

LACK OF SLEEP

by Mat Smith

Every night seems to follow a similar pattern.

You say a perfunctory, loveless goodnight at the bottom of the stairs. She goes to the room you used to share. You go to another. Each step toward the landing seems like a trial, like you're carrying a heavy load, like you're resisting making the climb. You lie down on the sofa bed in the spare room on the top floor, its thin mattress never designed to be slept on for more than a few days in a row, the badly put-together frame it rests on creaking and despairing and suggesting it could give way at any moment. The magical wonders of IKEA furniture, you think to yourself.

The black cat arrives, pushes open the door that you've just closed and jumps onto the bed. She sits at the end of the duvet, waits for you to throw the covers off, push the door closed again and climb back into bed, then settles behind your knees as you lie on the edge of the left side of the bed, facing the door. Apart from the space occupied by the black cat, you have the whole bed to yourself, yet you still lie in the smallest strip of bed like you would in the bed you used to share with your wife. You listen to the cat's soft breathing as she falls asleep. Your eyes slowly close and you drift off.

Unerringly, at exactly 0159, you wake up. The cat stirs, stretches out a paw and looks at you with half-opened eyes. Your mind is immediately filled with a tumult of thoughts – always the same ones, usually in a randomised order, clamouring together for your attention. You try to push them away but they shout ever louder.

“Energy bills!”

“Mutating viruses!”

“Interest rates!”

“Climate crisis!”

“Petrol prices!”

“Inflation!”

“Debt!”

Even if you block their insistent screams, they are just replaced by a quiet undercurrent of other nagging thoughts and voices. Things you said you'd do but didn't get around to; a meeting the next day at work you feel underprepared for; the email you forgot to send; the deadline that felt ages away but which now feels far too close; the vegan sausages you forgot to buy at the supermarket; the dentist appointment you didn't make for one of your daughters; the repair you forgot to collect from the dry cleaners; the item you sold on eBay or Discogs a few days ago that you still haven't packaged and sent.

You change position on the bed thinking this might block out the incessant thoughts. This offends the cat, who jumps down from the bed and retreats to the landing, where she falls asleep again effortlessly. You wish you could do the same. Instead you lie awake, tossing back and forth fruitlessly, wave after wave of chattering anxiety forcing your eyes open. Your counsellor suggested giving up, turning on the light and reading a book for a while. Sometimes you try this. Sometimes it works, and you wake up in the morning with the book over your face. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you don't try and instead just lie there, your frantic need for sleep only leading you to become more and more awake. Sometimes exhaustion takes over and, after three hours of tossing and turning, you fall

asleep, usually just before the alarm goes off.

You turn it off in disbelief that another night might be over. The voices are still there, though they have been reduced to barely audible whispers. They finally disappear as you make your way to the shower, where the jets of water struggle to stop you falling asleep standing upright. An espresso with your toast brings some semblance of alertness, but on the train to work half an hour later, you find yourself unable to stay awake. The day passes uncomfortably, and you feel continually on the fringes of alertness, constantly at risk of nodding off mid-conversation. You drink more and more coffee each day, which just seems to rob you of any energy by the time the evening rolls around, before the whole insomniac routine starts up again.

One night, it begins to get worse.

The spare room is in the eaves of the house. A February storm seems to lie dormant all day and spring to wakefulness just as you turn the light out. You lie awake all night, gripping the duvet whenever a loud gust of wind seems to jostle the roof tiles like a broken set of piano keys. The black cat is unfazed by the wind, but sufficiently irritated by your constant shifting under the duvet to leave for her spot on the landing much earlier than usual.

Your mind is alert amid the panic you feel lying there. You begin to listen intently to the pattern of the wind and rain, craving the quiet moments where it feels like the storm has given up all of its energy and its intensity is replaced by a quiet murmuring. You come to realise that these are just pauses, moments where the storm is off somewhere in the distance regrouping and preparing its next attack. Your mind races manically in the pauses.

To your list of worries are added house repairs, insurance claims and personal safety. You fret that the roof of your shoddy new-build is going to be torn off. You have lived in fear of this since the storm of 1987 where *Newsround* showed the roofs of a Welsh terraced street peeling back like a sardine tin lid and blowing onto a nearby hillside. You know it is irrational, and you frequently challenge the integrity of your memory of that TV clip – was it real? Did you imagine it? – but in those midnight moments it doesn't stop you predicting your own roof tiles being completely dislodged and raining down ruinously on the lease car on the driveway. You worry about the fence blowing down, suddenly not sure which of the two borders you share with neighbours you are legally responsible for.

A war that everyone had seen coming but which no one wanted to believe had started on the eastern fringes of Europe the same day and the anxiety of the storm seems to heighten your sense of existential foreboding. In those quieter moment, the clamouring voices thus seize the brief lull to show their faces and demand your attention, only to be suppressed by the gales as they return, full force. The combination of countless days of little sleep, an unthinkable war and the storm feels crushingly apocalyptic. There are moments in the night where you feel that no one will see the following morning, that the gusts of wind are, in fact, the life-terminating blasts from a nuclear warhead detonated fifty miles away over London.

Tiredness eventually overwhelms your panic at some point in the early hours, but it's pointless, as the alarm seems to ring out moments after, its cheerful chimes grating painfully through the fog of your broken, sleep-deprived spirit. As you wake, you notice that the wind has all but dissipated, being replaced by a soft and gentle fluttering outside the window. In your sleep-deprived state, it seems to goad you, hinting at the disruptive return it's planning, timed to start when you've ascended the stairs to bed that night. The fact that the world didn't end overnight seems to offer little comfort.

The black cat appears in the doorway, yawning and stretching its way from the landing and rubs itself up against your legs as you sit on the edge of the bed and wonder how you'll make it through the day. Her soporific purring has a soothing, calming quality that results in your eyelids getting heavy, but you know you have a train to catch and an early breakfast meeting to prepare for, so professionalism wins out over your personal health. You're reminded of the title of a film you once

half-watched: *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead*. You smile wanly at the gallows humour and head for the shower.

Your day is front-loaded with caffeine and a burst of unsustainable, temporary energy. In the afternoon your eyes begin to feel tight and pinched as the first murmurs of a migraine starts to appear. Your boss suggests you go home when he notices how pale you've become. You reluctantly agree and take a cab to the mainline station, where you fall asleep on the train and almost miss your stop.

You are shaking and unsteady when you unlock the front door of your house, which is still drenched with tiny raindrops from the previous night's downpours. You drop your bag in the office and walk into the kitchen where your wife is making a cup of tea. The black cat runs down the stairs and jumps up on the table, half-asleep, and rubs herself against your face as you sit down.

You'd forgotten to message your wife on the way home because you felt so weak, and despite your fragile, broken exterior, she doesn't seem especially surprised to see you or concerned at the mess you know you look.

"I can't sleep," you manage. It seems to take all of your energy just to get these three words out.

She turns around from the kettle and her steaming mug of tea. You search her face for a trace of empathy but there's nothing but a cold, blank harshness.

"There are people dying, losing their houses, their lives and everything they love, and you're worried about not being able to sleep?" she asks, dismissively. "I really think you need to get some perspective."

(c) Mat Smith, March 2023

This short piece of fiction was inspired by 'Lack Of Sleep' by Maps (James Chapman; published by Mute Song Ltd.). 'Lack Of Sleep' appears on the 2019 Mute album Counter Melodies.