

Paul Epstein

BETWEEN WAKING AND SLEEPING

This is what happened to me today: sitting in the coffeeshop before work, I glanced through the wide front window out at the patio and saw a girl crying on the steps.

I looked around behind me: the usual action, a few people walled in behind newspapers at widely-separated tables, a pair of lovers with their heads bent together over photographs, the green-aproned girls behind the counter busying about with trays of pastries and the cappuccino machine. An indistinct string melody on the speakers, a warm scent of coffee and cinnamon; the typical effects of the day; and on the steps outside, unnoticed by anyone but myself, this crying girl—this sobbing girl, actually, her sleek black-haired head bent down toward her clenched knees, her slim shoulders shaking beneath a black velvet suit jacket. She wore open-toed shoes and her toenails were painted the color of earth. She was twenty-two, twenty-five, something like that. I watched, mesmerized, as sadness poured out of her like water onto stones. Through the glass I could hear little besides the more strident of street noises: sirens, rumbling trucks. Why would she just sit there and sob? I wondered. Isn't there somewhere she can go? Someone she can call? It was clearly about to rain; the clouds were dark and heavy, the air thick with breeze. The girl cried and cried.

This is what happened to me today: when I awoke I hovered a moment between sleep and wakefulness, floating as it were in a hazy region where the clear shapes of dreams retained their possibilities, and the realities of the coming day were yet indistinct.

The clock radio on the nightstand read 6:30AM, and Chuck, morning DJ on 103.3, warned of rain. Without turning I knew my wife had already risen: the her dull warmth had left my back. The sink ran in the bathroom, behind the closed door. I heard spitting, meaning she'd just brushed her teeth. Next, I knew, would come silence, as she examined her face for blemishes, pimples, discoloration, or hair.

The interval between bathroom events: the longer, the more unsettled her mood. This morning it was a while before she turned on the shower. This

meant trouble—a period of self-appraisal in the mirror, an evaluation of her 36-year-old appearance, or, worse, a clear-headed, early-morning weighing of facts. Whatever she saw reflected in the mirror was her. The lights in our bathroom are very bright.

Through the blinds of the window close to the bed, I could see the sky, gray and shapeless.

This is what happened to me today: at work I could do no wrong. I pitched three concepts to the senior Vice President and he approved each one in turn. I enrolled two new clients before lunch. My established clientele increased the size of their accounts. My secretary twice touched my arm when handing me my mail. I conducted a meeting of my subordinates, with vigor and decision. I completed a sales report and began another. I strode about the office in rolled-up shirt-sleeves, an executive, a man of purpose. I took certain phone calls and screened the rest. I complimented my secretary for her high level of organization and chastised my new account supervisor for her low level of motivation. I used only recycled paper. I told a droll anecdote at lunch. I encountered a senior manager in an elevator and recommended a good health club. I turned in my expense account report and came in well under my allowance. I exchanged glances with my secretary through the open door of my office until the second of my newly-enrolled clients closed it behind him as he left. I barked commands in a moment of crisis. I corrected a computer irregularity for one of the temps. I made coffee, demonstrating that I was not above such things. I urinated freely and without shame with another man from my department standing at the urinal next to mine. The events of the day flowed around me like a stream over smooth rocks. After lunch I discovered a note from my secretary on my desk chair: “I understand your appreciation of the situation between us, but I am unsure that you have considered the matter from every possible perspective. Nonetheless, I hope and trust that our work relationship remains unaffected.”

This is what happened to me today: leaving the coffeeshop, a bit late because of my preoccupation with the crying girl, I hurried across the avenue, my thoughts already darting ahead towards the likely activity of the morning, wondering why I had decided against carrying my umbrella despite the inevitability of rain. Halfway across I heard my shouted name from the side of the street I'd just abandoned, and, without thinking, I turned, and headed back

again; and doing so I spotted a gleaming cab racing towards me; and quicker almost than I could think it I leapt ahead and out of the path of the oncoming taxi as it screeched onto its brakes and skidded through the spot in which I'd been standing perhaps a single heartbeat before; and I trotted onto the sidewalk again to meet a co-worker from the firm in which I used to work, a short, fast-talking man with a receding hairline who incessantly hit me up for ten or twenty dollars, an acquaintance frequently in need of a breath mint, always bugging people to come out to happy hour where he knew this great place that had cheap pitchers where they could meet some skirts, a poorly-groomed, well-paid, over-sexed, under-educated, preternaturally-lucky, self-obsessed miniature go-getter with incomprehensible success with women—it was for a conversation with this repellent person that I almost traded my life. Passersby on the street, witnesses of my leap from certain disfigurement to safety, stared at me with mixed contempt and relief. The cab-driver hissed guttural foreign curses at me and sped on. Wow, smirked my ex-co-worker, I almost killed you.

