



CHRIS KRESSER

Readers Write

UP ALL NIGHT

IT STARTED AROUND MIDNIGHT AS a trembling in the bed. Then my husband, Fred, started thrashing around as if he were in pain. When he slipped half off the mattress, I held my breath. After pulling himself back up, Fred lay on his back and laughed.

"Are you all right?" I asked, rubbing his shoulder.

"Get a load of those hats," he said.

"What hats?"

He pointed to the blank wall. "There. That one's pink."

"Oh. Pink's good. I like pink." I rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but then it happened again.

At 1:45 A.M., I got out of bed and retreated to the guest room. The night before, I'd stuck it out until 4 A.M.

This nighttime ritual has been going

on for months. One night Fred turned to me and asked, "Who are you?" Last week I woke to find him scrambling toward the wall behind the bed, as if he were swimming.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"There's someone there. I have to get to them."

And yet in the morning, sipping his juice and reading the paper, he remem-

bers none of it. If I tell him what he said and did the night before, his eyes widen in surprise: "I did?"

I am losing my husband to Alzheimer's disease. Someday soon he will move for good into that halfway state between waking and sleeping. For now, though, his hallucinations occur only at night. Not that there aren't daytime problems: he can't work the TV remote or the telephone, can't remember what day it is, doesn't know where I'm going when I head out the door for work.

We no longer make love when we go to bed, but sometimes he rolls toward me, and I slide into his arms and feel his warmth. He kisses me and rubs my back, my shoulders, my belly. And then we move to our separate sides. After a minute I hear him snoring.

Last night, while he was asleep, tears filled my eyes. I wiped them away and forced myself to think about the movie I had seen on TV and what I might make for dinner this week. I started to fall asleep. And then the trembling beside me began.

*Sue Fagalde Lick
South Beach, Oregon*

I WENT AWAY TO COLLEGE BELIEV-ing a full night of uninterrupted sleep was my God-given right. I lay seething in bed as my talkative (and lonely, I now realize) neighbor on the other side of the thin dorm wall blathered on the phone all night. I was happy when she flunked out.

Over the years my children's nighttime needs have taught me to relax my expectations about a full night's sleep. My first child was unable to nurse lying down or in the dark until she was two months old, so I'd bring her to the living room several times a night to feed her. It was exhausting, and I resented my husband for sleeping soundly — in fact, I resented everyone in the world who was asleep. Then, during one of our 2 A.M. living-room visits, my daughter looked at me and smiled. Her first smile. Suddenly it was wonderful to imagine that we were the only two people awake in the world.

Ten years later I'm four and a half months pregnant and can't sleep because

of what I tell myself is uterine-ligament pain. This is my fifth baby, though, and I should know it's not ligament pain. I should know this pain.

I feel something let go inside me, and I make my way to the bathroom, where the warm amniotic sac slips into my hands. Kneeling on the bathroom floor, I yell for my husband.

Within the bag of fluid I see the curve of a torso, an arm, a leg, an unmoving white body suspended in dark water. This is a shocking, horrible joke. What can I do? My midwife is unreachable.

Then I realize that this is my time with him. In the morning we will have to tell everyone, including our other kids. In the morning I will probably be mad with grief. But right now I pull myself together. We take pictures of our son. We make tiny footprints and handprints. I bend his perfect little knees, ankles, wrists, and fingers, feel the bumps of his spine and the swelling in his head and neck. I memorize him, kiss him, sit in a rocking

chair and hold him to my chest all night long.

*Chrissy Anderson
Culp Creek, Oregon*

ON A BUSY NIGHT THE CALLS COME AT 12:25, 3:35, 4:15, 6:00, 6:45. They are almost always calling about pain or shortness of breath, and they need my permission to take another dose of morphine. At six o'clock this morning I talked with a hospice patient who was crying from pain, despite having had morphine a few hours earlier. She had forgotten her routine medications the day before, and her pain had escalated out of control in the night. I told her to take a higher dose; the worst that could happen was the medication would make her sleepy. I use the word *sleepy* a lot when I am trying to reassure patients it's OK to take strong doses of narcotics. Of course, I am also trying to reassure myself. So far no one has overdosed from taking my advice, but I worry at times.

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

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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Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
The Dinner Table	September 1	March 2009
Faith	October 1	April 2009
Moving In	November 1	May 2009
Crushes	December 1	June 2009
Choosing Sides	January 1	July 2009
Fences	February 1	August 2009

My co-workers and friends ask how I can think clearly about the instruction I am giving when I've just been awakened in the middle of the night. I tell them that after thirteen years of hospice nursing, I am well versed in handling routine problems. The hard part is deciding whether to go back to sleep after hearing a patient with what we call "agonal respirations": the ragged, gurgling pattern of breathing that occurs within hours of death. Sometimes the caregivers call, frightened and exhausted, and I realize that they have been up all night, too.

