



CLEMENS KALISCHER

Readers Write

WAKING UP

LATELY I'VE BEEN WAKING UP A LOT, usually between three and four in the morning. I wake up, and I think. First I think about my oldest daughter someplace in Africa. Then I imagine a pretty neighborhood here in New Jersey where I hope someday she'll live.

I think, too, about my other daughter, in college. If it's a Saturday night, I wonder if she's out somewhere, and I hope she's safe. I also hope she will recover from the tragic death of her friend and be a happy college student once more, though I know she probably won't.

And I think about my son, about how gentle and vulnerable and stubborn and

sweet he is. I wonder if he did his homework, and sometimes I cross the hall to check on him. The sight of his lean teenage body all twisted up in his blanket comforts me.

If I get lucky and wake up when the red numbers of the clock glow 2:22, or 3:33, or 4:44, I get to make a wish. I wish for the well-being of all my children. Then I calmly drift back to sleep.

*Teresita Blake
Maplewood, New Jersey*

DAYS AFTER TURNING THIRTY-ONE, I found a lump in my breast. A biopsy led to a lumpectomy, more tests, another bi-

opsy, and a terrible decision that no one should ever have to face. The cancer had been caught early, but it seemed to be in more than one spot, possibly in both breasts. The doctors couldn't guarantee that a more thorough lumpectomy and radiation would leave me cancer free. In my mind, the choice became whether to save my breasts or my life. I chose my life.

During those months of tests, my eyes were opened to the incredible safety net of family and friends I had. They did their best to remind me that I was not entirely alone. While I was awake, it worked, but when I slept, I experienced nightmares and woke sobbing. In one dream I was

being repeatedly shot, unable to move as I took one bullet after another. I awoke more determined than ever not to be a helpless victim.

As the date of my surgery drew closer, I told a friend that I was afraid of falling asleep and waking up without my breasts. Her response was "What if you think of it as falling asleep and waking up without cancer?"

I took my friend's advice, and I did fall asleep and wake up without cancer. I should feel better, but I admit that I still sometimes cry myself to sleep.

*Dawn Burman
Cincinnati, Ohio*

I USED TO LOVE WAKING UP BEFORE dawn, getting that first smoke and first cup of fresh-brewed French roast, and letting my six hounds out to do their business. The dogs could always make me chuckle with their rough play. One after the other would break off from the rest and come to me for a pat on the head.

That was eight years ago. I reckon those dogs are all dead by now.

This morning I woke up from a beautiful dream of forests, summer breezes, and a woman's touch to find myself in a ten-by-ten-foot cell with the stink of five other men. The prison system has forbidden all tobacco products, and coffee will probably be next. I'm almost fifty years old with ten more years to go. I have no home, no money, no prospects.

Waking up in here takes a piece out of your soul. Sometimes I wonder: why bother getting up at all? But the fact is my heart is still beating, the blood still courses through my veins, and the pressure on my bladder says I either get up or lie here and piss the bed.

*Charles Tison
Raybrook, New York*

IT IS 1960, AND I AM CERTAIN JOHN F. Kennedy will win the upcoming presidential election. In televised debates against Richard Nixon, Kennedy knows when to smile, his hair is just right, and his eyes are quick and intelligent. He says we have a voice in how our country works and can make it better.

I am eleven and attend a boarding school where nobody recognizes Ken-

neddy as the hero he is. One weekend my mother and stepfather take me to a Kennedy rally, where I get a picture postcard of Kennedy that I keep under my pillow so I can talk to him and give him encouragement. The headmistress tells me that a young Catholic can never become president. I disagree. Miracles can happen. The other girls laugh at me and say I have a crush on him.

On election night I lie awake and listen to the other girls snore. "You can do it, John," I say into the darkness. Kennedy wants Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Negroes to be equal to whites under the law. When he gets elected, I'm going to ask him if he'll give Manhattan back to the Indians. I keep my radio close to my ear. At 3 A.M., Kennedy is projected to be the winner. I did it. I can't contain my excitement. I jump down onto the cold floor and wake up every single girl with the news.

*Stephanie Hart
New York, New York*

AS A CHILD I LOVED ANIMALS. ONE day, while playing in my yard, I saw several neighborhood children laughing loudly and throwing dirt into a trash barrel in their drive. Curious, I walked over and saw a terrified gray cat cowering in the sooty bottom of the barrel. I wanted to protest, but the kids were older and bigger than I was. I left, relieved that at least it wasn't my cat, Topsy Turvy, who was black.

At home my father asked me what the kids were doing. I told him, concluding with the good news that it wasn't Topsy Turvy. He immediately crossed the street, ordered the kids to back away, and lifted the cat out of the barrel.