This is what happened to me today: I sat at the coffeeshop counter and watched the crying girl, wondering what would cause her to suffer so. I of course first imagined an unhappy love-affair, but would such a thing wound her as deeply as this? And isn't that kind of sadness more usually suffered in privacy? It was that, the completely public spectacle of her misery, that most impressed me.

She was petite and graceful. She wore an attractive suit, and had a stylish bag beside her on the patio steps. She'd bought a coffee from the shop and held it in her clasped hands as she sobbed. She seemed to subside after a time, but then plunged again into deeper crying. She snuffled and mopped beneath her nose with a finger.

I found it impossible to concentrate on my newspaper and eventually gave up the pretense of trying. I watched. The rain clouds troubled me—I didn't want her to get caught in any sudden downpour. Perhaps she was lost, I thought, and I could direct her. Perhaps she'd been robbed, and I could loan her money, help her get back to wherever she belonged, buy her lunch for good measure. Perhaps she was an actress, struggling, despairing of making it, and I could listen with sympathy, encourage her, send her off again with renewed courage and purpose. But to simply sit and watch and do nothing—that was difficult; I was compelled to act. Something had gone wrong for this poor girl, and it now affected me as well. I felt confident I could help. I was

a good listener, a dispenser of solid advice. There was no reason the girl had to just sit there and cry; whatever it was that had happened to her could be worked out and made right again.

An employee of the coffee shop, a young black guy with dreadlocks, stood on the patio taking a cigarette break. I could see him appraising the crying girl even as I, wondering even as I was whether or not to approach her, to offer assistance or sympathy. He worked every other morning and one weekend afternoon; I had the impression that he was a decent guy. He flicked away his smoke and stood a moment with his hands in his pockets, and then tapped her gently on the shoulder.

This is what happened to me today: arriving home ahead of my wife I poured a glass of juice and wandered into the living room, the contents of our mailbox tossed unexamined onto the creamy leather of our sofa, the juice container empty on the counter, the kitchen cupboard left open. My suit jacket I left hanging over one of the wicker kitchen chairs; my tie slid from the coffee table and collected in a dark pool on the floor.

I stood a moment and listened to silence. Eventually I wandered to our bookcase and examined the titles. I noted with a *tsk* of annoyance that while our maid diligently whisked the spines of the books, she left their tops undusted.

There was something, a mood, a feeling. I listened again, and looked at our apartment with its tasteful original paintings, its collection of porcelain from the Low Countries insured by Lloyds of London, an antique Persian rug handed down through generations of my wife's family. I could see into the kitchen and into the open cupboard—white wine glasses, red wine glasses, champagne flutes, brandy snifters, cordial glasses. We owned a bottle of wine worth three thousand dollars.

On the bottom shelf of the bookcase I noticed, perhaps for the first time in two or three years, a book I'd kept from college: a fat volume of Shakespeare. I pulled it from the shelf and began to leaf through it, the thin pages brittle after years without moving, the titles tapping small chimes of memory, the very heft of it evocative of an earlier time: not since college had I purchased or even opened a book as *large* as this. Everything I'd read since had fit nicely into a briefcase or carry-on bag.

The pages opened suddenly upon a photograph I'd long ago stashed away—an ex-girlfriend, a dark-haired girl with serious eyes, a wool cap, a firm chin. The reds and oranges of a long-departed autumn glowed yet in the back-

ground. In the picture she was glancing over her shoulder at something behind her, and by the tilt of her shoulders I could see she was walking away from whatever she was looking at.

On the back was her name, Brigitte, in her own small, neat letters, with a curvy flourish beneath the “g” revealing a playful side not hinted at by the picture itself. That, and a two-word warning: *keep this!* The photo was creased in the middle—it stayed in my wallet for a very long time before winding up in the book—but I had every line, every shadow, every nuance of her eyes and lips memorized; and I remembered instantly that I’d loved her madly; but looking again at her picture I thought no, no, there must be some mistake, because the electric emotional jolt, the stab of longing, the quick compression of time that formerly allowed me to recall her scent, hear again her voice if only for a moment—all this was gone. It was just a picture, as still as a pond after the dropped stone has sunk and even the gentlest ripples have vanished. Looking around my apartment again, I finally identified the mood that haunted me: it was the absence of a sense of loss.

