



NOËLLE GABERMAN

Readers Write

THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

"ONE OF THESE DAYS," A FRIEND SAID when my daughter was two months old, "you'll wake up in the morning and realize you've slept through the night." Half crazy with lack of sleep, I couldn't even imagine it.

When the baby cried at night, I would get up, back aching, feel for my robe, and walk across the unswept floor to nurse her. I'd rock her a little. Then, in the quiet, I would hear a voice in my head whisper, *Remember this. Pay attention.* And I took it all in: the baby's warm, trusting weight; her head in the bend of my arm; her little hand on my breast; her eyes shining up at me.

Twenty-five years later, it's my bladder, not a baby, that wakes me in the night. But I remember those nights when I would hold my daughter, nearly overcome by fatigue, and I'm grateful for the voice that told me to pause and appreciate the moment.

Name Withheld

AS THE MOTHER OF THREE TEENAGERS, I looked forward to the late hours when the house was quiet and I could reclaim the computer, the television, the kitchen. I would pour a glass of wine or make a cup of Earl Grey tea and grade papers or read the *New Yorker*.

But this night I went downstairs and looked over my calendar, my teaching schedule, and my church and PTA commitments, deciding what could be canceled and what could not. Then I looked up my surgeon's number. Why couldn't I have found the lump during business hours, as I had last time, instead of in the middle of the night?

I climbed the stairs and looked in on my sons, whose long, awkward legs poked out of the covers, and then my daughter, her lovely face dotted with acne medication. I brushed my teeth and eased back into bed.

It would have been comforting to wake my husband and have him wrap me in his

arms and tell me it would be all right, but it seemed cruel to interrupt his peaceful sleep. Besides, I'd been through this so many times already that I felt like the Boy Who Cried Wolf. So far the biopsy reports had always come back benign. The last time, my husband had even forgotten to ask me about the results. After each good report, I tried not to lose that initial sense of gratitude for normality.

I longed for normality now as I slipped out of bed, walked softly back downstairs, and curled up on the sofa. Our dog Cozy jumped up and nestled next to me. Together we would get through the night.

*Peggy Varnado
Hattiesburg, Mississippi*

I GREW UP IN A CALIFORNIA HOUSING tract on the border between Burbank and North Hollywood. Because the neighborhood had no sidewalks, the other children and I walked in the street along the curb. We went barefoot a lot in

summer, and when the curb heated up, we walked on the neighbors' grass. Nobody cared except Mrs. King, who shouted at us to stay off her lawn and threatened to call our parents. We ignored her. Even the grown-ups didn't like her much. Besides, my mother had said that the grass near the curb belonged to the city.

One day we noticed Mrs. King planting bushes along the curb. They formed a solid barrier, making it impossible to walk on her grass. I called Ginger and P.J., my two best friends, and we hatched a scheme.

For two sweaty days, we dug holes in a vacant lot nearby. Then we arranged a sleep-over at Ginger's house, because her aunt was hard of hearing and wouldn't catch us leaving. After the aunt had gone to bed, we gathered shovels and boxes and flashlights and sneaked over to Mrs. King's.

It was tougher work than we'd anticipated, but we dug up all the bushes and carried them down the street to the vacant lot to replant them in our holes. Then we smoothed over the gaping pits in Mrs. King's lawn and were back in bed by 4 A.M.

Of course we were caught. We were the only ones who had the motive to pull such a prank. Mrs. King threatened to call the police, and my mother said if we couldn't replant the bushes, I'd have to pay for them out of my allowance.

When Ginger, P.J., and I went to Mrs. King's to begin the hedge repatriation, we were stunned to see that she'd dug new holes — set back two feet from the curb. After we'd put the last bush in place, we apologized. Mrs. King just nodded and disappeared into her house, then came back with some lemonade for us.

She never so much as smiled at us again, but we walked in peace on her grass. Out of gratitude, we also stopped ringing her doorbell at night and running away.

