving a smoke trail behind her in a room like a bit of sky-writing. Her handwriting was squiggly, too—crackling with energy. There was a current between us that did not exist, strangely, between her lovely, voluptuous daughter and me, or (I felt) between her distinguished husband and her.

Come to think of it, the sleeping pill in my imagined hand may have come from her husband’s cache. This was the drug-happy Sixties, and the two of them had pills to put them to sleep and pills to wake them up, pills to get their bowels working and pills to reverse the effect, pills that played upon their nervous systems as fluently as a harpist’s fingers upon the taut, color-coded strings. Old age, as encapsulated in the sunstruck, prismatic medicine cabinet, looked like a party: all bets were off, the sky was the limit. With those of us still of child-bearing, child-rearing age, the medical world was stingier, asking us to tough it out and maintain chemical purity, for the good of the race. Our doctors smugly denied us sleeping pills, and tranquillizers, however hard we begged. We *were* allowed, though, the Pill itself—the anti-conception tablets that had brought on the sexual revolution that might have been what was keeping me awake. Those pills came on toylike little cardboard wheels, twenty-one to a cycle, encoding for women from Berkeley to Burundi when to take and when to skip. Once, a woman I had slept with for a few glorious days of sexual tourism handed me, as we parted forever, with a little laugh, her emptied pill-disc. We had made love at the end of her cycle. We would never make a baby. She was, like my former mother-in-law, tiny—just five feet tall. Small women, my tall mother used to say, make the world go round. The very thought of it turned her forehead and throat red with indignation. My limited experience has borne this out: small women are the best, more concentrated. This woman’s parting laugh was debonair, brave, and sad, for we had done something unforgettable for each other, tourists or not.

Yet I don’t seem to have taken my mother-in-law’s sleeping pill, because when my wife and I packed up the car and left Vermont I was still groggy with insomnia; its glaze lay on everything, giving the summer day and the flatness of Quebec a hallucinatory shimmer. Vermont and extreme upstate New York seem the end of the world, a final thinning, and then north of them there appears this great city, with fancy restaurants and cathedrals and smartly turned-out women speaking two languages. Temporary villages had been constructed around the city to accommodate visitors to the fair: rows and miles of little boxes set down in muddy, flat areas that had perhaps been golf courses or rugby fields. We arrived toward evening, the four children cramped and hungry but steeled to have an exceptional time, in an actual foreign country, at an international exposition whose photographs had been in all the papers. It was raining. We must have eaten, somewhere—not fancy Montreal cuisine but friendly, fast food. What I remember is getting into my assigned corner of our thin-walled box, with rain drumming on the flat roof close above my head, and, while my children were still bumping around and disputing their territorial claims in this new world, falling headlong into the most delicious sleep of my life. This little rented box somewhere north of reality, my dependents all clustered around me, was the entrance at last to the heavily defended underground kingdom of sleep.

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Can this be right? Why wouldn’t I have taken the sleeping pill the night before, back in Vermont, and been well rested? Perhaps I have compressed, in the way of a rememberer, two separate bouts of insomnia, on two different trips to Vermont. I didn’t seem to need the pill in Montreal. Still, I certainly am right about falling so satisfyingly, so ravenously asleep in the little temporary cabin; sleep had become delicious, edible, a huge piece of shadowy cake I couldn’t wait to devour, toppling into its crumbly depth without hesitation.

(We fall *into* something, falling asleep, not *out* of things. Dreams are already there, beckoning; were sleep an unpopulated void, as null as a dead television screen or the surface of the moon, no one would want to go there. The great gleaming pond of the night would be full of floating ephemerids, each clinging in terror to his or her bubble of wakefulness.)

So unusually well rested, I was able to captain a successful raid upon the wonders of Expo 67; we got into the early-morning line for the Russian pavilion with its marvellous miniature hydroelectric dam, and devoted the day to the lesser and duller pavilions, including the Canadian one—housed in what I remember as an array of giant tree stumps—and lingered at night with takeout cartons on a grassy bank so as to gain admission, with less than an hour’s wait, to our own national pavilion, a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome touchingly devoid of imperial boasting or menace, in this era of rising Vietnam crisis. Instead, the dome was gaily filled with Raggedy Ann dolls and giant images of movie gods—the United States made weightless for its visit to the moon two years in the future. And then back we went to the box in the mud for another night of blissful (as the phrase is) sleep.

Perhaps I like exiguous wooden shelters. In New Hampshire, once, I fell asleep under a Ping-Pong table while a game was being played. Again, there were many children about—mine, and those of the male friend whose ski house we were in, and some friends of our mingled children. We had skied all day, one of the more strenuous mountains, Wildcat or Cannon. After our returning and having a drink and eating, an irresistible avalanche of sleepiness overtook me. Since every square foot of the little house seemed to be occupied by a person or a piece of furniture, I crawled under the Ping-Pong table and fell asleep on the cement floor while the paddles and the celluloid ball hollowly clicked overhead. It was a triumph of a sort, I could not help thinking at the time, something for *Believe It or Not;* yet my host was noticeably displeased. Just as he needed to fill his little house with furniture of all sorts—aluminum and plastic kitchen chairs in the living room, lopsided hassocks, driftwood lamps, odd bits of carpeting distributed on the cement floor like postage stamps in a messy drawer—so he needed to cram his hours with activities. He couldn’t take a bath without reading a magazine in the tub; he couldn’t drive a car without turning on a symphony or a language tape. He had planned, after our day of skiing, an evening of organized games, and I, as the only other adult male, had been important to his plans. The pressure of his expectations may have been part of the weight of the psychic avalanche that had swept me away.