This is what happened to me today: water that had evaporated somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, that had collected into a floating damp mass, that had been gradually nudged eastwards by the winds of the jet stream, that had drifted over the remote and stony coast of Oregon and plunged lower again after the snowy peaks of the Rockies, that had skidded high and distant over the Great Plains noted only by cows and the lone farmer here and there among the wide fields, that had dimmed afternoon skies above the flat cities of the Midwest but spared them not a single drizzle, that had taken a southward turn in the vicinity of the Ohio River and there gathered greater mass and compression, that had swung northeastwards again over bluegrass Kentucky and been darkened by soot from the steel mills of Pennsylvania, that crackled with static electricity and tolled their passage with steady booming thunder, that had crept mile by mile across the astonishing width of the continent, slowly these great heavy clouds engulfed the tops of the higher mid-town office towers, oppressed the air between them, and at long last dropped a deluge of warm thick rain onto the city, sweeping up coffee-cup lids and cigarette butts in fast-moving gutter currents, sending the late afternoon rush of workers and tourists scampering for shelter with umbrellas uselessly raised against the onslaught, cloaking the city in a fine mist of dampness and the easy sound of falling water, and I, standing alone beneath the awning

of an antique store throughout the downpour, was not touched by a single drop.

This is what happened to me today: I took a walk with my wife in the evening. We wandered without plan, up the north-running avenue, east along the sidestreet, passing from light to shadow as we walked beneath street lamps, joining other evening-walkers on corners as we waited for lights to change. We shared a pretzel, mustard on my side, dry on hers. Orange and green fruit lay in glistening heaps beneath the awnings of markets. Arguments in Spanish and Korean drifted down to us from open apartment windows. Some sparkly substance in the concrete of the sidewalk glittered in our path as we walked. Homeless people lay like crumpled grocery bags in doorways.

We wound up in a park next to the East River, leaning over a cold rail as an immense and silent ship slid past us on the dark water, ghost-quiet and steady with a tendril of curling white trailing from the prow, eclipsing lights from the buildings on the opposite shore as it passed. The wake of the ship's passage broke musically on the stones beneath us. The clouds of the afternoon's rain had cleared and here, next to the river, we could actually see some stars in the night sky, the brighter ones, remote and twinkly; and even if I knew far more about them than my ancestors did, more about their composition and distance and myriad number, they were to my ancestors far more meaningful, far more useful as a means of finding one's way; even though I knew what stars *were*, in the city I never looked for them, and when I did see them it was as if I discovered them anew each time.

My wife and I were holding hands, something we hadn't done for years. The night was chilly and clear. I looked at her, her eyes calm and deep, like stone basins filled with water; and she, looking into my eyes, could see tiny reflections of herself; and everything she saw reflected was her.

This is what happened to me today: my past grew longer, and my future grew shorter.

This is what happened to me today: I watched the coffeeshop guy talk to the crying girl, asking what, if anything, he could do for her. His gestures were gentle. I could tell that he sincerely wanted to help. They exchanged a few sentences and the coffeeshop guy nodded in uncertain sympathy and left her

alone again.

The morning stretched impatiently ahead of me but I was reluctant to abandon a situation in which I now felt deeply involved; simply walking away, letting the whole thing vanish beneath the onrushing course of the day's experiences, seemed a pointless loss; and of course I wanted to be involved, I wanted to softly probe her sorrow and with wise kind words make it go away; I wanted to put things into perspective for her, let her see the bigger picture, show her how whatever had happened to her fit into a larger pattern of meaning. I certainly couldn't just pass her on the steps without trying.

I threw away my paper and coffee cup and went onto the patio. I approached as innocuously as I could. Kneeling beside her I said, excuse me, I'm sorry, I saw you crying from inside and I was wondering if you needed any help?

She glanced at me and snuffled again and said, in a small voice, my best friend died, my best friend died today. She tried to compose herself a bit, looking away, and I, more embarrassed than anything else, muttered some quick sympathy and rose and went onward into the morning; because I knew that there was nothing I could do for her. Nothing.