It can feel like a minor form of torture to keep dragging myself out of bed and away from my husband. I bring my pillow and the phone to the other bedroom and doze as best I can. The sleep deprivation has gotten more difficult as I've gotten older. Sometimes, when I've just started to fall asleep and the phone rings, I feel like screaming. Then I remind myself that my lack of sleep is nothing compared to what my patients and their families are going through.

*Mary Johnson
Pleasant Hill, Oregon*

THE SUMMER I WAS TEN YEARS OLD, I was sent to visit my aunt and uncle at their lake house. One afternoon my uncle, my cousins, and I went swimming. After we'd trudged back to the house, my aunt explained that she'd been called in to work a graveyard shift. My uncle would be in charge.

I went to my bedroom and was changing out of my soggy bathing suit when my uncle came in. He was naked. I had never seen a naked man before and was unsure where to direct my gaze. Smiling, he scratched himself and said he felt some sand in his crotch. "Can you see any sand?" he asked, and, moving his penis aside, he motioned for me to come closer. I nervously stepped forward: no, I couldn't see any sand. With a grin, my uncle said thanks and left the room. I stared at the empty doorway, confused. No one in my family ever walked around naked. Something didn't seem right.

Later that evening, my uncle — now fully clothed — spooned out steaming bowls of macaroni and cheese as if nothing were amiss. I had a funny feeling in

my stomach, though, and the ravenous appetite I'd worked up earlier was gone.

That night I tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. Finally I got up to go to the bathroom, tiptoeing down the hallway by the glow of a night light. I left the bathroom door open, and after I'd flushed the toilet, I turned to find my uncle standing in the narrow doorway, naked again. He asked if I needed a hug. No, I said, and I stepped around him, went back to my room, and closed the door.

In bed I pulled the covers up to my chin. A clock ticked somewhere in the house. I stared at the crack of light underneath the door, where I saw a shadow pause briefly — and then move away.

Name Withheld

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE STUCK IN Saigon, Vietnam, waiting for a visa so we could bring our newly adopted three-month-old son, Ari, home. He had been crying a lot and seemed uncomfortable. Several times I asked my husband and my mother, who was with us, if we should take him to the international clinic, but they kept saying he was fine. My husband is a teacher, self-assured and knowledgeable; my mother is an anesthesiologist who had raised two children. I listened to them.

After three weeks of dragging its feet, the United States government finally granted us a visa. The night before we were to leave Vietnam, Ari woke up crying every ninety minutes as if in pain. We couldn't figure out why. Each time, he'd eventually go back to sleep, leaving us to worry and wait for the next bout. Worn out and anxious, I screamed, "I knew we should have taken him to the clinic!"

My husband said, "If it was so important to you, you should have taken him!"

Although I was angry, I knew what he'd said was the truth. I had been waiting for approval and support, when in fact I needed neither.

Without a word, I dressed and got Ari's and my things ready. When, at 3 A.M., Ari woke crying again, I slipped him into his carrier and told my husband that I was going to the clinic. Unless he heard from me, I'd see him at the airport at 6 A.M.

At the clinic the doctor said that Ari had bronchiolitis, a lung infection, and

could not travel in an airplane until it cleared up. Apparently, the thin oxygen in an airplane can be deadly to a baby with the disease. I called my husband and told him the news. Ari got better with treatment, and we left a week later.

I think of that night as the moment I became a mother first, a wife and daughter second.

*Michaele G.
Port Chester, New York*

IT'S THE LAST DAY OF OUR HONEY-moon in Italy. Our plane leaves tomorrow morning at 6 A.M., so Kyla and I decide that, instead of getting a hotel for the night, we'll eat a late dinner, walk around the city, catch the last bus to the airport, and sleep in the terminal.

When we arrive at the airport at midnight, rain is pouring down, and the place is empty. I volunteer to stay awake and keep watch over our luggage until 3 A.M.; then Kyla will relieve me until check-in at five. Kyla lies down on a tattered couch with her head on my lap. I stroke her hair, and within moments she's asleep.

Except for the sound of rain and thunder, the airport is silent: no planes taking off or landing, no buzz of humanity rushing this way and that. I study Kyla's face and notice wrinkles starting to form near her eyes and a couple of gray hairs. All of a sudden it hits me that I'm in this for the long haul. It took me eight years to propose, but now all my fear of commitment seems to dissipate.