"How could you do such a cruel thing?" he hollered at them.

One boy answered that they were just having fun. Besides, it was only a stupid stray.

My father hugged the cat to his chest. "It doesn't matter whose cat it is. You shouldn't be so cruel."

My father brought the cat home, and

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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
Nothing To Lose	August 1	January 2007
Help	September 1	February 2007
Good Friends	October 1	March 2007
Praying	November 1	April 2007
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007

as we cleaned the ashes off, the gray cat became black, and the stray became Topsy Turvy.

We gave her milk, and she took a nap in my arms. While she slept, I awoke from the idea that when I encounter suffering, I should feel relief if it's not someone I know and love.

*Miriam C. Murphy
Hamden, Connecticut*

AT THE AGE OF EIGHT, I WANTED TO demonstrate to my parents that I was big enough to cross the street by myself. I looked right and then left — no car in sight — and ran across while they watched. Safe on the other side, I yelled proudly, "I told you I could."

Before I'd finished the sentence, a bicyclist knocked me unconscious.

Like many traditional Chinese people, my mother and father rarely showed affection. I never saw them hold hands or hug their children. So when I opened my eyes in the hospital and found them hovering over me with attentive, loving smiles, I was confused, but happy.

Years later we immigrated to the U.S. Every time I visited my parents in Washington, D.C., I would give them a long, tight hug. Mom usually giggled and said, "Not again." Dad would try to push me away, saying, "Enough."

Their words didn't fool me. They wore the same expressions I'd seen that day I'd woken up in the hospital.

*Helen Chen
Rochester, Minnesota*

MY PARENTS DIVORCED BECAUSE OF my father's alcoholism and violent temper. Dad and I had a difficult relationship while I was growing up, but by the time I was old enough to get a job and support myself, we'd come a long way. I told myself he'd been confused and depressed and hadn't meant the things he'd yelled in his drunken rages.

One afternoon I decided to test him on the subject of abuse. I told him about a co-worker who had an alcoholic boyfriend who hit her sometimes. I wondered aloud why she would stay with a guy like that.

"The girl is probably the source of the guy's problem," Dad said.

I was stunned. When I asked him to

elaborate, he wouldn't reply.

Staring at this stubborn old man who wouldn't meet my eye, I finally saw him clearly. All those times he'd gotten drunk and hit Mom, he had rationalized that it was her fault.

Years later my father and I discussed his violence and reached an unsteady peace. But that afternoon I got my first insight into his real character.

*Cindy H.
Acworth, Georgia*

IN COLLEGE I SHARED A CROWDED old house with many roommates. I made my bedroom in an attic crawl space — a triangular, three-foot-high tunnel that stretched the length of the house. It was a cozy cocoon where I hid from the world, lulled to sleep by the sound of rain hitting the roof just above my head.

Two months before graduation, I became seriously depressed and suicidal. A couple of years earlier I'd gone through a similar depression and had devised a plan for killing myself: I tricked a doctor into giving me a prescription for twenty-four sleeping pills by lying and telling him I had insomnia. Life got better, though, and I didn't use the pills. But I didn't throw them away either.

Now I bought a bottle of vodka, dug out the pills, put my favorite CD on REPEAT, and began taking the pills two at a time in my tunnel-like room. I remember getting to twelve pills before I lost consciousness.

When I woke up twenty hours later, my first thought was that I was late for work. I tried to get out of bed, but my head was so heavy I could barely lift it. As I waited for my strength to return, I looked for the twelve remaining pills but found only one. Had I taken them in my sleep? Had someone discovered me there and thrown them away to protect me from myself? I never found out.

That afternoon I dragged myself to a photography workshop, then came home and ate dinner with one of my roommates. As we ate, I thought, *Start here, with this roommate and this spaghetti*. No joy or regret, just an observation of fact: *I will live*.

*Rachel Wakefield
Farmington, New Hampshire*

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE DAY BEFORE I left home in 1961 that I saw my younger brother Paul as a real person. We'd worked side by side on the farm and attended the same school since we were small, but he'd barely figured into my life. Now nineteen and about to be married to a boy I loved, I was leaving home. Paul came into my bedroom, sat on the bed, and told me he wanted me to be happy. I could tell his words were heartfelt.

I saw my brother as a person from then on, but I still didn't know him. When our father became ill and was hospitalized, Paul worked on the farm after school until midnight. His grades slipped, and eventually he joined the army, the way so many poor boys in the rural South do when they are searching for a better life.

I had very little contact with Paul in the years that followed. He was stationed with NATO forces in France. In the one letter he sent me, he said he was homesick. After he was discharged, he came by bus to see me. He seemed disoriented and was drinking more than I thought healthy.