*Patricia Wheat LeVan
Julian, California*

I BLAMED MY INSOMNIA ON MY MARRIAGE. Night after night I climbed from the bed, went into the living room, and huddled in a barrel chair, watching the city lights below. Sometimes I played "crystal ball" with a distant traffic light: I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, a red light meant "Get divorced," a green meant

"Work it out," and yellow meant "Proceed with caution."

While I played this game, my husband's snoring strengthened my resolve. *Tomorrow*, I promised myself each night. *Tomorrow, I'll tell him.* But my courage faded in the light of day.

My middle-of-the-night ritual went on for five years. Finally one night, I woke him and told him the truth. He sat in that worn barrel chair as we talked, then shouted, then cried.

I'd thought divorce would cure my sleeplessness. It didn't. Now I wonder if my insomnia caused the end of my marriage.

*Susan Reuling Furness
Boise, Idaho*

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, BESIDES SLEEP, I have done the following:

Watched an armadillo dig a hole underneath a camellia bush, extract a grub, and devour it noisily. Waited for an unfaithful lover to come home smelling of someone else. Danced to "Your Cheatin'

Heart" with another woman in a redneck cowboy bar and barely escaped with my life. Searched for bats in the Australian rain forest. Dropped a cold, wet washcloth on my sleeping sister's face and run like hell. Written bad poetry. Decided to join the convent. Decided to leave the convent. Lain in wait for giant cockroaches, armed with a beer, a brick, and a can of extra-strength Raid. Felt angry hands over my throat and mouth. Listened to Mozart's Requiem in G all the way through ten times. Talked nervously at length with an angel of the Lord who, in the morning light, turned out to be a cloth-draped upright vacuum.

*Beth Richards
Southington, Connecticut*

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, and I was staying in a campground across the street from Graceland, Elvis Presley's mansion-turned-tourist-attraction in Memphis, Tennessee. Beside me in the tent, my friend and sometime lover Kristi was asleep and snoring loudly. We were

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006
Falling	May 1	October 2006
Nine To Five	June 1	November 2006
Gambling	July 1	December 2006
Nothing To Lose	August 1	January 2007
Help	September 1	February 2007

moving cross-country, and I'd insisted on stopping at Graceland on the way.

Sometime after midnight, the rain came down hard and heavy. The tent was soon soaked through, and my down pillow and quilts were a soggy mess. I inched closer to Kristi and thought of the safe life I was leaving behind, in a town where I had family and was greeted by name at the sandwich shop. I thought about the great unknown ahead. I didn't know a soul in San Francisco and worried about finding a job and a place to live.

I'd made many changes over the previous few years: I'd started to eat meat again after a decade of vegetarianism. I'd left my boyfriend for a woman who'd later broken my heart. I'd graduated with a master's degree at the top of my class. And I'd decided, against all advice, to move to California instead of applying to PhD programs. Now I began to question all of that. The siren song of the familiar was loud in my ears. I knew if I didn't head west now — *right now* — before I changed my mind, I never would. I woke Kristi.

"We need to go," I told her.

"Now?" she asked goggily.

"Now," I said.

We were packed and on the road by 5 A.M. I never toured Graceland. Three years later I am still living in San Francisco.

*Dietlind J. Vander Schaaf
San Francisco, California*

WHILE MY WIFE SLEPT AT HOME, I sat in my office and hacked into her e-mail account. In a folder she'd named for our dear departed cat, I found her letters to her lover: declarations of loyalty, rendezvous plans, appreciations after sex. Everything I'd feared — and she'd angrily denied — was true.