It's not a gondola ride through the Venice canals, or a sunset stroll along Lake Garda, or late-afternoon lovemaking in Verona that finally makes me feel comfortable as a married man. No, it's staying up all night on an old, stained couch in an empty airport with my new wife asleep on my lap.

*Paul Grafton
Santa Barbara, California*

BEFORE MY PARTNER AND I MET, HE'D spent a year in Iraq serving in the U.S. Army. As our relationship progressed, I discovered that he often had to take sleeping pills or drink heavily before bed in order to sleep. He slept fitfully, grinding his teeth and moving his arms and legs. Sometimes he sat bolt upright, covered

in sweat and insisting that the sound of mortar rounds had awakened him.

I became familiar with the cast of characters who haunted his dreams: The small girl holding flowers who walked too close to the concertina wire hanging from his tank as they rumbled through her village. A beloved captain with blood gushing from a fatal shrapnel wound in his neck. An Iraqi man screaming as he burned alive in his car. Men my partner had killed, smoke rising from the bullet holes in their bodies.

"They ask me why," he would whisper.

Often he couldn't get to sleep, guilt and fear keeping him awake as he cried and yelled and moaned. I would stay awake with him: How could I leave him alone with his burden? It seemed too much for one person to carry.

Two years later, with medication and therapy from the VA hospital, we are both sleeping much better. He still has bad nights sometimes, but I often fail to wake when he does. I feel guilty for sleeping, but I have come to understand that there are places within my partner that I can never touch. Whether I stay awake or not, he is alone.

Name Withheld

THE MAN GLARING BACK AT ME IN THE mirror looked psychotic. He was drenched in sweat, and his nose was bleeding from both nostrils, blood smearing his face and drying in his untrimmed mustache and beard. He took short, rapid breaths through clenched teeth, his bloodshot eyes open wide, his pupils dilated.

When I saw him, I raised my hands to defend myself. Then I recognized my own face, and I gripped the bathroom sink. "Why do you keep doing this to yourself, you stupid fuck?" I asked the man in the mirror. His expression slowly changed from rage to sadness.

It was four in the morning, and I had been drinking whiskey since noon the day before. At some point in the evening, I had acquired enough coke to keep me wired for several days. I'd snorted it all in several hours. Now the bleeding in my nose wouldn't stop, and my body jerked with spasms, which I knew were not a normal side effect of cocaine. (You just never know what that junk has been cut

with.) Before long I was practically having convulsions. With considerable effort, I made it to my bed, where I lay wondering if I would be awake for my death or if it would happen in my sleep.

Death passed me by that night. Eventually my spasms subsided, but the questions remained: Why did I have so little regard for my own well-being? Didn't my life mean anything to me?

Sleep came the next day and lasted twenty-four hours. When I awoke, I made a decision to change my life.

That was seven years ago. I am a freshman at a community college and plan to get a four-year degree. The fear of failure is ever present, as are hope and determination. I do not regret the mistakes I've made, nor having lived the life I've now left behind. Like the life I live now and the life that lies ahead, it's mine.

Name Withheld

"YOUR FATHER HAS BEEN GONE ALL night, and I'm a little worried," my mother told me early one spring morning in 1974.

"Where did he go?" I asked. My dad often went off alone when he was feeling low.

"Fishing," she said, "down by the river at Oakland Mills."

"Well, I'm sure he's OK, but I'll drive down and check."

My husband, our two kids, and I were staying with my parents while our new home was being built. A little more than a year earlier my fifteen-year-old brother had lost a long battle with cancer. My parents' grief was deep. My mother was able to verbalize hers, but my dad still couldn't talk about it.

I found Dad sitting on a riverbank, holding a pole and staring into the water. The night had been cold, and he hadn't worn a coat. I grabbed a blanket from my trunk and wrapped it around his shoulders, then sat down beside him.

"Catch anything?" I asked.

"Nah."

"How long you been trying?"

"Don't know," he said. "Doesn't matter."

I wanted to chide him about making us worry, but it seemed irrelevant. Instead I said, "Sometimes you just need time to think."

He didn't reply. I could see that his cheek was wet. We sat there watching the sunrise reflected in the water. A hawk flew over and let out a call.

"Think we'll have fish for breakfast?" I asked.

"Nah."

"How about eggs?"

"You cooking?"

"Sure."

"OK then, let's go."

Kathy Wiley

Mount Pleasant, Iowa

TWO WEEKS AFTER I GRADUATED from college, my favorite professor invited me to her house for dinner. Katherine cooked the only dish she made well: sliced lamb and mushrooms in a white cream sauce. When we'd finished, she exhaled and said, "I'm going to kill myself now."