Paul returned home, fell in love, got married, and bought a house near the factory where he worked. He was a devoted husband and a good father to his daughter, but his wife left him, leaving behind the daughter. Paul remarried and divorced again, drinking now more than ever.

After a third marriage he got sober, and one Christmas Eve he told me that, when he was a child, he'd secretly suffered from constant fear and anxiety. He'd started drinking to ease the fear. Now, with the help of Jesus Christ, he'd stopped drinking and had gotten treatment for his anxiety. He could talk freely and without shame for the first time in his life. I vowed never to let go of this new relationship with my brother.

Paul and I talk frequently now. I admire his courage and take every opportunity to tell him how much I look up to him. He wants me to join his church because he's afraid my Unitarian faith won't be good enough to get me into heaven. I tell him we must agree to disagree about religion, but I am profoundly touched by his concern for me. I wish I

had his ability to love.

Name Withheld

I WAS SIXTEEN AND SLEEPING IN after a night of drinking with friends. About 11 A.M. I awoke to my father's loud voice from downstairs. He usually came home between 2 and 6 A.M., banged open doors, turned on lights, and screamed at my mother, who responded in quiet tones. On this particular morning, however, my father was yelling at my older brother Michael, whose response wasn't so quiet. "Motherfucker!" my brother yelled. I heard my father wailing in rage, followed by the sound of a chair hitting the floor and heavy footsteps running down the hall. I peered downstairs to see my red-faced father running out of the master bedroom with a shotgun in his hands.

"Michael, get out!" my mom pleaded.

Michael did get away, but a few months later he was driving, and his car hit a utility pole at sixty miles per hour. At the time, my mother was at the hospital visiting my grandmother, who was in a coma. That night my grandmother sat bolt upright in bed and said, "Michael? What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here." Then she lay back down and never again came out of her coma. Michael died in the accident.

Lisa B.

Austin, Texas

I WAS PART OF A LUTHERAN SERVICE trip to Bosnia. Each morning our group played with children at an elementary school, and I marveled at the beauty of their young faces. On the walls of the school were signs instructing students on how to identify land mines. The hillsides were covered in graves. While walking around the town we saw a bullet-ridden home where, an interpreter told us, soldiers had evicted a family to use the house as a barracks. When the soldiers moved on, they left a live bomb in the flowerpot for the family to find when they returned. We heard many stories like this. Some people in the group cried. I just felt numb.

One night I was walking down the sidewalk past what was left of the Olympic center when I stepped in a hole and tripped. I bent down to examine the hole

and could tell it had been made by a shell. This physical encounter with the effects of war finally awakened me and brought me to my knees on that Sarajevo street. I thought of the Bosnian children we played with each morning and their beautiful faces, which seemed even more beautiful to me now, because they could still smile.

Lori Lepelletier

Blairstown, New Jersey

AFTER I GOT OUT OF PRISON, I WASN'T sure how I would find work. I worried that when potential employers found out I was a sex offender, they wouldn't hire me.

I signed on with a day-labor contractor and was sent to work as a dishwasher in a large restaurant. I did a good job, and the restaurant asked that I be sent back. A month later the manager, Big Bill, asked me to work there permanently. A clause in the day-labor contract stipulated that I couldn't be hired by a company where I'd worked as a day laborer, but Bill said he would figure something out.

Then I dropped the bomb. I told him I was a registered sex offender out on probation, but I was in counseling and wanted to spend the rest of my life as a decent human being.

"I can live with that," he said.

A month later Bill was promoted, and Valerie became my manager. Bill had been easygoing, but Valerie was all business. Within a month she laid off three people who didn't like working with her. By law, I had to notify my new manager of my probation status and crimes. I put it off as long as I could. Finally one day I sat down with Valerie and began to tell my story. Before I could finish, she stopped me. "If your probation officer calls, I'll tell him you told me everything," she said.

For two weeks Valerie didn't talk to me. I figured my past would always haunt me, and I prepared to be fired. Then one day Valerie said, "John is out today, so I need you to prep." She smiled and punched me in the arm. I knew then that things would be all right.

My next manager, Steve, took it all in stride. He knew that I had been there a year and had learned to take care of the kitchen and the serving line. That was enough for him. I worked hard and felt

comfortable and safe.

I was laid off a few months later. Now I had to start over, but I felt confident that I could get a job based on my skills and experience.

That was two months ago, and I am still unemployed. I am beginning to think that my previous job was a fluke. I sometimes wonder when I will wake up and realize that my past is inescapable; that I will forever have to rely on luck, fate, and other people's pity.

I still look for work and try to have faith. I have not yet woken up to the certainty of my failure.

David Wood

St. Petersburg, Florida

(end of excerpt)