With the letters were a few voice-mail messages from him. I listened on my computer's tinny speakers to a rambling, pointless message; an erotic message; and finally a message left from our own phone number, dated two days after our thirteenth anniversary, while we were on vacation and her "friend" was feeding our cat. *My cat.*

Six months after that trip, I had found that wonderful cat lying cold and stiff on the kitchen floor, and I'd sat weeping and

stroking his fur. Now, in the background of the voice mail, I heard his sweet, bemused *meow* again. I played the message over and over just to listen to it. I imagined this was my cat's way of coming back to comfort me in my despair and suggest that all was not lost, that the marriage may yet have another life.

Name Withheld

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES I WAS AN elevator operator in the Longworth House Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Its cramped offices were assigned mostly to junior and minority members of Congress. My shift was 5:30 P.M. to 1:30 A.M., and most members were gone by the time I came to work, but there were exceptions.

One well-known Republican senator, the apotheosis of moral rectitude, was then an up-and-coming young representative. He invariably entered the elevator with a retinue of pretty, doe-eyed interns hanging on his every word. A flamboyant Democrat from the Bronx who wore a pinkie ring and a Rolex watch would often show up around midnight with a beautiful woman on his arm. He eventually ended up in Sing Sing, but back then he was riding high.

I'm a liberal, but oddly enough my favorite members were all Republicans. Gene Snyder from Kentucky had the common touch. He knew me by name and treated me with genuine warmth and friendliness. And Pete McCloskey from California reminded me of my late father, working long hours and schlepping home an overstuffed briefcase every night. It was McCloskey who derailed Pat Robertson's presidential ambitions by revealing that the future televangelist had avoided combat duty in Korea, thanks to intervention by his senator father.

Mostly, though, the building was empty, and there was little for me to do. I read voluminously and smoked marijuana with my co-workers. (One security officer wanted to bust us, thinking it might get him a promotion, until his superior explained that their real job was to keep members safe from embarrassment.) One co-worker and I even shared a joint on the Capitol steps in the early-morning hours of October 21,

1973. It was the height of the Watergate scandal, and President Nixon had just put the country on some kind of bogus security alert. We expected soon to see tanks rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue and the onset of martial law. Occasionally, when my shift ended, I'd sit lotus style in the center of the Capitol Rotunda and pray for peace.

I quit that job after I was accepted to graduate school in California. When I told Representative Snyder, he was aghast. "You're moving to Berkeley?" he said. "My God, you'll become even more of a leftist!" Then he wished me well, adding, "Nothing better for our side than good competition."

*Steve Furrer
Santa Fe, New Mexico*

AT 11 P.M. THE PHONE RINGS. MY HUSBAND, Pete, and I are already in bed, but he answers it. It's my sister Valerie. Naturally.

This is the pattern: Valerie and her husband have a fight, he leaves, and she calls and asks me to come over. Sometimes I end up sleeping on her couch.

"Are you coming back this time or staying the night?" Pete asks with a frown as I get dressed.

"I'll just stay an hour," I tell him, irritated that he isn't more sympathetic. Before I leave, I put my son's soccer gear in the foyer, just in case I'm not there in the morning.

As the older sister, I was taught to look out for Val. If someone teased her, I made sure they never did it a second time. If she got in trouble, I defended her. As we got older, I continued to rescue her: picking her up when she got a flat tire at the mall, lending her money, baby-sitting her kids, listening to her problems with men.

Tonight my sister falls asleep exhausted after three hours of talking about her marriage. I lie on the couch and make a mental note to take her trash out in the morning and set up a dental appointment for her daughter. It occurs to me that maybe I like being the responsible sister, the one who has her life together, the one who doesn't need saving in the middle of the night.

*Nancy D.
Redding, California*

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, I HAD AN AFTERNOON paper route. We lived in a poor neighborhood, but my memories of it are like a Norman Rockwell painting. I knew my forty-seven customers by heart, and as I pedaled my bicycle through the streets, kids would yell out my name, and adults would thank me and smile.

Then the paper switched from afternoon to morning publication. No more friendly salutations — I was the only one awake. Seven days a week, 365 days a year, I got up in the middle of the night, put on five layers of clothes, and hopped on my bicycle to deliver a bag of papers in the predawn chill. Monday's papers were thin, but Sunday's were big and heavy. The Thanksgiving paper was the size of a phone book.