I laughed, thinking she was joking. The dinner was her thank-you to me for helping her through her most recent hospital stay for depression and substance abuse: she'd overdosed on prescription pills.

But Katherine wasn't laughing. "Life sucks," she muttered.

She was forty-six years old, spoke three languages, and had tenure at one of the finest colleges in the country. But at that moment she sounded like a bored thirteen-year-old, and I told her so. (I was twenty-two; I knew everything.)

Katherine rubbed her hand over her face, then hauled herself up from the table. "I'll be in my study," she said.

I remembered the first time I had attended one of her classes. She'd held up a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and asked, "Who wants to read this in the original?" Silence. She put down her cigarette and peered at us over half-frame glasses. "None of you read Latin?" she said. Then, from memory, she recited the section about Icarus. I had never heard Latin spoken before; I was mesmerized by the sound of the words.

Now I followed Katherine to her study, which had floor-to-ceiling bookcases, a loft accessible only by ladder, and an oak conference table. It reminded me of a room in an English manor. Earlier in the evening we had sat at this table, talking about her estranged husband, who had contributed to her breakdown. "He knows

how to hit without leaving marks,” she’d said. I wondered if she had ever come to class bruised and aching under those dark tunics she always wore.

I climbed the ladder to the loft, pausing on the top step. Katherine leaned against the wall, loose pages from her latest manuscript strewn across the floor, along with a dozen empty vodka and scotch bottles. (If I had written this description in a story, she would have scrawled in the margin: “Give me a break!”) I hooked my leg over the top of the ladder and climbed into her loft.

I stayed up all night talking to her. I can’t remember what I said, but I hope I told her that in a college with more than twenty thousand students, she was the first professor who’d made me feel like an individual and not a cow passing through a chute. I hope I told her that killing herself was a cliché and beneath her. I hope I told her that I admired her, loved her.

I do know that the next morning she was still alive — and *is* still alive.

Name Withheld

AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-FOUR, AFTER my mood swings and irrational behaviors grew more frequent and I started to hear whispering, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Seven years later I have learned to live with this disease and have even formed a relationship with it. We meet after dark.

A manic episode can keep me up for days on end. My wild thoughts — which at the time seem rational — will not allow me to sleep. I might believe that the glow of a streetlight outside is an alien spacecraft, or that the shadows are wild animals out to attack me.

I must confess, I love the energy that an episode brings. I can write for hours on end. If I had the means and the know-how, I could probably build a boat! I have fallen in love with the night, because then there is no doctor to advise me, no family to interrupt; no time to think about the consequences, no time for regrets.

I take my medication because I don’t want to be a burden on my loved ones. But if it were up to me, I would forget all about medication and let the night swallow me whole.

Name Withheld

AS SOON AS I SET FOOT ON THE UNI-versity of Montana campus, I knew I wanted to go there the next fall. I was on a school trip with a group of other seniors, and I ran into an old boyfriend, Mike, who was a student at UM. He and I spent a couple of hours talking in the warm May sun and discovering we were still attracted to each other. Since Mike had left for college, I’d started dating another guy, Tim, and we’d gotten pretty serious, but now I wanted to be with Mike more than I did with Tim.

On the bus ride home I decided to break up with Tim, go to college, and be with Mike. Tim would never have supported my going to college, anyway.

When our bus got back to town, I called Tim and said I was coming over. I was nervous driving to his duplex, but I had broken up with a couple of other boys before, and I had remained friends with them. I figured the same would happen with Tim. I’d decided not to mention Mike, only my desire to go to college unattached.

Tim’s roommates were out, and we were alone. When I told him I thought we should break up, he was speechless. Then he started crying as if he were in physical pain: How could I do this to him? He’d thought I loved him; had that been a lie? How could I hurt him this way?

I hadn’t expected such a reaction. I told him he’d get over me, but he swore he wouldn’t and just kept crying. When I started to leave, he begged me not to. He said I at least owed him a chance to convince me we should stay together.

He played romantic albums and asked me to hold him. Every time I thought he was calming down, he’d start up again. When his roommates came home, I thought it was my chance to escape, but Tim insisted we move into his bedroom. I went along rather than cause a scene.

As the night went on, Tim wore me down. By the time the sun came up, I’d agreed not to break up with him.

I married Tim and stayed with him for twelve years, terrified of what he’d do if I ever tried to break up with him again. When the marriage ended, he did

cry and carry on, but within two weeks he was with someone new. I felt like a fool.

C.T.

Kalispell, Montana

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