Possibly this memory also belongs to the Sixties; it wears the psychedelic polychrome of that decade—there may have been a Peter Max poster on the wall, along with the obligatory New Hampshire mountainscapes and hunting scenes—and not the yellowing, sickly tint of the Seventies. But it seems later than 1967: my children are bigger, to judge from the ponderous scuffling of their feet as they race around the Ping-Pong table, and my wife, though still there, somewhere far above the tabletop, has a decaying presence, a dim feminine phosphorescence on the edges of the memory. My host finds her lovely and voluptuous, I happen to know, and perhaps it is this awareness—a knowledge, as in the Montreal cabin, that everyone was accounted for and taken care of—that has released me to oblivion.

Yet my host emanates sulky waves of disappointment that assault me as I fitfully wake and stir beneath the celluloid battering of Ping-Pong racket. He is somewhere near his prime—freshly divorced, resolutely bachelor. His felt displeasure leads me to reflect, as I shift position on the friendly cool cement, where perhaps a square of shag carpeting has drifted to pillow my cheek, on my role in his life: it is, I see for the first time clearly, that of an entertainer, of a hired jester, of someone expected to pay for his access to this jumbled ski house, with its electric heat and flimsy partitions, in coin of an unflagging willingness to participate in whatever games have been scheduled. Up to this moment, year after year, I have been willing; I don’t know what has come over me—this miraculous sleepiness, this refusal to come out from under the Ping-Pong table. It is, in Sixties style, a protest of a sort, this I also see. But I can’t stop making it, and fall asleep again, on my little island of cement, as if on a towering column of cotton.

Becoming a bachelor, my friend and host—Franz, he shall be called—acquired open access to the women I had to covet in secret, in the town we lived in, to the south. What a strain it was, always being in love! I seem to recall a costume party, where my wife and I were dressed in matching outfits—as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, or as a fork and a spoon—and Franz was escorting a fresh divorcée, she dressed as a Spanish male, with a black hat from whose circular rim small black wool balls hung. Her eyes, also black, looked at me from beneath the row of swaying balls, and her teeth showed in a teasing bite of a smile, as if to say, “Yours, too, could be this freedom.” And, again, after volleyball, in the summer sweat of it, and the long day’s light, having had drinks on Franz’s porch, all of us couples at last guiltily hurrying home to give the children Sunday supper, yet one lone woman lingering on the porch, lighting up another cigarette with a cocky twist of her pony-tailed head, the rusty old porch glider giving off a squeak beneath her, her glance flicking past mine like a cocky flick of ash, her thighs thrusting from her little denim skirt with a somehow unnatural gloss, as of plastic piano keys that have replaced gaps in the original worn ivory. Both these women Franz was taking from me were little, with small bright bones, solid hips, and pulses beating as rapidly as birds’ breasts.

Yet I once saw him, when we were all younger still—could it have been the innocent Fifties?—after a Christmas party that had left us all drunk, crying tears because my wife was mine instead of his. I was driving, she was sitting between us, and drops of bright water, I could see in the snowy streetlight, were falling from the tip of his nose, one after another. I had to love him, for that.

As for the era of my falling asleep under the Ping-Pong table: On second consideration, from the jaundiced tint of the memory, and the hormone-laden heaviness of my children’s feet, it must be later than I thought. It must be the early Seventies after all. It can’t be the mid-Seventies, for by then I had cast myself adrift from my family and was exploring such bastions of freedom as laundromats and art-movie houses.

My clear-eyed present wife, once when I asked her how I had seemed to her in the midst of that dear old crowd, said, “Oh, like a dog who doesn’t know he’s being kicked.”

“Really?” I thought about it. The image had a truthful ring that put me on the defensive. “I sound rather sweet,” I said.

Masochism is as unfashionable now as aggressiveness was twenty years ago, but that’s all right. Realities don’t need to be named to exist. Being kicked is a stimulus, and when the stimuli stop, we fall asleep. Insomnia is no longer one of my issues. As we age, the distinction between being asleep and being awake blurs. My grandmother used to fall asleep in a rocking chair, between one rock and the next. Once in a great while—too rousing a rental video, or a cup of coffee the hostess solemnly swore was decaf—I enter the old terrain, the three-o’clock twists, the four-o’clock disbelief that this is happening to me. It is thrilling, in a way, like reading Kierkegaard again, or Maritain. I console myself that I am storing up fatigue toward the next night.

And I rarely make it north of Massachusetts now. At a certain stage in life, which we pass into as if crossing the unguarded border between two friendly countries, the drift becomes southerly—toward New York, Washington, Florida. Going north, it turns out in retrospect, was a lot of unnecessary effort. An old buck can curl up and call it a day anywhere.