In high school I sometimes stayed out late drinking cheap beer, and it was harder to get up for my route after those nights. Delivering papers with a hangover was murder. But I continued to do my job, if not always on time. Neither snow nor rain nor dry heaves could keep me from my appointed rounds.

Now, at thirty-five, I have a paper route again, and I love it (except on Sundays and holidays). As the want ad promised, I "earn extra income while getting paid to exercise." I get up in the dark and cover my route the old-fashioned way, by bicycle, even when it is cold and raining. Sometimes it seems the whole country is shrouded in darkness. Maybe someday I'll have better news to deliver.

*Hobe S. Rubin
Eugene, Oregon*

WHEN I WAS FIVE, I WANTED A WATER bed. My parents had one, and so did my eight-year-old sister Susan. I asked my father again and again why I couldn't have one, and he always gave the same answer: "Because we don't want you to drown." To get around this unfair rule, I often slept in my sister's room. We would jump vigorously on the water-filled mattress and pretend we were walking on the moon.

One night Susan woke me and held a flashlight below her chin, giving her face an eerie look. "I have to tell you something," she said. "Listen good." She lowered the flashlight a bit, creating shadows around her eyes. "I'm an alien."

"Shut up," I said. "That's not funny. Just go to sleep."

"No, seriously. I'm an alien."

"Stop kidding. I'm going to tell Mom and Dad."

I took a deep breath, preparing to yell for my parents, but Susan put her hand over my mouth and whispered, "Don't even bother. They're aliens too. That's why we sleep on water beds and you don't."

Scared now, I ran to my room and hid in the closet. I heard footsteps approaching, and the closet door opened. "Get away from me, you stupid aliens!" I screamed at my dumbfounded parents. Then I saw my sister laughing quietly behind them and realized I'd been duped.

I didn't talk to Susan all the next day. When we crossed paths in the bathroom before bed, she asked if I wanted to sleep in her water bed again that night. Hesitantly, I agreed. We pretended to walk on an alien-free moon for a while and then fell asleep.

Now I'm almost thirty and haven't spoken to my sister in seven years. I wish grudges were still as easy to let go of as they were when we were kids.

*Brian S.
Long Beach, California*

WHEN MY COUSIN LILLIAN CAME TO visit, she and I would pull down the shades in my room and turn out the lights. Then she'd switch on her toy planetarium, and dots of light would appear on the ceiling. Lillian introduced me to Andromeda the princess; Orion the hunter; Cygnus the swan; and Polaris, the North Star.

The summer Lillian turned fourteen and I turned ten, her parents got a divorce, and Lillian and her mother moved from New Jersey to California. For our last star show, Lillian splashed the Big Dipper on the ceiling — seven bright stars: three forming the handle and four forming the bowl. She explained that long ago, when Africans were kept as slaves in the South, many escaped in the middle of the night by following the Big Dipper north to freedom.

After Lillian left, I learned to conjure up the stars when my mother's angry voice rang in my ears, or when my father's face looked like it might never smile again, or when my stepfather's hands moved like

spiders across my body.

Lillian and I grew up and fell in love with men who had roving eyes and loved themselves more than they did us. On the few occasions when I saw my cousin, she drank Scotch and spoke in a quiet, controlled voice. Neither of us mentioned the stars. We lost track of each other after a while.

Last summer I went to the beach with a friend and her fifteen-year-old daughter. One night the daughter and another girl came running into the house to say that they'd been looking at the stars. I went outside to look with them. We stood under the sky, and they pointed to the Big Dipper — seven bright stars — and to Polaris in the north, which Lillian had said shone all year long. Feeling a familiar excitement, I walked toward them in the darkness.

*S.H.
New York, New York*

(end of excerpt)